

The Hugh Miller Writing Competition 2019-2020

Fiction Winner

Cinder Toffee: Vee Walker

The Hugh Miller Writing Competition carries the name of one of Scotland's most endearing geologists, Hugh Miller (1802-1856), and aims to honour his legacy by inspiring new, original prose and poetry on the theme of Scotland's geoheritage. The competition is organised by the Scottish Geodiversity Forum and The Friends of Hugh Miller.

Further details of the competition, and all the winning entries, are available at www.scottishgeology.com/hughmiller/

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Cinder Toffee

by Vee Walker

‘Well, he is not going to be happy with us, John.’ The speaker, a broad-faced, tweed-clad and generously-rumped male, did not sound altogether sorry.

The wall clock in the echoing stone hall chimed the hour. The two geologists sat awkwardly on a pair of wooden chairs rather too small for their bulk. Both had removed their deerstalkers, kneading them between hardened palms tattooed with grit from a lifetime’s work. Their draft report, all 800-odd pages of it, and the precious box of samples, took up a third spindly chair between them. Although neither realised the other was imitating his own actions, each would in turn lay a hand on the reassuring substance of their findings.

Several months before, Professor Archibald Geikie, no less, had requested their presence, there at his office at the British Geological Society (Edinburgh Branch). He had peered at them over gold-rimmed spectacles, his fingertips drumming on the gold-embossed leather of his rosewood desk. He had then proceeded to fulminate against any upstarts who dared question the clear and the logical and indeed, the *natural* order of things geological.

‘Geology is formed of layers, gentlemen!’ he had spat. ‘Immense layers which form over the course of aeons, but which, logic dictates, must follow the chronological settlement of all creation. What is geology save one sedimentary layer formed on top of another since the time of the Flood, as Murchison has pointed out?’

The younger of the two listeners unwisely cleared his throat to interject. ‘But... *Lapworth*?’

‘Lapworth! Pah! Oddities abound in nature. Only the gullible seek to use them as evidence for heresy. Young Lapworth is merely spouting his false idol, Nicol. Utter *bunkum!*’ John had found himself nodding like a puppet. This was more down to the sheer force of The Great Man’s presence than true assent.

Ben instead chose to hold his tongue and pretend to be taking notes. John could see he was instead sketching a fair caricature of Professor Geikie seated atop an erupting volcano.

‘You do not share The Great Man’s views then, Ben?’ John asked him, as they traipsed with considerable relief down the staircase towards the damp, grey Edinburgh air.

Ben had shrugged. ‘Not that long ago, all Darwin’s theorising about fish growing paws and clawing their way out of the mud was considered the ravings of a lunatic, remember?’

John nodded, thoughtfully. Things were changing fast. Geological theories were being embraced which would have been unthinkable only a year or two earlier. ‘You heard what Geikie asked of us, though?’

‘A Great Man he may be, but his pompous manner will be his undoing,’ muttered Ben. Once out on the Caithness flag pavement, he grinned at John from under his umbrella. ‘If I have learned one thing from my life in science thus far, it is that utter certainty of any scientific fact can be a dangerous thing,’ was all he chose to add.

John understood the unspoken criticism. For upstairs, Professor Archibald Geikie, puce with professional ire, had all but ordered the two geologists to go and prove he and his mentor Roderick Murchison to be in the right.

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Six months had passed since that last encounter with The Great Man. He had penned several increasingly terse letters enquiring as to their progress, the last of which reminded them who was funding their expedition, which they had felt it best to ignore.

They sat in silence, listening uncomfortably to the faintly audible upbraiding of some poor soul in Geikie's office. Eventually John shook his head and snorted, 'Oh, to be on the road up from Ullapool instead, eh Ben?' His companion nodded. Neither was in his natural habitat, there in that heartless and heatless vestibule. They belonged among rough heather and steep hillsides with only each other, and an occasional golden eagle, for companionship.

'D'ye recall that day?' Ben continued. 'We'd paused to catch our breath. Munching our meat-paste sandwiches without much enthusiasm.'

'Lord, yes! The ones made by our landlady in Cròic a Chnocain.'

'That drab little croft overlooking the burial ground.'

'We slept on heather mattresses.'

'Itchy!'

'Very.'

'Those sandwiches. Just *awful*,' reflected John, shifting his own not inconsiderable weight from one buttock to the other, making the chair beneath him groan. 'The same *every* blessed day.'

'The only lodgings to be had near to the Crag, though.'

'A kindly enough old thing.'

'No English, only the Gaelic.'

'*Fìor fhìor!* No packed lunch on the Sabbath, remember?'

'Ah, but that extraordinary sweet stuff she made...'

'Wrapped in brown paper.'

'Quite delicious, wasn't it? Made up for everything else.'

'Indeed.'

Transported back there by their shared memory, the two men could once more feel the clean air and rain on their faces and hear the rattle of a ptarmigan from high on the slopes above the unassuming crag. *Lochan an Ais* lay spread below them, its grey, rain-pitted surface broken only by a lone great northern diver, its plumage sleek and oily in the downpour. *Cul Mor* soared beyond, her face veiled in heavy mist.

'A bitty dreich, as they say hereabouts.' John's canvas specimen bags were already grown dark and heavy with rain.

‘Indeed. But see how the wet brings out the fine patterns in the rocks.’ The younger man glanced at the speaker with considerable affection. How many times had he heard Ben bring out this phrase as mitigation for the most atrocious West Highland weather? Even though they did not always see eye to eye – far from it in fact – he knew the debt he owed his old friend. He, John, had the technical skills: could sketch accurately, write plentiful notes and find a perfect turn of phrase to describe a specimen; but it was Ben who had the *eye*. It showed in his paintings of the hills.

That morning the crag had shimmered in the bright light caught between two storms, every available rock surface wet. As he stared upwards, Ben’s head had inclined slightly to one side in a thoughtful manner which John had come both to anticipate and, occasionally, dread. ‘Up yonder today, I reckon. Perhaps we may reach the base of the cliff before we drown, laddie, eh?’ John was no longer a laddie by two decades or more. Ben had been teasing him about his comparative youth for as long as he could recall: sometimes he rose to the bait; today, he chose not to.

They worked methodically as usual, measuring, pacing, at times with the whole drenched hillside between them; at others, hunched head-to-head over a specimen, magnifying glass in hand. They spoke only in geological labels at such times:

‘Pipe rock. Perfectly clear, look there, and more here.’

‘Yes. Durness limestone too.’

‘Fucoid beds, Salterella Grits. Only what one might expect, dash it.’

‘Yes, yes, the correct sequence. And yet...’ John searched for words which would capture the nature of these oddly compressed sediments.

They had spent months now working slowly around several other crumbling cliffs in the area. In fair weather and foul, they were up and out just after dawn, providing a generous food source for midges and the occasional tick, nourished daily by hip flasks of whisky, dubious sandwiches and sublime confectionery. Sometimes, of course, they would quarrel over their findings. At such moments Ben would stamp off up to a high place to paint, while John would find a cleft out of the wind and tuck himself into it to read. John’s copy of *The Old Red Sandstone* was now weather-beaten and grubby. Hugh Miller’s ability to express joy in both nature and science always lifted John’s spirits, even though he was saddened by how the author’s fervent religious beliefs had formed an insurmountable obstacle to his thinking on evolution. Miller’s tragic early demise had robbed them all of a powerful and expressive mind.

When Ben and John came together once more, they would never speak of their argument; merely picking up where they had left off. In pencil, in dozens of notebooks, the two men meticulously recorded their still-inconclusive findings. What they *had* found was a curious mix. Perhaps it was due to glaciation, this odd jumble of layers, they had thought at first. Freezing and thawing can crack and shatter rock. And yet each of them knew in the depths of his soul that the answer did *not* lie in a glacial event of mere thousands of years ago.

They had paused that day to eat their dismal ‘pieces’, rendered even less palatable by the steady rainfall. ‘John, I must be getting old,’ sighed Ben. ‘I can feel the damp gnawing at my bones.’ For a fleeting moment John wondered if Ben were suggesting they call a halt, which would be a rarity. No such thing. ‘I need to warm up,’ Ben declared, tossing aside his stale crusts. ‘Let us ascend fast to the foot of the crag instead.’ With that he was up and off, leaving John to pack up the morning’s specimens and plod up the zig-zagging cragside deer track ten minutes or so later.

Ben's cry rent the still air. 'Here! John, hurry! This is *it!*'

John had no need to ask what *it* meant. *It* was their Holy Grail, the conclusive proof – or disproof – they had been instructed to seek.

John dropped the bags to scramble recklessly straight up, the flaky scree slipping beneath his feet. Ben was on his knees at the foot of the crag, as though at prayer. 'At last, John. See there. And there? Clearly Pre-Cambrian, yes? Schists, great sparkling layers of them. And all so *altered.*'

John joined him in worship at the shrine, impervious to the wet soaking through his plus-fours. He touched the pale gold outcrop with disbelieving fingertips. 'Good heavens. This must be *vastly* more ancient than the Cambrian layers we recorded below!'

'Indeed. Something has thrust the very burning bowels of the earth upwards here, to raise them to the surface. Ye Gods, what mighty force can have brought this about?' demanded Ben. He was pale now, shaking. John rummaged in his pocket and drew out the small and soggy brown paper packet. 'It's quite a shock, Ben,' he said. 'Eat some.'

Instead Ben held a piece of cinder toffee up against the hot-yellow, cold-bubbled rock before them. 'John,' he said unsteadily. 'How does she *make* this stuff?'

Puzzled, John replied, 'Well. In a great iron pot. Brown sugar. Then...'. Light dawned. 'Then, she must superheat it. Mixes in something else to change its nature?'

Ben nodded. 'Yes. Bicarbonate of soda, probably. The mixture would surge upwards as a scalding, foaming mass, quite altered.'

'Then she must pull it from the fire and tip it out on to a tin tray to cool.'

'And when it is hard?' asked Ben softly.

'She asks to borrow a hammer.' They said the words together, laughing.

'Bang! Bang! Bang! Elemental powers. Pressure, heat. We have been seeing the rocks as too *fixed*, John.'

'Exactly. Given sufficient force they can be changed, turned topsy-turvy. This proves it!' said John, already pulling out his notebook. Then he paused. 'Oh. The Professor. And *Lapworth.*'

'Yes,' said Ben. 'Quite. But we must tell neither. Not yet.'

Thrilled, almost fearful, they fell on the rain-sticky toffee with the appetites of men half-starved.

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'Get out, you shambolic fool! *Out!*' A junior geologist fled the Great Man's office without acknowledging their seated presence. After a short interval a pale and tearful young clerk beckoned them inside. John smilingly refused her offer of help. He cradled their report to his chest as Ben hefted the box, its small yet irrefutable samples from Knockan Crag cushioned within.

'Ah, good-day to you both, gentlemen,' boomed Professor Geikie. He did not rise, nor offer any apology for having kept them waiting. 'So?'

It was then that Ben Peach caught the widened eye of John Horne and, albeit fleetingly, winked.