

Sunset Song

Lewis Grassic Gibbon*

By Anne Tannahill

During this interminable lockdown, reading, especially rereading, has been my mainstay. The passage of time since my first encounters with novels means that I am now in many ways a different reader, with new perspectives and fresh understandings. That has certainly been the case with Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, the first novel of his masterpiece, the trilogy, *A Scots Quair*.

Published in 1932, *Sunset Song* is set in the early years of the twentieth century, in an ancient but soon to disappear crofting community in the Mearns, a region of north-east Scotland. The crofters' culturally rich but ruthlessly hard existence is brilliantly seen through two points of view: that of the intelligent, imaginative Chris Guthrie, and the Greek chorus of the community itself, narrow and judgemental but just as often earthy and funny. Brooding over it all are the Standing Stones on the hill, symbols of the timelessness of the land and reminders of the fleetingness of individual human experience.

As she grows, Chris is pulled between her resentment of the brutal life that eventually kills her mother and her intense, almost swooning, love of the land itself, holding her fast in spite of her ambitions to escape. Grassic Gibbon's use of a flexible stream of consciousness to capture her thoughts and feelings is moving and utterly convincing. His portrayal of her awakening sexuality, a confused mixture of innocence, fear, curiosity and desire, rivals and to my mind surpasses anything DH Lawrence ever wrote about the sexual experience of women.

While *Sunset Song* has remained overwhelmingly popular in Scotland (voted 'Best Scottish Book of All Time' in 2005 and 'Scotland's Favourite Novel' in 2016), it is less acclaimed, or even known, in the rest of the world. Why is this so? A major reason must be Grassic Gibbon's use of an only slightly adapted Scots to tell his story. Once your ear becomes accustomed to it (and of course that comes easier to Northern Irish readers), the words and rhythms are a continuing delight in their pithiness and salty humour. But there's no doubting that their unfamiliarity must present a stumbling block for many readers.

After completing his trilogy with *Cloud Howe* in 1933 and *Granite City* in 1934, Grassic Gibbon died of peritonitis in 1935 at the tragically early age of 33. The loss is incalculable: who knows what other masterpieces we might have had from him and to what heights might his international reputation have grown?

* Lewis Grassic Gibbon was the pen name of James Leslie Mitchell, himself a child of the Mearns.