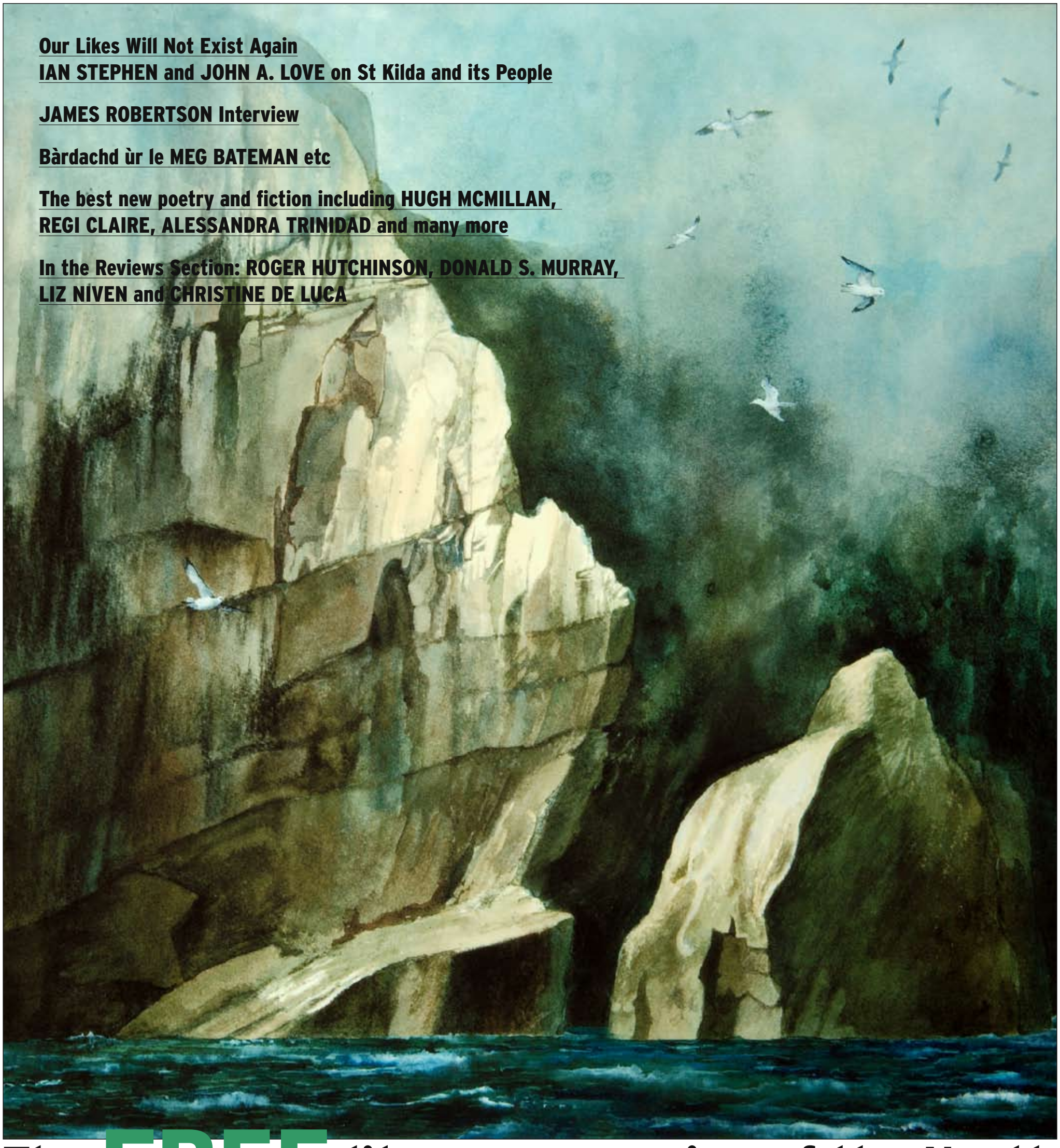
Northwords Now

Issue 17

Spring 2011



Our Likes Will Not Exist Again
IAN STEPHEN and JOHN A. LOVE on St Kilda and its People

JAMES ROBERTSON Interview

Bàrdachd ùr le MEG BATEMAN etc

The best new poetry and fiction including HUGH MCMILLAN, REGI CLAIRE, ALESSANDRA TRINIDAD and many more

In the Reviews Section: ROGER HUTCHINSON, DONALD S. MURRAY, LIZ NIVEN and CHRISTINE DE LUCA

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'Call me Ishmael.' The man in the whaleskin trousers spoke earnestly. 'I seek something for my captain. Else I believe that Ahab's obsession will spell doom for us all.' He turned to look into the enticing corners of the shop. 'Here I shall find something that he will want. Some intricate device or bauble' - then he paused to hold an embroidered kirtle against his chest – 'or mayhap some entrancing piece of outerwear that will make him forget, for a moment, the Great White Whale.'

Babalu

Chock full of things you will want.
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Now at 68 High St, Forres

Jeannie Rashencoats was happily dancing widdershins round a green hillock when it split open. Inside were dozens of the Good Folk furiously working at sewing machines among heaps of finished clothes.

'Jeannie!' cried the bearded foreman. 'Can you carry these clothes to our esteemed client in Drummond Street, Inveness?' 'I will,' said Jeannie. 'Good lass,' said the foreman. 'And for your trouble. . . ' He touched Jeannie's coat of rushes and it turned to cloth-of-gold. And she brought those clothes from the land of Faery to that quaint shop off Baron Taylor's Street.

Seems unlikely? Well, it is Far Fetched.

Farfetched

Funky clothes for funky people.
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On the south side of Loch Ness, between the dark Caledonian forests and the shore of the loch, there are two fields. One is full of electrons, buzzing like bees in a hive. It's a bonny field, but the other is even more attractive.
A man in green overalls opens the gate of the electric field. 'Come on, lads,' he calls, 'Time for work.'

At his word, a covey of electrons flow up to the gate and through the next field. The magnetic field.
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EDITORIAL

When it comes to reading a poem or a story I confess to a love for old fashioned paper, and that includes *Northwords Now.* It's not just that the layout is so easy on the eye, nor that a paper magazine is so portable, it's the very sound of the pages rustling – even the delicate, newspapery smell as you turn them. But no amount of nostalgia can or should blind me to the impact of information technology on how people communicate. As I write, the communication revolution seems inseparable from political revolution – in Egypt, Bahrain and Libya at least. On a more prosaic level, computers are changing how we work, shop, talk to one another and even check the weather forecast. They're also changing how we think and write, and how we share our thoughts and stories with the world. That's why Tony Ross' article on blogging (see page 17) is so timely and valuable; it gives a flavour of how people throughout the Highlands and Islands are reaching out to readers in ways that elude the authority of the established media and big name publishers. From Peter Urpeth's enlightening account of the Google Book Settlement to the wonderful profligacy (in terms of the amount of stories) of SeaPenguin ('a middle aged Scottish woman with a really short temper'), here are people dipping in and out of the mainstream as they see fit, and finding new ways of describing what it's like to be living here and now. The writing offered by blogs can be funny, serious, informative, entertaining, moving and frustrating, and, thankfully, not afraid of upsetting a few apple carts along the way. I have even begun to make my own, faltering entrance into the world of blogging. Although I've a way to go before I can match the bloggers Tony describes, you can witness my 'baby steps' at **www.open.ac.uk/blogs/WritingTutors/**. Also, don't forget that *Northwords Now* has a fledgling facebook presence which can be accessed via our website.

Tony Ross is also the man responsible for the *Northwords Now* website and thanks to his efforts we're now able to bring you an even more vivid picture of the literary scene in the Highlands & Islands, as well as the rest of Scotland. We're using the extra 'virtual' space to review more of the books that come our way, and this includes many fine books that struggle to get a mention in newspapers and magazines.

What's more, you can now not only read the writers that contribute to *Northwords Now*, thanks to the small miracle of the podcast you can hear them as well. I'm grateful to Jim McAuslan of Hi-Arts (a sound man in every respect) for his help in getting this new aspect of the *Northwords Now* show on the road. The podcasts accompanying this issue - Ian Stephen, Hugh McMillan, Regi Claire and Maoilios Caimbeul - are living demonstrations that literature can take on a new and vibrant existence 'off the page'. Just type **www.northwordsnow.co.uk** into your web browser to hear the results for yourself. ■

Chris Powici, Editor

Northwords Now

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Submissions to the magazine are welcome. They can be in Gaelic, English and any local variants. They should be sent to the postal address – see above. Unsolicited E-mail attachments will not be opened. The material should be typed on A4 paper. Contact details and SAE should be included. We cannot return work that has no SAE.

The next issue is planned for late July 2011

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Poems by Hugh McMillan

My Father from Extant Sources

The Oral Tradition
He was a bad bastard, well shot of him.

The Pictorial Evidence
He and his brother sat greasy haired on a gate,
their faces full of something worse than mischief:
Fat Boab and Soapy Soutar, grown bad in Auchinleck.
Another, on a horse, tanned and short sleeved,
watching the desert flatten to white waves.
Lawrence of Dumfries.

Moving Images
Mack Sennett outtakes spliced together
and replayed so often in the Multiplex of my head
that every detail's dodgy. Did he really jump that river
from a standing start? Did he really talk to the dead?

The Written Sources
Assorted documents confirming
he was the son and grandson of pitmen,
some Masonic certificates, well thumbed,
a 40s sex manual, mint condition,
a story, unfinished, about men
who didn't know they'd been killed at Alamein,
and a short account, unsigned, of his funeral
and a grave somewhere near Fortingall.

Other
That painting he left in the attic, a tree
dissected against a nightmare's sky,
with a thumbprint sunk in oils like a caldera,
the centre of a brief but violent storm.

Stone Girl

Last night the stone girl smiled at me.
She has changed since coming here,
for the better. There were stone girls to spare
once, but the few left are in garden centres
with wishing wells and fishing gnomes,
their dreams gone to ponds and pebble dash.
The rain will course from their tunics,
their faces smudge with sausage smoke.
She was on a sculpted lawn in Nunholm,
demure with her water jugs. We took
her home to stand in wild vine and lemon balm.
She took root in the bedlam.
Now ankle deep in tansy
she sloshes back from the sanctuary
with wine, her bared breast no decoration
but a carefree accident, or come-on.
Xiape, the stone girl seems to say, be
yourself like me, be free.

The Castle

Smoke on water,
clouds and mirrors,
reeds like drowning arms.
You stir a painted toe in
the loch and light shivers,
last sparks of the summer.
It would be easy to be lost here:
we fall in and out of dreams,
and could die as easily as lose our way.
Night takes everything, you say,
and soon there is just voice, then less.
Stars are sewn in gold at last
and cold is a kiss.

On the bus from Mycenae

The book's about a journey,
and your face is turned to the hills of the Argolid,
the fruit trees,
the suffering olives,
the landscape scored by history.
Round us children itch and snuffle
and they move slowly in dreams of light and shade.
It's Tuesday, or Wednesday,
who knows?
Light picks out beauty,
shade brings a sort of sleep.

Nith Stone

Leave the world between bridges: the narrow one
across the Nith with its sentry box and the old
crossing at Scaur squatting on its Roman haunch.
There's a shaded cup of fields between the bridges,
moss and trees darkened on every side by the hills.
The royal holm is here where Bruce camped on his way
to heaven via Whithorn, and *Penpont*, still scratched
on maps after seven hundred years. *Penpont*,
an island, and The Nith Stone, totem of this pagan space.
Rain has swept the dogma from its sides
and smooth as a grape it stares from a bright clasp
of weeds, sizing up visitors and their burdens,
daring them to stay for a night here
in the blaze between the bridges,
below our thin, bright slice of moon.

The White Stone

By the river's brown belch Jasmine
finds a pearl, 'the whitest stone ever seen'.
It's opaque but some veins and seams
glow with light and hidden streams
of colour. 'It's wet, that's why it shines'.
I zip it up and later put all the day's stones,
like 'the snake', the 'good writer' on the cairns
at our backdoor. I try to remember the names,
but within days the mounds seem
as inscrutable as Yucatan,
each the map of a day in a life, fields
of biography as distant and sealed
as Pictish monoliths yet they are here,
these girls, they grow and hop like birds before me
they talk away endlessly
and nothing seems at all lost or temporary
though the stones tell a different story,
each one a locked door, each a wedge in place.

Measurings

The windows frame the blues
that bank to the horizon,
throw up hints of the beauty
welled out there
displaced by circumstance.

So the internal view too.
Our speakers have a screen
that swims with sentences like eels,
today's terms of reference,
but words are everywhere

like air, and turn
to dread or desire more readily
than the curriculum;
that way, the sun on old wood like blood,
and there, that girl you could love.

Life is full of ghost measurings,
the gaps between what you pretend,
and what you are,
where you're sitting now,
and where you really ought to be.

The Most Intelligent Weekend Of The Year!

Stephen Keeler talks to James Robertson about the Ullapool Book Festival

Writers United – James Robertson and Guatemalan Maya K'iche' poet Humberto Ak'abal at the 2010 Ullapool Book Festival. Photo by Marianne Mitchelson

It is early February and snow has returned briefly to Ullapool for the fourth time this winter. This time it is thrown like sacks of stones, on the gales slamming in from The Minch, at the walls of the whitewashed cottages along Shore Street. 'Pretty fierce' would be an understatement tonight.

It takes faith as well as a feat of the imagination to remember the 'blue skies and hot sun' of early May when the annual book festival is held in this small village on the shores of Loch Broom, in Ross-shire. The recollection of good weather, as well as of bad, is from James Robertson, novelist, poet, publisher, defender of 'the native culture and language north of the border', and author of the *And The Land Lay Still – 'a story of Scotland'*. Robertson has recently taken over as the Ullapool Book Festival's president having been associated with it from its inception in 2005.

"I was privileged to be asked to that original weekend, a wonderful new experience, the only downside being the weather which I remember being pretty fierce. I've been back twice since, both times beneath blue skies and hot sun, which suggests that the gods were smiling down on the efforts of the organisers. Being asked to succeed the estimable Donny O'Rourke as honorary president of the Festival is indeed a great honour – as I said to Joan Michael (the Festival's chair and prime mover) at the time, I can't think of anything I'd rather be president of than this intimate, friendly, intellectually stimulating, beautifully located and fantastically well organised set of events."

Praise indeed, and it is worth deconstructing such an accolade, for the Ullapool Book Festival seems to have punched well above its weight from the very start. Now that there are (depending on how you define them) almost a hundred annual arts festivals in Scotland alone I wondered what Robertson thinks it is which keeps the UBF so much at the top of its game.

"The book festival phenomenon is pretty extraordinary on the face of it, but maybe the fact that so many have sprung up, especially throughout Scotland, simply reflects a hunger for good intellectual and cultural debate that is not being satisfied elsewhere. Newspapers are dying on their feet, quality journalism is in decline, television has largely abandoned serious discussion, high street bookshops are, with rare exceptions, not the stimulating places they once were – so is it any wonder that people seem to love book festivals?"

And the Ullapool Book Festival, in particular?

"The UBF has so much going for it: Ullapool itself which boasts not only the wonderful Ceilidh Place along with other excellent accommodation, bars and restaurants, but also great venues for readings and performances and not one but two of the finest independent bookshops anywhere in Scotland. If you are into good books, food, company and entertainment, it's all there. But more than all of this, the Festival programme is put together with such a mix of care and enthusiasm that it really feels unique. It makes a point of supporting and showcasing Scottish writing but is never parochial or narrow in its ambition. It prides itself on linking local, including Gaelic, voices with those from further afield, and new writers with established ones. All visiting writers are treated with respect but not with kid gloves, and are shown fantastic hospitality, so it's not surprising that once a writer has attended Ullapool they are always keen to be asked back."

What do you think is the UBF's usp?

"One special feature of Ullapool is that events do not overlap, so everybody – writers and audiences alike – can attend almost everything in the course of the weekend. That makes for a very inclusive festival in which arguments and discussions spill over from one day to the next."

Robertson's most recent novel – and many would argue his finest to date – *And The Land Lay Still* continues to be widely reviewed. Alex Salmond called it 'an important novel about Scotland and what it means to be Scottish'. Fiona Hyslop described it as 'an epic journey'. Doug Johnstone (The Independent) recognised in it 'a big step up in ambition'. Robertson himself has perhaps been over-interviewed of late (if that is possible for an author who after all wants to sell books), and when in replying to my question about what keeps him awake at night he answers, 'plotting the next novel', I am suddenly aware of his generosity with time. I can't resist a handful of questions about his own reading, though, starting with the book which was most formative:

"This is an impossible question, but for sheer brilliance of style and as a demonstration of how to unfetter the imagination completely I would probably cite Flann O'Brien's 'At Swim-Two-Birds'."

What are you reading now and what was the last book you bought?

"I've just finished Keith Richards' autobiography, 'Life', and a book of Maupassant short stories, and while in Brussels recently I bought a book about the Belgian surrealist painter, Paul Delvaux, and before that Don DeLillo's 'Cosmopolis'."

What is your favourite holiday reading?

"If I know I have a week or two of uninterrupted reading, I like to take a big 19th Century novel. Dickens is probably my first choice – I'm gradually making my way through his work – but I've also used holidays to take the opportunity to read blockbusters like 'Moby Dick', 'Les Misérables' and 'Middlemarch', and am seldom disappointed."

How do you like to read?

"Preferably in an armchair by an open fire with a dram to hand. How predictable! Depending on the book, I can thole classical music in the background, but generally I prefer silence."

Who influenced you most?

"Hugh MacDairmid. I knew nothing about him or his work until he died in 1978, when I was 20. I made it my business to find out about him, and became totally immersed in his poetry, language, literary and political and cultural ideas, everything. He changed or helped crystallise my ideas about Scotland, the world, writing and life in general. Unquestionably the single most significant Scot of the 20th Century."

If 'the opposite of a book festival is not a book-burning…(but)…indifference' then the Ullapool Book Festival is safe for a while yet in the hands of its new president. Was ever a writer quite so uninhibitedly enthusiastic? I ask him what he likes and dislikes most about book festivals before returning to the UBF and what it is he's looking forward to most of all in Ullapool this May:

"I like the Q-and-A sessions, both during and after readings. I like meeting enthusiastic readers. And I like selling books! It doesn't happen often (and never in Ullapool!) but it is very disappointing when you get poor accommodation and when there's an absence of copies of your books for people to buy. And I don't like shared events in which the brief you have been given bears no relation to how the event actually unfolds. If this year is anything like previous UBFs, it will be the most intelligent and stimulating weekend of the year. I'm particularly looking forward to chairing an event celebrating the poems and songs of the Polbain Bard, Neil MacLeod, with words and music from three other MacLeods, Roddie, Kevin and Ali Beag, two of whom happen to be good friends of mine. It should be a wonderful hour!"

It should indeed. ■

Bàrdachd Ùr

Dealan-dè
Meg Bateman

Bidh mi sireadh rudeigin na dèidh.
Cha do dh'fhàg i clann
no pìosan bàrdachd.
Tha rud na dhà a thug i dhomh mun taigh
ach chan eil dad ris an cante taisealan.
Tha a foto fhèin a' fàs fann.

A bheil buaidh sam bith aig a' mhath a rinn i?
A bheil liostachan nan euslainteach a' dol an lughad?
A bheil a caraidean ann an conaltradh?
A bheil a gàrradh fo bhlàth?

Thig dealan-dè fam chomhair
a laigheas car tiota air cluaran
's e a' sgaoileadh a sgiathan sa ghrèin
mus dùin iad, an taobh doilleir rium,
agus togaidh e air - aig Dia tha fios càite.

San Uaghaidh
Maoilios Caimbeul

Lachan-a'-chinn-uaine air an lochan,
iad a' sireadh lòn maidine
mar a stiùireas an aigne
no gineachan àrsaidh na fala.

Am bodach na chlosaich air a' bheing
's a shùil ri Àird an Teine
tarsainn an Loch Fhada
's Beinn Bheula fo sgòth;
adhar dùinte 's ciùbhran uisge
a' dèanamh pàtran chearcall air an lòn,
na lachan toilichte gu leòr;
am bodach 's na dulachan a' gliogadaich
mar bu nòs,
's an t-seann uaimh mar bu dual,
a' snìomhadh amhaich gu a beul,
ag iarraidh gu pòg an t-solais
fhad 's a tha an ròcais dhubh
a' cumail faire air toman thall
ag ith' a stòir.

Às Dèidh na h-Uaghaidh
Maoilios Caimbeul

Chaidh na bliadhnaichean seachad
anns an dorchadas do-sheachaint'

leis na faileasan air a' bhalla
's na ròcaisean a' cumail faire

nuair a thachair rud ris nach robh dùil,
thuit na sèinichean far a dhùirn

's sheas am bodach air a' chasan
's choisich e mach chun an talaimh

's chunnaic e a' ghrian sna speuran
's thuit na lannan dhe a lèirsinn

's cha bhi e gu bràth mar a bha e:
an àite dubhar, tha solas ga bhàthadh.

Nàbaidhean
Maoilios Caimbeul

An nigheadaireachd a' placadaich
air an ròp', ag innse a sgeul fhèin:
'San taigh seo, tha cuideigin beò.'

Buidhe is geal is dearg a' dannsa,
aoibhneach ann an gaoth an earraich,
a' glaodhaich, 'Tha duine seo fhathast air chothrom.'

Cha tig neach ach am post 's an dotair –
aodainn gun chrìoch air sgàilean –
's fiosrachadh uile air-loidhne.

Na taighean sgapte tarsainn a' bhàigh
faoileagan geala a' sgriachail,
a' sireadh sgudal dhan càil.

A h-uile taigh le a eòlas fhèin
na sheasamh treun air croit lom,
na loidhnichean trang a' gabhail na gaoith',

ag ràdh, 'Tha sinn fhathast beò,
ged nach eil sinn gar faicinn,
tha sinn ann, tha sinn ann

ann an seo nar saoghal fhìn
cho toilichte ris an aodach
a' cabadaich air an ròpa.

Aonghas MacLeòid
(Bhon a' Bheurla aig Tormod MacCaoig)
Rody Gorman

Shiubhail mi dhan dùthaich as docha leam uile
'S nochd am bodach
A bha mar bhrìgh dhi 's a chuir rithe
Na mo choinneimh ann an Ulapul.

Bha 'm fearann rìomhach fo shneachda
'S rìomhach ann an seagh às ùr.

An làrna-mhàireach, 's ann a chuir am fear
A chuir fàilte chridheil orm 's furan
Fuil a-mach agus chaochail e.

'S tuathanaich is balaich-an-iasgaich is mnathan-taighe
Nach rachadh ac' air an còrr a ràdh,
'S e thuirt iad: *Nach àlainn an latha,*
Nach lurach.

Is thuirt mi rium fhìn: *'S e gu dearbh.*
'S ghabh mi beachd air fhèin an sin
'S e na shìneadh an cridh' a h-uile càil.

Taigh aig Loch Bhaltois, Lacasaigh

Màiri NicGumaraid

Air beulaibh mìosachain,
Air còmhdach leabhar-fòn,
Air cairtean-puist is litrichean,
Bileag farpais iasgaich,
Cruinneachadh dhealbhan,
Fiosrachadh turasachd,
Iris eaglais,
Cuimhneachan làithean-saora;

Chan urrainn nach eil an fheadhainn tha fuireach ann
air fortan a dhèanamh,
chanadh tu,
à taigh cho ainmeil.

Feasgar foghair le faileas an òir
a' beartachadh,
is àirde là samhraidh
le geal, gorm is uaine,
's donn is glas is odhar -
a' neartachadh;
nuair sin dùmhlachd a' gheamhraidh
is oirean liosa an t-sneachd'
goirt-gheal air an t-sùil
a' grèiseadh nan annann,
a' crathadh siùcair
air na ballaichean,
's ag acaireadh sgàilean
nan oiseanan
ri talamh
le lìon bog on damhan-allaidh.

Chan urrainn do dhaoine sgur a stad ga choimhead
a' toirt thuice meas
inneas is eachdraidh,
an sgeul ,'s an co-dhùnaidhean fhèin.

Taigh a bhuineadh do sheann chroitear bochd
a b' fheudar teicheadh fearainn on bhàillidh,
Bothag a bh' aig aonaran,
Cròthan bana-bhuidseach,
Fasgadh fhògarrach o Thìr Mòr;
Maslairean o Thaobh Siar Leòdhais,
Banntrach air a fàgail eugach,
Càraid gaoil air ruith air falbh,
Fear-ealain à Lunnainn,
Feadhainn à Steòrnabhagh
air nach eil eòlas aig duine.

Cò aig tha fios ach fiosaiche?
Oir chan eil a' gabhail còmhnaidh ann
ach èalachas, cianalas
fìor-chorra ghill'-iasgaich,
is miann.

Bàrdachd le
Aonghas MacNeacail

siubhal, toiseach bliadhna
earball ceathaich ro àrd airson claisneachd,
a' sgàineadh na guirme,
ach cluinnear an gàire sgagach, ùine mus tig
sgiath rocach nan gèadh,
agus aon lòineag, na sanas shàmhach, toirt
oidheam caochlaidh,
gu bheil plaide liath thar fàire, a' giùlan cual
guinidh - paisg thu fhèin
na saoil gu bheil ràith' a' ghrìs-fhuachd an impis
trèigsinn, do lathadh dlùth -
ach theireadh luchd nan cleòc nach eil fasgadh
ann dhut, sir coille do mhuinntir (do sheisean)

◆

taibhsean dubha
a ghealach a' cur sgàile
gu taobh -
eich air gilead
bràighe
mar thaibhsean dubha

◆

an geal seo
cha do dh'iarr mise
gum biodh an saoghal cho geal
na sùmainn lùbach siùcair
nach fan anns an aon chumadh
ach a' siubhal ri dannsa na gaoithe
togail bhallaichan taibhseil
leig leis an speur a bhi mar anart
grinn thar nan rann is sgeul a tha
'g aithris càileachd na h-aimsir -
leig leis sgaoileadh gus an rùisgte
lainnir theinnteach an dallaidh,
cho lom glan seunsail don ghath
leig leis a ghrian a dhol sìos
is cha bhi mi air mo dhalladh
ach fann 's gum fàs an geal
chan fhaighear buileach a thrèigsinn
bhon a tha mi fhìn liath,
chan fhaic mi mar charaid
am bodach fuar dhan tug sibh cruth
le shùilean cloiche gun anail -
chan iarrainn seòladh thar bhruthaich
air long cho ìseal
sròin ris a cheathach reòta
's coma leam a dhol a dhannsa
air ghlainne
chì mi thusa, ged tha, 's do shùil mar
leug, ròs an àigh 'n a do ghruaidhe,
ròs ruadh nan gàire, na cridhe geal
agus deiseil airson dannsa thar nan
drochaid diombuan dòchais - cha
b' urrainn dha do shùil ògsa bhith
deiseil airson gach truailleadh a thig
le tionndadh gaoithe, togail grèine

◆

rìgh
a' tional nan là
thug cruth dha mo rè,
gach buadh is gibht
'g èisteachd rim bhuinn
a' bualadh na cè
mar theist dham bhith
an dìreadh suas
tro aineol 's oil
nam shireadh ciall
le dòchas bras
'son aiteal duais
a thaitneadh miann
's gach ainnir caomh
dhan tugadh gràdh
am briathran binn
le gealladh gaoil
suilbhir ach fàs
air teanga mhìn
bu chiont mo dhàn
's nàire mo bhinn
mur àichinn deòin
b' e dùsgadh tùir
chuir cogais an greim
gus èirig chòir
nan robh gu leòr
's an iomlaid fhial
bha 'n aigne saor
ach spòg 's a pholl
cha dean i ruidhl'
a lasadh caoir
cha choisinn bràist
am farpais mòid
a ghleidheas cliù
cho fad' o fhreumh
nan dòchas fìor
'son m' earrann diù

coiseachd an ròid
a ghabhadh mo cheum
gun mise bhi ann
mac-talla mo smuaint
cur an ìre na sgeòil
brat àraich dham chlann
sireadh meud grèin'
is lainnir ruadh ròis
gum b' ainnis mo chòrr
ach bithinn nam ghuan,
glaist' am chridhe gu teann
mhair mìrean de dh'òr

Photo Shomhairle
Crìsdean MacIlleBhàin

Thuirt e gum b' fheudar dhomh tighinn
na oifis fhèin, los gun nochdadh e rium
na *photos* a rinneadh nuair a bha esan
's a phàrantan a' dèanamh cèilidh
air a' bhàrd mhòr. Smaoinich e, 's dòcha,
gur fìor riarachadh a bhiodh ann an sin
air mo shon. Nach d'rinn mi a leithid
a rannsachadh mu dheidhinn is mu obair,
's mo leabhar a' dol a bhith clò-bhuailte?
Sheall mi air na h-ìomhaighean, na pàrantan
toilicht' is uaibhreach, ged nach b' urrainn dhaibh
a bhith cinnteach cho tràthail air
mar a shoirbhicheadh am mac na dhreuchd.
Ach bha iad earbsach, is bha iad ceart.
Cha robh facal Gàidhlig aca, no aige,
ach ann an suidheachadh coltach
bhiodh e air a bhith neo-mhodhail
rudeigin dhen t-seòrsa iarraidh orra.
Cha b' àill leis a' bhàrd an cur fo iomagain.
Dh'fheuch mi ri na bha feum air a ràdh,
briathran cùirteil, freagarrach, gun mòran cèill'.
Cha d'rinn mise fhìn riamh cèilidh air.
Cha robh pàrantan agam a ghabhadh taisbeanadh
air dòigh theàrainte, 's mo mhàthair comasach
air rud sam bith a ràdh gun rabhadh. Thuirt i
cheana rium gur cànain bharbarach a bh' anns
a' Ghàidhlig agus, fa chomhair bodaich a sgrìobh
uiread a rannan nach tuigeadh i càil dhiubh,
dh'fhaodadh dol air adhart a bhith aice
nach biodh modhail no taitneach.
A bharrachd air sin, cha b' àbhaist do m' phàrantan
cus ùidh air neo co-roinn a nochdadh
an dèanadas am mic a b' òig' aca.
Cha robh iad ag iarraidh ach morgaitse
bhiodh ga phàigheadh air dòigh riaghailtich,
obair mhath, giùlan moralta (san taobh a-muigh,
air a' char a bu lugha), dol don aifrinn
cho tric 's a ghabhadh sin a dhèanamh,
is fantainn sàmhach. Bhiodh iad a' fàs
nearbhach mu gach dol-a-mach
a bha comasach air aire nan daoin' a dhùsgadh,
is uimhir a chùisean ac' a b' fheàrr
an cumail ceilte. B' ann mar dhaltan a nàmhaid
a bha am bàrd a' sealltainn orm, 's cha robh
na sgrìobh mi mu dheidhinn obrach
a' taitneadh ris, bhon a chaidh sin an aghaidh
an dreacha 's an t-seòlaidh a bu mhiann dha
thoirt oirre às dèidh làimh'. Ach smaoinich mi
co-dhiù gur ann nas fheàrr a bha mo roinn
na roinn a' phroifeasair òig, shultmhoir is bhragail
nach leughadh eadhon facal de bhàrdachd Shomhairle.
Oir fhuair mi comas an sìoladh tro m' mheuran,
fhaclan, mar gur diasan a bh' annta,
am fasgnadh is am bualadh, gus gach brìgh
shùghmhor, bhiadhchar a tharraing ast', dam b' urrainn
fàs a thoirt do m' bheatha is do m' bhàrdachd.

12-13.XI.08

Amsterdam

Lodaidh MacFhionghain

Tha am plèan' a' togail ri' an-dràsta
Is tha mi dhen bharail gur e an ceart àm agam
A bhith toirt mo shoraidh leat
Beagan do lathaichean ann an deas-meadhan a' bhaile mhòir
Chunnaic mi na seallaidhean àbhaisteach
Math
Ach dìreach mar a ruigeas sinn an t-adhar
Shuas, os cionn na Mara Zeeder
Smaointich mi air na sràidean, na claisean-uisge,
Na daoine, is toglaichean na 17mh linn deug agad – gu h-obann ag ionndrainn
Do rùin
A bhuaileas gu dìreach cuideigin nach eil eòlach ort
Is mis' a' faireachdainn fìor shaorsa do shuairceis
Ged is trang is an sàs sa ghnothach agad fhèin
A tha thu
Tha thu 'leigeil le do dhaoine a bhith mar a bhios iad
Gun mhòran de bhreitheanas, gun mhòran de riaghailtean
Is sa mhionaid ud bu mhiann leam a bhith a' coiseachd air na sràidean ri taobh nan claisean-uisg' agad a-rithist
No coimhead air an luchd-fhuirich agad a tha sruthadh seachad orm air an cois, air rothairean is ann an càraichean is le an dh'aona ghnothach
Nuair a dh'fhàsas na tuiliopean ainmeil agad gach earrach
Nam bòidhchead mar a tha iad
A' flodradh air claisean-uisge
D' anama
Sna deich mìltean
A' tighinn a-mach len cùbhraidh
A' cur ann a' falach airson greis
Neo-miannan do uimhireachd
Gheibh neach diog de thàmh
Is toileachas às an fhàs
Ann an aodann blàth Duitseach
Air fhaighinn nuair a bhios tu ga lorg
Anns na cafés is na h-ionadan-fàilte is na tacsaidhean agad
Air rathad stòraidh do bhaile mhòir

Mo ghillean

Lodaidh MacFhionghain

Cha tèid agam air tuigsinn
Dòighean an t-saoghail seo
Chan ann ach soitheach a th' annam
Cuiridh an t-sìde bhlàth is fhuar is mhosach is
Bhòidheach mi dhan taoibh seo no dhan taobh sin
Uair ann nuair a tha mi coltach ri caiptean
Air a' bhowsprit ga stiùireadh gu pròiseil gu cala air choreigin
Uair eile nuair a tha mi coltach ri cealgair
nam chealgaireachd a' glanadh na dèile
Feuch am faigh mi cuidhteas am bùrach a rinn mi
Is uair eile eadar an dà chuid, gun ghnothach agam ri dhèanamh
Ach a bhith falbh leis an làn
Ach nuair a fhuair mi fios
Gum biodh an dithist agaibh a' tighinn a dh'fhuireach còmhla rium
A chompàirteachadh an t-soithich
A Dhia, ach cha mhòr nach do spreadh an soitheach gu buileach
Is rinn seo Manannan Mac Lir dhìom!

FARPAIS FIGSIN GHÀIDHLIG NORTHWORDS NOW CEANN-LATHA ÙR: **DILUAIN 23 CÈITEAN 2011**

'S ann saor an-asgaidh a tha an fharpais agus thèid duaisean a bhuileachadh airson nan sgeulachdan is nan criomagan goirid as fheàrr agus tha an cothrom ann an t-saothair agad fhaicinn ann an clò ann an Northwords Now. Airson barrachd fiosrachaidh, rach don làrach-lìn againn: www.northwordsnow.co.uk

Siuthadaibh!

NORTHWORDS NOW GAELIC FICTION COMPETITION NEW CLOSING DATE: **MONDAY 23rd MAY 2011**

The competition is free to enter and there are cash prizes for the best stories and flash fictions, as well as the chance to have your work published in Northwords Now. For full details on how to enter go to our website: www.northwordsnow.co.uk

Get writing!

Poems by Amy Anderson, Mark Edwards, Tracey S. Rosenberg & Howard Wright

Awake

By Amy Anderson

Today I get out on the road early, no car, leave your stretched-out skin
across the bed,
click the door softly, absorb the latch with my elbow - no need
to lock you in.
There is no sound on this island's dawn. I stop and listen
for the breathing of the sea
half a mile behind my back or for any other noise but there is nothing
but the mellow irises
bristling against each other, a stonechat's throat, the lark's
distant static.
Up there, tiny streams rib down after rain yesterday, slake the thirst
of exotic orange marshes.
The road swings to the left and writes a letter c drawing the valley's
perfect hip
and tough little trees cling to its mossy arc like a vineyard, or a miniature
and vociferous army
their spines, like us, bone dry, their limbs brassicar thick and armed
with lichen.
The lane swoops up to a stone bridge, fixed at a slight angle, maybe
deliberately so
I think, to encourage far flung visitors who have lost their way to slow down
or even retreat
but after this test of physics or faith, the road straightens, becomes a text book
example of linear perspective,
climbing up to Lharach Mhor and this liquorice of bracken and solitude
is intoxicating.
I hear the beat of the high earth that has not been disturbed perhaps since
everything began.
A speck of crow shudders down on a matchstick pole and I stop, waiting
for him to decide.

Time

By Mark Edwards

Time to dust off one of they auld 78s
those weighty boys I'm sure were made of slate
and when I talk about dust I don't mean grey veneers
I'm talking about that furry stuff when something's
been lying for years in what we called the posh room
right at the back of the house where they set you up again
after they brought you down, trust all men you said but
none too much, a quote from someplace I'll be damned
if I can find. In any case I stayed, even lifted the lid to
be sure, you'd have done the same in my shoes maybe
then kept it to yourself, the way your father would have
the way I never do
the hankies are dry the knives are out and
I want to bang my fist on the table, start laying down the law
when a wiser man would quietly pick up
the remaining clothes and carkeys, the good jacket depending
where he was going what he was doing
but he was always doing something or somebody
in them days so they say

Bait

By Tracey S. Rosenberg

His wife's silver body convulses
on the stone table
as he hacks her up for bait.

Water restores, he weeps,
nipping out her stark bare eyes,
plucking green slime from her twitchy skin.

Impatient waves flick the shore.

Clumped in her rainbow gut are flecks of seaweed
she nibbled when she felt empty,
wincing at how it tasted of the sea.

Blood pools in the nicks left by other, duller knives
that chopped up useless flesh for other use.
In the spots where poison dimmed her to dead white
his blade carves her free.

Flayed mermaids
culled from pink shells
twist and wither upon spiny rocks.

He sluices the table,
retrieves the rotten scraps,
hefts the bucket.

Bowing to the water and the hook
he cries for what he'll catch
as he restores her gray morsels
to the ravenous sea.

Gift

By Howard Wright

After a night on the tiles above
the cat thinks a dead bird
is something to be shared.

In its way, an act of love
we accept at the back door.
In a way, love needs no more.

Hazard of the Job

Short Story by Regi Claire

The knife slipped, slicing into Thea's thumb.

'Dammit!' But it was only a little cut. She sucked off the blood, waited until there was a juicy red blob, then sucked again. Warm and rusty-tasting. Nice. She laughed to herself.

'Move it, Thea, or you're out on your arse. Stew must be on the hob pronto.' Bruce the boss, BB for short, hadn't even bothered to look over.

Drop dead, asshole. She had a last suck and carried on with the vegetables. Mounds of them were heaped on the table in front of her: turnips, potatoes, carrots, onions, leeks.

BB was handling the meat as usual – cheap cuts of beef today, past the sell-by date so he could pocket the extra – chopping it to bits with flaps of gristly fat hanging off like dirty chewing gum. Luckily for him, none of the workers had ever got sick – or maybe they just didn't complain.

Thea shuddered, wiped her thumb on her apron and started peeling the onions. She never ate in the canteen here, always brought her own stuff. The near-translucent onion-skins reminded her of the lampshade her class had been shown at the museum. A lampshade made of human pain and suffering. It was one of the reasons why she'd run away from home. Things like that you didn't need to see; hearing about them was bad enough.

By the time she got back to her rented room, her thumb was sore. Not to worry though. Hazard of the job.

A couple of days later her finger was hot and swollen. The pain travelled in spasms through her hand, into her arm. She could feel stabs of it up in her shoulder.

Her chopping got slower.

BB was on to her like a shot.

'Want to lose your job?'

She shook her head.

'Want me to help?'

She stared at him, open-mouthed. Smiled tentatively. Nodded. So he was human, after all.

Next thing she was dragged into the store-room, then through another doorway she had never noticed before.

At first she thought he'd brought her to a cellar. The room had a flagged floor, walls of rough-hewn stone, no windows. A light bulb shed a fuzzy glow, yellowy-brown like in those old photos at the museum, onto a stained wooden trestle table in the middle. Pliers, cutters, curved knives and small saws lay on upturned crates against one wall. A workshop, then. But there was a bed in one corner. And suddenly she became aware of the radio on a shelf – it seemed ancient, big and glowering like a face with too-heavy brows. Strangest of all, the voices coming from it resembled those she'd heard in crackly documentaries.

'What the hell?' Thea stepped back, right into BB.

Only it wasn't BB. The man behind her had a seal's moustache and steel-rimmed glasses. Instead of the butcher's apron he was wearing some kind of whitish gown, like a surgeon.

'Where's BB?'

She ran towards the door.

But the door wasn't there anymore; it had moved to the wall opposite. The bed, too, was in a different place. And the crates. The shelf with the radio.

'Let me out! Please, let me out! Help! Help!'

As she ran screaming round and round the trestle table in the centre, everything else about her kept changing position, circling her, just out of reach, as if playing tag. One moment the stranger was to her left, the next he'd overtaken her and was waiting on the other side. She could have sworn she'd glimpsed his bones beneath the flesh, entangled in a spider's web of dried-up blood vessels.

Worn-out and dizzy at last, crying so hard her eyes felt raw, the way they used to when her father locked her in her bedroom, Thea climbed on top of the trestle table. Her thumb seemed to burst into flame as it brushed against the wood. It had doubled in size and gone a dark purple. Her whole hand had swollen into a discoloured lump of pain. She could hardly lift her arm anymore, it was so heavy with soreness. And there was a smell now she recognised, an old-meat-and-rotted-potato smell.

Gagging, she lay down, flat on her back. Closed her eyes. Fuck the cellar room! Fuck the skeleton weirdo! She was having a nightmare, nothing more. A fever dream. Wasn't she? She moaned; her hand was pulsing with fire.

'Want me to help?' BB's voice.

Thea could have cried with relief. She gave a brave smile, opened her eyes as wide as she could, and found herself staring straight at the light above. The bulb had a lampshade now, thin as parchment, with a familiar translucency. It was swaying slightly, as if moved by an invisible current. She tried to blink to make it disappear, but the more she blinked the more it started to sway, like a pendulum out of sync.

Just as she jerked herself away, a face leaned in over her. Steel-rimmed glasses, the outline of a seal's moustache – the rest was hidden by the surgical mask:

'Want me to take away the pain?' ■

Poem by Ross Wilson

The Old Patterns

How old would I have been?
More accurate to ask: how young?
Twenty one or so, lining up to clock in
to a factory full of women
and half a dozen men, pleating.
Reading on my lunch break how K
could never get into the castle
was like reading some reversal
to my own situation in Castleblair:
Despair, I called it. I was there
when 9/11 happened:
pushing a trolley full of patterns,
hot from an autoclave;
I over-heard talk of a plane flying
into a building, thought it was some
inane far-fetched film. Now,
Castle Despair is in ruin.
Even then they were talking
of transferring the labour to Turkey.
We didn't care, we were
only ever temporary, always ready
to move on. Twelve hour shifts –
minimum wage, standing by huge
tables, unrolling, clipping, fixing
material quickly but delicately, then
pulling the cover over, rolling
tight scrolls we'd tie with rags
and discard like giant cigars,
before starting over and over and over . . .
Sometimes we'd look up over
a factory floor buzzing with women:
it was as though they were making
themselves on the production lines where
they'd stitch and sow and perspire
and peer up and down and stare
at the Pleaters fingering material.
In our early twenties still, minutes
from a bar, hours from the feel
of soft fabric hugging her,
or her, or her, or whoever . . .
My hands would bleed and blister:
the head Pleater had never
seen such sensitive skin
in twenty years pleating.
Even my lips cracked in the heat:
I'd taste blood talking.
I'd taste blood laughing.
I'd feel blood pleating.
I only got the job because a man
punched another man in the face
and had to be replaced:
we can't condone such behaviour.
A year later, boys I went to school with wore
a new uniform: guns in place of pens, war
replacing lessons.
How old would we have been?
Old enough for anything:
young enough for thinking
to take second place to feeling.
We felt the material we'd been given:
we fixed it into the old patterns.

Writing The Islands

Additions to a St Kilda Library

By John A Love

The tiny, remote archipelago of St Kilda has long generated a fascination greatly disproportional to its size. There have been hundreds, perhaps a thousand or more accounts of St Kilda virtually all written in English. It was not until 1995 when Acair published Calum Ferguson's *Hiort – Far na laigh a'ghrian* that a book was to appear in the islanders' native language. Although not an islander himself, Ferguson, from Lewis, had family connections with St Kilda.

None of the published material, save a few extracts, had ever been written by St Kildans themselves. Contrast this with the Blasket Islands in Co Kerry. Like St Kilda this archipelago had been occupied for centuries but the population gradually dwindled in number until, eventually, some 30 souls evacuated to the Irish mainland in 1953 – thirty years after St Kilda had suffered a similar fate. Fortunately however, the Blasket islanders have left a rich and famous literary heritage in their native tongue. There are a score or more books– often referred to as 'The Blasket Library' - and many of them have since been translated into English. The first, best and perhaps the most famous, is *An tOileánach* (*The Islander*) by Tomás O'Criomhthain, a self-educated friend of the scholar Robin Flower.

This is not to say that accounts, albeit in English but at least by the islanders of St Kilda, do not exist. Most were penned away on the Scottish mainland or beyond, by a younger generation who were well-versed in English but had their island lives cut short by the evacuation. Extracts have appeared in David Quine's useful *St Kilda Portraits*, too long out of print. Happily this situation is being rectified, not least by the efforts of the Islands Book Trust. A modest clutch of useful titles has recently been added to an already exhaustive 'St Kilda Library' and launched at their major conference held in Benbecula in August 2010. This includes an account by Calum MacDonald a St Kildan who spent the first 16 years of his life on the island. Together with *The Truth about St Kilda – an Islander's memoir* by Donald John Gillies simultaneously published by Birlinn (and edited by John Randall, Chairman of the Islands Book Trust) we finally see autobiographies of native St Kildans reaching a wider audience.

The most handsome item by the Book Trust however is a hardback called *Destination St Kilda - from Oban to Skye and the Outer Hebrides*. Edited by Mark Butterworth, this contains the original text of two short illustrated lectures prepared for George Washington Wilson's Aberdeen firm, together with the actual photographs taken by Wilson, and his colleague Norman Macleod in 1886. Although only ten of the 67 images are of St Kilda itself, they are unique in that the glass plates were individually hand-coloured at the time, which doubtless greatly enhanced both the interest and spectacle of the two slide presentations. These include some of the

Photograph of the St Kilda Parliament by kind permission of Mark Butterworth.

familiar classic images of St Kilda – dividing the seabird catch, the Parliament of menfolk lining the main street, the women wrapped in shawls seated beside their cottages, and the whole village, church and manse, laid out three score years and ten before the modern Army base came to be built. The photographer even landed on Stac an Armainn while the fowlers harvested fulmars. For me, the bird's eye view across to Boreray in particular stands out as, obviously taken with a wide angle lens, but looking like an aerial photograph. The bulk of the book portrays the scenery and people of the Hebrides captured during a steamer cruise – doubtless in the same 'Dunara Castle' which was to be involved in the evacuation of St Kilda in 1930.

Next on offer, is a slim 36 page booklet *From Hirta to Port Phillip* printing a lecture given by an Australian professor Eric Richards to the Islands Book Trust in North Uist in 2009. It describes a major and tragic event in the decline and fall of St Kilda when, in 1852, 36 St Kildans, one third of the island population, were 'encouraged' (the exact circumstances are still not clear) to emigrate to Australia. It would be a year before news of their fate got back home; only 17 had survived the 98-day voyage, then to scrape together a new life on the other side of the world. Richards examines what is known of their efforts, and the impact on the little community they had forsaken.

Calum MacDonald was yet another St Kildan who forsook his native heath for a new life on the mainland. He writes: 'This story spans sixty-eight years, from my early remembrances as a youth on Hirta . . . until yesterday, 30th March 1976 – the day of my retirement in the Great City of London, where I have worked for the last twenty-six years as a valet in Grosvenor House, Park Lane.' His book, a neat little paperback, is entitled *From Cleits to Castles – a St Kildan looks back* and illustrated with a few black and white photographs of the islands.

Calum MacDonald was born in 1908, to a large family of eleven; one of sixteen families then on the island, most of whom were related by marriage. Several of his elder brothers and sisters had already left when, not in the best of health, Calum's father and his remaining family finally quit St Kilda in 1924 to seek employment in Harris.

The first half of Calum's autobiography describes life on St Kilda during his first sixteen years of life so his recollections are vivid enough. Less than ten years later Calum would return with some other islanders to assist in removing sheep from Soay to establish a flock on Hirta. Lord Dumfries had just purchased the deserted shores of St Kilda from Macleod of Dunvegan and was keen to maintain it as a sort of nature reserve. Impressed with the young man, his Lordship offered him his first opportunity in domestic service. The remainder of Calum's account may seem of less relevance to the St Kilda story but he never lost touch with the other islanders. Thus there are interesting insights into how the dispersed community still communicated with one another and indications of what happened to some of them.

Calum only lived three years into his retirement and it was his son John in Ireland who last year collaborated with Alasdair MacEachen of the Islands Book Trust to see his father's account into print. It was launched during the St Kilda Conference in 2010. This is arguably one of the most important accounts of St Kilda published since the quaint Olde English essay by Martin Martin. Calum MacDonald was mature enough to give a perceptive account of his early life on Hirta, without being coloured by the literary and media hype that the archipelago has endured in recent decades. Other retrospectives appear in abridged form in Quine's book and it is doubtful that any others now remain to be uncovered. The oldest living St Kildan was only two years old when his family were evacuated. The wife of a schoolteacher kept diaries early in the twentieth century, while another childhood account was printed privately in 1973 by the daughter of another schoolteacher. Amongst the shelves of books written by visitors most rely on recycled information, and the worthiest are by those who lived amongst the community for weeks or months on end.

Dr David Boddington did just that, albeit three decades after the evacuation. Although an outsider, David experienced a winter on St Kilda and explored the islands more thoroughly than most other island authors are ever able to do. He had even volunteered to complete his national service at this remote and unpopular posting, ostensibly as Medical Officer but ending up also as Rations Officer, Meteorological Officer, postmaster, barber, Nature Reserve Warden and National Trust representative! His *St Kilda Diary* is a highly entertaining and readable account of the Army's first year of occupation in 1958. What makes Captain Boddington's memoir stand out is his sense of humour, his passion for the St Kilda archipelago, its history and its natural history.

So the St Kilda Library continues to expand and always there seems to be something new to add, more information comes to light or a fresh synthesis offered of the existing facts. Witness the monumental tome written by Michael Robson, and produced by the Islands Book Trust (2005), evaluating a whole new and enlightening resource in the form of church records. Now that the Army Base is wholly civilianised, David Boddington's enjoyable little book contributes much to the Army's role in the evolution of a whole new society of 'St Kildans', consisting of resident civilian staff, National Trust volunteers, archaeologists, scientists, media and visitors, arriving for varying periods of time on charter boats, cruise ships, yachts, fishing boats or whatever.

It is encouraging to see books about St Kilda still being published by the Islands Book Trust, Birlinn, Acair and others, especially when offering a rare, internal perspective. It reminds us of unspoken voices of many more islanders . . . of their lifestyle, their folklore, their beliefs and language, their island homes, placenames and wildlife. As Tomás Ó'Criomhthain so eloquently put it:

'Ní bheidh ár leithéidi arís ann'.

'Our likes will not exist again'. ■

The stranding

Peace of course is something that comes from within yourself. You can see small misfortunes happen to people who can nod or give a small smile and see to the repairs. You can even think of souls who have had great losses and they bear them without blaming anyone or anything for what has come to pass. And even out at St Kilda, the geography is sometimes peaceful too.

You can be up on the high ground at Connachair and find, when you put your head out, exposed, that the gusts are absent. You can hear landbirds as well as fulmars. And when you return past the *cleitan* – the storehouses, you see how each one could not be anywhere else. It's built snug as the set of a hare into the hill. The walls of the cemetery, the boundary walls of the crofts, these too are where they need to be. The wrens dip in and out of the stonework. You realise that you have been able to do the walk this time without the harassment of bonxies or the sharper arctic skuas.

Out from the jetty, the water can be clear as the pool in a burn. You can see the flicker of the sand dabs, that's the small very sweet-fleshed flatfish, a dense shoal over the light sand.

Some days, even when the wind is high, there's that peace inside it too. When you pick out the sharp, dark blades of the storm petrel, clipping through the fine spray that's sweeping over the larger rise and fall of sea. Other days there's something in all the changes that disturbs you. You pity those at sea. You would never dream of shoving a boat, not even the beamiest one, down the slip. It could blow like that for weeks and the fishing gear could lie and rot.

The five nautical mile span from Hirta to Boreray is not much, when you study it on a chart. And there are a number of days in the year when that crossing would not pose much difficulty for a well-found, substantial open boat. This type of craft depends on the weight of gear or stones or people for additional ballast but they are stable because they are built with a very wide beam. The *Hiortach* were not great sailors. You need time on the water, through all manner of conditions, for a significant portion of your life, to be great at that game. There are too few days when the boat could be both safely launched and recovered in the weather and sea conditions that prevail in the St Kilda archipelago. And you could never keep a boat ready on a mooring, for very long, in Village Bay. When there's any east in the wind at all, a surge comes in with a rise and fall that would fill any open boat and sink it.

The history of navigation within the archipelago is a litany of lost and damaged boats. You could say they never looked after the vessels provided for them, for enterprise but you would have to see the territory to understand it. You'd also have to see the men in their own element. They were at their happiest in the air. In recent years the Director of the theatre in Valenciennes, France, one Lew Bogdan, recalled one name of Hirta as The Island of the Birdmen. He had a picture in his mind of the men in bonnets swinging on ropes in an opera.

The descent and recovery was more methodical than that. More like the quiet movements that are just enough to take you to the next footing or handhold without fuss or loss of energy. A rope was more valuable than a cow. They were used to going over, not only on Hirta but on the outlying stacks. Even on a calm day the first man had to time his leap with the swell. Sometimes he'd get more than a bootfull of salt water, but he'd be fished out on the rope. Once that rope was secure around a rock, everything was possible. But after each man had landed, the work would be organised soon enough. No time wasted. And they'd go down on ropes from vantage points to reach the fowl or the eggs or whatever they'd come for.

Now Boreray was different. The sheep were wilder than goats. They were out on the grazing there and the ground was fertile enough, shining green from quite a distance. You'll see *cleitan* out there too, the wind blowing through the stone beehive, drying the fulmars or puffins or mutton. You'd only consider that expedition in settled weather. And the men would often be out there for a day or two, seeing to the sheep and fowling as well.

This time, it was into the autumn but not a bad day. There was not a lot of sea running. The boat was carrying nineteen souls. Nine of them would attempt the landing on Boreray to see to the sheep and other work. The boat would then depart with a full working crew of ten. There would be six men on the oars and one on the tiller. There would be other work, on other parts of the island group before the landing at Village Bay. Now that seems a large number in the care of one boat but this was a vessel of over twenty-five feet and about nine feet in the beam. The boat would usually be launched and recovered on the same day so she would not carry stone ballast. The men *were* the ballast.

The winds around these Islands are unreliable and change very quickly. Squalls speed up as they are broken by the high ground and then they sweep across water with dangerous force. So the people would depend on oars rather than the sail. This would also make the boat easier to launch and recover. And there would be more space within it to carry the loads.

I would think the men might be landed on Boreray for a day or two and the boat would hold off for a night in exceptional weather, perhaps in Glen Bay, or it would be landed back in Village Bay and pushed down the slope again on a subsequent tide.

There wasn't a bothy as such on Boreray but the larger *cleitan* would give some shelter. These were hardy people. Of course there

tories

n Stephen

Falling man

You'd think you could pluck these birds from these cliffs forever. But you can pick a place clean. So you took what you needed and moved on. And the largest numbers of most of the birds were out, away from Hirta. Out on the stacks. So the men would take a boat. The climbers were landed. The boat was rowed away. It wouldn't be back until the next tide.

Some of these stacks are smooth as the spine on the back of a dogfish. You'd think you could never find a hold on that one. Some of the others have hand-holds and foot-holds but it's no easy thing to make a jump from a boat.

But this day, seven men were landed, out on one of these high stacks of rock. Seven men took turns leaning back on their ropes. The climbers were in good humour, as usual, in their element. Now if you could get back a bit, to have a look at them, you'd see they were all dressed much the same. Grey wool coats, with a belt at the waist. And blue bonnets. Well they were blue once. It was whatever came on the factor's boat, in exchange for bags and bags of feathers.

It all went very quiet. One of the men was looking down and his eye was fixed on something. The others turned to see what was holding him. They all followed his eyes. Saw it for themselves. They were seeing a body in the water, floating face-down and it was wearing a grey coat and a blue bonnet. Like them. So they were looking to each other. Counting. But there was no-one missing. So they all started thinking back. A day, a week, a month… But there was no-one missing.

That body belonged to someone and as they were watching, a black-backed gull landed and started pecking at its neck.

So they had to try something. But as they were lowering a man down, the tide got a hold of the body and it was gone. Out to the ocean and nothing's ever come back from there.

So what could they do but start working again. The boat wouldn't be back for them for hours yet. So they did that, taking the fulmar as before. But there was no laughing. No banter to be heard.

It wasn't long before a shout rang out. This time they did see a man fall. He split his head on the way down so he was already dead or stunned by the time he hit the water.

So all the others were looking down again. And of course what they were seeing was what they'd seen before. It was a body in the water. But now they know who it was.

It was floating face-down. And it was wearing a grey coat and a blue bonnet. And as they watched, a black-backed gull landed and started pecking at its neck. ■

would be a cheery wave as the boat was pushed back out. They weren't great for the fishing either but of course they'd wet a line or two on the way back. They couldn't arrive back on Hirta without something. A few decent ling or tusk.

Into the afternoon, the men on the slopes began to look to each other. You could feel it on the back of your neck, a change coming. And then sure enough, there was a pretty sudden increase in the wind. Before you knew it they were huddled for shelter, just lying as close to the slope as you could get. It was a full gale.

Now their first thoughts went to the boat that was returning, the one that would be back out the next day. She should be in Village Bay by now, maybe even secured up on the slip, clear of the danger. But if they'd hit a bit of a fishing or had some other fowling to do on the way back, then it could be borderline. So they were anxious. The coorse weather didn't last that long and the men and boys on Boreray had some more work to prepare for the night so that warmed them up. But each of them would be looking back towards the high ground up from Village Bay.

Not that you would see a soul standing there. But it was natural to look towards their home, when they were worrying about their people. When you work on the cliffs together, you're all dependent on each other's skills. That's at least as big a bond as sailors have. And there would be brothers and fathers and sons and uncles and nephews among the crew that had dropped them off.

And then there was a flicker coming from the hill. It was below the lines of stars and it wasn't one of these nights when the sky comes alive. It was a fire and it had to be for them. It had to be a signal. They watched it burn and then go quiet again. No-one was saying a thing. They were just standing, rooted to the spot, eyes peeled.

A second fire came up, stayed a while and faded. The stranded men began to count the fires. They counted four and watched for more. Nothing seen. They hoped that maybe dense cloud had moved in or kindling had got damp. But however hard and long they looked, there wasn't another fire came up for them to sight.

Ten men had left that morning, intending to return for them. Four fires were shown to them. One for each man. Not ten. So they knew then the boat must have failed in its return. She may have capsized in the coming ashore, often the trickiest part. If six men were lost, maybe the boat was wrecked. Even if it landed intact, they'd be short of crew.

Right then these five souls knew they'd need to get through a winter on Boreray. There was no possibility of another boat till spring. The factor would be out then. He'd make the trip loaded with provisions and replacement gear. Take their tweeds and feathers – the down from all these birds taken from these cliffs and stacks.

They were fairly well prepared. They had killed some sheep. Packed the meat for drying. They had not yet taken home all the drying birds. There was some basics of barley meal and oats. You always took that in case you were stuck. And there was a line or two they could rig to take a lythe or saithe from off the rocks.

That first day of the stranding they were able to return a signal fire. The tinder and kindling and fuel would not last them long. But they used some of the store for that. Families back on Hirta would know the stranded men and boys understood that there would be no relief boat till the Spring.

They held together and they shared the means of food and warmth. They might have killed some more sheep if they were strong enough to catch them. And they might have scraped skins and maybe joined them with a needle of bone.

Well into the winter, a clear day came on them. One of these days when you could just reach out and touch the Harris hills. So they sent another signal then. They couldn't make a fire. But what they did was cut the turf on the greenest part of the slope, one you'd see from the five miles over water. It was a marker. It had been done before. You cut a sod from one side of the slope to leave a shape of brown and grey. From a distance, that would stand out from the green. That signal would carry over the five nautical miles of separation.

So they cut nine shapes.

They knew that folk back on Hirta would look out on a day like this. They knew their families would know that all nine were holding on. In time the stranded crew saw a fire come up on the hill above their home village and they knew they had given hope to each other. From one Island to another.

Again, friends, I can't tell you how their days passed. No-one has told me the detail of their survival. I do know that if you're in the in the well of an open boat overnight, you'll get so tired you'll fall in your clothes and crew will just bundle in together. It must have been the same on that outlying island. A huddle filling the air in a shelter, not allowing space for the cold to be lethal. And they were well-fed to start with, by the standards of the day. In the mornings before this expedition they'd often have a puffin or a fulmar thrown in with the morning porridge. They would be building up the strength of the community while supplies were plentiful. That would help.

The factor's boat had its own adventures on the first crossing in the Spring. There was not the light or the strength to go a further five miles that night. But in the morning these Harris seamen and the four who had survived when the last boat was wrecked – they steered that distance in between.

They found the nine stranded souls, men and boys, all alive. None were injured but they were weak. I don't know how much longer they might have held on. They were lifted as gently as was possible into the strong craft. Then landed back on their home island.

You might think these souls would not have another word they could find for each other. You might think that they could not bear each other's company any further. I've heard it was not at all like that. I think that these nine people always found a way to work together. When the crews were divided along the cliffs. When they rowed to a stack. When they were killing and plucking, whatever they were working at. I think the nine that were stranded continued to hold together as long as they lived. And I think they prospered well enough after all that. ■

Two Poems by Alessandra Trinidad

Notes on a Murmuration of Starlings

1.
Something's unraveling
in the loom of a flight: a dazzling
thread needling in
and out of a cerulean muslin

woven with gothic,
schizophrenic
feathers. What slaps the sky awake, what tells the day to sit up straight,
what shows a girl it's never too late

to lean into a train's rattling window
is what you call a celestial murmuration of starlings;
of cyclonic wings
flapping so wildly against flying solo.

Out of place, I envy the geometry of incalculable numbers.
The vast, collective movement of kindred weavers.

2.
Something's breaking
the silence above the North Sea: a dark chamber
of starlings screaming
as if for the grammar

of symphonic
light. Here, the air's white
noise hardens into burning ice, wingless hail stones, anemic
rubies falling without radiance as I write.

What is migration
but a failed translation
of home---whatever

that might mean to all this pulverized snow,
to all this heartbeat of star-
lings palpitating toward winter's archipelago.

3.
Something's composing
with invisible
ink an airborne letter: a colossal
calligraphy of wing-

drops coagulating as one black stain erasing distances.
From peregrines
that scavenge and shadow
the sky's peripheries---

starling away. Below,
the last leaves cling to an ash tree's
flameless candelabra. A road breaks into an icy sweat.

One sheep goes *baa, baa* as if for a green
conflagration. Wet, winter-broken, Aberdeen
builds a cold fire beneath its shroud of granite.

Rhododendrons

Hang on the brink
of blossoming. To flower, I think,
is to unfurl, in full
bloom, each petal
already aging toward the sorrow, the saddest shade of pink.
Early May. April-

silence thaws to compose, grass-clef by grass-clef, a requiem for snow.
The sycamore
draws the air deep into its lung
as if to say, *Forgive the frost that has slain me.* Still, I know
the winter
more than the feather
of a thrush and a young

leaf rustling
in unison
as one
indivisible wing-
beat; or the north wind wrinkling newborn foliage.
Even if a cage

of branches might feel a pulse for fugitive flight,
a bird-shitty sign asserts YOU ARE HERE.
Late afternoon
rays furrow my face---a mirror full of shattered nectar.
Night
is on its way. This is a garden of renewal and ruin.

Butterfly Poems by Jean Atkin

Purple Hairstreak

Thistles spur the meadow in July
unpack their blazoned heads.
The oaks are crowned
with honeydew and the air-
dance of this colony,
indigoed and extraordinary.

You tell me
you've seen them flutter down
to drink the dew
on the woodland ride, and bathe
their changelings.

Who's to say?

Comma

Bright-winged
it skims
(and the meadow sways
around it).
It darts and falters
flashy
Comma orange. It rests
exactly,
on the white plate
of a bramble flower
with only days
to go.

Schrödinger's Cat

Short Story by Catriona Child

Ah wis starin oot the side windae, when there wis this big bang. Ah thought we'd crasht the car.

Ah turnt roond just in time tae see this fuckin huge burd, slidin across the bonneta the car. Its wings were aw at an angle an there were feathers flyin in aw directions.

"Did ye just hit that burd?" I turnt an said tae Calum, who wis drivin.

"It just landed on the car. Fell right oot the sky."

"Burds just dinnae fall oot the sky."

"Well this wan did. It must hae died in mid-air. Fuck, it's gave me an awful fright. Ma heart's beatin like mad."

Calum pullt over intae a layby. His haunds an legs were shakin. He got oot the car an startet walkin roond it; circlin me. Ah opent the door an swivellt roond on the seat, so Ah wis sittin wi ma legs ootside. Ah cuid feel the breeze as it blew roon ma ankles an up ma jeans.

"Ye awright?" Ah asked him.

"Aye, just need tae get ma legs workin again. Fuck, that gave me a fright. We were lucky it didnae come through the windscreen."

"Whit dae ye think happent tae it?"

Calum stoppt in frontae the open door an leant in taewards me, his arms restin on the roofae the car. Ah rubbed his legs, tryin tae get some warmth intae them, tryin tae stop them from shakin. His cords felt funny against ma haunds; aw friction like, as if ma haunds were aboot tae go up in flames.

"Heart attack mibbe? It lookt doon an realised how high up it wis."

"Dinnae be daft," Ah replied an poked him in the chest.

"Burd flu?"

"Dinnae joke aboot that, it cuid be. Mibbes we should phone the RSPB or sumet?"

"Nah, nah. Ye must get wan or two that die in midair. They spend, like, whit, eighty, ninety percentae their time flyin?"

"Who dae ye think you are, fuckin Bill Oddie or sumet? B'sides, how many burds have ye seen just randomly fallin oot the sky?"

"Ah saw wan two minutes ago!"

"Aye, very funny. Whit if it's a bad omen?"

"Noo, who's the dafty?" Calum replied an duckt doon, so his heid wis inside the car, just inches away from me.

"It's no great though is it? Bein hit by a dead burd?"

"It's good luck if wan shites on ye. Maybe it's extra luck if wan dies on ye?"

Ah wis aboot tae reply when Calum leant in an kisst me.

"Come on, let's get goin," he said. He lifted ma legs like Ah wis a paralysed person an swung them back roond intae the car, then he shut the door fur me.

Calum got intae the car, started the engine an pullt ootae the layby. Ah watched him fur a few minutes as he concentrated on the road. He wis tryin tae act like he wis okay, singin along tae the radio an that, but Ah cuid see his haunds were still a wee bit shaky, an Ah felt overwhelmed wi love fur him. Ah just wanted tae gie him a massive cuddle.

He didnae ken that Ah'd bin readin bad omens intae everythin this week. He didnae ken that Ah wis eight days late noo, an officially startin tae panic. At the startae last week Ah hadnae bin aw that bothered, but as time went on Ah wis gettin more an more freakt. Ah'd had naethin. Nae bleedin. Nae tummy pains. Nae cravins fur sweeties. It had got so drastic that Ah'd put ma best white knickers on in the hope of enticin it.

"Ye awright over there?" Calum squeezed ma thigh.

"Aye, just thinkin aboot that burd, eh?"

There were white feathers stickin oot the bonnet grill, an they blew in the breeze like wee surrender flags.

"Ah'm sure it lived a long an happy life. Try no tae worry."

"Aye, Ah suppose," Ah replied. "Ah did read somewhere that death cin mean, like, a new beginnin. Ken how people aw'ways think death is the bad one tae get in tarot cards an that? But it cin mean the death of an auld way of life an the startae a new wan."

Fuck. The words were oot afore Ah'd even realised whit Ah wis sayin. Ah wis happy wi ma life the way it wis. Ah didnae want any new beginnins. Calum an Ah had bin livin the gether fur almost a year noo, an things were guid. Ah didnae want tae wreck everythin. Where had Ah read aw that pish aboot tarot anyway? Ah hoped it wis in some crappy mag like Heat or OK. Somethin that couldnae be relied on as accurate information. Ma memory wis so shite Ah couldnae remember. Couldnae remember anythin. Tae take ma pill wis another thing Ah'd forgotten recently.

"A new beginning, eh?" Calum said. "Mibbe we'll end up buyin the hoose?"

"Aye, that wuid be nice."

"Unlikely though, seein as we cin hardly afford the flat."

"Aye."

We'd bin rentin a flat off some wifie at Calum's work. It wis tiny, an the bathroom had big, damp patches aw over it. The red walls were covered in black spots like a fuckin ladybird. The windaes didnae wurk properly either, an we'd find deid leaves aw awer the place in the Autumn. The rent wis pretty cheap though an she didnae bother us as long as we paid on time. Plus Ah liked it just bein me an him. Me an him versus the wurld.

"Sure ye're okay, babes?" Calum asked.

Ah glanced ower at him an he wis watchin me ootae the corner of his eye.

"Aye, just a bit carsick, eh? Ye ken whit Ah'm like."

"Dae ye need me tae stop?"

"Nah, Ah'll be okay."

"Cool, well just let me know an Ah cin pull over."

Ah aw'ways get really queasy when Ah'm travellin, an the talkin aboot money hadnae helped. We cuid hardly afford tae look after ourselves, let alone pay fur a bairn. Since Ah'd finished uni, Ah'd bin workin in Topshop; Calum's course wis a year longer so he wis still a student.

When Ah wis a kid, ma folks aw'ways had an empty ice-cream tub in the car fur emergencies. Ah'm okay as long as it's just ma tummy that's feelin it. It's when the sickness starts tae rise up that Ah have tae watch oot. It'll rise up an then it'll just sit fur a while in the backae ma throat; no quite reachin ma mouth. Then after a while warm, sticky saliva will flood intae ma mouth, roun ma teeth, an coat ma tongue wi fur. That's the warnin signal. Puke alert.

"Once Ah'm finished ma course, Ah'll buy us a hoose, an it'll be big enough for aw yer clothes an aw yer junk."

"Hey, Ah dinnae have any junk."

"Aye ye dae, Ah cin barely move fur aw yer crap. An whit aboot aw the claes ye come hame wi."

"That's ma uniform, an it's discounted anyway. B'sides, whit aboot aw yer ebay crap that the postie keeps bringin?"

"Ye're so easy tae wind up," he said.

Calum wis laughin at me noo. He leant across an helpt himself tae a jelly baby, from the bag which wis lyin in that wee gap in frontae the gear stick. He took a haundful an laid them on his lap, afore bitin intae them, wan at a time. Heid first, then the body. The white powdery stuff that they're covered in left a mess on his trousers, an Ah leant over an rubbed it away. Ah could see traces of it on the steerin wheel tae; sticky fingerprints from aw the sweets he'd bin munchin on.

Ah ran ma fingers across the back of his neck, grazin ma nails through his hair. It wis aw soft an bouncy. He leant his heid back intae ma haund, so it wis restin against ma fingers. It felt nice.

"Whit time did ye say we were meetin the estate agent at?" Ah asked Calum.

"Hauf two," he replied, glancin at the clock on the dashboard.

"How long dae ye think it'll take from here?"

"No long, an hour tops mibbe. You should ken."

"We never came this way though, we'd aw'ways be comin in from the other side."

"Aye, Ah suppose. Ah'm lookin forward tae seein this hoose ye're aw'ways goin on aboot."

Ah wisnae. Ah wis startin tae get second thoughts aboot the whole thing noo. It had aw seemed like a bit of a laugh when we'd planned it earlier in the week, but noo Ah had other things on ma mind.

The blood wis rushin doon ma arm, an Ah wis gettin pins an needles in ma haund so Ah moved it away from Calum's neck. Ah rolled doon the windae an let the wind blow in at me through the gap. It blew ma hair off ma face an felt cool against ma skin. The air inside the car aw'ways smelt funny; enclosed an stale wi a hintae petrol tae it. Just the thought of it gave me the boke. Some people love the smellae petrol but Ah hate it. Ah feel like when Ah breathe it in, it's pollutin me; instead of nice, red blood pumpin roun me, it's aw sticky an black. The ootside air is different; purer, like it's a mountain stream tricklin doon the hillside. Ah held ma face close tae the windae an inhaled through ma nose. The only thing Ah dinnae like aboot havin the windae open when we're drivin is the noise. It's so loud. It makes ma heid aw scrambled, an Ah feel like Ah'm goin deaf. Ah had tae turn the radio up so ah cuid hear the music better.

There wis a bagae barley sugars lyin next tae the jelly babies, so Ah took wan oot an unwrappt it. Ah held it in ma haund fur a few seconds afore poppin it in ma mouth. Ah hoped that if Ah suckt on a sweet, it might help tae get ridae the sick feelin. The first time Ah'd ever tasted a barley sugar had bin wi Granny. Her an Grandpa came tae visit us, an they came in the car wi dad tae pick me up from Primary Schael. Ah sat in the back wi Granny an she pullt ootae bagae barley sugars from her haundbag. They were in wan of they paper bags like a ten pee mix-up or sumet. Ah'd never had wan afore, an they lookt a bit strange, but she wis, like, oh ye'll like it, have a sweetie, so Ah did. It's funny as barley sugars aw'ways remind me of her noo, but Ah cannae remember her ever eatin them again. Fur aw Ah ken, that wis the wan an only time she ever had them in her haundbag, but in ma mind they're her favourite sweetie.

"D'ye think she'll ken we're lyin?" Ah asked Calum, crunchin doon on the barley sugar.

"Who?"

"The estate agent." ▸▸

"We're no lyin, we just wantae see the hoose."

"Aye, but it's no like we're goin tae buy it."

"Well, we just tell her the truth then. Yer grandparents used tae live there an ye wantae see whit it looks like after aw these years."

"We cannae say that. She'll kick us oot."

"Dinnae worry, okay, Ah bet she gets time-wasters like us aw the time."

Ah didnae just feel guilty aboot the estate agent wifie, Ah wis also feelin guilty aboot no tellin Calum Ah wis late. Everytime Ah lookt at him, or he smiled at me, Ah felt rotten; like Ah'd cheated on him or sumet. Done sumet terrible behind his back. An Ah hadnae. It wis stupid tae feel like this. Ah'd taken the pill as soon as Ah'd realised. As soon as Ah remembered Ah hadnae taken it. It wis only a day late. Ah'd ended up takin two at the same time tae catch up. Didnae bother tae read the instructions. Left me feelin sick aw day, an ma stomach wis totally churnin. Had diarrhoea so bad that Ah'd had tae take those Imoddium pills. Then Ah ended up no daein a shite fur aboot four days after. Fuckin strong those things. The stupid thing wis, Ah kent he wouldnae even be angry at me; he'd just gie me a cuddle an Ah'd feel that safe way Ah aw'ways dae when Ah'm wrapped up inside his arms.

Ah pickt the chewy bits of sweetie ootae ma teeth. A song came on the radio that Ah liked, so Ah turnt the volume up some mair. When Ah wis wee, singin used tae help ma car sickness. Ah'd take ma wee personal tape player wi me an sing along. Ma sister an brother did the same. It mustae drove ma parents berserk; aw of us in a row on the back seat, singin along ootae tune tae different songs. Ah dinnae ken why it helpt, but it did.

"Whit did ye say?" Calum asked.

"Ah wis just singin."

The song wis an auld wan ma brother used tae love. It made me feel weird tae think of him as a wee boy singin away; that maudlin kindae feelin, happy memories but they make ye feel bad. The whole day wisnae turnin oot the way Ah'd hoped. The last time Ah'd bin at the hoose wis aboot nine or ten year ago, when Ah wis just a wee lassie. Afore Granny had died. She went an then Grandpa followed her a month later; he just gave up. It wis weird because they'd aw'ways bin bickerin when they were alive, but after she'd gone he couldnae handle life wi'oot her. We spent aw our summers at their hoose when we were growin up. We'd watch the gliders from the airport across the watter, risin intae the air, an try an catch they parachute bits that dropped from them, even though they fell miles away. We'd play hide an seek in the bracken that grew on the hills behind the hoose, comin hame wi tics an aw sorts attached tae us but no even carin. Granny would tweek the pink beasties off wi a bitae ice an a pair of tweezers. We'd find bits of auld crab shell in the garden an think up stories as tae how they got there, tae wee tae realise the seagulls had dropped them. We'd sit in the front windae an try an spot the otter Grandpa kept tellin us aboot.

Ah wisht that Calum cuid have met Granny an Grandpa, but Ah had this weird theory that the universe had decided that they'd never be allowed tae meet. They made me so happy an Calum made me so happy; it wis impossible that two happinesses cuid exist at the same time. It wuid be tae much fur wan person. Ah liked tae think that Granny an Grandpa had fixt it so that me an Calum met, that they've bin lookin after me from above. Ah cuid feel the tears comin as Ah thought aboot them. Ah had tae bite ma teeth an clench them really tight tae try an force the knotae tears back doon ma throat. Ah wis noo fightin tae hud the sickness an the tears away.

"Any watter left?" Calum asked, "they jelly babies are makin me thirsty."

"Aye, Ah think it's rolled under ma seat."

Ah reacht ma arm back under the chair, an felt aroond fur the plastic bottle. Ah pullt it oot an wiped the wee specks of dust an fluff off, which had clung ontae the condensation. Then Ah unscrewed the lid an haunded it tae Calum who took a swig an haunded it back. Ah wondered if the watter might help ma churny tummy, so Ah took a wee sip. Nothin big. Granny aw'ways said that a cupae tea helped if ye were feelin sick, as it either made the sick feelin go away or it made ye bring the sick up. The watter wis warm, an it felt kindae comfortin, like Ah wis suckin bath watter through a sponge.

"Cin ye take a wee look at the map fur me?" Calum asked, "Ah think we must be nearly there."

Ah leant over ontae the back seat where the map book wis lyin. The movement made ma stomach lurch again an Ah rubbed it.

"Whit page?" Ah asked.

"Ah markt it wi a post-it note fur ye."

"Ah ken, but that fell oot."

Ah lookt up fur a signpost tae try an work oot where we were, when Ah realised that Ah recognised the surroundins.

"Hey, Ah ken where we are noo. Just keep goin on this road an ye'll come tae the hoose."

"Cheers, baby."

Ah couldnae believe how little the village had changed since Ah'd last bin here. The big wall that rose up in a hump an then sloped back doon again, so that we aw called it the dinosaur wall. The rhododendron bushes wi their pink an purple flowers. The rocky beach, which ran along the edge of the village. Ah cuid awmost smell Granny's fried breakfasts mixed in wi the sea air. Ah had that feelin that Ah wis in a completely different country, when in actual fact it wis just a few hours in the car. When Granny died, Ah remember feelin like the whole wurld had slipped on its axle, that aw the planets had shifted an nothin would ever feel right again. Ah'd just turnt thirteen, an fur months Ah thought it wis ma fault that they'd both gone. That Ah'd caused it. Unlucky thirteen. Ah remember bein so upset wan night that Ah lockt masell in the bathroom an pretended tae run a bath, so naebody wuid see or hear me cryin. Ah didnae put the plug in, just let the taps gush oot an Ah sat on the bathroom floor sobbin so bad that ma tummy ached an Ah cuid hardly breathe. Ah said oot loud tae Granny an Grandpa, please let me know that ye love me, that ye dinnae hate me. The weird thing wis that a few weeks later ma Dad found a boxae Christmas cards when he wis goin through their stuff. They were aw blank apart from wan that had bin written oot tae me. It said 'To our darling Ali Bally, Merry Christmas, All our love Granny and Grandpa xxxx.' Ah still have that card, kept it safe aw these years. It made me realise that it hadnae bin ma fault, an they'd kent how much Ah loved them both, even though Ah didnae say it enough.

"Just turn right at the end here," Ah said tae Calum, who wis drivin really slowly noo as he had nae idea where he wis goin. He turnt right an Ah got ma first glimpse of the hoose. Ah couldnae believe it. The restae the village wis identical tae how Ah remembert it, but the hoose. The hoose wis totally changed. There wis a seagull sittin on top of the fur sale sign in the garden. Ah felt like the whole sign wis growin in frontae me, risin up an towerin ower the car. Calum realised straight away that sumet wisnae right.

"They've wrecked it," Ah said. "That wooden conservatory thing is new, an they walls were white afore no yellay. An the orange roof tiles have gone. An there wis a tree there that we used tae climb, an that bit there on the corner's no right."

"Ah'm sorry baby. Are ye disappointed?"

Ah felt so shite, Ah couldnae even reply. How cuid they have changed it so much? There wis nothin visible that Ah cuid have touched an said tae masell, Granny an Grandpa touched that once. If a forensics team had done a sweepae the hoose, they wouldnae have found any auld fingerprints or traces of DNA. The lump in ma throat wis gettin harder tae keep doon. Ah kept swallowin an swallowin but Ah couldnae keep it doon an Ah startet greetin right there in the car.

"Baby, baby, it's okay, it's okay. Ah shouldnae have suggested this, it's aw ma fault."

Calum didnae even get ootae the car; he just climbed across the seats, so that he wis holdin me an we were both squashed ontae the wan chair. Ah leant ma heid on his shauder an Ah just let it aw oot, while he squeezed me an strokt ma hair.

"Ah'm sorry," Ah said between sobs, "ye've driven aw this way, but Ah cannae go in. Ah cannae."

"Dinnae worry aboot that. Ah dinnae care if we dinnae go in. Ah didnae want ye aw upset."

Ah pullt doon the sun guard an lookt at masell in the wee mirror there. Ma mascara wis aw runnin an ma face wis bright red. Ah tried tae wipe ma eyes an nose wi the sleeve of ma jumper, but Calum haunded me a tissue.

"Are ye sure ye dinnae want tae go in?"

"No, Ah'm sorry. Ah cannae. It's Schrödinger's Cat."

"Whit?" He held ma heid between his haunds; a warm palm on each cheek.

"Somethin Ah did at Uni, eh? There's a cat inside a box an it's like if ye cannae see the cat, then you dinnae ken if it's deid or no, so it's alive an deid at the same time, eh?"

"No really."

"Well, it's like if Ah dinnae go in, then Ah cannae see that it's aw different inside, an it keeps them alive a bit. They cin still be in there."

"Ye're a wee dafty. Ah'll go an let the estate agent wifey know."

Calum gave me a kiss on the tip of ma nose an then another wan on ma foreheid, afore he left the car an disappeared up the driveway. As he walkt past the fur sale sign, the seagull flappt its wings an rose up intae the air, afore comin tae rest on the roof of the hoose. Ah cuid still feel the kisses after Calum had gone; like his lips had left a mark there an ma skin wis hummin. Ah felt like such a dummy. It wisnae even the hoose that Ah wis cryin fur. It wis aw the changes an aw the people Ah misst, an how Ah just wisht that things cuid stay the way they were. How come that fuckin dinosaur wall wis still staundin? Crappy auld brick still survivin, when people Ah loved had tae leave. It made me think that in a few years time, me or Calum might no even be here anymair an the thought made me so scared. Ah'd finished uni an Ah wis meant tae be a grown up, but Ah wisnae ready.

Ah laid ma haund oot flat on Calum's seat; it still felt warm from where he'd bin sittin. It made me feel better, like the warmth of him wis floodin aw the way through me. Ah felt a tightness in ma tummy then, ma gut wrenchin an then relaxin, an then a familiar warm wetness spread in ma knickers. Ah knew wi'out checkin that it had come. It had fuckin come. Ah didnae want the warmth tae escape, so Ah kept ma haund on Calum's seat; kept it there until Ah saw him comin back doon the driveway taewards me. ■

Northwords Now Goes South

Just for one night Northwords Now will take centre stage in Edinburgh – the stage of The Forest Café to be precise – courtesy of the Golden Hour series of literary readings organised by Ryan Van Winkle. Three writers from this issue, Tracey Rosenberg, Hugh McMillan and Ian Stephen will read poetry and stories, There will also be music from The Wild Myrtles, The Irresistible Urges and Eye of the Duck!

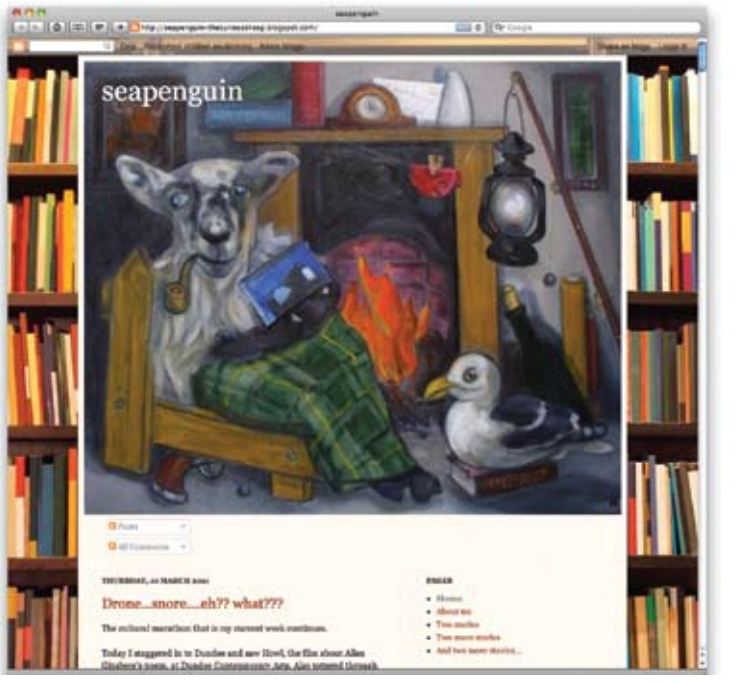
Join us for a night of words, music and even some cartoons. It would be great to see you.

Date: Wednesday 20th April
Time: 8.00 pm

Place: The Forest Café, 3 Bristo Place Edinburgh EH1 1EY Admission: FREE

Blog we daily, on we go...

Tony Ross roams the web



WARNING! THIS ARTICLE is about blogs. If you've deliberately steered-clear of technology or had your head buried in the proverbial sand for half a decade, the term "blog" is an abbreviation of "weB-LOG".

In most circles, you'd be forgiven for thinking that blogs don't belong in a literary magazine. You'd also be forgiven if your attitude was that blogs are the 21st century, big-brother, personal showpiece bastardisation of that sacrosanct tradition which used to be known as a diary (or journal, for those who wrote less than daily).

But, as time stands still for nobody, even in literary circles, the creative writing community at large is quickly adopting this method of virtual-communing with their public. It has long-since concluded that a blog is much more than a diary. A blog is a public-facing, delivered for free, rich tapestry of news, thoughts, events and other details about a person or subject. In this multi-everything world, a blog naturally contains more than just text. Photos, images, videos and even sound are all welcome to join the parade.

Aside from their normal function, blogs also have a writers-block clearing, stress-relieving and positively enjoyable aspect. Writing (or sounding-off, if that's your thing) in one's blog can deliver the equivalent stress-beating medication that used to require playing 20 games of Microsoft's Minesweeper. The blog is a place where authors and non-authors alike can talk, shout, moan and laugh about practically anything before delivering their verbitude to an unquantifiable audience at the click of a mouse. This makes blogs interesting because unlike a diary, the interactivity of a blog allows the audience to comment, and sometimes with very entertaining results.

Most, if not all, blogs also allow for subscriptions (or RSS – Really Simple Syndication - feeds). The subscription methods are varied, but the basic premise is the same. The subscriber receives instant, automatic notifications of updates, new posts and articles directly to their RSS reader (such as Microsoft Outlook, most modern mobile phones or web-browsers).

Having scanned the world-wide-way-to-fritter-away-your-time for literary-flavoured blogs with a Highland-topping, I found a plentiful supply and these are some of my favourites:

HI-Arts blog by Peter Urpeth

HI-Arts' Writing Development Coordinator, PETER URPETH, speaks to the world.
www.hi-arts.co.uk/peter-urpeth-blog.htm

Notably going against the grain of those filled with personal titbits, Peter Urpeth's Hi-Arts blog is based in and around the writing world and covers the ground of writing for both new and established authors.

Peter has long been a staunch supporter of the blogging movement and a great advocate of the many benefits it brings. In his October 2009 article "Taking the Digital Plunge", he describes the importance of blogging for new (and existing) authors as a simple way to effectively communicate with their current and prospective readers using digital means.

The most recent of Peter's articles "Google Book Settlement" demonstrates his perspective on the search-giant's mission to make every book (in print before 6th January 2009) searchable via Google Books.

Cybercrofter by Mandy Haggith

Life on a coastal croft in the northwest Highlands of Scotland.
cybercrofter.blogspot.com

If such a thing as a "traditional" blog exists, then Mandy Haggith's - describing her life as a poet, author and activist living on a croft in Assynt - is definitely one.

Current entries concerning her recent caravan to cabin move, bog-draining, feeding seaweed to her garden and her opinion of the government's plans to sell-off parts of the English forestry are as enjoyable as they are interesting and well worth reading.

Like many highland writers, Mandy also works to bring the joy of literature to those who live in the north-west of the Highlands. For the past five years, she has organised retreat weekends for creative people such as writers, artists, musicians and photographers. Her next retreat will be in September this year at Tanera Mor in the Summer Isles.

Northings Website

Arts and Culture in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland
northings.com

There are blog sites which have normal web-content (i.e. non-blog pages) and have a blog attached (e.g. Hi-Arts website). Others are purely a blog with with little or no normal web-content (e.g. Mandy Haggith's blog). The Northings website is a hybrid of both and is an excellent example of taking blogging to the extreme. This is a blog layout fashioned to resemble a normal website, with no immediate paragraph-after-paragraph to bombard your eyes. As a consequence, the site is "sticky"; it feels comfortable, non-oppressive and encourages the user to stay.

As a blog, Northings is a vast compendium of arts and literary information. Every article encourages reply and comment. The articles themselves, whilst true to the cause of highland arts and culture, are diverse in topic within this formidable arena. Of particular interest, is the current headline article detailing John Aberdein and Daibhidh Martin's appearance at the literary salon in Stornoway on 18th February.

The Northings blog also provides access to Podcasts. Podcasts are, at their most basic level, audio-files which can be heard directly through a browser or (as the name suggests) downloaded to a portable audio device such as an iPod.

Gavin Macfie's 57 Degrees North

Outdoor and travel writing from the Highlands of Scotland
gavinmacfie.blogspot.com

If travel-writing of all sorts floats your boat, look no further than Gavin Macfie's blog. Gavin describes himself as an outdoorsman, writer and scientist based in Inverness, but spends his spare time getting to know the landscape on foot, ski, by canoe or in the saddle.

Gavin's blog details his interest in pre-history, and the seeming lack of reading matter on that topic. He describes Neil Oliver's current series on BBC2 "A History of Ancient Britain" and Alistair Moffat's The Scots: A Genetic Journey" on BBC Radio Scotland as excellent programmes on the subject. As well as the usual method of listing topics, Gavin has posted two full-length articles (on the right of his blog page) detailing a claustrophobic snow holing trip to the Cairngorms and an hilarious description of a "Cow Toilet" on Kudle beach in Goa. Both articles are linked by images, rather than text, which is another nice feature available on blogs.

The writing is personal, humorous, informational and entirely reflective of Gavin's clear passion for the outdoors. The blog could be more accurately characterised as a "travelogue".

Sandstone Press

Contemporary Quality Reading
www.sandstonepress.com/blogs/

Not all blogs incorporate images or other multi-media components; some are purely text and are well executed. One such example is the Sandstone Press site which contains blogs written by their published authors.

At the time of writing, there were seven blogs; six authors' and the main Sandstone Press blog. Each of the authors' blogs provides the expected details of their thoughts and opinions on various subjects. However, they also give reasonably detailed accounts of their activities concerning the publicity and promotion of their book(s), their speaking engagements and interviews they've given to local radio and TV. This is a clear demonstration of why writers should be using blogs and how to do so effectively.

Sandstone's blog list is relatively short compared to say, blogger.com, but has an impressive archive of articles spanning nearly two years, which makes for interesting reading and excellent research material.

Sea Penguin by Kate Smart

seapenguin-thecurioussheep.blogspot.com

Kate Smart's blog could never be described as "run of the mill".

By making the rather unusual, but blindingly obvious choice of using the blog as a huge collection of flash-fiction articles, strung together as if they actually exist in a timeline, Kate has made for a fun and sometimes spooky read.

This blog is huge, with 185 top-level articles (or labels) at last count. The top article - "tuppence" at the time of writing - has 87 sub-entries (not comments). Some of the article titles such as heartache removal service, rice pudding challenge, mind muck removal kit and desperate dan's testicles are almost impossible to ignore. By choosing this as a method of publication, Kate clearly demonstrates how blogging can be used to great effect.

Of course, there are too many blogs and not enough space to do justice to them all in this article. I hope that the few examples cited above, has given an idea of the different ways in which blogs can, and are used.

In terms of web-presence and the now familiar topic of Search Engine Optimisation (or SEO), blogs also prove their worth. Due to the nature of their construction, and unlike most ordinary websites, blogs can very easily be searched by Google, Yahoo, Bing and most other search-engines. This greatly increases the chances of your article being returned in a list of results for a given keyword or two, which might just have been searched for by a publisher looking for authors writing about a certain subject.

In conclusion, the importance of having a blog, especially for writers, cannot be understated. Blogs are simple to operate, free of charge and an invaluable means of communication, discussion and marketing. Get yourself a blog today. ■

Just Another Day

Short Story by Maurice Gartshore

He hadn't slept at all. All night she'd thrashed in his head as if she wouldn't let go, and now with the grey light through his open curtains he welcomed the relief of real things again. But she came and went as he dressed and he found himself shouting 'Fuck off! Fuck off!' to chase her away.

Downstairs, as he shook the shredded-wheat box and poured what was left into a bowl, the day ahead took over: the corridor he'd walk down, the banging doors, the shouting from the cloakroom, the drilling bells, the smell of onions later from the dining room, and that stare of Mrs Stone's. Thinking of the usual things comforted him, and he let them settle till she came again in the smell from her pee from the hall: there again, both hands clinging to his arm as they mounted the stairs, her legs floppy so she stumbled step by step. And she was giggling as she did with the gin, falling and giggling as if life was a joke, and it wasn't, it wasn't, and he had to show her. At the top he pulled from her, away, free, and she left him. He hadn't thought she'd fall like that, over and over, thumping and squealing to the bottom. Then she was quiet, her legs gone funny, as if they'd been put on backwards.

Watching his spoon sink into the wheat dust that settled on the milk, he felt his chest heave as if something inside him had been lifted. He began to cry. He didn't often cry now and it took him by surprise, as if a tear-well, long held deep and growing, had burst. Giving way to it, he gasped. The Mickey Mouse clock above the cooker laughed.

He ran the cold tap over his burning arm till it went numb. He thought of going up to her room again but he couldn't face seeing her lying there where he'd dragged her. He'd covered her wet pants with the blue flowered duvet and then, heart pounding, he'd gone through her purse. There was a photo of him which he ripped up. He'd taken seven pounds and some loose change before he caught sight of her open eyes in the dressing-table mirror staring at him. It was as if she knew. He gave the mirror the finger.

For once, the house was quiet. Mona was sleeping over at her friend Laura's so her radio had stayed silent. He'd showered for a change, washing his hair with Mona's special shampoo and sprayed his armpits with his mother's unused deodorant. He felt clean, new, free: master of the house.

His father had been gone for over a year, and he and his mother had tumbled into the hole he'd left, only Mona able to maintain her balance. She'd called his dad a word his mother said she hated even more than she hated the old man. She'd only said it once but somehow from Mona's lips it sounded worse. He'd said it thirty-eight times on his way to the bus that same morning.

He left the soggy remains of his bowl and an arc of pain seared his shoulders as he struggled to pull on his cagoule. He would go to school as usual. He thought all night about what to do but decided he'd go on as if nothing had happened. Inside, he felt calm. It was like the time he'd jumped the river with Marc and Tommy. He wanted in with them and they'd gone to Marley's Wood where the river narrows and rushes between the old weir piles. They'd jumped it, they said, and if he did, he'd be in. He didn't sleep the night before, and after school they trooped up there. But when he stood ready, he'd never felt so calm, so confident. He took a long run and sailed over, clearing it and only just gaining his balance. They hadn't even cheered or anything but as he squelched his way home he felt elated.

He felt that now: that calmness, that sense of defiance. He wondered if he could go through the rest of his life doing things which other people were afraid to do. Maybe he could. He'd make a list of things sometime. He liked lists.

Outside the kitchen door he smashed Mona's wind chimes with his schoolbag and they flew from their hook and clanged like a bunch of musical sausages on the patio. It was drizzling now and the Crescent was stirring. A dog was on three legs against a lamp-post opposite Sadiq's shop and Mr Hadden, his hood up, was loading ladders on to the roof of his van. It was just like any other day he told himself, only better.

He caught the number 18 and arrived earlier than usual. Marc was kicking a tennis ball against the Girl's toilets and he joined in till the playground filled up and the bell went. It was Friday – drama. He liked Miss Calder with her long shiny hair, the way it swung when she'd turn suddenly. She was a good break from old Stone. Some of the kids took the piss out of her and she struggled to keep control, but last week he'd played a bus driver and had the class in stitches. She'd said she'd certainly ride on his bus someday and smiled at him and called him Joe. Today though, she seemed tired and when Marianne threw the pen at Marc and it hit him on the head, she went crazy and screamed. She wasn't the same after that for the rest of the lesson and they didn't do anything interesting.

Back in class after lunch, the chocolate still rich in his mouth, Mrs Stone got them writing. He liked writing, but she never asked him to read out what he'd written. Once though, his story about the Vikings coming to Glasgow had got a laugh, particularly the bit when they rampaged through the Buchanan Galleries. They all liked it when one of the raiders threw a security man over the balcony down three flights of stairs. Today though, they had to write about something they'd really like – that would change their lives. He started writing about Marc's I-pod which he'd dreamed about after Marc brought it to school on his birthday.

What I really want is a I-pod. It cost a lot. It's a wee thing and you need a docking thing (don't know name) and then you set it up and it lights up and you can play tunes. It's great. You get earphones too. All the time I could play music. That is what I would like.

He stopped writing and looked around him. They were different to him. He could smell his deodorant, noticed his bitten nails. He was sure he could smell his trainers so he tucked his feet further under the table. Sarah Stewart's hair cascaded as she wrote, scribbling away madly, then looking up for another idea. He'd never write like her because she used words he'd never heard of. She was always reading. Even when she went on holiday. She told Mrs Stone she took piles of books to read. And Marc over there with his I-pod. His father had his own business and he got everything he wanted. Lucky bastard. He scrunched up his paper and started again.

What I'd like most is a mum and dad. Other kids have mums and dads but not all of them. Other kids have a stable home but not me. My mum's a drinker and dad went away with his girlfriend. Good luck mum says but I liked him even if Mona didn't. Why can't everybody have a mum and dad that would be fairer and anyway if you want to change your life you've got to do it. I did it and now I don't know what happens if its care or what. Anyway its difrent now and I don't care.

He stopped writing just as Mrs Stone told them all to stop. They would read some of them out next day as a nice gentleman from the Gideons was going to give them all a present in the hall in five minutes.

As he lifted his bag to put his story away, Mrs Stone touched him on the shoulder. 'Joe, what have you done to your arm?'

He hadn't realised how far his shirt had ridden up in the fury of writing. The bruises looked bad under the lights of the classroom. 'Bumped it' he said, and he didn't look at her, but continued packing.

'Joe. Look at me.'

'No' he heard himself say.

'Stay behind Joe. I want a word.'

He looked up at her: that fat face, those little eyes that seemed to shine on some and go dead on others. All he saw in her eyes was anger because he'd defied her. What did she care about him? What did she know about him? She'd only liked his Viking stuff because it made the rest of them laugh and that was good for her. She never though he could write well, not the way she thought about Sarah's writing. Why should he give her anything? Why do what she said when he could defy her? Imagine Marc's face if he dared to...

'Fuck off.'

The words were out before he could crush them between thought and sound. She gasped and strode from the room. The classroom went quiet. Marc looked across and laughed in a funny way. Some of the others laughed and some seemed to shrink into themselves when he caught their eyes. In a moment the class were sent out and the Head, Mrs Wilson, came in.

He felt he was in a strange country whose language and gestures he didn't understand, as the two women stood before him, struck dumb. Here he was, Joe Mehan, alone with his teacher and the Head because of a sound he'd made. He saw his mother's dead eyes. The Head said something but he didn't hear it as he barged his way out of the room, the back of his hand brushing against the silk of the Head's blouse. Down the corridor past the janitor's soapy cupboard and out the door into the playground he ran blindly.

He turned left instead of right outside the gate and headed for the woods. He passed mothers with prams, an old man carrying a plastic bag from Tesco. He began sobbing uncontrollably as he ran. He thought of Marc's laughter and wondered what they'd think of him now. Told a teacher where to go. Others had done it. Bobby Graham in P7 had done it a year before and nothing much happened.

He flopped below a tree and felt the wet leaves through his trousers. Didn't matter now anyway did it? Who'd bother now? It was as if his world had moved, the way Stone had told them about the Earth's plates moving. He could feel the things inside him drifting about, shifting position as if nothing knew where it should be. It wasn't like this morning when he was still calm even with the tears. Now for the first time, a great fear clutched him and he began to shake. He heard himself cry out over and over and the sound made it better. He could see himself from above, crouched here like a wee dog, yelping helplessly, till a hand stroked and stroked and a calm settled.

He looked up and saw the man with the Tesco bag bent over him and his lips were moving. His eyes were kind and his hand stroked Joe's soft hair, gently, the way his mother's once did. ■

Six Poets

Coalend Hill Farm 1962
By Pippa Little

I don't remember the Beanley orra-man,
his boots down the lonnen black as a wet day, his caravan
under a butchered elm's imaginary wingspan,
rusted, cantankerous: *'all that can's been done'*,
my mother said, then, low, *'he's God's own one'*.
I can't recall his singing of the Kingdom come,
or whispering from underneath his hands
'if my soul the Lord should take', or how he crept away
like Billy Blin, awake long hours before the blackbirds, eager to begin
carving off a dead lamb's skin to roll one barely-living in
under a dazed ewe, force tongue to tit, tit to tongue :
mole-blind he'd move, from east to western sun, more whole
in his Gomorrah than the doucest thing, but slow,
immortal, helpless as his beasts to conjure up tomorrow.

Coalend Hill Farm 1962 was overall winner of the 2010 Norman MacCaig Poetry Competition.

Tiptoeing up the Mountain
By Simon Jackson

Gasping behind you up the knee turning incline
cobbled with tufts, paved with crack mud,
I am in awe of your graceful ascent.

Heels elevated you tiptoe up the hillside,
above you only clean air, sky,
each loose stone raising you toward the peak,
while I toil behind, flatfooted, breathless,
trying to stamp the mountain flat.

Air
By Maggie Wallis

across an open loom of sky
small birds shuttle threads of song
to and fro to and fro
weaving a fabric, finer
than anything an emperor
might dare not to wear

Moon
By Maggie Wallis

tonight
she's playing at guising her form
a pearl, opalescent in its shell
the eye of a nacreous fish

then head held high, she
slips free of her lingerie
and stand there, naked
as the day she was born

earth science
By Maggie Wallis

Patrick's working on the path again.
He explains to me in scientific terms
the creation of Knockfarrel.
Ah, I say
It's a hardened pluke
on the face of the earth.
I take my leave
and walk through new grass -
baby hair
growing through an ancient scalp.

Gannet
(for Gordon Meade)
By Desmond Graham

Taking the plunge
with a crash
of splintered glass
is something
we could well imagine

but this almost silence
parting the water
with a spear of beak
tunnelling
straight in

and then up so awkwardly
as if admitting
just how impossible
it had been -
that takes some cheek

so easy to dive
right through
so difficult
to clamber back
on nearly nothing

to gain a foothold
on water
and then
take flight

Across the Field
By Anna Macfie

How can I draw close to you
across the years
when you march off alone
- gone off ahead,
just as you always did?

Why don't you wait? Or even turn
your face, but you carry on, intent
on some private quest -

crossing the walled field
towards the river and the hills.

We are all following you now
a disparate tribe, incohesive
and each for our own reasons;
fear, hope, loneliness.

Just as we always did.

It is dark and snow has fallen
unmarked by our passing.

I wait inside the gateless entrance
on your side of the wall
calling my dog.

She runs to me -
picking her way around the iced-up puddle
carefully -
she crosses over to me,

Just as she always did.

Tracked
Tom McCulloch

For months the hare's coveted a winter pelt,
but knows he can't hide his tracks.
If wind weren't so fickle it could've lent an erasing hand.

The white is tempting as a virginal promise.
Anything, after all, can be written on a blank canvas.

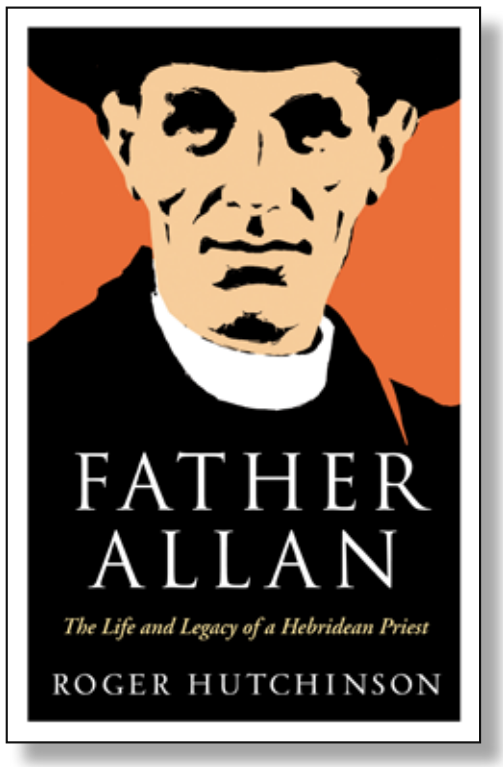
There's where old Cath smoked her Superkings,
over by where the farmer dozed.
And here's me, presuming to stand in their stead.

Sooner be a stranger, sometimes,
pre-determined, like the pylons fading into the bruised east?

There's little truth in winter
and too much sentiment in every snowflake.
Memories are treacherous in the ever-deepening drifts.

But like hare and man on blue winter moor,
all our paths will eventually cross.

REVIEWS



Father Allan: The Life and Legacy of a Hebridean Priest
By Roger Hutchinson
Birlinn
Review by Kenneth Steven

Allan MacDonald was born in Fort William in 1859, in that west coast strip of Catholic country at the heart of which the Young Pretender himself had landed in 1745. He always bitterly regretted having been born just a few crucial miles from the real Gaelic-speaking wilds of Lochaber. Even though his Gaelic was good enough later not only for rich and intellectual conversation in the Outer Isles, but also for poetry that seems to have become stronger and stronger all the time, he himself was supremely aware of only ever being a learner of the language.

I thought I knew something at least of the story of old Catholic Scotland (by that I mean the story of those isolated pockets – especially of the Gaidhealtachd) where the iron claws of the Reformation never reached. What I did not realize fully was the sheer ruthlessness of the persecution, and how this in turn, arguably, had a part to play in the clearance of a Gaelic-speaking island Scotland, where a 'barbaric' language and culture was perceived as going hand in glove with Popery.

This is where Allan MacDonald went after he had entered the priesthood – first to Barra and then to Eriskay. From Hutchinson's account it's fascinating to get a clear sense that even in the last quarter of the 19th Century the Outer Isles were as sharply divided between the 'dark' introspection of Calvinism and the 'bright' celebratory spirit of Catholicism. That Calvinism frowned on anything whatsoever that remembered song or story or poetry (God was the Creator; what right had we humans to sub-create?).

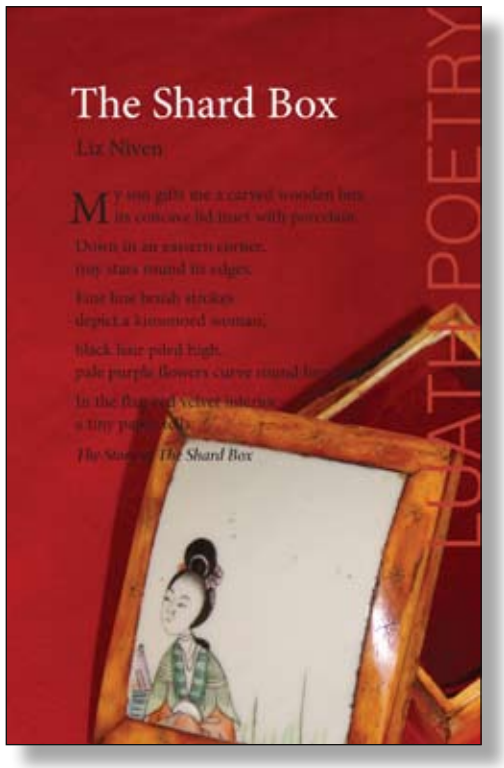
But if the islanders of Eriskay, Barra and South Uist celebrated life through their Catholic faith, it was very much despite the appalling poverty they had to endure. It is amazing to read eye-witness accounts of such hardship and consider they are little more than a hundred years old. It would be a stony-hearted soul indeed whose blood would not boil at some of the descriptions of the deliberately cruel treatment meted out by landowners of the time.

But it's clear that both the author of the book and Father MacDonald himself believed as a result he was in exactly the right place. Here in the Catholic islands a rich store of oral tradition and song had been kept safe because there simply was no schism between the sacred and the secular.

What comes across most powerfully is that Father Allan was an embodiment of that spirit. He was a polymath, hungry for learning of all kinds, be it in history or languages or in the understanding of doctrine. Roger Hutchinson has found account after account of the meetings that Father Allan had, and they shed a wonderful light on the man he must have been. It comes across that he would have been every bit as content in a poor crofthouse on Eriskay, hearing words handed down hundreds of years, as he would have been in a seminary arguing the finer points of some tiny element of doctrine. In fact more than that; he was exactly where he wanted and needed to be, and he was *utterly* content there.

He collected a vast amount of priceless material in his visits (very much in the way James Macpherson had done before him, and Alexander Carmichael in his own lifetime). The only sadness is that he was too generous with his treasure; others saw its rich glinting and could not resist pinching. A gentle man who carried the weight of his learning lightly – joyously, generously.

This is a most skilfully woven account not only of a life but of a world, a world that has been persecuted most shamefully by a Protestant kirk that purports to follow the same Master. Roger Hutchinson has allowed the light to shine through the life of Father Allan clearly and beautifully. I cannot recommend the journey back to those islands and that time it celebrates more highly.



The Shard Box
By Liz Niven
Luath Press
Review by Stuart B. Campbell

When a writer encounters a culture that is so very different from home, the challenges of writing about both the particular characteristics of that culture and the writer's experience of it can be magnified. Disorientation and lack of definition are a real danger as the writer seeks to make sense for the reader and herself of the impact of a truly foreign country. *The Shard Box* is Liz Niven's response to visiting China; that alone as a subject for poetry makes it quite unique. The publisher's back cover blurb says this collection "illustrates China as it is rarely seen". Whether or not that is viewed as a bold claim, it is nonetheless difficult for the reader to approach a subject such as this without being reminded of ones own ideas and perceptions (and maybe even prejudices) and that these might be called into question.

The reader needs a good companion to help them negotiate new territory and Liz Niven fulfils that poetic role sensitively and clearly; she also does that by not avoiding her own vulnerabilities. The fallacy of cultural stereotypes is confronted by the poet reminding herself how she's "never blown a bagpipe, / drank whisky only as a hot toddie cure" and by doing so highlights the pointlessness of her asking her host "Can you play your national instrument". It is the commonality of not fitting the stereotype that allows both to search for more authentic connections. Liz Niven deftly conveys that sense of being dislocated and of seeking to build bridges; she allows the reader to absorb the poet's experience, to gain a sense of being there, slowly: "tiny globes shift under our fingertips. / The East opening for us, that morning like a flower". There is a creative tension generated within this collection between poems that illustrate "Anither culture gap / we dinnae unerstaun"; the contrast between life for the Chinese: "the University dormitories packed / ten students to a tiny room. / Bathroom floor flooded under cracked pipes." and the experience of the visitor: "We slept in moon-white yurts filled with / double bed, television, decorated porcelain water basin."; and those poems that insist (rightly) that a bond can be established "Under the same moon / we lift and lay shared earth. / Let's consider the moon Gate, / we must go through it together.".

The humanity of these poems in obvious, but nowhere in this collection does the poet drift into an easy romantic optimism. It is worth quoting in full 'Aw the Ts in China', as it is almost a statement of intent by the poet:

> Don't mention the three Ts,
> *A wis telt;*
> *Tian'anmen, Tibet, Taiwan.*
>
> *So A didnae.*
> *Bit A drank everythin in.*

Liz Niven is dealing with China is as it is here and now. The poet's eyes are wide open and these poems bear witness to the realities of modern China. 'The song of the migrant worker' portrays these folk as almost expendable in the building of the Olympic stadium, but they hope "We'll return to our fields when work is done, / back to our peasant farming lives". 'Migrant workers' are "folk fleein fae poverty. / […] luikin fir income, / twenty tae a dormitory, / bunk bed if ye're lucky.". Poems like these testify to the hypocrisy of official spin; China giving itself makeover: "New world constructed / from recycled courtyard hutongs, / replicated pagodas"; the reality is "A nation counterfeits itself". There is, though, a hope that China's political isolation will end as "young folk blog in wifi hutongs"; the poet predicts it's "Only a matter of time till / this virtual wall's knocked down.". Despite that, we are reminded that censorship remains. On the English language TV station "It's rare uprisings are permitted, / reported or broadcast"; the state "machine rumbles on, / filtering everything efficiently". Elsewhere, there is an ambivalence about what might indicate progress. In '798 Art District', in disused factories, that "must have been a cold workplace / for blue-overalled citizens", there is now "cutting-edge contemporary art with an / Asian slant". Yet it is not a triumph of bohemian expression; the "shop stocked with books and prints" and "reproductions in cardboard tubes" tells us that, no less than in the West, art has become a commercial commodity. We are also confronted with our own collusion: "'Made in China' clothes much of the West / Maybe check that before voicing protest.". These poems tell of the confusion and complexity that is modern China and the poet, as a westerner, is sometimes unable to be little more than a spectator, but maintains an objective watch "speirin, wunnerin, whit wey / it micht gan oan the lang lobbie tae democracie".

About a third of these poems are in Scots and these are particularly powerful. The effect of using Scots is that these poems seem to speak more directly to the reader, make more distinct the poet's voice and engage us almost conversationally. Besides, there's sheer delight in lines like "A fin a cinema shawin Inglis leid / subtitlt Chinese films.". The use of Scots also allows us to encounter a dragon who is trying to modernise himself: "A've goat, ma shades, ma ipod, ma Nokia / An a've stoapt spittin fire.". He's not entirely a reformed character, he's as wide as the Clyde, and sees the main chance: "The West doesnae like it? / The West can tak a rin an jump tae itsel / A'll tell you this, / It'll no much maitter soon whit the West wants." and that perhaps makes this dragon more to be worried about than his ancestors. Four poems from the Chinese are also included and are beautifully represented. The value in these being translated into Scots, rather than ubiquitous English, is that a sense of a specific culture is preserved, as is their authenticity. These translations a represent a continuity from a pre-Mao China (Chang Yu) to the contemporary (Bei Dao) but a contemporary Scots reader will easily identify with their content. It would have been good to read more of this sort of work.

There is much to be enjoyed in this collection and it should be valued for the insights, complexities and challenges it presents the reader. At this point in time when China is changing, this collection of poetry is very necessary; its worth might very well increase as circumstances evolve.

North End of Eden
By Christine de Luca
Luath Press
Review by Elizabeth Rimmer

I was first attracted to Christine de Luca's work, precisely because it was in Shetlandic. I like the tang and texture of it, its rough edges and unfamiliar cadences that draw my attention to the archaeology of language. Words like *'blyde', 'gaet'* and *'pooch'* show where English and Shetlandic diverged from a common root and occasionally you get words like *'sainin'* (blessing) or *'kyunnen'* (rabbit or coney) which English used to have, but which have simply disappeared.

I also love the way Shetlandic is so closely hefted to the land and the way of life. It has adapted closely to the specialist needs of a community which lives intimately with the land and the sea. There are words for things an urban community doesn't notice, words like *'bretsh', 'lönabrack',* or *'shörmal'* ,dealing with the sea and the coast, *'blaahöl'*, or *'taing'*, for landscape features, *'flan'* (a gust of wind) *'hairst-blinks'* (summer lightning) or *'skalva',* (large-flaked snow) for wind, storm and weather, and like *'almark'* (a sheep that jumps fences) for farming . Reading Shetlandic extends our awareness into a new territory, but it also reinvigorates our understanding and increases our sensitivity to our own.

In the introduction to her earlier collection *Parallel Worlds* Christine de Luca says that she writes in Shetlandic to

> *pay homage not just to the people and landscape which formed me, but to the language – or dialect – which allowed me expression.*

but the issue seems to be kept somewhat at arms length. In conversation about that time she once expressed some concern that writing in Shetlandic might become restrictive. It would feel contrived and artificial to write poems that native speakers did not want to read, and there seemed to be an almost exclusive demand from them for poems about nature or nostalgia.

In *North End of Eden*, Christine de Luca has triumphantly resolved this dilemma, and her new collection has a much wider scope, more confidence, and considerably more authority. True to her roots, she now writes

> *If my poems do not speak to other Shetlanders*
> *I might as well give up. The writing has to be*
> *authentic, it should sing with their cadence,*
> *one which reflects the elemental nature of their*
> *surroundings.*

Now, however, support from editors and publishers at home, plus recognition from translators abroad who are willing to work directly from Shetlandic, has grounded her poetry more thoroughly in her native language, much to the benefit, not only of this book, but of Scottish poetry at large.

There are sixty-seven poems in this book, two-thirds of them in Shetlandic. But this does not mean that the poems are all about Shetland. There are, of course, many poems about the landscape, people and history of the islands, but there are also poems like 'Trespass', 'Russian Doll' and 'Haemfaring',

> *O aa da identities stakit athin wis*
> *whit een is da primal, da sharpest an truest:*
> *da haert-holl time canna erase?*

which deal more broadly with the sense of being at home, creating a home, a national identity.

There are several poems which featured in the anthology *The Hand That Sees* (edited by Stewart Conn) – I particularly liked 'Da Seevent Bairn', but it's hard to choose - and some reflecting on her mother's death from breast cancer – particularly Severed which starts as observation of a statue in a museum, but creates a moving parallel between her family's ritual of perming her mother's hair, and the care she received at the end.

Christine de Luca has also included poems about her travels, and this is where the collection reaches both a centre of gravity and a growing point. As she writes in 'Nae Aesy Mizzer'

> *Shetland isna banished tae a box*
> *i da Moray Firt or left oot aa tagidder*
>
> *- ta scale up da rest – but centre stage.*

From her heartland of Shetland, Christine de Luca looks out to Finisterre, Quebec, India, Italy, Thailand, finding ways for marginal cultures to speak directly to each other without mediation or modification by the mainstream.

> *See me noo as du wid a aald map: finger*
> *Hit lichtly; enjoy hits mizzerlessness,*
> *da marginalia, da element o winder.*

It seems to me that the greatest strengths of contemporary Scottish poetry are its rich diversity both in the languages available to us and in poetic form and subjects, and our refusal to reduce ourselves to the margins of British writing. In this collection Christine de Luca shows herself to be not only a heavyweight poet in her own right but also a trailblazer for the rest of us.

And on this Rock : the Italian Chapel, Orkney.
By Donald S. Murray.
Birlinn
Review by Lesley Harrison

Probably every visitor to Orkney visits the Italian Chapel. It sits up in a grassy field overlooking the sea, its round back echoing the low hills round it. The skies are massive; the islands are flattened by them, and on some days seem to bear their weight.

In World War II the Royal Navy fleet was anchored at Scapa Flow, an anchorage of fifty square miles partially enclosed by Orkney Mainland and the South Isles. Churchill ordered the narrow sea channels between South Ronaldsay, Burray and Holm to be blocked, so limiting the entrances to Scapa Flow and making it easier to defend the fleet. Prisoners of war, most of whom were Italian, were put to work building the Churchill Barriers that now make it possible to drive from Birsay all the way down to within sight of the Scottish mainland.

In his book *And on this Rock: the Italian Chapel, Orkney* Donald S. Murray spends some time recreating the Italian prisoners' first impressions of Orkney. "To their eyes, there seemed something almost inhuman in this landscape. They looked to the ocean for sign of orc or sea monster. As if they were Pinocchio arriving on Busy-Bee Island, they wondered if the place was inhabited by civilised people".

Murray's own kind of storytelling is a deliberate blend of fact, fable and historical fiction, occasionally interspersed with his own poetry. He begins his story like a folk tale, imagining the Italian prisoners on the darkest day of the year "when the sun is spent and sea and sky blur together", the sea a "white-maned dragon prepared to swallow all that came in its path". Orkney is a "place for ghosts and legends, myths and fairy tales". Throughout the book he often refers to the story of Pinocchio : the helium-filled barrage balloons above Burray and South Ron and moored to trawlers round Scapa Flow are "as bizarre and implausible ... as the puppet theatre Pinocchio visited when he ran away from Geppetto".

He explains his style in the Notes at the end of the book, saying that he was inspired by Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2001). Based on a true story, the narrator is an officer in the Moroccan army who, on being accused of collusion in a failed coup, was interred for 20 years in a tiny underground cell in complete darkness. The narrator of Ben Jelloun's novel tells his fellow prisoners stories, reinventing and renewing them in order to avoid contemplating their slow death, and to stay human with each other. In *And on this Rock*, the Italian prisoners constantly refer to folktales to find parallels for their circumstances, and Murray frequently alludes to the same tales in descriptive passages. Murray says he adopted this device of weaving fact and fiction "to add life and energy to the narrative", as well as a "depth of language". Readers will have to decide for themselves whether this works. Certainly the Italian prisoners did not experience anything like the torture and slow death of inmates of Tazmamart prison. They argued about their working conditions and wrote letters home. They left the camp to fish, go to the cinema or visit local families. I found myself wondering why Murray had turned his back on the huge amount of data, especially in oral histories, choosing to create fictitious events instead. However it might have been the fact that these sources are used so thoroughly by other authors that encouraged him to try a different tack.

Much of the early chapters are concerned with the general experience of war, and he describes the prisoners' probable journey from their camp in Egypt, sailing round the Cape of Good Hope, docking briefly at the British port at Freetown, Sierra Leone before arriving at Liverpool and then heading north by train. They were gathered and held in Edinburgh Castle, and some were then sent north again to Orkney by packet steamer, arriving in January 1941. Among these were artists and craftsmen who already had established reputations at home in Italy. This much, I think, is true. He quotes from Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* to describe the Italian Front, even though this book is set in the First World War. (*The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* also appears in his bibliography, but I couldn't find it in the text.)

The prose itself is colourful and expressive. Murray creates several vivid characters to guide the narrative, including that of Dominico Chiocchetti from Moena in the north, who considers himself not wholly Italian but Ladin. His native tongue is a rough version of Latin that originated with occupying Roman soldiers, mixing through the centuries with local dialects. Dominico often retreats into a private world where he is back in his village, surrounded by Ladin speakers, learning his trade as a painter at the parish church in Urtijei. Murray says that this man's faith was strengthened by the natural beauty he witnessed among the misery of POW camps, and in *And on this Rock* he is the chief force behind the creation of the Chapel. The real Dominico Chiocchetti was interviewed by the BBC in the 1960s; he also revisited Orkney in 1960, and wrote articles for *The Orkney Herald*. I presume Murray drew on these to recreate Chiocchetti's character,

▶▶

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▶ though neither are quoted or cited in the bibliography.

The lack of footnotes makes it impossible to separate fact from fiction, and Murray really does give himself free reign in his imaginative reconstruction of events. For example, one night the new camp commander orders all the prisoners outside to watch the Northern Lights. "Some of them were shivering with wonder." While marveling at the sky, Dominico remembers the words of a priest in Italy describing God wrapped in light, and is there and then compelled to ask permission to build the chapel. This episode is entirely fictitious, but it gives Murray the opportunity to compare the names of celestial bodies in English, Italian and his own Gaelic.

The downside of this device is that, in writing the story as a folktale, the characters become simple and emblematic. For example, following ongoing unrest and unwillingness to work, there is a visit to the camp from an elderly gentleman with blue eyes and a quiet, musical voice. "My name is Flett," he says. He describes the difficulties of those living in the South Isles, and how a causeway would "bring light and peace and hope" to the island. Murray does intersperse the narrative with wisps of conversation with Orcadians who witnessed these events first hand. He also describes the urban myths that grew up after events such as the sinking of the Royal Oak in 1939, including that of the man who stopped his car to "take the sea air" at Kirk Sound and watched U-boat *U-47* sail out of the Flow, the sea ablaze behind it. The very few local folk who did own a car in 1939 found themselves vilified by their neighbours; all part of the general paranoia of war.

The Italian Chapel is still used today for religious services, and *The Orcadian* regularly reports visits of descendants of the Italian POWs. Murray finishes with a lovely story of a christening in which he imagines the ghosts of the Italian prisoners mingling with the congregation and marveling at the new baby. Murray's retelling of the history of the Italian Chapel is often whimsical, and this might turn some readers away from what is a really powerful and very moving human story, still recent enough in our history to be recalled and retold accurately. However his prose is fluid and descriptive, and the story put together very well, making it ultimately a very satisfying, if slightly perplexing, read.

From The Small Presses: Two reviews by Peter Urpeth

Grace Notes 1959
By Jim Carruth
published by Dreadful Night Press (limited edition of 200 copies)
Design and artwork by Atalanta
www.jimcarruth.co.uk/publications
Review by Peter Urpeth

Im Carruth's *Grace Notes 1959* is the result of an imaginative commission by Glasgow Jazz Festival, and is a series of pieces arising from the poet's response to four seminal jazz albums from the year 1959. The albums in question are Ornette Coleman's *The Shape of Jazz To Come*, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*, Charles Mingus's *Mingus Ah Um*, and Dave Brubeck's *Time Out*. The collection is organised in sequences that divide the poems into pieces on each album with 'breaks' reflecting on issues of personal freedom and the socio-political issues that were so to the fore in the divided society in which these albums emerged.

The year in question, 1959, was a seminal year for jazz in the USA, but these recordings testify to neither a finishing point in which the varied trajectories of exploration reached a conclusion, or a start point for entirely new things. More, it was a year in which important records were made that established a kind of new high base camp for the music - and the now globally recognised and unique sounds of both Miles and Ornette were to receive their most forthright and clear statements. The albums also chart a key moment in the changing structure of jazz performance with both Miles and Ornette providing new directions for structured improvisation, both of which were to have a profound impact on what happened in jazz after 1959. Ornette gave melody and rhythm back to improvisation, removing the rigid reliance on chord progressions that had become a feature of hard bop. Brubeck's music at this time was a complex, structured and formalised affair involving detailed changes and compound time, but in Paul Desmond on saxophone, Brubeck chose a frontman for the band whose cool sound belied the artistry of improvisation. Mingus's music is perhaps the complicated in terms of its roots. Mingus was a true original, a genius bass player and composer who drew as much on blues and gospel as he did on recent developments in jazz. Looking back now, it is difficult to see why so much of the music of Ornette, for example, was vilified at the time. Ornette's music, like that of Miles, is pure melody, if anything a music that had rid itself of the complexity that had stifled the expressive range of jazz.

It is not easy to draw the obvious conclusion that the music of 1959 fits into a black and white cultural divide, or even a north east / south west divide in terms of the styling and influences on the music, for here we have three albums by leading black musicians, and one by a white musician; three albums from musicians born in the southern and south western states, and one born in the north. Miles' *Kind of Blue* features white pianist Bill Evans (whose influence on this music was far bigger than the piano stool on a few numbers in the studio), and Dave Brubeck's *Time Out* quartet featured black musician Eugene Wright on bass, and his inclusion in the line-up led to Brubeck cancelling a number of concert dates for the band as white club owners were none too impressed with the idea of a mixed race band performing on their stages, and this was a factor in the TV coverage of Brubeck's Quartet at the height of their fame - a grotesque phenomena that Jim Carruth covers with a clarity and directness of language in the poem 'From Father To Son' that is a hallmark of this collection:

ii.
Dave's refusal to play
on that music show
when they were riding high
in the pop charts
left TV producers confused.

All they had asked
was that bassist Eugene Wright
should remain out of shot.
After all he was
a Negro.

So what(as it were) of all this history? Well, it's here to show that the task of organising a personal response to a music with such complex aural immediacy produced in a time and place divided by profound racialism, and expressing that in poetry, is no easy job. A great deal of clarity of thought and response is required for such a task, and it is a credit to Jim Carruth that through this maze of elements he has produced a controlled poetry of great economy and precision, and with a clear love of the music that inspired his thoughts. There are pieces here that are straightforward in their construction, and a good number of word constructs and word grids. Some of the pieces swirl around the page, others are a line on their own. There is no better example of the constructs in this collection than in the piece 'Freedom At The Five Spot' in which neat rows of three words on three lines work with both freedom and structure, which is so apt for the music in question. I must also say that I am not big on font play, but here the design is tight and expressive and not overplayed.

Jim Carruth has achieved a lot in this collection. I love this music too and I know how easy it would be to swamp the page with words in its honour. I can't recall reading a poetry collection on jazz in recent years that is as good and as honest and open as this. It is ironic that Jim Carruth has the tag 'rural poet', for in this collection he clearly demonstrates that his art is well up to the job of addressing diverse and fundamental issues, as it his learning about the best time to shear a sheep from an elderly hill farmer. I guess that in all circumstances the poet is listening, and like the music he pays homage to in this collection, listening is an art as fundamental for the poet as it is the musician.

The Man Who Forgot How To / Black Motel
by Graham Fulton
published by Roncadora Press with monotypes by Hugh Bryden (limited edition of 300 copies)
www.hughbryden.com
Review by Peter Urpeth

In the same way as Jim Carruth's collection is as much an object/book of desire as it is poetry, Graham Fulton's double sided collection is a beautiful and tactile production, which thankfully reflects the quality of the word content. So where do I start? One half of this long-thin / thin-long book is the collection *Black Motel*, turn it over and upside down and there's the other half, *He Man Who Forgot How to?*

Black Motel: This half of the collection features 20 poems with single word titles. I regret giving away the punchline, but here goes. The poems are a sequence of twenty recounted dreams the author had in the winter of 2006, and each piece is given a single word title.

Dream writing is an impossible process by definition. The conscious author is compelled by that condition to intervene in the recounting. The temptation as a reader is to analyse the author, to further root the meaning of these words back to the control and intention of their author, perhaps with a force that is in ways greater than that which we read the words of the author awake. Does dream writing resolve the author of responsibility for his work? But the reading can be freer, too, it is easier to disengage from the need for meaning and to allow the flow of images and words to be more joyful. I confess to laughing with the poet. The absurd juxtapositions. The brutality and delicacy of events and propositions on successive lines. The fact that there are three Kirk Douglas's of differing disposition, that there is a half-inch high assassin on the loose causing havoc in the countryside, that the Croatian labourer does not emerge from his red tent.

The author's intervention is sparse and the rhythm of his words and lines is short and precise, a style that is high suitable to the content, it renders the work accessible, and the entire sequence has a compelling playfulness.

As to the other half of this collection - *The Man Who Forgot How to* - there is no note as to whether the poems originate in a state of full consciousness or not. The poems feature narratives that (generally) stem from descriptive, (auto)biographic titles (the first person is a common view point in this work). The subject matter stems from the everyday and the common place but with a distortion or an absurdity. Perhaps the narratives give us moments of differing but equal realities?

The author's sharpness of observation, of the movement and tone in everyday speech, blends that absurdity with the starkly real, as though the truth is best observed from a slight distance.

Like the poems in *Black Motel,* Graham Fulton's control of the line enables his work to flow with myriad differing patterning, sometimes with regular beats, other times with the freedom of the free jazzers mentioned above. For this reviewer, in these experimental works, these art objects, Graham Fulton achieves a poetry of originality, dynamism and freshness that confirms him as one of Scotland's vital contemporary voices. ■

CONTRIBUTOR'S BIOGRAPHIES

Amy Anderson has been writing for five years and is currently on the Clydebuilt 4 Poetry Apprenticeship Scheme. She is working towards her first Pamphlet.

Jean Atkin's short collection *The Treeless Region*, was published in 2010 by Ravenglass Poetry Press. Her pamphlet *Lost At Sea* has just been published by Roncadora Press.

Meg Bateman: Na h-òraidiche aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Chaidh an dà leabhar aice, *Aotromachd agus Soirbheas* a chur air adhart do dhuais "leabhar na bliadhna" ann an 1997 agus 2007.

Maoilios Caimbeul is from Skye. He is Gaelic Writer in Residence at this year's StAnza festival which celebrates the centenary of the birth of Somhairle MacGill-Eain (Sorley MacLean).

Stuart B. Campbell lives in Portsoy on the Moray Firth. His latest collection of poetry, *In Defence of Protozoans* is due to be published in the summer.

Catriona Child recently completed an MA with distinction in Creative Writing from Lancaster University . She lives in Edinburgh and is working on her first novel.

Regi Claire is Swiss by birth and upbringing, but writes in English. Twice short-listed for a Saltire Book of the Year Award, she is the author of a novel and two short story collections. Her most recent book is *Fighting It*.

Mark Edwards lives and works in Aberdeen. *Clearout Sale*, his first collection of poems and stories, was published by Andromache Books in 2009.

Maurice Gartshore won the Soutar Prize in 2010. His work has featured on Radio Scotland and at the Pitlochry Festival Theatre. He is a short story writer and poet who lives in Crieff.

Rody Gorman: Ann an dreuchd mar Bhàrd air Mhuinntearas aig Sabhal Mòr Ostaig an-dràsta. Cruinneachadh ùr Beartan *Briste* air fàire aige bho Chlò Oilthigh Cheap Breatainn.

Desmond Graham's eighth collection, *The Scale of Change* is due from Flambard in April. *A Gdańsk Sketchbook* 1984–2008, his poems about Poland, were published there on the thirtieth anniversary of Solidarity (Gdańsk 2009).

Lesley Harrison lived on Eday, Orkney until recently. Her poetry pamphlet, a collaboration with artist Laura Drever, will be published in June 2011.

Simon Jackson has been British Gas Young Playwright of the Year and has won The Grace Dieux Writers' Prize. He has been director of Living Arts Space Theatre Company and is currently working with Billy Bragg on a music video.

Stephen Keeler is a teacher and writer. He recently moved to Ullapool where he hopes to continue teaching and writing.

Pippa Little is Lowland Scots, but now lives in Northumberland. Her third collection, *Overwintering*, is due from OxfordPoets in 2012. She fell in love with Assynt last summer.

John A. Love was Area Officer for Scottish Natural Heritage covering the Uists, Barra and St Kilda. He still lives in South Uist, works as a freelance author, and gives illustrated lectures about the Hebrides and travels to many other parts of the world.

Lodaidh MacFhionghain: À Ceap Breatainn. Cruinneachadh *Fàmhair agus Dàin Ghàidhlig Eile* (Clò Oilthigh Cheap Breatainn 2008).

Anna Macfie grew up on Knoydart. She works in ecological research and with children in schools. She lives in Glenurquhart with her partner and daughter.

Crìsdean MacIlleBhàin: À Glaschu bho thùs ach a' fuireach ann am Budapest fad beagan bhliadhnaichean a-nis. 'S e an cruinneachadh às ùire leis *An Daolag Shìonach* (Oilthigh Ghlaschu).

Aonghas MacNeacail is an award-winning poet (including Scottish Writer of the Year 1997), journalist and broadcaster, working mostly between English and Gaelic.

Hugh McMillan has published five full collections of poetry, the latest being *The Lost Garden* (Roncadora Press 2010). He lives in Penpont in Dumfries and Galloway.

Tom McCulloch is a Highland poet currently resident in the Oxfordshire Flatlands. His prose and poetry has appeared in several journals.

Màiri NicGumaraid: Às na Lochan, Eilean Leòdhais. Cruinneachaidhean bàrdachd leatha: *Eadar Mi 's a' Bhreug agus Ruithmean 's Neo-Rannan* (Coiscéim).

Elizabeth Rimmer has lived in Stirling since 1982. Her first collection of poems, *Wherever We Live Now*, will be published by Red Squirrel in 2011.

Tracey S. Rosenberg won a 2010/11 New Writers Award and is working on a full-length poetry collection. Her novel *The Girl in the Bunker* (Cargo Publishing) is due this summer.

Tony Ross is a software developer living in Tain. He has authored newsletters, technical articles, bulletins and manuals. He is currently working on his first novel, and likely to be for some time!

Ian Stephen is a writer and artist from the Isle of Lewis. He has received bursaries from the Scottish Arts Council, won the Christian Salvesen/Robert Louis Stevenson award, and in 2004, was the first artist in residence at StAnza, Scotland's annual poetry festival.

Kenneth Steven lives in Highland Perthshire; he's a poet, translator and children's author. His collection of short fiction, *The Ice and other stories*, appeared from Argyll in 2010.

Alessandra Trinidad, originally from the Philippines, now lives in Aberdeen. So much of her writing depends upon a soft-green, second-hand, Smith-Corona typewriter.

Peter Urpeth is a writer and musician. He is HI-Arts' writing development coordinator and lives on Lewis.

Maggie Wallis lives in the Highlands. She loves to weave with words, colours and textiles.

Ross Wilson comes fae Fife. His first chapbook will be published in 2012 by Calder Wood Press.

Howard Wright lives and works in Belfast. His pamphlet, *Blue Murder* (Templar Press) will be published around Easter 2011. His first collection, *King of Country* (Blackstaff), was published last year.

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