

# Sunset Song: A Scottish Gift to German Readers

**By Regina Erich**

Scottish literature enjoys a wide international readership. Many Scottish authors, whether creators of classic novels or contemporary writers, have been translated into foreign languages. Germany is no exception to this. Walk into any German bookshop and you will find at least one book written by a Scot.

Yet one great Scottish writer seemed to have been overlooked by the German book market: Lewis Grassie Gibbon. Until recently this was true at least for the Federal Republic of Germany, whereas in the former GDR Grassie Gibbon's famous work *Sunset Song* - rated in a BBC survey 'Scotland's Favourite Book' - as well as the sequels *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite*, were translated and published already long ago, albeit under the author's real name, James Leslie Mitchell.

The story of this ambitious literary project goes back nearly six decades when, in 1961, the East German publishing house *Verlag Volk und Welt* (People and World Publishing) made a first enquiry at Jarrolds Publishers in London regarding the German language rights. *Verlag Volk und Welt* was one of the biggest GDR publishers based in East Berlin with a reputation of producing high-quality renditions of foreign language literature. To East German readers, whose opportunities to travel abroad were quite restricted, it became known as the 'window to the world'.

According to the former editor for English literature at *Verlag Volk und Welt*, Dr Hans Petersen, *A Scots Quair* was first brought to their attention by a Scottish friend who suggested the trilogy to be considered for translation. The enquiry at Jarrolds Publishers, which included a proposal for an initial German edition of 8,000 copies with a seven percent share of the sales, was met with interest. Shortly afterwards the negotiations were taken over by Curtis Brown Ltd., an international literary agency representing Lewis Grassie Gibbon's legal successor, his widow Rebecca (Ray) Mitchell.

In early 1962, a contract was signed by Rebecca Mitchell and *Verlag Volk und Welt*, and Dr Hans Petersen was assigned as translator. It turned out that the vernacular in Grassic Gibbon's work presented far greater challenges than first expected. *Verlag Volk und Welt* asked for an extension of the deadline and the publication date had to be postponed several times. It was agreed that the trilogy should be published in three separate volumes.

The German version of *Sunset Song* was finally published in 1970, almost a decade after the translation contract had been signed. It may well be that overcoming the linguistic problems combined with a long illness of the translator was indeed the reason why the project took so much time. However, it's also known that the GDR government imposed strict political control mechanisms on the content of arts, cinematic work, journalism and literature. In order to ensure compliance with the ideological directives of the socialist regime, all creative or journalistic work had to be assessed and approved before entering the public sphere. Literature, whether originally written in German or translations from foreign languages, were subject to a multi-level process of scrutiny.

The issue is examined in an essay published by the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, Wisconsin, USA:

*In order to reach any type of audience or 'public', texts and writers had to negotiate various levels of control. The pervasive hierarchical structure of control mechanisms extended from the SED Central Committee through the Ministry of Culture and down to the individual publishing houses. The Ministry of Culture supervised the Hauptverwaltung Verlage und Buchhandel (HV Verlage) [Administrative Authority for Publishing Houses and Book Trade], the regulatory board responsible for extending the authorization to print or Druckgenehmigung. Before a publishing house submitted a text to the HV Verlage for licensing, a series of pre- or internal censoring steps occurred that involved an editorial committee of the publishing house, a house editor or Lektor, and various internal and external reviewers or Gutachter. The review processes that the Stasi employed ran parallel to the predominant censoring processes. As politics and cultural policy often clashed, we can speak of a mixture of official and unofficial procedures at work. Indeed, the activities of inoffizielle Mitarbeiter (IM) [unofficial operatives] and cultural functionaries often overlapped: Many IMs held positions as Lektor, Gutachter, or editors*

within the publishing houses.<sup>1</sup>

As part of the internal censoring, editing staff at *Verlag Volk und Welt* checked texts for stylistic and political correctness. All too-liberal passages were 'toned down'.<sup>2</sup>

Hence writers, translators and editors had to 'get it right' before a text could be submitted for further external scrutiny. In this context it's worth considering the German titles which the editors at *Verlag Volk und Welt* chose for the individual volumes of *A Scots Quair*. *Sunset Song* - in literal translation *Lied vom Sonnenuntergang* - was replaced by a remarkably unfaithful and rather windy alternative: *Der lange Weg durchs Ginstermoor* (*The Long Way Through the Gorse Moor*). The title of the third volume, *Grey Granite*, was altered in a small but significant way: *Flamme in grauem Granit* - *Flame in Grey Granite*. The mere addition of the word 'flame' is enough to convey an entirely different image and mood. According to Dr Petersen, book titles were suggested by the respective editorial office at *Verlag Volk und Welt*. An internal Editorial Board then discussed the proposal and made the final decision. It wasn't uncommon that the Editorial Board rejected a suggestion made by the editors.

It's also worth noting that in 1965, at a time when *Verlag Volk und Welt* delayed completion and publication of *Sunset Song*, the GDR leadership held a conference - the 11th Plenary Session of the Central Committee of the SED (the Socialist Unity Party of Germany) - which went down in history as a turning point in East German culture and youth policy making. It involved the rejection of the liberalisation of the arts, which had gained ground in previous years, and meant bans and censoring especially of literary or cinematic work which was deemed 'decadent' or critical of the prevailing GDR ideology.<sup>3</sup> *Verlag Volk und Welt* was forced to put a number of publication projects on hold.<sup>4</sup>



German covers of 'Scots Quair',  
1977

Once the German edition of *Sunset Song* was finally published, publication of *Cloud Howe* and *Grey Granite* followed in 1972 and 1974 respectively. The books sold so well that a second edition was printed in 1977 and a third one in 1986. The press showed a lively interest in the books. Almost thirty reviews are still extant. They comment favourably on Gibbon's literary work and Dr Petersen's translation achievement. One review of the translation of *Sunset Song* concludes:

*Mitchell's highly poetic diction, well grounded in the way people speak, allows glimpses of Scottish life. People, landscapes, traditions, anecdotes and dramatic events are woven into a riveting story about a family. Its poetic yet down-to-earth language helps provide exceptional reading.*<sup>5</sup>

Dr Petersen achieved this 'poetic down-to-earth language' although he refrained from using any kind of dialect and kept to High German. Throughout the project Dr Petersen was assisted by David D. Murison, editor of the *Scottish National Dictionary*. Between 1968 and 1970 he was also supported by Rebecca (Ray) Mitchell who helped with the editing.

In the dust-jacket text of the third volume Dr Petersen described his conversation with Mrs Mitchell during a visit at her home in Welwyn Garden City:

*Ray Mitchell tells of the disappointments and the first small successes of the author James Leslie Mitchell. She remembers the literary projects her husband was able to complete and those he couldn't realise. Her tone is not nostalgic and there is a glint of humour in her sharp eyes. Her slim, Scottish face is turned towards the visitor from the GDR with a friendly and attentive expression. In a corner of the sitting room stands a big chest - yes, it contains the extensive collection of letters, personal notes and photos but only a few manuscripts. In astonishment the visitor asks what had happened to the manuscripts, and Mrs Mitchell explains: "James Leslie Mitchell used to write his drafts on a type-writer. But he rarely corrected them, he rather typed the pages once again. And as a true Scot he used the reverse page for his new work. Hence they got lost for posterity."*

According to Scottish writer and translator Iain Galbraith, there are several factors which may have contributed to the success of the books in the GDR. The issues raised in the trilogy - modernisation of farming, compatibility of religion with pacifism and a socialist attitude, the urban proletarian sphere and the implementation of communist ideals - were also issues no-one in the former GDR could avoid. But first and foremost Galbraith attributes the popularity of Grassic Gibbon's story to the fact that it tells a compelling family tale while using a progressive approach to love, sexuality and gender roles.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its success in the former GDR, the German translation of *A Scots Quair* was never published in the Federal Republic of Germany - neither before nor after reunification. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the former East German publishing houses were incorporated in the West German system. Re-unification of the two Germanys enabled former GDR residents to travel freely to countries which they previously could only explore via foreign literature. As a result *Verlag Volk und Welt* lost its long-standing significance as the 'window to the world'. Like other GDR publishers it was privatised but went into liquidation in 2001. Its archive is held at the *Akademie der Künste* (Academy of Arts) in Berlin. The contract folder of the translation of *A Scots Quair* can be viewed on request. It contains the extensive evidence of this ambitious publishing project including office notes, correspondence, the original contract bearing Rebecca (Ray) Mitchell's signature, royalty settlements and numerous carbon copy forms stamped with the seal of the GDR ministry of culture.

In Germany Lewis Grassic Gibbon's work firmly remained within the chronological and geographical boundaries of the GDR and, several decades down the line, was well and truly forgotten about. But luckily the German book market is not all about the big players in the publishing business. There is also a number of small, independent publishers who have successfully carved out a niche for themselves and are often willing to give lesser known authors a chance.



Such a publisher is Sebastian Guggolz in Berlin. He specialises in publishing German renditions of forgotten gems of foreign literature. He became aware of Lewis Grassic Gibbon through literary translator and author Esther Kinsky, married to the late translator and writer Martin Chalmers. Sebastian Guggolz quickly realised the quality of Grassic Gibbon's work and decided that this author deserved to be re-introduced to a German speaking audience. The essays and short stories, which Grassic Gibbon had contributed to *Scottish Scene* (jointly published with Hugh MacDiarmid in 1934), seemed to be a suitable starting

point. Seven of Grassic Gibbon's contributions were selected and translated into German by Ms Kinsky: 'Greenden', 'Smeddum', 'Clay', 'Sim', 'Aberdeen', 'Glasgow', and 'The Land'.

In March 2016 the book was published under the German title *Szenen aus Schottland* and under Lewis Grassic Gibbon's real name, James Leslie Mitchell. On [the publisher's website](#) an introduction to the book reflects on the author and his work:

*James Leslie Mitchell (1901-1935) frequently wrote about his native Scotland and in particular about the area around Aberdeen. Although his novels and journalistic work often took him to Africa and the Middle East, which he got to know during his time as an administration secretary in the army, he returns in his most important works to the rugged north of Britain. In Szenen aus Schottland, a collection of stories and essayistic prose about Scottish life in the early 1930s, his literary art can be explored in full. People, conversations, regions, seasons, history and myths are described in a language which - gentle and poetic as well as stark and clear - seems to reflect the Scottish scenery in all its diverse regionality.*

Esther Kinsky's work was widely acknowledged in a number of positive reviews.

Some of them can be found on the publisher's website, for example:

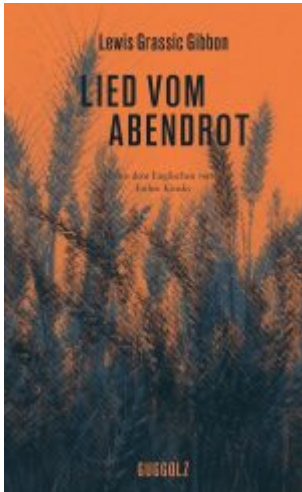
*Very good literature, powerful, unadorned impressions of rural life [...] the translator conveys all this in German through gripping language and a gritty poetry which plays a big part in the powerful appeal of the stories. (Paul Ingendaay, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)*

In October 2016, *Szenen aus Schottland* received the award for the best independently published book at the Frankfurt Book Fair and sold so well that a second edition was printed in 2017. Encouraged by this success, the publisher and translator took on the main project: a re-translation of *Sunset Song*. With the experience of several decades of literary translation under her belt, Esther Kinsky anticipated the work to be particularly challenging. To get a feel for the land and the speech of the Mearns she spent some time in the area exploring *Sunset Song* locations and visiting the Grassic Gibbon Centre in Arbuthnott. Above all, she listened to Doric native speakers and took voice recordings to guide her through the actual sound of the language while working on the written text.

Compared to the translator of the 'old' 1970 German version of *Sunset Song*, Ms Kinsky took a radically different approach to dealing with the vernacular. In her foreword to the new edition, published in March 2018, she writes:

*[...] yet the big question that presented itself when faced with the work on the retranslation of *Sunset Song* was the choice of an idiom which can take the place of the 'Doric' and form a contrast to the High German. [...] After experimenting with various dialectal elements I resolved to use the vocabulary of the Low German which is, although unfamiliar to myself, well documented and reaches from the 'Memel dialect' of the German speaking population of former East Prussia and the present Lithuania to the periphery of the Friesian and, in some cases, even shows an astonishing similarity to its equivalents in Scots.*





Terms and phrases of this idiom are 'embedded in a tone which emulates the one at the Scottish east coast because this melody carries the text and had to be retained'.<sup>7</sup>

Ms Kinsky's sympathetic approach to the source text is also evident in the title: *Lied vom Abendrot* - literally *Song of the Evening Glow*. In German language the word *Abendrot* is an expression for the ambiance and beauty of the red evening sky reflecting the light of the setting sun. Tribute to the source language is paid in the subtitle which notes that the novel is 'translated from the Scottish English'.

The book was well-received, as positive reviews in main German newspapers testify. In his afterword to *Lied vom Abendrot*, Iain Galbraith describes the re-translation of *Sunset Song* as a great gift to a German speaking audience.<sup>8</sup> No doubt readers will appreciate it.

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