Gothic Communities in John Burnside's *The Devil's Footprints* and Sarah Moss' *Night Waking*

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I. Introduction

Following the riots after the Southport stabbings of August 2024, King Charles told the prime minister, according to a Palace spokesman, »how he had been greatly encouraged by the many examples of community spirit that had countered the aggression and criminality from a few with the compassion and resilience of the many«.[1] The community spirit to which the king alluded is a common British myth, invoked in the most challenging national situations such as the London Blitz during the second World War or, more recently, the Covid Pandemic. It involves a sense of belonging, social inclusion and cohesion, compassion as well as collective action. But what if this community spirit is broken or distorted? What if, instead of compassion and resilience, a community is haunted by the evils of the past? Contemporary Gothic fiction in particular questions this myth, portraying communities as dysfunctional and in decline.

I would like to focus in this chapter on two historical forces or developments that form the background to the construction of Gothic communities in *The Devil's Footprints* by John Burnside (2007) and *Night Waking* by Sarah Moss (2011). Burnside situates his story in Coldhaven, a fictive former fishing town in the North-East of Scotland that had suffered from the decline of the Scottish fishing industry. Moss places hers on the fictive Colsay, a deserted Hebridean island representative of the depopulation of many Scottish islands after the destruction of Highland culture in the eighteenth century. Both novels employ central Gothic conventions and motifs to demonstrate the socio-historical decline of rural Scottish communities, and both novels ask questions about how reliable and decipherable historical accounts are and how they inform the present. They politicise Gothic anxieties as an effect of the infrastructural neglect and exploitation on the Scottish periphery, and they mobilise the uncanny to emphasise the ongoing presence of past exploitations. The Gothic here represents not just the evils of the past: its haunting presence in contemporary Scottish communities is a functional tool, pointing to the need for remembrance.

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[1] No author: »King Charles calls for ›unity‹ and praises ›community spirit‹ after riots«, in: BBC online, 10.08.2024, https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/articles/cx2gn28g9g20 (last accessed on 14.8.2025).

David Punter has analysed the transformations of the Gothic in recent fiction and has observed that it follows »the tradition of not merely describing but inhabiting the distorted forms of life, social and psychic, which follow from the attempted recollection of primal damage«.[2] Gothic literature has always addressed the effects of transgressive crimes over time, but the difference between earlier Gothic novels and contemporary ones, according to Punter, is an epistemological problem concerning the knowledge of the past and history. Whereas in older Gothic novels the uncovering of the past leads to resolution, contemporary Gothic fiction takes a less straightforward view of the correspondence between past and present. This can be read in the light of Jacques Derrida's concept of »hauntology«. In his answer to Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the »end of history«,[3] Derrida problematized the idea of linear historical sequences. When he coined the term hauntology in the essay *The Spectres of Marx*[4] in 1993, he was referring to two ideas: the first was the pun on haunting and ontology, implying that being as a material manifestation and haunting as an immaterial one, are intrinsically connected. In other words, our being in the world is and has always been haunted by the ghosts of the past. The second idea relates to the concept of future. Derrida has shown with the example of Karl Marx's famous statement about the spectre of communism haunting Europe that futures can haunt us which haven't even happened. Derrida's influence on contemporary Gothic fiction cannot be overstated: hauntology offers a model of problematising the relation between past, present and future in regard to psychology as well as memory, pointing to the fact that the twenty-first-century human condition is equally shaped by the spectres of the past as by the fear of dystopian futures and the mourning for impossible futures.

In his classic text *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, published in 1887, Ferdinand Tönnies understands community and society as binaries: community is a natural and organic state of existence, whereas society is teleological: it is deliberately formed, and held together by a common purpose. As a product of nature, the community is unplanned: it arises out of a common »Wesenwillen«, i.e instinct, emotions, and habits.[5] Consequently, the idea of community is closely connected with rural life.

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[2] Punter, David: The Literature of Terror. A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day, Harlow 1996, p. 178.

[3] Cf. Fukuyama, Francis: »The End of History?«, in: The National Interest 16 (Summer 1989), pp. 3–18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24027184 (last accessed on 14.8.2025).

[4] Derrida, Jacques: Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, translated by Peggy Kamuf, London/New York 1994.

[5] Cited in: Lyall, Scott: »Preface: In Search of Community«, in: Scott Lyall (ed.): Community in Modern Scottish Literature, Leiden 2016, pp. i-xvii; here p. vii.

Raymond Williams has argued in *The Country and the City* that the structures of feelings projected onto rural community life have always been nostalgic longings for the Golden age, the »idea of an ordered and happier past set against the disturbance and disorder of the present«.[6] In English literature, community nostalgia is mostly connected with the experience of industrialisation and the experience of the modern metropolis – both are seen as social changes which destroy the lived community of the village. Since the Romantic period, British writers have expressed a nostalgic longing for lost community, often portrayed as a consequence of modernity. In Scottish literature, Scott Lyall observes, community »has not only been a key thematic concern« but »has also been a bulwark of the Scottish tradition, helping to form Scottish literature as a subject area«.[7] In the late nineteenth century, a nostalgic view of the community found a powerful and influential expression in sentimental fiction of the Scottish Kailyard school.[8] Contemporary Scottish writers like Moss and Burnside are not the first generation to revoke the image of a benign rural community: Lewis Grassic Gibbon had done so powerfully in his depiction of the Kinraddie society in *A Scots Quair* (1932–1934). However, while in English literature community nostalgia is mostly connected with the experience of industrialisation and the modern metropolis as factors of social change which destroy the lived community of the village, in the Scottish tradition the loss of community is often expressed as a consequence of English interventions. Rather than framing this loss in nostalgic terms, Scottish novels portray it as a repressed past that continues to haunt the present. The suppression of Gaelic culture and the Highland clearances initiated by English landowners, economic depression, and consequently exile, all point to the instability and finally the loss of community.[9]

The genre in which disintegrating Northern communities are particularly prevalent is the Gothic. Gothic fiction has always been a key site for the exploration of sociocultural configurations, such as the family, kinship, or, in a larger sense, the community. If, as Alan Bisset and others have maintained, one defining marker of the Scottish Gothic is »the disbelief in the unity of the self«,[10] this uncertainty of unity surely extends to the communal. As early as 1880, we find a distinctly Scottish Gothic concern with community, rather than the individual, as the subject of haunting in Margaret Oliphant's story *The Beleaguered City.*[11] In the town of Semur, the dead return not to frighten, but to provoke moral reckoning. This anticipates the communal hauntings in Burnside's *The Devil's Footprints* and Moss' *Night Waking*, where the Gothic arises less from supernatural horror than from the ethical weight of a shared and repressed past. Contemporary Scottish Gothic novels explore the damaging dynamics of communities, as I want to argue, as a bleak and irrevocable consequence of the major historical forces that have shaped them. Gothic tropes and formats are employed to structure and define social experience, often in relation to memory and place. If in Scottish literature the community »has traditionally stood as a mythic signifier of commonality and communal resistance to Anglophone capital«, as Scott Lyall has proposed,[12] then Scottish Gothic literature exposes the dark sides of the community: the residual forces of a traumatic and violent national past which shaped the collective Scottish experience of the loss of territory, structure, order, and consequently the unity of the self. All these show a haunting presence in contemporary Scottish Gothic novels and tinge the portrayal of communities with a Gothic threat. »Rather than the collective knowledge of shared values and traditions«, Monica Germanà observes, »what binds these ›imagined communities‹ is a spectral web of secrets and the shared awareness of human corruption«.[13] Although I agree with the factors Germanà identifies as galvanising community, I hesitate to see the communities in these Gothic novels as ›imagined‹. Helpful as Benedict Anderson's concept of ›imagined communities‹ is in many regards, it is actually the description of their concrete genealogical entanglements, intergenerational trauma, and inherited collective hatred and guilt, which turns these communities into Gothic ones. Haunting is related as a major social force or constituent of social life rather than an effect of an individual trauma, psychosis, or superstition, and it functions as a signifier of historical discontinuities, erasures, and absences.

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[6] Williams, Raymond: The Country and the City, New York 1973, p. 45.

[7] S. Lyall: Preface, p. ix.

[8] See Tange, Hanne: »Grassic Gibbon's Art of Community: A Scots Quair and the Condition of Scotland«, in: Studies in Scottish Literature 33/1 (2004), pp. 247–262, https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol33/iss1/20 (last accessed 15.08.2025).

[9] Timothy Baker has shown how prominently the death of the island community figures in the poetry and novels of twentieth-century and twenty-first century poets such as Ian Crichton Smith, George MacKay Brown and Edwin Muir and poets Christine de Luca as well as contemporary Scottish novelists. Cf. Baker, Timothy C.: »The Lonely Island: Exile and Community in Recent Island Writing«, in: Scott Lyall (ed.): Community in Scottish Literature, Leiden 2016, pp. 25–42; here p. 31f.

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[10] Bissett, Alan: »›The Dead Can Sing‹: An Introduction«, in: Alan Bissett (ed.): Damage Land: New Scottish Gothic Fiction, Edinburgh 2001, pp. 1–8; here p. 5. The most iconic Scottish Gothic texts – James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) – focus on the phenomenon of a split personality.

[11] See Leonie Jungen's chapter on Margaret Oliphant in this volume.

[12] S. Lyall: Preface, p. ix.

[13] Germanà, Monica: »›Ghost-filled‹ Islands and the Haunting Feminine: Contemporary Scottish Female Gothic«, in: Carol M. Davison/Monica Germanà (eds.): Scottish Gothic. An Edinburgh Companion, Edinburgh 2017, pp. 222–235; here p. 235.

II. *The Devil's Footprints*

As a former north-eastern fishing town, Burnside's Coldhaven is typical for the economic setback of its main industry in the second half of the 20th century. The Scottish Government Report about social change in Scottish fishing communities from 2009 informs about the social consequences in Scottish fishing towns affected by the dramatic decline in the fishing industry since the 1970s: in the light of economic deprivation and the threat of erasure, the report claims, community spirit and identity became increasingly demoralized:

> […] fishermen and their wives think of their fishing communities as in decline and at risk of dying, demonstrated by the empty harbour, the loss of boat building, the dwindling number of fishermen, their shrinking spending power and a set of other social changes including shop closures, drugs, and the visible presence of incomers.[14]

Burnside draws on all these factors and turns them into a Gothic setting by translating the economic deprivation into a spiritual and moral one. Michael Gardiner, the homodiegetic narrator of *The Devil's Footprints*, had moved as a child with his parents into a fisherman's cottage in Coldhaven. His cosmopolitan parents – the mother an American artist, the father an English landscape photographer– had both lived in European metropoles before the father decided to move to Coldhaven »to be alone, to concentrate on his work«.[15] The family had never been accepted by the community, and, as Michael recollects, »a handful of the locals decided it was their business to make my family's life uncomfortable« (TDF, p. 80). However, the narrator makes it very clear that there existed no concerted action or plan among the locals to expel the outsiders. They were motivated only by an unmotivated shared hatred against each other as well as the family of the Gardiners. And this hatred proved to be fatal: In the course of the narrative, we learn that five people have found a violent death. The novel starts with the narrator remembering that a year ago a woman named Moira Birnie and her two small sons had been found dead in a burnt-out car. Moira had been his girlfriend at school for some time, and this memory evokes one of another violent death, the death of Moira's teenage brother Malcolm. Malcolm had bullied Michael as a child and finally, Michael had taken revenge. Grammatically, the memory of Malcolm's death is pushed into a subclause and nearly hidden beneath a convoluted heap of not really relevant information:

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[14] Jamieson, Lynn/Munro, Gillian/Perrier, Maud: Social Change in Scottish Fishing Communities: a Brief Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography, https://lx.iriss.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/0084016.pdf (last accessed 01.08.2025).

[15] Burnside, John: The Devil's Footprints, London 2014, p. 13. Cited in the text with the abbreviation TDF and the page number.

> For the fact was that I felt guilty, and drawn in, transfixed by a kind of morbid fascination, if that's the right word for it, because, even though Moira didn't know it, even if nobody knew it but me, I was the one who had killed her brother when I was thirteen and he was fifteen, killed him and left him to rot in the old lime-room on a weekday afternoon, when we should have been in school doing Maths or PE, in out of the cold and the rain, thinking about Christmas, or bird's eggs, or the pretty girl with black eyes and shoulder-length pigtails in 4C. (TDF, p. 8)

Similarly, the death of the narrator's mother is related in passing, again syntactically subordinated in a relative clause. Remembering the animosities against his family, Michael describes the main agents among the locals: »They were only a handful, just a few of the more vicious members of the uglier clans – the Kings, the Gillespies, the Hutchisons – and their unwitting instruments, like Peter Tone, the town drunk, the one who killed my mother« (TDF, p. 80). What turns these deaths into Gothic deaths is not the narratorial emphasis on particularly gruesome details (which one would perhaps expect in a Gothic novel), but, rather paradoxically, the opposite: the fact that the narrator pushes them into the background of his mind but eventually finds himself unable to repress them. The syntactical subordination of Michael's crime – and the trauma of his mother's death – mirrors the subconscious Freudian repression of these events. Since all five deaths had occurred before the narrative sets in, the novel's focus is not on their immediate circumstances but rather on the social fabric of the community that enabled them. Burnside's protagonist inherits community trauma indirectly, through a culture of implication and silence. Throughout the novel, irrational evil guides actions that result in fatal outcomes. Moira, who had been in an abusive marriage, had believed her sons to be sons of the devil, Peter Tone supposedly was only an instrument and not the willful agent of Michael's mother's death. Michael himself was a traumatized boy who developed a broken sense of self as a consequence of the continuous cruel bullying by Malcom Kennedy. He was talked into hatching a plan to take revenge by an old woman, Mrs Collings, whom he befriended and who taught him how to defeat the bully: »You have to know how he thinks and what he knows and, most of all, what he wants. Because what he wants is where he is weak« (TDF, p. 54). The relation between Michael and Mrs Collings, as well as the death of Malcolm show distinct intertextual traces of James Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*: In Hogg's novel, Gil-Martin talks Robert into killing his half-brother George Colwan. George was stabbed in the back, and Michael had taken a long pole to push Malcom into a lime pit. As an adult, Michael, like Hogg's Justified Sinner, is emotionally detached, devoid of remorse or guilt. »We do what we cannot avoid doing«, he resumes, »as Moira did when she escaped from the Devil in Tom, taking the souls of her babies with her« (TDF, p. 56). And also like the Justified Sinner, Michael ends in a tragic double-bind: he is as unable to forget the past that haunts him as he is unable to face and overcome it. He enters into a relationship with Moira's teenage daughter whom he suspects to be his own. After the breakdown of his own marriage, Michael leaves Coldhaven, taking Hazel with him. It is only later that he realizes she had used him to elope with her boyfriend. After a couple of days on the road, Michael finds himself one morning without a car or money alone in the hotel room, in a state of limbo, just like the whole town of Coldhaven, which, as the narrator states at the beginning, is haunted by the ghosts of its past:

> In those days Coldhaven was much as it is now, a confused jumble of houses and gardens and cramped boatyards running down to the sea on tight, rain-coloured streets and narrow cobbled wynds, and the people of that time were ancestors of the neighbours I have lived with these past thirty odd-years: obdurate, seagoing folk with their own superstitions and terrors, their own logic, their own memories of sandbanks and tides and the treachery of water – and though their children's children have all but lost that kinship with the sea, a kinship part-love, part-dread, like any other, I allow myself to imagine that I know them, if only a little and from a considerable distance. It may well be pure fantasy, as rare as that is, but I imagine I can see, in their slow-witted, clannish descendants, the ghosts of those old seafarers, men who were obliged, on too many occasions, to find their way home in thick fog or pitiless storms, women whose gaze did not stop at the horizon but worked its way out into the beyond, to the banks and troughs they only knew from maps and shipping forecasts, transforming them into seers, oracles, harpies (TDF, p. 1).

The present inhabitants no longer go to sea and are dissociated from their origins. Hence their community bonds – values, knowledge, and traditions – were lost. They are struggling economically and thrive only on gossip. »Some people said« or other references to hearsay are an over-used formula by the narrator to describe a community that talks about one another but does not communicate with one another, or share common values and connections.

The novel's title relates to a phenomenon initially recorded in Devon in 1855: after heavy snowfall, trails of hoof-like marks had appeared which people read as the tracks of Satan. Burnside transports this folk legend into Coldhaven, where one evening »some cloven-footed thing« had come from the sea, walked through the town, »ascended their walls and crossed their high, crowstepped roofs [...] before it stole away into the fields beyond« (TDF, p. 2f.). Unlike in Hogg's novel, the devil has no ontological presence here, yet the legend functions as a powerful metaphor for the return of a long-dormant or repressed past and the power of evil. As a narrative device, the legend brackets the story: Michael Gardiner introduces it at the beginning as a well-known Coldhaven folktale, and at the end, after Hazel had taken his car and he had decided to walk back home. When returning to Coldhaven on a winter morning, he sees the footprints of the Devil in the snow. Footprints are not ghosts or apparitions: they are material traces, and the narrator takes care to describe them in detail:

> […] when I looked closely, I could see they weren't just random marks in the snow. There was detail to them, fine ridges, barely smudged in the new snow, like the tracks an animal leaves – a fox, or a cat, maybe. Yet they were too large for any animal that might pass this way, so close to the water, too large, probably, for any animal not in a zoo. I had slowed down, again, to study the prints; then I realized that whatever, or whoever, had made them had passed through only minutes before and, with that thought in my mind, with the notion I might catch sight of this mystery creature, I quickened my pace and went on […] (TDF, p. 201).

The creature, however, doesn't materialize, and the footprints remain the only empirical evidence. Twice the narrator confirms his conviction of the material world as the only one:

> […] there wasn't a separate world, there was only this: the air, the sky, the snow, these strange marks, the water, the odd gust of wind finding me as I followed the tracks to where they stopped, all of a sudden, at exactly the point where my path diverged from the road. Now, there was no other world; perhaps there had never been (ibid.).

The novel ends with a firm renunciation of all folkloristic elements such as ghosts or the Devil: the legend that was introduced at its beginning is now turned into experience.

Albeit the Devil has no ontological presence in the novel, he functions as a powerful metaphor for the evil force that enters the lives of the people of Coldhaven and destroys their community at a time when they became dissociated from their old lives:

> They were the Devil's own, they were his chosen. They knew, in their hearts, that the simpletons and scapegoats they tried and burned were nothing but unholy innocents. They knew, because they tasted the devil on their own lips, smelt him on their own hands. […] All they had to do was open their hearts (TDF, p. 203f.).

Timothy Baker has observed that particularly in Northern Gothic stories, the North is used to »foreground the instability of place, nation, and ultimately genre«.[16] The footprints of the Devil mark the borders of social life, representing what is excluded, dysfunctional or hidden. In conventional Gothic stories, the uncanny gains momentum through the contrast with familiar environments, and it can often be overcome through the power of family and community – a classic example for this would be Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. By making families and communities the centre of the uncanny in an isolated Northern setting, Burnside refuses to resolve the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the uncanny, so that, as the circular structure in *The Devil's Footprints* shows, there is no escape.[17] In this, he adds a new dimension to the common Scottish trope of the split psyche as explored by Hogg or Stevenson in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*,[18] or James Robertson's rewriting of Hogg's *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*: all these novels end with the death of the protagonist. Michael not only returns to Coldhaven but stays on, continuing to live in his parents' house, realizing that the evil is not arbitrary or dependent on man's actions but a part of »wide eternal patterns« (TDF, p. 200):

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[16] Baker, Timothy C.: Contemporary Scottish Gothic. Mourning, Authenticity, Tradition, London 2014, p. 148.

> I also belonged to those wide, eternal patterns, those laws that guided the birds and the tides and the weather that had brought me home: the pattern that, the law that kept everything in motion and the pattern that allowed it all to open a little, every hundred years or so, to let the Devil in (ibid.).

The last chapter is set a year later. Michael relates that he lives a solitary life and has taken up bird watching, like his father. On his rare visits to Coldhaven he sometimes encounters Tom Birnie, the widower of his ex-girlfriend Moira who had taken him for the Devil and, out of fear, killed herself and her two sons. »It turns out he wasn't the Devil after all; he was just a man«, Michael resumes, and concludes: »I never speak to him or give out any signal that I know who he is, but there are times when I want to take him out to the point and show him the birds« (TDF, p. 217). This looks like a seemingly peaceful ending, but in the light of the death of Tom's brother-in-law, Malcolm Kennedy, who had been lured by Michael into a fatal trap under the pretext of showing him a rare bird's nest, this last sentence has a sinister ring, alluding to an inescapable perpetuation of death and evil. Rather than still being the outsider of the Gothic Coldhaven community, Michael has become fully integrated, and recognized his belonging to those wide eternal patterns or sociological conditions that allow evil to happen.

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[17] Ibid., p. 152.

[18] Apart from these classic examples of the Scottish Gothic, Monica Germanà has identified more recent novels such as Muriel Spark's *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* (1960) and James Robertson's *The Testament of Gideon Mack* (2006), that deploy »psychological fragmentation and a concern with the location of evil«. Germanà: ›Ghost-filled‹ Islands, p. 251.

III. *Night Waking*

The plot of Sarah Moss' *Night Waking* connects two stories, one set in our contemporary present, the other in the 1870s. Anna Bennett, the homodiegetic narrator, is a historian, a research fellow at Oxford University writing her first book about the invention of childhood in late eighteenth-century Britain and struggling to synchronise motherhood and her academic career. Carol Margaret Davison has observed how the Female Gothic in its initial stages around 1800 »brought the Gothic to bear on women's vexed experiences of love and romance, and the multifaceted ideology of femininity, particularly the constraining roles advocated for women and the institutions of marriage and motherhood«.[19] In the twenty-first century, the challenge to participate actively in the public sphere as a professional woman is added to these constraints. With Anna's story, Moss draws extensively on the repertoire of the female Gothic tradition, such as anxieties about childbirth, motherhood, institutional and patriarchal oppression, and domestic confinement. Anna is married to Giles Cassingham, an English aristocrat, ornithologist, and heir to the deserted Scottish Hebridean island of Colsay. Anna and Giles have two sons: the eight-year old Raph, a boy obsessed with doom and catastrophic events, and Moth, their two-year old toddler whose sleeping difficulties put Anna under enormous stress. The couple had decided to leave Oxford and move into Giles' inherited manor house on Colsay, where he would conduct his research on puffins' habitats in the Hebrides, and Anna would write her book. They had also restored an old Highland blackhouse to rent out to tourists: their first guests are a couple with a troubled teenage daughter with an eating disorder. These sparse family details are connected with the brutal social history of the Scottish Highlands in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, namely the destruction of the old kinship-based clan-system and the shift in the agricultural industries to modern capitalism, resulting in the eviction of thousands of people during the Scottish agricultural revolution. As the old ways of small farms were becoming increasingly unprofitable, landlords frequently repurposed their lands for sheep farming and evicted their tenants to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the US. Many Scottish landowners who were in debt sold their lands to the English, who often had even less sensibility towards the needs of the Highland communities.

In Moss' novel, the history of the Highland Clearances is not just a historical backdrop but a Gothic device which functions as the return of the repressed past. This is represented as a gruesome discovery: planting a tree in the garden of the manor house, Anna and Raph discover the long-dead body of a baby. The police are called to investigate and Anna herself starts historical research on infanticide on the web and in the public library on the mainland. Her results add up to a shocking history of infanticide on the islands from the Neolithicum to the Twentieth Century.

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[19] Davison, Caroline M.: Gothic Literature 1764–1824, Cardiff 2009, p. 85f.

Whether it be compartments in Neolithic chambered tombs used for the disposal of unwanted children,[20] the careless treatment of foundlings in eighteenth-century London foundling hospitals resulting in a mortality rate of over 97 per cent (NW, p. 127), Victorian funeral clubs that provided burial funds to their members, thus enabling infanticide among the desperate poor (NW, p. 139) or infanticide carried out by unmarried girls (NW, p. 140): Anna's research proves that babies always are the most vulnerable members of society and most needful of protection by a community. If this community lacks the resources to provide for their youngest and weakest, they will not survive. Anna's investigation into the identity of the dead baby becomes the pivotal plot element through which the novel's main themes are connected: individual parental responsibility to nurture and ensure the well-being of one's children, the wider social responsibility of a landowner to care for the well-being of one's tenants, and patriarchal power and violence towards women, because, as it turns out later in the story, the dead baby's father had been a Cassingham. Anna learns from a history of the island that, during the famine years in the mid-nineteenth century, a forebear of her husband had raped young women on the island in exchange for rent relief.

Embedded in the contemporary story revolving around Anna is a second one from the 1870s in the form of a series of letters written by a young English midwife, May Moberley from Manchester. After having been sent by Giles' great-great-grandfather, Hugo Cassingham to the island to assist the women of Colsay after an unexplained steep rise in infant mortality, she reports about her experiences on the islands to her sister and friends. Hugo Cassingham is described as a new-made aristocrat, an English industrialist who had bought the island as a holiday retreat. He had threatened the islanders with eviction if they refused May's attendance during childbirth. The linguistically ill-equipped May – she has no Gaelic and nearly none of the islanders speak English – experiences a fatal clash between English modernity and Scottish tradition. The islanders regard May's presence as part of the interventionist schemes of their English landlord and refuse to cooperate. May eventually finds out that the births on the island are usually attended by an old ›knee-woman‹ and she soon suspects that the cause of infant mortality may be neonatal tetanus contracted through the umbilical cord as a result of the unhygienic circumstances during birth. She is told by a pregnant woman on Colsay that giving birth is a dangerous rite of passage, during which otherworldly beings often interfere, trying to snatch away the babies. May reports in a letter to Miss Emily, her friend and sister to Hugo Cassingham, that:

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[20] Moss, Sarah. Night Waking, London 2011, p.87. Cited in the text with the abbreviation NW and the page number.

> Neither mother or child may be left alone until after the infant is baptized, for the ›trows‹ or – but I may have misheard – the ›hildufolk‹ will cause the mother to die and exchange the baby for one of their own if they find them unguarded (apparently the hildufolk have particular need of young mothers to suckle both trow and changeling children). A ›trowie‹ child is hard to feed, cries incessantly, may have strange features or physical peculiarities and, if not returned to its natural parents, will usually die in the first year of life. […] Can it possibly be the case that, while we govern an empire on which the sun never sets and bring education and rational thinking to poor people from India to the New Zealand savages, there are still British subjects in fear of elves? But I suppose that as long as they live in the dark, unventilated stone huts and remain illiterate there are no depths of superstition that should surprise us, and truly, the conditions of life are distressing to observe (NW, p. 111f.).

May's horrified tone reflects imperialist assumptions and underscores the cultural divide between English medical rationality and Hebridean folk beliefs. »Childbirth«, as Anna, the historian later puts it, »had become the locus of the tension between modernity and tradition, between metropolitan and peripheral ways of understanding the world« (NW, p. 372). The hostile islanders refuse to accept the help of the English midwife, and the manor's housekeeper, complicit with the islanders, intercepts May's letters and hides them in the attic. When the next baby dies, they bury her in an unnamed grave so that Hugo Cassingham will not know about it and consequently have no reason to implement his threat. The mothers of Colsay, as May Moberley finds out, are part of a community facing such an existential threat that infant deaths do not only count little in their struggle for survival but are even welcomed because it means one mouth less to feed. However, motherhood and its function and responsibility for the community is negotiated not only in the embedded epistolary story: Anna's story partly mirrors that of the nineteenth-century mothers. Anna's own children threaten her sanity, and the narrative questions the romanticisation of motherhood. Ghosts of infant death haunt the present. The novel's title refers to Anna's situation as a mother of a toddler with sleeping difficulties. Moth wakes up frequently during the night and it takes a long time for Anna to put him back to sleep. The narrative organizes these interruptions of her sleep into subchapters called »Night Waking«, adding the respective time of night. During these times, Anna recalls how motherhood was in constant conflict with her career at Oxford and develops morbid and destructive night thoughts: »Must not touch him or I will put my hands round his neck and kill him. I cannot leave because I would never come back and I cannot stay because I am about to pick him up and ram his head into the wall until he stops making that intolerable noise« (NW, p. 49). Like any eighteenth-century Gothic-novel heroine Anna is entrapped within domestic, gendered spaces and the »fear that self-identity and autonomy are threatened, or that heretofore repressed, possibly dangerous aspects of the self and others may be allowed expression«.[21] Moss projects classic gothic tropes such as confinement and female madness onto her heroine: the island is remote and not serviced by public boats, and the ancestral mansion echoes patriarchal structures that keep her in the house with the children while her husband conducts his research outdoors.

Throughout the novel, the conditions of the nineteenth-century community on Colsay parallel the situation of Anna and her family. The hostility of the nineteenth-century Colsay community to May Moberly is mirrored by the hostility of contemporary islanders towards Anna and Giles as representatives of the Cassinghams – outsiders in regard to class and provenance. Another similarity is the scarcity of food, a problem for Anna and her family as it was then. The people of Colsay are, as May observes, »a people endemically hungry, endemically dirty, endemically sick, in which no one has reason or opportunity to improve« (NW, p. 70). The children in particular are described by May as unkempt and dirty, and Anna likewise depicts her sons as grown out of their often stained clothes. Because of their isolated situation on a deserted island, and because a trip to the mainland depends on the weather conditions, the family often runs out of food and Anna prepares strange culinary combinations:

> Giles's eyes widened at the sight of his plate but he said nothing, as befitted someone who came in late to find a meal on the table […].
> ›Anna, my love, was there any motive but desperation for this combination?‹
> I poked at the mound on my plate. It looked like the vomit of some bottom-feeding fish, only drier.
> ›Mummy‹, said Raph. ›Is this the nastiest thing you've ever given us?‹ (NW, p. 343f.)

This comic representation of a frugal, even nasty, meal not only underscores the isolation and vulnerability of the family. It also reflects the monotonous meals of the nineteenth-century island community whose main fare is sea birds. Birds are also the major Gothic element that connects both timelines. With perhaps a nod to Hitchcock, Moss introduces the trope of uncanny birds who scare Anna and her children: Every night, they hear strange noises in the attic they can't identify. When Giles takes a ladder and inspects the attic, he not only finds that the noise came from a bird trapped in the chimney. He also detects May Moberley's letters which disclose the whole history of the nineteenth-century Colsay community in which birds play a crucial role as harbingers of death: The seabirds turned out to be the cause of the babies' death, because the knives the women used to cut up the birds were also used to cut the umbilical cord, resulting in infant tetanus. The Colsay community is shown to be fated to become extinct: their adherence to superstition, their lack of resources and support results in early deaths or emigration. It is not without irony that the descendant of Hugh Cassingham is Giles the ornithologist, working on a seabird preservation project on an island where the human community could not survive.

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[21] C.M. Davison: Gothic Literature, p. 96.

IV. Conclusion

Night Waking and *The Devil's Footprints* explore the Gothic not as a mode of supernatural terror or transgression but as a structure of feeling that emerges from the interplay between individual alienation and the persistent oppressive weight of community memory. The Gothic does not erupt in these texts into spectacular horror. It remains latent, immanent within landscapes, histories, and mundane domestic routines. It is rural, embedded in everyday life, and political in its refusal to romanticise the communal. The uncanny emerges from the banal repetition of daily life, shaped by unspoken violence, buried memories and shared silences. Burnside and Moss use the format and tropes of the Gothic genre in order to point out how social errors of the past, a failure of social responsibility not only develop their destructive energy in the present life of a community but haunt its future. Their protagonists are trapped in networks of inherited memory, gendered obligation, and repressive continuity (Moss in particular emphasizes the structural parallels between her two narratives). The novels differ considerably, however, in their appraisal of how permanent and persistent this haunting turns out to be. In *Night Waking*, the unearthing of the dead baby – a metaphor for the conscious awareness of historical trauma – leads to a solution of both Anna's professional as well as familial conflicts: the haunting past is laid to rest through research of the historiographer. Not only does she uncover the cause for the baby's death, but she also uses it successfully as a historical case study in a job interview. Again, Moss closely follows the script of a Radcliffean Gothic romance in that Anna, like Emily St Aubert in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, unearthes »the tragic, mysterious repressed histories«[22] of the women of Colsay, thus achieving closure as well as professional and financial success. Burnside, in contrast, refuses to follow this logic of historical progression through vanquishing the past. His protagonist experiences the past »as mixed up, reversed, and is caught in a simultaneity of past-present-future«.[23] Against the power of the ghosts of the past that have undone the social fabric of communities, there is little one can do to put it together again. Certainly, telling stories is not enough to exorcise the ghosts of the past: as John Burnside suggests, the Devil's footprints are more enduring than we might wish to believe. *The Devil's Footprints* and *Night Waking* portray community as a site of haunting that results in the inability to envision or achieve transformative futures. In *The Devil's Footprints*, this appears as social inertia; in *Night Waking*, it is hinted at as the repetition of colonial and maternal histories. Hauntology enables a reading of these Gothic communities as critiques of cultural paralysis: spaces where the future is haunted by what might have been, and the past continues to return, unredeemed and unresolved.

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[22] Ibid., p. 101.

[23] Bruhm, Steven: »The contemporary Gothic: why we need it«, in: Jerrold E. Hogle (ed.): The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction, Cambridge 2002, pp. 259–276; here p. 267.