

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

Highly commended in prose

Mary Ann Kennedy: Caolas (Narrows)

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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CAOLAS

Meòrachadh air Caolas na Linne Duibhe, dòchas-siubhail, agus cothroman an taobh thall. No bhos.

(Chaidh an aiste seo a sgrìobhadh bho thùs anns a' Ghàidhlig, agus tha i air a tabhann mar thagraidh Ghàidhlig. Tha eadar-theangachadh Beurla gu h-ìosal.)

Sheas mi.

Sheas mi air bruaichean na linne, a' coimhead a-null gu dùthaich nach b' aithne dhomh, ach san dol-seachad. An dol-seachad, gach bliadhna, gach turas a bhiomaid a' deanamh air an Eilean. Air tighinn tarsainn Loch Lìobhann 's na carbadan a' cur nan caran ann am bhalsa na h-aiseige bige sin. A' leantainn oirnn gu tuath. Mise an còmhnaidh a' gabhail iongnadh bhon chùl: saoil dè an t-àite mìorbhaileach, annasach a bha seo? Nach faigheamaid uair sam bith cead a dhol a-null?

Air còrsachan mòr-thìre, a' coimhead a-null a Chanada às an Roinn Eòrpa, sheas mi air laimrig Telford ri faire a-null dhan eaglais bhig a thog e fhèin le trannsa beag na dhìon an aghaidh sìde nan seachd sian. Cridhe mòr aig an duine, a' cuimhneachadh air na daoine fiù 's am-measg innleachd slighe ùr a' Ghlinne. An cothrom, mu dheireadh thall, faighinn tarsainn na Linne Duibhe, fìrd na h-Alba, an Cuan Siar fhèin. An sgoltadh mòr, bho Shualbard Nirrbheach, a' gearradh na Gàidhealtachd na dà leth, agus às an sin, a-mach dhan chuan àrd.

Ghabh mi orm.

Chaidh mi air bòrd a' bhàt-aiseig, a bheireadh à Loch Abar Iarach mi don dùthaich ùir, tarsainn caolais chumhaing, le sruth is làn a' sìor-strì an aghaidh a' chèile. A' togail rubhachan gnìobach de dh'uisge air taobh-sàil na laimrige; cumhachd gaoithe is a' ghealaich a' diùltadh gèilleidh.

Caolas a ghiùlainn dròbhairean, reubairean, croitearan, uachdairean, sgoilearan, ceòladairean. Fir is mnathan, clann, muinntir a' chinne-daonna. Aiseag ghoirid le eachdraidh fhada. Sgiobair a' crochadh bho ràmhann fhèin, mar leasan ann an dìlseachd bhon teaghlach aig a bheil fhathast, air èiginn, greim air an fhearann. Loch Iall 's Àrd Ghobhar a' ceannach fearainn bho chèile, gus cas air gach taobh fa leth a bhith aig an dithis. Ceòl, ceòl air gach taobh, aig Mac an Tòisich is Mac Rath is eile, sna taighean-seinnse, beò le muinntir an àite. Aon thaigh air fhàgail a-nise. "A' tae wan side, like Gourock".

Chaidh mi a-null.

Cha b' ann gur rithist a thuig mi na trì mionaidean sin a bhi nan triall-farraige, bho sheann chreagan Eòrpach gu fìor chreagan àrsaidh Ameirigea. An dà thìr mhòir air am brùthadh ri guailibh a-chèile, gus gleann a dhèanamh de chuan. Air a bhith air taobh thall a' chaolais, taobh na Morbhairne, taobh Àrd nam Murchan. Bha mi, a-nis, air an tìr eile. Na h-eilthirich a chaidh às an seo, a-null thar chuain; bha iad fhathast air an aon thalamh. Chan iongnadh gun do mhair an ceangal.

Bheachdaich mi.

Bha mi 'an dràst' an àit' ùr'. Àite far am faodadh uallach fhàgail as mo dhèidh, gadaraich na beatha làitheil', cunntasan, argamaidean, laigsean, mì-chinnt.

An uair a thuig mi an t-astar, a bha mi air siubhal, rinn e ciall. Carson nach biodh cead ann, a-nise, dèanamh air àras na h-oighreachd, far an robh àiteach is cruthachadh de sheòrsa eile, a-nise, a' dol. Fuinn, ceòl, guthan, no gàire? Bha mi air tighinn dhachaigh - nan robh fios agam air an uairsin. Bha mi air siubhal thall thairis – trì mionaidean, leth-mhìle – is air ruigheachd cladaichean ceanalta.

Thuig mi.

Aig a' chaolas seo, bha air 'ais 's air adhart' de sheòrsa eile a' dol. Clò ùr ga fhighhe: aodach lùbte gach pasgadh creige; reibhleas nam beanntan len snuadh sneachda. Sròl dubh-dhorcha na Linne, le doimhneachd a' ruigheachd cho fada sìos 's a bha na stùcan ag èirigh.

Ach 's iad sin snàth-cuir an spàil.

'S iad clann nan daoine an snàth dlùtha. 'S ann acasan, mar ghiuthais Albannach nan gleanntan beaga air a' chladach a-tuath, acasan a tha na freumhan a' gròbhadh sìos, sìos dhan ùir, dhan chreig, dhan domhan fhèin. Sliochd nan iomadh ginealach, no meanglan ùr air a phòsadh ri stoc-freumach nan linn-tean. 'S ann acasan a tha na sùilean, a' coimhead a-mach bhuapa, thar nead an dòbhrain, raon-cluiche na peileige, àit-eòlais na ròin. Às an sin gu h-àrd, ag amharc gach eun air ite; corra-ghrithreach, lach fiadhaich, clamhan, iolaire. A' leigeil le macmeanmna dèanamh air sgèith, suas dha na speuran, gu iarmailt fhosgailte saorsa, dòchais, is na dh'fhaodadh a bhith. Bho na creagan shìos gu na speuran shuas; à cridhe na cruinne, gu taobh thall tuigse.

Bha mi aig ceann-uidhe. Chuir mi umam an t-aodach seo.

Thòisich mi air òran ùr.

An Gearastan gu Glaschu – Am Màrt 2016

CAOLAS (NARROWS)

A meditation on the Corran Narrows, travelling in hope, and the possibilities of the far side. Or this one.

(This was written originally in Gaelic, and is intended as a Gaelic-language submission. An English translation is also given below.)

I stood there.

I stood on the banks of the loch, looking over to an unknown country, unfamiliar except in passing. Passing, each year, each time we would be headed for the Island, having crossed over Loch Leven with the cars birling the ferry waltz there, maintaining our northerly course. Me in the back, always wondering what this strange and exotic place might be, that we never had permission to cross over?

On the shores of a continent, looking over from Europe to Canada. I stood on Telford's slipway, looking over to the little church he built, with its bespoke porch a shelter from the elements: a compassionate man who remembered ordinary folk even amongst the lofty demands of a new route through the Glen. A chance at last to cross over Loch Linnhe - the Black Water, Scottish fjord, the Atlantic itself. The great slash from Svalbard, slicing the Highlands in two, and from there out into the high seas.

I carried on.

I boarded the ferry that would bear me from Nether Lochaber to this new country – across a narrow stretch where tide and current battled restlessly, raising great headlands of water on the salt-side of the slipway, the power of wind and moon refusing to yield.

A crossing bearing drovers, reivers, crofters, landowners, scholars, singers – men and women, children, all humanity. A short crossing with a long story. A ferryman hung from his own oars as a lesson in loyalty from the family who still now, though barely, retain their hold on the land. Locheil and MacLean exchanging parcels of land to allow each a foothold astride the loch. Music, music on either side, from Mackintoshes, MacRaes and the rest, and the change-houses alive with locals. Just the one hostelry left now. "A' tae wan side, like Gourrock."

I crossed over.

It was only later that I understood the three-minute journey for the sea-pilgrimage it truly was, from the old rocks of Europe to the ancient ones of America. The two continents pressed shoulder-to-shoulder, making a glen of an ocean. Standing now on the other side of the narrows, the Morvern - the Ardnamurchan side, I was now in another land. The emigrants from here, who headed overseas? They were still standing on familiar ground – small wonder the connection did not fail.

I contemplated.

I was 'now in a new place', to quote the song. A place where one might leave behind worry, the detritus of daily life, bills, arguments, frailties, insecurity.

When I understood the distance I had travelled, it made sense. Why not now make for the Home Farm, home now to another kind of husbandry and creation: melody, music, voices, laughter? I had

come home, did I but know it then. I had journeyed abroad – three minutes, a half-mile – and reached home.

I understood.

At these narrows, there was a criss-crossing of a different kind going on – a new cloth being woven: folded layers of rock-cloth, mountain ruffles, lacy with snow, the impenetrable silken darkness of the loch reaching as far down as the peaks rose upwards. .

But they are the product of the shuttle.

Humankind the warp-threads. Theirs – like the Scots Pine that grow in the north shore's little glens – theirs are the roots that work their way down, down into the earth, the rock, creation itself, the descendants of infinite generations or new graft on centuries' rootstock. Theirs the eyes gazing out over otter's holt, porpoise's playground, familiar territory of seal; and from there upwards, observing each bird on the wing – heron, wild duck, buzzard, eagle, up into the skies to the wide-open heavens of freedom, hope and what might be. From the rocks below to the skies above – from the heart of the world to the far side of understanding.

I was at my destination. I put on this clothing.

And I began a new song.

Fort William to Glasgow – March 2016