Haste Ye Back: Dorothy K. Haynes and the importance of childhood memory

By Craig Lamont

This year we published a new edition of *Haste Ye Back*, the memoir of the long-neglected Scottish writer Dorothy K. Haynes (1918–1987). First printed in 1973, the book is based for the most part between the years 1929, when Dorothy and her twin brother Leonard went to Aberlour Orphanage following the death of their mother, and 1933, when they returned to Lanark. It was during her stay at Aberlour when, aged eleven, Dorothy first tried her hand at writing and was encouraged when her poem ‘The Fairies’ was published in the orphanage magazine. Her best-known work to date is the short story collection *Thou Shalt Not Suffer a Witch* (1949), which was reprinted in 1996, and recent interest in her life and works may well lead to a new wave of Haynes studies. But to give *Haste Ye Back* its moment is to behold a writer very much looking back on her formative years and trying to link not just the passing of her own life and youth, but of an institution which had given her and so many others a home. Indeed, the book opens with a prologue set in the more recent past.

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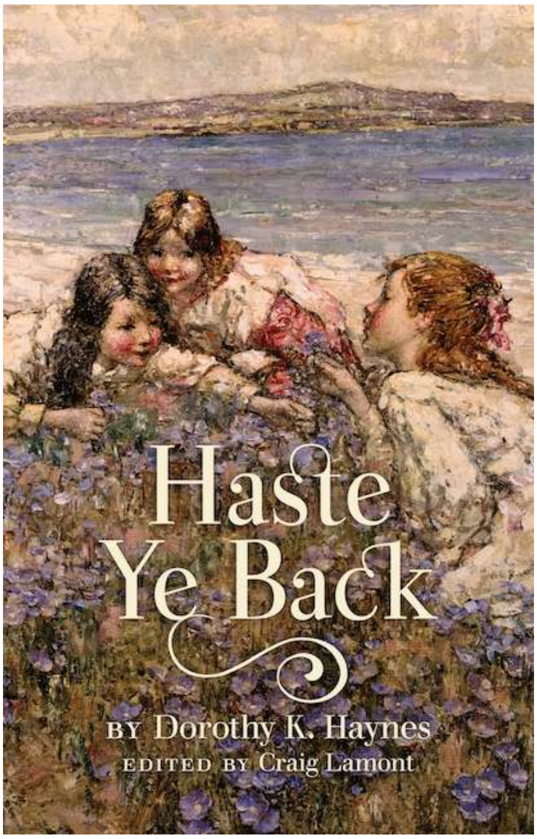
For the most part, the memoir is a life-affirming and positive – but not overly rosy – depiction of orphanage bustle. The sense of smallness and awe is palpable on every page. Dorothy was, after all, just one of five hundred children during her time. The rosiest memories (and the reason for the choice of Hornel's oil painting on the cover) are those describing 'Lossie Day' when the entire orphanage would descend on Lossiemouth Beach. Haynes describes the children in detail, separating the older girls 'with their hair in ribbons' from the youngsters 'in summer dresses', and the boys with 'newly cropped heads and stiff collars'. Babies were 'counted over and over again by anxious nurses' (*HYB*, p. 22). It was a day out for the staff, too, and everyone was well turned out, leaving behind the shabby run-of-the-mill for this day of frenzy and fun.



Throughout the rest of the book, Haynes conjures important pivotal memories. She recalls 'the exact moment' (*HYB*, p. 31) she decided to be a writer at Aberlour, and the 'queer kind of stupor' she recalled in 1944 when she travelled back from Glasgow after learning her brother had been killed in the war. Aberlour was an Episcopalian institution, and so plenty of the narrative captures the routine of the church calendar in fine detail. There are great swathes of description and drama, including the supposed Nazi spy on the staff, and the many great dances the children were involved in. Though she knows she cannot speak for every child, Haynes often offers a sense of shared frustration at orphanage life, and the lack of freedoms. Equally, she seems to speak collectively about the vibrancy of their experiences. In the midst of one of the dances, she says there was

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Later in life, Haynes became best known for her macabre content and supernatural tales. We can see the beginnings of this in *Haste Ye Back*, for example in her memory of watching the undertaker 'make a coffin large enough for a mother and two children to be buried together' (*HYB*, p. 14). And then there are the gory orphanage songs the girls would sing, with lyrics like

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Reminiscing on this Haynes recalls that 'even the more fortunate children were influenced by something beyond them, some mass memory which brought to their minds terrors they had never known' (*HYB*, p. 37). She references a seven-year-old girl who seemed to remember a hanging at Aberdeen. 'She was not an imaginative child,' Haynes says, 'and she never became much of a reader, but she knew how a man would look on the gallows, the blue tongue, the twitching limbs, and the crowd watching in sick lust and excitement' (*HYB*, p. 37). As the new edition notes, we find an echo of this in Haynes's short story 'The Memory'.

In the prologue, with the sights and sounds of the orphanage life ablaze in the reader's mind, Haynes brings us back to 1971 and the scene of the demolition. As a literary device, it works nicely. In the main text Haynes describes the construction of a new wing of the orphanage and seeing through a window to a square lawn with a bird bath or fountain. It gave her a 'peculiar haunted feeling,' having seen it so often but never gaining access to it (*HYB*, p. 96). In the prologue, in the midst of deconstruction, Haynes recalls having thought she'd finally found it: 'Yes, this was it! Here was the stone pedestal, and here the encircling walls and windows; but . . . where was the dining hall? Where had it been? Once again, I was disorientated, and now I would never know' (*HYB*, p. 18). In this last passage Haynes cleverly binds together the unreliability of memory in life-writing, especially where youthful memories are concerned, and the sadness imbued in revisiting sites of personal memory. There is something irrecoverable defying the wish to be brought back or to glimpse a feeling now too distant to fully recall. Her attempted retracing of her steps in Aberlour on this 1971 excursion, bookending her written attempt to retrace her time there more generally, is suitably melancholy.

In John Buchan's autobiography *Memory Hold-the-Door* (1940), he makes the compelling case that 'an experience, especially in youth, is quickly overlaid by others, and is not at the moment fully comprehended.' It is 'not lost', Buchan asserts, 'but it is overlaid [...] Time hurries it from us, but also keeps it in store, and it can later be recaptured and amplified by memory, so that at leisure we can interpret its meaning and enjoy its savour.'[2] It is worthwhile to consider a whole raft of other life-writing examples from across Scottish literature, some intended as autobiographies, others as novels. In my recent correspondence with colleagues and readers of Haynes the example of Jessie Kesson (1916–1994) has surfaced time and again as a comparison. Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* (1958) is a story of childhood which draws on the experiences of the author, especially those concerning orphanage life. Tim Baker draws Haynes and Kesson together with Jenni Fagan for their respective depictions of turmoil and 'unstable ideas of home' in early life.[3] The link between the works of these writers, regardless of their intentions, genre, subject, or style, is memory.

The unreliability of memory in life-writing was famously and playfully questioned by Janice Galloway, across her two autobiographical works *This is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2012), which she described as 'anti-memoir'. This is a strong tradition in Scotland going back to John Galt, many of whose novels are styled as autobiographies, featuring fictional narrators whose gift for recall across the decades provides the reader with exceptionally realistic detail of life in 1820s Scotland, from Scottish parish life to the heart of city politics. To sketch this detail requires the experience the likes of which Galt had in spades, as he outlines in his own autobiographical writings. Galt and the majority of other writers, including Haynes, take up this task of looking back at their life towards the end of it.

This is what makes Burns's autobiographical letter to Dr John Moore on 2 August 1787 quite special. With the publication of his second edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* in Edinburgh that March, Burns had tasted literary fame, and his letter to Moore is in many ways his reaction to this. Burns's letter begins with a complaint of ennui. 'To divert my spirits a little,' he says,

> *I have taken a whim to give you a history of myself.—My name has made a small noise in the country; you have done me the honor to interest yourself very warmly in my behalf; and I think a faithful account of, what character of a man I am, and how I came by that character, may perhaps amuse you in an idle moment.*

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Of course, we are all part-made by the vivid experiences of our youth over which we had little-to-no control. These things happened to us, firing one emotional reaction or another, sometimes triggering a life-long fear, others producing a fascination with a subject which drives careers or friendships. Elsewhere in this issue, Billy Kay talks us through some of these moments in discussion of his wonderful new book *Born in Kyle: A Love Letter tae an Ayrshire Childhood* (2023). Not only does Kay's text represent a continuation of the linguistic culture of his youth, but the memories therein are imbued with literary and historical associations, many of which are also rooted in childhood.

For writers like Haynes, we can connect those formative memories to the works of fiction she produced and see how closely they line up. This is a common tool in literary studies, with a good example being Virginia Woolf's description of her foremost memory: ‘lying half asleep, half awake in the nursery in St. Ives […] hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind.’[5] Not only her novel *The Waves* (1931), but several other works and passages have been connected to this place and this memory. Such is the significance of the writer’s decision to open the door to their past for us, rather than leaving it all scattered between the lines of their published works.

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As Jung makes connections between his own ‘unconscious’, his family line, and Goethe,[7] so too does George Mackay Brown ‘fondly linger over the notion that a drop of two of the same blood that powered [*The House with the*] *Green Shutters* and *The Jolly Beggars*’ is in his veins.[8] Here, Mackay Brown traces Burns’s poetical talents through the bard’s mother, Agnes Brown, and playfully wonders if those skills, together with those of George Douglas Brown, have made their way into his psyche. But every writer seeks their own legend and history, and for Mackay Brown it is the *Orkneyinga Saga* and the Norse fables which tempered his imagination most.

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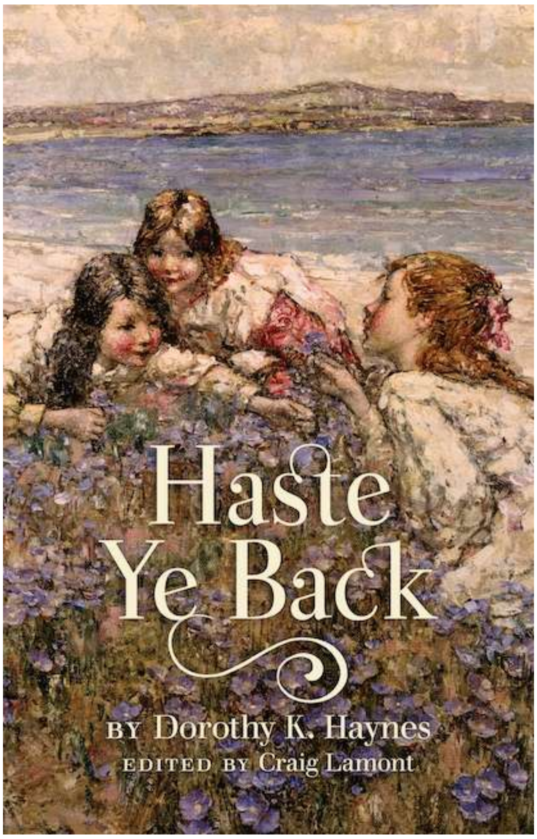

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(c) The Bottle Imp