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## THINKING OUTDOORS

### *A Scots Quair* as a Place-Based Perceptual Narrative

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# Abstract

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**Abstract:**

This thesis is an ecocritical reading of *A Scots Quair* with a focus on agency and perception of place. *A Scots Quair* is a trilogy consisting of the novels *Sunset Song*, *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*, first published in the 1930's. In this thesis 'Place' is perceived as an important key to *A Scots Quair*, where the main character, Chris Guthrie, finds refuge for thinking outdoors in communication with the landscape, regardless of time or season. Chris' integral relationship with the soil, the clouds and the stones turns these into agents of their own right, and simultaneously into key characters of the narrative. During her sessions 'thinking outdoors' she is the mediator of the story. Using an ecological term, Chris can be seen as 'observing edges', similar to what Mitchell Tomashow calls a 'Place-Based Perceptual Ecology' (2002, 73). Gibbon's focus on a reciprocal relation to the landscape deserves contemporary recognition. The bioregion wherein Lewis Grassie Gibbon's book is grounded is represented by four places where the human protagonist is placed. The whole narrative can in this way be considered a 'Place-Based Perceptual Narrative', although these places in the Scottish landscape could represent communication with any place on earth, not just Scotland. Gibbon's had a significant local-global perspective (Gairn, 2008, 9). The problematic concept of 'Nature' is replaced with the relatively new term the 'Earth Others', a considerably less passive concept used by Val Plumwood (1939-2008). I see human physical relation to 'Earth Others' shown as potent throughout the entire trilogy, not just in *Sunset Song*, this is shown via a thematic reading of all three novels with focus on 'Soil' and 'Stone'.

**Keywords:**

Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair*, Ecocriticism, Scotland, Landscape, Perception, Place-Based Perceptual Ecology, Earth Others, Soil, Outdoors.

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# 1. Introduction

In *A Scots Quair*<sup>1</sup> we are introduced to ‘The Land’ as the only thing that endures, juxtaposed with constant changes of human life and dwelling. This thesis is an ecocritical reading of the most famous work by the Scottish writer Lewis Grassie Gibbon.<sup>2</sup> The Scotland that is displayed in this trilogy is perceived and shared by the author in three consecutive stories, all taking place in between 1911 and 1932.<sup>3</sup> The perceptual knowledge of the author Lewis Grassie Gibbon is throughout the trilogy based in Aberdeenshire in North East Scotland. My idea for this thesis I ascribe to Professor Ian Campbell who declares in his introduction that Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s work is “a sensory equivalent of being there” (Gibbon, 2006, viii). I agree with Campbell that literature can allow readers to relate to a place or time outside their own life experience.

My ecocritical reading of *A Scots Quair* will focus on the main character’s relation to nature, where the four places from where the story is told will be seen as corner stones for Gibbon’s narrative technique. The four places where Chris stands is seen as the scaffold that supports her stream of consciousness. When Roy Johnson discusses politics in the *Quair* he also acknowledges physicality of the text in Chris’ sessions: “These symbolic and spiritually refreshing occasions have another purpose besides giving her a chance to take stock: she is also making a physical connection with the land (Johnson, 1976, 42). In this way the protagonist’s integral relationship with the soil, the clouds and the stones turns these places into key characters of the narrative, which in turn makes the *Quair* into a less anthropocentric narrative.

Val Plumwood (1939-2008), argues the importance of ‘place-attachment’ in her last book *Environmental Culture; The ecological crisis of reason* (2002). She states that the development of ‘a place-sensitive society and culture’ is a crucial structural shift. Plumwood is an Australian philosopher who strongly argues against anthropocentrism. In this thesis I will argue a protagonistic role for ‘Nature’ through a reciprocal communication with Chris,

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<sup>1</sup> A quair means ‘a book’ in Scottish English or Scots. As is common in Scotland I might at times refer to *A Scots Quair* as the *Quair*.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Grassie Gibbon is the writer’s pen name. The author’s real name was James Leslie Mitchell (13 February 1901 – 7 February 1935). He died just a few months after the publication of the last novel of the trilogy, *Grey Granite*. The same year (1934) he had published the work *Scottish Scene, or the Intelligent Man’s Guide to Albyn* co-authored with his friend Hugh MacDiarmid (Lyal, 2015, 19, 159-160).

<sup>3</sup> The march at the end of *Grey Granite* is the National Hunger March of 1932 (“Zircon”, 667). *A Scots Quair* was written by Lewis Grassie Gibbon, between 1932 and 1934. In reality it started from Glasgow in Scotland in September and reached Hyde Park in October. (*What Happened Where: A Guide To Places And Events In Twentieth-Century History* p. 115; Cook, Chris and Bewes, Diccon; Routledge, 1997).

the *human* main character, via her urge for ‘thinking outdoors’. However, the concept of the term ‘Nature’ is problematic and I will instead use Plumwood’s term, the ‘Earth Others’<sup>4</sup> throughout this thesis. This concept includes all that is alive, and all elements that take part in the many eco-systems to be found on Earth, whether stable or vulnerable, positive or negative. The Earth and all its dynamic eco-systems are thus called ‘Earth Others’, and considered as ‘agents in their own rights’ (Plumwood, 2002, 206), taking part in shaping the “communicativity and intentionality” of place (230). This means that any ‘place’ outdoors is in parts or as a whole regarded as the ‘Earth Others’. These may consist of water, gravel, stone, light, seasons, or trees, and plants, not to forget all innate but active substances that give smell, taste, texture, temperature, humidity. Think of the flow of minerals, plants and animals that forms the Biosphere. The term excludes us humans along with all man-made materials, e.g. houses, money, computers, etc.

The trilogy follows the main character, Chris Guthrie, through youth, womanhood and family life during three novels and three marriages. Miss Guthrie is a clever student at a grammar school in the nearest town and at home she is the hard working daughter of a lease-holding crofter who runs away to be alone and think outdoors. The Guthries’ has earlier moved from a croft near Aberdeen in Echt before the narrative starts in *Sunset Song*. During the span of the trilogy Chris will move again four times, eventually back to Echt near Aberdeen. At school Chris dreams of leaving the croft and a hard-hearted father for university, but when her mother commits suicide during an unwanted pregnancy, Chris is needed at the croft. Two younger brothers are adopted by her aunt and her older brother emigrates to Argentine, after life-long verbal and corporeal abuse by his father. Her father’s hard work and bitterness is ended by a stroke in the field, which turns him into a bedridden tyrant. When he finally dies Chris is the sole heir of Blawearie, their croft which is but a lease-hold. She loves the land and the fields and she climbs up to the Standing Stones any time of day or season.

At eighteen she marries a hard-working Highlander, Ewan Tavendale, who is a foreman at the biggest farm. Up to the Standing Stones by the loch, she comes to pause and meditate, although the narrative at the start of the chapters might indicate conflict or hardship on her arrival she leads a quite happy rural life. This life is dramatically changed by WWI in which she loses her husband and neighbours. With her son Ewan six years old, Chris moves to the

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<sup>4</sup> Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London, UK & New York: Routledge, US, 1993, 137).



nearest village, Kinraddie, and settles down as Mrs. Colquhoun. Later her husband, the Minister, gets a new position in the nearest town, Segget, where she finds a ruin for her sessions outdoors. Her marriage with Robert is happy at first, but when her husband becomes a fanatic socialist minister, they grow apart and sadly also lose a child. Robert later dies from working too hard. Again a widow at thirty-eight, she decides to follow her young son, now seventeen who has decided to abandon school for work in Duncairn.

When *Grey Granite* starts Chris Colquhoun runs a lodging house with another widow, Ma Cleghorn. When her business partner dies she remarries one of the lodgers, out of gratitude for saving Ewan from jail. Her third husband is Ake Ogilve, a socialist friend she knew in Segget. Their marriage is not happy and when they separate, he is moving to Canada. Ewan is also leaving, for political work in London. At the close of the trilogy she has moved to her birthplace up in the Grampian Mountains, to be just Chris, again.

## 1.1. Ecocritical Perspectives and Previous Research

Plumwood states that “[w]ithout the richness of narratives and narrative subjects that define and elaborate place, the connection between our lived experience and our sense of space and time is reduced” (231). In *Environmental Culture; The Ecological Crisis of Reason* she argues that our human-centeredness and human self-enclosure, is the main reason why we fail to perceive the ‘Earth Others’ or ‘more-than-human-aspects of place’ (234).

*A Scots Quair*<sup>5</sup> is the story of a landscape in constant change, mirrored through a young woman’s life. This narrative technique, with Chris and her perceptual skills at its centre, is in my interpretation not just any literary reconstruction. When Gibbon broadcasts the protagonist’s senses and thoughts to the readers, she is placed outdoors. In this thesis I will argue that Chris’ perceptive relation to the ‘Earth Others’ is the base for her role as the focaliser in these parts of the narrative.

During the sessions when Chris is placed ‘thinking outdoors’, during twelve sessions she possesses both “stillness and silence”, the ballast needed for “knowledgeable reinhabitation of [our] locales” (Garrard, 2012, 197). These outdoor sessions are all divided in

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<sup>5</sup> Hereafter I will use the full name of the chapter and page from the 2006 Polygon edition as reference. Please note that it is solely the Polygon edition of the full trilogy in a paperback compilation from 2006 which is used for references in this thesis. *A Scots Quair* consists of 672 pages, not counting the introduction by Ian Campbell with Roman numerals. I have decided not just to refer to the names of the three books but each chapter’s name. For my work with this thesis it has been important to see in which part of the long trilogy it is situated. These are the themes: *Sunset Song*-The farming cycle; *Cloud Howe*-Meteorological names of clouds; *Grey Granite*- Crystals found in granite. The same pattern is used for the sections “Introduction”, “Glossary” and “Notes”. The reference would otherwise have been (Gibbon, 2006, p.p.).

two, placed at the beginning and end of every chapter, in this way making them into a circle in time, a cycle with a relatively short time-span.

Gibbon's nuanced and interwoven narrative techniques in his *Quair* deserves more space than I can give here. Gibbon is consistent with all forms of direct discourse always set in italics in his writing. Notably, this setting is also used for non-human voices or sounds that are heard, including those remembered by Chris.

Crawford states in his introduction to *Sunset Song*<sup>6</sup> that both "Gibbon's and the reader's most vivid perceptions are mediated through Chris Guthrie's consciousness, [...] within frames of third-person past tense narrative description" (2008, "Introduction to *Sunset Song*", xi).<sup>7</sup> With reference to Graham Trengrove,<sup>8</sup> Crawford argues that Gibbon's use of 'you' can be considered "his most effective use for displaying both his entire fictional world and the mind of his heroine" (Ibid., xii). This narrative technique is seen in the latter part of this excerpt, which starts in stream of consciousness by Chris. It sounds more complicated than it is:

There were the Standing Stones [...] waiting they stood. [...] She leant against it, the bruised cheek she leaned and it was strange and comforting – stranger still when you thought that this old stone circle, more and more as the years went on at Kinraddie, was the only place where she could come ("Seed-time", 112).

Katarina Mewald can be seen endorsing Crawford's interpretation Gibbons narrative experimental technique:

Due to the indirectly confessional function of this kind of 'you' the most intimate thoughts and emotions of the character are voiced. Through focalisation, the self-referring 'you' thus provides insights into the psyche of the character, which could otherwise be gleaned only by the use of an omniscient narrator (2010, 165-166).

Crawford concludes declares this innovative technique the key to 'its magnificent *orality*' (2008, "Introduction to *Cloud Howe*", ix).

The Standings Stones as seen in the excerpt above is also the site which opens the first chapter after the prelude of *Sunset Song* is situated above the croft of Blawearie by. This place is the first and most referred to, by Chris as well as by several critics (e.g. Baker, 2015, 56 and Johnson 1976, 42).

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<sup>6</sup> The first version of this Canongate edition was published separately in 1988.

<sup>7</sup> The pagination of the Canongate edition 2008 is a reprint of the compilation of the three separately published novels released in 1995. Pagination is separated for each of the three books, with each a different introduction by Thomas Crawford (individually numbered with Roman numerals), unchanged from earlier editions released in 1988, 1989, 1990. N.B. This is not the edition used for my quotes in this thesis, which are quoted from the Polygon edition from 2006.

<sup>8</sup> An article by Graham Trengrove "Who is you? Grammar and Grassie Gibbon", *Scottish Literary Journal*. 2 (2). 1975. 47-62.

In the 1930's, at the time of writing the trilogy, Gibbon lived in England, from where he minded [remembered] present and old places in the North. The author had left Scotland for military service at eighteen and in 1925 settled in England with his wife, Rebecca (Ray) Middleton, also born and bred in the Howe of the Mearns.<sup>9</sup> The prospect of 'mind-travelling' back to well-known places is by Luisa Gairn in *Modern Scottish Literature and Ecology* seen as an important reason for some other Scottish writers' work in exile, e.g. John Muir and Robert Lois Stevenson (2008, 47-49). Campbell states the role of Gibbon's nostalgia in making his imaginative trips to Scotland, although Campbell concludes in his introduction to *The Speak of the Mearns* that Gibbon at this time must have been "describing a countryside he can hardly have visited at any length for over a decade and a half" (Gibbon, 1994, 10). In the *Quair* this reconnecting agency of the 'Earth Others' is powerful: "Sun and sky and the loneliness of the hills, they had cried her up her" ("Harvest", 237), and "the notion had suddenly arisen, to come up to the Kaimes" ("Cirrus", 299).

From a geocritical perspective (Goodbody, 2014, 68-69), the author can be seen as 'mind-travelling' to well-known places which he uses as fictional sites in the trilogy. Gibbon revisited some of these 'fictional' places in real life, and can at times be considered as writing the *Quair in situ* ("Notes", 677).<sup>10</sup> This will be discussed in chapter two.

With this ecocritical approach I will research Gibbon's trilogy as an archive of 'preserved perception', where the act of reading is reconnecting readers with the representation of a 'real landscape' from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will also claim that Gibbon uses the landscape as a potent protagonist in the *Quair*. The agency of the landscape – i.e. the "Earth Others" – affects the events of the story where the human protagonist often responds to the non-human protagonists as well as to social changes within the narrative. This is also seen in Gibbon's short stories and his non-fictional essay "The Land"<sup>11</sup>. I agree with Campbell when he compares Gibbon's work about Aberdeenshire to a sensory visit for the readers ("Introduction", viii), to such an extent that I thought it might be used as input for a 'place-based perceptual ecology', a method introduced by Mitchell Tomashow (2002, 73). Chris' perceptual skills echoes Tomashow's description of his

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<sup>9</sup> His wife Rebecca took part in his writing. Gibbon "would bring down every page after a mornings writing, and they would read together" according to Ian Campbell. (letter to the author from Prof. I. Campbell, 24 April 2016).

<sup>10</sup> The author sits at the top of Barmekin hill also called Benachie in Echt. It is part of the Grampian Mountains near Aberdeen. OS Landranger 38, map – Aberdeen inc. Inverurie & Pitmedden. Ordnance Survey Limited, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> "The Land" is an essay written in the style of a column of a newspaper, with four section named after the four seasons. It was first published in *Scottish Scene* 1934. It might be considered non-fictional, in the same way as *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd, although the narrator Lewis Grassie Gibbon is in itself a pen name, a created role. In this essay Gibbon jokingly mentions his real name, James Lesley Mitchell, as a distant writing cousin (Gibbon, 1994, 153).

method: “You rely on your senses to learn about the natural world and in so doing you develop intimacy with your surroundings” (75). Within this thesis I will thus investigate if *A Scots Quair* can be seen as a ‘Place-Based Perceptual Ecology’ (Tomashow, 2002).

Is deeper knowledge of any particular place still important in a globalised world? Visionary contemporary planning tools now pay ‘Literature’ close attention for sustainability and resilience against climate change.<sup>12</sup> Virtual mobility and digital technique have made us less earth-bound or grounded in any specific place ‘outbye’, but if we cannot communicate with our local surroundings, if the interaction with ‘soil’ needed for growing food is abandoned, we all die. I will show how this important reciprocal communication with the ‘Earth Others’, for mutual survival and wellbeing, resounds throughout Gibbon’s work.

Greg Garrard states that there is no such thing as ‘Saving the Planet’, since we humans are not powerful enough to destroy the planet, still the result might be “horribly uncongenial for ourselves, our symbionts and the other organisms we love.” He advises us instead to cease developing such a future. He concludes that apart from resourceful work in our response to environmental crises the world, the also world needs “better, less anthropocentric metaphors, [which] is the project and the promise of ecocriticism” (Garrard, 2012, 205). This ecocritical reading will thus focus on place and it will also discuss a possible non-anthropocentric perspective in Gibbon’s work. Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism* is a theoretical milestone for this study. I consider the focus on place, space and the Earth of central and growing importance within ecocriticism. His discussion of ‘Wilderness’ in the Old World analyses this astoundingly new concept from an historical perspective “for the hunter-gatherer, [...] fields and crops, as opposed to weeds and wilderness, simply would not exist” (Garrard, 67). The transfer into a farming society is “inclined to view the fruits of their labour as the consequence of struggle against nature rather than its blessings” (69). Reductionism is discussed in this chapter, mainly via Plumwood’s sharp words: “[O]nce the human mind is seen as the sole source and locus of value besides God, nature ceases to have any worth or meaning beyond that assigned to it” (Plumwood, 1993, 111, quoted in Garrard, 69). Garrard’s chapter on ‘Wilderness’ problematises whether it is for ‘inhabiting or sojourning’ (84). The importance of the wilderness for Chris will be discussed from this ambivalent perspective.

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<sup>12</sup> Such as ‘Landscape Character Assessment’, LCA, which is now performed in both England and Scotland (Tudor, 2014).

Garrard also discusses 'Bioregionalism' as a version of 'Georgic'<sup>13</sup> in his chapter "Dwelling" (118-145).

In the last chapter called "Futures: The Earth" (180-205), Garrard introduces a challenging approach to a landscape, *Bringing the Biosphere Home*, (Tomashow, 2002). The way in which Mitchell Tomashow in this work returns to certain places for 'disciplined reflection' (Garrard, 196), is similar to the way in which the protagonist in the *Quair* revisits the four different places from where the whole story is told: The Standing Stones, the Ruin of the Kaimes, the Windmill Steps, and eventually the top of the Barmekin Hill. Tomashow's methodology will be used in comparison with Chris' relation to the Scottish landscape in chapter two.

In *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Louise Westling, ed., 2014) two relevant ecocritical aspects focusing on 'place' are presented: Leo Mellor's development of 'Wilderness' (104-118), and Axel Goodbody's focus on the 'spatial turn' from the 1980's and 'geocriticism' (68-69). The use of literature as a means to discern our collective or individual perception of the environment, is vital, according to Goodbody. He also claims that 'geocriticism' along with 'ecocriticism' has successfully steered literary criticism from the dominating focus on human subjects in text analyses.

However, since my discussion of Chris perceptual narrative is based on a *human* writers depiction of her *human* perception of the 'Earth Others', and of course as such anthropocentric. When Campbell states that the seasons are used as powerful markers in *Sunset Song*, reflecting the importance of the tension between "the seemingly timeless countryside and the human society which tries to shape the land" ("Introduction", xi). It is important to remember that Chris in the role of a crofter both uses and shapes the land – she is not just communicating with the 'Earth Others' on equal terms. Ironically, Gibbon himself, in 1934 challenged my arguments for his foregrounding non-anthropocentric perspective when he confesses: "I am unreasonably and mulishly prejudiced in favour of my own biological species. I am a jingo patriot of planet earth" (1994, 161). Even so I insist that Gibbon's focus on a reciprocal relation to the landscape deserves recognition and I refer to Plumwood who concedes that a certain 'human epistemic locatedness' is unavoidable: "Human knowledge is inevitably rooted in human experience of the world, and humans experience the world differently from other species" (2002, 132).

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<sup>13</sup> Literature on farming (Garrard, 2015, 118).

Goodbody claims that to know a place means to acknowledge ‘multi-focalisation’ when perceiving its properties and the many systems of reference (68). Goodbody also touches upon the role of literature as an archive for human perception: “Symbolically reconnecting nature and culture, mind and body, human and nonhuman life is for [Hubert] Zapf one of the prime forms of literary knowledge production and vital function for literature” (70). Gibbon’s work will be used as such an archive in the following chapter.

In Goodbody’s review of Bertrand Westphal’s work *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, he acknowledges Westphal’s plurality of perspectives and multi-focalisation and his use of literature to bridge the gap between “self and environment” (Goodbody, 2014, 68-69). Goodbody agrees that fiction can bring places nearer if successful in “unfolding haptic, gustatory, and olfactory landscapes” (Goodbody, 2014, 68).

A work concerning Lewis Grassie Gibbon and ecocriticism is *Ecology in Modernist Scottish Fiction*, by Louisa Gairn (2008) is the only ecocritical reading I have found concerned with the full trilogy. Gairn reads *Sunset Song* as ‘a bioregional narrative’ and interprets it as an experience of dwelling in a network of humans and nature. This socio-geographical perspective was used already in 1902 by the environmental thinker Patrick Geddes. Gairn refers to Gibbon as a bioregional writer with the following definition:

Informed by an ecologist’s sense of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all living systems, bioregional writers picture specific localities as complex, multilayered palimpsests of geology, meteorology, history, myth, etymology, family genealogy, agricultural practice, storytelling, and regional folkways (Michael Kowalewski, quoted in Gairn, 2008, 103).<sup>14</sup>

Gairn states Gibbon as one of the first important ‘bioregionalist’ writers who along with Hugh MacDiarmid merged internationalism with regionalism (102, 114). Gibbon is introduced via his mentors Geddes (1854-1932) and MacDiarmid (1892-1978), who according to Gairn tried to reconcile the universal spectrum with the “intimate earthy and sensuous way we approach the world in everyday life” at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (91). She suggests modern Scottish writers to be more inclusive, with respect to their ecological visions:

[O]ur relationship with the natural world needs to be physical, as well as contemplative, and above all, that the practice of poetry and prose-writing requires close attention, intuitive observation and a sense of reverence for the ‘other’ (Gairn, 2008, 187).

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<sup>14</sup> Kowalewski, Michael. “Bioregional Perspectives in American Literature”, in David Jordan (ed.), *Regionalism Reconsidered*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), p. 41.

Her conclusion is that this focus on reciprocal connection of humans with the land makes Gibbon's work rooted in a region, but that this also makes it global:

This is, in essence, the Scottish 'take' on the globe: ecological lyricism which fuses universal and local geographies, universal and local human experience. In this way, it was the land under their feet, and by extension, the earth itself, that was important to Scottish regionalist novelists, like Lewis Grassie Gibbon (Gairn, 2008, 104).

Another important bio-regional writer, Nan Shepherd (1893-1891), lived all her life in Aberdeenshire, in the vicinity of the Cairngorms.<sup>15</sup> Both Garrard and Mellor discuss her work. Shepherd would have been approximately at the same age as Chris during the span of the trilogy<sup>16</sup>. *The Living Mountain* (1977) is from my perspective an example of a 'place-based perceptual narrative' from Shepherd's own walks in the Grampian Mountains. Shepherd's main issue is "the complex relationship of both the individual and the community to the land with which they interact and within they act", according to Gillian Carter's article on 'Domestic Geography' (Carter, G, 2001, 29). I will in this thesis very briefly compare Shepherd's non-fictional prose with Gibbon's work about the same bio-region.<sup>17</sup>

Campbell has published many studies on Gibbon, including the biographical "Lewis Grassie Gibbon" (1985) and "Lewis Grassie Gibbon and the Mearns" (1988), about his relation to the landscape. Campbell's introduction and notes in the Polygon edition reveals his profound expertise (2006). A more recent paper has been valuable to understand his long-standing relation and research of Gibbon. Campbell importantly found an unfinished novella during his research of Gibbon's papers (Campbell, 2013, 40) later edited by Campbell and posthumously published under the name *The Speak of The Mearns*<sup>18</sup> (1994, 14-79). Thomas Crawford's three separate introductions<sup>19</sup> to the Canongate edition (2008) has given me another important angle.

I have for this thesis concentrated my readings on the more recent critics who focus on Gibbon's sense of place and ecology. Most criticism during the 20th century has been engaged with *A Scots Quair* from a political perspective (e.g. Johnson, 1976 and McCulloch 2003). Another example of both political and agricultural discussion is Ian Carter's article

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<sup>15</sup> The Cairngorms are part of the Grampian Mountains, occupying almost half of the land-area of Scotland.

<sup>16</sup> Shepherd had published the novels *The Quarry Wood* and *The Weather House*, the first two parts of her trilogy set in the Grampians, well before Gibbon's *Sunset Song* was published (Carter, G, 2001, 26).

<sup>17</sup> It is strange that Gibbon not even mentions Shepherd in his literary essay "Literary Lights" Already in 1928 Shepherd had published the first one of her three novels about another female protagonist living in Aberdeenshire. Together with *The Living Mountain* from 1977 they have recently been published in the compilation *The Grampian Quartet*.

<sup>18</sup> This is said to be a quote of his mother's rebuke for "making his family 'the speak of the Mearns' by his caustic and all-too-recognisable portraits of local people" (Campbell, 2013, 40).

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Crawford's three introductions were written and published separately; one for each novel. See note 7.

“Lewis Grassie Gibbon and the Peasantry” (1978), a dialectic analysis of *Sunset Song*. Others have had a linguist or nationalist perspective, but since my focus in this thesis is the role of the ‘place’ and the ‘Earth Others’, I will not refer any of these with reference to their respective focal points. Johnson and McCulloch will be referenced in this thesis concerning their views on the importance of the land.

Since the 1980s, a feminist critique of the *Quair* has continually been developed, e.g. Lumsden (2003) and Norquay (2015). Both with a focus on Chris’ social or sexual life. From this viewpoint Gairn’s book might in some parts be inspired by ecofeminism. Scottish language, identity and nationalism are other longstanding perspectives, e.g. Lyall (2014) and Mewald (2010).

Since *A Scots Quair* to my knowledge not yet has been given a thorough ecocritical examination, I was expectant when the *International Companion to Lewis Grassie Gibbon* was released in November, last year (Scott Lyall, ed. 2015). Encouragingly Scott Lyall’s introduction confirms that Gibbon is still “best known for his portrayal of the changing face of the Scottish countryside; indeed his depiction of the ultimate significance of the land to human life” (2015, 7). Lyall also suggests that this attachment to the land might now be regarded as ‘green’ politics. It is then most surprising that the *Companion* includes nine essays with different approaches to Gibbon’s work, and none of them have any focus on ecocriticism. However, the historical chapter by Timothy C. Baker is highly relevant for this thesis, along with one by Morag Shiach’s on modernism. I will also refer to Glenda Norquay’s chapter on feminism.<sup>20</sup> These essays will be used mainly for my thematic reading.

In *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature*, Louisa Gairn states that “modern Scottish views of ‘ecology’ are [...] attempts to find new ways of thinking about, representing and relating to the natural world” (2008, 5). Louisa Gairn suggests that “ecologically-aware criticism is a potentially liberating influence on the study of Scottish literature, placing it within a field of enquiry that is of global relevance.” According to Gairn, Gibbon aimed to reconcile the local and the global, the human with the natural world in his work, inspired by cosmic and regional perspectives fostered by Geddes. Gairn gives Gibbon an important role as a bio-regionalist along with Geddes and MacDiarmid (2008, 2, 88). She clearly states

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<sup>20</sup> Hence referred to as Baker, Shiach and Norquay.



Gibbon's importance for the Scottish Renaissance,<sup>21</sup> in which Gibbon's and MacDiarmid's cooperation during the inter-war years is acclaimed for its "ecologically-sensitive local and global perspectives" (9).

## 1.2 Chapter Outline

The interpretations of 'Wilderness' has been problematised in an article by Leo Mellor "The Lure of The Wilderness" (2014), where I find the two sections about 'Terrain' and 'Ruins' most relevant, as Chris is leaving civilisation every whenever she escapes up to the Standing Stones above Blawearie or up to the ruin above the village of Segget. Chapter two will present the ecocritical theory with focus on 'place' used for this thesis, which will later be used for my arguments in chapter two, three and four.

The following chapter will discuss my claim for protagonist landscape in *A Scots Quair*. The importance of Chris' detailed physical perception will also be analysed in chapter two, where I will argue that the entire trilogy can be seen as 'place-based' via the main character's choice of place for 'thinking outdoors'. Inspired by Tomashow's method (2002) I will concentrate my study on the sections where the landscape is in focus mediated by Chris. The role of the 'Earth Others' will be discussed exclusively from Chris' viewpoint where the Scottish landscape will be considered as an agent. I will with this method investigate if Chris' outdoor sessions can be considered as a fictional precursor to a 'place-based perceptual ecology'. Plumwood's philosophical work concerned with the negative effects of anthropocentrism (2002) will be used as reference to examine the degree of Gibbon's foreseeing and perceptive input in this respect.

Chapter three and four will make use of my thematic ecocritical reading of the whole trilogy, with focus on Chris integral relation to 'Soil' and 'Stone'. Chosen examples from Chris' abundant perception and stream of consciousness will be discussed in the spectrum of ecocritical theory within each theme. The general critique of the role of 'Nature' or the 'Land' within the *Quair* has mostly been referring only to *Sunset Song*, perhaps with a concluding remark of the ending about Chris returning to nature. I will argue that *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite* reveal Chris' addiction to communication with the 'Earth Others', just as strong through the growing tension when it is denied her. This communication with

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<sup>21</sup> 'The Scottish Renaissance', can be understood as the Scottish version of Modernism. The Scottish Renaissance was further developed after WWII when Gibbon was gone. The essays and short stories that Gibbon attributed in *The Scottish Scene* were republished in *The Speak of the Mearns* (Gibbon, 1994).

the land *per se* will be discussed in chapter three, “Soil”. The representation of stones and their solid agency with will be further discussed in the chapter four, “Stone”.

## 2. *A Scots Quair* as a Place-Based Perceptual Narrative

Chris' capacity to form a dialogue with the 'Earth Others' is derived through a life-long communication with her environment, also after she has left Blawearie for good. I will claim the key role of the four sites, and that her perceptions of these places can be seen as turning the whole trilogy into a 'place-based perceptual narrative', by comparing her iterant thinking outdoors in line with Tomashow's descriptions of a 'place-based perceptual ecology' (2002).

The way in which Chris revisits certain well known places also resembles that of animal territories or migrant birds returning to their habitats: "[T]he Standing Stones to where she had fled for safety, compassion so often" ("Cirrus", 278).<sup>22</sup> The protagonist is aware of her need for communication with the 'Earth Others', and this is why she deliberately and consistently stays in contact with the non-human aspects of 'place':

Funny this habit she aye had had of finding some place wherever she bade to which she could climb by her lone for a while and think of the days new-finished and done. [...] She minded above the ploughed lands of Blawearie, this habit had grown, long syne, long syne, when she'd lain and dreamed as a quean by the loch in the shadow of the marled Druid Stones, and how above Segget in the ruined Kaimes she had done the same ("Epidote", 539).

Plumwood's solution to the loss of place-attachment includes the importance of narratives of individual attachment to a place, if we want to understand the land which is "offering to those who can understand its language, an explanative discourse of how it came to be as it is now" (232). According to Baker Gibbon gives us a colloquial version of "the communal memories attached to a place shape it" (47-48). An example of this 'speak' is used to present the well-known Standing Stones, confirming their site as well as their positions as important. I see them already in the prelude as non-human protagonists:

[S]ome were upright and some were flat and some leaned this way and that, and right in the middle were three big ones clambered up, out of the earth and stood askew with flat, sonsy faces, they seemed to listen and wait ("Prelude; The Unfurrowed Field", 22).

Gibbon's narrative is also seen as a "continuity that stretches beyond any individual consciousness" (Baker, 53-55), a form of 'collective consciousness' transferred via "local

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<sup>22</sup> My quotes are faithful to Gibbon's punctuation. Chris' is most often given this very modernist stream of consciousness. The same technique is used by Gibbon for all representation of direct speech.

gossip and pre-historic tradition” 48). Gairn sees some of these voices as ”a collective memory of the land” (103). She refers to how the land is presented with “the sweat of two thousand years in it” (19). Gibbon was worried that “the Scotland of memory, of sights and sounds and smells, [was] disappearing”, according to Professor Ian Campbell, the literary patron of Lewis Grassie Gibbon, at Edinburgh University (“Introduction”, viii-ix). This quest of preservation of a collective memory is similar to how Thomashow stresses the importance of history and the notion of time for exploration of the present. He encourages his readers “to seek out other community members [...] a woman who could recall summer nights [...] in the 1890s” (92). In *Cloud Howe* there is at first an unknown voice, a random local talking about their neighbourhood:

If you climb the foothills to the ruined Kaimes [...] of a winter morn and looked to the east and you held your breath, you would maybe hear the sough of the sea, sighing and listening up through the dawn [...] God alone knows what you'd want on the Kaimes, others had been there and had dug for treasure, nothing they'd found"[...]. A Mowat cousin was the heritor of the Kaimes, he looked at the ruin and saw it was done, and left it to the wind and the rain; and builded a house lower down the slope” (“Proem”, 267).

Gibbon’s version of natural history education is as we have seen ambitiously presented via the “Prelude” and the “Epilude” of *Sunset Song*, as well as in the “Proem” of *Cloud Howe*. The guide provides us with maps,<sup>23</sup> one for each novel (“Prelude; The Unfurrowed Field”, 6). The black arable land of Aberdeenshire is what first meets us in the “Prelude”. Gibbon’s aim is in line with Thomashow’s method: “One of the tenets for a place-based approach is that environmental awareness entails familiarity with the basic natural history of your home place” (2002, 79). In the “Prelude” Gibbon presents the Standing Stones by the loch and in the “Proem” we get to know the background of a deserted ruin, i.e. Chris’ new place for ‘thinking outdoors’ in *Cloud Howe*, an important non-human protagonist.

The authenticity of the *Quair* is repeatedly stated by Campbell, who elsewhere states that Arbuthnot and Kinraddie are virtually the same (Campbell, 1988, 15). “[T]he fact that Gibbon was remembering something he had lived through himself [...]. Kinraddie is realistic because it is real” (“Introduction”, xiii). It is interesting that Ian Carter’s rhetoric states that Gibbon cannot to be trusted with accuracy when it comes to the quality of the land: “The land around Ecth is not particularly bad for southern Aberdeenshire, but it cannot compare with

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<sup>23</sup> “The end maps of the early editions of the separate novels in the *Quair* are a delight, professionally redrawn from the author’s originals (slightly departing from reality, to ensure no one could claim libel)” (Campbell, 2013, 45).

the rich land of the Howe” (1978, 173). This would in real life have meant the opposite to what Chris states in the *Quair*. Carter concludes that this is proof of Gibbon’s detailed knowledge and part of his openly demonstrated distortion (174). That this cryptic geography of the Mearns is intentional is also confirmed by Campbell (“Notes”, 673-674, 684).

Gibbon openly scorns the Glasgow politicians’ of the 1930’s for their futile vision of Scotland as a great peasant nation: “They are promising its narrowness, and bitterness, and heart-breaking toil in one of the most unkindly agricultural lands in the world” (Gibbon, 1994, 153). This resembles the farmer’s struggling fight with nature to get his crops (Garrard, 69) than the interpretation of osmosis by Gairn (5-6). However, despite this bitter judgement Gibbon never depicts the land as cruel in the trilogy, as we can see in this section, premonition of the ending in *Sunset Song*:

For she sank herself in that, the way to forget, she was hardly indoors from dawn to dusk [...]. Corn and the shining stalks of the straw, they wove a pattern around her life [...]. So, hurt and dazed she turned to the land, close to it and the smell of it, kind and kind it was, it didn’t rise up and torment your heart, you could keep at peace with the land if you gave it your heart and hands, tended it and slaved for it, it was wild and a tyrant, but it was not cruel (“Harvest”, 226).

When Gibbon in this way emotionally and realistically provides a physical representation of the relation between humans and the land, the *Quair* might in parts also be interpreted as suggesting patterns for more frequent visits outdoors, encouraging healthier intermissions, encouraging us to go outdoors ‘straying in thought’. This message was sent in 1934 “a hundred years hence” to an imagined future and its “strange master of the cultivated lands”:

I send him my love and the hope that he’ll sometime climb up Cairn o’Mount and sit where I’m sitting now, and stray in summery thought into the sun-hazed mist of the future, into the lives and wistful desirings of forgotten men who begat him” (1994, 160).

I interpret Gibbon’s worry as a warning against urbanisation and its reduction of ‘place-sensitivity’, a concern shown in most of his short stories about Scotland and perhaps best clean-cut in the non-fictional essay from 1934, “The Land” (Gibbon, 1994. 151-162).

The sense of time is an insistent dimension in any communication with the ‘Earth Others’. Tomashow argues the necessity of using different scales, including time when perceiving a landscape:

The more immersed you become in the local, the more necessary it become to juxtapose place and time. Scale is a conceptual language that allows for the amplification of perception. It’s a tool for detecting patterns of connection across the boundaries of ecology, geography, history and psyche (93).

Campbell similarly states in his introduction to *The Speak of The Mearns*: “It was his ability to be inside the Mearns as well as outside, which gained him notoriety, and ensured his lasting ability to write critically” (Gibbon, 1994, 11). I claim that Gibbon’s both deeply rooted and yet distanced knowledge of the landscape gives the *Quair* an amplified time-scale. Although equally important as the historical and geographical distance is the cyclic method he uses for all his chapters. Chris might be virtually ‘petrified’ in the same place at every start and ending, (approximately at the same time), although her agile stream of consciousness and her mind-travelling enables her to simultaneously be standing in three different places – in the present, in history and in the future. Baker explains it like beautifully: “By avoiding a straightforward chronological narration [...] the entire novel, even as it edges into the present, is already historical” (53). This perceptiveness of the place and its time in itself is crucial, both regarding her role as a focaliser of the whole novel, as well as revealing historical events and their effects on her own life. Twice she physically goes back to her former ‘biding-places’, once to Blawearie in *Cloud Howe* (“Cirrus”, 278-279) and once to Echt, in *Grey Granite* (“Epidote”, 520). Tomashow describes such a trip back to a well-known place as a form of ‘time-travelling’:

In a way, returning to a place where you once lived allows you *to move backwards and forward in time*. Your memories represent the past in contrast to what you observe in the present, allowing you to feel like you’re observing the future, although I was just being brought up to date. The perceptual challenge is to engage in such travels by interweaving memories of the past with sensory observations of the present. In this way traveling into your past is less a nostalgic exercise and more an opportunity to observe global change. It allows you to take a measurable period of abstract time [...] it and experience it more directly. No land use atlas could have provided me with the visceral understanding I gained by revisiting Union City (99).

During her years in Duncairn Chris is seen to take one single day off, clearly due to the olfactory agency of the ‘Earth Others’. This outing brings her back to Echt and her childhood croft twenty-three years after they first moved:

And suddenly, washing the breakfast things, there came a waft of stray wind through the window, a lost wean of the wind that had tint itself in play in the heights of the summer Mounth. Chris nearly dropped the cup she was drying. Ma Cleghorn louped: *Steady on, Lass! Mighty be here, have you seen a ghost?*

Chris said *Only smelt one*, and then, on an impulse, *Ma, I want a day off. Can you spare me?* (“Epidote”, 516).<sup>24</sup>

Chris is grounded by her smell, and a wind from the hills is potent enough for her to be up in the mountains in her mind: *“I’m off to the country”* (“Epidote”, 516). Their old Croft in Cairndhu is deserted and in ley since “another and bigger farm long syne had eaten up the land and its implements” (“Epidote”, 520).

Leo Mellor discusses the human longstanding relation with places. What does it mean to know a place? In a section called ‘Terrain’. Mellor refers to Nan Shepherd (1893-1981) who according to him has a clearly chosen bioregion. *The Living Mountain* provides visits to the “windswept Cairngorms in Scotland” according to Mellor (106). Gibbon himself has commented on this intensity of memories and a higher grade of appreciation just because he was not living in Scotland. “I would never apprehend its full darkly colourful beauty until I had gone back to England [...] I would remember it and itch to write of it” (Gibbon, 1994, 158). To get to know a place via ‘place-based’ observations is according to Tomashow cumulative. This is similar to Gibbon’s and Shepherd’s individually independent methods, where they provide multi-layered versions of visions from the same site, in a well-known but ever-changing landscape. From my viewpoint this perspective also enhances the importance of an apprehensive and individual perception of any landscape. Tomashow describes his own technique as follows:

From this spot I can summon a melange of memoirs. The dates of the events no longer matter. Rather I experience layers of images of four elements at play, intermingling through the swirling biosphere. Views and scenes I’ve observed roll together, indistinguishable in my timeless reverie (108).

When Chris is ‘mind-travelling’ to a certain place, all her senses are used by Gibbon to swiftly move both in time and place as in this excerpt below at Edzell Castle. Baker discusses that this perceptiveness to the call of history, along with ‘multifocalisation’, might result in a readiness to move on, that “an understanding of history works as a force of both separation and aggregation” in her life (52).

*There’s nothing to see but a rickle of stones*, said Ewan, *but you’ll like them fine no doubt*. [...] There was never a soul at the castle but themselves, they climbed and clambered about in the ruins, stone on stone they were crumbling away, there were little dark chambers in the angle walls that had sheltered the bowmen long syne. Ewan said they must fair have been fusionless folk, the bowmen, to live in places like that; and Chris laughed and looked at him, queer and sorry, and glimpsed the remoteness that her books

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<sup>24</sup> This paragraph and punctuation are set just as the author set his writing in *Grey Granite* according to both Polygon and Canongate editions. N.B. Gibbon’s use of italics for all direct speech.

had made. [...] Folk rich and brave, and blithe and young just as themselves, had once walked and talked and taken their pleasure here, and their play was done and they were gone (Seed-time, 173-174).

Her deeper knowledge of history can be seen as her being part of a cultural memory and collective memory merging with earlier forms of memory – an access to the past, that is opened by Chris during her visions (Baker, 51). As we can see above, these apparitions pass just quickly through Chris' receptive mind. From where she is standing, I regard her as constantly 'observing edges' by her shift of perspectives. Tomashow calls this to "make the invisible visible" (102). The next minute she is back in the sun with Ewan.

This is typical for the way in which Gibbon treats time as both a circular and linear dimension. Her visions are grounded in knowledge as well as her elevated perceptual skills, deriving from earlier cultural, political and historical transfer of knowledge from her family or neighbours, or from schooling as shown above, but importantly also through her own experience from working the land. Chris is both evaluating and preparing for changes while standing there, just thinking. Using a term from Tomashow, she can be seen as 'modulating paces' and finding multiple views (157). Chris also distances herself from this abnormal drive to seek high places outdoors, and describes it as 'daft' ("Sphene", 587) and 'funny' ("Epidote", 539). Remoteness can also be seen towards her inner monologues, that she calls 'babble' ("Seed-time", 177). This vague desire for normality is once used rather self-destructively after Ewan's death, when she is on the verge of losing her mind and plans to let herself be "locked in from the lie of life, [...] from the world that had murdered her man for nothing" ("Harvest", 232). The importance of the outdoors for her health is stated in several sessions. Gibbon revives her urge to get out the same night she arrives to Segget: "Chris started and moved [...] she ought to be down in her bed, she supposed. [...] This impulse to seek the dark by herself!" ("Cumulus", 371). Another example is seen when she climbs to the ruin of the Kaimies perhaps to soon after a miscarriage ("Stratus", 372). Why she feels dizzy in this passage is suggested but not revealed until the very end of this chapter.

Chris' increasing urge to get outdoors gives her some physical 'exchange' with reality. This 'reciprocal quality' is required in Tomashow's method (75). Regardless the weather, Chris celebrates a form of reunion with the elements: "It felt like years – Years since she'd felt the rain in her face as she moiled at work in the parks" ("Cumulus", 300). Johnson interprets this urge as a physical attachment to the land:

In each of the volumes she regularly leaves her social situation to make solitary excursions to high places from which she can look down. She climbs to the Standing Stones above Kinraddie, to the hills behind



the Manse at Segget, and makes trips back into the Mearns to escape the claustrophobia of the city. But these symbolic and spiritually refreshing occasions have another purpose besides giving her a chance to 'take stock': she is also making a physical reconnection with the land. For it is that which she sees as a sheet anchor to which she can attach herself (42).

In *Cloud Howe* the proximity to the hills with frequent and long walks keeps her sane. One recurring part of her sessions is that Chris often falls asleep outdoors, and she explains how she misses her childhood with "hours in the hills and loitering by lochs and the splendour of books and sleeping secure" ("Seed-time" 177). This is contrasted with how in *Gray Granite* her surroundings are utterly insufficient, or even claustrophobic, according to Johnson (42). Not only her outing back to Echt shows the agency of the 'Earth Others' in the city, Gibbon iterates in every chapter how rain and cold weather gives her energy. Perhaps this is best shown in the second chapter of *Grey Granite*, where Chris reveals at the start that "she could sleep for a month – like a polar bear with the sleet for a sheet –" ("Sphene", 541), but after this midwinter session of 'thinking outdoors' she feels "brisk and competent, unwearied, she whistled a little as the sleet went by" ("Sphene", 586).

Through *A Scots Quair* we are able to share Gibbon's authentic experience, made realistic via Gibbon's transfer of multisensory perception of the land, negative as well as positive. Britain changed rapidly between 1932 and 1934, the period when Lewis Grassie Gibbon wrote the three consecutive epic novels. Gairn refers to Raymond Williams<sup>25</sup> when she states that his work sprung from experienced reality "from a love of the land and its natural pleasures to the imposed pain of deprivation, heavy and low-paid labour, loss of work and place" (Williams, 1973, 271 quoted in Gairn, 97-98). She also investigates the crofter's deep relation to their land: "the crofting community's love of the soil, and their wish to remain [...] was looked upon as somewhat irrational by many mercantile town-dwellers who could visit the area for a hill walking holiday whenever they pleased" (33). This is not the same as every-day contact with the soil, being part of the "aristocracy of the earth" (1994, 155).

Gibbon's local knowledge and perceptions also conveys a global warning. Through his writing, the author is seen travelling back to his childhood's landscape as well as simultaneously to the same area up to his own present day, in the two latter novels ("Introduction", xxvii). Naturally Chris also refers to other years with a longstanding

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<sup>25</sup> Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City*, London, Chatto and Widus, 1973, pp.264-71

knowledge of the seasons and the crops at her father's croft. In this reflection the climate change caused by the deforestations is also noted:

Chris wasn't the only one that noticed its difference from other years [...]. Over in Peesies Knapp [her neighbour] minded what [her husband] Chae had said would happen when the woods came down [...]. Chris could hardly believe that this was the place she and [her brother] Will had watched from the window that first morning they came to Blawearie ("Harvest", 211-212).

Gairn calls the connection between the land and its people the novel's ecological sense. The dwelling on the land within the rural society, is according to her manifested in the way in which "an old farmer [Chae] goes mad, the woodland is cleared from the hills and the arable smallholdings are taken over for sheep grazing" is threatened by the war (102). She also stresses the important fact that Gibbon's work exhibits the regional, rural roots of all urban population (97). In the city "[l]ocal and bioregional concerns are superseded. [...] Thus the cynical and exploitative 'greed of place and possession and great estate' overrides the peasant-farmers' local more ecologically minded wish for 'the kindness of friends, the warmth of toil and the peace of rest'" (102). She points out Gibbon's authentic experience of the devastating effects for the traditional ways of dwelling after deforestation and capitalisation of the countryside during WWI (97). Campbell also condemns this "rape of the countryside of [Gibbon's] youth. [...] Ordered in the name of a government with no understanding of the fragile systems which governed local agriculture" (1994, 5-6).

Plumwood argues that a high level of urbanisation and mobility, may increase alienation of place-attachment and promote a new type of global but more artificial perspective. This might silence the crucial communication with a place and its shift of seasons and "its in-human voices" (234-235). Plumwood consequently warns that such a globalisation would "prioritise a global standpoint of place which is the standpoint of no place or of abstract, virtual space" (235). I agree that a deep contact with the non-human aspect of a place requires time in this place. This is why Gibbon's fiction is so useful for us who have not lived long in this landscape. "It takes diligence and perseverance to understand how to place your observations in perspective" (Tomashow, 102). The way in which Gibbon focalises perception is realistic as well as experimental, built on his own and his family's longitudinal qualitative empirical study of a landscape. "During his years at his father's croft Mitchell would have developed an intimate acquaintance with local agriculture" (Carter, I, 173). Gibbon brushes over the fact that Chris must have the instinctive knowledge of this possibility to creep up on them from earlier experience, it is conveyed by Gibbon in a non-lecturing

manner. When the cows out in the fields are in the lee of the dyke they cannot sense her smell, “not heeding her as she came among them” (“Seed-time”, 123). Another example of this is seen when she communicates, and whispers with the beeches of Blawearie, she always reveals difference in leafage according to season. How they stand “brave and green rustling their new Spring leaves“ (“Seed-time”, 175) or “all in leaf, they were so thick” (“Harvest”, 183). Gairn considers the ecological discourses found within Scottish modernism providing a new sense of self, a relationship between humans and the environment as one of osmosis rather than consumption (5-6). This place-based reciprocity is in this example of Chris’ stream of consciousness combined with a global standpoint:

Cloud Howe of the winds and the rains and the sun! All the earth that, Chris thought, at that moment, it made little difference one way or the other where you slept or ate or had made your bed, in all the howes of the little earth [...] the REAL was below, unstirred, untouched [...] (“Nimbus”, 432).

I would say that Gibbon’s own roots in Scotland is not the main reason why it is realistic, his perceptual mind is. Smell and vision are direct and personal recognitions, although with the results from my analysis of *A Scots Quair* I argue that literature might give us a chance to vicariously reconnect to forgotten experiences or to imagine yet unknown sensations experienced by another human being in a more universal way.

In the following thematic chapters I will analyse the human protagonist Chris’ crucial relation to the ‘Earth Others’, ‘Soil’ and ‘Stone’.

# 3. Soil

As we have seen in chapter two, Gibbon's merging of experience uses also includes non-human matters. The narrative is given a strong empirical quality and the 'soil' is made physical through Chris' iterant communicative encounters with the landscape and its soil. This reciprocal communication is the focus of this chapter.

## 3.1. Living the Land

The physical quality of the soil is evident as soon as readers open *A Scots Quair*, with the red clay begging for rain ("Ploughing", 35). Chris regrets moving to Blawearie with much poorer land, although this red clay already in the next chapter is loved and absorbed with her wide open senses: "[T]he evening ploughed land's smell up in your nose and your mouth when you opened it,[...] queer and lovely and dear, the smell Chris noted" ("Ploughing", 54). Please, note her smelling and breathing with an open mouth. I agree with Campbell that the 'Red Clay' and its colour haunts Gibbon's mind, just as the peewits<sup>26</sup> do ("Introduction", xiii). Eating as well as sleeping in the field is a sensory thing. Gibbon brackets his childhood's sleeping outdoors in the field "(my mother used to hap me in a plaid in harvest time and leave me in the lee of a stook while she harvested)" (1994, 152). Gibbon's own 'overweening pride' of his background 'of peasant rearing and peasant stock' (1994, 152) makes him call the ploughman and the peasant the real 'aristocracy of the earth' (155).

Johnson claims that Chris' strong intimacy with the landscape is inherited from her mother (42). However, her father's relation with the land can be seen as just as intimate, although more polarized as either tender ("Drilling", 82) or cruel ("Ploughing", 64). Chris' hatred of her father's tyranny and abuse only eventually subsides. This happens when she is reminded of John Guthrie's skills by an old neighbour from Echt: "Chris felt herself colour up with sheer pleasure, her father could farm other folk off the earth!" ("Cirrus", 298). Chris' inheritance of both intimacy and skill in her contact with the land is shown in the way she seems to know the land from the very first scene, shifting perspective from a daydreaming child to the crofter's. The want of rain is firmly stated by her as less devastating in the

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<sup>26</sup> Peewit or peesie is the same as lapwing ("Glossary", 693).

wilderness of the hills, compared with the in fields below her, where her family risks losing the crop this year:

[A]ll the parks were fair parched, sucked dry, the red clay soil of Blawearie gaping open for the rain that seemed never-coming. Up here the hills were brave with the beauty and the heat of it, but the hay field was all a crackling dryness and in the potato park [...] the shaws drooped red and rusty already (“Ploughing”, 35).

Later as a crofter – not just the crofter’s daughter or wife – Chris notices the “fine black loam for soil, different from the clay of bleak Blawearie”, (“Seed-time”, 173) and she appreciates Ewan’s “cleaving the red-black clay” (170), or “*wisshing*<sup>27</sup> up the face of the rig” (175). When Campbell states that “Ewan [...] is ‘wedded’ to the land as well as to Chris” (“Introduction”, xxiii), I do not find this in opposition to regarding Chris wedded as to it as well. My interpretation agrees with Gairn’s discussion of gender, where she states that Gibbon and his contemporaries Nan Shepherd and Neil Gunn are unusual in not treating the land as purely feminine:

The land, in *A Scots Quair*, is neither male or female, although the paralleling in *Sunset Song* between the developing sexuality of Chris Guthrie and the processes of ‘Ploughing’, ‘Drilling’, ‘Seed-time’ and ‘Harvest’ – the titles of four of the five sections comprising *Sunset Song* – would seem to allude to the old idea of the agricultural land as feminised. Indeed, the figures which most frequently mediate the relationship between human communities and the land in Gibbon’s work tend to be strong-minded women (Gairn, 2008, 100).

Gairn credits Gibbon’s work for not depicting humans as privileged or above “these other elements of the natural world” (101). Accordingly, she gives both positive and abusive examples of this ‘biological process,’ stating that human sexuality is closely linked to the cyclic seasons of the farming year during harvest. Chris’ visceral contact with the soil can be interpreted as semi-erotic during her adolescence, although the smell of the land is enough to satisfy Chris (“Drilling”, 77) just as it was for her mother in childhood (“Ploughing”, 37). At school Chris day-dreams of “the champ of horses and the smell of dung and her father’s brown, grained hands till she was sick to be home again (53), and at home, helping father sowing the fields, she describes her intoxication during “an early morning when the dew had lifted quick [...] and the wind blowing up the braes with a fresh wild smell that caught you and made you gasp [...] there were larks coming over that morning, Chris minded [...] the sweetness of the trilling dizzied you” (56).<sup>28</sup> Gairn argues that “the land itself influences the

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<sup>28</sup> N.B. the shift from third person to self-referring you in this quote. See my discussion in page 4.

actions and emotions of humans” (101). When standing outdoors, Chris is often just a being. She is not placed there as a feminine object,<sup>29</sup> e.g. she is a creature, resting physically exhausted on the ground up by the Standing Stones, after “the ploughing was done, she was set to her drilling and faith! it was weary work! (“Drilling”, 110).

A more genderless relation to the land is also shown when Chris first calls Scotland ‘she’, during a discussion with her brother, but immediately afterwards, she thinks of the soil outdoors as genderless: “Seeing it [the land] so quiet and secure and still, thinking of the seeds that pushed up their shoots from a thousand earthy mouths” (“Harvest”, 214). Her first child Ewan, is like one of these seeds from the earth. “So close to the earth and its smell and its feel that nearly he came from the earth itself!” (“Cumulus”, 316). Gibbon states that ‘The folk’ is in it (1994, 152, 158). In this perspective Chris *is* the land and the often quoted exclamation: “Chris Caledonia” (“Stratus”, 401), might refer to endurance, resilient as the soil, even more so since she is pregnant in this scene.<sup>30</sup>

Once during her first pregnancy we are allowed to see how she falls asleep out in the field. She is content and secure “and she’d close her eyes in the sun-dazzle then, in the smell, green, pungent, strong and fine [...] she’d doze and waken sun weary” (“Harvest”, 183). This sleeping outdoors reflects the way she related to land in her youth, before puberty. I interpret this as a reflection of Gairn earlier mentioned thoughts of osmosis (5-6). This genderless connection with the soil is also shown through the memory of her mother’s mind and voice:

She was never happier in her life than those days when she tramped bare-footed the roads [...] she hadn’t worn shoes till she was twelve years old [...] the feel of the earth below her toes. *Oh, Chris, my lass, there are better things than your books or studies or loving or bedding, there’s the countryside your own, you its, in the days when you’re neither bairn [child] nor woman* (“Ploughing”, 37).

In her adult life, her mother has had to wear hateful shoes, and obey a religious patriarch. This symbolic sensual barefoot life of Jean Guthrie and her daughter’s corresponding freedom during childhood, is contrasted with how Chris feels alienated from “The life waiting outbye!” (“Cirrus”, 275). Chris never experiences her mother’s apathy, but in *Grey Granite* she feels ‘lost’ and ‘tethered’ (“Sphene”, 579).

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<sup>29</sup> Gibbons has often been criticized for ‘male voyeurism’ by e.g. Murray in the scenes where she stands sensually looking at her-self in a mirror, naked in a very cold room. (Murray, Isobel. 2003. “Gibbons’ Chris: A Celebration with Some Reservations” in *A Flame in the Mearns; A Centenary Celebration*. Eds. Margery Palmer McCulloch and Sara Dunnigan.. Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies. p.59.)

<sup>30</sup> I admit that Chris and her age and pregnancies, the miscarriage, and her menopause also play important parts of a biological and natural time cycle in the trilogy. Lumsden calls this her biological potential. (2003, 47), but since Chris herself is not one of the ‘Earth Others’ and this would be Chris’ perception of self and as such not the focus of this essay. I recommend Cairn Craig’s’ chapter “Fearful selves” (1999, 64-69).

### 3.2. The Speak of the Land

The theme of change is central throughout the trilogy: “A queer thought came to her in the drooked fields, that nothing endured at all, nothing but the land she passed across” (“Seed-Time”, 122). This endurance of the land, juxtaposed with everything else changing, makes Chris’ repeatedly come to the dry conclusion that only the land endures, but later she deeply mourns the loss of Blawearie’s open rigs. Her father’s croft is during a walk mute to her senses, the ‘smell of earth’ is hiding, but Chris is also changed: “[O]nce she had seen in these parks, she remembered, the truth, and the only truth there was, that only the sky and the seasons endured, slow in their change” (“Cirrus”, 278). Campbell argues that Gibbon in this passage reinstates the devastating effects of deforestation (“Notes”, 679).

Chris is grounded in the smell of the earth, and she is not stable when she cannot use her senses. The reciprocity of the crofter’s relationship to the land is seen when leaving Blawearie: “[S]he’d weary to death with a house and naught else, not to have fields that awaited her help” (“Cirrus”, 279). In Duncairn, after the knowledge of Ewan’s torture in jail, she is broken down. It is psychologically interesting that her memory is remarkably quickened by holding a hoe in her hand. She knows her earth-quality and she scorns this poor soil that “men she’d once known wouldn’t pause to wipe their nebs [noses] with!” (“Apatite”, 618). Earth is affirmed by its smell as well as its touch.

In Gibbon’s posthumous novella *The Speak of The Mearns* (1994, 14-79) the patriarch and his fine nose for dung is even jealous of the neighbours’ midden [dung-heap] “fine for the crops, fine for the crops.” This spring in childhood is never forgotten by the boys: “[I]t wove into the fabric of their beings and spread scent and smell and taste and sound” (43), and when these ‘children of the land’ approach the sea, the strange, salty smell reaches them faster than the sound of the waves.

This appreciation of cow-dung is also frequently seen in the *Quair*: (e.g. “Ploughing”, 53, “Drilling”, 76). Gibbon’s praise of the smell of cow-dung is repeated in “The Land”: “They sell stuff in Paris with just that smell [...] the smell that backgrounds existence (Gibbon, 1994, 155). This sensual relation to ‘Soil’ as an agent of life is echoed by Nan Shepherd in *The Living Mountain*:

Scent – fragrance, perfume – is very much pertinent to the theme of life, for it is largely a by-product of living. [...] The smells I smell are of life, plant and animal. Even the good smell of earth, one of the best

smells in the world, is a smell of life because it is the activity of bacteria in it that sets up this smell (Shepherd, 2011, 52).

Gibbon brings forth a relationship with 'smell' early in Chris' life in a session revealing a most unusual and perceptive interpretation of death as anti-sensory. I consider this scene to be her most perceptive and powerful vision of death. It takes place when her best friend Margaret jokes about corpses. Chris is then struck by the thought of losing her olfactory skills and she instinctively laments herself lying there dead, "down in the earth that smelled so fine and you'd never smell" ("Ploughing", 54).

This addiction to the land and its smell is further stressed when Chris is cut off from the land. When she eventually answers to its call and returns for good to her childhood croft, I see this as a sensory investment or resourcing, not a last resort. According to Campbell, the ambiguity of the ending was Gibbon's only choice. He leaves the question unanswered: "Does she achieve a moment clarity and in that clarity disappear and become one with the country she loves? Does she simply leave the stage and go on with her life?" Campbell describes the writer at the top of the Barmekin hill writing the last outdoor session for chapter twelve *in situ* ("Introduction", xxxvii, "Notes", 677).

If this is Chris' death, it is Gibbon's second version of it as anti-sensory. This time the loss of touch and hearing, not, as discussed above, through the loss of smell ("Ploughing", 54). At last we see Chris grounded in her final outdoor session, reconnecting with the present 'Earth Others' in the summer rain, until Gibbon decides to close down her consciousness: "feeling no longer the touch of the rain or hearing the lapwings going by" ("Zircon", 672). Bear with this scene, we will return to it at the ending in the next chapter 'Stone'.



# 4. Stone

During her changing life Chris yearns for peace, in Europe as well as in her own life. This is one reason to why she often places herself thinking outdoors with a view, by the Standing Stones, the ruin of the Kaimes or at the cairn in the end at the Barmekin hill, all four in contact with this enduring element, and this presence of stones gives her stability. In the presence of these stones Chris can be alone and herself, since the four sites are all more or less desolate. This chapter will discuss and the symbolic and physical importance of the element of stone.

## 4.1. Representation of Stones

Baker refers to the Standing Stones as a place deeply shaped by its communal memories (48), comparing the trilogy to *Scottish Scene*.<sup>31</sup> Gibbon shows that history is not a record of individual experience, instead it must be framed collectively (54). In Gibbon's work the life of any one individual experience is far from being considered 'real'; only the land can take on that role of communality (55). I agree that the soil and the landscape are shown as actively taking part in history throughout Gibbon's work. In chapter two I claimed the Earth Others, e.g. 'stone' and 'soil', are not only powerful metaphors, but also subjective and active. I agree with Gibbon's wider interpretation of 'the land': "They are the Land!" Where 'they' refers to much more than just the fields – i.e. the crying peewits and the farming people (1994, 152). In this way the land or the Standing Stones form part of Chris and *vice versa*. Craig interprets both Chris and her son as two Standing stones who remembers and gestures towards a community free from fear. "Warmth and vitality are centered and evolve around their granite implacability [...] bearer of the ultimate truth" (69).

It has been discussed whether *Grey Granite* is the problematic child of the trilogy ("Introduction", xxix). Is this the reason for such hard names for the chapters? To most readers those names are either magic or incomprehensible, and I want to give Crawford and Shiach credit for elaborating Gibbon's link to geology.<sup>32</sup> Gairn more conventionally links the

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<sup>31</sup> See note 2, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Crawford ("introduction" to *Grey Granite*", xi), Morag Shiach (14).

names to Gibbon's celebration of his friend MacDiarmid<sup>33</sup> and their mutual interest in Geology (101). These four crystals can all be cut as gemstones, but since the third one is the most brittle of those dynamic crystals<sup>34</sup> their order is not in this way logical. Gibbon's use of the epidote, sphene, apatite and zircon, crystals that can be found in granite might also show that even stones and rock have been fluid or shifting in prehistoric times, and as such they give a perspective of 'deep-time'.

## 4.2. Communication with Stones

In Leo Mellor's "The lure of the Wilderness" (104-118) there is a whole section about 'Ruins', although this is met in an unexpected way (113-115). Mellor's survey runs from ruins in Post War London to Chernobyl and reflects apocalyptic visions where the wilderness is animated. Naturally, in ruins there are signs of death and changes. This is part of the lure for visitors, just as it is for Chris in *A Scots Quair*. Even Mellor's more modern or even post-apocalyptic ruins fulfill this important role of refuge and recuperation in the midst of "a vista of destruction [...] mapped out in sensuous terms of environmental resurrection" (114). Another lure is the sensation of revenge or disobedience, which is a natural part of trespassing. According to Mellor, these perceptual concepts are sought in abandoned places long left to themselves (115).

To show the symbolic and physical agency of the Standing Stones I have chosen three different contexts of revenge or disobedience and refuge or recuperation as discussed by Mellor, but I focus on their reciprocal communication, perhaps the most important reason for Chris to seek comfort from the Standing Stones.

There were the standing stones, so seldom she'd seen them this last nine months. Cobwebbed and waiting they stood, she went and leant her cheek against the meikle [big] one, the monster that stood and seemed to peer over the water and blue distances that went up to the Grampians ("Seed-Time", 112).

The stones are probably part of a Neo-lithic bronze-age recumbent stone circle.<sup>35</sup> This would be in agreement with their being put there by "the hands of the [oldest of the] crofter folks" ("Seed-time", 123). Although elsewhere in the *Quair* they are linked to the Druids, long before the crofters arrived ("Prelude; The Unfurrowed Field", 22, 26), ("Cirrus", 273).

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<sup>33</sup>This is done by most critics. The author firmly recommends reading the poem "To a raised Beach" by Hugh MacDiarmid, to whom *Grey Granite* was dedicated by Gibbon.

<sup>34</sup> Acknowledgement to Professor Rodney Stevens, Gothenburg University, who spared some of his time discussing these dynamic crystals in granite rock.

<sup>35</sup> They are typical in North East Scotland. 2500-800 BC. *Recumbent Stone Circles*, Forestry Commission Scotland, 2015. ([www.forestry.gov.uk/scotland](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/scotland))

Chris has no fear of the Standing Stones, although they at times make her visualise or communicate with the dead. In a relaxed way she often lies there reading or thinking (Ploughing, 35-69). The fact that they are hated by her religious father as “course, foul things”, makes the place feels safer to her. To our knowledge he does not visit them again: “him that was feared of nothing [...] shiver by those heathen, looming stones” (“Ploughing”, 50). Ironically a much smaller stone comes in her father’s way in the cornfield<sup>36</sup> and causes his downfall. Chris this time blames him and his anger, not God, nor the stone (“Drilling”, 108). Another role is seen during her early pregnancy, when they provide safety and refuge. In one of these scenes she comes running up the hill to her worrying and contemplative friends, “the Standing Stones wheeling up from the whins<sup>37</sup> to peer with quiet faces then in her face” (“Seed-time”, 179). The next time she comes for consolation it is as a widow, but this is yet unknown to us. This chapter provides a good example of the cyclic narration, with every chapter starting and ending in the same situation. “She closed her eyes and put out a hand against the greatest of the Standing Stones, the coarse texture of the stone leapt cold to her hand” (“Harvest”, 181). This is how she stays, in physical contact with them, holding her hand there on the surface of the stone until the end of the chapter, i.e. the second part of the same outdoor session: “She gave a long sigh and withdrew her hand from the face of the Standing Stone” (“Harvest” 237).

Even in *Grey Granite*, mostly situated in the city, I find the ‘Earth Others’ active, often through the protagonist’s acute loss of them, just as earlier mentioned by Johnson (42), although importantly she still seeks new energy from her sessions of ‘thinking outdoors’. The first three chapters all start and end in the poor lee or refuge at the Windmill Steps. Baker describes Chris as being “stranded in a liminal place” during *Grey Granite* (59). She needs peace and a distance to her strife and she never avoids, or rather prefers ‘caller winds’.<sup>38</sup> Chris comes here often to “[r]est for a minute in the peace of the fog – or nearly at peace, but for its foul smell” (“Epidote”, 485). Why choose a granite passage, where nothing is green or growing, not even the air is fresh? It provides her with a solitary place, if not sufficient energy: “[T]he blessed desertion of the Windmill Steps, so few folk used in Duncairn toun” (Ibid.).

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<sup>36</sup> The crop up here in the North of Scotland is oats or barley (Gibbon, 1994, 159).

<sup>37</sup> Gorse bushes (“Glossary”, 696)

<sup>38</sup> Scots for colder winds, meaning freshening weather (“Glossary”, 688).

Eventually Gibbon shows how Chris' agony when being tied indoors in the second chapter of *Grey Granite*. At her business partner's deathbed she is out of touch with reality – locked in a room “with the sickly flare of the gaslight”, where she mourns winter in Duncairn, without the view and the smell of “the rigs sleeping under their covering” (“Sphene”, 579). Baker's interpretation is that “the only possible response to change, for Chris [...] [is] to return, in a very physical way, to the land itself” (57).

The last two pages of the last chapter in *Grey Granite* might resemble an epilogue,<sup>39</sup> but importantly the pattern in this chapter follows the same narrative cycle as all other chapters. The difference in this chapter is that the place is well-known to her, but not from any earlier prolepses.<sup>40</sup> When she climbs the Barmekin hill at the start of the chapter this is a new place for to be ‘thinking outdoors’ (“Zircon”, 632) and at the end of the chapter she still rests, she is not leaving (672).

The importance of the Standing Stones explains Baker's mistake by placing Chris there at the ending of *Grey Granite*. He writes: “The novel closes with Chris returning to the standing stones that have been a solace and a place of reflection throughout the *Quair*, and in death, finally becoming one with them” (56). Unfortunately these ‘stones about her’ (“Zircon”, 671) are not her friends from *Sunset Song*. This is a cairn<sup>41</sup>. She goes back, not to Blawearie, but to another well-known place since childhood, the Barmekin Hill above their old croft in Echt.<sup>42</sup> Lumsden's analysis of her retreat opens for a feministic interpretation of the ending:

Through her decision to step 'out of the world' and return to the enduring land and the 'eternal spring', may embody a subversively feminine impulse which acts to break through the 'hirpling clock' of linear time, and reassert the monumental and cyclic time of eternity (48).

Johnson is the one closest to my own interpretation, arguing that she during childhood makes “a physical reconnection with the land” and that this is why she “turns away from human relation to live alone, returning to an elemental relationship with the one thing with which she feels at ease” (42). The full circle of the trilogy is closing with Chris ‘thinking outdoors’.

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<sup>39</sup> The three novels consist of twelve chapters, with the addition of a prelude and an epilogue in *Sunset Song*, and a proem in *Cloud Howe*, but no epilogue, but *Grey Granite* lacks any corresponding parts.

<sup>40</sup> The term Prolepsis-Prolepses, (Latin term from Greek) is used by Baker to represent the important start of the chapters with Chris (52). Crawford uses the term curtain raiser in Canongate 2008, 205-208). Since Chris' sessions both start and end all 12 chapters I do not use these terms.

<sup>41</sup> Heap of stones (DSL, Dictionary of the Scots Language; web: <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/>)

<sup>42</sup> Campbell tells how Gibbon in poor health had to return to Aberdeenshire to finish *Grey Granite* (Notes, 677).

## 5. Conclusion

The role of the landscape in the trilogy consisting of *Sunset Song*, *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite* has often been regarded as an emotional or beautiful background for political, sociological or feminist critics, although my thesis is that the landscape *per se* is an important protagonist. My main argument has been that Gibbon, when placing his main character physically outdoors, makes the ‘Earth Others’ into key characters. I have shown how the agency of the Landscape affects the whole narrative. In this thesis I have also claimed that Gibbon focalises Chris, as a “place-sensitive” perceptive protagonist, often with a non-anthropocentric standpoint.

I have also found that *A Scots Quair*, by Lewis Grassie Gibbon can be seen as an example of a ‘place-based perceptual ecology’ (Tomashow 2002) of Aberdeenshire in Scotland. Modern life is for health reasons as well as the climate challenge in need to find ‘greener’ reciprocal communication with places outdoors for education, recreation and reflection. I have showed how Chris seeks communication with reality as well as a distance to it, to be able to think and breathe. I have also briefly suggested that *A Scots Quair* can be read as a perceptive model for a sounder, non-appropriative relation with the environment, in agreement with Gairn’s analysis of the land as an active participant (2008, 101). My thematic ecocritical reading, presented in the chapters ‘Soil’ and ‘Stone’, has further revealed the agency of the landscape represented by the ‘Earth Others’ soil and stone. I have in these chapters argued that Gibbon’s profound and corporeal earth-sense is strong throughout the trilogy, not just in *Sunset Song*.

Human communication with place, is in my view the most challenging field within ecocriticism. I would suggest more focus on sensory perception. In this respect it would be interesting to compare the work of Nan Shepherd and Lewis Grassie Gibbon. For future research within ecocriticism I would suggest *A Scots Quair* analysed as a pattern for healthier and more reciprocal relations regarding humans and ‘Earth Others’, e.g. the link between Chris’ health and outdoor life during the span of the trilogy.

Gibbon was in many ways a pioneer and his cross-disciplinary and narrative initiative deserves to be better explored and developed. I conclude my thesis by advocating more research of Gibbon within the developing field of ecocriticism.

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