

The Ell-Wand and the Sword: The historical fiction of Neil Munro

By Ronnie Renton

At the dedication of the monument to Neil Munro (1863–1930) in Glen Aray, Argyll, R.B Cunningham Graham described Munro as the “apostolic successor of Sir Walter Scott”. Whatever the truth of this statement (and to me there seems to be a great deal), Neil Munro wrote a number of historical novels, two of which – *John Splendid* and *The New Road* – are particularly fine and deserve much more attention than they currently receive.

Neil Munro was born in Inveraray, Argyll in 1863, son of a kitchen maid. His father is rumoured to have been of the House of Argyll. He was brought up in the Gaelic-speaking household of his maternal grandmother. In 1881 he left for Glasgow where he soon carved out a career for himself as one of Scotland’s best known journalists, spending almost all of his working life with the *Glasgow Evening News*.

He made his first significant mark on the Scottish literary landscape with his short story collection the *Lost Pibroch and other Sheiling Stories* in 1896 – an innovative collection which sought to counteract the sentimentality of “Celtic Twilight” writing which was becoming fashionable. In 1897 he reduced his journalistic commitment to two columns per week in order to concentrate on his literary work and went on to produce eight novels (four of them historical), three short story collections and five collections of humorous sketches which had been published previously in his columns in the *News*. These latter, of course, included the famous tales of Para Handy, the intrepid captain of *The Vital Spark*, and his crew.

With the outbreak of the First World War Munro returned to full time journalism and soon after became editor of his paper. He died in Helensburgh in 1930. Although extremely popular in his own day his literary reputation diminished during the second half of the twentieth century. It is now, thankfully, being gradually rebuilt.

Of his four historical novels *John Splendid* (1898), *The Shoes of Fortune* (1901), *Doom Castle* (1901) and *The New Road* (1914) the first and last of these are very accomplished. *John Splendid* is a well-judged historical novel of the 17th century Highlands. It contains an excellent analysis of the character of the chief of Clan Campbell, Gillesbeg Gruamach, the Eighth Earl of Argyll. Most of us are aware of the Massacre of Glencoe in 1692 when the Campbells slaughtered the MacDonalds. What we are not so aware of is that in 1644 the Marquis of Montrose supported by the MacDonalds committed a much worse slaughter on the Campbells when he absolutely sacked Inveraray and its environs. During this invasion Gillesbeg Gruamach deserts his people and goes off to Edinburgh - supposedly to organise reinforcements.

Later in the novel full battle is joined between the Campbells and Montrose's supporters at the Battle of Inverlochy, near Fort William. In the run up to this Munro describes brilliantly Montrose's march from Corrieyarrick, through Glen Roy and Glen Nevis amid bitter ice and snow. In the combat which follows again Montrose wins - and again Gillesbeg deserts. And yet coward though he may have been on these occasions, all his life he was trying, as he saw it, to civilise the Highlands. He was trying "to teach his clan the arts of peace and merchandise" and the rule of law rather than the sword.

And this is where the character John Splendid himself comes into the picture. He is a marvellously depicted swaggering soldier, deriving from the character of Dugald Dalgetty in Scott's novel *A Legend of Montrose*. He is boastful and sure of himself. But he is also a true Highlander, totally committed to the old clan system and completely devoted to his chief Gillesbeg Gruamach. And herein lies his weakness: although he completely disapproves of his chief's modernising ways, he is so loyal to him and so determined not to offend him that he collaborates in specious excuses for Gillesbeg's desertions instead of telling him roundly where his duty lies. Indeed, in the end, Gillesbeg blames him for not being honest with him when he says:

You and your kind are the weak strong men of our Highland race. The soft tongue and the dour heart; the good man at most things but at your word!¹

In short, if John Splendid and others like him had been true advisers, disaster could have been avoided for the Campbells. When he does finally speak his true mind at the end of the story it is too late.

These two vacillating characters, Argyll and John Splendid, are contrasted in the novel with two real men of action, significantly both Lowlanders. They are Montrose himself and the Protestant minister Gordon, Gillesbeg's chaplain, who spells out John Splendid's duty to him in no uncertain terms. The counterpointing of these two sets of characters emphasises a weakness in the Highland society of the day.

John Splendid is an excellent historical novel. It can claim to be the first "authentic" Highland novel; that is to say, the first novel written about the Highlands from the inside by a writer who really knew the language and culture of his people. It is action-packed and exciting. At the same time it examines the need for change and the conflict between the old and the new in the Highlands, themes which will be taken up again in *The New Road* and will finally be played out a century later at the Battle of Culloden.

The New Road was Munro's last novel. It was completed in 1914 at outbreak of the First World War. This required his return to full time journalism and such were the burdens of the job that he seems never to have had the time again for extended creative writing. *The New Road* is a very accomplished and wonderfully entertaining anti-Jacobite novel (unusual in itself!). The action takes place about the year 1733 and deals, among other things, with the building of Wade's famous road between Stirling and Inverness. The setting is Inveraray and Inverness and all the country in between. The two main characters, Ninian Macgregor Campbell and the young Aeneas Macmaster, travel from Hanoverian Argyll to the country of Jacobite Simon Fraser Lord Lovat in the far north to investigate gun running and vandalism of the New Road and also to assess the possibility of building up trade with the northern Highlands. As they progress they gradually uncover the mystery of the death of Paul Macmaster, Aeneas's father. He was a Jacobite (unusual for an Argyllshire man) who was alleged to have been killed at the Battle of Glenshiel in 1719. As the plot unravels, however, it turns out that he was not the casualty of a romantic cause but, in fact, the victim of a sordid murder by an unscrupulous and greedy friend, Sandy Duncanson, his business manager. By guile and treachery Duncanson had succeeded in acquiring Paul's estate of Drimdorran.

The novel is first and foremost an eighteenth-century whodunnit! The story starts and finishes at the mysterious doocot at Carlunan in the grounds of Inveraray Castle. We are held in suspense as to the identity of the murderer until the very

last page when we discover that the doocot is in fact a tomb.

But *The New Road* is much more than an eighteenth-century whodunnit. It builds on real historical characters such as General Wade, Lord Lovat and Duncan Forbes of Culloden. It is great historical fiction showing the forces which shape the destiny of the Highlands.

Aeneas Macmaster, like Scott's Edward Waverley, sets out on his journey with Ninian, full of romantic notions about the Highlands and the chiefs and the north. But as he journeys on he becomes more and more disillusioned. First he meets Col of Barisdale a chief who turns out to be nothing better than a bully and a cattle thief. Then he gets involved with some Macdonalds at Druimbeg and is appalled when Ninian honours him in accordance with Highland tradition "for blooding himself" when he kills one of them. This he regards as barbaric and it sickens him. Then in Inverness he meets a group of chiefs who turn out to be nothing more than rapacious schemers. His greatest and most powerful disillusionment comes, however, in his meeting with the most powerful Jacobite chief in the North, MacShimi himself i.e. Simon Fraser Lord Lovat. He is an out and out rogue. In his specious paternalism to his people Lovat treats them with utter contempt. He even refuses them schools and education to keep them under his thumb so that they will be available to support his hegemony in the north.

Like Waverley, then, the veil has been lifted from Aeneas MacMaster's eyes and he now see the Highlands for what they really are. The only aspect which has remained true to his earlier romantic notion of them is the image of his Jacobite father, Paul MacMaster, who proved not to be corrupt in any way.

Against this rot, however, we have the regenerative aspect of the book. We are conscious of the hand of the current Duke of Argyll and his brother Islay, supporters of the Hanoverian government, in the background managing things for the better. They are civilised men of the Scottish Enlightenment, "improvers". Likewise the supportive Duncan Forbes of Culloden, the Lord Advocate, is presented as a reasonable man, a Highlander torn between instinctive clan loyalties to the past and the need for civilisation in the modern world. Most interesting of all, however, in this regard is the highly charismatic character of Ninian Campbell, *beachdair* (scout) and Messenger at arms to the Duke of Argyll. It has frequently been remarked that Aeneas and Ninian are counterparts to David Balfour and Alan Breck in Stevenson's *Kidnapped*. Superficially this is true.

But where Munro rings a very skilful change is in placing his highly charismatic Alan Breck equivalent (i.e. Ninian), not on the side of the romantic Stuart cause, but on the side of Argyll and the Hanoverian establishment. The mere act of doing this transforms the credibility and attractiveness of the Hanoverian side in the reader's eyes.

The regenerative aspect of the novel is further intensified in the character of Aeneas's merchant uncle Alan Iain Alain Og. He sees Wade's new road not just as a means of moving soldiers but also as an opportunity for trading with the north, and, like Scott's Bailie Nicol Jarvie, thinks trade and commerce are the only way for a modern nation to progress, rather than the feuding of the past. Indeed, he believes that trade and commerce and the provision of luxury items for the unruly chiefs is the way to ultimately defeat them and pacify the Highlands.

Then we come to the New Road itself. It will penetrate a land previously impenetrable to all but the brave or foolhardy. Wade's road will open up the country from Stirling to the Moray Firth and this will radically improve trade and prosperity. In short the road itself becomes a symbol of peace and prosperity. But there will be a price to pay for it and sacrifices will have to be made. As Ninian says, at one point, the whole Gaelic way of life will change irretrievably:

I'm tellin' you that Road is goin' to be a rut that, once it's hammered deep enough, will be the poor Gael's grave!²

Indeed, the process of change initiated by Wade's road continues to this day as the north is relentlessly stripped of its Gaelic character.

The New Road, then, is much more than a whodunnit. It deals at a more profound level with the forces which have shaped modern Scotland and the direction which, as Munro saw it, a modern Scotland had to take - whatever our views may be of this today! It is, I believe, Neil Munro's finest work.

John Splendid and *The New Road*, with their concern for progress and the rule of law and their support for change and "civilisation", can be used to justify Cunninghame Graham's claim that Neil Munro is the "apostolic successor of Sir Walter Scott". But Munro has his own very distinctive voice, and with his expert knowledge of its language and culture he articulates Gaeldom with more precision and sensitivity than Sir Walter and, indeed, RLS. Neil Munro should be read for himself.

References & Further Information

¹ Munro, Neil, *John Splendid* (with introduction by B.D.Osborne), Edinburgh: B&W Publishing, 1994; p142.

² Munro, Neil, *The New Road*, (introduction by B.D.Osborne), Edinburgh: B&W Publishing, 1999; pp34 & 35.

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(c) The Bottle Imp