



# STRAVAIG#5



Scottish  
Centre  
for  
Geopoetics

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**Expressing the Earth: A Trans-disciplinary Conference** *Call for Engagement: Creative workshops, presentations, papers and performances*

**Scottish Centre for Geopoetics** *Membership Details*

*Design: Bill Taylor*





# Expressing the Earth

**Norman Bissell**

Each issue of *Stravaig* has its own internal logic. In the case of this issue the invitation that went out was for essays, poems and images in some way related to geopoetics, a very wide remit. As a result, the work that came in was extremely varied in content and for a long time it was difficult to see how it could work together. However, once Jane Verburg, the winning essayist from the Hugh Miller Writing Competition, and Antonia Thomas, the runner-up, had agreed to allow us to publish their entries, it became apparent that their individual creative responses to the geology of Hugh Miller would provide the bedrock that would bookend this issue.

Poems about climate change and particular places also emerged as major themes and the irony is that the renewable energy that is required to combat global warming itself raises conservation issues when wind turbines are proposed in scenic areas. Lisa Macdonald's essay highlights this dilemma in acute form in the change needed to ensure the survival of communities like Coigach in the Highlands.

It is fitting that this issue of *Stravaig* should begin to explore the work of Nan Shepherd, particularly her stravaiging in and writing about the

Cairngorms, which is only now being recognised as significant 25 years after her death. Fitting also that a majority of the submissions we received and selected are from women writers when the geopoetics 'canon' has tended until recently to be dominated by men.

The wide ranging essay by Bill Eddie illuminates what drives the avid ornithologist to try to track down a rare species like the wall creeper and argues passionately that we must reinvigorate a poetic interpretation of the Earth and re-learn how to 'see' with all our senses. Indeed, geopoetics is as much, if not more, a sensitive and intelligent way of perceiving the world as it is a world outlook, and this comes through strongly in many of the poems included in this issue and in Hugh Miller's advice, which Jane Verburg and Antonia Thomas have followed so well, to 'learn to make a right use of your eyes'.

The use of not just sight but all our senses when we go out into the world in order to express it creatively will form an important part of the *Expressing the Earth* geopoetics conference to be held on the Isles of Seil, Easdale and Luing, and at Kilmartin Glen in Argyll, in June 2017. The creative work in a variety of forms which emerges from that event will form the basis of the next issue of *Stravaig* as well as of possible future exhibitions of that work. Invitations to participate in the conference will soon be extended far and wide.

Meanwhile, enjoy issue 5 and do let us know your thoughts about its contents and the new format which Bill Taylor has kindly designed and created for *Stravaig*.

# Learn to make a right use of your eyes

*Jane Verburg*

Fossils are ghosts. Ghosts that I can hold in my hand. Turn in my pocket. Ghosts that last beyond a moment. Fossils stay. They are solid and dependable. Once a nodule is split, it stays split. I can't change the split, can't change the fossil inside. It is. And it will remain.

I have one here. A feathery echo. Filigree tidelines drawn across a sea pebble. Perfect as a hand hold. An anchor to the past. Tonight I use it to weigh open pages. I found it down on the seashore, on the east beach below the midden and the archaeology of medieval Cromarty. I'd like to ask you about it.

Sometimes I sense you about the place. I have walked the Vennels and felt the fringes of your shepherd's plaid brush my arm. I have been at the corner of Church Street at Lammastide and seen you heading off to the Clach Malloch, hammers stuffed into your pockets. Once I saw you and Lydia up in the woods, giggling.

You often saw ghosts threaded through the stairs of time. You said you knew the tilt of old John Feddes wandering in the dark in his light-blue greatcoat. The night your father died you saw a dis severed hand and arm stretch towards you; five years old. Saw straight through where the body should have been to the objects beyond. A ghost. A fleeting fossil. Nothing left for you to hold. Nothing left for you to see and study. No wonder you became fascinated by stony ghosts that stay where they are; caught in their matrix forever.

A fossil is a petrified thing. Once living, now turned to stone. Did you begin to ossify when your father drowned in the man-stealing sea? A few years later, were you gulping for air, calcifying, under your mother's rejection and the death of both your sisters? You wrote that the Accursed Stone, the Clach Malloch, underwent a feverish dream of intense molten heat and overpowering pressure. But how much pressure and sadness can a child contain? How many layers of grief can land on such small shoulders without change? Much later your eldest child died. And more years again, you had a fearful dream the very night you lifted your fisherman's jersey and shot into your skin. Stratification comes in many forms. The delicate layers rot, the scaled harder layers remain and the die is cast. The earth is a book of geological pages and epochs. You were a book. We all are.

At the low point of a spring tide, I climb in to the marble-producing Doocot Cave. A single rock pigeon stays. Here, where bats, like fossils, are locked for winter torpor in crevices and sharp-edged cracks; I rest on the story of a man searching for his wife amongst the mermaids. You too stayed a night here with gasping sea ghosts. So many tales, so many layers. Each of us: a precariously balanced mould with crushed internal features.

In the gloaming a sun-gilt sea outlines the promontory. Curlews etch the crooked bay. I pace the South Sutor; with fish-bearing Old Red Sandstone and Conglomerate below. Could we be formed in some way by the bedrock below us? Could our natures be influenced by the characteristics





*Cromarty beach with a view of the Sutors*

of the geology in which we live? Could the red sandstones that have been dug from this hillside and that have built my home somehow infuse my very being? You gathered fossil fragments - squashed, contorted jigsaw pieces - collectively revealing the scope and shape of some strange creature. You walked these pathways, followed the contours, knew when a nodule might release another ghost into the world. Did you fear that one day your own father and all the lost souls from your life, would walk, arms out-stretched down the Sutor towards you?"

You touched the cold enamel scales of *Osteolepis macrolepidotus*, cracked open from its sea-washed nodule. A story opened, a page in an ancient book, a folktale whispered from the rocks. You: part sennachie, part religious scientist. May be it is not only the Earth that holds deep time and folded complexities but also ourselves. You call me to observe even the commonest of things. And I try. I watch the seasons kiss the seashore. I know the prevailing winds from the lichen on the rowans and the tilt of the downy birches. Once I touched a dying woodcock when the ground froze through December and into January. I know where the woodpecker raised her young last spring and I watch the treecreepers with their downturned bills skirting ivy-ed ash trees. I hear the chaffinches' warning calls, the wrens alarming my approach, the redshanks as they move ahead of me. I know where the ferns grow greenest and which beech will fall in the next gale and even where the yellow shells get swirled and gather. I collect sea-scoured pebbles with grooves like runes, like Darwin's tree of life; keep them in a basket in the hall. But I do not notice the blue tits' nest and the bull-finches' perch nor have I plotted the edges of the buzzards' territory. The exposed Conglomerate by the Target Stone is pointed out to me not observed by me.



*Conglomerate*

I am learning to use my eyes - all my senses - still learning.

Your words stay with me as I take another step along the strandline, as I watch an oystercatcher return, over and over, to her drowned partner.





*Hugh Miller Memorial plaque, Cromarty*



# Phronima – A Hyperiid Amphipod

*Lisa Macdonald*

Clear, transparent but for my brackish brown eye  
Inside the sucked-out shell of my salp -  
He fed me – I hunker and fold my legs.  
I course in his barrel  
The wilful currents of brine.

It took Twitter four hours to name me:  
A family's winter shore storm treasure find.



*Phronima*

# Out from Clashnettie

*David Francis*

I walk through the quiet glen  
into a rapid cross-fire of images:

a hanging buzzard, a quivering scut  
a rising and falling helix of peewits  
fieldfares swinging through the air  
like iron filings pulled by some unseen magnet  
the wide, wide wings of a grey heron  
folding in as it lands by the rippling lochan

A squall of chaffinches flutters,  
perches, considers, moves on.

One glimpse makes a song.

# To Laura at Forty

*David Francis*

Standing by Roag,  
the sea loch at your gate,  
you sense liminal currents  
flowing between your remembering  
and your imagining,  
drawing you to the tantalising horizon.

Over it the sea road rolls out and away,  
pre-figuring companioned journeys,  
each of you singular but paired,  
twinning orbiting planets  
the one held in the other's pull,  
spinning like tandem wheels.

Out and away, out and over  
deserts and tundra,  
through forests and cities,  
ice and dust, to oceans  
that carry waves to your door.



# Nan Shepherd: An Early Geopoet\*

*James McCarthy*

I first encountered Nan Shepherd in the relatively recent writings of the landscape writer and broadcaster Robert Macfarlane – and was quite captivated. Nan lived all her long life (1893-1981) in Peterculter and was proud of this Aberdeenshire association. She was an Aberdeen University graduate (like myself) who maintained a close link with her *alma mater* throughout her life. Born to a middle-class family, she nevertheless developed a remarkable insight into the life and language of the poor farming communities of the rural hinterland, described often through dialogue in the local vernacular in her three novels.

Published in the short period between 1928 and 1933, they are now recognised as significant contributions to the Scottish literary renaissance of that time and set in the small communities of North East Scotland – a precursor of *Sunset Song*.



*Nan Shepherd*

She was a pioneer in women's writing in Scotland, focussing especially on their struggle to escape a patriarchal society. Jessie Kesson attributed her own start in a distinguished writing career to Shepherd's advice and encouragement, but she was also a valued confidante of Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, and many other literary figures. It was Kesson who said that she possessed 'a grace of the soul' expressed in discretion and reticence.

Nan was a charismatic teacher of English, initially at the Aberdeen Training Centre for Teachers (subsequently to become the Aberdeen College of Education) throughout her working life, encouraging her mainly female students to embrace the wider world, but not to despise their often impoverished backgrounds and to constantly seek fresh knowledge – a topic constantly reiterated in her novels. An enthusiastic hill walker, she organised trips for her students into the nearby Cairngorms, introducing

them to the geology and natural history of the largest area of subarctic environment in Britain, with all its wonders. (As the former Deputy Director of the Nature Conservancy Council with responsibility for this contentious area this contributor feels a special connection with her work.) It was my colleague, Dr. Grant Roger, who is sadly no longer with us, who introduced Nan to the botanical riches of the massif. Her influence on her students can be gauged by the number who, often established in one-teacher schools, invited her to stay with them, from Galloway to the Northern Isles.

In 1934 she published *In the Cairngorms*, a paean in poetry to the mountains with which she so closely identified – but also expressing her own personal loves and anguished longings. She worked long and hard on her poetry – a form which she claimed ‘offered glimpses of the burning heart of all life.’ Only recently, approaching my 80<sup>th</sup> year, have I come to appreciate this insight, which converts poetry from a mere literary device to something of a quite different order of importance in reflecting a deeper level of life experience, especially in relation to the natural world. It is nothing if not about life itself. The mountain landscape apart, she is particularly entranced by water – from the the stillness and clarity of Loch Avon to the Highland torrents. In the very first lines of *In the Cairngorms*, she declaims

‘Oh. burnie with the glass-like shiver, singing over stone’

– which come very close to the theme of *Tao: The Watercourse Way* by Alan Watts i.e. the flow of a natural stream reflecting, in accordance with the great Chinese philosophers, the spontaneous harmony of an interdependent universe, going its own way. (She was in company with MacDiarmid who declared ‘aye, and ilka drap a world/Bigger than ‘a Mankind has yet unfurled.’)

But it was her last work, *Living Mountain*, published in 1977, having lain unregarded in a drawer from the 1940s, that establishes her as an original geopoet for its extraordinary deep identification with the natural environment – a meditational work with Zen-like undertones. The title of this journal absolutely encapsulates Nan’s approach to the mountain landscape. Abjuring the predominately male preoccupation with conquering summits, she described her *stravaiging* into her beloved mountain range as a journey into *Being*.... *I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am.* I use the word **into** very deliberately as it expresses both the outward and the inward journey, while not neglecting the sensual pleasure of the body’s response to activity, especially energetic walking. It has resonances with Thich Nhat Hanh’s walking meditation, in which, in Macfarlane’s words, she refined her philosophy. ‘The mountain does nothing, absolutely nothing, but be itself.’ (*The Living Mountain*)

One eminent reviewer stated unequivocally that it was the finest book ever written on nature and landscape in Britain. Macfarlane, a writer of the greatest sensitivity to the Highland landscape, described it as a sensual exploration of the area and claimed that it had quite altered his vision of this mountain range, which he had previously known intimately. It has quite altered mine.

*\*The author of this article is currently researching the life of its subject.*

## four short poems

*Clare Diprose*

flagstone path   some are short  
some are elongated  
stepping onto the grass  
feels like liberation

the garden door clicks shut  
the path nonchalantly  
loops itself round a bed  
formal flowers   hemlock

elderberries glisten  
the bush is full of birds  
a pair of blackcaps stretch  
to pluck the same berry

the ash tree is in bud  
each triangular nub  
a neat winter locker  
holding a crumpled dress





# Mind the Gap

*Mike Roman*

July 10<sup>th</sup>  
the 10:29 to Kilpatrick from Partick:

The train like the bicycle, like the ferry,  
is a vehicle of revelation:

We are now approaching Nature.  
Please disregard the subject-object split  
when alighting from this train.



# Hearing through the Heather

**Mike Roman**

*You wish to see? Listen then: hearing is a step in the direction of vision.*

**Bernard de Clairvaux**

The hegemony of the eyes  
has no place in the heather,  
all those tangles and overlaps and shades.  
Here it's the ear that sees,  
that crawls and feels,  
that listens *in*,  
attains if it works hard enough  
an insight through the auricle;  
arrives if it goes far enough  
at the mind's eye through the ear.



# The Desertic Moor

*Mike Roman*

It comes as no surprise to learn of the monks and the desert:  
There's nothing to attach the mind to,  
the body too has trouble clinging to that sloshing oceanic sand.

Purification by space -  
Perfection through silence -  
Natural gradual movement.

The desertic moor devoid of detail  
gives space to the senses  
unleashes them;  
now destitute of all the homely furniture of thought  
lets them wander out and get lost -

One day perhaps they'll stay out there:  
The seeing, the hearing, the feeling,  
and I, a being with no shell, shaken by every sound,  
will wander around in crystalline simplicity  
with saffron eyes, and tensile tendrils, connected to every earth capillary,  
no longer simply a *human* being,  
holed up in his own kind,  
but a universal life form,  
whose powers of identification have dissolved  
have wandered out extravagantly  
have been emboldened  
in the depths of the highland moor, in the heights of the braes,  
in the sinuous wings of birds.



# Days of Encounter

*Bill Eddie*



For the ornithologist, the lure of certain birds occasionally becomes an obsession, almost to the exclusion of other species. This inevitably triggers the urge to travel, which is perhaps already latent, for most birders are wanderers at heart. A compelling need to be 'up and away' undoubtedly drives many bird-watchers to seek out the most exotic species in far-off places. They suffer from pre-migratory restlessness or *Zugunruhe*, that awkward German word coined by students of bird-migration<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps it is the fulfilment of a basic human longing analogous to that which impelled



Johann Wolfgang Goethe, in his thirty-seventh year, to head incognito for Italy on the 3am mail-coach out of Karlsbad.<sup>2</sup> It may simply be a more prosaic need for novelty born out of the boredom of seeing the same birds day after day in one's home patch. Whatever the reason, the wall creeper is one of those 'exotic' birds, and nowadays many bird-tour companies place it high on their list of 'must see' priorities. Its scientific name *Tichodroma muraria* is derived from the Greek 'τείχος' (a wall) and 'δρόμος' (running). In German, it is known by the equivalent name, 'Mauerläufer', but in French it has the lovely name, 'Tichodrome échelette', which presumably alludes to its spasmodic progress on walls, as if it were ascending a ladder. Its Chinese name means 'flower of the rocks'.

In *The Wanderer and his Charts*, the Scottish author and philosopher-poet Kenneth White, relates an encounter with such a bird on the Vignemale in the high Pyrenees by the French poet Saint-John Perse (Alexis Leger), who described it as the 'Rose-of-the-Mountains.'<sup>3</sup> Saint-John Perse felt a great significance in this event, for he intuitively knew that he would perhaps never see the like again. It left him with '*the sensation of having been...initiated into, the secret life of the earth.*' Was this the result of the dual reaction between the contemplation of beauty and feelings of awe, which Immanuel Kant characterised as the essence of the 'natural sublime'? One of the earliest naturalists to record sublime feelings was Horace Bénédict de Saussure, who climbed Mont Blanc in 1788 and experienced 'an elevation of the soul, the broadening of spiritual horizons, and the secret voices of Nature'<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, in 1816, in his poem *Mont Blanc*, Shelley exulted:

*"I seem as in a trance sublime and strange*

*To muse on my own separate phantasy,*

*My own, my own human mind, which passively*

*Now renders and receives fast influencings,*

*Holding an unremitting interchange*

*With the clear universe of things around..."*<sup>5</sup>

Bird-watchers rarely happen upon wall creepers for they are normally solitary denizens of the highest mountains of Eurasia, living in summer at elevations from about 2,000 metres above sealevel up to the snowline, although, in Switzerland, they have been recorded breeding at 350 to 550 metres. Further east in the Himalayas, they occur even higher, from about 4,000 to 5,500 metres. Unless one resides in alpine regions or is a seasoned mountaineer, the opportunities of finding this bird by chance are slim, for even in its nesting areas, which are usually sheer cliffs or gorges above fast-flowing streams, it is difficult to spot despite its flamboyant plumage. Luckily, when the grip of winter descends, this delightful little bird has nomadic tendencies, and leaves its remote mountain fastnesses for more genial surroundings.<sup>6</sup> Then it has a predilection for old ruins, church towers and castle walls where the lucky birdwatcher may encounter it. In Greece, it has been seen on the ruins of Delphi and Mystras, and on the



walls of the Acropolis above the bustling metropolis of Athens.<sup>7</sup> During its wanderings it may travel far from the Alps, occasionally to southern England where it usually inhabits coastal cliffs or quarries – a far cry from the splendour of its home ranges. There have only been a handful of records of this species in the British Isles during the last century so it is not a bird that one can be guaranteed to see. On the contrary, to see this bird requires effort and planning.

In the summer of 1970 I read about wall creepers nesting on the walls of

Neuschwanstein,<sup>8</sup> the famous ‘fairytale’ castle of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and I made a special trip there to see them. At the time, although I was sufficiently aware of the visual impact of Neuschwanstein, my appreciation of the building’s history (and indeed the whole European Romantic Movement) was negligible, and so, in my youthful enthusiasm, my concentration focused mainly on the birds themselves. Because of the access restrictions around the walls of the castle, I was only able to observe a single bird feeding near the windows high on the palace walls. Yet I was left with a memorable experience that must have been similar to the sublime feelings felt by Saint-John Perse.

What kind of bird could make such an impact? The wall creeper is certainly so unique that it was formerly classified in a family of its own. Linnaeus recognised that its habit of creeping around vertical surfaces was reminiscent of the familiar tree-creepers of European woodlands and so, in 1766, in the 12th edition of his *Systema Naturae*, he named it *Certhia muraria*. Linnaeus had a broad concept of genera, which included diverse species that only have a superficial resemblance to each other. The wall creeper lacks the cryptic colouration of the tree-creepers and does not have stiff tail feathers to help it climb. By means of its powerful and unusually long claws, it dances effortlessly over sheer vertical surfaces in short jerks, its progression aided by its large rounded wings, which it flicks almost continuously.

Some 50 years after Linnaeus, the German zoologist and first director of the Zoological Museum at the University of Berlin, Johann Karl Wilhelm Illiger (1775-1813),<sup>9</sup> recognised these important differences, and in 1811 placed it in its own genus, *Tichodroma*.<sup>10</sup> Much later, in the 1950s, the relationships of the wall creeper were investigated more fully by the American ornithologists, Ernst Mayr and Dean Amadon, who tentatively placed it in the nuthatch family,<sup>11</sup> and this was also the hypothesis of the French ornithologist Charles Vaurie (1906-1975).<sup>12</sup> In 1964, based on behavioural evidence, a relationship with nuthatches was given greater support by the German ornithologist H. Löhrl,<sup>13</sup> and in 1988 by Charles Sibley and his colleagues using DNA hybridisation techniques.<sup>14</sup> Despite this, it is very isolated from them, including the rock nuthatches, which it approaches somewhat superficially in habits. The bill of the wall creeper is long and slightly decurved and is precisely honed for prising insects and spiders from the tiniest nooks and crannies, unlike the short chisel-like bills of the omnivorous nuthatches. Also, unlike nuthatches, it does not plaster the entrance to its nesting cavity with mud. The wall creeper has seemingly explored the space of evolutionary possibilities in a radically different way from that of the nuthatches. It alone among all the songbirds is perfectly at



home on the sheer vertical rock faces of alpine regions.

*'Life and Earth evolve together!'* said the panbiogeographer Leon Croizat,<sup>15</sup>

and indeed one cannot think of wall creepers without considering the massive mountain-building processes that thrust up the loftiest of the world's peaks in Eurasia during the Tertiary. In Asia, Wall creepers occur north to the Tarbagatai, the Mongolian Altai, the Tien Shan and northern Hopeh, and south to Iran, northern Afghanistan and the Himalayas. In the southern parts of its European range, it occurs from the Cantabrian Mountains and the Pyrenees eastwards to Corsica, the Apennines and the Abruzzi in Italy, and in the Peloponnese on Mount Taygetos, which is the southernmost breeding locality for the species in western Eurasia. Its status in North Africa is uncertain and it may have bred in Algeria and Morocco during colder periods of the last Ice Age when the ranges of many European birds were displaced further to the south.

Its wandering habit in winter probably accounts for the fact that, throughout its vast range, it has not differentiated into many local races. Prince Charles Lucien Bonaparte (1803-1857), a nephew of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte and a renowned ornithologist, recognised the Asiatic populations of the wall creeper as being darker, slightly more bluish-grey above, with a tendency to have larger white spots on the wings. He named them *Tichodroma muraria nepalensis* in his *Conspectus Generum Avium* (1850),<sup>16</sup> which was never completed before he died.

Superficially, the wall creeper resembles a large butterfly and this effect is heightened by the habit of constantly flicking or 'flashing' its wings in a half-open position, which undoubtedly gives greater agility to the bird as it clambers over vertical surfaces. Its flight is rather fluttering and desultory but it can fly powerfully over longer distances when the occasion demands. The wings are exceptionally large for its size, which allow the bird to soar in the wind without much expenditure of energy. It can also indulge in downward glides and swooping dives from a great height in which the wings are held close to the body.<sup>8</sup> Probably the wing shape evolved rapidly in response to the vicissitudes of such extreme habitat, whereas the coloured wing pattern may have evolved from mutual sexual selection, as a way of synchronising the breeding behaviour of courting birds, since both sexes possess the same pattern and colours. Löhrl suggested that it may have evolved as a substitute for its rather weak vocal ability.<sup>8</sup> At least these are the ways that the orthodox scientific mind might interpret such phenomena. *A wall creeper*

The plumage is predominantly soft dove-grey, with a dusky lower breast and belly and a whitish throat that changes to a black bib in the male in springtime. Its tail is grey-black, relieved by greyish-white tips to the feathers, which are also white on the outer margins. The wings are mostly bright crimson-red on the coverts and inner flight feathers, while the outer primaries are mainly blackish with two contrasting rows of large white spots. The spots on the inner row then become progressively smaller and pinker on all the other flight feathers towards the body. When the wall creeper opens its wings, the metamorphosis is startling. The striking pattern recalls the hoopoe, whose plumage has a disruptive effect, in the





manner of zebra stripes, rendering that species almost invisible in the shady under-storey of Mediterranean olive-groves and African savanna woodlands. Could it be that the wing pattern of the wall creeper also has a disruptive effect that affords it some protection on the rock-faces where it could be very vulnerable to passing avian predators? This seems unlikely. In the face of an attack by a bird of prey, the wall creeper immediately leaves the rock face and is able to evade the predator by its extraordinary agility in the air.<sup>8</sup> A Darwinian explanation of the wing-flashing phenomenon is that it has a signalling function, or it may startle insects in the manner used by the mockingbirds of the Americas. During wing-flashing, the white spots are displayed together with the red coverts, but during threat display the white spots are kept hidden.

It is hard to determine the real significance of these patterns and actions but to the human observer they do seem to be semiotic. However, like the peacock's train, they also appear to be extravagant and in excess of functional requirements as signals. Perhaps there are phenomena that are



*A wall creeper*

beyond rational explanation. We simply don't know. We are at a loss to envision what their visual experience could be like. In contemplating such heady topics I'm also inclined to think that these exquisite wing patterns and wing-flashing behaviour are what the zoologist Adolf Portmann termed 'unaddressed phenomena,'<sup>17</sup> which are normally directed neither at the

eye of a sexual partner nor that of an enemy. That Nature seems to have a way of adding elaborate finishing touches of no apparent functional significance – novelty for its own sake – to characters that, initially, may have been selected for, becomes comprehensible, even when couched in the language of mechanistic biology. Darwin was keenly aware of this. The net effect of combined patterns and actions expresses the phenomenal essence of the bird – an event rather than an appearance – the inevitability of developmental completeness in a living creature. Organisms are irreducible wholes whose structures cannot be understood by genes and isolated characters alone. Nature is creative. Instead of the image of organisms struggling up peaks in a fitness landscape, doing 'better than' – which is a very Calvinist work ethic – there is the image of a creative dance.

*“For me, Nature is not a landscape but the dynamism of visual forces — an event rather than an appearance — these forces can only be tackled by treating colours and form as ultimate identities, freeing them from all descriptive or functional roles.”* (Bridget Riley).

This is what Buddhists would call *suchness* or *tathagata*,<sup>18</sup> or what the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus referred to as *haecceitas*,<sup>19</sup> It is therefore integral to the 'being' of a wall creeper, just as wagtails cannot help wagging their tails and dippers cannot stop dipping. Goethe believed that the task of science is to direct us to the most lucid and most central experiences. When we see these clearly, we have the foundation to extend our understanding to more complex phenomena, but, beyond certain limits, intellectual enquiry becomes futile when not insane.<sup>20</sup>

The complementary nature of the grey, crimson, black and white plumage makes it hard to believe that birds do not have some sense of aesthetic appreciation, for the colour harmonies of the wall creeper's plumage resonate so closely with human taste. John Ruskin, the enigmatic 19th century art and social critic would have endorsed this anthropocentric view, for he wrote, 'the presence of the strongest life is asserted by characters in which the human sight takes pleasure, and which seem prepared with distinct reference to us.'<sup>21</sup> In 1904, in his *Queen of the Air*, he wrote :

*Over the entire surface of the earth and its waters, as influenced by the power of air under solar light, there is developed a series of changing forms, in clouds, plants, and animals, all of which have reference in their action, or nature, to the human intelligence that perceives them.”*<sup>22</sup>

Goethe also comes close to this way of thinking. In his *Verses in Prose* he wrote:

*“The beautiful is a manifestation of hidden laws of nature that would otherwise have forever remained concealed...The law that manifests with the greatest freedom, on its own most individual terms, evokes the beautiful in its objective form, which then, to be sure, must find worthy subjects to perceive it.”*

This way of seeing phenomena united through analogy, is essentially a

sympathetic gesture and should not be confused with the Greek concept of *telos* (τέλος), meaning 'end' or 'final cause'. Goethe was inclined to keep his whole attention directed towards Nature, learning to read its diverse forms as a true picture of reality. The profound naturalism of Goethe led him to realise that the Greek concept of *telos* is a developmental one, roughly equivalent to the German word *Bildung*. In correspondence with Karl Friedrich Zelter,<sup>23</sup> he wrote: '...old Kant did the world, and I might add, myself an inestimable service when, in his *Critique of Judgement*, he placed Art and Nature on the same plane and conceded to both of them the right to act out of great principles without purpose. Spinoza had already authorised my hatred of those absurd final causes. Nature and Art are too great to pursue purposes...' Unlike Aristotle, Goethe clearly saw that development is a continuous process like a piece of music, and that no stage in this process has priority, each being equally required by the whole, not as a means to an end, but as a mode of being-in-the-world.

Thirty-seven years were to elapse before I made my second adventure to Neuschwanstein. Wall creepers had been increasingly on my mind after reading White's essay, and a new urgency was growing in me. Accompanied by fellow-stravaiger<sup>24</sup> Mike Roman, who arrived from Warsaw and met me in Munich, we headed for the Bavarian town of Füssen where we stayed for the next few days. In the crystalline light of our first afternoon we made our way up to Neuschwanstein bypassing the castle of Hohenschwangau. Heavy snow had fallen the previous day and the beeches and spruces glittered in the sunshine filtering through the forests on the lower slopes.

Searching for wall creepers involves having a permanent crick in the neck, but literally, within five minutes of arriving, Mike yelled, 'There it is – the wall creeper!' Astonishingly, there it was, bounding provocatively up the walls of the tall tower nearest to the gatehouse. After thirty-seven years and a trip across half of Europe, here was a second encounter with this wonderful species - a second initiation perhaps into the secret life of the Earth. Was it significant that the first time I saw this bird was the year that Mike was born? It soon flew off over the upper courtyard but we relocated it on the window ledges of the Minstrels' Room. For another hour or so, we watched it performing its little Ballet de cour on the walls of the castle, flitting from tower to tower and from tower to palace. These were moments of wonder and marvelling, the manifestation of poetic intelligence that seeks to see things in themselves. I became the wall creeper, up there on those heights, gripping the rough limestone with my long claws, sweeping my crimson cape and dancing like a butterfly in the icy vortices that played around the towers.

*"Let the images go bright and fast and the concepts be extravagant"*<sup>25</sup>

Neuschwanstein is obviously a magnet for wall creepers and I suspect that the attraction for them is the diversity of places to feed, roost and nest. With a permanent staff in the building, there must be pockets of warmth in the rooftops. Wall creepers are fond of sun-bathing, and, as the sun moves across the winter sky, they change their feeding locations on the castle, which is flooded with sunlight in the morning and afternoon. This is in marked contrast to the severe chill of the Pollät gorge (Pollätschlucht)

above Neuschwanstein, where, given the more natural setting, one would think that wall creepers would be more at home. However, their liking for buildings is widespread, for they are well-known inhabitants of Buddhist monasteries from Ladakh to Nepal and Tibet.

From a phenomenological point of view, the castle of Neuschwanstein itself is a truly remarkable building. Construction began in 1868 and took more than twenty years to complete. Although it falls somewhat short of



*Neuschwanstein*

the final design that Ludwig II wanted, it is nevertheless a remarkably homogeneous structure and presents a dynamic interplay of transcendent towers, turrets, palace and walls. Ludwig II's inspiration for the design came from Richard Wagner's operas *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*. Though designed by the architect Eduard Riedel, the building construction followed the modifications of the painter and theatre designer Christian Jank, while Julius Hoffmann was responsible for the interior decoration. The majority of the paintings in the castle depict motifs that Wagner used as the bases for his stageworks. Ludwig only lived in the castle for 172 days, and Neuschwanstein ('New Swanstone') only received its name after his untimely and mysterious death in 1886 at Starnbergsee.<sup>26</sup>

For most of the year Neuschwanstein is thronged with visitors and access to the interior is by guided tour only. Perhaps it was inevitable that such an iconic building should fall victim to mass tourism. Images of the castle are now commonplace and touted in roadside stalls. The view from the Gratweg (ridge walk) leading to the Tegelberg, showing the eurhythmic soaring towers to their best advantage, is considered by some cynics to be especially clichéd. For others, Neuschwanstein is simply kitsch, reminiscent of Disneyland, or the folly of a 'mad' king who squandered his wealth. However, these attitudes only surface within a very narrow context, and do a great disservice to the fine sensibilities of an individual who was thoroughly at odds with his time and, through accident of birth, caught up in late nineteenth-century German politics. I think we need to look more



discerningly at the phenomenon of Neuschwanstein and Ludwig's vision. Through the process of letting things manifest themselves, we may be able to see more clearly what is right before our eyes, yet somehow obscured by a cloak of abstractions, inherited concepts and prejudices.

The fineness of Neuschwanstein has nothing to do with pomp and splendour or the assertion of wealth and status. Neuschwanstein's life-enhancing architecture addresses all the senses simultaneously and articulates our experiences of embodiment. Its ultimate meaning is beyond architecture. Standing as it does on the commanding site of two ancient citadels, Neuschwanstein is serene and gracious. In its sublime grandeur, it is surely one of the greatest expressions of the Romantic mind, of the lofty and ideal longings that we all have. Ironically, such quixotic quests all too often dissipate, as in a dream, and are not continuously realisable in the everyday world. That was perhaps Ludwig II's downfall, in addition to his too-easy access to great wealth. Certainly, Romanticism has fallen out of favour in the modern world and maybe that is welcome, for its vision of society was a chimera. But it was a noble attempt to counter the tyranny of reason and progress that epitomised so much of the Enlightenment and its legacy – an unfeeling positivistic science. It was an attempt to refocus on the earth.

Although I think it is impossible for most visitors not to be moved to some degree at the sight of Neuschwanstein, I cannot help feeling that a sizeable majority do not find any deep meaning in the castle's neo-gothic structure itself, and merely treat it as just another item on their itinerary, something to be seen simply because it is famous. For such tourists it may represent a temporary novelty as they dash around, forever spectators of the avant-garde. For me, Neuschwanstein is not so much a symbol of the sublime as an imperfect reflection of a higher reality, but more as a meditation on a new way of seeing, a way that grounds a world in *poiesis*. This is particularly so when it is held in peripheral vision, enfolding its magnificence in its mountain space. It is imperative that we reinvigorate a poetic interpretation of the Earth, to counter the human cacophony that has lost imagination, fervour, and the ability to wonder.

*"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes..."* (Marcel Proust)

The idolatry of mass tourism, as Proust might have called it, has its parallel in the world of bird-watchers for, unfortunately in the last few decades, there has been a tendency for birders to dash all over the world in search of novelty, 'consuming' species for their life-lists and fuelling an ever-expanding bird-tour industry. I often wonder how many of them have actually travelled as a means to acquiring and transferring knowledge. How many have *seen* the birds that they have paid so much for, or for that matter, how many of them have *seen* the common birds on their home patch before boredom set in? Although it can be argued that tour companies contribute to local economies and provide a rationale for the conservation of dwindling wildlife and wilderness, there is a downside – the commercialisation of nature not only reduces meaningful encounters with the diversity of the world's species to mere consumerism, but also



creates blindness to the phenomenal world. For so many in the modern world, the ability to really 'see' has been lost.

*"Knowledge is 'seeing' this vital meaning behind the appearance of things. It is penetrating the mystery of life. Thus, it is only through this process of learning to 'see' that we come to know ourselves."* (Socrates)

If we are to survive and preserve what is left of the natural world we need to re-learn how to 'see' with all our senses.<sup>27</sup> Only when we recognise and identify with the *other* will we accommodate ourselves in an ecologically sustainable way and feel at home in the world. Given the nature of the human species, the dream of Utopia is unrealisable, for it is difficult to envisage a society that is organically whole without conflict, but for how long can we go on being estranged from the world?

Our encounter with the wall creeper on Neuschwanstein re-awakened an intangible vision that speaks to all ages — the re-enchantment of the world, the union of aesthetic pleasure with the pure joy of discovery. On our second day, dazzled by the shimmering morning-light breaking over the mountains, we looked in vain for it from the vantage-point of Marianbrücke. Returning to the castle, Mike and I caught mere glimpses of it very high up on the tallest tower, dancing along the snow-covered ledges, in the completeness of its own world. It was enough, and so, in the unlettered light, we left and descended through the dark deep woods to Hohenschwangau.

## Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> *Zugunruhe* can often be seen in swallows and martins as they assemble on telegraph wires in the autumn.

<sup>2</sup> Goethe, J. W. *Italian Journey [1786-1788]*. Transl. W. H. Auden & Elizabeth Mayer. 1970. London: Penguin Books Ltd., Karlsbad is now located in the Czech Republic and is renamed Karlova Vary.

<sup>3</sup> White, K. 2004. *Along the Atlantic Coast*. p. 116, in: *The Wanderer and his Charts. Essays on Cultural Renewal*. Edinburgh: Polygon Books.

<sup>4</sup> Sala, C. 1993. *Caspar David Friedrich and Romantic Painting*. Paris: Éditions Pierre Terrail.

<sup>5</sup> Reiman, D. H. & Fraistat, N. 2002. *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

<sup>6</sup> Hauri, R., 1970. 'Zur Lebensweise des Mauerläufers *Tichodroma muraria* im Winter'. *Orn. Beob.* 67: 14-34.

- <sup>7</sup> Handrinos, G. & Akriotis, T. 1997. *The Birds of Greece*. London: Christopher Helm (Publishers) Ltd.
- <sup>8</sup> Löhrl, H. 1970. Studies of less familiar birds: 158. Wallcreeper. *British Birds* 63(4): 163-68.
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- <sup>10</sup> Illiger, J. K. W. 1911. *Prodr. Syst. Mamm. et Avium*, p. 210.
- <sup>11</sup> Mayr, E. & Amadon, D., 1951. 'A classification of recent birds. *Amer. Mus. Novitates*, no. 1496.
- <sup>12</sup> Vaurie, C. 1957. Relationships of *Tichodroma* and *Sitta*. pp. 1-5, in: *Amer. Mus. Novitates*, no. 1854. New York: American Museum of Natural History.
- <sup>13</sup> Löhrl, H. 1964. Verhaltensmerkmale der Gattungen *Parus* (Meisen), *Aegithalos* (Schwanz-meisen), *Sitta* (Kleiber), *Tichodroma* (Mauerläufer) und *Certhia* (Baumläufer). *J. für Orn.* 105: 153-181.
- <sup>14</sup> Sibley, C. G., J. E. Ahlquist & B. L. Monroe. 1988. A classification of living birds of the world based on DNA-DNA hybridization studies. *Auk* 105: 409-423.
- <sup>15</sup> Croizat, L. 1962. *Space, Time, Form: The Biological Synthesis*. p. 815. Caracas: published by the author, 1962. Croizat was dissatisfied with the Darwinian explanation of plant and animal distributions as the result of their means of dispersal. His track method of panbiogeography revealed that plants and animals with different dispersal capabilities showed repetitious patterns of distribution.
- <sup>16</sup> Bonaparte, C. L. 1850. *Conspectus Generum Avium*, 1, p. 225.
- <sup>17</sup> Portmann, A. 1964. *New Paths in Biology*. Transl. Arnold J. Pomerans. New York: Harper & Row.
- <sup>18</sup> Nishitani, K. 1982. *Religion and Nothingness*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- <sup>19</sup> Williams, T. (ed.). 2003. *The Cambridge Companion to Duns Scotus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- <sup>20</sup> Brady, R. H. 1987. Form and Cause in Goethe's Morphology. Pp. 257-300, in Amrine, F., Zucker, F. J., and Wheeler, H. (eds.). *Goethe and the Sciences: A Reappraisal*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publ. Co.
- <sup>21</sup> Cook, E. T. & A. Wedderburn (eds.). 1903-12. *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols. London.
- <sup>22</sup> Ruskin, J. 1904. *Queen of the Air*. London: J. M. Dent.
- <sup>23</sup> Riemer, F. W. (ed.). 1833-34. *Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*. , V: 381. 6 vols. Berlin.
- <sup>24</sup> Robinson, M. (ed.). 1985 *The Concise Scots Dictionary*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen Univ. Press, 1985). It defines the verb 'to stravaig' as *to roam* or *to wander about in an aimless casual manner*. My interpretation is that stravaiging may be casual but is only *apparently* aimless.
- <sup>25</sup> White, K. 2003. *Scotia Deserta*. p. 602 in: *Open World: The Collected Poems 1960- 2000*. Edinburgh: Polygon Books.
- <sup>26</sup> On 13th June, 1886, King Ludwig II and the physician Dr. von Gudden took an evening stroll through the grounds of Schloss 'Berg' on Starnbergsee. They never returned and their bodies were eventually found in the lake. The cause of their deaths has never been established.
- <sup>27</sup> Pallasmaa, J. 2005. *The Eyes of The Skin. Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

# Climate Change

*LesleyMay Miller*

Day drags after each dreich day  
with no colour in the dawn.  
Night after long night  
the roaring sea encroaching,  
shouts against the headland.  
No sign from moon or sun.  
Foam blows far inland,  
blown from rearing waves.  
No cry from gulls  
as they lift with the storm.  
The wheel turns no more,  
though yule has come and gone.  
Water douses our flames,  
creeps inside our homes.



# Climate Scientist Speaks

**Helen Moore**

*The Sibyl, with frenzied mouth uttering things not to be laughed at, unadorned and unperfumed, yet reaches to a thousand years with her voice by aid of the god. – Heraclitus*

Our integrated Earth system is a thing of beauty –  
the work of algorithms and differential equations.  
In the calm of the lab, I sit by a plasma screen observing  
the kaleidoscopic patterns of sea ice concentrations.  
Through the laws and logic focussing my mind,  
I peer into the future.

Arachne, our super-computer, makes 600 trillion calculations  
per second, weaves scenes of spiralling instability.  
With a tap on my touchscreen, I look through distant eyes in the sky –  
polar orbiters that monitor deep-water currents, surface  
temperatures and melting rates of glaciers and ice sheets.  
Data drops into my office like subterranean water  
in a limestone cave, leaving ever more profound impressions.

Often I'm gazing thousands of years into the past,  
analysing cryospheric systems, evidence from borings in icecaps –  
those giant, glassy scrolls chronicling periods of global heating  
and cooling. Unforeseen results appear like rays of sunlight  
piercing the atrium of a temple; then my mind fedges hypotheses  
that rise on thermal currents. I race to track them down,  
start the next phase of rigorous assessment.

When the media publishes my findings, or I report with colleagues  
to Congress, there's always the hope that this time  
our work will make a difference. Mostly I feel as if I'm speaking  
with addicts on the subject of their habit –  
the harm it's doing them and others, the denial of this truth.  
Back home, I well up as my kids play at being adults –  
their make-believe shaped by the only world they know.

*O, but my angels, the unravelling web....*



# The Coigach Conundrum

*Lisa Macdonald*



The Coigach Peninsula lies 25 miles north of Ullapool. There is one shop, one hotel, one pub and a filling station with an uncertain future. The mobile bank comes once a fortnight, for now. The Hydroponicum, a major employer and tourist draw, closed seven years ago and the smokehouse was moved away from the area in 2014. The pier is crumbling and will not be repaired by the cash-strapped Highland Council; for now, it remains closed.

The area shares characteristics with many locations on the west coast of Scotland: it is a place of aching beauty with its dramatic mountainscapes and its untamed seashore. Stac Pollaidh with a crown of snow against a wide, green-grey sky and the jewel-blue water at Achnahaird on a summer's day are images that linger in the mind and leave imprints upon the soul.

The communities here also share some of the advantages and disadvantages of geographical positioning. The scenic splendour attracts visitors, many of whom fall in love with the location and return time and time again. Those who are lucky enough to live in such places are uplifted and nourished every day by the endlessly changing light and the almost excessive generosity of the natural world around and, for many, these factors have played a role in our very presence.

The social fabric of these places is special, too. Neighbours are, more

often than not, friends as well and, for the most part, everyone pulls together; that's how it works. People rely upon each other and communities function because everyone plays their part. Nobody is missed out, nobody is unwelcome and nobody is exempt.

However, access to facilities, employment and services can be challenging in a centralised socio-economic climate which often perpetuates the myth of remoteness, though it is deeply flawed as a concept. Remoteness is entirely dependent upon the point of view of the judge of such things. We may appear remote to Edinburgh or London but they, in turn, appear remote to us. Who is to say which is the correct assessment? Surely greater numbers do not, in themselves, guarantee increased objectivity or even authority. In terms of value-for-money, though, the crude mathematics of centralised reasoning mean that these tiny communities simply cannot compete for scarce resources. In the long run, they are at risk of becoming empty shells of pretty scenery and overpriced housing without a heartbeat. No employment, no young people, no school, no regeneration. No shop, no library, no surgery. Just a café which opens between May and September, weekends only. It's not hard to see how the story ends.

Settlements such as those in Coigach (còig achaidhean: five homesteads, i.e. Achiltibuie, Altandubh, Polbain, Reiff and Achnahaird) are not nearly as rare as Edinburgh or London would have us believe, nor are they, in this age of ease of travel and connectivity through social media, as isolated from each other as they used to be. What has been a way of life for hundreds of years continues to be a positive lifestyle choice for many today and until this is valued in terms of strategic planning by local and national governments (as it is to a much greater extent in Scandinavian countries), these communities have to get by on their own wits. If they want to survive they will have to shore themselves up; there is no other way. Councils will be forced to concentrate and contract their spending like a receding tide and its allocation will be based upon population density. For now, there are grants and measures aimed at supporting small, rural communities in their quest to become more resilient in times of financial peril. However, it is clear that the funding even for these measures cannot last. How quickly communities take up these measures, and how far and fast they run with them, will determine their own survival.

What the most successful and resilient of these communities have in common is that they rely upon a critical mass of positive, proactive, innovative residents with vision and dedication to the common good in order to drive forward positive change. Village halls are renovated or newly built, playing fields are upgraded, footpaths are created. Improvements to housing and broadband can attract new families who will, in turn, maintain school rolls. Mull and Applecross are powerful examples of the sort of long-term vision that can change the fortunes of small communities. From hydro-schemes to wind turbines to electric cars, the bold and innovative spirit is paying real dividends. Lochaline, a tiny Morvern village, has 3G coverage to rival Inverness and Glasgow. It also has a community-owned filling station.

All this becomes possible when those who have the vision, knowledge and

skills, and those who are willing to put in the hours (and days, weeks and months) of unpaid hard work, are encouraged by their communities. Vision must be communicated and communities need to be inspired; that, in itself, takes time. Meetings, consultations and conversations are held over many months; often, it's years. People worry; that's natural. But when almost an entire community is in support and less than a handful of locals have the power to scupper a project that took years to build up, what happens then?



*Coigach looking to the Summer Isles*

The people of Coigach currently find themselves in an unenviable situation. Coigach Wind Power, established in 2011, is a subsidiary of the Coigach Community Development Company. It is staffed entirely by local volunteers and is now faced with a very real threat to its proposed and much-needed wind turbine, projected to bring an income of £2.2 million (and twice that when match funding is included) for community regeneration. The small, single community turbine (74m tall, about the height of the Douglas firs that used to line the road to Inverness) has planning approval and work was progressing well until three of the 35 crofting shareholders objected. Their stated objections pertain not to the design of the turbine but to the proposed legal arrangement covering reimbursement for the temporary release of the small portion of common grazing which is to host the turbine. This legal framework is well established for energy generating projects on common grazing and, in every case until this one, has been warmly welcomed by crofting communities across the Highlands. "Money for old rope: we sit back and do nothing, and the money comes in," is how it was explained by the grazings clerk of another, similar community. It is, of course, entirely right that the objectors' argument should be heard in a process administered by the Scottish Land Court. However, the arbitrary deadline for FIT pre-accreditation which determines the future electricity tariff means that this delay jeopardises the entire project.



Where is democracy when most of a community want something, including those who live closest to the proposed site, and it is threatened by a tiny minority of objectors? What can be done to support those few who are not yet sure? In the absence of dialogue, it is difficult to ascertain the real reasons for opposition. It could be NIMBY, plain and simple. It could be personal: I don't like you and if you want it then I don't. So there. It could be political if a group driving a project are perceived to have similar leanings. It could be scientific, or due to lack of science. It could be aesthetic and it could be lack of information.

Wind turbines, in particular, provoke a curious reaction that is often disproportionate to their actual impact. Yes, they are visible; but so are other signs of human habitation like bridges, mobile phone masts, electricity pylons and roads. The bridge at Kylesku has a tremendous visual impact and though it could be considered graceful and a feat of engineering, there could equally be an argument made for its stark contrast against the beauty and grandeur of that otherwise unspoilt vista. The little ferry was undoubtedly much quainter and more in keeping with our current notion of olde-worlde charm. But who in their right mind would begrudge the people of Sutherland and their visitors the ease and reliability of that bridge? We barely notice electricity lines; very few people, it's fair to say, would find them aesthetically pleasing, yet most of us accept them as a necessity. Why are so many of us still reluctant to find the beauty and grace in these 'dancing ladies', as the people of Gigha have christened their turbines? There still persists a troubling lack of information about wind energy, its efficiency and its perceived side-effects. The difficulty appears to lie in combining those who have questions with those who know the answers. Wilful ignorance is never a helpful trait in any decision-making process.

Some of the possible hesitations can be addressed while others are more difficult to overcome. The law and the planning regulators allow for due process. But under pressure of time, created by unhelpful Westminster energy strategy in conjunction with funders' deadlines, due process may put a particular project outwith the realms of economic feasibility. The very few objectors may or may not be aware of this; it may or may not form part of their strategic thinking. What remains unclear is what happens should such a project falter. The hours of work will have been wasted but they were given graciously and unconditionally. They will not be resented. The money already invested will be lost. But what would the loss of the potential outcomes, of the hoped-for benefit to the community mean in the long term? The loss of revenue that could have supported housing or other necessary developments? If the project fails then the young families may not be able to move in. The school roll will not increase. Its long-term future will be at risk. A village without a school can very quickly become a village without a shop. The possibilities for community initiatives will diminish, that much is certain. Will those objectors feel a perverse sense of power? Will they even care? Will it change the way they fit into these communities? They may not think they mind, but no man is an island. The school roll may not mean much to them but the new petrol pump might. The library may be of little interest but the doctor's surgery may be different. What would it take to make people feel that they can make a positive difference to a place and that it's worth doing that? What will it



take to help people see that in the current economic climate these sorts of communities must build their own resilience? One of the councillors recently pointed this out at a meeting, but how many heard the message? Ultimately, who would really be to blame in the event of a defeat? The hard-working, unpaid volunteers who tried to make a difference? The stubborn, perhaps selfish, but perfectly human objectors who couldn't quite see it? Or the administrators of flawed policy who became unyielding and blinkered in their adherence to anonymised guidance?

If there was ever a time to talk then this must be it. If there is any willingness on all sides to accept the need for collaboration, to realise that we are, in fact, all in this together, then human nature can yet show itself from its best side and people can work together to achieve understanding. Everyone needs to feel heard and valued; everyone has the right to an opinion. But everyone also has a duty to consider the impact of their actions. Our communities depend on it. In the meantime, those in charge of government strategy and its implementation must allow communities who are willing to fight for their survival the opportunity to do so without arbitrary limitations. We must challenge government policy which is, ultimately, what is bringing a perfectly common and human situation to such a dangerous point. Behaviour can be underpinned by a wide variety of motivations but it would be utterly perverse if government protocol should allow timelines to become so tight that due process (i.e. fairness, respect and correct procedure) results in failure whilst doing the right thing.

# Am Fearann

*Lisa Macdonald*

Beinn Mhòr na Còigich 's nan slèibhtean àrda geur  
Sula Bheinn an riochd dìneasair drum an t-siùil bhiarach  
Stac Pollaidh na cuirm-cnuic  
'S nan ceapairean blasta

Na h-Eileanan an t' Samhraidh air mo chùl  
Am bàta luath orains gam sguabadh air ais gu tìr  
'S mi gan coimhead às ùr, na cumaidhean  
Ainmeil m' eòlais  
Gu tur diofraicht' o fhradharc eile.

Blàr a' Chumhaing (1882)  
Na croitearan nan èiginn  
Gun teagamh gun robh iad gaisgeil curanta treun  
Cha mhòr, ge-tà, nach robh roghainn sam bith romhpa.

Eilean Shanndaidh ìosal crùbte  
An dìneasair na chadal, ciùin.  
Bha crodh is caoraich ann  
Mus do thog Dick taigh-òsta air an robh  
Am Byron Darnton, an dèidh bàt' a chaidh air chall faisg air.  
Rinn e aran cùbhraidh ùr gach uile latha  
Uighean air bhlas sàlainn on a rùraicheadh  
Na cearcan tron fheumainn.  
Cheannaich dithis bhancairean an t-eilean -  
£2.5 muillean.  
Thàinig iad a-null às an Eilbheis triop no dhà  
'S coma leatha uinneagan nan taighean air tuiteam às  
Fhad 's a tha na dealbhan fhathast snog san Investment Portfolio.

# Land Reform Bill

*Lisa Macdonald*

Benmore Coigach of the sharp, steep slopes,  
Suilven, the crouching sail-backed dinosaur,  
Stack Polly of the sandwich picnics:

The Summer Isles behind me now,  
The orange RIB sweeps me back to land and I  
See them all anew, their famous, familiar shapes taking  
Quite different forms from a new perspective.

The Battle of the Braes (1882) - I visited the plaque on holiday.  
The crofters in despair  
Doubtless brave, fierce, daring  
And yet without real choices.

Sanda Island, low and rounded,  
The dinosaur asleep.  
They ran sheep and cattle here  
Before Dick built the tavern-  
The Byron Darnton, named for the ship that sank nearby.  
He baked fresh bread every day and the eggs were salty  
From his beach-fed seaweed chickens.  
Two bankers bought the island and paid  
£2.5 million.  
They visited from Switzerland once or twice and cared not much  
For the windows broken and the warping doors.  
It still looks good in the Investment Portfolio.

# Light from the Summer Isles

*LesleyMay Miller*

Sally could hear the splash of oars  
as her captors left her to darkness.  
Would he ever find her?

Stumbling and tripping she edged  
towards the shore, guided  
by the ripple of waves on stones.

Using an alder branch  
for support, she felt her way  
through the heather.

Across the bay  
the growl of an engine returned.  
She struggled over the pebbles

into the sea while the helicopter  
hovered closer; she stirred up the plankton  
with the stick and wrote

over and over again in phosphorescence  
Sally..... ..Sally





# Bone Caves

*LesleyMay Miller*

Splash - a waterfall,  
footsteps on limestone.

Crunch - parched  
moss in the dry riverbed.

Song - a blackbird  
on this high track.

Bubbles - the spring  
near the caves;

deep inside dark echoes of lynx,  
reindeer and wolf, roar of a bear.



# Written in stone: geology and graffiti in Orkney

*Antonia Thomas*

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

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



*Black Craig from Billia Croo*

Known as an excellent site for *ichthyolites* from at least the 1830s, T.S. Traill, Professor of Geology at Edinburgh University, collected fossils from the area, corresponding with Louis Agassiz and sending him drawings and maps. Orkney's west coast was, Hugh Miller exclaimed, a "Land of Fish". At the height of the Black Craig's slate industry, Miller was still a quarrier,

yet to discover the fossil fish that dominated his life. But in 1846, by now a renowned geologist, he travelled to Orkney to see the Old Red Sandstone and the fossil fish sandwiched in its ancient layers.

By the time of Miller's visit, the Black Craig quarry was no longer worked, its spoil tips explored by fossil hunters rather than stonemasons. No accounts survive of the men who once worked the slates. But in the geo just downslope of the quarry, where they would eat their lunch shielded from the wind, they left a different record. Whether because the need to work stone was so ingrained in their daily life, or perhaps because they just had to make their mark, those quarrymen carved their names, and sometimes dates, on the geo's flagstone walls.

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

By that time, tourists had become a familiar sight along the west coast, fossil hunting amongst the spoil of the old quarry, carving their names and taking lunch in the sheltered geo. Promoted by writers such as Miller, geology had become an exciting and fashionable new hobby, whilst a generation of Victorians had grown up with the work of Walter Scott romanticising the Highlands and Islands to tourists. Scott had visited Orkney in 1814 on a six-week summer cruise with the Northern Lighthouse Board collecting folk-tales. Many were later integrated into *The Pirate* (1822), but one stands out in particular: the Dwarfie Stone. A massive



*The Dwarfie Stone*





# Expressing the Earth

## *A Trans-disciplinary Conference*

*Seil, Easdale, Kilmartin and Luining, Argyll*

*22-24 June 2017*

**Call for Engagement:**

**Creative workshops, presentations, papers and performances**

*'Geopoetics is concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and the opening of a world'.*

The Scottish Centre for Geopoetics and the University of the Highlands and Islands will host **Expressing the Earth** in Argyll 2017 to bring together creative artists, musicians, poets and film makers along with academics, researchers, students and teachers to explore, create and debate the earth and the environment in this spectacular area of Scotland.

*'Atlantic space, the west coast of Europe, is characterised in the first instance by fragmentation ... a multitude, a proliferation of islands and peninsulas separated by difficult waters. It is a territory of dispersion and precariousness – but each fragment is exact in itself, there is no confusion in this plurality. In a word, unity is not something given, to be taken for granted, it has to be composed.'* (Kenneth White, 2004)

**Expressing the Earth** will look to the multitude and proliferation of the islands and peninsulas and address the ways in which people are influenced and brought together by these features from the Neolithic and Bronze Age, early Celtic Christian heritage and seafaring history to more recent industrial exploitation of the Slate Islands.

Themes and activities, rooted in Geopoetics, include literature, history, visual arts, film making, archaeology, geology, geography and theology – with active engagement and creative outcomes as central to the conference as academic papers and presentations.

The conference will take place at the Seil Island Hall in Argyll with field activities also in Kilmartin Glen, Easdale Island and the Isle of Luining. Poetry readings, musical performances and social gatherings will play a key part in the conference programme and it is intended that publications and exhibitions will follow.

Please send a 200 word proposal, title, short bio and supporting images, if appropriate, to Mark Sheridan, Reader in Music and Creativity at the University of The Highlands and Islands, by 15 January 2017 – [mark.sheridan@uhi.ac.uk](mailto:mark.sheridan@uhi.ac.uk).

*Further information on the programme, key speakers and content will be published in due course.*

## Scottish Centre for Geopoetics Membership



The Scottish Centre for Geopoetics is a membership organisation which relies on members' subscriptions to fund its activities which are carried out by volunteers. Its purpose is to raise awareness of geopoetics as a crucial way of approaching and creatively responding to the natural world of which we are part.

It is a network of individuals including visual artists, writers, musicians, ornithologists, geologists, botanists, teachers and lecturers who share a common interest in developing an understanding of geopoetics and applying it creatively in their lives. The Centre organises talks, discussions, events and field walks which are designed to extend members' knowledge and experience of geopoetics. As the main English language geopoetics centre, it has members in USA, Canada, Sweden, Poland and England as well as throughout Scotland.

Further information is available from [normanbissell@btinternet.com](mailto:normanbissell@btinternet.com) and at [www.geopoetics.org.uk](http://www.geopoetics.org.uk).

If you join or renew your membership you will receive:

A free copy of *Grounding a World*; Essays on the work of Kenneth White:  
ed. G Bowd, C Forsdick & N Bissell rrp £9.95

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Encouragement to develop your own understanding of and creative response to geopoetics

Please send this completed form with a cheque for £10 waged/£5 unwaged payable to the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, to David Francis, 214 Portobello High Street, Edinburgh EH15 2AU

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