

**Highlands and Lowlands, Romance and Realism:  
The Fiction of Neil Munro**

DOUGLAS GIFFORD

This essay claims that the fiction of Neil Munro, for far too long neglected or read as entertaining Highland escapism, is in fact of major importance both in terms of its quality and in terms of its satirical and deeply critical reevaluation of what Highland social culture had become in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Munro, very much a child of Inveraray and Argyll, yet in his adult life a Lowland-based Glasgow journalist dissociated from it, has both a Highland and Lowland perspective on the territory and culture from which he came. Yet far from associating himself with romanticising and escapist tendencies in the Scottish culture of his time, such as those movements in fiction, poetry, and drama termed 'Kailyard' or 'Celtic Twilight', in his best work—such as *The Lost Pibroch* (1896), *John Splendid* (1898), *Gilian the Dreamer* (1899) and *The New Road* (1914)—he consistently renegotiated questions of Highland identity and values with subtlety and sympathy, yet probingly analysing fundamental weaknesses in his Argyll Highlanders' perception of themselves, as well as initiating twentieth-century clarification of Lowland and British perceptions of Highland history and culture.<sup>1</sup>

This claim presupposes that popular and earlier views of Highland history and culture were inaccurate and biased. That said, the essays on Lowland perceptions of the Highlands in this volume reveal a fascinating series of expedient shifts of valuation, in all of which the Highlands emerge as a territory which is as much a construct of mind as a loosely defined geographical topography. And

<sup>1</sup>A version of this essay has already appeared as 'John Splendids and Jaunty Jocks': Neil Munro, the Highlands and Scottish Fiction', in *Exploring New Roads: Essays on Neil Munro*, edd. R. W. Renton and B. D. Osborne (Colonsay 2003), 37–67.

perhaps, with hindsight, we realise that they were never so much of a concrete threat to Lowland peace and prosperity, as a convenient site for ideological appropriation by the Lowlands, and a timeless and convenient raiding-ground for British politicians and social leaders in the formation of expedient politics and social theory. One of the most breathtaking and cunning appropriations of the Highlands was surely Prime Minister Pitt's transformation of troublesome northern caterans into loyal British regiments at the end of the eighteenth century—an ironic and metaphoric reversal of actual and historic clan raids and blackmail.<sup>2</sup>

For all Pitt's redefinition of Highland rebels as front-line defenders of Empire, and for all the illustrious role of Highland regiments in Napoleonic wars and imperial battles, Lowland opinions of the Highlands in the years around the great potato famines of the 1840s reveal how volatile nineteenth-century Lowland Scottish—and British—views of the Highlands were becoming. Within a year or two, sympathy for the plight of a simple people could turn into contempt for their feckless irresponsibility (mirroring contemporary attitudes to Ireland)—and back again.<sup>3</sup> Clearance and Famine can thus be deplored or condoned, according to bias and perspective. While James Grant's best-selling Victorian novel *The Romance of War; or The Highlanders in Spain* (1846) glorified the robust, hard-drinking yet noble kilted regiments in the Napoleonic wars, *The Scotsman* could blame the improvidence of Highlanders for their appalling troubles during famine. Yet novelist William Black (the darling of the lending libraries) went on to present even newer and more fashionable Victorian stereotypes of the Highland chief, outstandingly in *Macleod of Dare* (1878)—in which he cast a romantic aura of noble savagery around his young

<sup>2</sup>For the suggestion that this initiative was first mooted by William Dalrymple, second earl of Stair, see Allan. I. Macinnes, *Clanship, Commerce and the House of Stuart, 1603–1788* (East Linton 1996), 216.

<sup>3</sup>See Krisztina Fenyő, *Contempt, Sympathy and Romance: Lowland Perceptions of the Highlands and the Clearances During the Famine Years, 1845–1855* (East Linton 2000).

Mull chieftain of McLeod, whose curious mixture of barbarity and breeding temporarily captivates a famous London actress. She plays with her fashionable toy princeling for a while, then drops him when the social season ends—a mistake, this, since he carries her off from London in his galley and, since she won't be persuaded, sinks the galley in a storm and drowns them both, appropriately enough, in the Sound of Mull. What mixed messages! —trivial London (but essential to maintain readers' interest and very much the needed foil for romantic Highlands); noble savages (but ultimately tiresome in their obsessive and anachronistic pride of race); dark undercurrents to superficially socialised natives (so don't play around with primitives!).

Yet this typical declension of Lowland perspectives of the Highlands into melodrama and subject-matter for entertainment continued alongside more sinister manipulations. The most obvious of these is exemplified in later nineteenth-century Lowland collusion with fashionable Victorian Balmorality, a powerful aid to further exploitation of the Highlander as redoubtable warrior and bulwark of Empire. Once again, public opinion could be volatile, as Iain Crichton Smith bitterly points out in *An Honourable Death* (1992), his revisionary novel on that quintessential Victorian and heroic stereotype of the noble Scottish Highland warrior, Brigadier-General Sir Hector Macdonald VC. Known throughout Britain and the world as 'Fighting Mac' for his military exploits in Afghanistan and Africa, Macdonald, son of a Ross-shire crofter, was at first adored as the hardest of Britain's sons; then, after discovery of his alleged homosexuality, disgraced to the point of suicide. Smith's novel contrasts the romantic view of Highland imperial achievement with the grotesque and ironic reality of the recurrent situation in which Highland regiments killed and were killed by enemies of Britain, both sides often unable to understand, far less speak, the English of their imperial manipulators. Military Kailyard fiction and poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century celebrates and sentimentalises as heroes such cannon-fodder, and the disproportionate contribution of the Highlands to the terrible death-

roll of two World Wars must surely stem in large part from the successful creation of that iconography. Queen Victoria's Scottish chaplain, Norman Macleod, turned out several of the most successful of these useful Empire-endorsing fictions. More insidiously, 'Fiona McLeod', the essential feminine Celtic spirit discovered inside himself by Surrey-based journalist William Sharp, ended Victoria's century with her/his Celtic Twilight pseudo-celebrations of the Gaels and their culture, in novels like *Pharais: A Romance of the Isles* (1894), and *The Mountain Lovers* (1895), portraying them as doomed children of the mist, last remnants of an ancient poetic race, now brain-fevered and dying into their Western oceans. Romantic though this might appear, it had a more sinister political subtext, as it can be seen as effectively condoning a political attitude of *laissez-faire* towards the, by now, all too restive Highlands, taken over as they were by absentee landlords of great hunting estates, landscape painters, and an educational system which outlawed the speaking of Gaelic in schools—while at the same time Ernest Renan, Matthew Arnold and Grant Allan paid glorious lip-service to Celtic achievement in the world. Two contrasting quotations here from Holbrook Jackson's chapter on 'The Discovery of the Celt' in his classic study of 1913, *The Eighteen-Nineties*, illustrate some of the worst excesses of pseudo-Celtic enthusiasm. The first is 'Fiona Macleod', indulging her poetic sensibility in lament for the glory that had been that of the Gael:<sup>4</sup>

Strange reversals, strange fulfilments, may lie on the lap of the gods, but we have no knowledge of these, and hear neither the laughter nor the far voices. But we front a spiritual destiny greater than the height of imperial fortunes, and have that which may send our voices further than the trumpets of East and West. Through ages of slow westering, till now we face the sundown seas, we have learned in continual vicissitude that there are secret ways whereon armies cannot march. And this has been given to us, a more ardent longing,

<sup>4</sup>Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen-Nineties* (London 1913); quotations from Pelican edition (1939), 147.

a more apt passion in the things of outward beauty and in the things of spiritual beauty. Nor it seems to me is there any sadness, or only the serene sadness of a great day's end, that, to others, we reveal in our best the genius of a race whose farewell is in a tragic lighting of torches of beauty around its grave.

If this typically exemplifies a view of the Gael which, for all its apparent dignifying of its subject, could be read as supporting political and social neglect of Gaelic economy and culture, other southern commentators presented a diametrically opposed but equally overblown rhetoric. Jackson quotes Grant Allen, who had in 1891 in *The Fortnightly Review* claimed astonishing Celtic influence over all things English (by which he meant, of course, British). In a grotesquely inflated claim which collapses under the weight of its own pretentious exaggeration, Allen found that Celtic influence had brought about almost every significant achievement and development in late-Victorian Britain, including Home Rule, Land Nationalisation, Socialism, Radicalism, the Tithes' War, and the Crofter Question; it had introduced to political life 'the eloquent young Irishman, the perfervid Highland Scot, the enthusiastic Welshman, the hard-headed Cornish miner', as well as Methodism, Catholicism, the Hebrides, the Scotland Division of Liverpool, and a host of Irish-Scottish Celtic writers:<sup>5</sup>

The Celt in Britain, like Mr Burne-Jones' enchanted princess, has lain silent for ages in enforced long sleep, but the spirit of the century, pushing aside the weeds and briars of privilege and caste, has set free the sleeper at last ...

Celtic Twilight proved to be a literary dawn in Ireland, but its counterpart in Scotland never emerged out of the gloaming. For a decade or so, under Patrick Geddes and his journal of the new Scottish Celticism, *The Evergreen* magazine, with Fiona McLeod, and other painters and poets (and with Rennie Mackintosh its most interesting by-product at the vogue's end), the Lowlands flirted with

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 147-8.

this latest fashion in Highland appropriation. Then the First World War burst that iridescent bubble for good, and a new wave of dark and sceptical novels of Highland realism and despair began to appear in the 'twenties with the work of Neil Gunn, Iain Macpherson and another, darker pseudonym denoting identification with Celtic ancestry, 'Fionn MacColla' (whose real name was Thomas Douglas Macdonald).<sup>6</sup>

A survey of that later revisioning of the Highlands lies beyond Neil Munro. I am motivated, in presenting him, by two considerations. Firstly, I claim that this is a major Scottish writer who for far too long has been seen as a second-rate Scott or Stevenson, or as the perennially entertaining creator of Para Handy and his crew, the loveable Highland—and Lowland—scamps of that relic of the Clyde, the puffer coal-boat, *The Vital Spark*. Secondly, and as importantly, I claim that he represents that badly undervalued period of Scottish culture from 1890 to 1914, when creative Scots grew heart-sick of the false mythologies and time-serving icons of nineteenth-century Scotland—the chieftains, the stags at bay, the minister and dominie serving simple worthy peasants in bens and glens, the lads of intellectual and high moral parts from simple schools and straths, the Scottish soldier, the Highland Lass—as well as all the cohorts of Lowland Heaven-taught farmer-and-weaver poets. Fed up with these stereotypes, images which had filled the vacuum of Scottish culture in the mid-century, a new breed of writers grew up, Highland and Lowland, with parodic mockery their primary weapon, and their aim the exposure of the ludicrous irrelevance of these stock representations. Their

<sup>6</sup>For examples of Gunn's re-assessment of Highland history, culture and character see *Sun Circle*, *Butcher's Broom* and *Highland River* (Edinburgh 1933, 1934, 1937); and *The Silver Darlings* (London 1941). Virtually all of Gunn's works of fiction and non-fiction contribute to this revaluation; most of his work is available in recent editions. For typical work of Iain Macpherson and 'Fionn MacColla' see Macpherson's *Shepherd's Calendar*, *Land of Our Fathers*, *Pride in the Valley* (London 1931, 1933, 1936) and MacColla's *The Albannach* (London 1932), *And the Cock Crew* (Glasgow 1945), and *The Ministers* (London 1979).

effect was to destroy false and anachronistic territorial boundaries and to reveal the interconnectedness of Lowlands and Highlands. Their work marks the point where old expedient prejudices of Lowlands against Highlands begin at last to crumble. MacDiarmid, Gunn, Gibbon, Mitchison and others of the so-called 'Scottish Renaissance' are usually credited with this dramatic revaluation; but this crucial and necessary destruction of the abundant distortions in Scottish cultural and historical representation generally was as much the work of Neil Munro, together with contemporaries in the Lowlands like George Douglas Brown of *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901). And at this point Lowland and Highland deconstruction of false ideologies merge. Munro's fiction inspires Douglas Brown, who in turn inspired a Highland *Green Shutters* in John MacDougall Hay's *Gillespie* (1914), set in Tarbert, Loch Fyne. This group, which includes Violet Jacob and Marion Angus, and the exiles James Barrie and John Davidson, began to break down the ancient cultural boundaries between Lowlands and Highlands. They deserve now to be seen as major figures in their own right, but also as providing the revisionist basis of what is too often compartmentalised in the 'twenties and 'thirties as 'The Scottish Cultural Renaissance'.

At this juncture we should note elsewhere in this volume Alison Lumsden's re-assessment of Walter Scott's treatment of the Highlands in his fiction.<sup>7</sup> She argues convincingly that Scott was not the great romanticiser of the Highlands, but—as critics have begun to realise—far more knowledgeable and satiric in his perspectives on the Highlands—and the Lowlands—than we have appreciated. She argues that his work should be read as far more interrogative of both cultures in relation to each other, with a surprisingly early recognition of the beginnings of boundary disintegration, along with a recognition of the increasing mutual interdependency of clanship and commerce. That said, the romanticising influence of Scott—whether this was his intent or not—on the popular view of Scottish

<sup>7</sup>See chapter 6.

history and Highlands is beyond doubt (although Lumsden makes clear that Scott was only a later part of this changing of perception), and novelists like William Black, James Grant, George Macdonald and Stevenson outstandingly added to this, joining the landscape painters in their inflated and exaggerated picture of a fiercely proud yet honest culture, which, while claiming individual equality within the clan, remained deeply subservient to the chief—a subservience which would be identified by writers like Munro and Gunn as the fatal flaw in Highland ideas of valour and kinship, leading to a fatalistic acceptance of Clearance and imperial militarisation. By the end of the century there existed a heady brew of realism and romance which too often went to the heads of the followers of Patrick Geddes and writers like Fiona McLeod. But there were other perspectives on the Highlands. As one of the most prolific and internationally influential writers about the Western Highlands, his work going into ten editions by the First World War, with another eleven by 1940, and a steady reprinting even now, where does Munro stand in relation to nineteenth-century image-making, and to the later ‘Scottish Renaissance’ which claimed revision of all previous portrayals of the Highlands?

Munro was born in Inveraray in 1863, the illegitimate son of a kitchen-maid in the castle. Rumours continue to the present that he was the unacknowledged son of a great Argyll. Whether he was or not, the equivocal nature of his birth pervasively influenced his fiction. On the one hand Munro identified with the great house of Argyll, Inveraray, and the West Highlands as representative of the best of Gaeldom, and leading it from barbarism to a new future in which it would bond with the Lowlands. But opposed to this, Munro also felt an antagonism towards his ancestral house, in which the absence of a father, together with his sensitivity towards the limitations of clan inheritance, leads to a portrayal of a series of Argyll father-chieftains and Campbell aristocrats as apparently noble, but flawed and bombastic, pretentious, anachronistic and representative of the failure of the clan-based Highlands to come to terms with a new world order where clan military and mercenary

values were outmoded and irrelevant. There is throughout his work a tension between instinctive and inherited reverence for martial Gaeldom, brilliantly evoked in scenes of battle such as Montrose's devastation of Argyll in 1644—and, on the other, a compassionate distaste for wanton slaughter, which comes out in sensitivity to the aftermath of such destruction, in the descriptions of smoking ruins and families destroyed. Munro understood Highland ferocity; the reader of his war-poems for 1914 like 'Hey Jock, are ye glad ye 'listed?' and 'Wild Rover Lads' could be forgiven for thinking that Munro was celebrating the continuity of the Highland warrior tradition. It is important to realise that these poems are spoken not so much by himself as by a *persona* representing the traditional blood-instinct for war of his forebears. Fierce sentiments like 'Come awa, Jock, and kill your man!'<sup>8</sup> have been misunderstood as representing an uglier side of Munro, when arguably they represent his representation of anachronistic Highland sentiments; the 'Jaunty Jock' of this poem is merely one of many dubious heroes following what the poem calls 'your daddy's trade', and the images and values of cocked bonnets and swagger are very much those attacked most ferociously by Munro in his short story 'War', discussed below. Taken with Munro's work as a whole, the poems are part of his complex exposure of ancient attitudes which in 1914 culminated in his greatest attack on Highland military anachronism, his last and greatest novel, *The New Road*, in which General Wade's opening up of the old Highlands to trade with the Lowlands is triumphantly endorsed, and most of all for its destruction of the selfish, sinister and manipulative chieftains at the centre of webs of anachronistic corruption, such as the strutting double-dealing blackmailer

<sup>8</sup>The line is from Munro's apparently bellicose poem, 'Hey, Jock, are ye glad ye 'listed?' Munro intended a collection of his poetry; this was unpublished in his lifetime, but appeared in 1931 with an introduction by John Buchan as *The Poetry of Neil Munro* (Edinburgh 1931; Stevenage 1987). In an early draft of a prefatory note Munro explains that some of his war poems 'take on that spirit of braggadocio which comes so naturally to youth ... and to races like the Gaels who loiter so much in their past ...': *ibid.*, 5.

Barisdale or the treacherous MacShimi, Simon Lord Lovat, symbol of what Munro sees as the endless betrayals and treacheries of the Northern clans.

Significantly, Munro did not stay long in Inveraray. At eighteen he was in Glasgow, shortly to begin an illustrious career in journalism which would see him become Scotland's outstanding newspaper editor and critic, spanning the worlds of industry and commerce as well as the arts, with *The Glasgow Evening News*. (The bulk of Munro's huge body of journalism has never been published in book form, although his close friend, the novelist George Blake, published two collections, *The Brave Days* (1931) and *The Looker-On* (1933) showing the richness and range of his commentaries on the new twentieth-century Scotland.)<sup>9</sup> Munro never returned to live in Inveraray, but moved restlessly around Glasgow, Eaglesham, Gourrock and Helensburgh, his choice of homes revealing an underlying desire to accommodate both Highlands and Lowlands. The maps which Munro chose to accompany two late works, his study of *The Clyde* (1907) and the Highland novel *The New Road* (1914) reflect Munro's interlocking and overlapping territories; the reader who surveys their coverage of territory begins to understand how this writer, vastly influential in his time, was helping to usher in a new phase in Scottish cultural awareness, where Lowland perceptions of the Highlands as 'the other', the wild zone beyond the Clyde and the barrier mountains of Perthshire, begin to disintegrate, with the Scottish regions becoming, in popular consciousness and in the minds of Renaissance writers, intertwined and part of an emerging meta-identity for Scotland. After the Great War others like MacDiarmid followed, if they did not always acknowledge, Munro's inspiration (C. M. Grieve's choice of pseudonym is, after all, homage

<sup>9</sup>As 'Mr Incognito', for the last three years of his life (1927–1930) Munro produced a series of 'Random Reminiscences' for Glasgow's *The Daily Mail and Record*. A selection by George Blake appeared as *The Brave Days: A Chronicle From the North* (Edinburgh 1931). Blake's second selection, from Munro's huge number of articles for *The Glasgow Evening News*, spanning almost forty years' contributions, appeared as *The Looker-On* (Edinburgh 1933).

to the master-tribe of Diarmid, Munro's oldest, pre-Clan Campbell forebears, suggesting an underlying ideological link). The work of Neil Gunn, Lewis Grassie Gibbon, Eric Linklater and Naomi Mitchison would follow Munro in developing a synthesis of Highland and Lowland folk tradition, legend and myth.

Munro is profoundly important for this later reorientation. Hostile to the Kailyard and Celtic Twilight movements from the beginning, his first desire was to interpret the Highlands from the inside, since he felt that all previous literary evocations had been Lowland distortions. The result was the pioneering collection of short stories, *The Lost Pibroch* of 1896, published in the same year as Barrie's satire on Scotland's repression of imagination and art, *Sentimental Tommy*, and in the period of the most ferocious of anti-kailyarders—and anti-Scots! —of the time, John Davidson, whose fiction and poetry marks another savage break with a romanticised past. Subtly exploiting and parodying the nostalgic self-indulgence and pseudo-Celtic mannerisms of 'Fiona Macleod', these poetic stories are essentially tragic, elegiac, and satiric. They draw in style from the great collections of oral tradition by J. F. Campbell, *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860–2) but they consciously underweave a dark sub-text which can easily be missed given the strength of their narratives, their cruel and often shocking twists of fate, and their seemingly sincere but deceptively mannered Celticism. The title story tells of a haunting and ancient pipe tune which must not be played. If it is played—and of course it is played, such is the vanity of the rival pipers—a blight will descend on the dear green places of the Highlands, and villages will lose their young men to emigration and war, following a nameless yearning. Munro never explicitly answers the implied question as to why an ancient pipe tune played by a blind piper should contain a curse of such power; but there is already the suggestion that something dark in the Gaelic inheritance, a 'feyness' or fatedness, has entered Highland culture, together with an excessive vanity and jealousy of loyalties which forces endless and unnecessary challenges of blood and vendetta. Story after story has this sly sub-text. A jealous second wife

slashes the piping hand of her stepson, who threatens to outplay his father, a son kills his unknown father as a result of a pointless, long-drawn blood feud, jealous brothers drive a French lover from their enchanted sister, and again and again tragedy results when neighbouring communities and clans are mutually distrustful and ready to find the insult that leads to bloodshed. Romance is a deceit, the traditional artist an anachronism—blind, crippled, or pushed outside the community to wander. The last pibroch has been played.

Three stories outstandingly represent Munro's attack on what he felt had become the weakened heart of his Highlands; 'Boboon's Children', 'Castle Dark', and 'War'. The first tells of how John Fine Macdonald, leader of an ancient nomadic tribe, at one with season and landscape, portrayed as a kind of *ur*-Highlander, is 'civilised' by the Campbell Captain of Inveraray. The Captain is seen as a pseudo-father who aims to destroy these original and natural Highlanders, with his clanship enclosure of their ancient and nomadic simplicity of spirit. Boboon hears his tribe calling at night to him from outside the castle walls, and eventually succumbs to their outlaw temptations of salmon and deer and freedom—but his daughter dies as the Captain's prisoner-wife. 'Castle Dark' is even more revealing of Munro's sense that something ancient and good in Highland tradition has been corrupted by dominance of ideas of castle power and male assertions of the values of war. In this, the closing story of the collection, a fable of Highland history and culture, the blind piper, Paruig Dall—he whose piping of the legendary Lost Pibroch sent Highlanders wandering the earth, and whose story opened the volume—begins with his description of Castle Dark, which seems to be an archetype of all great Highland houses and clans. 'Once upon a time', Paruig tells us, 'Castle Dark was a place of gentility and stirring days ... now it is like a deer's skull in Wood Mamore, empty, eyeless, sounding to the whistling wind, but blackened instead of bleached in the threshing rains'.<sup>10</sup> To find this quintessential castle of all the Highlands, the traveller must journey twice on the Blue

<sup>10</sup>Neil Munro, 'Castle Dark', *The Lost Pibroch* (Edinburgh 1896), 261.

Barge, the *birlinn ghorm*, the galley of Fairy Lorn; thus Munro deepens the idea that the journey is one of spirit and imagination rather than actuality. Paruig tells us how an Adventurer made the two trips; Munro, behind him, setting out his dark three-stage account of Highland declension. On his first trip:<sup>11</sup>

When Adventurer reached the bridge, it was before the time of war, and the country from end to end sat quiet, free, and honest. Our folks lived the clean out-by life of shepherds and early risers. Round these hills the woods—the big green woods—were trembling with bird and beast, and the two glens were crowded with warm homes,—every door open, and the cattle untethered on the hill. Summer found the folks like ourselves here, far up on sappy levels among the hills, but their sheilings more their own than ours are, with never a reiver nor a broken clan in all the land. Good stout roads and dry went down the passes to Castle Dark from all airts of Albainn—roads for knight and horse, but free and safe for the gentlest girl ever so lonely. By sea came gabberts of far France with wine and drink; by land the carriers brought rich cloths, spices and Italian swords ...

But the harmony of these ancient days is not to last. Even as Adventurer marvels at the tranquillity and beauty of the land, he realises how the Highlands are changing, as he overhears the young chief of Castle Dark taking farewell of his lover. Echoing the first story of the volume, he tells her, 'I am for the road tomorrow'. 'For yon silly cause again?' she sighs:<sup>12</sup>

'For the old cause', said he; 'my father's, my dead brother's, my clan's, ours for a hundred years. Do not lightly the cause, my dear; it may be your children's yet'.

And, with the false promises of 'War', the chief goes off to the endless clan feuds, battles, and wars so beloved of romance, but which Munro sees as terminally destructive for his Highlands. The second trip on the Blue Barge reveals the extent of the tragedy.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 266–7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 270–1.

“Twas a summer’s end when he [Adventurer] went on the next jaunt, a hot night and hung with dripping stars. The loch crawled in from a black waste of sorrow and strange hills ... hissing among the wreck ...’<sup>13</sup>

Suddenly, with savage reversal, it is winter, despite Paruig’s beginning the jaunt with summer. ‘Winter I said, and winter it was’—and morning too, emphasizes Paruig, deliberately contradicting himself to emphasize that the times are out of joint:<sup>14</sup>

It was the middle and bloodiest time of all our wars. The glens behind were harried, and their cattle were bellowing in strange fields. Widows grat on the brae-sides and starved their bairns for the bere and oat that were burned. But Adventurer found a castle full of company, the rich scum of water-side lairds and Lowland gentry, dicing and drinking in the best hall of Castle Dark. Their lands were black, their homes levelled, or their way out of the country—if they were Lowland—was barred by jealous clans ...

Munro’s nightmare picture of what Argyll and the Highlands have become after internecine wars and Jacobite rebellions is prolonged, with drunken card-playing and slumbering wrecks of revellers littering the castle. The extent of degradation is represented in the self-hatred of George Mor, a mercenary famous, ‘namely for women and wine and gentlemanly sword-play’.<sup>15</sup> That ‘gentlemanly’ is deeply ironic; George Mor is one of the first of a long line of ‘Jaunty Jocks’ and John Splendids, raffish adventurers twisted by Highland feud and war-culture into a deformation of older Highland values. The story’s climax comes with the return of Castle Dark’s young chief, embittered and yet again disillusioned to find that George Mor would appear to have taken his place with his lady. Whether he has or not is left open; they fight, and George Mor is killed. The story—and the collection—ends as it began, with desolation, the end of

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 275–6.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 276.

Castle Dark, the young chief yet again for the road that leads to the furthest ends of the world.

Munro's satiric vision of his Highlands can be seen developing in these tales. Broadly he sees Highland culture and history as existing in three distinct periods—firstly, a golden age (anticipating key ideas of the later writers such as Gunn, Gibbon, and Muir); secondly, the descent into clan rivalry and bloodthirsty wars of so-called honour; and thirdly, an inevitable move of Highlanders out into the big world of trade and commerce, yet too often as exiles or mercenaries, and leaving behind the nostalgic wasteland of half-pay retired soldiers and empty boasters mulling over their war memories, so vividly represented in the novel *Gilian the Dreamer*. Increasingly Munro's work identifies the archetypal Highlander as unreliable, deceitful and flattering, too often a braggart who represents the tragic flaw at the heart of the degeneration of a once-noble clanship: clan feuding and approved despoliation, a social system which finds its ultimate value in stealing cattle and killing women and children in the name of tribal honour, and in which the traditional equality of blood kinship (found with Boboon and his children) has been replaced by the hierarchical claims of the clan chief in his new and anglicised guise of Marquis or Earl or Duke.

Munro was never more scathing about this male-dominated and hierarchical swaggering than in 'War', one of the starkest and most effective of his many tragedies. Rob Donn follows Duke John to Culloden and the boastful, satisfied killing of fellow-Highlanders, leaving his pregnant wife with no money, but with pretentious promises of his returning glory. Months pass; the restless soldier squanders the money he took from his wife; glutted with killing, he returns just as his wife, her own milk long dry, in last extremity of famine drawing off blood from her cow for her baby, hears the child's death-cry. The closing passages, with their evocation of the swagger of the Campbells as they boast of their defeat of Charles at Culloden, convey the depth of Munro's hatred and disgust at warlike male posturing, as Rob Donn returns home with the cockade of the

seventh man he has killed as a gift for the child he has left to starvation and death:<sup>16</sup>

... Rob Donn left the company as it passed near his own door.  
 'Faith, 'tis a poor enough home-coming, without wife or bairn to meet one', said he as he pushed in the door.  
 'Wife! Wife!' he cried ben among the peat-reek, 'there's never a stot, but here's the cockade for the little one!'

Here, with George Mor of 'Castle Dark', is the prototype for the Jaunty Jocks, the 'John Heilanmen'—and ultimately the Campbell chieftains themselves, who are merely their swaggering clan unreliaables writ large. Munro will play with endless cunning with many variations of the type—and the name—of Highland Jock. A kindlier and later mood—yet, I will argue, still parodic and satiric—will see Munro reshape them into the crew of *The Vital Spark*, slipping in and out of Highland and Lowland ports with all the unreliability and shiftiness of their forebears, generally avoiding any claims of duty and responsibility, and covering their tracks with the relics of older self-inflating importance. But in 1898, with *John Splendid*, Munro was out to change Lowland perceptions of the Highlands with a subtle but deadly undermining of the House of Argyll from within.

For this is the strangest of historical romances—indeed, it is closer to the anti-romance of Lowlander James Hogg in his *Tales of the Wars of Montrose*, and particularly the parody of historical romance of *An Edinburgh Bailie* (1835). The two 'heroes', ex-soldiers of European fortune John McIver (John Splendid, so called because of his vain but charismatic demeanour) and 'sobersides' Colin Elrignore, are amongst the Marquis of Argyll's right-hand men. The events are set amidst Montrose-Macdonald's ravaging of Argyllshire in 1644, and the consequent pursuit of Montrose by Argyll, in which the hunted became the hunter. After his legendary mountain march Montrose surprised and destroyed Argyll's army at Inverlochy,

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 241–2.

and—for the second time—Argyll fled from him, leaving his men to death and disgrace.

Argyll's double shame hangs over the book; and virtually all the narrative shares this overall feeling. For John and Colin achieve nothing for their side, apart from saving their own and some of their friends' skins. As far as battle goes, they are strangely ineffective, getting caught by their enemies as they carelessly dispute Highland poetry with the cranky Bard of Keppoch, John Lom Macdonald, before the battle of Inverlochry. They are on the run constantly, slouching like thieves, begging from poor women in lonely cottages, lost on Rannoch Moor, inglorious in their company and their cause. The reader should realise that this is a parodic extension of Scott's ambiguous presentation of complex protagonists such as Edward Waverley or Redgauntlet, as well as of Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, with its apparently similar but essentially different Breck-Balfour relationship. The tradition in the Scottish novel of sly use of dramatic monologue, from the work of Galt and Hogg down to *The Master of Ballantrae*, in which the suspect teller of the tale reveals more about his limitations than he knows, is maintained here in Colin Elrighmore's obtuse unawareness throughout the novel that his idolised Betty, the Provost's daughter, loves, and is being wooed by, his apparent boon companion John Splendid. Little is as it claims to be in this novel: Highland honour is exposed as sham bragging, shallow loyalty, and male egocentricity, as John wheedles, struts, and manipulates up to the edge of murder, with Colin his rather dull Sancho Panza.

These nasty little wars of Lorn, with their rival leaders Montrose and Argyll seen as hardly in control of their armies, are strangely detached from what is going on in the bigger British world. Munro deliberately leaves out any account of what Argyll is up to in the bigger world, and nothing of how he plays his much greater game with Covenanters, King Charles, and Westminster parliamentarians. The Highlanders are not interested in the larger picture, and Munro thus shows their limited and disconnected mindset. And nowhere is Munro's point about reductive Highland insularity made more clear

than in the treatment by his Campbell adherents of Archibald the Grim, Gillespie Gruamach, Marquis of Argyll. Their failure to understand his new-world vision, and their insistence on fawning upon his least wish, is summed up in his relationship with John Splendid. Here is the key to Munro's psychological analysis of the destructive mindset of Gaeldom, and it is a critical assessment the more trenchant because it comes from within, from the heart of Inveraray—or at least from an Inveraray exile moved by love and profound disillusion.

Argyll can be read as representing the beginning of the third phase of Highland development as predicted and half-welcomed, half-deplored by Munro; namely, that move away from clan identification and ethos to acceptance of the values of a bigger world. Argyll plays his part—whatever his failings—in this bigger world; it will lead him to execution in Edinburgh ten years after Montrose. John Splendid will have none of Argyll's bookish and civilising tendencies—freedom to war, at home against Macdonalds or the Atholl men, or abroad as mercenary, never judging the morality of the cause, is John the Hielanman's way, as long as he cuts a good figure, and fair speech is given to friends. As the novel develops, Munro shows the Lowlands changing Inveraray. The new shopkeepers, the vessels from Glasgow and Ayr, and the new 'English' church with its dour minister Gordon seem to sleepy Colin at first an intrusion, but by the end of the book he accepts the need for Lowland influence and change, and even decides—to Splendid's discomfiture—that the most courageous soldier and the best man throughout the sorry wars of Lorn has been the minister Gordon, the dour and inflexible Lowlander, the only man to speak plain and honest, without Highland flattery and face-saving and boasting—especially to Argyll. The most impressive part of this strange treatment of what could so easily be the subject for romance lies at the end, when Argyll lies sick in his castle after Inverloch. John Splendid and Argyll's leaders had at the beginning advised him to quit Inveraray—and then again Inverloch—to lead the clan another day. Their subservient and face-saving advice has brought

about the spiritual demoralisation of the Campbells. Now at last Argyll begs his cousin John McIver to speak true and to tell him what he thinks of his chief, maintaining that he has been the victim of the smooth-tongued 'Highland liar'. And at last John seems to speak out honestly—although even now it will appear afterwards that his apparent final frankness has been calculated roleplaying, and his dramatic declaration to abandon Argyll for European wars was for effect only:<sup>17</sup>

'What do I think?' echoed McIver. 'Well, now—'  
 'On your honour now', cried Argyle, clutching him by the shoulder. At this McIver's countenance changed: he threw off his soft complacency, and cruelty and temper stiffened his jaw.  
 'I'll soon give you that, my Lord of Argile', said he. 'I can lie like a Dutch major for convenience sake, but put me on honour and you'll get the truth if it cost me my life. Purgatory's your portion, Argile, for a Sunday's work that makes our name a mock today across the envious world. Take to your books and your preachers, sir—you're for the cloister and not for the field: and if I live a hundred years, I'll deny I went with you to Inverlochy ... Tomorrow the old big wars for me ... and I'll find no swithering captains among the Cavaliers in France'.

This is a subtle novel, and a superficial reading will miss the fact that both Argyll and McIver are being satirised, the one for accepting corrupt and hierarchical flattery, the other for giving it, and failing to see that the day of the old barbaric Highlands is over. Yet even in McIver's retraction we realise that he is equivocating; as he admits to Elrigrmore, 'I could scarcely say myself when a passion of mine is real or fancied'; while Elrigrmore, while still seeing him as his friend, can describe him in these closing stages as 'a most wicked, cunning, cruel fellow'. Such ambivalences and qualifications are Munro's way of expressing his love and hate for the way the essential early and natural goodness of Highland culture has been warped into time-serving deceit and arrogance. John must not be

<sup>17</sup>Neil Munro, *John Splendid* (Edinburgh 1898), 279–80.

read solely as Highland deceiver; he has many of the old virtues—the skills of a scout, the loyalty to immediate comrades, an instinctive protectiveness towards women and children. He may deceive Colin Elrimore in love, but he relinquishes his chances for love to the younger man, and does indeed go off to Europe—leaving as the end of the novel the realisation by Betty that she has lost the man she really loves through misunderstanding, and the possible realisation—for he *is* dense!—by Colin that the woman he will marry will always love another—hardly the conventional romantic finale!

If *John Splendid* is important as Munro's fusion and summation into the two main figures of John Splendid and Argyll of all he deprecates and values in a period of Highland culture which has lost its way, then his next novel, *Gilian the Dreamer* (1899) is its counterpart, an assessment of the nineteenth-century Highlands at the tail-end of the Napoleonic wars, when innumerable half-pay colonels ('Cornals' in Inveraray) and major-generals returned from Spain and Europe to rot in Inveraray and the small Highland towns, in a dwam of bloody and glorious memories of the foreign wars of Empire. It is the era of an even more illustrious and by now remote London grandee Duke John, McCailein Mòr, and these washed-up soldiers are the heirs of John Splendid. Munro mercilessly anatomizes them, and their repressive and malign influence on a burgh struggling to enter modernity. Casual reading will miss the deadliness of Munro's satire on these pensioned-off relics, boorish to their women, utterly self-centred, and nurturing old feuds. Munro was never more acidic than in his picture of the three Campbells of Keil: the old general Dugald, virtually dead apart from his memories in his dull room in a dark tenement; his brothers, Cornal John and the bull-necked Paymaster Captain John Campbell, another version of Jaunty Jock, and perhaps the least attractive. His is a portrayal of colossal male egotism which was to be developed in Douglas Brown's Ayrshire merchant-tyrant Gourlay in *The House With the Green Shutters* two years later, and in the Highland merchant-tyrant Gillespie in Hay's novel of that name of 1914, set in Tarbert. Munro's

half-pay officers are in varying degrees bullies, philistines and anachronisms, unquestioning killers for empire. Munro leaves some of them—like the decent general, John Turner—respectability and a place to fulfil in the world; but in the main this town has become a place of drunken ex-soldiers roistering in its taverns while women do the work.

But Munro has deeper issues to fathom—and now he articulates a crucial Scottish predicament, which illustrates how he transcends Highland limitations to speak, like Neil Gunn after him, for Scottish culture and its failings. Gilian—the name a mocking echo of Gilian-of-the-Axe, one of Munro's Celtic folk heroes—is a fatherless boy of twelve whose grandmother has died. From the start we realise he is an unusual and perhaps not entirely healthy child; utterly alone at her death in Ladyfield, a small farm outside Inveraray, he plays on his imagination as to how he will tell his sad news in the town – suddenly, for maximum impact? Leading up slowly, for other, more complex effect? Gilian plays with his grief, genuine enough, but dearer still to him for its imaginative and emotional effects. This is fine natural awareness and sensibility gone wrong through marginalisation.

For this boy is in his way a genius, with an imagination which cannot be fulfilled in this repressive burgh, with its lack of any aesthetic nourishment. Munro is in fact asking the question Scott posed in *Waverley* in 1814, and posed again in 1896 by Stevenson in his portrayal of hyper-sensitive Archie Weir of Hermiston, and yet again in the same year—and just three years before *Gilian*—by James Barrie in his study of imaginative genius in an equally repressive environment, in *Sentimental Tommy*. Clearly this recurrent focus on socially thwarted Scottish creativity stems from a recurrent and highly significant preoccupation of serious Scottish writers, for it is also central to George Douglas Brown's portrait of the excessively sensitive and imaginative John Gourlay junior in his novel of repressive small town life, as it is in MacDougall Hay's *Gillespie* thirteen years later, in his evocation of the disturbed mind of young

Eochan Strang, sensitive to his environment and family pressures to the point of his destruction.

What is the question? It is simply this; what happens to creative genius in a culture and country which cannot and will not provide nourishment for it? And the answer, from all these writers—and Eric Linklater, Robin Jenkins and Iain Crichton Smith thereafter, to name but a few of the major writers who later took up the same theme—is that creative imagination becomes sick when its community denies it, forcing it inward into uncertain roleplaying to the point where it is an irrelevance, even a danger to its community and society.

It is important to realise that this novel is not just about the loss of ancient bardic involvement in Highland community. Munro's perception of the Highlands is beginning to merge with a more general perception of the overall problems of Scottish culture, including problems of Anglicisation, neglect of native language and genius, and a hardening of philistine attitudes towards local talent and subject-matter. (The problem will remain at the forefront of Scottish culture, whether urban or rural, until the seventies, as shown in novels like Archie Hind's *The Dear Green Place* (1966) and Iain Crichton Smith's *Consider the Lilies* (1968)—one set in Glasgow, the other set in Strathnaver, but both deploring the repression of the creative imagination in a repressive society.) And nowhere in Scottish literature is re-assessment more needed than in this area in which the treatment of this central theme of Scottish fiction through ironic parody brings together such a mixture of writers too readily labelled as 'kailyard' or 'romantic escapist' or 'over-blackly realist'.

Gilian isn't a John Splendid. Indeed, he's closer to Munro himself, and this novel is arguably a working out of Munro's own troubled awareness of Campbell fatherhood as well as his recognition that Inveraray could never be a complete home to him. We never learn who Gilian's father is; is it the Paymaster, who owns Ladyfield, where Gilian's mother worked? Why else does he assume responsibility for the boy? Gilian is a misfit who will fail the

assessment of all but the few who see his buried qualities. To his adoptive Campbells he is a playacting fool; to his contemporaries at school a wild and unpredictable solitary; to his friend Nan, merely a foil to her love interests elsewhere. Yet again Munro introduces parody of the conventional love narrative of romance, as Gilian woos Nan Turner—only to lose her to the genuine boy of action, young Islay Campbell, who saves her from shipwreck when, like the wayward hero of Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), he is frozen at the moment of truth into thinking too precisely on the event. Imagination is divorced from action, argues Munro, seeing Gilian's predicament as symptomatic of a sickness at the heart of Highland culture. (Intriguingly Munro knew and liked Conrad, having met him in Glasgow in 1899, when Conrad was seeking a ship's command; one can only speculate as to whether they shared thoughts on their mutual preoccupation with the dangers of disablingly excessive imagination.) Casual reading will miss the parody of romance, as Gilian, utterly at home with birds, animals and all nature, finds himself trapped between what Munro portrays as the ancient and natural Highland landscape and its traditions—the world of 'Boboon's Children'—and this ugly, contradictory and deeply unsatisfying modern world which has no respect for Art, whether it be legendary tale or traditional song—a Highland world, but now very like its Lowland counterpart, in its absorption into empire and Britain.

A chapter such as this cannot do justice to the entire and neglected output of this writer. Other Highland—and island—novels, such as *Doom Castle* (1901) and *Children of Tempest* (1903) followed, together with Lowland work like the *Shoes of Fortune* (1901) and, of course, the *Para Handy*, *Jimmy Swan* and *Erchie* stories running from 1904 into the twenties. Always the dark undercurrents remained, together with the sense of a writer seeking new, parodic ways of handling old romances or humorous yet deceptively realistic stories of the new, urban Scotland. And always the John Splendid figure recurs, in different guises—as the magnificent villain Sim McTaggart, Argyll's factor, in *Doom Castle*, a

spy on the Jacobites in France who has fled home from his betrayals, but a charmer whose flute-playing hypnotises the reader throughout the novel into disbelief that he can be such an evil sham. In *The Shoes of Fortune*, Lowlander Paul Greig, exiled from Scotland, falls in with Highland intrigue in France with Prince Charles and Clementina Walkinshaw. He discovers that the lady is formidable, if decent, while the prince—the ultimate John Splendid?—and his adherents are utterly vain and corrupt. This novel leads directly to Violet Jacob's historical deconstruction of Jacobitism in her novel *Flemington* (1911) (rediscovered and edited by Carol Anderson),<sup>18</sup> while *Children of Tempest* helped inspire Gunn to *The Gray Coast* and *The Lost Glen* in the twenties. And then there are two experimental and highly theoretical novels set in what is virtually the modern Scotland of the turn of the century, which, if not as successful as these others, break entirely new ground in their speculations regarding future Highland development. *The Daft Days* (1907) shocks the sleepy backwater of Inveraray with a girl-version of Gilian, the thoroughly modern and irrepressible American child Bud, whose fresh thinking sweeps cobwebs out of the old town. Munro said that he loved Americans 'because they beat that stupid old King George and laughed at dynasties'; while *Fancy Farm* (1910) unsuccessfully tried to recreate a Highlander of the old natural order in the unbelievable reformer Sir Andrew Schaw—but successfully presented a picture of how New Woman may ruthlessly sweep out Highland failings and prejudice.

Munro was writing now as the successful and influential Lowland and Glasgow editor. His perspectives had greatly changed. He was now the sophisticated art critic, whose discussions of the paintings of Whistler, French impressionism and Rennie Mackintosh richly deserve republication, as do the dozen or so unpublished volumes of rich commentary on war, the changing industrial Clyde, the fascinating new technologies of the Empire exhibitions, the New Glasgow. Munro would certainly have laughed at MacDiarmid's

<sup>18</sup>Violet Jacob, *Flemington*, ed. Carol Anderson (Aberdeen 1994).

ideas that Glasgow, at any rate, needed a renaissance, since he believed that Scottish culture was already in revival, with his Glasgow and Lowland life a rich mixture of art and commerce. But for all this relocation, he was still developing his final view of the Highlands, which found articulation in 1914 in his last and greatest historical novel, *The New Road*, of what he saw as the most significant transition in Highland culture, that of the period between the 'Fifteen and the 'Forty-five Jacobite rebellions, when Wade's roads would drain away what he now clearly saw as the poison at the heart of the Highlands.

At the same time he was also trying out other ways of expressing this sense of the flawed Highland inheritance. Osborne and Armstrong's recent and richly annotated editions of Munro's later comic stories of Para Handy and the crew of *The Vital Spark* suggest that we have not always realised the depth of social and satiric comment in Munro's presentation of his Highland sailors.<sup>19</sup> I would argue that Munro's aims here are only partially comic and entertaining, and that these stories, albeit in an apparently more light-hearted way, are nevertheless critical, derogatory and ironic portrayals which continue into the modern period Munro's portrayal of Highland cultural malaise. These anachronistic misfits—and especially the charismatic but utterly selfish, manipulative, and amoral Hurricane Jack—are the heirs of John Splendid, latter-day Jaunty Jocks who cannot adapt to modern realities. Munro himself grew somewhat disgusted with their immense popularity; and while he may simply have felt fed up and perhaps ashamed of prolonging their shelf-life, it may be also that he felt his stories had been misread. The hilarity of Para's hilarious escapades should not blind us to two deeper, if typically ambivalent messages. The first of these sub-texts is that the crew are a feckless, squabbling lot, who will

<sup>19</sup>Neil Munro, *Para Handy: the collected stories from 'The Vital Spark', 'In Highland harbours with Para Handy', and 'Hurricane Jack of the Vital Spark', with eighteen previously uncollected stories*, edd. Brian. D. Osborne and Ronald Armstrong (Edinburgh 1992). See also Osborne and Armstrong's *Erchie and Jimmie Swan: with fifty-nine previously uncollected stories* (Edinburgh 1993).

neither work nor want, who slip in and out of Highland and Lowland harbours with equal disrespect, who would literally sell each other down the river with the exception of Sunny Jim, whose presence in the stories was cut short with his being replaced by the most dubious and clay-footed Jaunty Jock of them all, the idol of the crew of *The Vital Spark*, the arch-schemer Hurricane Jack. Readers could well revisit his exploits; they will discover the most manipulative and ruthlessly selfish of all Munro's Highlanders, cunningly disguised by Munro through the adulation of the crew as a colourful scamp.

The second sub-text is less satirically damaging—and here we may invoke the current literary fashion for citing Michel Bahktin as a source of possible revaluation of the subversive, the lowlife and the bawdily irreverent in our literature from the Makars to Ramsay, Fergusson, and the Jolly Beggars of Burns. Are the crew not the descendants of Burns' motley misfits, as they mock the pretentious, refuse to be located in any system, and generally ape their betters with their parodic and pompous philosophising? In any event, they are the heirs of the mixed qualities of John Splendid; and Munro's deceptively genial relocation of them into a territory neither sea nor land, neither ocean nor river, neither Highland or Lowland, marks their author's revisioning of Scottish literature and culture as having become a single entity, where no part of the whole can any longer claim separate vitality, and where the Highlands are seen as having to accept this inevitable commercial and cultural change.

All of Munro's development to this point goes into his last and greatest historical novel, clearly separated from the earlier Highland work by ten years. *The New Road* is his masterpiece, with a detached irony which runs alongside a more generous and affectionate recognition of a lingering but doomed survival of that original and natural spirit of the Highlands. This survival is exemplified in his vivid and affirmative picture of Ninian MacGregor Campbell, who takes his place between Scott's Rob Roy, and John Splendid at his best. Inveraray and the house of Argyll are now seen as a bridge between old Highlands and new Lowlands, fulfilling

Gillespie Gruamach's dream. It is a novel in the grand tradition of Scottish mythic regeneration in fiction, taking its place alongside the best of Scott, Gunn and Mitchison.

It begins in 1733. Aeneas Macmaster is a tutor in Drimdorran house to Black Sandy Duncanson, agent supreme of London, and Edinburgh-based Duke Red John. Aeneas's father Paul, who rashly went out on the Jacobite side in the little-remembered Glenshiel rising of 1719, is presumed drowned, and Black Sandy has taken over his forfeited estate. Fears are growing of another rebellion; arms are being smuggled from Holland, and the chief of Clan Fraser, the dreaded MacShimi, Simon Lord Lovat, is spinning his latest web of intrigue and self-aggrandisement in his fastness in Inverness. Against this movement into typical Highland unrest, however, is the Road; Wade's regiments are toiling without cease to drive the first-ever passage for troops and commerce through the glens.

These two counter-movements are echoed in subtle patterns of juxtaposition throughout the novel. And here the debt of Munro to Scott must be acknowledged, for Munro is once again reworking an earlier fiction – this time that most misunderstood of Scott novels, *Rob Roy*. Scott's great oppositions of past and present, disorder and order, Highland and Lowland, are reworked here to bring Scott's predictions of the triumph of order to fulfilment. The oppositions are rich. Here is the Inveraray Bailie Alan-Iain-Alain Og Macmaster, reformed Highlander, the modern Baillie Nicol Jarvie who relishes the impact that the Road will have on his wild countrymen; and, set beside him, his friend—a subtle joke here—a cousin of Rob Roy's in the form of *Iain Beachdair*, 'John the Scout', Ninian Macgregor Campbell, who can be seen almost as a Rob Roy himself, if more socially acceptable, since he is in the Duke's service as his messenger-at-arms, and since he has all Rob's cunning and natural skills. The connection with John Splendid through name is also intentional; for, if the Bailie is the future, third phase of Highland integration with the Lowlands, then Ninian is descendant of Boboon, the original captain of the children of the mist (a motif which runs

through the novel), chanter of ancient and pagan prayers and absolutely at home in wild nature.

As in Scott's novel, this pairing of opposites is symbolic. Ancient and modern will destroy the corruption which came with the clans – of MacShimi, of all the petty chieftains, and of Black Sandy, who turns out not to be serving his Duke, but to be the murderer of Aeneas' father and in league with McShimi and his treacherous chieftains. And with another unlikely pairing, Munro returns to exploit *Kidnapped* again, this time by setting Aeneas on a journey with Ninian, with two aims. Aeneas is to learn the new trading skills, while Ninian is to seek out the arms smugglers and the plotters of rebellion. The journey will finally destroy all Aeneas's romantic notions of the Highlands. He finds the apparently impressive and romantic giant Highland brigand Col Barisdale to be a hollow drum, a huge bullying bubbly-jock; he finds the merchants of Inverness haggling like fishwives over salmon and salt and pickled beef; he finds the lairds planning to cut down woods to feed their new furnaces. He vows never to wear the kilt again, and, says Munro, 'his dream dispelled of a poetic world surviving in the hills, he got malicious and secret joy from stripping every rag of false heroics from such gentry'<sup>20</sup>—summarising Munro's own longer journey of highland revaluation.

At the heart of the novel lie potent symbols. On the one hand, Munro places in opposition two kinds of Highland power-broker—one, the black Highland spider, MacShimi, rotten to the core, with his kidnappings, his flattery of his fawning clansmen with the old lie of equality, his lust for total power; on the other, Duke John, accepted now as a force for improvement—but never allowed the dignity and status given to Duncan Forbes of Culloden as the real new peace-maker of the Highlands. And, most powerful symbol of all, the Road; a nightmare construction for Wade's men, threatened by winter, flood and attack by the clans, who see all too well what it spells for them. Its epic, steady movement north is brilliantly evoked

<sup>20</sup>Neil Munro, *The New Road* (Edinburgh 1914), 177.

by Munro, a vision of the future Scotland, its internal boundaries broken down. Munro has regrets. Ninian will lament the loss of open landscape and freedom, and the decline of the Gael's sinewy athleticism—but, as in Scott's ambivalent treatments of Scottish history, his reason sees these losses as secondary to necessary progress and national integration.

The treatment of boundaries is one of the most intriguing features of this novel. Aeneas may at times feel Inveraray to be a Gaelic-speaking, Highland place; but frequently its status as a gateway to the Lowlands is emphasized, and the roads south from it are main routes, stripped to the rock by passing commerce. Conversely, as Aeneas and Ninian move north, they encounter boundaries as real to them as any separating Inveraray from the Lowlands. Several times Ninian will indicate to Aeneas that they are crossing another boundary—at Glenorchy, at Kingshouse near Glencoe and Rannoch Moor, and—most of all—as they approach Inverness, where Ninian warns Aeneas of 'The Wicked Bounds'—the boundaries of MacShimi's power. Isn't Munro making a fundamental point? That boundaries aren't fixed in nature, but man-made? That Highland-Lowland separations mean as little as these internal Highland separations of greed and violence? Duncan Forbes, the great peace-maker in history as well as Munro's novel, should be allowed to speak for this novel. For all his even-handedness, he too is a Highlander; and 'half-mocking and half-sad', he sums up the great changes that Wade's new roads will make. Sympathising with Ninian's regrets for the passing of the best of the old Highlands, he surely speaks for Munro's ambivalent mixture of criticism and love of his original country and culture:<sup>21</sup>

The hearts of all of us are sometimes in the wilds. It's not so very long since we left them. But the end of all that sort of thing's at hand. The man who's going to put an end to it—to you, and Lovat, and to me—yes, yes, to me! or the like of me, half fond of plot and strife and savagery, is Wade ... Ye saw the Road? That Road's the

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 215–16.

end of us! The Romans didna manage it; Edward didna manage it; But there it is at last, through to our vitals, and it's up wi' the ell-wand, down the sword! ... It may seem a queer thing for a law officer of the Crown to say, Mr Campbell, but I never was greatly taken wi' the ell-wand, and man, I liked the sword!

Nothing Munro wrote after this is as good. He had made his point about the reconciliation of two Scotlands, and while he continues to write short stories based on his two beloved territories, north and south of the Clyde, he was by now more than anything else the war correspondent, the editor, the commentator on Scotland as a whole, who has said goodbye to his ancient, pre-clan Highlands. The rest was for the Scottish Renaissance to take up from him, and Sorley MacLean, Gunn, MacColla, Macpherson (and Linklater for the non-Gaelic Orkneys) continued his deconstructions. Crichton Smith, MacCaig (and Mackay Brown with the Orkneys), and so many later twentieth century writers from Naomi Mitchison to Jessie Kesson modified romantic perceptions to the point of recognition of the paradoxical relationship in Highland (and Island) territories with their underlying tragedies, in which ironic awareness of cultural disintegration accompanies profound love of landscape and tradition. The process continues: in Lewis and the Western Isles, in the work of writers like James Shaw Grant, Calum Macdonald and Anne McLeod; in Orkney, Shetland and the Northern Isles, in the work of writers like John Graham, Gregor Lamb and Margaret Elphinstone.<sup>22</sup> Most recently some of the more

<sup>22</sup>A selection from some of the newer fiction on the Highlands and Islands includes, for the Hebrides, Iain Crichton Smith, *Consider the Lilies* (London 1968), and many other novels, stories, and poems; James Shaw Grant, *Their children will see, and other stories* (London 1979); Charles McLeod, *Devil in the Wind* (Edinburgh 1976); Norman Macdonald, *Calum Tod* (Inverness 1976) and *Portrona* (Edinburgh 2000); Anne McLeod, *The Dark Ship* (Glasgow 2000); for Orkney, Shetland and the Northern Isles, George Mackay Brown, *Greenvoe* (London 1972), and many other novels, stories and poems; John Graham, *Shadowed Valley* and *Strife in the Valley* (Lerwick 1987, 1992); Gregor Lamb, *Langskaill* (Byrgisey 1998); and Margaret Elphinstone, *Islanders* (Edinburgh 1994) and *The Sea Road* (Edinburgh 2000). The dubious effects of Highland modernisation are satirised in the work of writers like Lorn MacIntyre,

bizarre effects of modernisation of the Highlands have been anatomised in the work of writers like Alan Warner, Duncan McLean, and Bess Ross. Criticism, whether through fiction or non-fiction, has however not yet recognised the crucial role of Neil Munro in the beginnings of radical revisioning of both Lowland and Highland perceptions of Highland society and culture, a revisioning which has enabled contemporary perception to see clearly the complex and often sinister reasons for the decline of an ancient people, their language, and their ways of life.<sup>23</sup>

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*Cruel in the Shadow* and *The Blind Bend* (London 1979, 1981); and *Empty Footsteps: from the chronicles of Invernevis* (Duns 1996); Alan Warner, *Morven Caller, These Demented Lands, The Sopranos* (London 1995, 1997, 1998); Duncan McLean, *Blackden* (London 1994), and *Bunkerman* (London 1995); and Bess Ross, *A Bit of Crack and Car Culture, Those Other Times, Dangerous Gifts* (Nairn 1990, 1991, 1994), and *Strath* (Edinburgh 1997).

<sup>23</sup>Editions of Munro's novels have recently been appearing from B & W Publishing; they include *John Splendid* (1994), *The New Road* (1994) and *Doom Castle* (1996), all with introductions by Brian Osborne, and *Gilian the Dreamer* (2000), with an introduction by Douglas Gifford.