

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

2nd place in prose

Antonia Thomas – Written in stone: geology and graffiti in Orkney

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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Written in stone: geology and graffiti in Orkney

Orkney's story has always been written in stone. Underneath its rich soil lie thick layers of Devonian flagstone, laid down as sediments when the islands were submerged under Lake Orcadie millions of years ago. The ghosts of old sun-cracks and wave ripples are often visible in the strata, along with the fossilized remains of ancient fish: the *ichthyolites* of the famous Sandwick Fish Bed. These lake deposits helped form the rolling landscape of Orkney today; soft hills giving way to sea-cliffs, indented by deep *geos* along lithic flaws in the readily-fractured flagstone. Its properties have been exploited from the earliest times, quarried for walling stone and roof-slates from the Neolithic to the present day.

Old extraction scars punctuate the landscape. On the edge of the west coast just outside Stromness lie the remains of the Black Craig quarry, opened in the 1770s to satisfy the exploding population's demand for building stone. Slates were loaded straight onto boats and transported to customers throughout Scotland. Within 20 years, it was producing some 30-40,000 slates annually, and they were considered the best available. But this boom industry was not to last. By the early 19th century, they were not worthy of export, and in the Ordnance Survey map of the 1880s, the quarry lies unmarked. It was not, however, forgotten.

Known as an excellent site for ichthyolites from at least the 1830s, Professor T.S. Traill of Edinburgh University collected fossils from the area, corresponding with Louis Agassiz and sending him drawings and maps. Orkney's west coast was, Hugh Miller exclaimed, a "Land of Fish". At the height of the Black Craig's slate industry, Miller was still a quarrier, yet to discover the fossil fish that dominated his life. But in 1846, by now a renowned geologist, he travelled to Orkney to see the Old Red Sandstone and the fossil fish sandwiched in its ancient layers.

By the time of Miller's visit, the Black Craig quarry was no longer worked, its spoil tips explored by fossil hunters rather than stonemasons. No accounts survive of the men who once worked the slates. But in the *geo* just downslope of the quarry, where they would eat their lunch shielded from the wind, they left a different record. Whether

because the need to work stone was so ingrained in their daily life, or perhaps because they just had to make their mark, those quarrymen carved their names, and sometimes dates, on the geo's flagstone walls.

Those who visit the site today are surprised by the palimpsest. The soft flagstone is vulnerable to the elements and many of the earliest dates have been eroded, replaced by new inscriptions or suffocated by encroaching black lichen. A generation ago many more carvings dating from the late 18th century were visible; local names – *Mowat, Linklater, Cursiter, Budge* – mingling with less familiar ones. There are hundreds of names and dates now, ranging from the 1770s when the quarry was opened right up to the present day. Most, however, are from the mid to late 19th century: declarations of identity in a new age of literacy and leisure.

By that time, tourists had become a familiar sight along the west coast, fossil hunting amongst the spoil of the old quarry, carving their names and taking lunch in the sheltered geo. Promoted by writers such as Miller, geology had become an exciting and fashionable new hobby, whilst a generation of Victorians had grown up with the work of Walter Scott romanticising the Highlands and Islands to tourists. Scott had visited Orkney in 1814 on a six-week summer cruise with the Northern Lighthouse Board collecting folk-tales. Many were later integrated into *The Pirate* (1822), but one stands out in particular: the Dwarfie Stone. A massive block of *Old Red*, it is one of several in a remote valley at the north end of Hoy, but unlike the others, it has been hollowed out forming a small chamber. Presumed to be a Neolithic tomb, it was immortalised in *The Pirate* as the home of the dwarf, Trollid.

A generation later, during his own summer cruise to Orkney, Hugh Miller visited the infamous Dwarfie Stone. With his stonemason's eye he found a 'compact' stone that he estimated he could carve out to order in a matter of weeks. But as was often the case with Miller, what intrigued him was not just its geological properties, but the *human* story it told. Inside the tomb he found numerous graffiti, including the inscriptions of *H. Ross 1735*, and *P. Folster 1830*. And just as quarrymen and tourists had felt compelled to do in the geo below Black Craig, Miller also felt moved to leave his mark:

'The rain still pattered heavily overhead; and with my geological chisel and hammer I did, to beguile the time, what I very rarely do,—added my name to the others...which, if both they and the Dwarfie Stone get but fair play, will be distinctly legible two centuries hence. In what state will the world then exist, or what sort of ideas will fill the head of the man who, when the rock has well-nigh yielded up its charge, will decipher the name for the last time, and inquire, mayhap, regarding the individual whom it now designates, as I did this morning, when I asked, "Who was this H. Ross, and who this P. Folster?"'

His words were rendered all the more poignant by their posthumous publication. On Christmas Day 1856, Hugh Miller shot himself dead. But the legacy of his writing engaged an entire generation, contributing to the new era of popular science which would come to define the 19th century. His story too had been written in stone: firstly as a quarryman, latterly as a geologist. It is fitting that his name lives on in Orkney, 'distinctly legible two centuries hence', written into the very fabric of the Devonian sandstone that defined his work and life.

ⁱ *The Cruise of the Betsey, p.514*