NATIONAL AND PERSONAL IDENTITY IN GIBBON'S SUNSET SONG
AND BUCKLER'S THE MOUNTAIN AND THE VALLEY

For every better known country a national literature has satisfactorily
formulated and expressed the national character—refining, shaping, and
uttering the essentials of the nation's spirit. Novelists, dramatists, poets
create the human beings and the folk heroes in whom, as in a mirror, a
people see for themselves what they are and what they wish to be.¹

Since the publication of Lewis Grassic Gibbon's Sunset Song (1932) and Ernest
Buckler's The Mountain and the Valley (1952), both have received a very warm critical
reception: the former was endorsed as "a milestone in Scottish literature"² and the latter
as "the most distinguished and promising first novel ever published by any Canadian any-
where."³ There are several reasons, apart from their similar critical acclaim, that I should
speak of these two novels together. Both are set in rural communities, one in Scotland
and one in Canada, at the beginning of this century and both are concerned with the ob-
stacles to personal identity which the communities present. Though the novels belong to
two different cultures, there are striking similarities between their fictional backgrounds.
The two actual cultures also have much in common. Scotland and Canada are both over-
shadowed by a large and powerful neighbour to the south. The two peoples, especially
the new nation of Canada, strongly aspire to discover their own national essence, to keep
their own culture, and to resist "cultural imperialism". This must be reflected in the
literature, since literature is a primary expression of culture. Gibbon's Sunset Song and
Buckler's The Mountain and the Valley attract by their lucidity, elegance and especially
by their similar themes — national and personal identity.

It is no wonder that in the twentieth century, a renaissance or revival emerged in
Scottish literature, represented by Hugh MacDiarmid and James Leslie Mitchell (known as
Lewis Grassic Gibbon), while in Canada a group of outstanding writers such as Hugh
MacLennan, Ernest Buckler and Margaret Laurence have been giving birth to a flourish-
ing literature in the new land.

It is also no wonder that traces of the Scottish Renaissance appear in Canadian
literature. In a chapter on literary influences in The Scottish Tradition in Canada, Elizabeth
Waterston states, "The physical, social and economic similarity between Canada and
Scotland, added to the large number and power of the lowland immigrants, made the
Scottish strain in Canadian art appropriate as well as pervasive and persistent."⁴ This in-
fluence on Canadian literature can be traced back to Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns
and first became strong with the establishment of Nova Scotia in 1763. In the develop-
ment of the new nation, Scots, more than most ethnic groups, have contributed certain
characteristics to Canadian identity, while the Scottish tradition has played a not in-
considerable part in Canadian literature. Buckler for example was born and grew up in
the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia — "the New Scotland", which faces the older Scot-
tland across the Atlantic Ocean and has the same geographic features of mountains and
sea. Mainly because of the geographic factors — closeness, similar landscape and climate —
Nova Scotia received thousands of Scottish immigrants since the mid-eighteenth cen-
tury. Besides working to survive in a material sense, the Scottish settlers introduced their
cultural tradition into Nova Scotia by setting up churches and schools and publishing
books. Thus, the Scots of Nova Scotia won "a reputation for qualities of trained intelligence and energy throughout North America," and there is, therefore, no doubt that in his works Ernest Buckler bears obvious "testimony to the Scottish influence". Professor Waterston concludes in "The Lowland Tradition in Canadian Literature", that

even when Lowland groups no longer predominate at immigration points, and even when Lowland names no longer sound most persistently in the roll call of poets, novelists, essayists, journalists, painters, musicians, architects and sculptors, values and tastes which we recognize as Scottish still permeate Canadian life and art.... Many of our intellectual resources remain as a naturalized form of Scottish values. These values are powerful here both as a heritage from a day when Scottish threads were the strongest inweavings of the Canadian fabric, and also as a continuing, inevitable and appropriate response to an environment similar to Scotland in geographic forms, in climate, and in politico-sociological structures.7

No wonder quite a few Canadian authors have been, consciously or unconsciously, searching for identification with Scottish tradition in their literary works.

"Culture must be in intimate relationship with the land, the land as a correspondence to inner vision, as numen."8 This identification of "land" with "vision" is one of the basic themes for all the literatures in the world. Without this identity, many literary works would be like trees without roots. This is so much a commonplace of Chinese thinking that it becomes for me a good basis for judging literary greatness. And I see the fundamental cause of the success of Gibbon's Sunset Song and Buckler's The Mountain and the Valley as lying in the search for national and personal identification, which is very much tied to the land itself.

The land for Gibbon is the Mearns district of Kincardineshire in Scotland where he was brought up, an ancient land of Standing Stones, Stone Circles and Roman Camps. When Gibbon was eight, his family moved away from Aberdeenshire where he was born toward the south by stages to the farm-croft of Bloomfield in Arbuthnott parish in much the same way as Chris Guthrie's family in Sunset Song. There, in the Howe of the Mearns, his father crofted and supported the family in fairly straitened circumstances. As a country boy, Gibbon [Leslie Mitchell] worked with his father on the farm, or walked the red-clay lands of the Mearns, or cycled around in search of history and archaeology, deeply aware of his own Scottish earth. Similarly, Buckler was born to a farming family in Nova Scotia in 1908. Alan Young states in his introduction to Ernest Buckler, "His family can be traced back through several generations in an area that has retained a deep consciousness of its links with Canadian history, a consciousness which Buckler shares and frequently expresses with considerable intensity".9 The area for Buckler is the Annapolis Valley. But the cultural landmarks in the new land are naturally less complex than those in old Scotland, even though mountains, sea and arable land are remarkably similar. After a few years of staying away from this place, Buckler came back in 1936 at the age of twenty-eight and began his writing career. Before writing his first novel, The Mountain and the Valley, Buckler spent six years as a farmer, like David in the novel, in the Annapolis Valley.
Thus both Gibbon and Buckler felt kinship for their home lands, where they lived and worked and where their family roots went deep. This kinship seems to have provided them not only with the creative resources but also with imagination and inspiration. Meanwhile it led them in their writing to identify themselves with the earth and with the people who inhabit it, in Buckler’s case the Annapolis Valley folk; in Gibbon’s case those of the Mearns.

Chris Guthrie, in *Sunset Song*, and David Canaan, in *The Mountain and the Valley*, are the protagonists through whom Gibbon and Buckler establish their identities in relation to the landscapes. In the first chapters of the two novels, “Prelude” and “Prologue”, the authors lead the reader to their home territories – one is Kinraddie in the Mearns with its ancient Standing Stones and sea; the other is Canaan Farm in the Annapolis Valley. Both settings are small rural communities before the Wars when modern “civilization” has not reached these parts of Scotland and of Canada. Life there seems remote and isolated from big cities. The characters are closely related to others within their families and the communities. The reader, in turn, feels close to the centre of life. The two families are almost the same: the parents (who will die in the course of the story), the brothers and the sister. The most significant similarity is that the central character is the only one in each family to be educated. Another similarity is that Chris is particularly attached to her brother Will who runs away from Scotland, while David is particularly attached to his twin sister Anna who moves away from the Valley after her marriage.

Of course, in the process of history, the landscapes do not remain unchanged. War and mechanization are the major causes of upheaval. In *Sunset Song* The Great War took away the lives of four young people of the community. Kinraddie becomes “a strange place and desolate with its crash of trees and its missing faces. And not that alone, for the folk seemed different, into their bones the War had eaten, they were money-mad or mad with grief for somebody killed or somebody wounded”.10 In *The Mountain and the Valley* killing in the Second World War is suggested by David’s story: “I suppose I meant that he [Toby] was dead. I don’t think we were fighting for liberty or justice or any fancy things like that in this war.”11 Once again killing is implied by the departure of David’s friend, Toby. When Toby tells Anna that he has to go back to the Navy, she puts her hands on his face and cannot say anything, “because she knew that after tomorrow she would never see his face again”. (MV, 272)

With the approach of “modernization” in the rural lands, even greater changes occur. In *Sunset Song*, after the War, large-scale mechanised farming has begun on the ancient land which the “Norman childe” once conquered. In “Epilude”, Colquohoun preaches during the memorial service at the Standing Stones:

... Nothing, it has been said, is true but change, nothing abides, and here in Kinraddie where we watch the building of those little prides and those little fortunes on the ruins of the little farms we must give heed that these also do not abide, that a new spirit shall come to the land with the greater herd and the great machines. For greed of place and possession and great estate those four had little heed, the kindness of friends and the warmth of toil and the peace of rest—they asked no more from God or man, and no less would they endure. (SS, 252)
In the new land of Canada, even greater and faster changes took place. Before the Second World War, about forty percent of the total population of Canada were farmers. But forty years later only sixteen percent live on the farms. The magnitude of the change is noted towards the end of the story, as David realises how his

... neighbours had changed, as the village had changed. The road was paved now. There were cars and radios. A bus line passed the door. There was a railway line along the river. With this grafting from the outside world, the place itself seemed older; as the old who are not remembered are old ... the people lost their wholeness, the valid stamp of the indigenous. (MV, 229)

Only the grandmother in *The Mountain and the Valley* seems unchanged or she at least does not notice the changing. But the characters are affected and the changes affect the destinies of our protagonists.

In spite of the changes, both Gibbon and Buckler demonstrate great love for their mother earth even though the lands are dirty and coarse. The protagonists carry the weight of Gibbon’s and Buckler’s love for the land and their search for identity. In fact, much of the two novels is seen through the eyes of Chris and David and spoken through their mouths. As Ian Campbell says in his review, on one hand Gibbon presents “the background of real life spite and meanness”¹² which causes difficulties in finding identity; on the other hand, “he follows out the actions of the principal characters, and develops them, in a world removed from the crudities described”.¹³ Buckler does the same in *The Mountain and the Valley*.

Both Chris and David are intelligent and as the educated member of their families education makes them aware of the differences between their own environments and the outside world. This awareness creates their inner conflicts in searching for identity. They hate the dirt and discomfort of life on the farm, yet they cannot tear themselves from their lands. In *Sunset Song*, the teenage Chris’s struggle between love of learning and love of the earth is vividly portrayed in the following passage:

So that was Chris and her reading and schooling, two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day and the next you’d waken with the peewits crying across the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you and the smell of the earth in your face, almost you’d cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skyes. You saw their faces in fire-light, father’s and mother’s and the neighbours’, before the lamps lit up, tired and kind, faces dear and closed to you, you wanted the words they’d known and used, forgotten in far-off younghness of their lives; Scots words to tell to your heart, how they wrung it and held it, the toil of their days and unendingly their fight. And the next minute that passed from you, you were English, back to the English words so sharp and clean and true—for a while, for a while, till they slid so smooth from your throat you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all. (SS, 32)
Here Chris, feeling herself “two Chrisses” — the English and the Scottish — and being pulled in both directions, is really too confused to make her decision. With poetic language and the switch of voice Gibbon brings the reader in from objective viewer to active participant. Remarkably similar is the way David faces the same painful conflicts in searching for his identity:

Anyone to spend their youth in this God-forsaken hole instead of the city ... the same damn talk ... the same damn faces, every day and every day ... the same damn coop of trees to look at ... walking over and over your own tracks, like a damned ox. In the city there’d be movement, and something to feed your mind all the time. Your mind wouldn’t spin empty and clacking, like the rollers of the thresher when the feeder got behind with the grain. (MV, 162)

By using so many curses and similes together with the sudden characteristic change from “him” to “you”, Buckler vividly and authentically describes David’s hatred for the monotonous and tough life on the farm and his yearning for the city life: “I’d like to get out of this place so damn quick, he thought .... I’d like to go so damn far....” (MV, 163)

But it is not easy for David to break away from his beloved people and native soil. The crisis occurs on the day that he and his father move a big rock. The conflicts between father and son end with a physical blow — a blow to David’s forbearance. As he tries to escape from the intolerable farming life, he thinks of his father, mother, sister, brother and grandmother: “He saw all their faces cameo-clear as remembered faces of the newly dead.” (MV, 171) Pulled between love and hate he cannot make his final decision:

He looked both ways up and down the road. Then he turned and began to walk toward home.... Suddenly he put his head into the only place left to hide: the crook of his elbow along the rail of the bridge. He began to sob. He sobbed because he could neither leave nor stay. He sobbed because he was neither one thing nor the other. (MV, 171)

Here, David looks “both ways” — one represented by his twin sister Anna leading to Halifax, and one by himself leading back to the valley. The phrase, “both ways” remarkably resembles Gibbon’s phrase “two Chrisses”. But the difference is that the duality in each case is localised in its own national way. It is clear that Gibbon and Buckler create the torn personalities to express archetypal dualities.

At this crisis of leaving or staying, Chris and David solve the problem in different ways. First, with her mother’s suicide, Chris has to leave school and come back to keep the house. Then, after her brother’s running away and her father’s death, Chris is freed of any responsibility and becomes independent financially:

Three hundred pounds! And now she could do as she’d planned, she’d go up to the College again and pass her exams and go on to Aberdeen and get her degrees, come out as a teacher and finish with the filthy soss of a farm. She’d sell up the gear of Blawerie, the lease was dead, it had died with father, oh! she was free and free to do as she liked and dream as she liked at last! (SS, 116)
But Chris knows well her own mind: she is too sentimentally attached to her native land to leave it and lose her identity.

... a queer thought came to her there in the drooked fields, that nothing endured at all nothing but the land she passed across, tossed and turned and perpetually changed below the ends of the crofter folk since the oldest of them had set the Standing Stones ... but the land was forever, it moved and changed below you, but was forever, you were close to it and it to you, not at a bleak remove it held you and hurted you. And she had thought to leave it all!

She walked weeping then, stricken and frightened because of that knowledge that had come on her, she could never leave it. (SS, 118)

Thus Chris commits herself to the land and begins to plan her future life as a crofter's woman. In her searching for identity, Chris makes the first and decisive step forward by marrying the Highlander Ewan Tavendale. This marriage symbolises not only Chris's integration with the land but also her drifting away from "Anglicization". At her own wedding, Chris chooses to sing "The Flowers of the Forest", Scotland's national lament. The song and the use of Scottish dialect and ballad strongly reflect the Scottish tradition and spiced the ritual with a native flavour. All of these provide a national foil to set off the major theme of personal identity. In telling Chris's story, Lewis Grassic Gibbon also finds his own identity as a writer, finding "words ... known and used ... Scots words to tell to your heart."

Unlike Chris, David goes through a life-long search for his identity. On Canaan Farm there are no Standing Stones for David to appeal to, no "The Flowers of the Forest" to sing. There is only isolation keeping him away from his valley people. David never achieves his identity by marriage. Even in the school play he fails to "marry" his "princess". Wavering between leaving and staying dooms his search to failure. David's sensibility and the blindness of his pride confine him to a painfully isolated life. He realizes in despair that "the unquestioned premise all his calculations had been built on was false" and "his feet must go on in their present path". (MV, 274) In his own home he feels as if he is deserted in a cold cell:

David stood at the window now, watching the highway.... Detail came clearly enough to his sight, but it was as if another glass, beyond the glass of the window pane, covered everything, made touch between any things impossible. (MV, 280)

In this mood of total isolation and of confusion of vision, indicated by the imaged glass upon glass, David leaves the valley and begins to climb the mountain.

On his way to the top of the mountain, David recalls and relives all the significant moments of his past that cry out accusingly for identification:

... again and again, like the mounting of music that keeps passing the melody from one instrument to another, he was translated to other moments.... He was lying in bed after the dance ... then he was sitting in the schoolroom ... He was in the kitchen ... then he was in town....
And then, abruptly, he was standing on the road again.... The moment of translation had passed as quickly as it had come. (MV, 291)

David indulges himself in fancies of being "the best musician", "the most famous mathematician", and so on. But nature calls him back from his fantasy to reality. Then "the voice of his frightened child", identity, "is still calling". (MV, 292) He wants to be part of nature — "a tree and a stone and a shadow and a crystal of snow and a thread of moss and a veining of a leaf" (MV, 292) — identifying himself with the soil of his upbringing. Then he once again recollects his people:

All the faces there were everywhere else in the world, at every time, waited for him to give the thought to exactly how each of them was. (MV, 295)

At the top of the mountain, David convinces himself that he can do it and "it would make him the greatest writer in the whole world." (MV, 299) He comes to see the truth: "It wouldn't be necessary to take them one by one. That's where he'd been wrong. All he'd have to do ... oh, it was so gloriously simple ... was to find their single core of meaning." (MV, 298) The "core of meaning" is just Canadian consciousness. At last, David reaches his vision of identity with his people and his land on the top of the mountain. Unlike*Chris, whose identity is achieved in marrying and carrying on her family tradition — typical crofting life close to the land — David, far away from his valley, only realizes his identity in his mind, instead of in his life. Unfortunately, David has exhausted all his energies and overstrained his weak heart in climbing the mountain. His life-long pilgrimage in search of identity ends in a solipsist moment of vision. Yet, though David is dead, his creator, Buckler, has successfully fulfilled his vision in the writing — Buckler believes and has shown that an artist must take root in his land and identify himself with his people.

In Gibbon’s Sunset Song and Buckler’s The Mountain and the Valley, two similar devices play a very important role in exploring the theme of identity. The first of these devices is the use of a pre-chapter and an epi-chapter. In Sunset Song, the Prelude and the Epilogue, both under the same title, “The Unfurrowed Field”, deal with the same place, Chris’s native land, Kinraddie. The Prelude introduces the setting while the Epilogue reverts to the village to give account of the changes. Within this frame the “Song” of four periods is inseparably composed in terms of the development of Chris’s personal identity. In The Mountain and the Valley, both the Prologue and the Epilogue deal with the same time, the last day in the life of David. The Epilogue, which concludes the story, continues immediately from where the Prologue leaves off at the beginning of the book, and six chapters of complex flashback about David’s life-long search for his identity are tightly framed in between. In both books, the great unifying force is time, which is seen not only as a handy narrative method for chronologically relating events but also as a mysterious and powerful entity in itself.

The second narrative device is their successful use of the dominant motifs. Gibbon employs the ancient Standing Stones, to which Chris appeals in her four stages of personal development, to link the past and the present of the land, Buckler similarly creates a rug-making grandmother, who appears “on all of David’s yesterdays”,14 to interweave the
Valley's yesterday with its today. But history is long while life is short. The Standing Stones are grander and more permanent though part of them can be turned into a memorial. The grandmother is a human being to whose life there is a limit. Her rug is woven of family moments. No part of it can be removed without destroying the circularity of its shape. Both the Standing Stones and the grandmother as symbols endure through time like living embodiments of the past and the people that the protagonists are attached to, the people who share personal identity and the identity of communities and nations.

In style, *Sunset Song* retains the rhythm of Scots. In Buckler's style, the cadences do not imply a national dialect as clearly as does the "voice" in *Sunset Song*. The difference in style reflects an apparent difference between the two nations, which affects their hope of resisting pressure from the strong neighbour — England in one case, the United States in the other. Canadian speech seems to differ only very slightly from that of the United States, whereas Scots, as strong in its tang now as it was in Chris Guthrie's day, makes audible the national distinction from England. This difference, taken along with the failure of David, compared to Chris, to build a strong new life on the land, perhaps warns of the more fragile hope of surviving national identity in Canada, given the relative shallowness of Canadian history, and the very strong inroads of technological change.

Lewis Grassic Gibbon turned the Scottish novel away from the sentimentality of the Kailyard, while maintaining Kailyard emphasis on the dignity and intensity of individual life among simple people. Ernest Buckler, together with such writers as Hugh MacLennan and Margaret Laurence, led the Canadian novel into a similar concern with personal identity, but Buckler, unlike MacLennan and Laurence, links his story of a search for self-understanding with his sense of the land.

Both Gibbon and Buckler poetically and faithfully present "the essentials of the nation's spirit" in the two novels. In *The Bush Garden* Northrop Frye states: "Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective and rooted in a political feeling." It is true that Buckler identifies for us the life and the feeling of the rural Canadian in *The Mountain and the Valley* as Gibbon identifies the Scottish Mearns people in *Sunset Song*. They also both present "an imaginative legacy of dignity and of high courage" in the two novels, by reflecting their national identity in the face of a more powerful neighbour. Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Ernest Buckler have contributed greatly not only to their own country's literature but also to the literature of the world.

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NOTES

3 Watters, "Unknown Literature", 51.


6 Waterston, "The Lowland Tradition in Canadian Literature", 230.

7 Ibid., 231.


10 Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Sunset Song*, Book One in the trilogy *A Scots Quair*, (London: Pan Books, 1973), 201. (Further references to this book will be set in parenthesis in the text, with the abbreviation SS).

11 Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1984), 263. (Further references to this book will be set in parenthesis in the text, with the abbreviation MV).


13 Ibid., 46.

14 Watters, "The Mountain and the Valley", in *Ernest Buckler*, see Note 1.


16 Ibid., "Conclusion to a Literary History of Canada", 251.