Rural Realism

By Dorothy McMillan

What follows is the text of the McNeillie Lecture, which I gave at the Wigtown Book Festival, 2006. Some recent interest in *The House with the Green Shutters* has prompted me to reproduce the lecture here. It has never been published and may provide readers with some thoughts, not academic, but I hope still of interest. I have not changed the tone of the lecture which was informal thoughout.
Dorothy McMillan, 2021.

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I came back recently from a holiday in China with my husband and son. Our younger son, John, is studying Chinese and he was our guide; I don't think we'd have tried it otherwise. But tourism is big in China now and in company with thousands from East and West we did the usual things, from the Great Wall to the more Western delights of Shanghai, and we made a short cruise down the Li River, where we saw that weird landscape of karst excrescences which in some ways typifies the Chinese landscape of scroll and screen. We sailed from Guilin to Yangshuo, a small and beautiful town, but a backpacker's paradise; it seems hardly a place with which to begin a talk on rural realism in *The House with the Green Shutters*. Yet, we had an experience in Yangshuo which made me think about what I would be talking about in 6 weeks time, made me think about the meaning and implications of the notion of the rural real.

The three of us hired bikes – lots of people do – but after a fairly terrifying (for me) encounter with the traffic on the main road, we turned off into a stony track, where we saw no other tourists. We saw a few workers in the rice-fields, lots of dogs and chickens and the odd curious, but not particularly surprised, peasant. We were not, of course, the first to turn that way: a board announced that we were in a scenic area and that Lin's café was up ahead of us. We reached the river at a point where there was a little island in the middle and a half-crossing to the island, but we could go no further with the bikes and Lin's café wasn't in evidence. At once a man appeared and when John asked him where the café was,

he pointed to a tarpaulin hump; he removed the tarpaulin revealing a table and chairs; then he disappeared and came back with a café umbrella and three menus in English and Chinese. We had coke and beer and John had eggs and tomatoes. And each time, Mr Lin had to climb up a hill to his home and back down again with our orders. While we were sitting there, an old man in a straw hat, shorts and a shirt, torn almost all the way up the back, appeared from somewhere and walked a bit into the river, where he took off his shirt, washed it in the water and put it back on, cleaner but still, of course, torn almost in two.

The river remained a problem since we did not really want to go back the way we had come. John asked Mr Lin and he said there was no problem since he had a motor boat and would take us across for a tiny sum. We couldn't see the boat but agreed to the deal. Mr Lin disappeared again and came back with a mate: they were carrying between them an outboard motor which they attached to a bamboo raft. Mr Lin took us over in two stages: first John and myself and then Richard and the bikes. I forgot to say that we were able to take advantage of Mr Lin's introductory offer of a calligraphy scroll or painting done by his sister, free to all customers who spent over forty-five Yuan, about three pounds – we took the scroll.

This was the rural real and it did make me think of *The House with the Green Shutters*: Mr Lin is, if you like, the Wilson of his village, the man who can see the future of the small community, the local entrepreneur. I do him a disservice, perhaps, in comparing him to Wilson, since Mr Lin seemed wholly pleasant and

not a scheming man, but what I want to suggest is that what was real to him and his family, the life that they led and proposed to lead, had for us the texture of fantasy or romance. Realism depends on where you are standing, while you look. Had Mr Lin spoken of that day, and perhaps he did later to family or friends, telling them about the boy who could speak Chinese and the parents who no doubt seemed to him rather comic, like most foreigners, it would have been a realistic narrative, but then he would not have written it down; as I speak of it or write it down, it becomes a travellers' romance with a slanted relationship to the real. And what if the enterprising Mr Lin had been or becomes the subject of a novel by a member of the village who had left for Middle School and University? The novel would no doubt be recognised as an example of rural realism, but it would be offered to a reader outside the community and this seems to me to mean that the real might well become coloured by fantasy or romance in the process of fictionalising it. The authenticity of the narrative would be in danger of being compromised by the situation of the teller. I want to begin, then, by considering Brown's situation as teller, his stance, his positioning in relation to his material.

Most fictional rural realism *is* written, after all, from the position of an insider who for one reason or another has become an outsider. Or, if he is not already an outsider, then the act of writing will make him one; and this is a process which may transform fact into a kind of fantasy or romance. You can argue, of course, that this is the condition of all fiction – as soon as self-consciousness enters, the real lived experience is compromised. This is surely true of urban writing as well as rural, but it seems to be the case that writing about rural life is peculiarly open to forms of fantasy, whether fantasies of bliss or of bleakness does not, I think, alter the problem. It is a consequence, I think of the values that we have come traditionally to place on the country. Well, you may feel, this is a bit annoying – here I am supposed to give a lecture on rural realism, on a novel that is billed as one of the foremost examples of its kind and here I am apparently subverting at the outset the possibility of the rural real. I have, however, John McNeillie himself to back me up. Here he is from his *A Galloway Childhood*, 1967:

> *The Galloway of which I write here was a magic world.*

And of its people:

> *Every one of them, male or female was what some people would call a*

> *character – bigger, louder, stronger, more fey, more whimsical and more alive than most. [7]*

Finally he says, 'The Galloway of my childhood is no more'; and implicitly he confesses that perhaps it never was:

> *the people who belonged in it have gone. No-one who writes about life does life justice by being a realist. The fields were greener, the trees were taller, the spots on the trout were the most brilliant red you could ever imagine, and the curlew's cry would have broken your heart, and you will never hear its like, now or ever. You must take my word for that. [160]*

But how are we take the word of a self-confessed fantasist? Well, we might say that this gentle disclaimer should not perhaps lead us to doubt the possibility or the authenticity of realism. McNeillie is after all merely offering here a kind of defence of the pastoral idyll. Elsewhere in the earlier *Wigtown Ploughman* the grass is very often far from green. And it is *Wigtown Ploughman* that seems to be in the tradition of *The House with the Green Shutters* rather than the nostalgically presented *A Galloway Childhood* whose affinities are closer perhaps to the Kailyard that Brown himself said he was reacting against. *Wigtown Ploughman* certainly provoked the kind of outraged local denials that made it clear that withers had been wrung. In the Preface to that novel John McNeillie insists on both fiction and truth:

> *Farm names and names of characters have been invented to suit what is purely fiction. No reference is made or intended to any living person. As for the harshness of this tale … there is no need to invent the truth. Would you have me tell you a fairy story?*

At the end of *Wigtown Ploughman* Andy finds he cannot leave the land he loves, to make his life, as he had briefly proposed, as a professional fighter. But his creator, John McNeillie, did. He lived his life away from his childhood land, although he remained in many ways a countryman. At the end of *A Galloway Childhood* he clarifies, however, the impossibility for him of remaining wholly within a community and writing about it, the inevitability of alienation in the process of assuming the narrating eye:

> *I might have been a farmer. I had ploughed the land. I had harrowed the newly sown fields, rolled them and cut the crop with reaper or binder. I had built ricks, helped doctor cattle and shared every sort of work that was done, but I had picked up a pen to write and somehow cut myself off from my peasant heritage. I thought long and hard about it while I divorced myself from what might have been my proper vocation. [159]*

To pick up a pen is to place oneself outside the community in the act of being self-conscious about it. As Burns discovered, it is not really possible to write about community and remain uncompromised within it. *Tam o' Shanter* is a good example of how the fantasy of the poet exploits but does not quite palliate the fact of drunkenness. Burns treats Tam genially, but there is no doubt that he feels superior to him and the undoubted fact that Burns knew perfectly well what it was like to be drunk doesn't make him write from Tam's level. Burns was close enough to the life of the ordinary man to be banished from Riddells, as Ross Roy puts it, for 'some drunken behaviour of which we have no details' [33], but not close enough to completely banish self-consciousness from his treatment of ordinary men.

Brown was interested in exploring his relationship with Burns: he wrote about him when he was a pupil at Ayr Academy, he gave a talk about him to the Arnold Society while he was at Balliol and wrote about him for *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1896. To the Arnold Society, he perhaps exaggerates the comfortableness of Burns's integration into peasant life:

> *Burns is unique in the matter of his work. He was born and lived and died among the people. Others have described peasant life from above, Burns knew it from the inner and the under side.*

In a letter to his friend Tom he describes this as 'vivisecting Burns for the Arnold Society […] The paper was critical rather than panegyrical and I seemed to make the men understand Burns in spite of the fact that they have no more conception of Ayrshire than a Hottentot has of Paradise.' In his essay for *Blackwood's* Brown is good on Burns's qualities as a lyric poet but probably underestimates his intelligence and contemplative abilities. The most noticeable characteristic of the essay, however, is Brown's persistent irritation with the failure of more highly educated critics of Burns, especially Arnold and Stevenson, to perceive his

essential qualities. At the same time, he is anxious not to admire everything, lest he be felt himself to be uncritical: there is something uncomfortable in Brown's stance, since he so clearly feels that he himself possesses the intellectual attainments that Burns lacks, yet knows he could never achieve the intuitive intensity of Burns's love poems.

In his attempts, however, to convey Burns to his listeners and readers from different social and educational backgrounds, we can see some of the problems he would encounter in writing his novel. Brown's stance vis-a-vis the *matter* of his work is finally different from Burns's; it is closer to that of Hardy, because like Hardy, Brown in various ways separated himself from the people he wrote about.

Brown admired Hardy's work – at least Brown's biographer Veitch tells us he disagreed vehemently with his friend William Menzies when Menzies criticised Hardy – and Hardy is the novelist who is perhaps most helpfully compared with Brown. G. K. Chesterton speaking of Hardy's approach to his material said that he 'was like the village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot'. Of course, this is absurdly reductive but it sufficiently hit a nerve for Hardy to find it unforgiveable – at least he wrote his bitter 'Epitaph on G K Chesterton' ('Here lies nipped in this narrow cyst/The literary contortionist …') when he was on his own death-bed. But Chesterton has got something to say about the difficult relationship Hardy has with his subject matter – Hardy is not sure how superior he is to his material and he is not quite sure how to treat it authentically. And I think this is also true of Brown.

Now the received wisdom about *The House with the Green Shutters* is that it was a counterblast to the Kailyard school (not clearly a school, of course, but that is another lecture) which idealised rural life in an offensively sentimental manner. It is after all how Brown initially spoke about his novel in his letter to his friend, Barker:

> *It is more complimentary to Scotland, I think, than the sentimental slop of Barrie, and Crockett, and Maclaren. It was antagonism to their method that made me embitter the blackness; like Old Gourlay I was going 'to show the dogs what I thought of them.' [Veitch, 57].*

Well, I need scarcely rehearse how the novel offers negatives of all the alleged virtues of the small community as represented in the so-called Kailyard novel; and

turns the potential achievements of its youth into disaster, misery and death. The novel begins with the Gourlay family at the height of its fortunes, showing prosperous Gourlay after the completion of the fine House with the Green Shutters at the top of the town of Barbie, and it concludes with the deaths of all four of the family; John Gourlay, expelled from University, murders his brutal, taunting father in a fit of drunken rage. John's suicide by poison is then followed by that of his mother and sister, already dying from breast cancer and consumption. Gourlay's downfall is a consequence of his own stupidity and refusal to embrace modernity, and the scheming competition of his rival Wilson. The whole affair is attended and commented upon by a malignant chorus of the 'bodies', the paltry, vicious citizens of the little town.

The narrative voice of *The House with the Green Shutters* is an authoritative one: we are very often told what to think and how to judge; this is not, of course, unusual in nineteenth-century fiction, but the authority of the voice is perhaps undermined by the indiscriminate spatter of angry fire, the narrator often using the depreciating sarcastical humour that he himself, elsewhere, deprecates.

It is also received wisdom, now, that Brown himself, half-repudiated his own black vision of rural Ayrshire. He said on more than one occasion that 'there is too much black for the white in it'. On the back page of his proof copy of the book, he seems already to have had these doubts – he enumerates the people of more or less good will and says, 'Only ten decent folk in the book, and about thirty brutes, ruffians and fools. Too much black for the white …'

Well, this would seem to confirm my own contention that the real is always lost, when it is written about, but it is the insecurity of Brown's perceptions that interests me most. Like Hardy he is not sure about the perspective he has achieved on the local community.

It seems to me that having turned their backs, as it were, on their rural communities, in coming to terms with their loss, as well as in seeing what they had to leave, both Hardy and Brown deal most comfortably with those figures who are not at all like themselves. Hardy came back to his local places but, of course, he could not reassume, nor did he wish to, the place he had in them before. But it was *after* his return that he wrote his masterpiece *The Mayor of Casterbridge* whose Henchard bears comparison with Brown's Gourlay. And Henchard, wonderfully surely drawn, is not like his creator. Nor, in spite of the remark I

have just quoted, is Gourlay like Brown. Both writers, if you like, make a point of distancing themselves firmly from their local origins by their classical allusions and patterning; and both surely place their heroes. Henchard, to be sure, is much more sympathetically rendered than Gourlay, but despite a couple of hiccups, where Brown seems to want to subvert his own rendering of Gourlay as heroic, if coarse – his insistence, for example, that he is a resolute dullard or his calling Gourlay's stick a 'trifle', just as he is establishing its almost mythical status [122] – despite these hiccups, Gourlay is coherently, if unsparingly presented.

The presentation of Gourlay takes account of his bravery and his brutality, showing where he fails his family and where, in a sense, they fail him. And there are moments of deep, unsentimental feeling as when, just before the complete collapse of his business, he dismisses old Peter Riney: 'Aye, aye,' said he, aye, aye. There goes the last o' them' [223]. But Brown does not allow this to palliate what is terrible in his destruction of his son, after John on whom he had foolishly pinned his hopes for the future, is expelled from University: Gourlay is reduced to an animal:

> *Sometimes Gourlay would run the full length of the kitchen, and stand there glowering on a stoop: then he would come crouching up to his son on a vicious little trot, pattering in rage, the broken glass crunching and grinding beneath his feet. At any moment he might spring. [260]*

But if Gourlay is cast from a different metal than Brown, Gourlay's son, John, shares many of Brown's characteristics and follows Brown's own educational trajectory from High School to University (Skeighan High School and Edinburgh University standing in for Brown's Ayr Academy and Glasgow University). Of course, Gourlay foolishly and pridefully sends John to Edinburgh against his son's desires and in spite of his deficient abilities; Brown, on the other hand, was assisted by scholarships and the excellent schoolmaster, William Maybin. But my point is that Brown gives John Gourlay enough of himself for us to remark it, and not enough for it to save John from his horrible fate – as drunkard, murderer and suicide. Brown ensures, indeed, that John's virtues, his sensibility and his vivid pictorial imagination become in the absence of application and self-control not blessings, but rather factors in his downfall. The 'bitter dominie' Bleach-the-boys delivers the definitive verdict on John Gourlay, 'The fault of young Gourlay is a sensory perception in gross excess of his intellectuality' [168]. Bleach-the-boys is

himself a failed intellectual, however, and Brown makes sure that he, too, suffers for his perceptions, which we are sarcastically told are a product of his 'astounding mind' [168]. To raise your head above the parapet is a risky business in Brown's universe. But is not this true also with many of his Victorian predecessors?

Why should *The Mill on the Floss* end over Maggie's dead body, why must Jude and Sue's children die and Jude return to Annabel in *Jude the Obscure*; why must Clym in his blindness turn to furze-cutting; why must John Gourlay's sensibility and his essay prize be curses to him and not rehabilitating blessings? Well, I am tempted to feel that these terrible fates visited on their characters are a kind of finger-crossing on the part of their authors, a superstitious (from these agnostics) propitiatory offering to the gods, against their own possible future failures. It is a kind of superstition in writers who leave or become other to the rural community, that they cannot project success on to those of their characters who also leave, or who leave and return. And they contrive sufferings for their characters, making them scapegoats for the guilts they feel about their own hubristic ambitions. Brown, then, gives John Gourlay something of himself and then appears to punish him horribly for their shared sensibility.

It is tempting also to speculate that Brown perhaps wanted to give John an oppressive father to cheer himself up for the father he never had, to persuade himself that a bad father is a great deal worse than none at all – but that is another and an unprovable tale.

But it is not merely John Gourlay with whom the narrator has an especially uneasy relationship: the nature of Brown's narrative stance, as well as a kind of angry honesty, draws him into a kind of obscene closeness to Wilson. Now, most readers find Wilson an unattractive figure and this is clearly Brown's doing. The first sight of him stresses his dirty waistcoat: that grubbiness never leaves him and it is not pleasing. Farfrae, his counterpart in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* repels because of his gentility, Wilson repels in his sleazy complacency and continues to repel through his last morally grubby encounter with Gourlay. The disorder of his house and yard points to a moral disorder and it is a chosen disorder – he keeps the Emporium tidy because it is necessary for business. Mrs Wilson excuses the dirt by the old proverb, 'The clartier the cosier', which had been exploited and tested through the novels of Elizabeth Hamilton and Walter Scott. And Mrs Wilson's appeal is as ambiguous as that of Mrs McClarty in Elizabeth Hamilton's *The*

Cottagers of Glenburnie (1808). In the earlier novel Hamilton's persistent denigration and undermining of Mrs McClarty cannot quite extinguish her vitality, Mrs McClarty gets out of control. Brown's treatment of Mrs Wilson is more consciously even-handed – he pays tribute to what is life-giving in her but qualifies her blousy appeal by stressing the tawdriness of her moral life. But the uneasiness of Brown's stance expresses itself more tellingly in his handling of Wilson. Brown's narrative self is, as I have suggested, never really aligned with Gourlay. Brown does not possess Gourlay's heroic qualities, the brute virtues of courage and physical strength; neither, of course, does he share his disabilities of impercipience and insensibility. Wilson is another matter. With Wilson the narrator admits a kinship. Now, neither Gourlay nor Wilson have a romantic sensibility, neither of them responds to the beauty of the natural world around them: Gourlay is 'dead to the fairness of the early morning scene' [44], absorbed in his own importance and the show that his house and carts will make; Wilson has no eye for 'the large evening star, tremulous above the woods, or for the dreaming sprays against the yellow west …

> *Yet, [Brown continues], Wilson was a dreamer, too. His close musing eye, peering at the dusky-brown nodge of his pony's hip through the gloom, saw not that, but visions of chances, opportunities, occasions. When the lights of Barbie twinkled before him in the dusk, he used to start from a pleasant dream of some commercial enterprise suggested by the country round. … His delight in his visions was exactly the same as the author's delight in the figments of his brain. They were the same good company along the twilight roads. The author, happy with his thronging thoughts (when they are kind enough to throng) is no happier than Wilson was in nights like these. [116]*

Put in the best light both the businessman and the writer are entrepreneurs, working for themselves; put in the worst light, both Wilson and Brown, the literary chronicler of rural Barbie, exploit the community for profit. And Brown doesn't try to duck out of or palliate the relationship 'his delight in his visions was exactly the same as the author's delight in the figments of his brain' [116].

It is tempting to speculate that it is his perception of his unholy kinship with Wilson that makes Brown develop the aggressive and combative qualities of his narrator: at least if he is going to be a successful dreamer, he is not going to achieve it in the sneaking bit-by-bit way of Wilson, but rather by showing the

sentimentalisers of rural life what he thinks of them: 'like Old Gourlay I was going "to show the dogs what I thought of them"' [104] – in this way he does, after all, become a bit like Gourlay. The refusal, then, to be ingratiating, to persuade his readers into acceptance of his vision; the determination that his readers will give their assent almost against their will, derives, I think, from the necessary betrayal entailed by writing about one's own abandoned community.

The uneasiness of Brown's stance also shows itself in the language of the novel, where again he is situated as an inside user of Scots and an outside listener to it, and an outside user of the standard English of the young man on the make, who needs to repudiate, or at least gentrify his tongue in order to get on in the world. It is the rising man that at the outset of the novel stigmatises the chamber-maid of the Red Lion as Blousalinda and describes her meeting with the ostler as one of 'amorous dalliance' [43]. Yet it is the Scots idiom, as opposed to dialect speech in the same opening passages that achieves impressive effects: as the chamber-maid tosses out her arch of water: 'John Gourlay, standing in front of his new house at the head of the brae, could hear the swash of it when it fell. The morning was of perfect stillness' [43]. Those 'ofs' – swash *of* it, *of* perfect stillness subtly make a Scottish cadence of the prose.

The tension between educated speech and Scots idiom or actual vernacular dialogue remains throughout the novel. The vernacular is tapped for deep emotional effect. The vernacular is also tapped for its sarcastic, reductive idiom, the 'I kent his faither' idiom that we are all familiar with. But elsewhere it sometimes seems as though the narrator asserts himself as the standard English speaker, who has left the community and its speech behind. At these times the results are awkward as with the unfortunately early use of Blowsalinda for the chamber-maid of the Red Lion or the disastrous invocation of 'Dian the queen … witching the heavens' [195] as John Gourlay returns to Barbie with his prize. But this is not by any means consistent: elsewhere he aligns himself with the lowering idiom of Barbie – when Wilson is laughed at for his pretentious use of his initials, he remarks, '*Ours* is a nippy locality' [107].

The Scots/English dilemma is, of course, an old story, an old story both about Brown in particular and about the linguistic dilemma in general for Scottish writers. As early as 1988 after all Emma Letley was authoritatively insisting that:

> *In the linguistic plot of the text, it is simply not relevant to suggest that the*

> *whole should have been either in Scots or in English; it is the counterpointing of the two and of elements of each language that gives the novel artistic integrity.*

This seems largely true: Brown's use of the vernacular in speech is assured and I think that in his overall narrative voice, Brown manages, *more often than not*, to achieve a distinctively Scottish idiom that is neither forced not shame-faced, often managed by a simply well-placed word or phrase: gawcey [240]; a 'gleg' look [240]; 'gurly' [241]. Elsewhere the narrative voice and the use of *style indirecte libre* subtly merge as in the description of the street after Wilson has insulted the wounded Gourlay, leaving him in impotent rage: 'Gourlay felt a great flutter of pulses against his collar: there was a pain in his throat, an ache of madness in his breast. He turned once more. But Wilson and the Templar had withdrawn discreetly to the Black Bull; the street wasna canny' [245]. It's worth remarking, too, that although Brown would have been aware that a compact had to be made with standard English to rise in the world, he continued to use a good deal of vernacular language in his letters to his intimates.

I have not, then, tried to gloss over what is uncomfortable in *The House with the Green Shutters*: it is an uncomfortable novel, not just in the way that all fiction should be disturbing, should dent complacency, but uncomfortable also in the sense that Brown is himself sometimes made angrily miserable by his own fiction. I concluded my Introduction to my edition of *The House with the Green Shutters* with an adaptation of Edwin Muir's comment on Brown, 'As he is without serenity, so he is without pity'; we should think rather, I wrote then, that 'it is because he cannot rid himself of pity that he is without serenity' [28]. He feels pity for Gourlay even as he keeps him at arms length, and keeps cutting him down to size; he feels pity, indeed, for the whole family, however much he tries to batter away their claims on his compassion. He feels a kind of pity for Barbie itself, intermittently transfigured, although 'usually so poor to see' [44]. But more than that, he is at once both horribly like John Gourlay and horribly complicit with Wilson. This explains much that is clumsy and flagellatory in the novel's narrative technique.

Perhaps I may in my final moments return to Hardy. In Hardy's work we find, I think, insecurities of stance and tone, not unlike those in Brown's novel. Indeed, T. S. Eliot said of Hardy that his work 'sometimes reaches sublimity without

having passed through the stage of being good' ('After Strange Gods', 1934). One understands what Eliot means. It is my experience of Hardy that although I am often exasperated by and resistant to his manipulations and *longeurs*, I cannot read Henchard's will or Marty South's elegiac words over Giles Winterbourne's grave, without weeping. My family will tell you that I weep at everything from *Portrait of a Lady* to *Sleepless in Seattle*, but tougher souls than myself have confessed to being unable to lecture on Hardy for fear of just such behaviour. Now, tears can perhaps not be invoked as critical criteria, may even worry with the threat of sentimentality. But, then, Nabokov in his lecture on Dickens's *Bleak House* says that 'people who denounce the sentimental are generally unaware of what sentiment is'. Whatever, I think the ending of *The House with the Green Shutters* might like these episodes in Hardy move us to tears. Brown too is guilty of manipulation and *longeurs* in the passages leading up to the deaths of Mrs Gourlay and Janet: the murder, followed by John's terrible nightmares and the triple suicide has seemed to many to be piling on the agony, to be over-stepping the licences even of fantasy and romance. Certainly he is over-explanatory in his descriptions of Mrs Gourlay:

> *'Ha, ha, ha! She screamed, 'it's to be a clean sweep o'the Gourlays! Ha, ha, ha! it's to be a clean sweep o' the Gourlays!'*
>
> *There is nothing uglier in life than a woman's cruel laugh, but Mrs Gourlay's laugh was more than cruel, it was demonic; the skirl of a human being carried by misery beyond the confines of humanity. [289]*

And again later 'Willing her death, she seemed to borrow its greatness and become one with the law that punished her. Arrogating the Almighty's function to expedite her doom, she was the equal of the Most High', 290: here again the educated man obtrudes himself: as Henry James would put it, there is too much telling here, when the showing, which is splendid, would be enough.

But when the final moments come, Brown's touch is sure, his commentary is of the briefest:

> *They rose, the the scrunt of Janet's chair on the floor, when she pushed it behind her, sent a thrilling shiver through her body, so tense was her mood. They stood with their hands on their chair-backs, and looked at each other, in a curious palsy of the will… To move was to give themselves to the irrevocable.*

[291]

That Brown can so tellingly bring together the vernacular ‘scrunt’ with the formal ‘to give themselves to the irrevocable’ shows the security of his moral and linguistic stance.

And again as the postman flees from the deathly house, the ordinary mess of his muddle and confusion points up the sublimity of the novel’s close:

> *‘Oh, my God!’ he screamed, leaping back, and with his bulky bag got stuck in the kitchen door, in his desperate hurry to be gone. [294]*

Brown knows to offer no comment on the last scene and there is a supreme, and supremely Scottish, sureness of touch again in his last sentence:

> *They gazed with blanched faces at the House with the Green Shutters, sitting dark there and terrible, beneath the radiant arch of the dawn. [294]*

‘sitting dark there and terrible’ is so much better than ‘sitting there dark and terrible’. ‘Style,’ says Martin Amis, ‘is not neutral; it gives moral directions.’ Brown does not always remember that style itself is enough to do this, but when he does, as here, his writing cannot be bettered.

So is this, then, what rural Scotland is really like? Is this the dark truth beneath the marquees and the culture, the restaurants and coffee bars and Internet cafes? Well, yes, of course, because this is an intensely felt and intensely written fiction and such writing has always the force of the true; and what is true must after all be real. But also, no, of course not, because here we all are and this is authentic enough. I spoke in my 1985 Introduction to the novel of how Brown conveyed the human need for community, even as community seemed to fail. And as I speak here today, it seems to me that this festival is a proof that something fundamental has happened to rural life in Scotland, and that this is a consequence of that opening up to experience in the fullest and most generous sense, that Brown could see as necessary but feared was impossible: I am extremely grateful to have been given the opportunity to be a little part of this communal experience.

Dorothy McMillan, 20o6; 2021

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What follows is the text of the McNeillie Lecture, which I gave at the Wigtown Book Festival, 2006. Some recent interest in *The House with the Green Shutters* has prompted me to reproduce the lecture here. It has never been published and may provide readers with some thoughts, not academic, but I hope still of interest. I have not changed the tone of the lecture which was informal thoughout.

Dorothy McMillan, 2021.

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I came back recently from a holiday in China with my husband and son. Our younger son, John, is studying Chinese and he was our guide; I don't think we'd have tried it otherwise. But tourism is big in China now and in company with thousands from East and West we did the usual things, from the Great Wall to the more Western delights of Shanghai, and we made a short cruise down the Li River, where we saw that weird landscape of karst excrescences which in some ways typifies the Chinese landscape of scroll and screen. We sailed from Guilin to Yangshuo, a small and beautiful town, but a backpacker's paradise; it seems hardly a place with which to begin a talk on rural realism in *The House with the Green Shutters*. Yet, we had an experience in Yangshuo which made me think about what I would be talking about in 6 weeks time, made me think about the meaning and implications of the notion of the rural real.

The three of us hired bikes – lots of people do – but after a fairly terrifying (for me) encounter with the traffic on the main road, we turned off into a stony track, where we saw no other tourists. We saw a few workers in the rice-fields, lots of dogs and chickens and the odd curious, but not particularly surprised, peasant. We were not, of course, the first to turn that way: a board announced that we were in a scenic area and that Lin's café was up ahead of us. We reached the river at a point where there was a little island in the middle and a half-crossing to the island, but we could go no further with the bikes and Lin's café wasn't in evidence. At once a man appeared and when John asked him where the café was, he pointed to a tarpaulin hump; he removed the tarpaulin revealing a table and chairs; then he disappeared and came back with a café umbrella and three menus in English and Chinese. We had coke and beer and John had eggs and tomatoes. And each time, Mr Lin had to climb up a hill to his home and back down again with our orders. While we were sitting there, an old man in a straw hat, shorts and a shirt, torn almost all the way up the back, appeared from somewhere and walked a bit into the river, where he took off his shirt, washed it in the water and put it back on, cleaner but still, of course, torn almost in two.

The river remained a problem since we did not really want to go back the way we had come. John asked Mr Lin and he said there was no problem since he had a motor boat and would take us across for a tiny sum. We couldn't see the boat but agreed to the deal. Mr Lin disappeared again and came back with a mate: they were carrying between them an outboard motor which they attached to a bamboo raft. Mr Lin took us over in two stages: first John and myself and then Richard and

the bikes. I forgot to say that we were able to take advantage of Mr Lin's introductory offer of a calligraphy scroll or painting done by his sister, free to all customers who spent over forty-five Yuan, about three pounds – we took the scroll.

This was the rural real and it did make me think of *The House with the Green Shutters*: Mr Lin is, if you like, the Wilson of his village, the man who can see the future of the small community, the local entrepreneur. I do him a disservice, perhaps, in comparing him to Wilson, since Mr Lin seemed wholly pleasant and not a scheming man, but what I want to suggest is that what was real to him and his family, the life that they led and proposed to lead, had for us the texture of fantasy or romance. Realism depends on where you are standing, while you look. Had Mr Lin spoken of that day, and perhaps he did later to family or friends, telling them about the boy who could speak Chinese and the parents who no doubt seemed to him rather comic, like most foreigners, it would have been a realistic narrative, but then he would not have written it down; as I speak of it or write it down, it becomes a travellers' romance with a slanted relationship to the real. And what if the enterprising Mr Lin had been or becomes the subject of a novel by a member of the village who had left for Middle School and University? The novel would no doubt be recognised as an example of rural realism, but it would be offered to a reader outside the community and this seems to me to mean that the real might well become coloured by fantasy or romance in the process of fictionalising it. The authenticity of the narrative would be in danger of being compromised by the situation of the teller. I want to begin, then, by considering

Brown's situation as teller, his stance, his positioning in relation to his material.

Most fictional rural realism *is* written, after all, from the position of an insider who for one reason or another has become an outsider. Or, if he is not already an outsider, then the act of writing will make him one; and this is a process which may transform fact into a kind of fantasy or romance. You can argue, of course, that this is the condition of all fiction – as soon as self-consciousness enters, the real lived experience is compromised. This is surely true of urban writing as well as rural, but it seems to be the case that writing about rural life is peculiarly open to forms of fantasy, whether fantasies of bliss or of bleakness does not, I think, alter the problem. It is a consequence, I think of the values that we have come traditionally to place on the country. Well, you may feel, this is a bit annoying – here I am supposed to give a lecture on rural realism, on a novel that is billed as one of the foremost examples of its kind and here I am apparently subverting at the outset the possibility of the rural real. I have, however, John McNeillie himself to back me up. Here he is from his *A Galloway Childhood*, 1967:

> *The Galloway of which I write here was a magic world.*

And of its people:

> *Every one of them, male or female was what some people would call a character – bigger, louder, stronger, more fey, more whimsical and more alive than most. [7]*

Finally he says, 'The Galloway of my childhood is no more'; and implicitly he confesses that perhaps it never was:

> *the people who belonged in it have gone. No-one who writes about life does life justice by being a realist. The fields were greener, the trees were taller, the spots on the trout were the most brilliant red you could ever imagine, and the curlew's cry would have broken your heart, and you will never hear its like, now or ever. You must take my word for that. [160]*

But how are we take the word of a self-confessed fantasist? Well, we might say that this gentle disclaimer should not perhaps lead us to doubt the possibility or the authenticity of realism. McNeillie is after all merely offering here a kind of

defence of the pastoral idyll. Elsewhere in the earlier *Wigtown Ploughman* the grass is very often far from green. And it is *Wigtown Ploughman* that seems to be in the tradition of *The House with the Green Shutters* rather than the nostalgically presented *A Galloway Childhood* whose affinities are closer perhaps to the Kailyard that Brown himself said he was reacting against. *Wigtown Ploughman* certainly provoked the kind of outraged local denials that made it clear that withers had been wrung. In the Preface to that novel John McNeillie insists on both fiction and truth:

> *Farm names and names of characters have been invented to suit what is purely fiction. No reference is made or intended to any living person. As for the harshness of this tale … there is no need to invent the truth. Would you have me tell you a fairy story?*

At the end of *Wigtown Ploughman* Andy finds he cannot leave the land he loves, to make his life, as he had briefly proposed, as a professional fighter. But his creator, John McNeillie, did. He lived his life away from his childhood land, although he remained in many ways a countryman. At the end of *A Galloway Childhood* he clarifies, however, the impossibility for him of remaining wholly within a community and writing about it, the inevitability of alienation in the process of assuming the narrating eye:

> *I might have been a farmer. I had ploughed the land. I had harrowed the newly sown fields, rolled them and cut the crop with reaper or binder. I had built ricks, helped doctor cattle and shared every sort of work that was done, but I had picked up a pen to write and somehow cut myself off from my peasant heritage. I thought long and hard about it while I divorced myself from what might have been my proper vocation. [159]*

To pick up a pen is to place oneself outside the community in the act of being self-conscious about it. As Burns discovered, it is not really possible to write about community and remain uncompromised within it. *Tam o' Shanter* is a good example of how the fantasy of the poet exploits but does not quite palliate the fact of drunkenness. Burns treats Tam genially, but there is no doubt that he feels superior to him and the undoubted fact that Burns knew perfectly well what it was like to be drunk doesn't make him write from Tam's level. Burns was close enough to the life of the ordinary man to be banished from Riddells, as Ross Roy

puts it, for ‘some drunken behaviour of which we have no details’ [33], but not close enough to completely banish self-consciousness from his treatment of ordinary men.

Brown was interested in exploring his relationship with Burns: he wrote about him when he was a pupil at Ayr Academy, he gave a talk about him to the Arnold Society while he was at Balliol and wrote about him for *Blackwood’s Magazine* in 1896. To the Arnold Society, he perhaps exaggerates the comfortableness of Burns’s integration into peasant life:

> *Burns is unique in the matter of his work. He was born and lived and died among the people. Others have described peasant life from above, Burns knew it from the inner and the under side.*

In a letter to his friend Tom he describes this as ‘vivisecting Burns for the Arnold Society […] The paper was critical rather than panegyrical and I seemed to make the men understand Burns in spite of the fact that they have no more conception of Ayrshire than a Hottentot has of Paradise.’ In his essay for *Blackwood’s* Brown is good on Burns’s qualities as a lyric poet but probably underestimates his intelligence and contemplative abilities. The most noticeable characteristic of the essay, however, is Brown’s persistent irritation with the failure of more highly educated critics of Burns, especially Arnold and Stevenson, to perceive his essential qualities. At the same time, he is anxious not to admire everything, lest he be felt himself to be uncritical: there is something uncomfortable in Brown’s stance, since he so clearly feels that he himself possesses the intellectual attainments that Burns lacks, yet knows he could never achieve the intuitive intensity of Burns’s love poems.

In his attempts, however, to convey Burns to his listeners and readers from different social and educational backgrounds, we can see some of the problems he would encounter in writing his novel. Brown’s stance vis-a-vis the *matter* of his work is finally different from Burns’s; it is closer to that of Hardy, because like Hardy, Brown in various ways separated himself from the people he wrote about.

Brown admired Hardy’s work – at least Brown’s biographer Veitch tells us he disagreed vehemently with his friend William Menzies when Menzies criticised Hardy – and Hardy is the novelist who is perhaps most helpfully compared with Brown. G. K. Chesterton speaking of Hardy’s approach to his material said that he

‘was like the village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot’. Of course, this is absurdly reductive but it sufficiently hit a nerve for Hardy to find it unforgiveable – at least he wrote his bitter ‘Epitaph on G K Chesterton’ (‘Here lies nipped in this narrow cyst/The literary contortionist …’) when he was on his own death-bed. But Chesterton has got something to say about the difficult relationship Hardy has with his subject matter – Hardy is not sure how superior he is to his material and he is not quite sure how to treat it authentically. And I think this is also true of Brown.

Now the received wisdom about *The House with the Green Shutters* is that it was a counterblast to the Kailyard school (not clearly a school, of course, but that is another lecture) which idealised rural life in an offensively sentimental manner. It is after all how Brown initially spoke about his novel in his letter to his friend, Barker:

> *It is more complimentary to Scotland, I think, than the sentimental slop of Barrie, and Crockett, and Maclaren. It was antagonism to their method that made me embitter the blackness; like Old Gourlay I was going ‘to show the dogs what I thought of them.’ [Veitch, 57].*

Well, I need scarcely rehearse how the novel offers negatives of all the alleged virtues of the small community as represented in the so-called Kailyard novel; and turns the potential achievements of its youth into disaster, misery and death. The novel begins with the Gourlay family at the height of its fortunes, showing prosperous Gourlay after the completion of the fine House with the Green Shutters at the top of the town of Barbie, and it concludes with the deaths of all four of the family; John Gourlay, expelled from University, murders his brutal, taunting father in a fit of drunken rage. John’s suicide by poison is then followed by that of his mother and sister, already dying from breast cancer and consumption. Gourlay’s downfall is a consequence of his own stupidity and refusal to embrace modernity, and the scheming competition of his rival Wilson. The whole affair is attended and commented upon by a malignant chorus of the ‘bodies’, the paltry, vicious citizens of the little town.

The narrative voice of *The House with the Green Shutters* is an authoritative one: we are very often told what to think and how to judge; this is not, of course, unusual in nineteenth-century fiction, but the authority of the voice is perhaps

undermined by the indiscriminate spatter of angry fire, the narrator often using the depreciating sarcastical humour that he himself, elsewhere, deprecates.

It is also received wisdom, now, that Brown himself, half-repudiated his own black vision of rural Ayrshire. He said on more than one occasion that 'there is too much black for the white in it'. On the back page of his proof copy of the book, he seems already to have had these doubts – he enumerates the people of more or less good will and says, 'Only ten decent folk in the book, and about thirty brutes, ruffians and fools. Too much black for the white …'

Well, this would seem to confirm my own contention that the real is always lost, when it is written about, but it is the insecurity of Brown's perceptions that interests me most. Like Hardy he is not sure about the perspective he has achieved on the local community.

It seems to me that having turned their backs, as it were, on their rural communities, in coming to terms with their loss, as well as in seeing what they had to leave, both Hardy and Brown deal most comfortably with those figures who are not at all like themselves. Hardy came back to his local places but, of course, he could not reassume, nor did he wish to, the place he had in them before. But it was *after* his return that he wrote his masterpiece *The Mayor of Casterbridge* whose Henchard bears comparison with Brown's Gourlay. And Henchard, wonderfully surely drawn, is not like his creator. Nor, in spite of the remark I have just quoted, is Gourlay like Brown. Both writers, if you like, make a point of distancing themselves firmly from their local origins by their classical allusions and patterning; and both surely place their heroes. Henchard, to be sure, is much more sympathetically rendered than Gourlay, but despite a couple of hiccups, where Brown seems to want to subvert his own rendering of Gourlay as heroic, if coarse – his insistence, for example, that he is a resolute dullard or his calling Gourlay's stick a 'trifle', just as he is establishing its almost mythical status [122] – despite these hiccups, Gourlay is coherently, if unsparingly presented.

The presentation of Gourlay takes account of his bravery and his brutality, showing where he fails his family and where, in a sense, they fail him. And there are moments of deep, unsentimental feeling as when, just before the complete collapse of his business, he dismisses old Peter Riney: 'Aye, aye,' said he, aye, aye. There goes the last o' them' [223]. But Brown does not allow this to palliate what is terrible in his destruction of his son, after John on whom he had foolishly

pinned his hopes for the future, is expelled from University: Gourlay is reduced to an animal:

> *Sometimes Gourlay would run the full length of the kitchen, and stand there glowering on a stoop: then he would come crouching up to his son on a vicious little trot, pattering in rage, the broken glass crunching and grinding beneath his feet. At any moment he might spring. [260]*

But if Gourlay is cast from a different metal than Brown, Gourlay's son, John, shares many of Brown's characteristics and follows Brown's own educational trajectory from High School to University (Skeighan High School and Edinburgh University standing in for Brown's Ayr Academy and Glasgow University). Of course, Gourlay foolishly and pridefully sends John to Edinburgh against his son's desires and in spite of his deficient abilities; Brown, on the other hand, was assisted by scholarships and the excellent schoolmaster, William Maybin. But my point is that Brown gives John Gourlay enough of himself for us to remark it, and not enough for it to save John from his horrible fate – as drunkard, murderer and suicide. Brown ensures, indeed, that John's virtues, his sensibility and his vivid pictorial imagination become in the absence of application and self-control not blessings, but rather factors in his downfall. The 'bitter dominie' Bleach-the-boys delivers the definitive verdict on John Gourlay, 'The fault of young Gourlay is a sensory perception in gross excess of his intellectuality' [168]. Bleach-the-boys is himself a failed intellectual, however, and Brown makes sure that he, too, suffers for his perceptions, which we are sarcastically told are a product of his 'astounding mind' [168]. To raise your head above the parapet is a risky business in Brown's universe. But is not this true also with many of his Victorian predecessors?

Why should *The Mill on the Floss* end over Maggie's dead body, why must Jude and Sue's children die and Jude return to Annabel in *Jude the Obscure*; why must Clym in his blindness turn to furze-cutting; why must John Gourlay's sensibility and his essay prize be curses to him and not rehabilitating blessings? Well, I am tempted to feel that these terrible fates visited on their characters are a kind of finger-crossing on the part of their authors, a superstitious (from these agnostics) propitiatory offering to the gods, against their own possible future failures. It is a kind of superstition in writers who leave or become other to the rural community, that they cannot project success on to those of their characters who also leave, or

who leave and return. And they contrive sufferings for their characters, making them scapegoats for the guilts they feel about their own hubristic ambitions. Brown, then, gives John Gourlay something of himself and then appears to punish him horribly for their shared sensibility.

It is tempting also to speculate that Brown perhaps wanted to give John an oppressive father to cheer himself up for the father he never had, to persuade himself that a bad father is a great deal worse than none at all – but that is another and an unprovable tale.

But it is not merely John Gourlay with whom the narrator has an especially uneasy relationship: the nature of Brown's narrative stance, as well as a kind of angry honesty, draws him into a kind of obscene closeness to Wilson. Now, most readers find Wilson an unattractive figure and this is clearly Brown's doing. The first sight of him stresses his dirty waistcoat: that grubbiness never leaves him and it is not pleasing. Farfrae, his counterpart in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* repels because of his gentility, Wilson repels in his sleazy complacency and continues to repel through his last morally grubby encounter with Gourlay. The disorder of his house and yard points to a moral disorder and it is a chosen disorder – he keeps the Emporium tidy because it is necessary for business. Mrs Wilson excuses the dirt by the old proverb, 'The clartier the cosier', which had been exploited and tested through the novels of Elizabeth Hamilton and Walter Scott. And Mrs Wilson's appeal is as ambiguous as that of Mrs McClarty in Elizabeth Hamilton's *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808). In the earlier novel Hamilton's persistent denigration and undermining of Mrs McClarty cannot quite extinguish her vitality, Mrs McClarty gets out of control. Brown's treatment of Mrs Wilson is more consciously even-handed – he pays tribute to what is life-giving in her but qualifies her blousy appeal by stressing the tawdriness of her moral life. But the uneasiness of Brown's stance expresses itself more tellingly in his handling of Wilson. Brown's narrative self is, as I have suggested, never really aligned with Gourlay. Brown does not possess Gourlay's heroic qualities, the brute virtues of courage and physical strength; neither, of course, does he share his disabilities of impercipience and insensibility. Wilson is another matter. With Wilson the narrator admits a kinship. Now, neither Gourlay nor Wilson have a romantic sensibility, neither of them responds to the beauty of the natural world around them: Gourlay is 'dead to the fairness of the early morning scene' [44], absorbed in his own importance and the show that his house and carts will make; Wilson

has no eye for ‘the large evening star, tremulous above the woods, or for the dreaming sprays against the yellow west …

> *Yet, [Brown continues], Wilson was a dreamer, too. His close musing eye, peering at the dusky-brown nodge of his pony’s hip through the gloom, saw not that, but visions of chances, opportunities, occasions. When the lights of Barbie twinkled before him in the dusk, he used to start from a pleasant dream of some commercial enterprise suggested by the country round. … His delight in his visions was exactly the same as the author’s delight in the figments of his brain. They were the same good company along the twilight roads. The author, happy with his thronging thoughts (when they are kind enough to throng) is no happier than Wilson was in nights like these. [116]*

Put in the best light both the businessman and the writer are entrepreneurs, working for themselves; put in the worst light, both Wilson and Brown, the literary chronicler of rural Barbie, exploit the community for profit. And Brown doesn’t try to duck out of or palliate the relationship ‘his delight in his visions was exactly the same as the author’s delight in the figments of his brain’ [116].

It is tempting to speculate that it is his perception of his unholy kinship with Wilson that makes Brown develop the aggressive and combative qualities of his narrator: at least if he is going to be a successful dreamer, he is not going to achieve it in the sneaking bit-by-bit way of Wilson, but rather by showing the sentimentalisers of rural life what he thinks of them: ‘like Old Gourlay I was going “to show the dogs what I thought of them”’ [104] – in this way he does, after all, become a bit like Gourlay. The refusal, then, to be ingratiating, to persuade his readers into acceptance of his vision; the determination that his readers will give their assent almost against their will, derives, I think, from the necessary betrayal entailed by writing about one’s own abandoned community.

The uneasiness of Brown’s stance also shows itself in the language of the novel, where again he is situated as an inside user of Scots and an outside listener to it, and an outside user of the standard English of the young man on the make, who needs to repudiate, or at least gentrify his tongue in order to get on in the world. It is the rising man that at the outset of the novel stigmatises the chamber-maid of the Red Lion as Blousalinda and describes her meeting with the ostler as one of ‘amorous dalliance’ [43]. Yet it is the Scots idiom, as opposed to dialect speech in

the same opening passages that achieves impressive effects: as the chamber-maid tosses out her arch of water: 'John Gourlay, standing in front of his new house at the head of the brae, could hear the swash of it when it fell. The morning was of perfect stillness' [43]. Those 'ofs' – swash *of* it, *of* perfect stillness subtly make a Scottish cadence of the prose.

The tension between educated speech and Scots idiom or actual vernacular dialogue remains throughout the novel. The vernacular is tapped for deep emotional effect. The vernacular is also tapped for its sarcastic, reductive idiom, the 'I kent his faither' idiom that we are all familiar with. But elsewhere it sometimes seems as though the narrator asserts himself as the standard English speaker, who has left the community and its speech behind. At these times the results are awkward as with the unfortunately early use of Blowsalinda for the chamber-maid of the Red Lion or the disastrous invocation of 'Dian the queen … witching the heavens' [195] as John Gourlay returns to Barbie with his prize. But this is not by any means consistent: elsewhere he aligns himself with the lowering idiom of Barbie – when Wilson is laughed at for his pretentious use of his initials, he remarks, '*Ours* is a nippy locality' [107].

The Scots/English dilemma is, of course, an old story, an old story both about Brown in particular and about the linguistic dilemma in general for Scottish writers. As early as 1988 after all Emma Letley was authoritatively insisting that:

> *In the linguistic plot of the text, it is simply not relevant to suggest that the whole should have been either in Scots or in English; it is the counterpointing of the two and of elements of each language that gives the novel artistic integrity.*

This seems largely true: Brown's use of the vernacular in speech is assured and I think that in his overall narrative voice, Brown manages, *more often than not*, to achieve a distinctively Scottish idiom that is neither forced not shame-faced, often managed by a simply well-placed word or phrase: gawcey [240]; a 'gleg' look [240]; 'gurly' [241]. Elsewhere the narrative voice and the use of *style indirecte libre* subtly merge as in the description of the street after Wilson has insulted the wounded Gourlay, leaving him in impotent rage: 'Gourlay felt a great flutter of pulses against his collar: there was a pain in his throat, an ache of madness in his breast. He turned once more. But Wilson and the Templar had withdrawn

discreetly to the Black Bull; the street wasna canny' [245]. It's worth remarking, too, that although Brown would have been aware that a compact had to be made with standard English to rise in the world, he continued to use a good deal of vernacular language in his letters to his intimates.

I have not, then, tried to gloss over what is uncomfortable in *The House with the Green Shutters*: it is an uncomfortable novel, not just in the way that all fiction should be disturbing, should dent complacency, but uncomfortable also in the sense that Brown is himself sometimes made angrily miserable by his own fiction. I concluded my Introduction to my edition of *The House with the Green Shutters* with an adaptation of Edwin Muir's comment on Brown, 'As he is without serenity, so he is without pity'; we should think rather, I wrote then, that 'it is because he cannot rid himself of pity that he is without serenity' [28]. He feels pity for Gourlay even as he keeps him at arms length, and keeps cutting him down to size; he feels pity, indeed, for the whole family, however much he tries to batter away their claims on his compassion. He feels a kind of pity for Barbie itself, intermittently transfigured, although 'usually so poor to see' [44]. But more than that, he is at once both horribly like John Gourlay and horribly complicit with Wilson. This explains much that is clumsy and flagellatory in the novel's narrative technique.

Perhaps I may in my final moments return to Hardy. In Hardy's work we find, I think, insecurities of stance and tone, not unlike those in Brown's novel. Indeed, T. S. Eliot said of Hardy that his work 'sometimes reaches sublimity without having passed through the stage of being good' ('After Strange Gods', 1934). One understands what Eliot means. It is my experience of Hardy that although I am often exasperated by and resistant to his manipulations and *longeurs*, I cannot read Henchard's will or Marty South's elegiac words over Giles Winterbourne's grave, without weeping. My family will tell you that I weep at everything from *Portrait of a Lady* to *Sleepless in Seattle*, but tougher souls than myself have confessed to being unable to lecture on Hardy for fear of just such behaviour. Now, tears can perhaps not be invoked as critical criteria, may even worry with the threat of sentimentality. But, then, Nabokov in his lecture on Dickens's *Bleak House* says that 'people who denounce the sentimental are generally unaware of what sentiment is'. Whatever, I think the ending of *The House with the Green Shutters* might like these episodes in Hardy move us to tears. Brown too is guilty of manipulation and *longeurs* in the passages leading up to the deaths of Mrs

Gourlay and Janet: the murder, followed by John's terrible nightmares and the triple suicide has seemed to many to be piling on the agony, to be over-stepping the licences even of fantasy and romance. Certainly he is over-explanatory in his descriptions of Mrs Gourlay:

> *'Ha, ha, ha! She screamed, 'it's to be a clean sweep o'the Gourlays! Ha, ha, ha! it's to be a clean sweep o' the Gourlays!'*
>
> *There is nothing uglier in life than a woman's cruel laugh, but Mrs Gourlay's laugh was more than cruel, it was demonic; the skirl of a human being carried by misery beyond the confines of humanity. [289]*

And again later 'Willing her death, she seemed to borrow its greatness and become one with the law that punished her. Arrogating the Almighty's function to expedite her doom, she was the equal of the Most High', 290: here again the educated man obtrudes himself: as Henry James would put it, there is too much telling here, when the showing, which is splendid, would be enough.

But when the final moments come, Brown's touch is sure, his commentary is of the briefest:

> *They rose, the the scrunt of Janet's chair on the floor, when she pushed it behind her, sent a thrilling shiver through her body, so tense was her mood. They stood with their hands on their chair-backs, and looked at each other, in a curious palsy of the will… To move was to give themselves to the irrevocable. [291]*

That Brown can so tellingly bring together the vernacular 'scrunt' with the formal 'to give themselves to the irrevocable' shows the security of his moral and linguistic stance.

And again as the postman flees from the deathly house, the ordinary mess of his muddle and confusion points up the sublimity of the novel's close:

> *'Oh, my God!' he screamed, leaping back, and with his bulky bag got stuck in the kitchen door, in his desperate hurry to be gone. [294]*

Brown knows to offer no comment on the last scene and there is a supreme, and

supremely Scottish, sureness of touch again in his last sentence:

> *They gazed with blanched faces at the House with the Green Shutters, sitting dark there and terrible, beneath the radiant arch of the dawn. [294]*

‘sitting dark there and terrible’ is so much better than ‘sitting there dark and terrible’. ‘Style,’ says Martin Amis, ‘is not neutral; it gives moral directions.’ Brown does not always remember that style itself is enough to do this, but when he does, as here, his writing cannot be bettered.

So is this, then, what rural Scotland is really like? Is this the dark truth beneath the marquees and the culture, the restaurants and coffee bars and Internet cafes? Well, yes, of course, because this is an intensely felt and intensely written fiction and such writing has always the force of the true; and what is true must after all be real. But also, no, of course not, because here we all are and this is authentic enough. I spoke in my 1985 Introduction to the novel of how Brown conveyed the human need for community, even as community seemed to fail. And as I speak here today, it seems to me that this festival is a proof that something fundamental has happened to rural life in Scotland, and that this is a consequence of that opening up to experience in the fullest and most generous sense, that Brown could see as necessary but feared was impossible: I am extremely grateful to have been given the opportunity to be a little part of this communal experience.

Dorothy McMillan, 20o6; 2021

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