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The journalism of Neil Munro: fiction, criticism and cultural comment

McDougall, Allan Young (2011) *The journalism of Neil Munro: fiction, criticism and cultural comment*. MPhil(R) thesis, University of Glasgow.

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Abstract

In a period of over thirty years from the mid 1890s, Neil Munro occupied a unique position in Scotland's literary and social scenes. Although perhaps now best known as a novelist, short-story writer or essayist Munro was primarily a journalist, mainly with Glasgow's Evening News and later

life with the Daily Record, and in this role he cast a wide and critical eye over Scottish life and letters. This research focuses primarily on Neil Munro's journalistic output in the (Glasgow) Evening News and seeks to determine his views on literature, his literary and artistic peers and contemporary and current affairs in two specific periods gathered from prime records (from 22nd August 1895 to 27th January 1898 and at the resumption of the columns after the Great War, 19th June 1919 to 28th June 1920) and from published compilations of articles gathered throughout his career until 1927. In compiling two weekly columns in the Evening News, The Looker-On on the Monday and Views and Reviews on the Thursday, Munro influenced the opinions and reading habits of a large section of the population of the west of Scotland. In Views and Reviews he set out his views on the meaning of art and literature, nationally and internationally; in The Looker-On Munro sketched the world around him, whether local or national or international, through his eclectic choice of topics and his personable and endearing style. The thesis is structured in three main parts, each one dealing, in short, focussed episodes, on topics arising from the journalism. One deals mainly with material before the First World War; Part Two with issues which straddle the pre- and post-War periods; Part Three considers the episodic fiction found in The Looker-On columns. Rather than adopt a general, over-arching argument, this approach allows us to take shorter, sharper assessments of Munro's views of particular aspects of the culture that was his context. These then gradually accumulate to allow us to draw general conclusions only after we have allowed each one its particular value and place. This consideration of a range of subjects builds up a picture of a journalist with strong views on the state of literature, of Scotland, of all the arts. His opinions are founded on Victorian and Edwardian sensibilities, in the sense that he is open to the working of arts and science in society as a whole, and the romantic tradition, in that he engages emotionally as well as intellectually with his subjects, seeking passion in the work of others rather than intellectual rigour. Crucial to the structure of the thesis is the argument that by considering these two periods of his journalism, pre-War (1895 – 98) and post-War (1919 – 1920), two different aspects of Munro's character can be understood more profoundly. Pre-war, his journalism expresses his healthy curiosity in human nature, his comfort in tradition and the effect of scientific and social progress and a creeping globalism on the citizens of his adopted city. Post-war, acknowledging the changes caused by the Great War, he seems to become paralysed, trying to respond to new literary and social structures, rejecting the experimentalism of modernism and seeing no need or value in an organised "Scottish Renaissance". And yet, as the research for this thesis should make clear, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sensibility that is evident in Munro's journalism does in fact carry him forward into the context of the modern world in his three series of episodic fiction, Erchie (1902-1926), Para Handy (1905-1924) and Jimmy Swan (1911-1917 and then 1923-1926). In conclusion, I will suggest that the essential literary value and popularity of these stories lies in their emergence from the pre-War sensibility and their characteristic humble sympathy for the pre-War world.

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