

[Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Smeddum*](#), the tale of the Menzies family in rural north-east Scotland, is a beautifully crafted, and really satisfying short story. The word *smeddum* means spirit, determination, true grit. That grit is now metaphorical, but the earliest recorded use of the word shows that *smeodoma* in Old English was used as a gloss for the Latin word *polenta*. That the word that forms the title of this short story should have such natural origins is entirely in keeping with earthy nature of the narrative. The tale is told from a thoroughly rural perspective. Animal imagery runs through the text, serving to characterise the main players in the unfolding drama. Meg, for instance, on first appearance is described as being a big roan mare, the first of frequent comparisons made between the heroine and horses. This stands in stark contrast to the layabout Will, who emerges from his bed like a weasel. Equally connected to the earth is the eldest son Jock, whose main confrontation with his mother takes place on a newly-ploughed field. By contrast, one of the daughters, Kath, is compared to the swallows dipping and flying near Kinneff: Kath is not tied to the earth, not bound by the same chains as the rest of the family. It is she who seems most likely to fly the nest, to break the Menzies mould. But she is also very clearly her mother's daughter, the only one of the offspring who is not sniffling and weakly.

The first time I read *Smeddum*, I was struck by how much the narrative reads like gossip. The reader is subtly presented as being part of the community, involved in the story from the outset. For instance, the first description of the Menzies home appears in the following account of Meg's hard labour: For from morn till night she was at it, work, work, on that ill bit croft that sloped to the sea, the use of the demonstrative *that* implying a shared, pre-existing knowledge between narrator and reader (notice how such involvement of the reader would disappear if the demonstrative was replaced by the article *an*). Such subtle linguistic choices are part of what makes this story so outstanding. The assumption is that the

reader knows exactly which croft is referred to, while the narrator offers some juicy scandal on Will's drinking or Kath's elopement, with a couple of waspish comments on various members of the family. On Will's death, the narrator observes: 'Well, he drank himself to his grave at last, less smell on the earth if maybe more in it'; and after Kath's departure, the narrator speculates that the community has seen the last of 'young Kath Menzies and her ill-getted ways'. And the narration moves along with an effortless rhythm, the repetition of the two stresses regularly marking out grammatical constituents: 'for if ever a soul had seen her at rest when the dark was done and the day was come he'd died of the shock and never let on.'

The heroine, Meg Menzies, is Gibbon's answer to Austen's Mrs Bennet. In fact, she works as a kind of anti-Mrs Bennet. Both respond admirably to the economic necessities of their circumstances (Meg does half Will's work on a regular basis; Mrs Bennet recognises the danger on the economic horizon for five brotherless daughters), both are concerned with marrying off some or all their children (to two of her children, Meg's a: s ang 3heirofof chilb Megofof ofofk

many threads of the narrative that the reader was only dimly aware of. Do what you can to get a copy of this short story. And as to whether you'll enjoy it, well, as Meg says: It all depends if you've smeddum or not .

(c) The Bottle Imp