



GERMAN EDITIONS: I realised why my internet search had been in vain when I saw the name that Lewis Grassie Gibbon was published under.

From Arbutnott to Berlin: the hunt for Lewis Grassie Gibbon

BY
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If you move to the North-East, you will inevitably encounter Lewis Grassie Gibbon. You might pass the road sign for the Grassie Gibbon Centre on your way down the A90 and decide to find out what it is all about.

Or you might read about the author and his work in a local newspaper. It may be that someone asks you if you have read *Sussex Song*. If you are not only an inabooconer but also, like me, a European immigrant, your answer ▶



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is likely to be ‘No’.

My native language is German and although I have grown fond of my English ‘stepmother tongue’, reading *A Scots Quair* is a fair challenge.

After several attempts I gave up and pinned my hope on the possibility that there might be a German translation of the trilogy. I trawled the German internet sites, but to no avail.

Then, on a Sunday outing to Arbutnott, I dropped in at the Grassie Gibbon Centre to have a look at the exhibition. And there, in a display case, I spotted a complete German edition of *A Scots Quair* – three separate volumes neatly spread out on the author’s jacket. I realised why my internet search had been in vain: the books had been published under Grassie Gibbon’s real name, James Leslie Mitchell.

The copies in the display case looked a bit dated. When had they been printed? And were they still available? Being a translator myself, I was keen to see how Grassie Gibbon’s style and language had been rendered in German.

Back home I re-started my research, not knowing that it would take me as far as Berlin, nor that the German translation is in some ways connected with recent German history.

In 1961 the East Berlin publishing house Verlag Volk und Welt (Volk & Welt Publishing) enquired at Jarrold’s Publishers in London about the German language rights for *A Scots Quair* and proposed to publish a German translation of the trilogy in a first edition of 8,000 copies.

In the former GDR as well as in West Germany, Volk & Welt was known for producing quality editions of foreign literature in German translation. It was often referred to as the East German ‘window to the world’.

Gibbon’s trilogy was brought to their attention by a Scottish friend; their enquiry at Jarrold’s publishers was met with interest. Soon negotiations were taken over by international literary agency Curtis Brown, who represented Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s successor, his widow Rebecca (Ray) Mitchell. Several months later, in early 1962, a contract was signed by Rebecca Mitchell and Volk & Welt.

As the translation was expected to be difficult due to the ample use of dialect, the agreement allowed two years for completion of

the work. The editor for English language literature at Volk & Welt, Dr Hans Petersen, was assigned as translator.

Grassie Gibbon’s work presented far greater challenges than had been expected and, as a result, the publication was postponed several times. Throughout the translation Dr Petersen was assisted by David D. Murison, editor of the *Scottish National Dictionary* and advised by Rebecca Mitchell.

On the dust-jacket of the third volume Dr Petersen gives an account of his conversation with Rebecca in her home in Welwyn Garden City.

“Ray Mitchell tells of the disappointments and the first small successes of the author James Leslie Mitchell. She remembers the literary projects her husband was able to

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complete and those he couldn’t realise. Her tone is not nostalgic and there is a glint of humour in her sharp eyes. Her slim, Scottish face is turned towards the visitor from the GDR with a friendly and attentive expression.

“In a corner of the sitting room stands a big chest – yes, it contains the extensive collection of letters, personal notes and photos, but only a few manuscripts. In astonishment the visitor asks what had happened to the manuscripts, and Mrs Mitchell explains: ‘James Leslie Mitchell used to write his drafts on a typewriter. But he rarely corrected them, he rather typed the pages once again. And as a

true Scot he used the reverse page for his new work. This way they got lost to posterity.’”

In his translation Dr Petersen refrains from using any dialect, but keeps strictly to High German, but manages to convey the background and the atmosphere of the story.

The German version of *Sussex Song* was finally published in 1970, followed by *Cloud Howe* in 1972 and *Grey Granite* in 1974. The books sold well. In 1977 a second edition was printed and a third in 1986, although it was never published in the Federal Republic of Germany. The press took a lively interest in the trilogy and almost 30 favourable press clippings of reviews are still extant.

For example, the review of the translation of *Sussex Song* in a daily newspaper for the city of Schwerin, 1970, concludes: “Mitchell’s highly poetic diction, well grounded in the way people speak, allows glimpses of Scottish life. People, landscapes, traditions, anecdotes and dramatic events are woven into a riveting story about a family. Its poetic yet down-to-earth language helps provide exceptional reading.”

After 1989 the former GDR publishing houses were incorporated in the West German system and Volk & Welt went into liquidation in 2001. Its archive is held by the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Arts) in Berlin, which supports the arts and German cultural heritage. Here I spent two days browsing the office notes, correspondence and royalty settlements.

Two documents caught my special interest: the original contract, bearing Rebecca Mitchell’s signature, and a black-and-white photo of Lewis Grassie Gibbon himself – an earnest young man smoking a pipe. The same image had been used for the dust-jackets of the German books.

The German version is now only available second-hand, but maybe there is a glimmer of hope. According to an article in the *Guardian* the British film director Terence Davies is to turn *Sussex Song* into a movie.

If *Sussex Song* is screened in Germany, perhaps Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s work will make a second appearance for a German audience.

REGINA ERICH moved from Germany to Scotland 11 years ago and has adopted the North-East as her new home. As a translator and writer, she is a busy traveller between two worlds of language.