

The Hugh Miller Writing Competition 2019-2020

Prose Highly Commended Pilgrimages of Wonder: Rhona Steel

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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Pilgrimages of Wonder

By Rhona Steel

1950s - Dad. He is on shift at the Scourie hotel in the morning, but the long summer days will give him plenty time for a stravaig en route. The car drops down past Eddrachilles and begins its slow ascent to Upper Badcall. A Bedford 16-seater bus is rumbling in low gears on its way south, so he pulls in to the passing place to let it past, two toots of the horn and waves from the driver and passengers alike. He scans Loch an Daimh Mor, sees fish nosing, chooses left and the car bounces along the untarred road and through a gate. A fine view of the bay to the south, a fishing boat hauling a wake of gulls, the diesel engine booms low and heavy off the hills. To the south, the mountains of Assynt are lined up, chessmen waiting for a divine hand. He remembers the musky book at the hotel that described the Moine Thrust and tectonics, older rocks lying on younger ones, and marvels at the great minds that made such discoveries in the centuries when religious belief lay at the soul of it all and time was deeper than he can fathom even now.

The front of high pressure from the east has lasted over a week now and it looks settled for the weekend. Perfect for exploring God's own country, he laughs aloud at the expression. He parks the car near the gnarly oaks that have been spared the sheep, walks past the last croft house with its collie dogs that nip the heels.

South east, through crofters' land, he lifts back into place the rusting bedstead that serves as a gate. He heads over crisp heather, following winding sheep tracks to the coast and this intriguing rock he has visited before. A lick of pink some 70 feet wide and 250 feet long spills down to the sea. It is hard and coarse to the touch and harder to understand. Studded with a profusion of greys and reds, swirls of whites, rusts and reds on a dark background. Beauty too perfect, too complex to understand without study. He takes solace that here, among these patterns of rock, the sun glinting on sea, the warm wind at his back, the salt tantalising his senses, that he is closest to the marvels of the universe.

1970s - childhood. The tarpaulin covering the bags on the roof rack flaps in the wind, dislodged during the last ferry trip aboard the roll on roll off at Kylesku. The car rolls along, the family singing 'She'll be coming round the mountain' as a bright flash of post van trundles south, the postie tooting a thank you to us for pulling in at the passing place. 'How far is it now?' she asks, unsticking her legs from the hot plastic seats and trying not to need a pee. 'Just round the next corner,' the family choruses the party line. But this time, it is the last corner. She looks across Loch an Daimh Mor, spots an owl on a stone that flies off as they swing around the corner and head up over the cattle grid to the house at Upper Badcall. It's late, past tea-time, but the summer light makes it feel like lunchtime. Her brother slips on sharn in his excitement to be first to the house, to shoo the sheep invaders from the garden. They all make fun of his trousers, smeared with the fowl smelling stuff.

The Glasgow trade holidays: two glorious weeks of freedom and discovery. The first days are rainy, so dad teaches them to draw and they become adept in setting in

perspective the ruined barn and fir tree against the back drop of the bay with its fishing boats and islands. The wind howls up from the bay, but soon turns to the east, bringing high pressure to last

the rest of the holidays with sweet smells of heather and peat. With each day's adventures, there is an underlying tale being told.

We picnic on the beaches, sand mixing with sandwiches, squinting at dad as he guides us through rocks with names you can eat. Pudding stone, all lumpy and round, studied with multicoloured fruits. Gneiss shot through with black bands of liquorice. As my sister the ghost hunter peers into weathered caves, I try tasting the black rocks for that sweet tangy taste, a childish mind missing the value of metaphor. We plead to be allowed into the Scourie village shop for 'Fruit Salad' and 'Black Jack' sweeties in exchange for our holiday pennies.

And one evening after tea, there's a lightness in the house and it is still warm enough for mum to suggest a walk. We wander with the dog along the road, past the windswept gnarly oaks, the goats with their devilish horns, and the collie dogs that nip the heels. Crossing over croft land, pulling open and closed wooden gates and bedsteads, we wander towards the sea and I do not know who spots it first. Mum starts making barking noises that make us writhe with laughter, but the seal calls back. So begins this magical moment where time slows, sitting on a large band of pink rock which dad says is amongst the oldest on the planet and mum communing with a seal. Every time we think it has ducked and disappeared for good, she calls again and it resurfaces.

Now - you and I. You power down past the turn off to the Eddrachilles Hotel and fly up the hill, down through the gears in a racing change and up to the turn off to Upper Badcall. A fish lorry with Spanish plates thunders past on the road south, a full cargo from 'Bervie heading to the continent. You indicate left and scan Loch an Daimh Mor: I remember the rock with the owl. Around the corner, past the borrow pit, over the cattle grid, you pull in at the house, which my friend is renting, left the keys under the rock for us. A cat is on the window sill, unfaithful to its home a mile up the road. A grand view of the mountains of Assynt to the south, lunar shadows cast by strong sunshine against blue skies. Perhaps in your mind, these are subterranean beasts, diving and surfacing? In the bay below, a fish farm rib is heading back to shore, carving a wake, the outboard echoing off the hills.

I tell you dad had a summer job, working for a hotel and transport company, exporting fish to the London restaurants, until a lorry went skewwhiff at Scotch Corner, silver scales, fins and tails on the tarmac carriageways. An artistic study in fossils.

The high-pressure front is about to break, the wind has swung back to the south. Walking past the gnarly oaks, then following a path over croft land, man-made dykes travel in veins across the land, at times abutting the arteries of natural ones. You come upon one such dyke of quartz-dolerite, you say, sinking a low channel among the harder gneiss. Upon its last reaches, scrambling on the lichen covered rock, a dragon fly's wing nestles in a crevice. You've learned from a ranger on your child's

school outing that some species live for but a day. Hatch, mature, mate and die all in a spin of the earth. There's a rock pool, big enough to immerse yourself in. Looking past your reflection on the surface, you make out a universe of anemones, kelp, a star fish, waiting for high tide. Nearer the coast, that band of pink rock, nearly as old as the earth. We wonder at what that means.

We still rely on metaphors to understand: if the rock metaphors speak of food on the table, the formations describe the arrival of unwanted dinner guests: intrusion, swarm, thrust. To the north, the new roadbuilders have made a grand job of the cutaway. Drilled and blasted until a slice of earth tells its story to the inquisitive, on their North Coast 500 adventures. The raw land reveals light muscovite and quartz against dark hornblende and biotite: a recipe for liquorice for all to see.

Turning east at Laxford, named by the Norse after the salmon that were plentiful there even in my childhood. You fancy climbing Arkle, and at the top we find pipe rock, fossilised burrowing creatures from the Lapetus sea, they reckon. And here we sit, with the distant booming of the bombs on Cape Wrath, wondering at it all.

The future. And when we are gone or too old to make our pilgrimages north to wonder at the land, our days but a dragon fly's life, there will again be discoveries so that those who look back at land, time and creation can marvel at the unfathomable.