

**“THE PRIME O’ OUR LAND LIE CAULD IN THE CLAY”: WORLD
WAR ONE IN LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON’S *SUNSET SONG***

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at analyzing how Lewis Grassic Gibbon portrays World War One in his novel *Sunset Song* (1932). In the narrative, Gibbon depicts the influence of the war on the fictional village of Kinraddie, which functions as a representation of the Northeast of Scotland. Although the conflict seems distant from the characters at first, its impact reaches the rural community, mainly in the form of propaganda and loss. The war brings drastic changes to the village, with economic transformations and the end of the peasants’ traditional way of life.

Keywords: Scotland, World War One, Lewis Grassic Gibbon

**“OS MELHORES DE NOSSA PÁTRIA JAZEM FRIOS NA TERRA”: A PRIMEIRA
GUERRA MUNDIAL EM *SUNSET SONG*, DE LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON**

Resumo: O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar a forma como Lewis Grassic Gibbon retrata a Primeira Guerra Mundial em seu romance *Sunset Song* (1932). Nessa narrativa, Gibbon retrata a influência da guerra no vilarejo fictício de Kinraddie, que representa a região nordeste da Escócia. Embora o conflito pareça, a princípio, distante dos personagens, seu impacto alcança a comunidade rural, especialmente na forma de propaganda e perda. A guerra traz mudanças drásticas para o vilarejo, com transformações na economia e o fim do modo de vida tradicional dos camponeses.

Palavras-chave: Escócia; Primeira Guerra Mundial; Lewis Grassic Gibbon.

It is telling of the position of Scotland within the United Kingdom that this nation’s history was neglected for a long time, with its study only becoming compulsory in Scottish schools in 1990, after interest in the past greatly increased in the 1970s (LYNCH, 1994, p. xv). In his essay “The Antique Scene”, from the 1930s, Lewis Grassic Gibbon (2007b, p. 103) claims, in a rejection of romanticized interpretations of the past, that “[f]ew things cry so urgently for rewriting as does Scots history”. Some of his works, such as the trilogy *A Scots Quair* (1932-34) and the novel *The Thirteenth Disciple* (1931), deal with Scottish history, showing the author's effort to contribute to this task.

Set between 1911 and 1920, *Sunset Song* (1932), the first volume of *A Scots Quair*, represents not only an important period for Scotland, but also encompasses relevant events of

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world history, such as World War One. The focus, however, is not on historical figures, but on the daily lives of common people, the novel being mostly narrated by an anonymous community voice. The growth of Chris, the main character, into a young woman mirrors the moment of transition to a different way of life undergone by the community during and after the war, showing how history and the lives of the characters are deeply intertwined. The objective of this paper is to explore how Gibbon portrays the beginning of the 20th century, including World War One, in rural Scotland, as the fictional village of Kinraddie functions as a micro representation of the country, especially its northeastern region of the Mearns.

Gibbon's exploration of the history of Kinraddie puts in evidence the importance of the past and the continuity of some of its elements into the present. The past is present not only as material evidence, like monuments, buildings and tombstones, but also on people's memory, preserved through stories and songs, for example. Braudel's (1992, pp. 351,356) idea that there are coexisting time strata, with some underlying structures resisting change and existing in the long duration, is helpful in the analysis of the novel. Layers from the past coexist with and influence the reality experienced by the characters, which is a fictional representation of the beginning of the 20th century.

Gibbon depicts a community whose way of life has remained fundamentally unchanged for a long time; however, some signs of transformation begin to arise, both in technology and in the realm of ideas. The clash between change and the old customs is evident in some passages from the novel which take place before the outset of World War One. New technology starts to arrive in Kinraddie in the form of cars and farming machines and meets with the resistance of some crofters.

Two incidents involving cars happen to John Guthrie, Chris's father, and one of Chae Strachan's sons right in the beginning of the novel: Chae's son is almost run over, and John Guthrie is accused of obstructing the road while riding his cart (GIBBON, 2007a, pp. 36, 45-46)². Chae and Chris's father, both representatives of the old, traditional way of life, react strongly against the intrusion of automobiles in their lives, the first hitting the driver and the latter insulting the car owner. Thus, the two crofters may be considered symbols of the resistance of the old Scotland, albeit almost run over, against changes.

More than simply the arrival of new technology, these incidents highlight the issue of social inequality, representing the opposition of the poor tenant farmers to the elite who can afford a car. The narrative voice, making reference to the community's point of view,

² All quotations are from the same edition of the novel, which will be hereafter referred to by page numbers only.

expresses a negative opinion about the elite, stating that “they'd little care for anybody, the dirt that rode in motors, folk said” (p. 36). When the incident involving John Guthrie is recounted, the narrative voice also approves of his attitude of insulting the car owner, affirming that “[t]hat was the way to deal with dirt like the gentry” (p. 46).

Nevertheless, both Chae and John Guthrie have to face negative consequences for having opposed individuals from the elite. Chae is charged with assault and has to pay a fine while Guthrie has his application for renewing the lease of the farm where the family lived denied (pp. 36, 46). This way, the vulnerability of the poor in relation to those with economical and political power is evident in the novel. In a parallel way, these peasants are also powerless to resist inexorable historical processes, such as the spread of new technologies and the transformations affecting their community and the surrounding areas.

In addition to automobiles, other technological novelties influence the peasants' lives, bringing changes to the way of farming the land. The creation of farming machines contributed to the advance of large-scale farming, which would crush small traditional farms. This change of paradigm may be illustrated by the passage in which John Guthrie has to seek a new farm to rent after his lease was not renewed and finds out that “nearly all the district was land of the large-like farm, he'd be squeezed to death and he'd stand no chance” (p. 46). Hence, it is clear that this process meant the exclusion of the crofters from the land that had supported them for generations.

Once again, Chris's father represents a force of resistance against changes in the community's way of life. He refuses to make use of new farming tools, such as a binder, preferring to keep on using “an old reaper” even after his son's protest (p. 76). John Guthrie also uses a scythe and swears that “the scythe would yet come back to its own when the binders and reapers rotted in rust” (p. 76). Despite the character's defense of the use of old, traditional farming tools, the narrative voice makes it clear that change is inevitable and that even John Guthrie has to give in, stating “[b]ut its time was past or yet to come, the scythe's, out the reaper was driven and yoked” (pp. 76-77).

Chris's father believes that his way of working and living is at an end and sees this transformation in a negative light, as a force ruining traditional morals and values. The idea of the end of an era is present in passages such as:

it grew plain to him [John Guthrie] here [...] that the day of the crofter was fell [very much] near finished, put by, the day of folk like himself and Chae and Cuddiestoun, Pooty and Long Rob of the Mill, the last of the farming folk that wrung their living from the land with their own bare hands. (p. 84)

Thus, John Guthrie predicts, in a foreshadowing of what the following years would bring, that

this generation of tenant farmers would be the last to keep the way of life passed on by their ancestors. Guthrie also relates these changes to the corruption of moral values and a deepening of the social abyss, “with the country-folk climbing in silver, the few, back in the pit, the many” (p. 84). This way, the concern about social inequality and the oppression of poor farmers is once again expressed in the novel.

Nevertheless, not every character in *Sunset Song* sees transformations, such as the use of new farming machines, in a negative way. For instance, Chae Strachan, Kinraddie's self-proclaimed socialist, believes that machines will improve the lives of the peasants by making their harsh work easier. Therefore, he affirms that “*the machine's the best friend of man, or it would be so in a socialist state*” (p. 162). Chae's point of view seems to be more similar to that of Gibbon (2007b, p. 173), who states in his essay “The Land” that he would see changes in the fields and the use of machines “with no more regret than the sensitive felt in the passing of the windjammers and the coming of the steamboats”. Gibbon, like Chae, values the peasants' quality of life over the continuance of traditions out of nostalgia.

The presence of emigration in *Sunset Song* is a mark of continuity through history. The migratory flux of Scottish people to other places increased during the 18th and 19th centuries due to the enclosures of land, also mentioned in the novel, and continued into the 20th century. In the years between 1905 and 1914, the emigration rate was higher than any recorded in the 19th century (ROSS, 2008, p. 289). The perpetuation of this migratory process is represented by the characters Chae and Will, Chris's older brother. Chae, “a fell wandering billy” (p. 17), settled in Alaska, California and South Africa before coming back to Scotland. Several years after Chae's return, Will plans to pursue the dream of a better life in Canada, a place where “a man was soon his own master” in his opinion (p. 75). He ends up moving to Argentina to raise cattle in a ranch in 1913 (p. 110).

Although Chae's journey took place in the end of the 19th century, when Britain possessed a vast empire, he does not take part in the colonialist project. After looking for gold in Alaska and working in fruit farms in California, Chae settled in South Africa. However, instead of seeking to dominate the natives, he became close to the chieftain of a tribe, and they “had fought against Boers [non-British white settlers] and British both, and beaten them, or so Chae said” (p. 18). Even though the community narrative voice casts doubt on his battle achievements in this passage, his siding with the native Africans remains unquestioned. Therefore, the character seems to have stayed true to his egalitarian ideals.

Another sign of permanence from the 19th century is the political polarization between Tories and Liberals, which is visible in different scenes in the narrative, especially in

the ones dealing with a by-election in the region. The references to politics in the novel are consistent with its focus on the lives of tenant farmers, concentrating on local issues and on how the community's lives were affected by political decisions. The political preferences of some of the characters are explicit, like Erbert Ellison's, who "said he was a Conservative but everybody in Kinraddie knew that meant he was a Tory" (p. 14).

Chae Strachan is fiercely against the Tories, which marks a distinction between him and most of Kinraddie's inhabitants. Chae says after some drinks that he would have "all Tories nailed up in barrels full of spikes and rolled down the side of the Grampians", to which Long Rob replies that "there would be a gey [great] boom in the barrel trade then, the most of Kinraddie would be inside the barrels" (p. 102). The characteristic humor of the narrative is used here to show the conservative inclination of most of the characters portrayed.

Whereas John Guthrie declares himself a Liberal, Chae refuses to choose one side in the polarization between Tories and Liberals. To the latter, it makes no difference which party is elected since "one tink [disreputable person] robber was bad as another, Tory as Liberal" (p. 105). Chae believes that everyone should have the same amount of money, an idea considered "clean daft" by Kinraddie's folk (p. 18). However, even though the community laughs at Chae and does not share his ideals, people defend him when a political candidate tries to expel him from the room after being attacked by Chae. After all, "they weren't to see him mishandled by an English tink and the coarse fisher brutes he'd hired from Gourdon to keep folk from asking him questions" (p. 105). This passage makes it clear that, above political differences, there is a sense of community which makes people from Kinraddie defend one another when confronted with "outsiders" from other villages or England.

This enmity toward people from other places, especially England, is present in passages throughout the book. The narrative of the regional by-election campaign reinforces this idea and shows clearly the distance between political candidates and the people they are supposed to represent. The Tory candidate, who tried to expel Chae from the meeting, is described in an unflattering manner, as "an Englishman with a funny bit squeak of a voice, like a bairn [child] that's wet its breeks [trousers]" (p. 104). Besides nationality, language itself sets the candidate apart from Kinraddie's community. In a place where most people speak Doric, a Scots dialect, speaking English makes the politician more distant and may even sound pedantic. This issue related to language is expressed in the following quotation: "the Tory said the House of Lords had aye [always] been defenders of the Common People, only he didn't say aye, his English was a real drawback" (p. 104).

The Liberal candidate tries to take advantage of the fact that his rival is English,

using a slogan – “*Vote for the Scottish Thistle and not for the English Rose*” (p. 104) – which refers to both nations’ floral emblems to sound closer to the electorate. Another attempt to bridge the gap between him and voters is his support to measures which are expected to appeal to the working class, like the institution of insurances for workers and the end of the House of Lords’ power of veto. Although he tries to show himself as part of the community, he is also a stranger to the village, being from Glasgow.

However, more than geographical, the distance between candidates and voters also has to do with social class. Both Tory and Liberal candidates belong to the upper-class, the first being described as a “gent” whose uncle is a lord and the latter as a “fell [very] rich” man working on the shipbuilding business (p. 104). The community narrative voice seems to see through their speeches, affirming of the Liberal candidate that “real Radical he was, with everybody’s money but his own” (p. 104). The Tory man, who has the minister’s support, tries to affirm that he is on the side of the common people, but ends up being attacked by Chae, who says that “there was a greater Lord who heard when the Tories took the name of poor folk in vain” (p. 104). After his stewards try to take Chae away from the room by force, the Tory candidate ends up losing the election. However, reinforcing Chae’s statement that both parties were similar, the Liberal politician never appears in Kinraddie again after his victory, as his predecessor had done (p. 105). Hence, it seems that politicians’ complete disregard for Kinraddie and, by extension, for poor, rural regions is yet another element of continuity.

Within a predominantly conservative community, Chae’s and Long Rob’s points of view call the attention for different reasons. Chae, as mentioned before, defends social equality and identifies with socialist ideals, which makes the community laugh at him. Long Rob has an anti-clerical attitude and reads agnostic texts “of a coarse creature Ingersoll” (p. 26), a behavior which is negatively regarded by Kinraddie’s folk, as the use of the word “coarse” by the narrative voice demonstrates.

While Chae’s and Rob’s ideas are shocking to Kinraddie’s community, they are actually closer to Gibbon’s own positions. The author’s deep concern about social inequality may be perceived in his essays, such as “Glasgow”, in which Gibbon (2007b, p. 137) affirms that “[t]here is nothing in culture or art that is worth the life and elementary happiness of one of those thousands who rot in the Glasgow slums”. Besides, Long Rob’s ideas are not very distant from some of Gibbon’s statements, like “[r]eligion is no more fundamental to the human character than cancer is fundamental to the human brain” (GIBBON, 2007b, p. 183).

This identification between Chae’s and Rob’s views and Gibbon’s may explain these characters’ generally positive characterization in the novel. Even though their ideas, in a

reflection of the community's opinion, are described by the narrative voice as “coarse” or “daft”, Chae and Rob are considered good workers and well-liked, which is a much more positive description than “there were worse folk than Munro, though maybe they were all in the jail” (p. 21), for example. Moreover, both of them are generous and help Chris in many situations. They are also the characters who appear the most in *Sunset Song*, apart from Chris and her family, and are responsible for a good part of the humor present in the narrative.

Thus, when World War One begins, Kinraddie is a place where politics and social hierarchy have not significantly changed for a long time, though some technological novelties and non-conservative currents of thought are beginning to appear. At first, the war seems comfortably distant from the crofters' reality. When Chae announces that war was declared, Chris and her husband Ewan do not pay much attention to it. With Chris's pregnancy and their crops to take care of, there seems to be more pressing concerns, as the following passage may illustrate: “Chris paid no heed to the war, there were aye [always] daft devils fighting about something or other, as Ewan had said; and God! they could fight till they were black and blue for all that he cared if only the ley [fallow] field would come on a bit faster” (p. 191).

Nevertheless, the influence of the war starts to be felt in Kinraddie soon after that. The first effect is the spread of war propaganda, especially an anti-German discourse, which was propagated not only by the media, but also by the church. The aggressiveness of the media may be perceived in passages like “*Man, some of those [newspaper] editors were right rough creatures, God pity the Germans if they'd their hands on them!*” (p. 197). This anti-German discourse is reproduced by some characters, such as Chae, who says that if Germany won the war, “there'd be an end of both peace and progress forever, there wouldn't be safety in the world again till the Prussians – and they were a kind of German, with meikle [big] spiked helmets, awful brutes, and the very worst – were beaten back to the hell they came from” (p. 196). The creation of this extremely negative image of the Germans was intended to encourage people to fight, making them believe that “every man might yet have to fight for bairn [child] and wife ere this war was over” (p. 196).

As an anti-German feeling grows among the population, the minister's sermons become increasingly hostile to fit the community's mood and avoid being mistaken for pro-German. Reverend Gibbon, Kinraddie's minister, compares the Germans to Attila in one of his sermons, saying that they were God's punishment for the world's sins (p. 197). As for the future, the minister states that “from chastisement by blood and fire the nations might rise anew, Scotland not the least in its ancient health and humility, to tread again the path to grace” (p. 197). In spite of his comparison of the Germans to “a curse and a plague”, many members

of the congregation leave the church, shocked to see the minister “defending the German tinks [disreputable people] and some friend that he called Attila”, and some even threaten to hit him (pp. 197-8). This passage evidences not only some of the crofters’ ignorance about history, but also the growing anti-German hysteria among the community. Once more Kinraddie seems to represent fictionally what happened in the country as a whole, where propaganda promoted “a hearty jingoism and savage hatred of ‘the Hun’ (the Germans)” (GRANT *et al.*, 2011, p. 326).

If Reverend Gibbon is at first attacked due to the extreme anti-German feeling, his subsequent sermons, which embrace the patriotic discourse, end up increasing this hatred with the help of the press. While newspapers warn the population about the presence of pro-Germans and retell cases of aggressions against them, the minister preaches that “the Kaiser was the Antichrist, and that until this foul evil had been swept from the earth there could be neither peace nor progress again” (p. 199). After a sermon urging the congregation to act since there were “traitors that sided with the Antichrist” in Kinraddie, a group of people decides to beat Rob, considered a pro-German (p. 200).

Rob is one of the characters who act as a counterpoint to the war propaganda, deconstructing the official discourse about the conflict and the Germans. In his opinion, it is not worth fighting to defend the Belgians against the German invasion for one country is as bad as the other. The character recalls the Belgian colonization of the Congo to justify his opinion, without, however, acknowledging Britain’s colonial exploitation of other countries (p. 199). Besides, Rob points out the distance between those who decided to declare war or encourage it and those who are affected by the conflict, as illustrated by the following quotation:

He [Rob] said that it [the war] was a lot of damned nonsense, those who wanted to fight, the M.P.s and bankers and editors and muckers, should all be locked up in a pleiter [bog] of a park [field] and made to gut each other with graips [pitchforks]: there’d be no great loss to the world and a fine bit sight it would make for decent folk to look on at. (p. 199)

Once again, there is the suggestion of the distinction between a negatively regarded elite of politicians, bankers and editors and ordinary people, considered “decent”, in the novel.

Chris’s opinion also contrasts with the official war propaganda, an illustration of the fact that her views and values are often different from the community’s. The atmosphere in Kinraddie is so full of suspicion and hatred during the war that simply affirming of the Germans that “*they’re maybe not such bad folk as the papers make out*” makes Mrs. Strachan accuse Chris of being pro-German (p. 198). The extremely negative image of the Germans is hardly confirmed by soldiers’ experience. When Chae comes back home on leave after

enlisting, he is asked whether the Germans are so bad as people are saying and answers that he does not know as he has practically no contact with living Germans (p. 205). Staying true to the community's suspicion towards foreigners, though, he says that he does not like the French, who are bad farmers and a "damned poor folk you'd to fight for, them, meaner than dirt and not half so sweet" (pp. 205-206).

Folk's suspicion is also extended to soldiers, revealing a paradoxical attitude towards them. Whereas most of Kinraddie accepts the discourse of defending king and country and some of the characters even affirm they would enlist if they were younger (p. 196), those who choose to fight are considered lazy. An example of the belief that soldiers lead an easy life is the fact that one of Chae's neighbors slights him during his visit, stating that "[a]h well, we'll have to get on with our work. Fine being you and a soldier, Chae, with your holidays and all. But poor folk aye [always] have to work" (p. 208).

Like the anti-German exaggerations, the idea of heroism created by war propaganda is deconstructed in *Sunset Song*. This deconstruction is clear in the narrative of the scene of Mrs. Gordon's visit to her son, blinded in the war, at the hospital, when he affirms: "*What think you of your son now, old wife? – the son you wanted to make a name for you with his bravery in Kinraddie? Be proud, be proud, I'll be home right soon to crawl round the parks and I'll show these holes to every bitch in the Mearns that's looking for a hero*" (p. 209). This way, the relation between war and heroism and glory is denied, with the emphasis laying on the brutality of the life on the front.

In addition to the influence of propaganda, the effects of the war are also felt in the economy. Due to the war, Kinraddie experiences a rise in the price of food, which increases some of the crofters' expenses, but mostly offers them the chance to make more money. Tenant farmers, like Chris and Ewan, who used to work mostly on crops, can afford to invest more in raising cattle (p. 204). The opportunity for easy profit brought by the war is seized by most people, like Ellison, the manager of the estate, who "[had] grown fair big in the mind and the pouch [pocket], folk said he was making silver like a dung-heap sourocks [sorrel]; and he'd bought him a car and another piano" (p. 207). This excerpt shows that the change in the financial situation brings along a transformation in the way of thinking and behaving, for example, reinforcing Ellison's feeling of superiority in relation to the other crofters.

Ambition soon becomes excessive and gives way to selfish, thoughtless greed. Most of the tenant crofters, who endured harsh work and life conditions in exchange for little money for so long, become too greedy once they finally have the opportunity to increase their earnings. When Chae comes back home on leave, he notices this transformation, which is

clear in the following passage: “it seemed the same wherever he went in Kinraddie, except at the Mill and his father-in-law’s: every soul made money and didn’t care a damn though the War outlasted their lives” (p. 208). The community, who, despite prone to gossip, used to be close-knit and offer support to each other in moments of need, becomes so selfish that most are not concerned about the impact of the war as long as they could continue to profit without being negatively affected by it. Therefore, it is suggested that money exerts a negative influence on people, which echoes Gibbon’s diffusionist idea that civilization – which includes money and social classes – is a corruptive and oppressive force.

This thoughtless ambition is demonstrated by the decision to let the woods surrounding Kinraddie be cut down. Attracted by the opportunity to make money, Kinraddie’s trustees sell the timber and “they got awful high prices, the trustees did, it was wanted for aeroplanes and such-like things” (p. 207). Nevertheless, this was a mindless decision since the cutting down of the woods would cause the climate in the region to change, making it impossible to cultivate the land. Besides showing the prevalence of immediate gain over long-term planning, this attitude reveals the trustees’ lack of consideration for the tenant farmers and their means of subsistence. This is yet another instance in which the novel portrays the elite as a selfish group becoming wealthier at the expense of the poorer.

The falling of the trees also symbolizes the end of the peasants’ traditional way of life. Once more, mirroring the incidents with cars in the beginning of the narrative, Chae is outraged and scolds the manager of the estate, but this time he is also nostalgic, telling his wife that “he’d often minded of them out there in France, the woods, so bonny [beautiful] they were, and thick and brave [fine]” (pp. 206-207). Again, Chae considers change negative and resists it; though his nostalgia suggests that this time he sees the transformation as inevitable.

Even though Kinraddie’s folk have some financial benefits due to the war, they cannot escape its negative consequences. One of the most remarkable and traumatic effects of the war was the trail of violence and loss it left. In *Sunset Song*, more than the aggressions perpetrated by the Germans, it is the violence inflicted by the State and the very community which is highlighted. This emphasis is related to the narrative’s focus on Kinraddie and how the conflict affects its people, without the representation of battles or the life in the trenches.

Long Rob suffers aggressions from the State and is also ostracized from Kinraddie’s community. News of the Conscription Act arrives in Kinraddie, as much of the information, “in a wave of gossip”, and “that meant you’d to go out and fight whatever you said, they’d shoot you down if you didn’t” (p. 212). This quotation makes it clear that the war effort

implied not only sacrifices from the population, but also an amount of violence inflicted by the government. War propaganda discourse is also used as a persuasive tool to convince people to fight. When Rob resists the mandatory enrollment, the chairman of the Exemption Board asks him if he likes the idea of being considered a coward, to which Rob replies that *“I’d rather any day be a coward than a corpse”* (p. 213). The deconstruction of the ideal of heroism is also present in the description of the chairman, who is *“a wee grocer that worked night and day to send other folk out to fight the Germans”* (p. 213), in which it is clear that he does not meet the standards of bravery that he hypocritically advocates.

As Rob refuses to enroll in the army, the police take him from his house, and Kinraddie is left wondering what happened to him as rumors circulate. Once a much weaker Rob comes back home, stories spread quickly that he was sent to prison, where he was awfully *“ill-used”*, and resorted to a hunger strike (p. 222). Even after enduring all these aggressions, he was not released until a doctor attested that *“he’d never be of use to his King and country”* (p. 223). This episode illustrates the dehumanization involved in the war as individuals are valued more as soldiers than human beings and deemed useless when they are not able to fight.

Although Kinraddie’s people show curiosity and gossip about Rob’s fate, many continue to reject him as a pro-German. No one but Chris takes the corn to be ground by Rob anymore, and even the grocer does not stop at his door to sell goods (pp. 223, 233). The community’s rejection is so strong that Rob ends up abandoning his pacifist ideas and enlisting after realizing that *“there was neither trade nor trust for him here, or rest ever again till this War was over, if it ever ended at all”* (p. 233).

The community’s pressure and the brutality of military life may also be perceived in Ewan’s story. Chris’s husband decides to enlist because he cannot stand anymore *“folk laughing and sneering at him for a coward, Mutch and Munro aye [always] girding at him”* (p. 217). This episode shows the power of both propaganda and popular pressure to persuade people to fight in the war. Gibbon portrays the influence of the atmosphere of military training as extremely negative since Ewan undergoes a radical transformation. The kind, loving young man comes back home on leave turned into a jeering and abusive husband. The transformation is such that Chris thinks that *“it wasn’t Ewan, her Ewan, someone coarse and strange and strong had come back in his body to torment her”* (pp. 217-218). Ewan’s change may be considered another demonstration of the dehumanizing power of the war.

Ewan’s fate, being executed as a deserter, is another instance of violence inflicted by the State. The use of executions as punishment for cowardice, desertion or mutiny remains

controversial, being considered excessively harsh given that many soldiers suffered from shell shock. British military forces executed more than 300 of their own men whereas Germany, with the double of troops, condemned 48 men to death (TAYLOR-WHIFFEN, 2011). As the wind brings a smell which reminds him of home, Ewan realizes that it was a mistake to enlist, “*it was just daft to be there*”, and decides to go back home and try to reunite with the wife he mistreated so badly before leaving (pp. 240-241).

Once more, Gibbon deconstructs the ideal of bravery and heroism promoted by war propaganda. Chae, when describing what happened to Ewan, tells Chris that he was executed “*as a coward and deserter*” (p. 240). Ewan, however, employs the word “coward” in a very different way. As he recounts to Chae his abuses against Chris before leaving to the war, Ewan says that “he’d be a coward if he didn’t try [to go back to her] though all hope was past” (p. 241). From Ewan’s perspective, cowardice is not related to the refusal to fight, but to the ill-treatment and abandonment of his family. To the court martial, Ewan was a coward for leaving the battle; to his mind, though, he would be a coward for staying there in the war front, setting a different standard of bravery. The novel’s treatment of the issue of desertion also differs from the official discourse in that Ewan’s name is included in Kinraddie’s memorial to those who died at the war, as opposed to what happens up to this day in Britain.

Moreover, grief and the feeling of loss also lead to the questioning of the patriotic discourse of defending one’s country in the book. After the news of Ewan’s death, two neighbors visit Chris and say that “he’d died fine, for his country and his King he’d died”, to which Chris’s response is “*Country and King? You’re hawering, hawering [talking nonsense]! What have they to do with my Ewan, what was the King to him, what their damned country? Blawearie’s his land, it’s not his wight [fault] that others fight wars!*” (pp. 238-9). In this fragment, Chris points out, as Rob did before, the distance between politicians’ and common people’s interests, emphasizing the idea that soldiers are risking their lives for the sake of a war which is not theirs. She also criticizes the authorities in another passage of the book, in which she calls them “cowards and liars and bloody men, the English generals and their like down there in London” (p. 238). This reinforces the distance between those who fight and those in power, as well as suggests a hierarchical relation between England and Scotland.

The futility of war is expressed in several passages of the novel. First, Chris believes that Ewan “died for nothing, for nothing, hurt and murdered and crying for her, maybe, killed for nothing” (p. 239). Secondly, as Rob’s death is retold, having been the result of an act of bravery which won him a medal, the community narrative voice comments “[n]ot that he got it, faith! he was dead, they came on his corpse long after, the British, but just as a mark of

respect” (pp. 250-251). This remark highlights the emptiness of such medals of honor in comparison to one’s life, the price paid for many of them. Thirdly, the fact that Chae is killed just an hour before the cease-fire foregrounds the futility of a conflict which claimed so many lives. Nevertheless, Hew Strachan ([2012], p. 130) affirms that the vast majority of the soldiers and their families believed in the legitimacy of the war and the causes they were fighting for. Thus, it is possible that the perspective on the war presented in the narrative is related to Gibbon’s temporal distance from the conflict, as he was a child when it happened and only wrote *Sunset Song* in the 1930s.

As Gibbon places Kinraddie within a long historical tradition, he also suggests links between the First World War and previous conflicts. An element which shows these connections is the traditional song *The Flowers of the Forest*. First recorded in writing in the 18th century, the song is a lament for the dead in the battle of Flodden (1513), in which the English inflicted many casualties, including the king, on the Scottish army. This way, the song brings closer two military conflicts separated by centuries.

This song appears in different moments of the narrative: first, when Chris is a young girl; secondly, during Chris and Ewan’s wedding; and thirdly, on the inauguration of Kinraddie’s war memorial. The song describes a scene of young women grieving over the young men killed, which moves teenage Chris as she imagines the lonely, unmarried girls (p. 43). During her wedding party, it is Chris herself, in a foreshadowing of the war and the loss to come, that sings *The Flowers of the Forest*, lamenting that “The Floores [Flowers] o’ the Forest, that fought aye [always] the foremost, / The pride o’ oor [our] land lie cauld [cold] in the clay” (p. 170)³. Towards the end of the novel, in the scene of the inauguration of the war memorial, the song is played one more time, and even its musical score is included. Therefore, a parallel is established between the grief following both the 16th century battle and World War One, as the community narrative voice goes on to describe the reactions of Chris and Kirsty Strachan, Chae’s wife, both women who are left “lamentin [their] dearie”⁴.

Another reference to a past conflict is Chae’s vision of a soldier from ancient times. Coming back from a visit to Rob on his leave, Chae sees a man “in strange gear, hardly clad at all, and something had flashed on his head, like a helmet maybe” (p. 211). Terribly frightened, he thinks that “maybe it was one of the men of old time that he saw there, a Calgacus’ man from the Graupius battle when they fought the Romans up from the south” (p. 211), in a reference to the first recorded battle in Scottish history. Symbolically, the scene

³ Most sources consulted register “the prime o’ our land”, a small variation which is acceptable in oral texts.

⁴ *The Flowers of the Forest*. Available at: <www.darachweb.net/SongLyrics/FlowersOfTheForest.html>

takes place near Kinraddie's circle of standing stones, which are a sign of the endurance of the past. Even though the vision may be attributed to the power of the whisky drunk by Chae, the passage is another example which suggests that the past lives on in the present and that one can still feel the presence of people from long ago in Kinraddie.

The establishment of connections between these different battles and conflicts points out to a cyclical view of the passage of time. Instead of a constant forward movement, history would move as a spiral, bringing wars and destruction from time to time. This idea of the circularity of time is reflected in the structure of the novel, whose sections mirror the cycle of agricultural activity: "The Unfurrowed Field" (Prelude); "Ploughing"; "Drilling"; "Seed-time"; "Harvest"; and the Epilude, also entitled "The Unfurrowed Field". This way, the ending of the narrative does not represent an absolute conclusion, but a new beginning.

One of the novel's main themes is the end of a way of living, the sunset of the crofters' days. On the one hand, the war brings prosperity to the tenant farmers due to the rise in the prices of meat and grain. Some of them even manage to buy their land and other pieces of the estate when the trustees decide to sell the property (pp. 248, 253, 255). On the other hand, there is a price to pay for this economic improvement. The emergence of this "new gentry" does not imply that there was less inequality, the narrative voice affirming that "Rich and Poor were as far off being Equal as ever they'd been" (p. 254). This way, the possibility to earn more does not necessarily entail social justice or better quality of life.

Besides, uncontrolled greediness leads to the decay of the land as Chae's predictions about climate change due to the cutting down of the woods are fulfilled. The community narrative voice remarks nostalgically that "faith! the land looked unco [strange] and woe with its woods all gone [...] folk said that the land had gone cold and wet" (p. 259). A symbol of the death of a way of living, the felling of the trees represents the deterioration of the land "where once the parks flowed thick with corn" and which becomes fit only to the raising of sheep, something lamented by the community narrative voice (p. 255).

Other signs of decadence are the abandonment of the properties of the Mill and Pooty's, as well as the decay of Pooty's health. Pooty, the oldest inhabitant of Kinraddie, starts having a paranoid behavior during the war, being extremely frightened by the possibility of an invasion of the Germans or their ghosts (p. 210). This fear is probably stimulated and heightened by the intense war propaganda. At last, Pooty's mental health deteriorates to the point that he has to be taken to a mental asylum (p. 249). As a result of his confinement and Rob's death, their houses are deserted and start to crumble, which is yet another symbol of the end of an age and way of life.

Nevertheless, in spite of a somewhat nostalgic tone, the novel ends in a more positive note, with the hope for a better country in the future. Like the thistles, a Scottish national symbol, continue to grow in the midst of the desolation of Pooty's, so can Scotland flourish after the radical changes brought by the war. This hope is embodied in Colquohoun, the new minister who arrives in Kinraddie after the war and shares the author's left-wing political position.

On the inauguration of Kinraddie's war memorial, Colquohoun begins his speech by reaffirming the end of an age, saying that “[w]ith them we may say there died a thing older than themselves, these were the Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk” (p. 260). This passage reinforces the idea of the loss of a long tradition, which had been passed on for generations, and shows his high regard for the crofters. The minister also praises a simple life and harshly criticizes the excessive ambition felt by Kinraddie's folk, which is illustrated by the following fragment:

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. [...] So, lest we shame [the dead], let us believe that the new oppressions and foolish greeds are no more than mists that pass. They died for a world that is past, [...] but they did not die for this that we seem to inherit. Beyond it and us there shines a greater hope and a newer world, undreamt by these four died. But need we doubt which side the battle they would range themselves did they live to-day, need we doubt the answer they cry to us even now, the four of them, from the places of the sunset? (p. 261).

Colquohoun expresses hope for a better future, free from oppression and the blind search for wealth. Even though it is necessary that Kinraddie's folk change their attitude to reach this future and honor the dead, it would still be an attainable goal from his viewpoint.

In sum, Gibbon introduces the reader to a community which preserves basically the same social and economical structure for centuries, with few signs of change in the beginning of the 20th century. Even though geographically distant from Kinraddie, World War One acts as a catalyst and a trigger for transformation, leading not only to a new social and economical organization, but also to a change of mentality. Although these transformations are recounted in a nostalgic tone, they also represent the opportunity for a new beginning. It is in the hands of Kinraddie's folk the chance to sow and reap a better future.

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