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## 8. Rivers, freedom and constraint in some of Stevenson's autobiographical writing

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This chapter examines the various ways in which Robert Louis Stevenson, in a selection of essays from the 1880s, expresses the idea of freedom and its contrary through the image of rivers and their flow. The freedoms in question are multiple – the freedom to move forward professionally, to travel unfettered, to explore the world. The constraints are just as varied – the feeling of being hemmed in geographically; of being locked into the logic of family heredity; of being condemned to long periods of convalescence and subject to the constraints of family life. Resentment about this lack of freedom is keenly expressed, for example, in the essays written during the time that he spent convalescing in Davos in the Swiss Alps; a period of enforced isolation, hemmed in on all sides by high mountains, surrounded by snow and condemned to follow the valetudinarian lifestyle. It seems that the essay form offered Stevenson a freedom of content and style that allowed him to explore the tensions between the extremes of freedom and dependence and this, very often, through images of flux, of flowing rivers, held in on both sides by river-banks but constantly moving forwards, bringing with them the traces of the places and times through which they have passed; of the tyranny of inheritance cascading down generations.

When Stevenson set out to write an essay about his ideal house, his first requisite was that there should be water nearby. 'The house must be within hail of either a little river or the sea,' he writes. His preference is specifically for a modest watercourse because 'a lively burn gives us, in the space of a few yards, a greater variety of promontory and islet, of cascade, shallow goil, and boiling pool, with answerable changes both of song and colour, than a navigable stream in many hundred miles.'<sup>1</sup> As we shall see, this flow of liveliness and of variety is deployed by Stevenson in several essays where he uses the river as an organising and pacing device especially in the opening

paragraphs: his fluctuating flow of ideas and words mimicking the river's irregular course but occasionally drifting into calmer pools of reflection – an opening that reflects the irregular and unpredictable flow of ideas in the essay itself.

This is the case in two essays that recall Stevenson's Edinburgh childhood. These pieces illustrate both the importance of rivers in general for Stevenson and the influence that they had on his imagination, in particular the extent to which he identified his Edinburgh childhood with the Water of Leith, the title of one of the essays. 'It is not possible to exaggerate the hold that is taken on the mind of men by a familiar river,'<sup>2</sup> he writes. The river in question is a modest waterway but an interesting one, running down from the Pentland Hills through a varied urban and rural landscape: 'Such as it was, [...] it was the river whose streams made glad my childhood and for that reason ever memorable to me.' It 'skirted the outposts, vacant lots, and half-rural slums of a great city, and at last, running between the repose of a graveyard and the clatter of engine factory, lapsed, between dark gates and groves of masts and a long alley of weedy piers, into an islanded salt estuary' (45). The Water of Leith is thus entrusted with Stevenson's sense of his childhood identity and with the memory of the variety and industry of his native city: they are braided rivers.

The Water of Leith is also celebrated in the essay 'The Manse: A Fragment'. In the opening paragraph, Stevenson approaches Colinton Manse, the home of his maternal grandfather, by way of the river describing the exact time and spot from which he dreams of the old manse.

I have named, among many rivers that make music in my memory, that dirty Water of Leith. Often and often I desire to look upon it again; and the choice of a point of view is easy to me. It should be at a certain water-door, embowered in shrubbery. The river is there dammed back for the service of the flour-mill just below, so that it lies deep and darkling, and the sand slopes into brown obscurity with a glint of gold; and it has but newly been recruited by the borrowings of the snuff-mill just above, and these, tumbling merrily in, shake the pool to its black heart, fill it with drowsy eddies, and

set the curded froth of many other mills solemnly steering to and fro upon the surface.<sup>3</sup>

As the passage develops there is an overwhelming sense that the old Water of Leith, the site of Stevenson's happy childhood has been irretrievably polluted; a sense that the river is a locus of change, degradation and loss.

Or so it was when I was young; for change, and the masons, and the pruning-knife, have been busy; and if I could hope to repeat a cherished experience, it must be on many and impossible conditions. I must choose, as well as the point of view, a certain moment in my growth, so that the scale may be exaggerated, and the trees on the steep opposite side may seem to climb to heaven, and the sand by the water-door, where I am standing, seem as low as Styx. And I must choose the season also, so that the valley may be brimmed like a cup with sunshine and the songs of birds; – and the year of grace, so that when I turn to leave the riverside I may find the old manse and its inhabitants unchanged. (155–56)

Although the permanency of the existence of the riverscape might suggest otherwise, Stevenson knows that however much he would like to view the scene again from a child's physical perspective with towering trees and low water, a return to the cherished place is no more possible than a return to his boyhood.

Just as the Water of Leith flows through the opening paragraphs of the eponymous essay fragment and 'The Manse', establishing their course, drawing the reader in to the current of the essay as the sentences gather mass and momentum, so the remembered river branches out inter-textually into letters, poems and no doubt other genres too. He expresses a similar desire to return to Swanston in a letter to his nurse Alison Cunningham written at almost exactly the same time as he was writing those essays: 'I would like fine to go up the burnside a bit, and sit by the pool and be young again – or no, be what I am still, only there instead of here, for just a little' (16 April 1887).<sup>4</sup> A similar sentiment acknowledging the impossibility of

the enterprise is expressed in 'To Minnie,' a poem in *A Child's Garden of Verses*, written for his now grown-up girl cousin:

The river, on from mill to mill,  
Flows past our childhood's garden still;  
But ah! we children never more  
Shall watch it from the water-door!<sup>5</sup>

Stevenson means this in a Heraclitian sense. Fresh waters now flow in the Water of Leith and he shows a keen awareness that absolutely everything changes, nothing remains still and one can never step twice into the same stream. As Denis Denisoff observes, 'This active, transhistorical self-engagement constructs the narrator as both child and adult simultaneously. [...] To try and unravel the temporal conflations is to fight the spirit of the piece.'<sup>6</sup> What Denisoff calls the 'temporal conflation' of the piece is made possible by the permanence of the river as a feature of the landscape but also by its slipperiness – it is here and it is elsewhere at the same time, it flowed through this place in the past just as it does now and will continue to do in the future.

Rivers continued to irrigate Stevenson's sense of place and self throughout his young adulthood as attested by the subject matter of his first published book *An Inland Voyage* which recounts his adventures paddling along the waterways of northern France delighting in the forward impulsion through tranquil scenery. He poses in the persona of an experienced man of the world, recruiting the river of life topos as he recounts shouting out to some young women by the river who had blown kisses and asked him and his companion Walter Simpson to come back. 'Come back? There is no coming back, young ladies, on the impetuous stream of life' he retorts.<sup>7</sup> The faux-experienced Stevenson also strikes a pose when he rather startlingly declares that 'After a good woman, and a good book, and tobacco, there is nothing so agreeable on earth as a river' (146–47). Again, something less sunny and straightforward lurks below the surface of this perfect vehicle for the insouciance of young adulthood and when after heavy rain, Stevenson's canoe capsizes, he finds himself dragged under discovering that the river can

take away freedom just as easily as it gives it: 'You can never know, till you try it, what a dead pull a river makes against a man' (112–13). The narrative takes on a serious tone, as in the words of Oliver Buckton 'the journey down the river becomes a metaphor for the vagaries of life and the deferral of death.'<sup>8</sup> The traveller Stevenson depicts the river-journey as a futile struggle against death until the very shape of his canoe becomes a *memento mori* as people call out to him that it is like a coffin (122) and he warns the reader that:

And we must all set our pocket-watches by the clock of fate. There is a headlong, forthright tide, that bears away man with his fancies like a straw, and runs fast in time and space. It is full of curves like this, your winding river of the *Oise*; and lingers and returns in pleasant pastorals; and yet, rightly thought upon, never returns at all. For though it should revisit the same acre of meadow in the same hour, it will have made an ample sweep between-whiles; many little streams will have fallen in; many exhalations risen towards the sun; and even although it were the same acre, it will no more be the same river of *Oise*. And thus, O graces of *Origny*, although the wandering fortune of my life should carry me back again to where you await death's whistle by the river, that will not be the old I who walks the street; and those wives and mothers, say, will those be you? (145–46)

The same image – that of life as a turbulent river – is used in the essay 'Crabbed Age and Youth' when Stevenson writes: 'we may compare the headlong course of our years to a swift torrent in which a man is carried away; now he is dashed against a boulder, now he grapples for a moment to a trailing spray; at the end, he is hurled out and overwhelmed in a dark and bottomless ocean.'<sup>9</sup>

During Stevenson's next journey in France – the one that provided the subject matter of *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* – rivers and streams are associated with no such impending watery graves, but rather with variety in the landscape and the promise of possible relief from the weariness of

walking. As he follows the Tarn to Pont de Montvert he admires its crystal clear hues and at every pool longs to bathe his 'naked body in the mountain air and water'.<sup>10</sup> The river bathing is a semi-pagan act of worship. Physical contact with the river water is then a thrilling way of paying homage to nature and to the landscape he is moving through: a way of circumventing the thorny question of religion that was so much on his mind during this long walk through Camisard Country. The joyful celebration of bathing continues in 'Fontainebleau'<sup>11</sup> an essay recalling the time Stevenson spent in the artists' colonies in and around the Forest of Fontainebleau, choosing to live in Gretz because unlike many of the other artists' colonies it actually had a 'bright river' running through it. 'It is vastly different to awake in Gretz, to go down the green inn-garden, to find the river streaming through the bridge, and to see the dawn begin across the poplared level' (134), a river ready to receive the author's body in the sultry noon.

These laughing rivers, trotting rivers, cool embracing rivers in France all reflect uncomplicated freedom of movement, freedom from the shackles of everyday life and the insouciance is later called upon in his textualised memories of the period. But as the writer grew older the very concept of freedom became more complicated for the mature adult that Stevenson now was. He had left his bohemian days in Fontainebleau behind, for the time being at least, and surrounded himself with a wife and ready-made family in need of financial support. He was also fettered by the climatic requirements of his own health problems, and increasingly those of his wife. It was clear that a healthy, stable, adult life came at a price, as he was to write in the essay 'Gentlemen' in 1888:

Freedom we now know for a thing incompatible with corporate life and a blessing probably peculiar to the solitary robber; we know besides that every advance in richness of existence, whether moral or material, is paid for by a loss of liberty; that liberty is man's coin in which he pays his way; that luxury and knowledge and virtue, and love and the family affections, are all so many fresh fetters on the naked and solitary freeman.<sup>12</sup>

The experience of this new lack of freedom is acutely expressed in a series of five somewhat discontented essays written during a sojourn in Davos in Switzerland and published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Stevenson had come to Davos for the invigorating mountain air but immediately felt hemmed in and imprisoned in this mountain sanatorium, bored by the sameness of so much white landscape. This sentiment is reflected in his resentment of the joyless river which runs through the valley but is never named. In the first of the five essays, 'Health and Mountains', Stevenson briefly delineates the main features of a mountain sanatorium surrounded by walls of mountains; hotels and black pinewoods contrasting with the white curd of snow that covers the mountains, the whole scene populated with invalids going about their health-seeking activities:

A certain furious river runs curving down the valley; its pace never varies, it has not a pool for as far as you can follow it; and its unchanging, senseless hurry is strangely tedious to witness. It is a river that a man could grow to hate. Day after day breaks with the rarest gold upon the mountain spires, and creeps, growing and glowing, down into the valley. From end to end the snow reverberates the sunshine; from end to end the air tingles with the light, clear and dry like crystal. Only along the course of the river, but high above it, there hangs far into the noon, one waving scarf of vapour. It were hard to fancy a more engaging feature in a landscape; perhaps it is harder to believe that delicate, long-lasting phantom of the atmosphere, a creature of the incontinent stream whose course it follows.<sup>13</sup>

This is a far cry from the qualified release expressed in the more famous 'Ordered South',<sup>14</sup> the first of Stevenson's essays to explore the experience of seeking a healthier climate abroad. The Mediterranean somehow heightened the exotic nature of the release from family tension which, to some extent at least, compensated for the humiliation of being incapacitated. In 'Davos in Winter', the river is unsatisfactory because it is neither an interesting, varied, meandering river nor the sea. It offers no promising vista with an unseen shore only the unbending logic of its monotonous course; a constant

reminder of a present locked into the logic of the ill person's ritual occupations. Not even in the neighbouring valleys is there any escape:

[...] as the hour proceeds, [...] you will find yourself upon the farther side in yet another Alpine valley, snow white and coal black, with such another long-drawn congeries of hamlets and such another senseless watercourse bickering along the foot. You have had your moment; but you have not changed the scene. The mountains are about you like a trap; you cannot foot it up a hillside and behold the sea as a great plain, but live in holes and corners, and can change only one for another.<sup>15</sup>

The 'senseless river' provides him with no inspiration. It has no name that means anything to him, unlike the association-laden rivers of his youth, the names of which all tumble out in a joyful gazetteer-like list in one of the opening paragraphs of 'Pastoral' (1887).

How often and willingly do I not look again in fancy on Tummel, or Manor, or the talking Airdle, or Dee swirling in its Lynn; on the bright burn of Kinnaird, or the golden burn that pours and sulks in the den behind Kingussie! I think shame to leave out one of these enchantresses, but the list would grow too long if I remembered all; only I may not forget Allan Water, nor birch-wetting Rogie, nor yet Almond; nor, for all its pollutions, that Water of Leith of the many and well-named mills – Bell's Mills, and Canon Mills, and Silver Mills; nor Redford Burn of pleasant memories; nor yet, for all its smallness, that nameless trickle that springs in the green bosom of Allermuir, and is fed from Halkerside with a perennial teacupful, and threads the moss under the Shearer's Knowe, and makes one pool there, overhung by a rock, where I loved to sit and make bad verses, and is then kidnapped in its infancy by subterranean pipes for the service of the sea-beholding city in the plain. From many points in the moss you may see at one glance its whole course and that of all its tributaries; [...]<sup>16</sup>

A good river (or even better, a litany of good rivers) provides him with enough flow to carry his essay along through landscapes and ideas as in 'The Water of Leith' or in 'Forest Notes'. It ensures continuity and coherence but also variety. It also provides him with an image for the thing that flows perhaps most easily in his life: words. He relishes the flow of words in conversation and in text, regularly comparing their movement to that of a river. An old lady in Gondet, whose acquaintance he made during the trip to the Cévennes made a particular impression on him due to her 'unwearying flow of oaths and obscenities, endless like a river.'<sup>17</sup> The more gentlemanly talk of the Savile Club in London – where Stevenson himself was an admired conversationalist – is submitted to the same metaphor in the two-part essay 'Talk and Talkers', a celebration of Stevenson's friends and their talking styles: 'The genuine artist follows the stream of conversation as an angler follows the windings of a brook, not dallying where he fails to "kill".'<sup>18</sup> Not only words but consciousness also can flow, not like a stream of consciousness but more like a mind that has freed itself of imperious physical needs and desires. As the essay 'Lay Morals' suggests, if a man learns to love a woman he overcomes 'betrayals and regrets; for the man now lives as a whole; his consciousness now moves on uninterrupted like a river; through all the extremes and ups and downs of passion, he remains approvingly conscious of himself.'<sup>19</sup> Clearly for Stevenson a liberated mind flows: it is an internalised river.

And the language of the essay flows river-like too within the structural banks imposed by the genre. Ann Colley writes 'the sentences not only move in delicate gradations and pause in pools of meaning but also progress through brusque juxtapositions, irregularities, or even through outlandish use of words [...] his sentences break their continuity for a moment by submerging themselves in reviving figures of speech or by dipping into images that invigorate meaning.'<sup>20</sup>

In the dedication to *Catriona*, Stevenson addresses his friend Charles Baxter and recalls the Edinburgh of their shared boyhood memories expressing the hope that there exists in Edinburgh 'some seed of the elect; some long-legged, hot-headed youth must repeat to-day our dreams and wanderings of so many years ago; he will relish the pleasure, which should

have been ours, to follow among named streets and numbered houses the country walks of David Balfour.'<sup>21</sup> This notion of passing the baton on down the stream to future generations is also expressed the poem 'Where Go the Boats?' from the collection *A Child's Garden of Verses* in which the child wonders what will happen to the boats he launches.

Away down the river,  
A hundred miles or more,  
Other little children  
Shall bring my boats ashore. (32)

Stevenson releases his thoughts in his work and sends them out into the world to be picked up by others, future readers and here a connection seems to be established between Stevenson's professional life as a writer and his childhood: literature as play by the riverside.<sup>22</sup>

Stevenson was obviously keenly aware of personal and professional posterity – the downstream – but he was just as preoccupied with upstream identities, and in the continuation of the dedication to *Catriona*, composed in Samoa in 1892, he includes an explicit reference to the metaphor of the river and its upper reaches:

I have come so far; and the sights and thoughts of my youth pursue me; and I see like a vision the youth of my father, and of his father, and the whole stream of lives flowing down there far in the north, with the sound of laughter and tears, to cast me out in the end, as by a sudden freshet, on these ultimate islands. And I admire and bow my head before the romance of destiny. (vi)

This is a familiar trope in Stevenson's essays: the establishment of a chain of inheritance — a river – linking past, present and future generations through their familiarity with a given place. We find it notably in 'College Memories', in 'Fontainebleau: Village Communities of Painters' and in 'The Manse'.

After the opening paragraph structured around an evocation of the Water of Leith quoted earlier, 'The Manse' moves on to a consideration of

the concepts and confusions of heredity. In the words of Colley, ‘The water’s motions, to and fro upon the surface, help him find his way back to memories of his grandfather, as well as to the revered crannies of his own childhood. Stevenson’s recollections of his grandfather flow in and out of the river’s interrupted streams’ (211). The author wonders whether the things he thought he learned to love through experiences at the manse are not rather the result of the influence of his ancestors’ professions or perhaps some atavistic hangover from his grandfather’s childhood experiences. Might his grandfather’s experiences be nothing more, in fact, than memories that he has forgotten? The sense of strangeness is heightened with the contemplation of the fact that the mini-Stevenson being carried around Edinburgh in the body of his Balfour ancestor must have been meeting other potential mini-Stevensons embodied in other ancestors so that one quarter of the future Stevenson was meeting the other future quarters. Stevenson’s ancestors go about their business with never a thought for the possibility of the embedded existence of their future descendants. The evocation of a flowing river in the essay was a preparation for this rumination on the question of heredity with characteristic traits pouring down the generations.

Alongside the obvious nostalgia for youth expressed in the dedication to *Catriona* we also perceive how restricting the weight of heredity might have been for Stevenson had he stayed in Edinburgh as the last in a long line of weel-kent faces in the streets of the city and a dead-end in a long line of river experts. For let us not forget that the river and the management of its course fell within the area of expertise of the Stevenson family of engineers: always ready, as Stevenson states in *Records of a Family of Engineers*, to take on the problem of training and guiding a river in its course (83). So that while a river was certainly a pleasant sight for the young Stevenson, he was always aware of how much more it represented for his father:

To my father it was a chequer-board of lively forces, which he traced from pool to shallow with minute appreciation and enduring interest. [...] Thus he pored over the engineer’s voluminous handy-book of nature; thus must, too, have pored my grandfather and uncles.<sup>23</sup>

Release from the weight of his lineage, that ‘whole stream of lives flowing down there far in the north’ had only come for Stevenson through being cast out by that freshet into a life of exile.

Stevenson approached his own profession in much the same way as his engineering forebears had gone about potamology, understanding and decoding literature as they had rivers and then applying that knowledge to his own creative work. The text of his essays in particular were mapped and engineered after long observation and training just as Stevenson’s father and grandfather had mapped and engineered rivers.

The image of the river is a good representation too of the freedom that the essay form provided for Stevenson. Montaigne invented the word ‘essay’ to designate a new type of literature that allowed him to go with the strange flow of his contemplations. This strangeness, central to the essay as practised by Montaigne, implies, in the words of Kenneth White, ‘leaving the harbour of a fixed identity in order to plunge into the floating life, following the transformations of the self and the meanderings of thought’.<sup>24</sup> The essay flows forward like a river, but stops in pools from time to time to accommodate longer reflections; it is free too to deviate from the path initially suggested, to branch out then come back and join the main waterway. Ideas are floated and come together, forming a system rather than a merely linear progression. The essay, as practised by Stevenson, is a space for flux and freedom – freedom to float, to meander, to shift, to be unsettling, to draw the reader under, to be haphazard, to be creative, and in the end to open out into possible seas of reflection, the aim of the essay having been not to reach a cut-and-dry conclusion, an ultimate truth, but to provoke free-flowing thought.

### Notes

- 1 R. L. Stevenson, ‘The Ideal House’, in *The Works of R. L. Stevenson*, vol. 28 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1898), p. 42.
- 2 R. L. Stevenson, ‘Water of Leith’, in *Stevenson’s Scotland*, ed. by T. Hubbard and D. Glen (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2003), p. 45.
- 3 R. L. Stevenson, ‘The Manse’ in *The Works of R. L. Stevenson*, vol. 1 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894), p. 155.
- 4 B. A. Booth, and E. Mehew (eds), *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson: Vol. 5* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 393.

- 5 R. L. Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses* (London: Penguin Books, 1952), p. 116.
- 6 D. Denisoff, 'Pleasurable subjectivities and temporal conflation in Stevenson's aesthetics', *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 4 (2007), pp. 227–46, (p. 238).
- 7 R. L. Stevenson, *An Inland Voyage* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co, 1878), p. 145.
- 8 O. S. Buckton, 'Reanimating Stevenson's Corpus', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 55, 1 (Jun., 2000), pp. 22–58, (p. 45).
- 9 R. L. Stevenson, 'Crabbed Age and Youth' in *Virginibus Puerisque and other Papers* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co, 1881), p. 97.
- 10 R. L. Stevenson, *Travels With a Donkey in the Cévennes* (London, Chatto & Windus, 1916), p. 115.
- 11 R. L. Stevenson, 'Fontainebleau: Villages Communities of Painters', in *Across The Plains* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1892). First published in two parts in the *Magazine of Art* 7, May 1884.
- 12 R. L. Stevenson, 'Gentlemen', in *Scribner's Magazine* III, (January–June 1888), pp. 635–40, p. 635.
- 13 R. L. Stevenson, 'Health and Mountains', in *Essays of Travel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1905), pp. 214–15.
- 14 R. L. Stevenson, 'Ordered South', in *Virginibus Puerisque and other Papers* (London: C. Kegan Paul & Co, 1881).
- 15 R. L. Stevenson, 'Davos in Winter', in *Essays of Travel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1905), pp. 210–11.
- 16 R. L. Stevenson, 'Pastoral', in *The Works of R. L. Stevenson*, vol. 1 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894), p. 145.
- 17 R. L. Stevenson, 'A Mountain Town in France', in *The Works of R. L. Stevenson*, vol. 21 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1896), p. 226.
- 18 R. L. Stevenson, 'Talk and Talkers, 1', in *The Works of R. L. Stevenson*, vol. 1 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1894), p. 181.
- 19 R. L. Stevenson, 'Lay Morals' in, *The Works of R. L. Stevenson*, vol. 21 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1896), p. 346.
- 20 A. C. Colley, *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), p. 210.
- 21 R. L. Stevenson, *Catriona* (London: Cassell, 1893), p. v.
- 22 We might be reminded here also of Joseph Conrad and the desire he expressed to return to his early years: 'when I launched my first paper boats in the days of my literary childhood.' (Preface to *The Shorter Tales of Joseph Conrad* quoted by Nathalie Jaëck, 'Conrad's and Stevenson's Logbooks and 'Paperboats': Attempts in Textual Wreckage', in *Stevenson and Conrad: Writers of Land and Sea*, ed. by Linda Dryden (Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2009), pp. 39–51.
- 23 R. L. Stevenson, *Records of a Family of Engineers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1912), p. 85.
- 24 K. White, *The Wanderer and his Charts: Exploring the Fields of Vagrant Thought and Vagabond Beauty. Essays on Cultural Renewal* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), p. 58.

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## 9. Freedom and subservience in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song*

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PHILIPPE LAPLACE

O thou who lived for Freedom when the Night  
Had hardly yet begun: when little light  
Blinded the eyes of men and dawntime seemed  
So fair and faint – a foolish dream half-dreamed!  
(*Gibbon 2001: 185*)

*Sunset Song*, the first novel of the trilogy *A Scots Quair*, has enjoyed a wide readership and general esteem in Scotland and throughout the world, in spite of its linguistic difficulties and its abrasive social and political standpoints. Voted 'the best Scottish book of all time' in 2005 in a survey backed by BBC Scotland, it is undoubtedly *the* novel (along with *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*, the subsequent two novels of the trilogy) which gave the thirty-two-year-old Anarcho-Marxist James Leslie Mitchell – Lewis Grassic Gibbon's real name – his nearly iconic status in the Scottish Literary Renaissance. The so-called English novels written by Mitchell are not as well-known – *Spartacus* where the desire for freedom is of course at the heart of the novel and maybe *Stained Radiance* are the exceptions – whereas he has remained famous and celebrated for the work he produced as Lewis Grassic Gibbon – namely a collection of essays with Hugh MacDiarmid, some short stories and *A Scots Quair* which he set in his home region, the Mearns in Kincardineshire.

The novelist famously wrote shortly before his death: 'I hate capitalism; all my books are explicit or implicit propaganda.'<sup>1</sup> The first two volumes of *A Scots Quair* reflect Gibbon's main concerns about society and the burden imposed by capitalist values upon farmers and farming communities before turning his attention towards workers in the final volume. This chapter considers how the theme of freedom, and its necessary component,