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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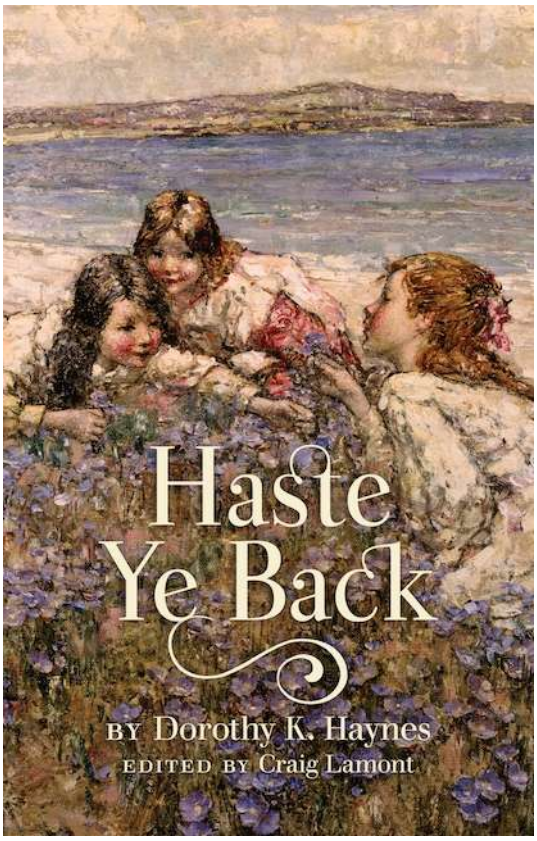

Throughout the rest of the book, Haynes conjures important pivotal memories. She recalls 'the exact moment' (*HYB*, p. 31) she decided to be a writer at Aberlour, and the 'queer kind of stupor' she recalled in 1944 when she travelled back from Glasgow after learning her brother had been killed in the 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.

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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.*

Not only do we know more about Burns's reception than we ever will about his true character (such is the mythic power of his legacy), we also know how performative his writing was; his self-fashioning and adaptable personality are woven throughout his prose and verse. Yet we can draw a line from Burns's youthful experiences of inheriting stories – for example those from 'an old Maid' of his mother's who cultivated a great range of supernatural folk legends which fired the young Bard's imagination – to Haynes's time at Aberlour.[4]

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.

In Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961) the famed psychologist and philosopher offers an incredibly vivid account of his youth – scenes of early fears, excitements, disappointments and dreams. Though he admits that autobiography is 'so difficult to write because we possess no standards, no objective foundation, from which to judge ourselves,'[6] his self-analysis is helpful to have in the background here. Yes, his metaphysical deep dives and descriptions of synchronicity – indeed his entire career – make his particular autobiography somewhat unique, but those early memories and formative childhood experiences are still comparable with others. Jung ascribes so much of his intrigue to the unconscious, which, in childhood, can wield power without the burden of prejudice or knowledge. Jung's recollections of feelings and notions which seemingly emerged from 'nowhere' is also useful because memoir-writers often replace the 'nowhere' with some sort of lineage, even tentatively.

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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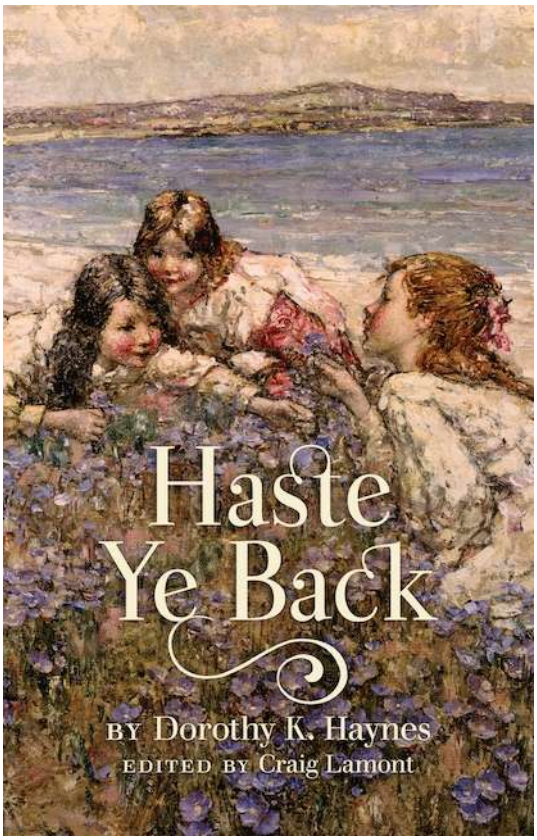

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(c) The Bottle Imp