

## Glasgow to Galilee via Oban

J David Simons trilogy of immigrant Jewish experience

Reviewed by Ian Stephen

There must be many readers like me who missed out on J David Simons' novels until they experienced the Graham Greene-like moral ambiguity in *An Exquisite Sense of What is Beautiful* (Saraband, 2013). The pitch-perfect tone of that work, international in scope and settings, brought me to the author's first two novels. *The Credit Draper* was first published by Two Ravens Press in 2008 and *The Liberation of Celia Khan* by Five Leaves, Nottingham in 2011. Both have been re-issued by Saraband in a handsome series style, building up to their publication of the concluding work, *The Land Agent*.

The three books can be read independently but characters are shared and the stories do interlock to amount to one large-scale work in the best traditions of the historical novel. It's fashionable to dismiss the inventor of this whole genre as the man who prompted a thousand designs for shortbread tins. All right, Scott's *Marmion* and *Lay of the Last Minstrel*, madly popular long narrative poems, in their day, have not worn well. But the euphoria depicted at the start of the '45 rebellion in *Waverly* gives way to a realistic depiction of brutal civil war and retribution. The story drives you through the history, once you beat through the author's asides. Simons' trilogy is very much driven by story and by the memorable protagonists.

There are sustained studies of Jewish settlement in Glasgow, with the counterpoint of the adventures of the travelling Jewish draper in the Highlands. And the tracks of refugees of persecution in Eastern Europe are traced, as the restless seek to found their socialist utopias in desert land or ply trades in swelling cities like the seaport of Haifa. Finally, two of the central characters return, disillusioned but still questing, to the territory of Argyll.

You turn the pages out of concern for these immigrants, still learning to swim in strange waters. The author lets major and minor characters gasp into dangers which are too much for them. This could be the jealousies of rival lovers in the Highlands of Scotland or the inevitable reaction of either city-dweller or Bedouin who come to see the flow of immigrants as a threat to their own ways of life. The first book ends with a stingray's sting in the tail.

As in *Heart of Midlothian* the narrative alternates between settings in city and countryside. Oban is the town of transition. North of that, there is a stone cottage by a loch, as much an oasis as the rare slopes by a precious river, out in desert. Looking back to the first book, I would suggest there is an occasional slight slip into a too hastily sketched impression of the Highland setting – the smell of the heather. The Glasgow scenes and those set in Oban such as a bar-scene, and a gladiatorial football match, are much stronger. But the writing in the second is consistent and the last book has the swift fluency of a master storyteller. Yet all three books are compelling and amount to a host of memorable characters.

Despite the skilful plotting, the quests of the central characters remain to the fore – the talented footballer, the suffragette or the international negotiator. The trilogy is one strong work taking you through

history, cityscape, landscape, rites of passage and the cultural tension in the immigrant's soul. The intimacies and tensions of families and the heartbreaks of individual aspiration are scrutinized, as much as Jewish identity.

**Ian Stephen**'s latest novel is *A Book of Death and Fish* – see review pages of *Northwords Now* 29.