JAMES HOGG (1770–1835) was born in the Ettrick Valley in the Scottish Borders. When he was seven, his father, a sheep farmer, went bankrupt and Hogg left school hardly able to read; he could only shape letters “nearly an inch in length,” he wrote later in his autobiography. For many years, he worked as a cowherd and later as a shepherd. His mother, however, steeped him in ballads and folklore, and his grandfather was apparently the last man to talk with the fairies. Only in his twenties, when Hogg was exposed to books once more, did he begin to write, his first creations being “songs and ballads made up for the lassies to sing in chorus.” At forty, he set out for Edinburgh and, after starting the short-lived satirical magazine The Spy, he wrote poems and stories for Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner, first published in 1824, has long been considered his masterpiece.

MARGOT LIVESEY was born and grew up on the edge of the Scottish Highlands and now lives in the US. She is the author of a collection of stories and four novels: Homework, Criminals, The Missing World, and Eva Moves the Furniture.
THE PRIVATE MEMOIRS AND CONFESSIONS OF A JUSTIFIED SINNER

JAMES HOGG

Introduction by
MARGOT LIVESEY

Afterword by
ANDRÉ GIDE

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
Although it was published nearly two centuries ago in 1824, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* becomes only more piercingly relevant with each passing year. At first glance the novel may seem to portray a distant and eccentric cast of characters whose arguments about predestination—the justified sinner gains entry to heaven regardless of bad behavior—have little to offer the modern reader. But when we look more closely, putting aside the language and manners of eighteenth-century Scotland, we discover that James Hogg offers a compelling and subtle portrait of a human condition that, alas, we ignore at our peril: fanaticism.

Both the author and his work were phenomena. Hogg was born in 1770 in the Ettrick Valley in the Borders of Scotland. His father, a sheep farmer, seems to have been comfortably off at that time, but went bankrupt a few years later, in 1777. Hogg, who had been at school a scant six months, was forced to leave. In his autobiography he reports that he could barely read and write, though he had got “into the class that read the Bible,” and could make letters “nearly an inch in length.” From the age of eight Hogg worked in the fields, and for many years his education was neglected; his main reading at that time would have been the Bible and the Psalms, texts which he later put to good use. During his twenties, however, his fortunes began to improve when a relative of his mother, Mr. Laidlaw of Blackhouse Farm, employed him as a shepherd. The house had a good library and Hogg took vigorous
advantage of it. His reading spurred him to begin composing his own verses, which he initially must have done in his head, for he reports some difficulty in transcribing them.

Hogg is frequently compared to Scotland’s other great rural poet, Robert Burns, but such was his sheltered life that in fact he first heard of Burns only in 1797, a year after the poet’s death. A passerby found Hogg on a hillside and recited for him Burns’s splendid narrative poem “Tam o’Shanter,” which describes Tam’s drunken ride home and his narrow escape from a group of warlocks and witches he watches dancing in the graveyard at Kirk Alloway:

The wind blew as ‘twad blawn its last;
The rattling showers rose on the blast;
The speedy gleams the darkness swallow’d;
Loud, deep, and lang the thunder bellow’d:
That night, a child might understand,
The Deil had business on his hand.

Surely it is no accident that “Tam o’Shanter,” as Hogg’s finest works would later do, deals with the supernatural.

“Every day,” he wrote, “I pondered on the genius and fate of Burns. I wept and always thought with myself what is to hinder me from succeeding Burns?” Almost everything, would be the sensible answer. But luck once again favored Hogg. His employer’s son, William Laidlaw, was acquainted with Sir Walter Scott, who was at that time at work on his Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border. William brought his father’s shepherd to Scott’s attention and Hogg’s poetry gradually began to be published. Although Hogg could never truly be said to be Burns’s successor, he did achieve a level of fame and reputation such that when he died in 1835 no less a poet than William Wordsworth was to write an “Extempore Effusion” mourning the silence of “the mighty Minstrel.” One likes to think that Hogg would have been pleased by the
eminence of his relative, the contemporary Canadian writer Alice Munro, née Laidlaw.

In 1810, at the age of forty, Hogg set out for Edinburgh, determined, having failed at farming, to “push my fortunes as a literary man.” He had some success. Unabashed at being a newcomer to the city and its literary scene, he established his own weekly critical journal, *The Spy*, of which apparently he wrote most of the material himself. It folded after a year and no copies survive. He also became involved with the famous *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, both as a contributor and as the model for a character named the Ettrick Shepherd, who featured in a series of fictional conversations composed by its main writers. During the next decade he published a book-length poem, *The Queen’s Wake* (1813), and a series of novels, *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818), *The Three Perils of Man* (1822), and *The Three Perils of Woman* (1823), each of which to some degree concerns the supernatural. Then in 1823 a letter appeared in *Blackwood’s* under his name, describing the exhumation of a suicide’s grave; after nearly two hundred years the man’s clothes and body were almost perfectly preserved.

The letter, which does not give an exact location for the grave, was a canny piece of advance publicity and a wonderful example of metafiction. Hogg was simultaneously seeking to pave the way for the short novel he planned to publish the following year and to render its implausible events more credible by suggesting that, however farfetched, they had indeed occurred and somewhere not too far away. He went on to include the bulk of the letter in *A Justified Sinner*, and again ascribed it to James Hogg. “But, God knows!” says the “editor” who ostensibly presents us with the novel, “Hogg has imposed as ingenious lies on the public ere now.” The editor proceeds to seek him out and ask him to act as a guide to the grave, but Hogg refuses in broad Scots—a parody of the Ettrick Shepherd—citing his many agricultural duties.
The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner is often described as the great Scottish novel, both in its own right and by virtue of its tremendous influence on subsequent writers, including many who may never have turned its pages. Its basic plot is immediately powerful and memorable. A woman of strict religious views is married to a man of lax ones. From their first night together they are at loggerheads, and quite soon they divide the old mansion house between them, she occupying the upper story, he the lower ones. Nonetheless a son is born and goes on to be reared entirely by his father, Mr. Colwan, and his father’s housekeeper. Presently, the wife is delivered of a second boy whose paternity is more doubtful. Perhaps she and her religious adviser, Mr. Wringhim, have crossed over from zealous theological debate into another kind of ardor? The husband acknowledges the boy as his son but leaves him to be raised by his wife in an atmosphere of fervent religiosity.

The two brothers grow up quite separately and each responds to his different environment appropriately. George Colwan is a pleasant, normal young man, not particularly studious but openhanded and openhearted. Meanwhile his younger brother, Robert Wringhim (his mother’s adviser offers his protection as stepfather while still denying any role in his birth), is a very different kind of individual, an excellent scholar but so stern in his demeanor that his fellow pupils shrink from him. As young men, the two at last meet in Edinburgh. Robert persists in following George and in tormenting him while he plays first tennis, then cricket with his friends. Initially George has no idea of the identity of the peculiar young man dressed in black who keeps standing too close to the tennis court. “Does any of you know who the infernal puppy is?” he asks his cronies. “‘Do you not know, Sir?’ said one of the on-lookers, a stranger: ‘The gentleman is your own brother, Sir—Mr. Robert Wringhim Colwan!’” Robert’s pursuit of George is in many respects laughable, but
it ends in tragedy. George is killed in a midnight scuffle and at length, through the valiant efforts of Mr. Colwan’s housekeeper, the blame for his demise is pinned on Robert.

Such is the plot of the first half of the novel, which is presented to us as “The Editor’s Narrative.” Although the story is a gripping one, full of incident and drama, it has to be admitted that the editor’s style, especially in the early pages, is often dry, almost to the point of obscuring the excitement of the subject matter—perhaps indeed this was part of Hogg’s intention—but happily this fault is remedied later in the narrative; the prose grows increasingly fluent, vivid, and, in places, genuinely funny. Throughout the language is the plain, accessible Scots English that Robert Louis Stevenson too was later to employ. Only in the dialogue do we get the occasional example of Scottish dialect.

The second half of the novel retraces the same events from Robert’s point of view and purports to be his confession. Like his predecessors Daniel Defoe and Mary Shelley (Frankenstein was published in 1818), and his heir Stevenson, Hogg knew the value of documents in supporting an outlandish tale. He also makes cunning use throughout of historical detail—the novel is set in the early eighteenth century—and of actual personages who would have been familiar to many of his contemporary readers. Mr. Drummond, for instance, the young man initially blamed for George’s death, is based on the son of John Drummond, the controversial first earl of Melfort, who, like Hogg’s character, took up military service in Austria. Indeed, Hogg’s virtuosity in both writing and structuring A Justified Sinner was such that there was considerable debate as to whether he was really its author.

He has need of all his cunning, for as we turn the pages of Robert’s confession, it becomes apparent that this is not merely a retelling of Cain and Abel, although that would be quite enough, but a project of even greater scope and ambition. Mr. Wringhim has a gift for recognizing the elect, and
one morning he announces that, after much prayer, he has discovered that his stepson too is among the just made perfect. In a state of exaltation, Robert bounds away into the fields and woods, where he sees “a young man of a mysterious appearance coming towards” him. He does his best to avoid the stranger—this is no moment for idle conversation—but some invisible power draws him closer. “What was my astonishment, on perceiving that he was the same being as myself! The clothes were the same to the smallest item. The form was the same; the apparent age; the colour of the hair….” When he comes home from this first meeting his mother cries out in terror at the sight of him. “‘You are ill!’ cried she; ‘you are very ill, my dear boy; you are quite changed.’” And his stepfather agrees: “I could not have known you for the same person. Have you met with any accident?”

From this moment on Robert is seldom alone. His mysterious friend, whom he calls Gil-Martin, takes various forms: sometimes he is as like Robert as an identical twin; sometimes he resembles other people. And Robert’s own attitude to him seems to undergo many changes too, from fascination to repulsion; on one hilarious occasion he speculates that Gil-Martin is in fact Czar Peter of Russia, traveling incognito in Europe. But whatever his attitude, Robert falls increasingly under Gil-Martin’s thrall, and at every stage, as he sinks further and further into wrongdoing, he takes comfort from the fact that he is among the elect: no amount of sin can keep him out of heaven.

Hogg had long drawn on folklore and local superstitions in his work. Certainly many of his contemporary readers would have believed that the Devil still walked the earth, in more or less tangible form. But no such belief is necessary to read and appreciate the novel, for on all sides we have analogues for the Devil’s perambulations and examples of people who believe that the end justifies the means. How does one come to such a steadfast, unswerving conviction in the righteous-
ness of one’s own point of view? How does one reach a place where one rejects all evidence that contradicts one’s own beliefs? Religion has often been the guide on such journeys, and Hogg, in his scrupulous analysis of Calvinist extremism, offers a model for how an individual might, by virtue of both nature and nurture, leave the paths of normal tolerance and travel into the country of excess. What makes this all the more heart-rending in the case of Robert Wringhim are the many moments when he struggles to free himself from his malignant influences, when he recognizes that he is indeed behaving badly and has to be reminded that it’s all in a good cause.

_The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner_ is a dark book, but James Hogg himself seems to have remained unremittingly cheerful. “I never knew,” he wrote, “either man or woman who has been so universally happy as I have been; which has been partly owing to a good constitution, and partly from the conviction that a heavenly gift, conferring the powers of immortal song, was inherent in my soul.” Reading _A Justified Sinner_ is not likely to make most readers universally happy, but it is a book that will stay with you for many years and to which, until the world changes dramatically, you will have many opportunities to refer.

—Margot Livesey