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‘We are Scottish nationalist and Catholic’: Death’s Bright Shadow and Catholic Literary Nationalism

While the ‘golden age’ of the English Catholic novel is frequently documented in scholarly criticism, and new studies of Greene and Waugh’s literary Catholicism continue to be published,¹ there have been comparatively few critical appraisals of a separate tradition of Scottish Catholic literature.² Nonetheless, the close relationship between Catholic fiction and the nationalism of the Scottish Literary Renaissance movement of the 1920s-1940s is a rich area of study much to contribute to our understanding of the Catholic novel and its literary frontiers. One such work of Catholic literary nationalism is George Scott-Moncrieff’s impassioned, poignant novel Death’s Bright Shadow (1948), of which Patrick Reilly claims ‘perhaps only a Dostoevsky could have succeeded with so ambitious a work’.³ Reilly’s confidence in this novel’s strength and longevity is clear in his assertion that it is ‘an impressive achievement which, apart from anything else, will surely preserve its creator’s memory.’⁴ However, despite both Reilly’s high regard for Death’s Bright Shadow and its author’s significant place within late Scottish Modernism, both the novel and Scott-Moncrieff have fallen out of literary and critical fashion.

Using Death’s Bright Shadow as a case study, this article will trace the relationship between Catholicism and nationalism in the Renaissance movement, arguing for a Scottish

¹ Theodore P. Fraser notes that the work of the early critic of Catholic fiction, Albert Sonnenfeld, ‘reflect[s] on the full range and production of the Catholic novel from the “Golden Age” – the 1920s to the 1950s – and then from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) to the end of the 1970s.’ The Modern Catholic Novel in Europe (New York; Twayne; Oxford: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), xi-xii. Although Fraser’s study contains a valuable chapter on Sigrid Undset, Gertrude von le Fort, and Elisabeth Langgässer, and despite a good deal of scholarly work on Flannery O’Connor and Muriel Spark, criticism on Catholic fiction has tended to concentrate most on canonical male authors, including (in the French tradition) Mauriac, Bloy, and Bernanos, and (in the English tradition) Chesterton, Belloc, Greene, Waugh, and Lodge. In the last decade there have been several new studies of Greene and Waugh in their religious contexts. These include Martyn Sampson’s Between Form and Faith: Graham Greene and the Catholic Novel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), Paula Martin Salván’s The Language of Ethics and Community in Graham Greene’s Fiction (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and Michael G. Brennan’s Evelyn Waugh: Fictions, Faith and Family (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).
² This article expands upon the preliminary remarks on Death’s Bright Shadow which appear in Linden Bicket’s George Mackay Brown and the Scottish Catholic Imagination (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 23-6.
⁴ Ibid., 201.
Catholic literature which interacts dynamically with, but departs powerfully from the conventions of the English Catholic novel.\(^5\) Three lines of enquiry will be followed in this examination: first, a retrieval of Scott-Moncrieff’s biography and place within the Scottish literary nationalism of the Renaissance; next, an exploration of the ways in which *Death’s Bright Shadow* can be situated within the conventions of the English and French Catholic novel; and finally, a reading of the novel as the work of a uniquely Scottish Catholic and nationalist imagination. Ultimately, my aim is to illuminate the contribution of an overlooked figure of the Renaissance movement and enrich our understanding of the Catholic novel, a genre which has wider vistas than previously understood.

George Scott-Moncrieff, conversion, and the literary nationalism of the Renaissance

*Death’s Bright Shadow* is set in 1939, with the protagonist, Robert Nisbet, returning to Edinburgh to ‘take up the law seriously’ after a youthful sojourn in France.\(^6\) An aristocratic Edinburgh of countesses, baronets, lords and ladies is quickly established, and Robert learns from a friend that he has missed only ‘a handful of minor scandals’ during his time away, with ‘no murders’, but ‘some dull divorces, an elopement, and a conversion to the Church of Rome.’\(^7\) The early hint at the conversion of his friend, Ewen McNish – another well-bred Anglo-Scot – is significant, as it is Ewen and Robert’s love for the heroine, Mairi MacSween, which is the cornerstone of this novel, in which earthly love for a woman leads to spiritual fulfilment and love of God. As the novel progresses, Scott-Moncrieff’s Robert, who was ‘really brought up an Anglican’, and Ewen, the son of a kirk elder, re-establish a bond of friendship based on their shared grief over the death of a young woman from the Highlands whom Ewan was to marry.\(^8\) Their Scottish nationalism and their deepening interest in Catholicism become two major seams in the novel’s exploration of love and grief. Both Robert and Ewen receive instruction and become Catholics. The novel ends sombrely in the summer of 1940, with Ewan recently killed, and Robert facing service in the war.

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\(^5\) The most famous exemplar of the Catholic novel in English is still Graham Greene’s so-called ‘Catholic cycle’: *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), and *The End of the Affair* (1951).


\(^7\) Ibid., 7.

\(^8\) Ibid., 35.
Reading the plot points of Death’s Bright Shadow as straightforwardly autobiographical would no doubt be unwise, but there are striking parallels between the world of the novel and Scott-Moncrieff’s youth and family background. In his memoir of Scott-Moncrieff (1910-1974), his friend Morley Jamieson recounts his subject’s ‘blameless and respectable’ ancestors. These included the Secession minister and Professor of Divinity Alexander Moncrieff (1695-1761), and Robert Scott Moncrieff (1793-1869), the advocate, illustrator and caricaturist who appeared in Benjamin William Crombie’s Modern Athenians: a series of original portraits of memorable citizens of Edinburgh (1882). These ‘establishment’ ancestors were later followed by Scott-Moncrieff’s grandfather, who co-edited The Student newspaper with Robert Louis Stevenson at the University of Edinburgh, and his father, an Episcopalian clergyman. Religious and literary leanings appear, then, to have been a notable feature the Scott-Moncrieff family line.

In Death’s Bright Shadow, Robert Nisbet and Ewen McNish reflect their author’s dual inheritance of ‘the Episcopalian Church and […] distinguished literary relations’. Robert’s parents attend a ‘fashionable Episcopal church’ in Edinburgh; meanwhile Ewen is the child of Lord Gilliston, a ‘son of the manse’, Kirk Elder and judge, and he lives a literary life as a noted theatre critic. The converts Robert and Ewen resist the expectations and religious traditions of their aristocratic families, as perhaps Scott-Moncrieff did, with Ewen living a life of bohemian semi-poverty in London and Edinburgh’s Old Town, and Robert rejecting his step-mother’s urgent proposals that he marry an heiress to ensure the family’s continuing financial security and social status. While Robert Nisbet disparages his English public school education (declaring ‘I think children are better to be educated in their own country’), Scott-Moncrieff later derided his own ‘miserable schooling in England’, which he said ‘increased my partiality for my homeland.’ He did not matriculate at Edinburgh

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9 Morley Jamieson, George Scott Moncrieff and a few friends: a brief memoir ([Scotland?]: [The Author?], [1987]), 1.
11 Jamieson, George Scott Moncrieff and a few friends, 1.
12 Ibid., 3.
13 Scott-Moncrieff, Death’s Bright Shadow, 48, 59.
University as might have been expected, and instead went to London. There, like Ewen McNish, he made his living as a journalist, and appears to have scandalised some family members with his first novel, *Café Bar* (1932), a ‘closely linked series of low-life vignettes’, which a formidable aunt deemed to contain ‘too many tarts’.  

But *Death’s Bright Shadow* reflects Scott-Moncrieff’s life most powerfully in its conversion narrative, and in its account of the life and death of Mairi, the young woman who is loved by both Robert and Ewen. George Scott-Moncrieff met the Orcadian Agnes Shearer (later Ann) during his years in Fleet Street, where she had also headed ‘to try her luck as a writer’ after studying archaeology for a year at the University of Edinburgh. The Scott-Moncrieffs married in 1934 and returned to Scotland to write, living first in a cottage in Peebleshire (which they rented in return for farm work), before moving to Midlothian, Badenoch, and Haddington. Both wrote prolifically, with Ann Scott-Moncrieff finding success writing fiction for children and publishing short stories and poems in magazines, while her husband edited the Scottish nationalist journal *The New Alliance* between 1939-45, and simultaneously produced novels and works on Scottish landscape, history and architecture.

Jamieson recalls that ‘some time in 1936 I asked them if they were Catholics. I meant Roman Catholics of course. Only such a peculiar and alien culture could account for their apparent deviations.’ These ‘deviations’ in a Scottish and predominantly Presbyterian culture included having ‘Catholics and distinguished priests’ as their guests at parties, mixing with other convert writers (including their lodger Tom MacDonald, who wrote under the name Fionn MacColla) and, it seems, becoming gradually more interested in conversion. Ann Scott-Moncrieff became a Catholic in 1940, with her husband joining her in 1941. However, their happiness did not last. Ann died, aged twenty-nine, in 1943. Neither of the Scott-Moncrieffs’ work has received detailed critical attention, and much of Ann Scott-Moncrieff’s writing remains unpublished. Their daughter has claimed that ‘something of

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15 Jamieson, *George Scott Moncrieff and a few friends*, 4, 5.
17 Ibid.
18 Jamieson, *George Scott Moncrieff and a few friends*, 10.
19 Ibid.
[Ann’s] personal impact is to be found in *Death’s Bright Shadow*, which meditates on the loss of Mairi MacSween, a young Catholic woman who ‘torpedoes’ Ewen McNish with the ‘fantastically simple’ statement, ‘where there’s no love there’s no truth’. Notably, in his fond tribute to Ann Scott-Moncrieff, Jamieson remembers her as ‘highly gifted’ and ‘dynamic’, and recalls: ‘She had an extra-ordinary depth of feeling and one of her favourite observations was “– where there is no love there is no truth”.

There are other echoes of Ann Scott-Moncrieff’s life, personality, and faith in the novel. After discovering that Mairi has died, Robert recalls her ‘throwing herself on the grass in Princes Street Gardens on a hot spring day [....] “It’s gold now, it’s all gold,” she cried [...] “All gold, but not always.”’ This enigmatic declaration contains something of the ‘dazzling saying which lighted up all experience’, which the poet and critic (and fellow Orcadian) Edwin Muir identified as a hallmark of Ann Scott-Moncrieff’s character. And this moment effectively mirrors the lines of Muir’s elegy, ‘For Ann Scott-Moncrieff’, in which he remembers:

... ‘the world is a pleasant place’
I can hear your voice repeat,
While the sun shone in your face
Last summer in Princes Street.

Alongside Muir, a number of Ann Scott-Moncrieff’s friends paid tribute to her in the April-May 1943 issue of *The New Alliance*, with the playwright Robert Kemp (another Orcadian) noting that he first met her when ‘she happened to be sitting under a reproduction of the Raeburn painting, “Mrs Scott-Moncrieff”’. Raeburn’s painting (1814) of Margaritta MacDonald, wife of George Scott-Moncrieff’s ancestor Robert Scott Moncrieff, is one of his most famous portraits. It is surely no coincidence that in *Death’s Bright Shadow*, Robert

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20 “Scott-Moncrieff, Agnes Millar (Ann), n. Shearer,” 382.
21 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 106.
22 Jamieson, *George Scott Moncrieff and a few friends*, 20.
23 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 42.
27 Poignantly, the entry for Robert Scott Moncrieff in Crombie’s *Modern Athenians* notes that: ‘Robert Scott Moncrieff, whose age at this time we would suppose to have been over seventy [...] was then a widower, and
Nisbet’s family dining room is decorated with family portraits, including paintings by Raeburn. While this detail adds further texture to the canvas of upper middle-class wealth and privilege that Scott-Moncrieff paints in *Death’s Bright Shadow*, it seems clear that, just as the genteel Nisbet household mirrors the interior décor of the Scott-Moncrieff family home in Morningside, the novel’s heroine owes a good deal to the ‘completely decided character’ of Ann Scott-Moncrieff (and her husband’s family history).

Kemp notes in his memorial for Ann that ‘her Nationalism was only one of the expressions of a complete view of the world’, and that ‘the tremendous strength she gained from her religious devotion’ was immediately apparent. He was not alone in this observation. The depth of the Scott-Moncrieffs’ adopted religious beliefs (and the fervency of their nationalism) was also remarked upon by Jamieson, who writes: ‘In the early days of their conversion George and Ann were enthusiastic about all their friends sharing the benefits of the Faith.’ He adds: ‘Their letters, written separately, followed me all over the country like birds carrying news, views and argument […] They were always exciting and stimulating letters and, oddly, Ann’s letters were theological and George’s more political when I would have expected them to be reversed.’

These letters provide a fascinating insight into the Scott-Moncrieffs’ social world, political beliefs and deepening spiritualities. Both were energetically engaged with a network of friends, ‘including many of the writers of the Scottish Literary Renaissance’, for whom Scotland’s pre-Reformation past would have been a much-frequented topic of conversation. Ann Scott-Moncrieff writes to Jamieson passionately and provocatively in defence of her religious faith. In a letter dated 1941, she declares: ‘you must have heard it mentioned once or twice in all our long acquaintanceship, that we are Scottish nationalist and catholic; and it seems to us there’s a wonderful consistency in that’.

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30 Ibid., 15.
31 “Scott-Moncrieff, Agnes Millar (Ann), n. Shearer,” 382.
32 Ann Scott-Moncrieff to Morley Jamieson, 2 May 1941. MS 26973, National Library of Scotland. This and other letters written by Ann Scott-Moncrieff are quoted by kind permission of her literary executor, Mrs Lesley Findlay (née Scott-Moncrieff).
Mackenzie’s *Catholicism and Scotland* (1936) and George Scott-Moncrieff’s later *The Mirror and the Cross: Scotland and the Catholic Faith* (1960). These are texts which challenge popular perceptions of Scotland’s Protestant history, culture and character, and which baulk at notions of Protestant enlightenment and progress. Mackenzie, who became a Catholic in 1914 and who, with Hugh MacDiarmid and R. B. Cunninghame Graham, founded the National Party of Scotland in 1928, writes acidly in *Catholicism in Scotland* of the ‘intellectual despair and doctrinal anarchy to which Protestantism has reduced the country.’[^33] The Scott-Moncrieffs’ one-time lodger Tom MacDonald (another convert who, like Mackenzie, moved to live and work on the Catholic Isle of Barra) writes in his autobiography *Ro Fhada Mar So A Tha Mi* (1975) that ‘Protestantism erupted like a mountain of lava, destroying everything, and had hardly settled when it began to fragment and crumble, till it reached its present condition which resembles nothing so much as a mountain of cinders or clinkers, from which the fire has practically all gone out.’[^34] According to the Scottish convert view, Protestantism, with its fear of idolatry and its subsequent hostility to the arts, stripped Scottish altars and robbed the nation of its rich pre-Reformation cultural heritage, leaving it with a much reduced, infantilised literary and intellectual culture. Indeed, Scott-Moncrieff brings Scotland’s ‘tartanry’ directly into connection with the country’s religious history where he notes that his pamphlet ‘Balmorality’ was ‘a protest against various Victoriana, tartan terrorism and suchlike, and a rather severe diatribe against the Church of Scotland.’[^35]

Scott-Moncrieff’s correspondence with Jamieson is certainly of one mind with the wider hostility to Calvinism expressed by Renaissance writers. Much like MacDonald (writing as MacColla), who decried the Reformers as ‘among the worst men in history’, he claims that Luther was ‘a fundamentally despicable man’, and he writes (rather gleefully) that Presbyterianism in present-day Scotland is ‘on the wane’.[^36] In part this is likely to be a reaction to the endemic sectarianism and anti-Irishness in Scottish society that he witnessed and

[^34]: Fionn MacColla, *Too Long In This Condition: Ro Fhada Mar So A Tha Mi* (Thurso: John Humphries, 1975), 77.
[^36]: MacColla, *Too Long In This Condition: Ro Fhada Mar So A Tha Mi*, 41. George Scott-Moncrieff to Morley Jamieson, 17 September 1940. MS 26973, National Library of Scotland. This and other letters written by George Scott-Moncrieff are quoted by kind permission of his literary executor, Mrs Eileen Scott-Moncrieff.
later described in *The Mirror and the Cross*. But his letters are also the site of more intimate and revealing reflections on the symbiotic nature of his political nationalism and his conversion to Catholicism. Scott-Moncrieff writes to Jamieson on 24th November 1939 that ‘Loyalty to a nation is a good thing, it connotes a wide interest, in country and town as well as in people’, and adds: ‘nationalism as I see it is revolutionary in the only admirable sense.’ Later in this letter, he admits:

In the end it matters to me as an individual less that we should [. . .] achieve nationalism than that I should achieve [. . .] spiritual ennoblement (forgive the term!) through courageous and unselfish striving for that and the other ideals I have and that are connected with nationalism to a greater and lesser degree--- or of which one might say that nationalism was the political manifestation.\(^{37}\)

It seems reasonably clear, then, that Scott-Moncrieff’s nationalism was inextricably connected with – or even based – on his new identity as a Catholic. It is his Catholicism, in part a romantic gesture towards Scotland’s lost independence and pre-Reformation artistry prior to the taint of what he calls ‘the Union of 1707, humiliatingly entered into by the partner in the north’, that fuels and gives stimulus to his political perspective.\(^{38}\) However, it would be wrong to suggest that Scott-Moncrieff’s conversion was not religiously sincere and very deeply felt. In a later missive to Jamieson, he says that he and Ann are ‘amazed, amused, & excited’ to learn that Jamieson is himself ‘turning towards Catholicism’, and he describes their own conversion experience:

Roughly it has gone so – First, the making of each of us “psychologically whole”: this was wild, thrilling & took me, & perhaps Ann too, to the very brink of despair & outer darkness, then left us panting, empty & drunkenly amazed. Alongside this were some intellectual doubts and questionings, but these were curiously insignificant. […] Now we are getting ready for first communion, trying to draw close to God through prayer & meditation so that the force of that communion may have

\(^{37}\) George Scott-Moncrieff to Morley Jamieson, date unclear but likely 1940. MS 26973, National Library of Scotland.

\(^{38}\) Scott-Moncrieff, “The Scottish ‘Renaissance’ of the 1930s,” 70.
receptive answers: we comprehend, or apprehend, the Love concept – love of God that becomes the one great reality in one’s life. Strange the impediments that still delay despite one’s complete conviction, revealed knowledge of truth in [one’s acceptance] what one is doing. Yet it is only delay – Now I Know.39

The tone of this letter is feverish, the excitement palpable, and Scott-Moncrieff’s ‘complete conviction’ rarely wavers here, nor in any of his other letters to Jamieson. For Ann Scott-Moncrieff too, Catholicism provides ‘the greatest elevation and release of spirits.’ She rejects any notion that she has a ‘highly idealised view of Catholicism’, and defends her new faith passionately, calling it ‘a constant, a mean, the perpetual human measure, the Golden Rod, that Christ came on earth to give – and did give – and does give.’40

Death’s Bright Shadow and the English and French Catholic Novel

The convert experience, described so ardently in the Scott-Moncrieffs’ letters, is turned to by David Lodge in his incisive essay ‘The Catholic Church and Cultural Life’ (1980). Reflecting on generations of Catholic intellectuals and artists, from the Oxford Movement to ‘the “Catholic novel” of Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh in the 40s and 50s’, Lodge writes:

Most of these figures were converts to Catholicism, and many of them were attracted to the Church precisely because of its cultural heritage. But that cultural heritage was continental European – or, if English, medieval. Catholicism, to most of these men, meant Dante, Aquinas, Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance painting, Baroque architecture, orchestral masses, the organic, pre-industrial society. Or else it meant the splendours and miseries of the spiritual life – dramas of sin and salvation, miracles and mysticism, still amazingly going on in the midst of the drab materialism of modern society. It had relatively little to do with, say, Rosary and Benediction on a Sunday evening at the parish church of an industrial suburb, followed by a meeting

40 Ann Scott-Moncrieff to Morley Jamieson, dated ‘2d Sept’ but collated with other letters from 1941. MS 26973, National Library of Scotland.
of the Legion of Mary and a whist drive organized by the Union of Catholic Mothers.\(^{41}\)

While Lodge focuses on the English convert experience, and his identification of these literary converts as ‘men’ overlooks important figures including Alice Thomas Ellis, Beryl Bainbridge, Muriel Spark and indeed Ann Scott-Moncrieff, he does rightly point out that the artistic heritage of Catholicism was irresistible to many writers who turned to Rome in the early to mid-twentieth century. And while the Scottish converts had their own particular models of pre-Reformation artistry (summed up succinctly in MacDiarmid’s dictum ‘not Burns – Dunbar!’),\(^{42}\) they shared the view of Catholicism ‘as something essentially exotic and/or boldly opposed to the prevailing spirit of the native cultural tradition’.\(^{43}\) For Scott-Moncrieff and other writers of the Renaissance movement of the 1920s-1940s, the embrace of Catholicism as a positive artistic and spiritual force was in fact an act of cultural retrieval; Catholicism was re-claimed as Scotland’s true spiritual and cultural tradition, and one that existed long before the catastrophe of Calvinism. In converting, the Scott-Moncrieffs, Compton Mackenzie, Tom MacDonald, Bruce Marshall, George Mackay Brown, John Herdman, Muriel Spark and others were ‘expressing what had led them to the Church in the first place – a sense of its “difference”’.\(^{44}\) Catholicism was the dramatic and even flamboyant antidote to Scottish Calvinism, which was seen as at best bookish and sedate, and in its worst caricature, as David Ferguson remarks, ‘socially cramping, repressed, overindustrious, or intolerant of diversity and the simple pleasures of life’.\(^{45}\) This article will return to the novel’s specifically Scottish Catholic perspective momentarily; but first it is worth examining the tropes and motifs of concurrent Catholic fictions – both English and European – which are traceable in the novel, and which demonstrate Scott-Moncrieff’s sharp-eyed observations of his contemporaries, and their work’s shared spiritual preoccupations.


\(^{43}\) Lodge, “The Catholic Church and Cultural Life,” 33.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 34.

Although Scott-Moncrieff’s rhapsodic account of his own preparation for confirmation is in line with the exotic ‘splendours and miseries of the spiritual life’ that Catholicism represented to convert writers in the first half of the twentieth century, in *Death’s Bright Shadow* he is fully aware of the clash between the convert’s spiritual ecstasy and the rather more mundane experiences of everyday Catholic faith. This experience in the novel is mostly focalised through both Robert Nisbet the cradle Episcopalian, and Ewen McNish the Presbyterian. Robert and Ewen’s convert experiences both chime and contrast sharply with other English Catholic fictions, and in fact it becomes clear that both have an impression of Catholicism that may well be indebted to the reading of Catholic fiction (as well as popular prejudices and misconceptions about the faith). Both find their priest rather jarring: he could not be less like the beleaguered, hunted whisky priest of Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* (1940), which Ann Scott-Moncrieff describes as a ‘grand’ book in a letter of 1941. Nor is he the devoted but suffering young priest of George Bernanos’s *Diary of a Country Priest* (1936) who declares that ‘Grace is . . . everywhere’ on his deathbed.

Instead, on meeting Fr Reilly after going to Mass for the first time, Ewen McNish reflects: ‘On the whole I was glad that Fr Reilly was entirely un-prepossessing: small, rather ugly, earnest and a little bit stupid.’ He continues: ‘I did not resent his lack of warmth and enthusiasm; as I say, it was almost a relief to find him un-charming – I suppose I had often felt that people might be lured into the Church by the personality of a delightful priest!’

This notion of the ‘lure’ of Catholicism as a faith promulgated by cunning, sly, and Jesuitical adherents, and of the surprisingly un-glamorous figure of the priest, is something returned to often in the novel, with Ewen recognising that elements of his burgeoning faith may seem ‘a sly Papish quibble’ to friends.

Indeed, some of Scott-Moncrieff’s own friends and family appear also to have found his conversion to be challenging. Jamieson writes that after George and Ann Scott-Moncrieff’s conversion ‘they were now part of an Establishment that many regarded as the

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48 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 78.

49 Ibid., 79.

50 Ibid., 90.
devil’s own and the most reactionary. This was the era of [the fiercely anti-Catholic] Councillor John MacCormack in Edinburgh, the Spanish Civil War and the looming approach of the Second World War.\(^51\) Jamieson adds that at the parties hosted by the Scott-Moncrieffs, he at first ‘saw Jesuits at every corner armed with devilish casuistry to entrap the unwary’,\(^52\) but this view softened over time. He describes priests who were friends of the couple (Father James Christie S.J. and Father Ronald Moffatt S.J.) as ‘gentle men’ who seem to have been ‘designed to end all the fears I harboured about Jesuits’.\(^53\) These statements indicate something of the anxiety, or even hostility, that Scott-Moncrieff may have found in those closest to him as he made his conversion.\(^54\)

However, in Death’s Bright Shadow, Robert Nisbet’s rather scandalous turn to Rome is grudgingly accepted by his family, with his step-mother exclaiming in fond exasperation that his getting married in a Roman Catholic church ‘just puts the lid on it’.\(^55\) While Robert himself finds Fr Reilly, ‘with his face harshly pink, his eyes distrustful and uncertain’ to be ‘like a grocer’,\(^56\) his step-mother reflects:

‘You must admit, Fr Reilly is very vulgar. I know all priests are not like him. But in our Church you know where you are: and parsons are nearly always gentlemen. [...] I daresay he’s a good little man. But he seems to have no savez.’\(^57\)

In its aristocratic characters’ gimlet-eyed observation of class distinctions and, indeed, in their moments of snobbery and disdain, Death’s Bright Shadow conforms neatly to the preoccupation of much previous English Catholic fiction with class. In noting that ‘British Catholic authors were obsessed with class’, Richard Griffiths points out the centrality of this theme to a corpus of work which includes Brideshead Revisited (1945) – perhaps the archetypal Catholic novel of ‘the aristocratic romanticism of the old recusant families and

\(^{51}\) Jamieson, George Scott Moncrieff and a few friends: a brief memoir, 12.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 11.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 24.

\(^{54}\) Jamieson also claims that the reaction to the Scott-Moncrieffs’ conversion by a friend of the family, Dr Charles Robertson, ‘was typical of many who knew them at the time. He was mystified [...] for him their conversion meant that they had ceased to think for themselves and that they were incapable of criticism.’ Ibid., 13.

\(^{55}\) Scott-Moncrieff, Death’s Bright Shadow, 251.

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 235.

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 252-52.
the down-to-earth vulgarity, as [middle-class converts] saw it, of the working class Catholic majority.\(^{58}\) *Death’s Bright Shadow*, with its titled lords, ladies, generals and countesses, self-referentially signals its place within this body of work, particularly in moments where it nods to Waugh’s influence directly, for example in Robert’s recollections of a ‘wretched night with the bright young lot’, or in the novel’s references to Robert’s visit to his family mansion as ‘Montfleury revisited’.\(^{59}\) The novel also reflects meta-fictionally of the trend for conversion, or ‘second spring’ predicted by John Henry Newman almost one hundred years previously. When Robert Nisbet admits to his daunting (yet sympathetic) Aunt Kate that he believes he is ‘going to turn religious’ and that a friend (Ewen) has converted, she replies: ‘Quite a few people seem to come to it that way nowadays […] In my young days the Roman Catholics were considered a little shocking. Of course, there was Newman, but his was an intellectual sphere rather outside us.’\(^{60}\) In this way, the novel nods to its English Catholic literary sources and heritage with a measure of pride, and situates itself firmly within this corpus of work.\(^{61}\)

*Death’s Bright Shadow* also signals its allegiance to other works of Catholic fiction in its determined and sustained focus on ‘tacky aesthetics’.\(^{62}\) Although, as Lodge rightly points out, literary converts were strongly attracted to the Church’s medieval and Continental European cultural heritage, they often highlighted the gaudiness of popular Catholic piety as a way to signal difference. In *Death’s Bright Shadow*, the collision between moments of religious epiphany and manufactured, mundane representations of the divine on earth are frequently emphasised. In response to his question about whether he has become a Catholic, Ewen McNish tells his friend Robert: ‘I was received at the altar – after having my provisional baptism over a chipped enamel basin that looked as though it had been thrown out of the Infirmary.’\(^{63}\) This is no douce Presbyterian Church, then, but neither is it the site of the kind of high Catholic cultural expression that might appeal to a convert used to more stark and sedate places (and forms) of worship. As his own interest in the Catholic faith

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59 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 98, 143.
60 Ibid., 111, 112.
61 The novel also generally echoes Benjamin Disraeli’s *Lothair* (1870).
63 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 89.
grows, and ‘animated by welcome resolve’, Robert visits ‘the garish church of which Ewen had told him.’ He is not greeted by a scene of tasteful Catholic serenity:

The church lived up to Ewen’s description. Its interior was fairly crusted with white marble, and a posse of highly coloured statuettes lurked along the walls. The altar was like a formidable sundae, composed of layers of coloured marbles with barley-sugar brass candlesticks. The tabernacle bulged between sheeny flounces. The Stations of the Cross were executed in almost unbearably high relief, richly coloured. But like some potent corrective to all this fantasy there were half a dozen drab-dressed figures bowed over their beads in pews or before the candles at the feet of the statuettes. Robert crept into a pew and buried his face in his hands. 64

The church’s décor is so lurid that it is described in terms of boiled tweets and sundaes, a provocative and childish ‘fantasy’ of rich colours and garish materials. But this is no criticism. As Griffiths notes, ‘English Catholic writers found ugliness, tawdriness, to be in no way contrary to the worship of God, but on the contrary its sincere expression. Such tawdry art could also be a sign of the contrast between the convert’s faith and the views of the uncomprehending masses surrounding him.’ 65 Scott-Moncrieff’s Robert is clearly moved by the sincerity of religious devotion shown by the church’s worshippers, who are of quite a different class to the well-heeled congregation of the ‘fashionable Episcopalian church’ to which he currently belongs, and which his family attends. He is moved to prayer by this scene.

One of the most powerful and significant examples of the ‘tacky aesthetics’ of popular Catholic piety comes three years after the publication of Scott-Moncrieff’s novel. In Greene’s The End of the Affair (1951), the heroine Sarah Miles is both repelled and fascinated by the Catholicism’s contemporary, mass-produced material culture. Woodman notes that ‘Greene’s Sarah [...] finds even the vulgarity of popular Catholic art meaningful [...] in the way it emphasizes the sacramental physical reality of the truths of the religion,

64 Ibid., 234-35.
65 Griffiths, The Pen and the Cross, 116.
and she links this insight with her sexual love for Bendrix’s body.”

In *Death’s Bright Shadow* we find something remarkably similar. Scott-Moncrieff’s Mairi is a cradle Catholic, and so sacramentals and the objects of Catholic piety are not (for her) a novelty, but for the men who love her – Robert and Ewen – these objects are curios which draw them further into the faith (which is of course their intended function). Mairi’s rosary, reports Ewen, is ‘one of those absurd things made of Irish horn, forever breaking. The horn was dyed red and yellow. And the figure of Christ was made of some glutinous white plastic, like a cheap sweetie stuck on to two shavings of wood.’ Indeed, Ewen’s first experience of attending Mass with Mairi takes place in a church that seems to him ‘shamefully ornately ugly’. The ugliness of popular Catholic devotion surprises and repels him, but like Sarah Miles, he is gradually and inexorably drawn to the faith.

If *Death’s Bright Shadow* sounds in some ways imitative or derivative of *The End of the Affair*, this is hardly surprising. Both novels are concerned with a love triangle between two men and a deeply religious woman who ultimately finds her deepest peace and consolation not in romantic love, but in the love of God. Greene’s Sarah Miles writes to God as she would a lover, and Scott-Moncrieff’s Mairi MacSween is ‘radiant’ in her devotion. Patrick Reilly has observed rightly that in Scott-Moncrieff’s novel ‘the terrain explored is “Greeneland”, and it certainly contains the same ingredients of sin, sex, and salvation as *The End of the Affair*, with Mairi – like Sarah – turning away from carnal desire and channelling all her energy into religious devotion. But *Death’s Bright Shadow* pre-dates Greene’s novel by three years. Instead of owing a creative debt to Greene, Scott-Moncrieff and Greene (and indeed Waugh, whose *Bridehead Revisited* contains a similar romantic rivalry between earthly and divine love) owe much to the tropes and literary formulas of the French Catholic Revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Greene was, of course, a careful and committed reader of the novels produced by writers of this Revival. He ‘read widely in French literature’ and ‘had shown a particular interest in Léon Bloy and Charles Péguy, both of whom dealt, in differing idiosyncratic ways, with the themes of vicarious suffering and of

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67 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 77.
68 Ibid., 78.
69 Ibid.
the special role of the sinner in God’s plan for the world.’71 It is unclear whether Scott-
Moncrieff was similarly enamoured with this corpus of French Catholic fiction, but he
certainly read Greene, and *Death’s Bright Shadow* conforms strikingly to the preoccupations
of Bloy, Péguy, and Mauriac, to name a few revivalists.

Alongside the typical themes of French Catholic fiction borrowed by *Death’s Bright Shadow*, one stands out particularly. Theodore P. Fraser identifies (via David Lodge) that in
addition to dwelling on the role of the sinner ‘at the heart of Christianity’, ‘mystical
substitution’, and the critique of materialism and God’s pursuit of the wayward soul,72 are
the ‘tensions between flesh and spirit’ in Catholic novels:

[...] most generally the fictional clash is embodied by the physical encounter of the
male protagonist with a female persona (a kind of Eve whose other face is Mary).
“Woman is the cross”, says Bloy [...] As a vessel of sin and salvation, the female is at
the very heart of the drama of salvation presented in the fictional universe of these
Catholic novelists. Woman thus combines the role of seductress (symbolizing the
Jansenist thorn of sexuality) and spiritual mother, whose capacity for suffering and
redemption raises up all sinful creatures.73

Scott-Moncrieff places the search for God and the tension between flesh and spirit at the
very centre of his plot, and woman is the cross which his two male protagonists must
encounter in order to be spiritually transformed. Scott-Moncrieff’s heroine Mairi
MacSween, ‘a child of grace’, is also a sexually-charged ‘seductress’, in a rehearsal of what
Marina Warner identifies as the Church’s veneration of ‘two ideals of the feminine –
consecrated chastity in the Virgin Mary and regenerate sexuality in the Magdalene.’74 She

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71 Griffiths, *The Pen and the Cross*, 162.
72 Here I paraphrase David Lodge’s oft-quoted summation of the preoccupations of the Catholic novel, as seen
in Mauriac’s *Viper’s Tangle*. Lodge’s summary from his introduction of Mauriac’s novel is quoted in Theodore
Fraser, *The Modern Catholic Novel in Europe*, xiv.
73 Fraser, *The Modern Catholic Novel in Europe*, xviii. Here Fraser discusses the work of Conor Cruise O’Brien on
Catholic fiction.
74 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 69. Warner notes that ‘Mary Magdalene sins because she is not
chaste, and not for any other reason that might be considered more grave. The Christian harlot has absorbed
to some extent the role of the classical goddesses of love. [...] This facet of human personality could not be
represented by the Virgin Mary, however beautifully and youthfully and enticingly she is portrayed. Her
unspotted goodness prevents the sinner from identifying with her, and keeps her in the position of the
Platonic ideal; but Mary Magdalene holds up a comforting mirror to those who sin again and again, and
and Ewen MacNish engage in a passionate sexual relationship and conceive a child together outside of marriage; Mairi leaves Ewen angrily one night after an argument and has sex with one of his acquaintances; and she completely occupies the mind of his friend, Robert, who returns from France intending to find her and tell her of his feelings. She does not sound, according to the prevailing moral standards of the times, like a ‘spiritual mother’. And yet, like Greene’s Sarah Miles, whom ‘erotic experience has brought [...] a knowledge of the divine and even into a state of grace’, Scott-Moncrieff’s Mairi is the still, spiritual centre of the novel. After re-discovering her childhood Catholicism, she completely commits herself to love of God, and this prompts a chain of conversions.

In a pivotal scene in which Ewen recalls watching Mairi at her prayers, he confides in Robert that she ‘simply, completely and fervently loved’ God. There might well be an echo of Ann and George Scott-Moncrieff’s early marriage here, as Ann converted first, with her husband following her a year later. Ewen is also, of course, the precursor of Greene’s bitterly envious Maurice Bendrix in this moment, as he finds that Mairi ‘was perfectly manifestly speaking to him whom she most loved.’ He claims that he ‘felt deserted’ by Mairi’s devotion, and explains: ‘I was jealous of God when I discovered how she loved him.’ And yet, as with Ann Scott-Moncrieff, the cradle Catholic Mairi’s religiosity is infectious. In retrospect Ewen realises:

I too was in the same presence whose existence I could not question when I looked at Mairi speaking to him. It was like having God proven to you tangibly. The sort of thing you don’t believe can happen. But it did happen. I knew then irrevocably that God was, and that it was possible and essential to know him.

Mairi’s death occurs before the novel begins, and so we might expect her to be a ghostly presence, glimpsed only fleetingly during recollection and remembrance, but she is ever-present in the text and is called constantly to mind by the men who knew and loved her.


76 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 77.
77 Ibid.
78 Ibid., 77, 161
79 Ibid., 78.
She is often evoked as a type of penitent Magdalene, serenely at prayer, full of ‘heroic innocence’, and yet also libidinous. Ewen MacNish declares that his love of Mairi ‘changed my whole evaluation of man, and so gave me the knowledge of God’, while Robert discovers ‘a peculiar glory’ and ‘a sense of peace and wellbeing’ as he ‘give[s] thanks to the God he had discovered’ through hearing of Mairi’s faith. As he ‘undressed slowly’ after prayer, writes Scott-Moncrieff, Robert discovers ‘a lover-like aspect of theism’, and felt ‘as though he were in love; far more serenely, more confidently in love than ever before; with no queries, but with complete acceptance and joy.’

This charged mingling of the erotic and the divine (so reminiscent of Scott-Moncrieff’s own conversion experience, which left him ‘panting, empty, and drunkenly amazed’) makes Death’s Bright Shadow a sister novel to The End of the Affair, and – as noted earlier – it shares much in common with Catholic fiction more broadly. Its intertextual nods to Greene, Waugh, and Newman, its sharp-eyed observation of the convert experience, class, and ‘tacky aesthetics’, and its debt to the French Catholic Revival mean that, despite its critical neglect, it can be situated clearly within the heyday of the Catholic novel. However, the text goes beyond the confines of this genre, and is at the same time the product of a uniquely Scottish Catholic literary, and nationalist imaginary. Scott-Moncrieff notes in a later essay that ‘Scotland has had to depend too long upon the goût Anglais for what has been considered publishable’. It is to the novel’s specifically Scottish dimensions that this article will now turn.

Death’s Bright Shadow as Scottish Catholic Novel

In his overview of the supple interaction between political nationalism and Scottish literature throughout the twentieth century, Colin Kidd argues that ‘Unionism [...] was a kind of anti-matter, and anathema to the Scottish writer.’ But Kidd cannily observes that ‘lost nationhood’ is far from ‘the dominant subject of the Scottish novel’, as ‘the morbid excesses

80 Ibid., 140.
81 Ibid., 73, 109.
82 Ibid., 109.
of Calvinism provided a far more meaty bone to gnaw.\textsuperscript{84} As noted earlier in this article, Scott-Moncrieff’s Renaissance circle spilled much ink on the topic of both nationalism and Calvinism, and writerly arguments, debates and squabbles on these subjects are woven throughout the fabric of \textit{Death’s Bright Shadow}, reflecting the literary culture in which its author – ‘an essentially gregarious man’ – thrived.\textsuperscript{85} Indeed, the novel’s nationalism (and its nationalist characters’ dislike of the sixteenth century Scottish Reformation) might be called the b-plot to the novel’s primary narrative: the Catholic pilgrim’s progress of Robert Nisbet. But in fact, nationalism, ‘lost nationhood’ and Catholicism are intimately interconnected throughout, and they are integral facets of Scott-Moncrieff’s artistry.

In a neat reflection of the well-trodden Scottish literary focus on the duality of Edinburgh’s Old and New Towns – with their subsequent metaphorical suggestion of outward respectability masking inner darkness and depravity – Scott-Moncrieff sets his Edinburgh scenes in both elegant Georgian townhouses and in much scruffier pubs and gentlemen’s social clubs. It is in ‘the Patriot Club’, a howff described as ‘a hotbed of nationalism’, ‘a dive in a garret in the Old Town’, and ‘an evacuated slum’ that much of the novel’s masculine literary and political debate takes place.\textsuperscript{86} On Robert’s return to Edinburgh, clashes between socialist and nationalist positions on the looming threat of war are thrashed out in the club. Nationalism is extolled in the face of imperialism and expansionism, while Marx is condemned as ‘a man who mummified himself in the British Museum, and avoided the men he pretended to write about’.\textsuperscript{87} Meanwhile, the case for socialism is made to Robert Nisbet by Brodrick, ‘a hatchet-faced young journalist’, who asks ‘What does nationality, or anything else, matter to a man if his stomach’s empty?’\textsuperscript{88} But Brodrick’s distrust of Catholicism, and his attendant suspicion that Ewen McNish has converted, mark him early as a character in whom the reader is not encouraged to put much faith. He says, sneeringly: ‘The Church of Rome is about [Ewen’s] mark. I can see him as an Inquisitor.’\textsuperscript{89} As with the novel’s other lightly-sketched barflies, Brodrick is not psychologically well-developed, and because his religious sense is lacking, his political

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\item[\textsuperscript{85}] Jamieson, \textit{George Scott Moncrieff and a few friends}, 23.
\item[\textsuperscript{86}] Scott-Moncrieff, \textit{Death’s Bright Shadow}, 16, 17, 18.
\item[\textsuperscript{87}] Ibid., 21.
\item[\textsuperscript{88}] Ibid., 19.
\item[\textsuperscript{89}] Ibid., 20.
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perspective (the novel suggests) should also be viewed with some scepticism. Likewise Ron Brown, a young university lecturer and ultimately the novel’s villain, is shown early on to be sympathetic to Calvinism, and thus is not entirely to be trusted. Like Ewen’s father, he is the son of a minister, and he insists: ‘It’s easy enough for people to attack Calvinism now: no doubt the Calvinist beliefs were absurd. But there were guts to them.’

Robert, early in his spiritual journey, laughingly agrees that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination ‘has a superb illogicality that demands faith of a high order!’ but he offers that the sixteenth-century Calvinists ‘were pretty grim where the arts and the graces of life were concerned.’

His belief in a crushing Calvinist puritanism – harshly resistant to artistic expression as a kind of idolatry – is representative of the thought of the broader Renaissance movement. Indeed it is difficult to find a Scottish writer of the early decades of the twentieth century for whom the Reformation was to be celebrated. One young student in the novel, ‘a mild little fellow’, “observe[s] dreamily: it’s the poets we need, and a living drama.”

This unnamed character seems to speak for Scott-Moncrieff and his wider circle in this moment, but of course what is missing from this student’s view of the state of the nation, for his author at least, is faith.

Robert Nisbet is Scott-Moncrieff’s answer to the problem of political nationalism lacking the crucial dimension and ‘wonderful consistency’ (as Ann Scott-Moncrieff would have it) of faith. The reader learns early on that Robert has ‘been through phases of socialism and political nationalism; he had been interested in the communism and pacifism fashionable of his generation’, and while he found politics ‘always inadequate […] he sought still for something that could coordinate his motives so that they might through unity have some purpose.’

The unifying purpose of his life becomes Catholicism, but Robert’s attraction to the Church of Rome is irrevocably wound up with nationalist romance and nostalgia, so that his conversion is at once spiritual and political. As noted earlier, Mairi MacSween comes to represent ‘the cross’ in Death’s Bright Shadow, but she also comes close to standing as a female emblem of the nation. Correspondingly, it is not the aggressive machismo of debates in gentlemen’s clubs in Edinburgh’s Old Town that seduce Robert, but

90 Ibid., 35.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid., 165.
93 Ibid., 95.
scenes in townhouse parlours – and in the Scottish Highlands – which are gendered (and very defiantly feminine) spaces.

One of the novel’s earliest nationalist conversion scenes in this regard comes with Robert’s visit to a gathering hosted by Miss Madeleine Murdoch of the New Town’s elegant Heriot Row. Robert’s companion on the train in the first page of the novel, she is described as ‘middle-aged to elderly’, bearing ‘the mark of breeding and culture’, and dressed ‘elaborately yet unobtrusively [...] her clothing and jewellery evidence of an interest in the arts during a period that had dated.’ Miss Murdoch is, the text suggests, a vestige of the late nineteenth-century Scottish Arts and Crafts movement, her Celticism signalled by her dress and tastes (it is no accident that she is later complimented by Robert’s friend Sir Grant on her ‘lovely old Scottish chairs’, made of laburnum). Miss Murdoch’s decadent heyday would have been sympathetic to Robert’s own burgeoning conversion. As Michael Shaw puts it: ‘Decadent writers and artists across Europe found themselves turning to Catholicism for spiritual and artistic awakening’. He notes that ‘decadents turned to Catholicism to express a religious dilettantism or, much like neo-Jacobites, because they were attracted to the aesthetic dimension of Catholic ritualism’. Therefore it is unsurprising – particularly given the decadent and neo-Jacobite sympathy with Catholicism – that in Miss Murdoch’s house, an old Gaelic air stirs nationalist feeling in Robert. A girl performs for the assembled company:

She sang other Gaelic songs, singing with a pure voice, very sweetly, and the cultured Edinburgh drawing room was filled with nostalgia for the remote places, the neglected and sinned-against peoples, its desolate ancestry of the mountains and isles. Robert thought how odd it all was, this unquiet yearning for what had been spurned in favour of the civilised city life, awoken quickly, making the whole company feel momentarily exiled and restive.97

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94 Ibid., 7.
95 Ibid., 51.
97 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 52.
Neo-Jacobitism is hinted at through the reference to the feeling of exile produced by the girl’s song. And though he finds it ‘odd’, the grieving Robert finds himself moved almost to tears by this drawing room scene; his nascent Catholic masculinity nurtured by (what he understands to be) the female singer’s vision of Scotland as victim, ‘neglected and sinned-against’, but resolute, ancient, and beautiful. Robert feels something similar at a ‘swarry’ hosted in a later chapter by Sir Grant, in which ‘the company was largely female’. Sir Grant’s patriotism ‘seemed to cut clean through the miseries and the shabbiness that were Scotland’, and produces in Robert ‘a pride of place, of belonging to a people, of inheriting a land, of sustaining a history’. These New Town soirées are gentler spaces entirely than the male-only clubs where Marx is denounced for his ‘intolerance, pig-headedness, and lack of charity’, and men vie for political superiority. They are hosted and attended by women and make the female performance of Gaelic national song (which is assumed to be one of lament by the English-speaking Robert) the main form of entertainment. Scotland is viewed nostalgically at these Edinburgh parties, and nationalist feeling is evoked by wistful reflection on the nation’s past glories. As one ‘little student’ says, ‘with unexpected fervour’: ‘If it had not been for the Jacobites there’d no have been any Scotland now.’

If the singing girl at Miss Murdoch’s party takes the place, momentarily, of Robert’s Scottish muse, this role is inhabited posthumously once more by Mairi when he visits the Highlands (the heart of Romantic Scotland, Jacobitism, and the place of Mairi’s birth), and when he hears about her Highland funeral from Ewen McNish. Ewen’s account of the funeral builds upon and substantiates the romantic vision of Scotland which Robert is so affected by at Miss Murdoch’s gathering. Mairi is buried, says Ewen, in ‘one of those remote Catholic burial places, in a deserted countryside, right off the road, the way to it marked out with cairns where the bearers rest.’ Her resting place solidifies for Robert his notion of Mairi as something of a Scottish saint: her burial site is located within a site of rugged, romantic beauty, the way there a kind of pilgrimage. Significantly, the grief these men feel for their lost beloved mirrors their grief for lost nationhood. This is made explicit when,

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98 Ibid., 164.
99 Ibid., 168.
100 Ibid., 22.
101 Ibid., 165.
102 Ibid., 88.
eventually, Robert makes the journey to the Highlands to visit his Aunt Kate. He finds that ‘his whole visit had a peculiar glory to it’, and:

Then he thought of Mairi, who sprang from such country as this, and brought with her to Edinburgh something of an older, finer culture: although one dying visibly, inexorably before the insidious values of an effete civilisedness. Here in the rapt peace, restless with mountain tops that speired the sky, he could see Mairi’s nativity and the source of her purity. And through all some godly grace given, not acquired, not natural but super-natural – the natural, as it were, drawn up beyond itself and revealing its origin.\(^{103}\)

Here Mairi comes to stand for the nation – a ‘Scotland-as-woman figure’ and ‘female figure linked to the Scottish land’ not unlike the womanly totems who feature in the work of Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Neil Gunn and other Renaissance writers, as Kirsten Stirling suggests.\(^{104}\) However, unlike many of the female totems of nationhood and Scottish soil found in Renaissance works, Mairi stands for a specifically Catholic Scotland. In Scott-Moncrieff’s convert, neo-Jacobite vision of the nation, the Scottish muse must be Catholic, in order to represent Scotland’s true (if exiled) faith. That faith is fully revived in the heart of Scott-Moncrieff’s Robert in the following pages. The apex of Death Bright Shadow’s drawing together of nationalism and Catholicism comes with Robert’s visit to a Highland chapel as chaperone to his aunt’s two maids. Though the outside of the church was ‘as simple a building as any [Protestant] kirk’, the interior introduces Robert to a Highland Catholicism that he finds irresistible:

The woodwork was unstained, the pews worn until the knots rose above the grain. Now there seemed too few of a congregation to wear them further. The walls were decorated with damp, and the oil-print Stations of the Cross were curled in their frames. The sanctuary was hung with faded reds and greens. Only the crucifix and the candlesticks gleamed with any freshness. Yet to Robert the whole occasion was

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 110.
\(^{104}\) Kirsten Stirling, Bella Caledonia: Woman, Nation, Text (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 36.
tremendously impressive: the people kneeling throughout Mass, infinitely still and recollected. Mostly they were old, with fine lines to their faces, their dark thick clothes hanging from their shoulders, posed like draperies, and beads between the gnarled fingers of the hands before them. The priest was white-haired. He preached in Gaelic, his eyes gently resting on the remaining handful of his congregation, patiently, quietly exhorting them, to what end Robert could not tell, but he felt it was all true – it was bound to be true. And he thought, ‘I never heard a sermon with which I agreed more deeply!’

This scene is one of deterioration and decline; the church is dank, the interior is ‘faded’, and the parishioners and priest are aged. Yet faith is brought to vivid and intense life within Robert, who – despite his total lack of understanding – finds that the Gaelic homily strikes him deeply within. Of course, this monoglot perspective of Gaelic preaching and a ‘foreign’ Latin liturgy is entirely appropriate to the conventions of Catholic fiction; Griffiths notes that the liturgy was a regular feature of English Catholic fictions, written by converts because ‘The Catholic Mass, in a language not “understood by the people”, and with much of it being intentionally inaudible, shocked those who believed that the clergy should speak to the intellect of their flock.’ Here the alienating effect of worship in a language other than English is intensified even further than it would be in contemporary English Catholic fictions. If the Latin liturgy is alien to Robert, the homily in Gaelic is completely inaccessible, and yet in this moment his burgeoning Catholic spirituality and his nationalism coalesce thrillingly. In the decaying Highland chapel, Scott-Moncrieff’s protagonist-in-mourning feels life coursing through him like an ecstatic revelation. As with his author, for whom ‘nationalism was the political manifestation’ of ‘spiritual ennoblement’, Robert Nisbet embraces his conversion to Catholicism and Scottish nationalism, which are seen not as two separate or competing entities, but as mutually inclusive, enriching faiths.

Conclusion

106 Griffiths, The Pen and the Cross, 113.
Like its much more canonical Catholic sister novels *The End of the Affair* (1951) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), *Death’s Bright Shadow* ends in the midst of the Second World War, with Robert finding romantic fulfilment just as ‘a great age of slaughter and all manner of murder was dawning.’ Earlier in the novel, the looming war causes Robert’s nationalist acquaintance, Inglis, to blurt out: ‘We’ll go like sheep and fight for England.’ Robert concedes that Scots will not refuse the fight ‘Because they don’t see things independently.’ He says ruefully, ‘I wish they did, but they don’t.’ By the novel’s final chapter, which takes place exactly a year after it began, Robert is prepared to die. He ‘anticipates death in action’ as a convert who (in the catechism’s formulation) recognises that this is the door to the blessedness of heaven. And on the eve of his wedding to yet another convert, Janet Armour, ‘the amazed happiness that he felt was made infinitely sweeter, and sharper, by the sword-thrust that went with it.’ This oncoming tragedy amplifies the pathos of Robert’s tenderly-felt new-found faith and love.

*Death Bright Shadow*’s preoccupations with war, sex, and love – both romantic and divine – make it all of a piece with Waugh and Greene’s work, and yet it departs from those much more famous texts in important ways. I began by noting the critical attention that the canonical authors of English Catholic fiction continue to receive, but this article presents the first sustained critical survey of Scott-Moncrieff’s Scottish Catholic nationalist novel to demonstrate that Catholic fiction is deeply contextual, and makes the case for more scholarly attention to be paid to lesser-known works. There is much still to be gleaned about the geographical, cultural and political realities of place which inform the twentieth-century Catholic novel. And while Scott-Moncrieff’s work clearly shares a good deal with some of the best-known exponents of French and English Catholic fiction, there are important differences in these novels’ intense explorations of nation, spirituality and the soul. The Scottish Renaissance fascination with the destructive legacy of the Reformation, the state of the nation, and the necessity of Scottish independence are all built into the fabric of *Death’s Bright Shadow*, making its themes significantly different to those of its English contemporaries, but despite their critical erasure, just as rich.

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107 Scott-Moncrieff, *Death’s Bright Shadow*, 239.
108 Ibid., 164-65.
110 Ibid., 247.
References


