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Confessions of a Justified Sinner captures the modern condition perfectly

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Valentina Bold



The Devil infiltrates the righteous – or does he? Untitled Projects



One of the highlights of this year's Edinburgh International Festival is undoubtedly a [new production of](#) Paul Bright's *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, which runs between August 19 and 22. In a year which is strong on Scottish literary adaptations (Alasdair Gray novel *Lanark* is also [being staged](#)), Paul Bright's *Confessions* is based on James Hogg's masterwork *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*.

First published anonymously in 1824, the *Confessions* is one of the defining texts of modern Scottish literature — and an outstanding novel within European traditions. Partly based on E T A Hoffman's [Die Elixiere des Teufels](#) (*The Devil's*

Elixirs) of 1815, Hogg explores the downward spiral of the unappealing Robert Wringhim, who comes to believe in the justness of all of his actions by virtue of being among God's saved. The novel plays with Calvinist concepts of predestination and ideas around free will — whether our actions, or God's plan, decide on our salvation and damnation.

If this sounds worthy but staid, the Confessions is in fact fast, dramatic, and shocking. Much of the action is focused around Wringhim's violent engagements with his somewhat more wholesome estranged brother, George Colwan. Wringhim's beliefs are fostered by his mother and her mentor and alleged lover, the Rev Wringhim; and enforced by his possibly imaginary "friend" Gil-Martin, who is part doppelganger and part Devil. Gil-Martin encourages Robert (perhaps) to commit ever more criminal acts – culminating in murder.

The only certainty in Hogg's vision is that evil is present within the outwardly civilised – and inwardly raucous – Scotland of the early 18th century. Glasgow emerges as a religious hotbed. Edinburgh, where much of the action takes place, is a seething, brawling city. In the semi-wilderness Edinburgh areas of [Arthur's Seat](#) and [Salisbury Crags](#), atmospheric effects enhance the visual qualities of this disturbing and unsettling text.

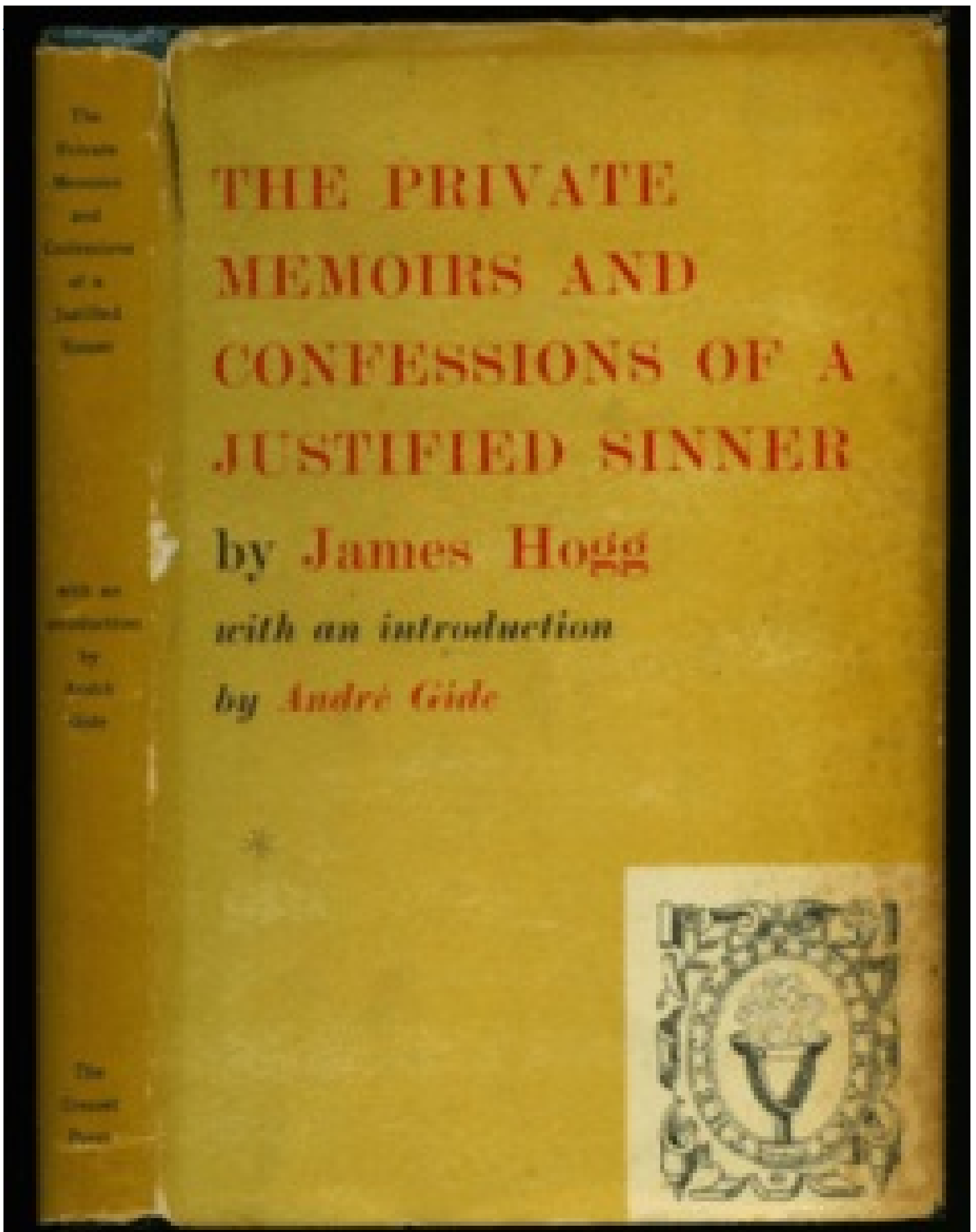
Yet the success of the novel is a modern phenomenon. The original reviews were mixed and half of the first edition was remaindered. It was only after World War II that Hogg's now-acknowledged masterpiece came into its critical own, when in 1947 French Nobel laureate [André Gide](#) provided a new introduction.

Gide had read the novel in Algiers in 1924, alongside John Stuart Mill's [Autobiography](#) and his utilitarian classic [On Liberty](#). Finding "a renewal of topical interest" in Mill, given the "menace of 'totalitarianism'", Gide was "voluptuously tormented" by Hogg's book. He admired Hogg's exploration of moral questions and his "ingenious" psychological portrayal of the Devil. He found it remarkable "that a civilized country existed at a relatively recent period ... where such an aberration of Faith was possible".

Confessions on the boards

Hogg's central theme of religious extremism has added resonance today, of course. Writing 60 years after Gide, the Scottish detective novelist Ian Rankin [admired](#) Hogg's treatment of the theme of the purification of apostasy, arguing this made the book enduringly relevant and resonant for modern audiences. Anchored in Scottish experience, Hogg's reflections on a distorted form of Calvinism make this a defining text of religious extremism, past and present.

Though there have been several adaptations of Confessions before, [Paul Bright's](#)



Confessions 1947 edition AbeBooks

ambiguities, while taking the story some distance from its original material. First developed in 2010 and performed in Scotland, Ireland and Sweden, The Guardian [listed it](#) as one of the top ten theatre productions in 2013, admiring its exploration of “the borderline between the real and the imagined”.

With apologies in advance for giving the game away slightly, theatregoers are treated to a pre-performance exhibition about Bright. He is [depicted as](#) a forgotten writer who “redefined Scottish theatre in the 1980s” by masterminding a series of experimental adaptations of the play in locations ranging from a Celtic pub to the summit of Arthur’s Seat. He is then said to have mysteriously disappeared until his death in 2010. When the performance begins, the lead actor picks up this tribute, only for it to become clear that this is actually part of the play itself.

Bright himself has left suspiciously few traces. A review of the 2013 production in the Telegraph [commented](#): “those of a suspicious nature – and some critics – might conclude that ... Paul Bright’s Confessions of a Justified Sinner is a witty and admirably elaborate hoax”, noting the audience is explicitly reminded acting is “lying and getting away with it”.



What is really going on? Untitled Projects

All this is wholly in the spirit of the original and adds a fresh interpretative layer to an already complex whole. Nothing is as it seems. The central story in Hogg’s novel is presented through two main versions: the alleged facts presented by a possibly unreliable editor, and the memoirs of Wringhim. These are combined with oral testimonies, a description of opening the suicide’s grave and the quoted statements of Gil-Martin. His ambiguous central statement – which can be read as a proclamation of salvation or damnation – is: “I have but one great aim in this world, and I never for a moment lose sight of it”.

Above all, Confessions is stunningly duplicitous. In my afterword to the [Merchiston Press edition](#) from 2009, I described reading the book as an almost interactive experience. The reader is required to make personal decisions about what has actually happened, and judgements on the reliability of the text and its narrators. Both Hogg's and the current Confessions are wholly based on cross-tellings, rumour, and half-rememberings. Perhaps it is this shifting nature that ultimately has an enduring appeal to modern audiences. We live in a world of propaganda, misinformation and multiple sources of information. From the distance of two centuries, Hogg's masterpiece captures our confusion and uncertainty perfectly.

[Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner](#) is at the Edinburgh Queen's Hall from August 19 to 22



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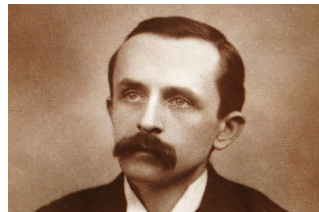
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