

Testimonies of the Rocks: the Hugh Miller Writing Competition 2015-16

Joint 3rd place in poetry

Michael Davenport: *Pterichthyodes milleri*

The Hugh Miller Writing Competition 2015-2016 invited entries inspired by the geological and landscape writings of Hugh Miller, Scotland's celebrated self-taught geologist. The competition was organised by the Scottish Geodiversity Forum, the Friends of Hugh Miller and many other partners.

Further details of the competition, and all the winning entries, are available at

www.scottishgeology.com/hughmiller/

We hope that this writing competition has encouraged a renewed interest in Miller's work, a catalogue of superb new writings inspired by one of Scotland's greatest nature writers and greater awareness and appreciation of Scotland's geodiversity.

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Pterichthyodes milleri

A specimen sits in glass-cased silence.
But I hear the clink, clink of his hammer and chisel,
clear like a stonechat in the morning air.
Miller, in his search for fossils,
*an explorer of ravines, loiterer along sea-shores,
climber among rocks, labourer in quarries.*

He splits a nodule to reveal the first example
of a 'winged-fish' from the Old Red Sandstone.
*I opened it with a single blow and there lay the effigy
of a creature, fashioned out of jet, two 'arms' articulated
at the shoulders, head lost in the trunk, long angular tail.*
Its armoured plates remind him of a turtle.

In *My Schools and Schoolmasters* he describes
his life in Cromarty, family history, education,
work as a stonemason, fascination with geology.
To Miller fossils were *Footprints of the Creator*
that he reproduced in detailed diagrams.
He believed in successive creations by the deity.

A Cromarty churchyard: cold echoes of his trade.
Miller carves the headstone of his child, Eliza.
The last time he ever put chisel on stone, his wife reported.
Years later, different reverberations:
alone at home he shoots himself.
Despair from religious doubt? Fear of brain disease?

The National Museum: *Beginnings, Life in the Mid-Devonian.*
A sandstone slab, small fish fossil secretive through rise and fall
of species, mass extinctions, the appearance of reptiles,
mammals, advent of *Homo sapiens* – until released by Miller.
I focus on the label *Pterichthyodes milleri* and see a symbiosis,
two existences confirmed by the power of naming.

Eons between the lives joined in this binomial.
I whisper *Pterichthyodes milleri*, a 'winged-fish'
swims in warm seas and Miller moves clear
of tragedies and struggles. He's part of a community
of discovery and the mystery of how, through transient beings,
the world begins to comprehend itself.