

**P29 Neil M. Gunn; Novelist of the North
RECORDS' IDENTITY STATEMENT**

Reference number: GB1741/P29
Alternative reference number:
Title: Neil M. Gunn; Novelist of the North
Dates of creation: 1975
Level of description: Fonds
Extent: 3 booklets, 19 sheets
Format: Paper

RECORDS' CONTEXT

Name of creators: J. B. Caird
Administrative history: Neil (Miller) Gunn was born in Dunbeath, a small fishing and crofting community in Caithness, North East Scotland, in 1891. Although he was educated in Galloway, he grew up with a love of the Highlands and Highland culture and, as an adult, he returned to the North East to live and work.

Gunn, the son of a fisherman, was born at a time when the herring fishing industries of Scotland were beginning to die out, and much of Highland culture was in decline, with a falling population and growing unemployment. He saw that Highland culture was also under threat as the old ways were forgotten, and fewer people spoke Gaelic or Scots, so traditional songs and stories were beginning to disappear. Reflecting this trend, Gunn himself spoke only English, although in his writing he used the rhythms and syntax of Gaelic speech to give a sense of the people and communities he depicted.

For a number of years, Gunn worked in London for the Civil Service before joining the Customs and Excise in 1911. Returning to the Highlands, Gunn worked as an Excise Officer until 1937, when increasing financial success allowed him to become a full-time writer. This writing

also extended to journalism and, in the 1930s and early 40s, he wrote articles for publications such as the Scots Magazine. In this he argued that the Highland way of life was worth preserving and should be supported to stop it disappearing altogether, a position which he also expressed politically through his involvement with the SNP.

Gunn is best known, however, for his novels, the first of which, *The Grey Coast* was published in 1926. His early novels reveal a bleak, often harsh, portrait of the communities he knew so well, although through time his fiction shifted to reveal a more hopeful vision of Highland experience. These more positive portraits include ***Highland River (1937)***, ***The Silver Darlings (1941)*** and *Young Art and Old Hector (1942)*, novels which remain his most widely-read work.

In 1956 he published his final book, *The Atom of Delight*, a spiritual autobiography which traced his interest in Zen Buddhism. Gunn died in 1973. He is recognised as one of the major writers of the renaissance of Scottish literature in the early twentieth century and the Dunbeath Heritage Centre in Caithness houses a permanent exhibition of his life and work.

James Bowman Caird, poet and literary critic, was born in 1919 in West Linton, and educated at Boroughmuir School, Edinburgh University, the Sorbonne, Paris, and Moray House College of Education, Edinburgh. He married Janet H Kirkwood. Caird was assistant teacher of English at Wick High School in 1938 and at Trinity Academy, Edinburgh, from 1938 to 1940. Between 1940 and 1946 he served in the Royal Artillery Army Education Corps and after the war became principal teacher of English at Peebles High School, 1946-1947. From 1947 to 1974 he was HM Inspector of Schools for Dumfries, Glasgow, Stirlingshire and the Highlands. Caird was a member of the National Trust for Scotland and a member of the Culloden

Committee and had a reputation as an accomplished poet and critic. He was a close friend of the poet Sorley MacLean whom he met while at Edinburgh University.

Custodial history:

RECORDS' CONTENT

Description: Lecture transcripts and pamphlet, 1975

Appraisal:

Accruals:

RECORDS' CONDITION OF ACCESS AND USE

Access: open

Closed until:

Access conditions: Available within the Archive searchroom

Copying: Copying permitted within standard Copyright Act parameters

Finding aids: Available in Archive searchroom

ALLIED MATERIALS

Related material:

Publication:

Notes:

Date of catalogue: August 2011

Ref.	Description	Dates
P29	Neil M. Gunn (1891-1973)	1975
P29/1	Transcription of lecture by J.B. Caird 'Neil Gunn, Novelist of the North' [19 sheets]	1975
P29/2	Printed edition of the lecture 'Neil Gunn, Novelist of the North' [2 booklets]	1975
P29/3	Pamphlet 'Neil. M. Gunn, Novelist of the North' by J. B. Caird [1 booklet]	n.d.