CAN THE PEASANTS SPEAK? *REVISITING SCOTTING HISTORY IN LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON'S SUNSET SONG*

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RESUMO

Em seu romance *Sunset Song*, Lewis Grassic Gibbon dá voz à perspectiva dos camponeses do nordeste da Escócia, reescrevendo eventos da história escocesa sob uma nova luz. O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar a representação da história da Escócia presente na narrativa, assim como explorar a influência da posição política e do ponto de vista do autor em sua obra. Simpatizante de correntes de esquerda, Gibbon faz críticas fortes à elite e valoriza figuras históricas consideradas por ele líderes populares.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: História, discurso ficcional, Escócia.

ABSTRACT

In his novel *Sunset Song*, Lewis Grassic Gibbon gives voice to the perspective of peasants from the northeast of Scotland, rewriting events of Scottish history in a new light. This paper aims at analyzing the representation of the history of Scotland in the narrative, as well as exploring the influence of the author's political position and viewpoint on his work. A sympathizer of left-wing ideologies, Gibbon strongly criticizes the elite and praises historical figures whom he considers popular leaders.

KEYWORDS: History, fictional discourse, Scotland

Historical studies in the 20th century highlight the similarity between historical and fictional narratives, as well as the influence of the context and of historians' point of view on the account of past events. Besides, literature comes to be valued in this period as a way to represent History which may be complementary to historical texts. This paper aims at investigating how Lewis Grassic Gibbon writes Scottish History up to the 20th century in his novel *Sunset Song* (1932) and how the chosen representation may be related to his political creeds and to the social and historical context in which the novel was written and published. Gibbon (2007b, p. 103) is an advocate of the rewriting of Scottish history and rejects idealized or romanticized accounts of the past, affirming in his essay "The Antique Scene" that "[f]ew things cry so urgently for rewriting as does Scots history".

Sunset Song is marked by a blend of official history and legend, interweaving historical and fictional events and also real and invented places. The setting of the narrative is the fictional village of Kinraddie, located in the northeast of Scotland. Even though the village is not real, based on the author's notes on a map, it is possible to determine its location as close to Gibbon's hometown, Arbuthnott. The novel also mixes references to historical figures with fictional characters, some of whom bore such a resemblance to Gibbon's acquaintances that "[his] parents were to complain that he had made them 'the speak of the Mearns' with his all-too-recognisable portraits and sardonic references" (CAMPBELL, 2007, p. 1).

Sunset Song depicts the life of Chris Guthrie, a young girl coming of age in a rural village in Scotland. The story is set between 1911 and 1920, dealing with the impact of World War One in the community. In this way, the narrative portrays a moment of transformation both in Chris's life and in her village, as well as Scotland as a whole,

demonstrating the profound relationship between History and the lives of common people. *Sunset Song* is the first novel in the trilogy *A Scots Quair*, which tells Chris's story up to the early 1930s.

Not only does history in the novel focus on common people, but it is also told from their point of view. According to Catriona Low (2003, p. 104), the whole *Quair* trilogy and some of Gibbon's short stories share the technique of using an anonymous community narrative voice. As a result, the language in *Sunset Song* reproduces some characteristics of oral narratives, with simple, loosely connected clauses, exclamations and comments from the narrative voice (CORBETT, 2003, p. 91-2). Besides, the fact that direct speech is only distinguished by the use of italics suggests that the text takes the form of a conversation with the reader. This form of narrative, bringing the reader closer to the characters, contributes to the readers' feeling as part of the community of Kinraddie.

This communal narrative voice recounts several events in the novel in the form of rumors and gossip, with a pervasive ironic tone. Low (2003, p. 105) affirms that the narrative voice adopts at times a malicious tone, expressing criticism, mockery and judgment about the neighbors. The community's tendency to criticize and ridicule others without their knowledge is also recognized by the narrative voice, which after mentioning that a character was laughed at, questions “But God knows, who is it [folk] don't laugh at?” (GIBBON, 2007a, p. 18)[i].

In addition to showing a negative, malicious aspect of the community, telling the story through gossip reveals the subjectivity present in the act of recounting past events. Mirroring Veyne's (1978, p. 46-7) claim that historians select some of the innumerable perspectives about an event, the narrative voice in *Sunset Song* acknowledges that there are different versions of the same fact. When describing Chae Strachan's experience in Africa,

for example, two perspectives are presented: "[An African man] and Chae had fought against Boers and British both, and beaten them, or so Chae said, but folk that didn't like Chae said all the fighting he'd ever done had been with his mouth" (p. 18). This passage demonstrates how feelings like affinity and the desire to create a good personal image may influence what one says about oneself and others. In this way, unreliability is inserted, unfolded, relativizing the idea of narrative as an objective representation of the truth.

Furthermore, the technique of narrating from the viewpoint of the community creates the impression that the story belongs to a tradition passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the other. An example is the retelling of the land clearances in the 18th and 19th centuries, whose main objective was generally raising sheep to supply the growing factories with wool. As the clearance of part of the properties in Kinraddie is narrated, it is said that "folk told that a hundred years before five of the crofter places had crowded there till Lord Kenneth threw their biggings down and drove them from the parish and built the fine farm of Upperhill" (p. 27). This quotation shows that there is an orally transmitted collective memory of the village, which preserves the history of the place.

As aforementioned, in *Sunset Song*, Gibbon privileges the lives of common people, who "had no history" (p. 12), but were affected by historical events. Even though famous historical figures are mentioned in the novel, all the characters who are more fully developed are tenant farmers. Gibbon's (2007b, p. 103-4) interest in the poor is also evident in his nonfictional works, in which he affirms that behind romanticized historical characters and events are "the lives of millions of the lowly", "bedevilled or uplifted by the play of the forces of civilization in that remote corner of the Western world which we call Scotland". Hence, Gibbon gives voice in his novel to those who suffer history instead of making it and are traditionally excluded from historical accounts. In this sense, *Sunset Song* may be an

example of literary work which fulfills the role mentioned by Korhonen (2006, p. 18-9) of complementing historical studies by bringing to the center those who have often been marginalized.

Although the story is set in the 20th century, other moments of Scottish history are mentioned in the novel, revealing the importance attributed to them to the writing of a certain image of Scotland. Some of these references are connected to the idea of the landscape as a witness of history. There is sometimes material evidence of the past, like the 11th century Pictish tower in Brechin (p. 126). Some places are also remembered in relation to the people who once lived there. When Chris and her husband Ewan visit Edzell Castle, for instance, she thinks about those who had walked around there before, "who had no name or remembered place, even in the lands of death they were maybe forgotten" (p. 179), echoing Gibbon's concern about history, memory and what is not recorded or remembered, such as the lives of common folk.

Moreover, this treatment of the land as a witness of the past inserts the setting of the novel in a long historical tradition, reinforcing how the present is shaped by history. For instance, when Chris heads toward Mondynes, the narrative voice does not fail to explain "there where the battle was fought in the days long syne" (p. 84), in a reference to the conflict in 1094 which resulted in king Duncan II's death. Another example is the description of the farm of Peesie's Knapp as having "the sweat of two thousand years in it" (p. 17), which values the labor of the peasants who lived there. In this way, Gibbon makes it clear that even a small, rural place in Scotland has a history that is part of a bigger panorama and sometimes representative of the whole.

Gibbon believed in Diffusionism, claiming that civilization was an oppressive force which spread from the Nile Valley. This view of history is present in *Sunset Song*, for

example, in the episode in which a minister preaches about the beginnings of civilization in Scotland and, consequently, the end of the Golden Age: "the first voyagers sailing the sounding coasts, they brought the heathen idols of the great Stone Rings, the Golden Age was over and past and lust and cruelty trod the world" (p. 62-3).

Regarding Ancient History, Gibbon mentions Calgacus, the leader of the Caledonian resistance against Roman attacks led by Agricola in AD 83. This episode, known as the battle of Mons Graupius, was the first to be recorded in Scottish history (LYNCH, 1994, p. 3). The only remaining account is Tacitus's, describing a huge defeat of the Caledonians, who would have suffered 10,000 casualties – as opposed to 360 Roman deaths –, despite a great numerical advantage. Modern historical studies question Tacitus's version since the Romans retreated after the battle and there is no evidence that they managed to expand their domains (FRY; FRY, 1995, p. 25). Gibbon (2007b, p. 106), however, not only praises Calgacus as "a great military leader" in an essay, but also presents a completely different version of the event in *Sunset Song*. Calgacus is described as "him that chased the Romans all to hell at the battle of Mons Graupius" in the novel (p. 24), making it evident that the narrative voice privileges a more flattering view of the Caledonians and seeks to value the Scottish people and their origin. Thus, it is clear that the limited access to information about the past may foster a multiplicity of versions and interpretations, depending on who is writing and what their interests are.

As for the peoples which gave origin to the Scottish population, Gibbon sees a continuity of the Picts and their culture well after the 9th century, when they were last mentioned in historical accounts, describing peasants from the early 19th century in *Sunset Song* as "of the old Pict stock", who "had no history" (p. 12). The notion that not much is known about the Picts' history is confirmed by historical texts. Maclean (1996, p. 22)

describes the Picts as “a shadowy, ill-documented race of people of uncertain antecedents”, and Lynch (1994, p. 12) compares their history to a mystery narrative.

Standing stones are important pieces of evidence of Pictish art and history, showing its distinctiveness, but also similarities with Celtic art (LYNCH, 1994, p. 13). In the novel, besides the aforementioned tower in Brechin, the standing stones of Blawearie, the property where Chris's family lives, are signs of Pictish occupation. The community voice describes the people who erected the stone circle (“Druids”) as wild, violent, “coarse devils of men” (p. 20), revealing a negative view of non-Christians as primitive. This opinion can be explained by the community's belief in the Church of Scotland, a Christian denomination of Presbyterian basis.

The adoption of the feudal system in Scotland is told partially through myth in *Sunset Song*. According to the narrative voice, a Norman man, Cospatric de Gondeshil, gained the lands of Kinraddie after killing the gryphon that lived in the region. The story, reminiscent of tales of medieval romance, is set in the times of William I (1165-1214), described in the novel as “when gryphons and such-like beasts still roamed the Scots countryside” (p. 9). Thus, historical events are mixed with myth, blurring the line between fact and fiction. The choice to narrate the origin of Kinraddie in a mythical way emphasizes the importance of popular culture in the novel, as well as it acknowledges the richness of Scottish traditional legends. This narrative option reinforces the idea that history is told from the perspective of the common folk since it values the stories circulating among them.

Besides recounting Kinraddie's mythical origin, Cospatric's story recalls an important aspect of the Scottish Middle Ages – the Anglo-Norman presence and influence, especially in the Lowlands. The influence of Anglo-Norman culture, with the adoption of the feudal system in the Lowlands, started to be felt in Malcolm III's reign (1057–93). This process is

represented in *Sunset Song* by the story of Cospatric de Gondeshil, which makes Kinraddie a representative of what took place in a good part of Scotland. William I, "the most Anglo-Norman of the macMalcolm kings" (LYNCH, 1994, p. 86), bestowed the lands of Kinraddie on Cospatric, a landless Norman, as a reward for killing the gryphon. After that, Cospatric married a Pict lady and his son adopted Kinraddie as his surname (p. 10), assimilating into the old aristocracy. As for ordinary people, Lynch (1994, p. 56) affirms that not much is known about their status in the medieval period. Gibbon chooses to focus on their oppression, affirming that Cospatric had license to "keep down all beasts and coarse and wayward folk" (p. 10). The language used by the narrative voice is filled with irony, simultaneously reproducing and denouncing a derogatory discourse about the poor.

This irony is reinforced by the fact that the aristocracy is negatively represented in the novel, revealing the community's point of view on the elite. William I, for instance, is presented as an idle man living in luxury, who was "sitting drinking his wine and fondling his bonny lemans in Edinburgh Town" when heard the news about Cospatric and the gryphon (p. 10). Besides, the narrative voice's irony targets the volatile alliances, based on political and economic interests, made by the nobles. This is clear in the passage about the Kinraddies' participation in the battle of Mondynes (1094): "[Cospatric's son] took out his men and he fought there, but on which side they do not say, but maybe it was the winning one, they were aye gey and canny [cautious] folk, the Kinraddies" (p. 10). The description of the Kinraddies is telling: "canny" sounds very much like a euphemism for "sly" in this context.

While William Wallace (c.1270-1305) – a leader of the resistance against the English invasion in the end of the 13th century – is one of the most frequently mentioned historical figures in *Sunset Song*, he is portrayed in different ways depending on the passage of the

novel. In a survey of the history of Kinraddie in the Prelude, Wallace is described, in an ironic reproduction of an aristocratic voice, as “the Cateran who dared rebel against the fine English king” (p. 10). Those who fought beside him are equally represented in a derogatory language, as “coarse and landless men” and “vagabond Scots” (p. 10-1). The ironic tone suggests that the narrative voice's viewpoint is actually the opposite of what is said, thus corresponding to the community's stance toward Wallace.

While Lynch (1994, p. 119) goes against the idea that Wallace led a revolt of poor peasants, Gibbon (2007b, p. 111) highlights the fact that Wallace managed to convince the peasants to join the cause and attributes his eventual defeat to the aristocrats who had become part of the force after the victory in 1297. In this way, a negative view of the aristocracy is once again clear, as the nobles are represented as cowards and called “laggard”. Gibbon (2007b, p. 110-1) considers William Wallace “one of the few authentic national heroes”, who “apprehended and moulded the historic forces of his time”, comparable to great leaders such as Lincoln and Lenin. This positive image is reflected in passages from *Sunset Song*, which, apart from the Prelude, do not describe Wallace with irony or derogatory language. These references to Wallace reflect folk's opinion, showing admiration for him and contempt for the English, as illustrated by the passage: “But everybody knew that the English were awful mean and couldn't speak right and were cowards who captured Wallace and killed him by treachery” (p. 43).

In the novel, Wallace is strongly related to the landscape of the region, which suggests an idea of continuity through history. Dunnottar Castle, for example, is associated with Wallace since it is the place chosen by Cospatric's great-grandson and the English to resist him (p. 10), an episode that echoes Blind Harry's poem, in which Wallace sets fire to the castle's chapel (DUNNOTTAR CASTLE, 2015). Considering Gibbon's position, Kinraddie's

alliance to the English may be considered an act of treason against Scotland, which is interestingly punished in the novel, seeing that the character dies without an heir after Wallace invades the castle, and the family only continues through a child out of wedlock (p. 11).

The memory of Wallace's presence in the landscape represents a desirable inspiration, as Gibbon (2007b, p. 143) points out in his essay "Glasgow", a text in which he mentions the Battle of the Bell o' the Brae and remembers Wallace's successful "venture unsupported by priest or patrician, the intellectual or bourgeois of those days". As the author affirms that the Glaswegian population may succeed in a new undertaking of this kind one day (GIBBON, 2007b, p. 143), it is clear that he considers Wallace a symbol of revolutionary fighting beside and for the poor.

The next historical event referred to in the novel is another conflict with the English: the Battle of Flodden (1513). The battle was a terrible defeat for the Scottish, having led to a big number of casualties, even if Lynch (1994, p. 161) believes that it was probably not as bad as the 10,000 reported by English chroniclers. Among the dead were King James IV (1488-1513) and several nobles, which left the kingdom in a state of instability since the heir to the throne was only a baby (MACLEAN, 1996, p. 74-5).

Whereas historical texts tend to give emphasis to the deaths of noblemen and the resulting political situation, Gibbon focuses on the suffering of ordinary people in *Sunset Song*. Maclean (1996, p. 74-5), for example, presents a small list of aristocrats killed, but, apart from them, only informs that "thousands" of young men died. When Chris thinks of the battle, however, she, as a young unmarried woman, is sad for "the lads that came back never again to their lasses among the stooks, and the lasses that never married but sat and stared down south to the English border where their lads lay happed in blood and earth" (p.

43). Other casualties, including the king, are not mentioned by Gibbon. In this way, the novel exposes the tragic consequences of war on the lives of anonymous people, depicting scenes of grief described in the song *The Flowers of the Forest*, which comes to Chris's mind in the passage.

Gibbon holds different views on the Reformation in Scotland and on John Knox (c.1514-72), its main leader. Reflecting his negative opinion about religion, he affirms that Reformation brought the beginning of the eclipse of Scots civilization, ironically describing this historical process as "men fought and died with enthusiasm in the cause of ceremonial cannibalism" (GIBBON, 2007b, p. 113-4). However, Knox's description in Gibbon's essays is predominantly positive, as he is considered a man "of truly heroic mould", "capable of apprehending the direction of the historic forces, and determined to enchannel those for the benefit of a Commons' Scotland" (GIBBON, 2007b, p. 114-5). His image is that of a revolutionary fighting for the ordinary people, a role Gibbon attributed to him as well as to Wallace. The representation of Knox as a leader in the fight for equality also appears in *Sunset Song*, in which Chae, a self-proclaimed socialist, relates the Protestant minister to social justice, claiming that equality would come one day because "The God of old Scotland there was, aye fighting on the side of the people since the days of old John Knox" (p. 104). This viewpoint is explained by some of the policies adopted by the Church of Scotland, such as laying some decisions in the hands of the community's elders and determining the establishment of a school in each parish, an ideal which was not fulfilled for a long time (MACLEAN, 1996, p. 94).

Gibbon's negative view of the aristocracy is also present in his narrative of the turbulent 17th century, marked by religious and political conflicts. The organization of the Scottish church was threatened in the reigns of Charles I (1625-49), Charles II (1660-85) and

James VII (1685-89), due to attempts of bringing it closer in structure to the Church of England and to the latter king's Catholic faith. In 1638, the National Covenant, a document defending a Presbyterian church in Scotland, was signed by thousands of people, who came to be known as the Covenanters. However, religious conflicts persisted for a good part of the century.

In the novel, during this period of turmoil, "the Kinraddies sat them quiet and decent and peaceable in their castle, and heeded never a fig the arguings of folk, for wars were unchancy things" (p. 11). Once again, as in the battle of Mondynes, the Kinraddies do not reveal a clear position, but are ready to support whichever side eventually wins. Nevertheless, they fought in the medieval battle and only later made their stance unclear, whereas they remain completely detached from the fight in the 17th century, making it even more evident that the family is not moved by political or religious ideals, but only seeks to keep their position of power.

In a reflection of Le Goff's (1990, p. 422) idea that those in power are greatly interested in the creation of collective memories, the Kinraddies seek to filter historical information to perpetuate a positive image of themselves. Once the religious question seems settled with the deposition of James VII and the reign of William (1689-1702) and Mary (1689-94), the Kinraddies not only support the Covenant, but claim that they have always done so. This attempt to rewrite history is illustrated by the following passage: "then Dutch William came, fair plain a fixture that none would move, and the Kinraddies were all for the Covenant then, they had aye had God's Covenant at heart, they said" (p. 11). This shows yet another instance in which Gibbon portrays the Scottish nobility as dishonest and untrustworthy.

Nevertheless, the 17th century historical figures who appear more prominently in *Sunset Song* are the Covenanters. Considered by Gibbon (2007b, p. 115) the defenders of "the Church of the Commons, of the People", the Covenanters are still present in Kinraddie's landscape. Some of the tombstones in the churchyard date back from "the old, unkindly times of the Covenanters" (p. 67). While crossing the churchyard, Chris is scared as if she could feel the presence of the dead around her. This passage shows that historical records exist all around us, as part of our everyday life, and also reinforces the continuing presence of the past.

Another passage in which the landscape is a witness of the Covenanters' fight and suffering is Chris and Ewan's visit to Dunnottar Castle. The castle was the setting of an episode of the Killing Time, Charles II's violent repression of the Covenanters. The numbers about this period vary: Maclean (1996, p. 137) claims that 1400 Covenanters were made prisoners at the Bothwell Brig rising, whereas Lynch (1994, p. 295) states that less than 300 people were punished on this occasion and that there were fewer executions during the Killing Time than in other religious persecutions. Gibbon (2007b, p. 116), in his nonfiction, describes the period as a "political Terror [that] has few parallels in history".

The episode in Dunnottar Castle, in 1685, involved 167 prisoners, seven of whom died during captivity or attempting to escape, and resulted in the transportation of most of them (DUNNOTTAR CASTLE, 2015). The novel reproduces an inscription in the castle which commemorates the Covenanters who died there (p. 132). These ordinary men and women have long been forgotten, turned into a number, and the names of some of them were not known even when the inscription was made. This sign in the castle might be the only evidence that some of them ever lived.

Chris's thoughts and feelings about the Covenanters reflect those expressed by Gibbon in his nonfictional work. Chris sympathizes and identifies with them in opposition to the elite, a feeling inherited from her father, as the following passage shows:

> There the Covenanting folk had screamed and died while the gentry dined and danced in their lithe, warm halls, Chris stared at the places, sick and angry and sad for those folk she could never help now, that hatred of rulers and gentry a flame in her heart, John Guthrie's hate. Her folk and his they had been, those whose names stand graved in tragedy (p. 132).

Like herself, Chris sees the dead Covenanters as peasants, leading a harsh life, very different from the nobles', and the perception of this inequality breeds hatred in her. Gibbon, both in his fiction and nonfiction, associates the conflicts in the Killing Time with social inequality and a rotten aristocracy who oppresses the poor.

The effects of the French Revolution in Scotland are depicted in an ironic way in *Sunset Song*. Maclean (1996, p. 199) affirms that the support given to the revolutionary ideas in Scotland was strong enough to attract a heavy repression from the authorities. In the Prelude of the novel, the representation of the revolution's influence, as that of Wallace, is filled with irony. The narrative voice mentions risings of peasants and other common people inspired by "the poison of the French Revolution" (p. 11). Once more the language used by the narrative voice ironically reproduces an elitist discourse, with derogatory terms to describe popular movements.

Irony is also present in the depiction of the young laird Kinraddie's support to the French Revolution. The young man participates in riots and sells land to send money to the revolutionaries. However, these actions are actually hypocritical since the support of the ideal of freedom and equality for everyone does not include ordinary people in Scotland. This point, which reflects Gibbon's negative opinion about the nobles, is presented in the episode of a revolt in the village: "the crofters marched on Kinraddie Castle in a body and

bashed in the windows of it, they thought equality should begin at home" (p. 12). Interestingly, the narrative voice seems less ironic in its description of the rising, not characterizing the tenant farmers in a negative way, which suggests that it actually agrees with the ideal of equality.

The laird's decision to sell land to support the revolution left his family in a difficult financial situation. His son sought a solution and, in order to have bigger farms which would be worth higher rents, evicted "half the little tenants, […] [who] flitted off to Canada and Dundee and parts like those" (p. 12). This passage fictionally represents two historical processes under way in the 18th and 19th centuries: the clearances of land and industrialization, thus, positing Kinraddie as a microrepresentation of what happened in several places in Scotland. The clearances consisted of the expulsion of many tenants from the farms, usually to give way to sheep farming in order to provide wool for the sprouting factories. Many of the cleared peasants emigrated to territories of the British Empire or industrial cities, which is mirrored in the description of what happened in Kinraddie. Once more, the novel focuses on the consequences of history for common people, who were uprooted and ironically affected in a negative way by the previous laird's support of ideals of equality and freedom. This reinforces the idea that his political views were limited to the revolution in France and not extended to Scotland.

The history of the Kinraddie family symbolizes continuity throughout time since they keep the village under their possession from the 12th century until the beginning of the 20th century. This may be related to Braudel's (1992, p. 342) analysis of the long duration as he mentions social hierarchy as one of the underlying structures which resist change. Even though Scotland went through many transformations during this period, the Kinraddies' power over the land and the peasants endured. However, in the early 20th century, as the

Age of Empire begins to collapse, so does the Kinraddie family, with their only heir living in an asylum and the estate mortgaged and left under trustees (p. 13).

In sum, Gibbon writes Scottish history from a perspective which differs from most of historiography. The novel focuses on and gives voice to a group of people generally forgotten due to their being poor and living in a rural area remote from the center of political power. Characteristics such as the negative portrayal of the elite may be attributed both to Gibbon's left-wing political position and to his project of representing the community's perspective. In this way, the story of Kinraddie offers a contribution to a better understanding of the multiple possible versions of Scottish history.

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