Scottish Centre for Geopoetics

STRAVAIG #8

Rivers and Forests

Part Two

Poems	Art	Essays

Scottish Centre for Geopoetics

Geopoetics

- places the Earth at the centre of our experience
- develops heightened awareness of it using all our senses and knowledge
- seeks to overcome the separation of mind and body and of human beings from the rest of the natural world.
- learns from others who have attempted to find a new approach to thinking and living, e.g. 'outgoers' like Henry Thoreau, Nan Shepherd, Patrick Geddes, Joan Eardley, Kenneth White and many others.
- expresses the Earth through oral expression, writing, the visual arts, music, geology, geography, other sciences, philosophy, combinations of art forms and of the arts, sciences and thinking.
- develops a network of Geopoetics Centres with a common concern about the planet and a shared project to understand geopoetics and apply it in different fields of research and creative work.
- opens up the possibility of radical cultural renewal for individuals and for society as a whole.

More information:
www.geopoetics.org.uk
https://www.facebook.com/ScottishGeopoetics/
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Front cover Image: Lesley Burr, *In the Forest,* oil on canvas
Back cover image: Maria Lalić, *Caledonia (detail),* textiles
Design and layout by Caroline Watson

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Rivers and Forests in the Age of Ecological and Climate Emergency

Editorial

What's the connection between the failures of Governments in response to the global Covid-19 pandemic and the ecological and climate emergency? Would it be too simple to say: capitalism? Not really. It's those who believe in the 'free market' and austerity who have underfunded health and social services and who refuse to take action against the corporate multi-nationals responsible for polluting and destroying the natural world and so many of its species.

At our June 2019 Expressing the Earth Conference at Wiston Lodge near Biggar, we had many talks, films and workshops about rivers and forests, so we chose them as the theme of *Stravaig#8*. Then came the Extinction Rebellion actions and Climate Strikes at schools worldwide, so we made the Ecological and Climate Emergency a key part of our theme. As a result, we received fifty poetry, nineteen essays and thirteen art submissions — more than ever before. The standard was so high that this issue became 95 pages long.

However, since the Covid-19 pandemic has prohibited the printing and distribution of issue 8, we have decided to publish it online in 3 parts. The first part focuses on rivers, the second mainly on trees and forests, and the third mainly on rivers again. You will find differing opinions on the large scale planting of trees in the Highlands in essays by James Fenton and others. We hope this will stimulate discussion about the best way forward. The poems, prose and artwork provide very personal responses to our theme and yet they form a cohesive whole.

But what use is a creative journal to activists who are campaigning to reverse the effects of climate change on the planet and the extinction by humans of so many species, you may well ask? As the creative expression of the Earth in arts, sciences and philosophy, Geopoetics offers an alternative vision of the world which deepens our understanding of it and sustains those who wish to celebrate and conserve it. Geopoetics combines a love of and attentiveness to place and particularity, with a knowledge of global and historical issues of geology, climate, and culture. A truly green politics must have the generosity and imagination to connect the local and the global, emotion and strategy. *Stravaig*, the annual journal of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, is an important way of bringing together those who believe in a better world in which humanity sees itself as part of the natural world rather than separate or superior to it.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a worldwide human tragedy and it has taken from us Tim Robinson, one of the great exponents of geopoetics in his writings about Connemara and the Aran Islands. In the late 1990s he gave a talk to members of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics in Edinburgh at the invitation of Tony McManus. Yet this crisis has also shown the tremendous courage and self-sacrifice of health and social care staff and how communities can work together for the common good despite the many failings of the UK and US Governments. It remains to be seen what lessons will be learnt from what has happened and whether people will allow those in power to return to business as usual.

We hope that *Stravaig#8* will provide you with stimulating reading when staying at home and will encourage you to be as aware as possible of the landscape, bird life and other forms of life in the course of your daily walks outdoors. We welcome your thoughts on its contents by email, on Facebook and Twitter and we would encourage you to respond creatively to the Earth in whatever medium you decide.

Editors: Sue Bell, Norman Bissell, Ullrich Kockel, Callum Sutherland and Caroline Watson.

Birch Notes

Anne Shivas

Singular plural, we do not grow too close,
leave open space, don’t crowd, allow
for moss, fern and bramble.

Here since ice retreated, we keep
the company of our own kind.
Trespass. The space of three paces, gives us

room to branch.

Most we like a pile of rock
for roots to wind around, hold.
Slender, in a light breeze only our crown

waves, reeshles to sky. Birds crowd in
with quick songs and sound moves
like a river in space. In autumn gold

light glistens through dying leaves.

Our bark becomes canoes, holds words
and we ring the earth across its North.
Spring’s fine flame leaves a tonic,

our trunks thicken with age; bark
roughens and gnarls; when one falls,
another grows in her place.

Together we make a numinous silence.

Caroline Watson, *White Relief,* mixed media on paper

Deshabille

Ian McFadyen

Up North, I'm told,
birches are stunted by the Arctic cold.
But unlike other trees,
they don't grow cowed by the wind:
they are so loosely, delicately feather-limbed,
so pliable, they offer no resistance;
they bend before the gale,
then back they spring.
They winter laden with a weight of ice,
but come the thaw they rise up
lithe and lissom as before.

Down here, they're elegantly tall,
more willowy than willows,
that yellow coinage against a thin blue sky
a wonder when the sun shines, every fall.
The birch in the garden there
has wrestled three whole days
with a vicious equinoctial wind,
and not a leaf spent.
Last night the frost blew softly
in its arborescent ear,
and this still morning it is quite undone,
for all its foliage lies carelessly
about its feet, a pale gold ring,
the sunrise glowing on its silver skin.

Fire

Mandy Haggith

When evicting a household, the sheriff's first act was to put out the fire.

The hearth was the heart of the old blackhouse, within which the embers were never allowed to go cold: without fire to keep it dry, in the Scottish climate, a turf or thatch roof will rot and start to crumble within a year. Extinguishing the fire was symbolically and practically the ending of life. Without fire, even an August day in Assynt can be life-threatening – how else do you dry yourself after a drenching in the fields or on the hill? How do you eat oats or fish? In the winter, how do you see for the eighteen hours that there's no daylight?

When the sheriff put out the fire, he put out the people. Each hearth supported a family of, on average, 5 people. In the 1810s and 1820s, more than 150 fires were put out in Assynt. The parish roll dropped from more than 3000 to 2000 and it has been falling ever since.

The sheriff's second act was to remove the furniture. Only if the house was being re-let to another would he relight the fire in the hearth, to welcome the new tenant. But for most families cleared from their Assynt homes, their buildings were to remain unoccupied. Their land was being turned into sheep farms and sheep in these parts are not offered accommodation. Sometimes, if the people were being cleared to a particular place, having been given permission to abide in some other part of the estate or offered a tenancy in some other Highland glen, the family would be allowed to take the roof beam of their house with them, to help them construct their new home. However, if the people were being evicted by force, or if the sheriff felt no mercy should be shown, he was entitled to burn the roof timbers.

Fire. It is a force of destruction. For many of the Assynt families, the early nineteenth century clearances were not the first time they had lost their homes: a raid by Mackenzies on Macleod land in 1646 burned 180 houses. The rich had their share of arson: Calder House was razed to a shell - which it remains - a mere twelve years after it was built in 1728. It was the grandest house in the West Highlands at the time, but too much resentment glowered between the Macleod and Mackenzie clans to allow such an arrogant architectural gesture to stand.

Did the same fate meet the building on the split rock at Clachtoll, which would in the 1990s become the icon for the Assynt Crofters Trust in their historic land buyout? What, other than hubris, could have motivated construction on such a site? The vitrified stones on its tip are one of Assynt's many mysteries, and although I've made up a story about how it was used for my Iron Age novel *The Lyre Dancers,* we will never really know whether it was a defensive structure, a beacon post for signalling to friendly navigators or firing warning shots to foes, or whether it was, along with the 'duns' at Clashnessie and Culkein Stoer, a grandiose folly built to show off, a flaunting of wealth and power or was it merely the iron-age equivalent of the current craze for conservatories. Keeping-up-with-the-Mackenzies? Either way, and whatever it was, it was burned. As were the ambiguous and much more ancient piles of stones dotted about the landscape, known as burnt mounds, their meaning unfathomed: sauna, feasting venue, brewery or ceremonial site; we may never know.

Burning has shaped more than the buildings here, and it still does. Each year, without fail, somewhere in Assynt a crofter will set fire to

the heather on one or other stretch of common grazing and the muir will erupt into flames. There's a code, a rulebook, for muir burning. It isn't always followed. There are those of us who mourn each fire, for the loss of wildlife in its wake and for the check it makes on natural ecological succession, stopping the development of scrub and woodland. But that is precisely the point of the exercise from the perspective of those who strike the match, who want not woods but pasture lands, open grazing for stock, especially sheep. I loathe sheep, not only because they stink and are ugly and stupid and don't belong here, but mostly because, for their sakes, landowners here in the Highlands have perpetrated evils, banishing native people and destroying the richly wooded environments that close-herded cattle and resident people create. You only need to look at some of the places to which people were cleared around the Assynt coast – Glenleraig, Drumbeg, Achmelvich and Torbreck - to see that people and woodland flourish together. In places where the people made way for sheep – Ledbeg, Kirkton, Achmore, Beannach, Tubeg – woods recorded in the late eighteenth century have been decimated, the vegetation hammered down to the ground and kept there by teeth and flame.

Where woods survive in Assynt they are now largely safe, in these cool, damp times, from fire, but thousands of years ago, when the weather was much warmer here, the woods would have been dense and wild fires would have erupted in the forest after lightning strikes. Imagine the deer running, bears diving into lochs, birds in flight; how scary it must have been for the hunter-gatherer people who lived here.

For thousands of years, wood was our main source of heat. As recently as the 1790s, the Statistical Account reports wood being used for iron smelting at Tubeg, "where charcoal was plentifully got, the bounds being one thick forest". Fires have been used for industry of various kinds here.

There's a lime kiln at Achmore and corn drying kilns all around the coastal townships. Some, like the one at Ardroe, retain the flue where the flames would have been fed and fanned, perhaps drying the barley grains to be boiled up into whisky at the illicit still on the other side of the Dubh Loch. Itinerant bronzesmiths must, from ancient times, have shared stories around the fire as they forged. There was kelp-processing and fish-smoking, and always food to be cooked and wet clothes to dry. Travelling people were given temporary shelter in the grain kilns, where people would gather for the craic. Fires are sociable places. Their dance and flicker welcomes conversation. There's always more than one reason to light a fire.

As the cleared population crowded into coastal villages and wood supplies diminished, peat became the primary energy source. Its cutting was a vital community activity, testified to by the peat roads that wind into the hinterlands of the parish, down which slices of the fibrous flesh of the land were carted and heaved, to be burned, to keep people alive.

These days, to keep themselves warm, most folk depend entirely on bought-in power: oil drilled out of the seabed, coal from the South, gas, probably from Russia, electricity from the grid. This is due to a combination of wealth and necessity – it's a cash economy here now, and people don't have time to cut peats, or wood, anymore: they're far too busy working to earn money to pay their rising fuel bills. The fragrance of woodsmoke on a winter's night has been replaced by coal and diesel fumes. We have to wonder how long will it be feasible to warm ourselves by burning fossil fuels and what energy sources we will use in future? There are signs that wood may make a comeback: there are trees being planted and old woods regenerate as

sheep numbers decline. Charlie Russell can be seen driving trailer-loads of split wood to the increasing number of households with wood-burning stoves here; we even have a ceramic artist, Fergus Stewart, whose pots are birthed from a wood-fired kiln. Like I said, there's always more than one reason to light a fire.

An academic project I worked on years ago involved a series of interviews with a researcher from Sri Lanka. She worked for a soon-to-be-Professor of ecology and resource management. Rather daunted, she described to him how women in the Kandy region light fires in their home gardens at the end of the dry season, sweeping up leaves and burning them, 'in order to release their nutrients back into the soil to help crops to grow when the rains come'. In a further interview, perhaps because I was similarly young and female, the researcher confessed that she didn't actually think the women were concerned about nutrients at all, but lit the fires as 'an opportunity to relax, gossip with friends and neighbours, cook food together and have a social time'. Is that what the women told you? I asked. 'No', she said, 'they say they light the fires to send messages to the cloud spirits, asking them to end the dry season and bring the monsoon rains.' She had censored the spirits from her account to the chief academic as being 'unscientific'. She smiled to me, 'I sometimes wonder whether, just maybe, it really works. What if the smoke particles from their fires seed clouds, and really help the first rains to come?'

What if fires here in Assynt, too, were not just practical ways of keeping warm or making a living, not only social venues to ceilidh through long winter nights, but also spiritually powerful forms of communication? Would that help us to explain all those enigmatic ancient burnt mounds? Maybe explanations of them as hunters' fireplaces or sites for bathing sound so hollow and unsatisfying because something more enthralling was going on. Up above Kirkton, near Inchnadamph, along the stream called Alt-an-Druim-Torr, there are five, perhaps even seven, burnt mounds close together. If the building of one is a mystery, surely the building of seven requires a mystic explanation?

A burnt mound is described as a crescent-shaped pile of burnt stones, beside a trough, presumably where they heated water. They are always close to water. At Druim Torr, they are in a small, secluded valley. The nearby hills were dense forest, we can assume from their names: Druim an Coille Moire (hill of the big wood) and Creag a'Choimhleum (woody crag). The Alt – the river – is formed from several vigorous springs that burst out of the limestone here into beautiful wells of fresh, sweet water, trickling together into the single stream that flows for just a few hundred metres then cascades down a sparkling waterfall into Loch Assynt. The top pool of the waterfall has a handy washing platform with a spectacular view out to the west down the length of the loch, perfect for a sunset shower.

The burnt mounds are not so much crescents as double mounds the shape of two hips joined by a sternum. The triangular trough lies between the hips like a crotch. I imagine a round tent stretched over it between the hip mounds like the big raised belly of a pregnant mother. I feel the wonder of fresh water gushing from the earth here. My instinct is this is a place for giving birth and these burnt mounds are the remains of womb rooms, birthing tents, women's fertility places, where rituals of earth worship would have been performed around the hearth and where mothers would have been helped to bring forth children in the warm safety of the round shelter. They would have been both sacred and practical; the pure spring water both mystically powerful and a hygienic help. I wonder what other ceremonies would have been performed here: initiations into womanhood for girls at their first bleeding, spell-casting to assist

fertility, recovery after miscarriage, perhaps more general healing and life-affirming magic. I imagine the cleansing fire and the pure, hot spring water. I imagine the springs changing through the seasons, their limestone channel-fed movements, their moods and fluxes, how the siting of the womb room would have had to modify as the years passed and how the burnt mounds would have been even more wonderful to those who understood their full significance and believed that they, and the sacred fire that made them, connected them to their ancestors and to the earth.

Our excavation of a burnt mound has shown that it was used for at least a thousand years in the bronze age and then again in the mediaeval period. The charcoal comes from a variety of species including alder, birch, hazel and willow, indicating plentiful woodland in an area now almost completely denuded of trees. Once again, the evidence points to the conclusion that if we want woods to be present, we need people to be there, valuing the trees. We are forest creatures.

When the sheriff put out the fires in the Kirkton houses below the Alt-an-Druim-Torr, he extinguished not just the physical life of the people there, but also their spiritual role as children of the land, birthed as pure as spring water from the earth. To heal the injustices of the past, to heal this land, to heal ourselves, we need to relight the fires in the Assynt glens. We can reconnect to the earth through the warmth of burning, flaming wood. And if we can change our attitude to fire as a precious mystical force, even all the little blazes and crackles of gas stoves and petrol engines, perhaps we would find it easier to be more thoughtful, less profligate, with our use of fossil fuels.

Go, today, and rekindle a sacred fire.

Jane Kelly, t*he dark days/aurum*
The storm fallen leaves were allowed to dry, then painted with shellac, followed by gold size and finally gilded with loose Red Gold Leaf.

White heat

Leela Soma

Dazzling, blinding, sweat-encrusted bodies,
humid
a veil of tropical rays
the aroma of stillness.
a dry riverbed.

Stillness
Silence
Scarce water
Crops wither
The empty earthenware pot
on the dying firewood stove
the cries of hunger
deep into the brown fissures
as they await
the first drop
of the monsoons.

Fragments of Storm Vaia, the Aftermath

Dina Fachin

This work is part of my ongoing project about climate change and natural disasters. Storm Vaia hit my home region in Northern Italy one year ago, destroying wide areas of ancient forests as well as some urban areas. With these works I have been experimenting with ink, watercolor, masking tape, drawing and painting as a way to comprehend and replicate the complexity of this natural phenomena, as well as make sense of the tragic changes onto the fauna and flora of the places where I grew up.
These paintings and drawings in different sizes are just fragments of an entire story that is affecting not only nature, but the entire ecosystem, including us; they speak to the aftermath of a violent storm, yet at the same time, they hint at a future of desolation, destruction and death. However, in the midst of such a tragic and likely outcome, some of these works specifically address the Japanese concept of wabi-sabi: similarly to the cracks filled with gold in wabi-sabi pottery, the golden lines appearing in some of these paintings remind us that in between the cracks, there is space to grow and reflect on the disruptive effects of climate change, which can help us revisit and restore our environmental consciousness thus putting together the pieces again.

Above: *The Forest that Used to Be*, watercolour, ink and pen

*Fallen and Uprooted, w*atercolour, graphite and ink pen.

*Reaching Out, w*atercolour, graphite and ink pen.

A LANDSCAPE LOST

James Fenton

"… Let us give thanks for the things of the north…
For winds and rain that scour endless miles of rippling heather,
for an elemental wildness that knows little of cities and towns,
for an understanding that in stark harshness blinding beauty there abounds
for those who walk and seek to find …"
The Things of the North, Rennie McOwan

"… how still the moorlands lie,
Sleep-locked beneath the awakening sky!
The film of morn is silver-grey
On the young heather, and away,
Dim distant, set in ribs of hill,
Green glens are shining …
The antique home of quietness …
But when the even brings surcease,
Grant me the happy moorland peace;
That in my heart's depth ever lie
That ancient land of heath and sky …"
Leap in Smoke, John Buchan

"A brilliant, though cold day. But a glorious district…. O these large, heathery, silent hills. Treeless, peakless, and nearly rockless! Great masses of solitary silence, broken only by high rills, tumbling into raging and sparkling torrents in the valley! And the gradual opening of the rich low country, ending in the beauty of Perth! Were I to see it yearly for a thousand years, I cannot conceive that the impression would ever fade."
From Braemar down Glenshee to Perth (1853), Circuit Journeys, Lord Cockburn

Have you noticed that trees are the answer to all our environmental problems? By growing and planting them we provide a focus for community engagement, we put right the damaging woodland destruction of our ancestors, we protect ourselves from damaging floods, we prevent landslides onto our roads and railways, we benefit wildlife, we offset climate change through the carbon the trees store, we provide essential rural jobs, we produce a sustainable and sweet-smelling fuel, and timber for our needs, we provide places for recreation, we can hide unsightly development, and we add to the aesthetics of the landscape[i]. The list goes on and on …

Trees undeniably hold an aesthetic appeal which perhaps blinds us to their actual place in the ecology of the Highlands (Silver birch, Kincraig).

We demean mere scrub, preferring instead our trees to be man-sized (if that is a phrase we are still allowed to use)! We are impressed by the way they tower over us, either tall and straight soaring up to the clouds, or with branches bent and twisted into impossible shapes; by their colours in the autumn, by their flush of bright green spring growth, their solid grandeur of summer; we are impressed by the shear longevity of some, thousands of years, outlasting even the Roman Empire, and by their variety of profile, the skinny Lombardy, the triangular trees of Christmas, the delicate, white-barked birch, the solid oak, the majestic beech …

And we like the way they add a touch of homeliness to a bleak, windswept landscape, bringing a sense of shelter and refuge to an

otherwise hostile environment – a clue perhaps as to why they have us in our sway: an atavistic memory of when trees were indeed our home, when we, in our early years, swung from branch to branch and tree to tree as children still do today.

We are so obsessed with them that every place now has its own community woodland or tree nursery, every landowner is out planting trees and creating new native woodlands, and, indeed, trees are so important to us that the Scottish Government wants to cover 25% of the country with them: we are told that Scotland has the lowest tree cover of any country in Europe, surely justification enough for all this action? Especially when we witness the continual destruction of the great rainforest of Amazonia, so that when we plant trees in Scotland we feel we are doing our bit to save the planet.

After this panegyric what can be said against them?

But, but, but… Are we in Scotland not getting a bit carried away by all this fervour? And historically, what role have trees actually played in our lives and culture? And why, by covering Scotland with trees do we want to make the place the same as everywhere else in Europe? After all, one of the aims of the European Landscape Convention, of which Scotland is a signatory, is to prevent the general homogenisation of landscapes, to fight against our tendency to make everywhere look the same, to make everywhere fit in with our own human preferences, now that we can, rather than accepting what we have inherited from nature and previous generations.

For has Scotland not always been (at least for the past several thousand years during which our culture developed) an open, bleak, wind-swept, largely treeless landscape, infested with peat bogs and with barren muir? Has this general barrenness not shaped our personalities and cultures? Provided the location for the various wars and uprisings, the wind-blasted Culloden Muir, for example? Providing the backdrop for the clans to raise cattle and fight each other, and for the hardy farmer to make a meagre living from the poor soils?

Wooded Norway, an inspiration for Scotland but there are reasons why the ecology is different in the two countries (tree-line woodland, central Norway).

And surely, unlike the wooded Norway, from whence we have imported timber over the centuries and where buildings are universally of wood, has the building culture of Scotland not been that of stone: from the Neolithic Skara Brae, through the Pictish brochs, Highland castles and black houses to the improvement houses, east coast fishing ports and Edinburgh's New Town? And over most of history were not the houses of the common people built of turf, not wood? Was wood not so rare and valuable that, down the Long Island, roof joists formed the dowry of those getting married?

No, the culture of woods and trees is, to us, an alien culture – with the possible exception of Strathspey where native woods held out longest. At least it was: I fear that history is being rewritten, and we are now being told that Scottish trees and woods have always been important to us, although it is hard to see how this could have been the case when trees, even hundreds of years ago, only comprised about 4% of our landscape. In other words, and this is worth stating strongly, 96% of our country was open land, a

land of peat bog, open moor, heather and grass. This change of culture has been rapid: in my youth it was common to see cars heading south back to England with a sprig of heather in their bonnet, a symbol of Scotland. We do not see this nowadays because heather has been stigmatised as representing the land of the rich elite (guilt by association), land where grouse and deer are shot and land which properly ought to be trees: trees of that new Scottish symbol, the Caledonian or Scots pine. Although we are never told that this pine could just as well be called the Vladivostok pine for it is one of the commonest trees in Eurasia, spreading from Scotland to the far eastern shores of Russia.

Nowadays whole hillside of heather are ploughed up to plant trees (Dava Moor, Moray) in 2018).

At the risk of bringing facts into an emotional debate, the last time there was significant woodland cover, as exemplified by the ancient trees at the base of our peat bogs, was over 4,000 years ago. Even the Ancient Wood of Caledon, as promulgated by the Romans is now seen as myth, and certainly an oft repeated myth; so, at least, the Historiographer Royal of Scotland tells us[ii].

But it makes a grand story: Once upon a time there was a great forest stretching from coast to coast across all the marches of Scotland. And then one day we humans came along, and we cut down all the trees, and we brought in sheep who ate the ones which remained, and we allowed deer numbers to increase way above what they ought to be so that no trees can now survive. And so we must go out into the world and restore this once great forest, we must cover our land once again with trees to restore it to its former glory …

This makes planting trees almost a moral imperative, and is in tune with what we are being told is happening in other parts of the world. Scotland is no different to Brazil where coastal and inland rainforest has been cut down and the right thing to do is to replant. Indeed, conservationists In Scotland are reinforcing the comparison by calling our remaining woodland fragments 'Scotland's rainforest'. Except that 'forest' seems to me to be an exaggeration: however, 'Scotland's rainwoods' does not have the same ring to it!

The only problem with this story is that there is no evidence to support it! Even a cursory look at the excellent maps produced by General Roy and his team 1747-52[iii] shows that our Highland woods must have disappeared way before the sheep came in, and, whatever Highland politicians would have us believe, in a period when Tom Devine tells us much of the Highlands were uninhabited. And also during a period when wolves were present, an important point because conservationists are always telling us that deer numbers are now so high because there are now no wolves to eat them. If we only brought back the wolf, so their story goes, then deer numbers would fall and the trees would come back. Except that the woods disappeared during the 10,000 year period when both wolves and deer were present: so how could their presence change the situation? Most unlikely.

To reiterate, Tom Devine states: "Settlement in the western Highlands and Islands was mainly confined to very limited areas because of the challenging constraints of geology, climate and geography. Therefore, when modern visitors contemplate hills and glens which are empty of people, they should not assume they were inhabited in the past. Or that their present silence and loneliness were necessarily the consequence of later clearance and emigration."[iv]

And Haldane states: "When cross-country droving in Scotland on an appreciable scale first began [post 1700], and for many years thereafter, a great part of the Highland and upland areas of the country was common land, or at the least land which, while nominally owned by the local chieftain, was in fact unused and uncared for."[v]

Thus the trees disappeared even from places where there were no people and where the land was unused. This suggests natural causes for their disappearance[vi], which was in fact realised 150 years ago by that great Scottish geologist, James Geikie, who concluded: "As it can be shown that the destruction of our ancient forests has not been primarily due to man…"[vii]. And indeed, modern research tells us that this is to be expected after an Ice Age. After the glaciers retreat, plants recolonise the land until eventually forest becomes common; but thereafter millennia of rainfall causes the nutrients to be washed out of the soil, the forests decline and moorland becomes prominent, a process which occurred even during interglacials when humans were not present. Indeed, there is even a name for the phase of woodland regression we find ourselves in: the oligocratic phase. Why is this not widely known? Perhaps because it does not fit in with our certainty, a belief if ever there were one, that us humans must have destroyed the forest: after all, our destructive powers are well known.

I blame Frank Fraser Darling for all this, for he it was who seeded the idea in people's minds that it was people who got rid of the forest which should naturally clothe the Highlands, and thus it is a degraded landscape[viii]. This notion was in tune with the period, being put forward at a time when our modern environmental consciousness was just emerging, including the realisation of our generally malign influence on all things natural.

But why not, just for moment, put aside everything you know, including the fact that trees must always be the top plant, and just imagine that, instead of being a degraded landscape, the open, unwooded landscape of the Highlands is one of the most natural remaining in Europe? Would this not make it especially special? Would this not make it a thing of value, something precious to be safeguarded at all costs? Would we then be so cavalier in trying to transform it into something different?

We perceive landscapes, not objectively by what our eyes are showing us, but through the filter of what we know. If we 'know' that the Highland landscape is degraded, then that is what we will see – and we will want to act to put right the sins of our forefathers in order to restore it to its natural glory. However, if instead we 'know' that it is one of the most natural remaining in Europe, then we damage it at our peril and will be nervous even about touching it. It is essential, therefore, to get our story right: we must not be cavalier, we must resist the temptation just to get on and do something and take time to research the history of the landscape, and, difficult though it is in the times in which we live, to base our actions on evidence. Just because everybody is saying something does not make it true!

There was once a time, times I can just remember, when you could traverse the watershed of this once great land of ours from east to west and all you could see were untrammelled views of untamed open hills and moors to distant horizons in all directions, no plantation, no fence, no track, no building in sight. Those days are long gone, but if you have more than a moment to spare and are prepared to get out of your car, to put on your boots and to stravaig beyond the bounds of the road into a distant pathless glen, you just might come across the old Scotland, a throw-back in time to when the Highlands really were wild, when the land was left to itself (and not having to fulfil the Protestant work ethic), a time when behind a

rock there may hide a fleeing clansman, beside the burn there might be the lone shieling in its small island of green, or coming down the glen a great herd of cattle headed for the markets far south in the Lowlands. You might meet unexpectedly an antlered stag with his proud head held high (if that is, the conservationists have allowed any to remain alive). But the glimpse may only be fleeting, soon, like a will o' the wisp, vanishing away into dreams and imagination.

The picture may linger long in the image portrayed to the tourists by our august institutions, the image we also like to imagine to ourselves, the image of the unspoilt hill, glen and loch; but it is just that – imaginary – the Scotland of the past, not the reality of the landscape which is there before our eyes, over-designed, over-managed, compartment-alised, ploughed, dug-up, planted, levelled, filled with roads and tracks and things, and tall fences running miles and miles and miles over the hills, the rivers dammed, the burns piped, and the hills topped with lines of turbines. Lord Cockburn would be dismayed at what he saw for, writing way back in 1838 about the Rest and Be Thankful, he said: "As I stood at the height of the road and gazed down on its strange course both ways, I could not help rejoicing that there was at least one place where railways, canals, and steamers and all these devices for sinking hills and raising valleys, and introducing man and levels, and destroying solitude and nature, would for ever be set at defiance." Is this still true today?

No, we have cut the landscape up into blocks and, only if you are lucky and search hard enough will you find a small corner of open hill, the ancient Scotland, but now a fenced-off block, an island in its own land. The integrity of the landscape has been lost because we did not value what we had; or, as is our fate, we only know what we value when it becomes rare and under threat, generally when it is too late. Our hills and mountains are not allowed to be themselves, not allowed to be wild: we have to manage everything because we know better. Even the rewilders want to transform it to fit in with their imagination, to force it to follow the path of Norway where the tree is king. Perhaps they have been parasitised by trees (is this too extreme?), taken over by the insidious tree goddess which resides in us all.

The dismaying truth is that the Highlands have followed the same course as other parts of the world: not under their own volition, but their fate annexed by us, designed by us, used by us. They have been tamed, their wildness has evaporated.

One of the most natural landscapes remaining in Europe, (Ben Alligin, Wester Ross).

Reference

[i] Although often stated, many of these benefits are questionable: there is little evidence that our ancestors destroyed a once great forest in Scotland; the most damaging floods are caused by exceptional rainfall on saturated ground when trees will not make much difference to rates of water run-off; landslides can be observed in Scotland on both wooded and unwooded slopes; most trees in the uplands are planted on moorland plant communities of high biodiversity value in their own right, whose value will be lost; trees planted on upland soils can exacerbate climate change by oxidising soil carbon and reducing the albedo (reflectivity) of the landscape; native woods are often impenetrable to walkers except along paths, and also a good habitat for midges; and it is a matter of judgement whether trees or open hill land are more aesthetically pleasing.

[ii] "Let us begin with the Great Wood of Caledon. It is, in every sense of the word, a myth." Smout, T.C. 2000. *Nature contested*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, page 37.

[iii] National Library of Scotland 2019. The Roy Maps of the Scottish Highlands 1747-1752. https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/

[iv] Devine, T. 2018. *The Scottish Clearances: a history of the dispossessed.* Penguin Random House (Allen Lane).

[v] Haldane, A.R.B. 1952. *The Drove Roads of Scotland*. Thomas Nelson & Sons, Edinburgh.

[vi] See my recent 2019 paper *Woodland or Open Ground: scenarios for the persistence of woodland in the presence of grazing* which explains how the unwooded landscape of the Highlands can be explained by natural processes. Download from https://www.fenton.scot/woodland history and ecology.htm

[vii] Geikie, J. 1867 [read in 1866]. On the buried forests and peat mosses of Scotland, and the changes of climate which they indicate. *Transactions of the Royal Society, Edinburgh*. Vol. XXIV, Part II, 363-384.

[viii] "In short, the Highlands are a devastated countryside …" Fraser Darling, F. 1955. *West Highland Survey: an essay in human ecology*. Oxford University Press, page 192.

Juniper, Crag Head

Geraldine Green

I'd like to sleep beneath
this ancient Juniper,
twisted as it is,
bent low by prevailing Westerlies

blown in from the Irish Sea.
Bivvy or one night only, or more
perhaps, if I were brave enough.

If I were underneath
this old tree's sanctuary, evergreen
that cattle have trodden round,
this keeper of flame, incense tree,
maker of gin and dreams and love
that has seen many winters.

I'd like to sleep below its twisted arms.
Wake, to see morning, gold, or fog-ridden,
look across the lake and see
the Old Man of Coniston.

To wake, after slumber
beneath this ancient Juniper,
twisted as it is,
breathe in its incense.

Ash

Jan Sutch Pickard

Fire among the giant redwoods
doesn't often kill them; it clears
the forest floor of duff: the leaf-litter,
bark crumbled to dust, animal bones,
debris built up over years.
It de-clutters. It sweeps clean, it heals.

Lightning strike, human hand or other chance
starts these fires: smoke curls like mist
around the ankles of the trees, with
a whiff of incense in cathedral aisles;
a flame glimmers, another catches, they dance
like dervishes now, leap and race
through the undergrowth, red as the boles,
red as the eyes of fleeing animals.
Into that silence, fire sings a fierce song.

But the trees resist, their thick bark –
holding more tannin than navvies' tea –
fends off the heat; and when the fire's gone
and the smoke clears, they still stand,
resilient, great feet blackened, signed
with the fire that crossed their path,
rooted in earth now swept and purified.
And deep in nourishing ash, already,
the tiny seeds germinate, one by one.

Norman Bissell, *Rebirth 2*

Norman Bissell, *Rebirth 3*

‘Reflets dans l’eau’

Mark Sheridan

This essay is a personal reflection on the influence of rivers, the sea and forests on my creative output as a composer over the last two decades, and the influence of Geopoetics on my work.

Lennox

I am standing on the shoreline where the River Leven meets the Clyde at the foot of Dumbarton Rock. Dun Bhreatain, the town of my birth. The grit and sand crunch below my feet, the tide is low and the sky clear blue, with the dark formation of the tree lined walkways of Levengrove Park behind me. It is mid-November 1995 and their leafless branches stretch upwards and outwards, stripped of leaves, painfully stark and bare. The plaintive calls of the seagulls and the oystercatchers, the odd curlew and lapwing, echo a clear hollow canvas, carrying across the delta exposed at low tide. The sun glitters on the pools in the sand and sediment, and reflects on the channel of the Clyde farther out – across to the south bank of the river, and towards the west where Finlaystone Forest lies beyond Langbank.

I was rebuilding my state of mind in this place of my childhood and formative years, during a challenging time in my life where darkness hovered around my psyche. I retreated to a place I knew well. A waymark in my journey of restoration, a place between these rivers and the forests of my mind.

This memory visits me from time to time, unbidden, but welcome, a reminder of the influence these rivers, this place, have had on my creative life and music. That moment: the sounds, images, the light, the river, the trees, and the clear November air. And a reminder of challenges overcome. Often, when visiting my daughters and grandsons I take time to wander that shoreline and the banks of the Leven and the Clyde.

Artists are influenced by many factors, by the things that matter to them: political, spiritual, moral, cultural, elements of their heritage and environment. Rivers and the sea matter to me. For almost 40 years, at one time or another in my working and creative life, I lived alongside these Dun Bhreatain rivers and landscapes. They have also heavily influenced my work.

The area itself, originally Leamhnachd in Gaelic, ‘the field of the smooth stream’, or Levenauchen and eventually Lennox, was one of the ancient Provinces of Scotland. It has had an interesting cultural heritage including writers such as Tobias Smollet, Don Roberto (Cunningham Graham), the engineer Robert Napier, the Wagnerian singer, David Ward, David Byrne of Talking Heads, and local legends of Robert the Bruce and William Wallace.

A keen singer and student of music at school, ‘Lennox Water’ was the title of my first performed composition, a simple modal work for school orchestra and piano, in 1972. An impressionistic piece, reflecting both the river movement through the landscape and woods, and the sonic influences of Sibelius, Dvorak, Debussy and Bartok in my musical development. The essence of the work revisited me 30 years later, in 2002, when it appeared in the ‘Curve of the Earth’, a commission for Celtic Connections performed by Alasdair Fraser and Natalie Haas and Orchestra, and at Festival Interceltique de Lorient later that year. This work was in two parts, a Suite and a Fiddle Concerto. The Suite was biographical in nature, a culmination of reflections and thematics for Orchestra

and the band Brolum featuring Julie Fowlis and Martin O'Neil. The concerto was an exploration of folk influenced themes set in a quasi-baroque concerto grosso style, which Fraser and I agreed was mid-ground between the folk tradition and classical foundations. It gave me the space to explore folk melody, angular and brutalist lines, explosive driving rhythms and contrasting impressionist themes. 'Lennox' appeared as a reflective slow movement with a triadic melodic line on fiddle, rising and falling above a sweeping cello melody supported by a repetitive arpeggiated clarsach accompaniment, providing momentum and forward movement.

Geopoetics: 'Inner visions and the world of dream experiences'

Of course, these descriptions of 'Lennox' music bear some resemblance to the movement of a river, but interpretations of this sort – 'meaning making' - are for the listener to determine. The holy grail of interpretation and meaning making, the study of semiotics and symbolism in music, is an academic treasure trove for some, or an Escher maze for others. Many composers reject such 'extra-musical' notions, particularly those that elevate abstraction, absolutism and pure musical strategies and techniques to their work. Others are drawn to metaphors and extra-musical inspirations that align to their creations and musical production.

The dominance of serial technique and mathematical formulae (developed in the 1920s and 30s by Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Weber) in much post WWII music, particularly in the works of Pierre Boulez, Milton Babbitt and other maximalists, drew many avant-garde artists away from more neo-romantic or impressionistic styles, as these were regarded as old-fashioned or lacking in intellectual rigour. And yet the father of serial technique, Schoenberg, composer and painter in the Expressionist style of early 20th Century Vienna, offered such imaginative perspectives on his own music, in works such as 'Five Pieces for Orchestra' (1912). Robert Craft wrote:

> 'The *Five Pieces for Orchestra* are also 'inner visions' and their headings – *Vorgefuhle, Farben, Peripetia* – might have been borrowed from almost any of the (his) paintings. The music too, especially of *Vorgefuhle* and *Peripetia* will suggest to some people, as the paintings avowedly do, a world of dream experience, though being music, it need not suggest or relate to anything, but only be.' (1968)

I believe that the tangible connections between music and life, the environment and the world we experience every day, exemplify the basic principles of Geopoetics. Kenneth White, 1989:

> ' … geopoetics provides not only a place, and this is proving more and more necessary, where poetry, thought and science can come together, in a climate of reciprocal inspiration, but a place where all kinds of specific disciplines can converge, once they are ready to leave over-restricted frameworks and enter into global (cosmological, cosmopoetic) space.'

My association with Norrie Bissell over the last 20 years has drawn me to the Geopoetics field of expression and to a greater realisation of my creative and cultural process. I am comfortable in my understanding of my own cultural journey – Kenneth White again: '…what culture means is the way the human being conceives of his or her self … So it's a way of conceiving oneself, a way of working on oneself and a way of getting somewhere.'

(1996) Our 'inner visions' and our 'world of dream experiences' often shape our creative work. Memories of my childhood summers in the early 1960's are of idyllic family holidays, the 'fair fortnight' 'doon-the-waater' to Rothesay and Port Bannatyne on the Maid of Skelmorlie or the Jeannie Deans from Craigendoran. The ferries were packed with holidaymakers revelling in escape from the Clydeside factories, and as a child, I was excited by the whole experience of travelling on the river, and mesmerised by the surge of the water from the bow and the frothy wake aft the boat.

The Waverley, which still plies the river in summer, was a special experience. Below deck, you could observe the enormous engines, bright polished copper and brass with powerful pistons, their rhythmic power, thundering and driving the shafts below your feet on the walkway to the paddles, as they pounded the river. You could see the turning paddles through observation portholes, churning the river, showering the glass with white spray and sheets of water, all the while surrounded by booming rhythms of the machinery and the pungent odour of the oil and grease from the pistons and the engines: memories indelibly imprinted on the mind of a young boy. Later, with the advent of a car – a Ford Popular no less- we would travel by Loch Lomond, by Arrochar, through the raw beauty of the Rest and be Thankful and down through the dark and brooding forests of Argyll and Glendaruel to Colintraive and the short ferry to Rhubodach: a very different perspective for the impressionable mind, but one as rich and powerful.

Don Roberto

For the remainder of the school break, I spent long hot days on the Clyde shore at Westcliff with my sister and cousins, and have clear memories of splashing about the sun-glittering river at the 'Scotch Rocks' close to Leabrae and Ardoch; picnicking with meat paste sandwiches and Irnbru.

This was where Robert Cunningham Graham lived for many years after WW1, and it was on these stretches of sand at low tide he would ride his horse, Pampa, to the mouth of the Leven and back. His family at one time owned much of the estate, agriculture, forests and woodlands on both the north side of the Clyde stretching from Ardmore on the Clyde, south of Loch Lomond, and north east through Gartmore to the Lake of Menteith, and on the Southside from Finlaystone across a swathe of Renfrew. In addition to his legendary exploits as an Argentinian gaucho in the 1870s, and his radical political career, he was an exceptional writer.

He was a friend and colleague of George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad and Neil Gunn, and recognised as an exceptional writer by Hugh MacDiarmid, Compton Mackenzie and others such as William Power, author and nationalist politician. There was a monument to Don Roberto situated in a park which I passed every day for years next to my old school – until it was removed to Gartmore for safety from the unappreciative youths of Dumbarton.

Late to his writing, I found Don Roberto's style, though dated, to be quite inspirational - evocative and impressionistic. His lyrical, descriptive writing is largely from personal perspectives, as a viewer-observer: 'All that we write is but a bringing forth again, of something we have seen or heard about.' (1906)

From 'Mist in Menteith' (1913):

> ‘The lake, with its three islands, its giant chestnuts, now stag-headed and about to fall, the mouldering priory, the long church with its built-up, five-light window, the castle, overgrown with brushwood, and with a tree springing up from the middle hall, the heronry, the rope of sand the fairies twisted, which would make a causeway to the island had they not stopped in the nick of time, the single tree that marks a gallows, and the old churchyard of the Port, all these the mist invests with a peculiar charm that they lack when the sun shines and shows them merely mouldering ruins and decaying trees.’

And from ‘Snow in Menteith’ (1905):

> ‘The trees, congealed and tense, stood silent, quivering and eager for the embrace of the keen frost, their boughs all clad first with a thistle-down of cold ….’

Such evocative writing is a stimulus to the imagination. One cold, misty, mid-winter morning on the Clyde, not far from Ardoch, was the source of inspiration for me while working on the orchestration for ‘Paracas’ (2005) with Fred Morrison, the exceptional piper, creative mind and ‘force of nature’. It was a mammoth task – a time-limited production, as usual, for a large-scale 90-minute work based on Fred’s melodies and musical energy; a series of tableaux celebrating the Gael and the music of the Highlands unfolds through the work as a narrative, with lyrics by Angus McNicol. The work was first performed by 15 traditional musicians, including 5 pipers and the Orchestra and Chorus of Scottish Opera at Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. A dawn walk on the deserted pier at Helensburgh inspired the opening of the slow movement, ‘Leaving Lochmaddy’, with sustained inverted pedal chords unfolding on woodwind and soft, rising low strings, and tubular bells signifying the departing vessel. Childhood memories were also recalled, of hearing the distant lonely sound of foghorns on vessels anchored at the Tail of the Bank of the Clyde, greeting the ‘bells’ at Ne’erday. Poignant and far from home.

Such memories invade the creative process – and are integrated in the mind with musical ideas, plastic, malleable sound materials, compositional techniques and methods, layers of musical meaning, and then worked as harmonic and melodic fragments and instrumental colours, to create musical moments in time. Composition is more often than not a hard slog of mapping sonic ideas to conventional notation, scoring, arranging and editing. Such moments of inspiration and creative joy feed the soul and sustain the task of composition.

‘The Flight of the Arctic Tern’

I have written a number of works that also use images and text alongside the music to carry the narrative. One theatre work for narrators, Gaelic singer and ensemble, ‘The Flight of the Arctic Tern’ (2009) tells the story of a young man leaving Durness in the Highlands in 1854 to seek a new life in Australia. The annual migration of the Arctic Tern from the north of Scotland to the southern hemisphere serves as a metaphor for young Alastair Gunn’s journey. His story is told in the manner of a letter to his descendant, Iain Anderson, BBC broadcaster and my accomplice in many creative ploys. In this sequence, Alastair sails from Glasgow on a new vessel, The Ivanhoe:

> ‘…Well there was a lot of excitement as we left Glasgow ... with people lined all along the piers and jetties. It was The

> Ivanhoe's first sailing so every ship we passed there was shouting and bells ringing and folk waving. All along the Clyde, there are shipyards too – quite a sight. Ships and vessels in all sorts of states ... some shells, with arching wooden hulks, some almost finished ready for launch... and thousands of men swarming all over them. All the way, down the river on both sides too! And noisy! Banging, sawing, and shouting....
>
> … When we passed Dumbarton, where the Rock is and the river running into the Clyde, a lot of the men from the yards were all turned out... that's where the Ivanhoe was built. The captain cut in closer to the shore and the men were cheering and waving. The crew and the passengers – well we all started to join in ... it was like a big party. What a day we were having of it. Old MacKay from Strathy had the fiddle – he had been at war in the 92nd with the bodach and he was over 70, but he was as strong as an ox! Well it was great. Reels and jigs and all. The Captain, Henderson, was well impressed.'

As the ship heads further into the Clyde Estuary and the Irish Sea, beyond Arran, the music replaces the narrative with an Urnuigh Mhara, a Sea Prayer for singers and a small traditional music ensemble. The repeated refrains and the music undulate, rising, and falling like the Barque in the open sea, the sails furled and the wind picking up the speed:

'Beannaicht and long;
Beannaicheadh Dia an t-Athair I;
Beannaicht and long;
Beannaicheadh Dia am Mac I,
Beannaicht and long;
Beannaicheadh Dia an Spiorad.'

'Blest be the boat,
God the father bless her;
Blest be the boat,
God the son bless her;
Blest be the boat,
God the Spirit bless her.'

The 'Carmina Gadelica' (1900) collection of prayers and incantations in the 19th Century Highlands and Islands by Alexander Carmichael has been a constant companion to my composition output since my early teaching days in South Uist and Eriskay in 1979. The inclusion of these chants and refrains in this work, reflect the cultural context from which Alastair migrated at the age of just 19.

Trees and Forests.

> '… early to-morrow morning we will take the children out into the forest to where it is the thickest. There we will light a fire for them, and give each of them one more piece of bread, and then we will go to our work and leave them alone. They will not find the way home again, and we shall be rid of them.' (Brothers Grimm)

My childhood in the 50s and 60s involved bedtime illustrated story books, featuring the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales, grim illustrations, and dark dreams of an impressionable young boy. Hansel and Gretel, Sleeping Beauty, Rapunzel – forests and dark tales! And of course studying folklore and traditional ballads and songs over the years opened up a whole world of stories, songs and legends around forest, woods and trees.

> 'Through the spread of Greek culture, the Roman empire, and the revival of Greek thought in the Renaissance, an association of trees with spiritual and intellectual "shadow" and their cutting down with "enlightenment" may have

made its way into the collective unconscious throughout Europe. Deciduous forests and their seasonal cycles of falling and growing leaves, or new growth sprouting from the base of burnt or cut trunks, may have induced people to regard trees as symbols for an eternal and indestructible life force. Trees and forests thus took on symbolic divine characteristics, or were seen to represent superlative forces such as courage, endurance or immortality. They were the means of communication between worlds.' (J, Crew: United Nations, FAO)

In Scotland we are trying to restore the great forests which have been lost over thousands of years. The ancient Caledonian Forest – our own rain forest which thrived in the rough terrain of the Highlands - at one time spread over 1.5 million hectares from central Scotland to Caithness and Sutherland in the north and beyond the Cairngorms in the north east. Only 75,000 hectares now remain. The Caledonian Forest was mentioned by Pliny and Tacitus. In Roman occupation 'each time the Caledonians emerged to skirmish or fight a battle against the legions, they melted away back into the forest … The Caledonian Forest persisted in the history of the north for a long time.' (Moffat; p22, 2005).

Don Roberto captures something of the mystique of the forest in 'Laroch', (1905).

'Firs, remnants of the Caledonian forest, sprang from the rocky soil and stood out stark, retiring sentinels of the old world – the world in which they, the white cattle, the wild boar and wolf, were fellow-dwellers, and from which they lingered to remind one of the others who had disappeared.'

The mystique and dark secrets of forests in folklore have influenced two of my works in particular – the opera based on Andrew Greig's dark novel 'When they lay Bare' (2003) and more recently 'Dreaming Agracas' (2017).

'When they lay Bare'

Andrew's borders tale recalls the 'debatable lands', the contested space between England and Scotland, fought over for centuries and in particular the local family rivalries, betrayal and revenge – 'hot and cold trod'. Essentially the narrative revolves around the arrival of a mysterious visitor, Marnie, (Horse MacDonald) who is intent on revenging the death of her mother, Jinny Lauder who fell to her death, pushed over the cliff by Lord Elliot, her secret lover (Pat Kane). In addition to the complexity of the story line and the fascinating layers of narrative – I was drawn to the intensity of the characters and their interweaving lives and passions. Towards the denouement one of the key protagonists – the gamekeeper Tat – (David Scott) – is tempted to venture into the forest by the fleeting glimpses and visions of a beautiful woman. Deep in the forest, it is the spirit of the dead Jinny Lauder (Maureen McMullen) that appears:

Tat *'This isn't possible?'*
Jinny *'These things happen.'*
Tat *'You're no Banquo's ghost, you're real! Maybe I'm dead, Jinny's dead, you're dead.'*
Jinny *'These things happen. Everything disappears, but nothing ends. It all comes back.'… 'Follow me into the woods, like we used to play hidies before Marnie was born…'*

The work is essentially a 'dream experience' in which reality, fantasy and the metaphysical interlock, creating a rich tapestry of fable and truth. The forest is

instrumental in masking reality, fantasy, love trysts and death. The music portrays the same elements and characteristics with shifting tonality between folk modalities and dissonances, often ambiguous in its harmony, melody and counterpoint. I also chose three separate elements of musical style to enrich this musical fabric – Rock/Jazz singers, a traditional music ensemble and a string quartet. Blurring edges and creating ambiguity of style.

Dreaming Agracas

In 2012, Maria and I visited Sicily and we spent some time in Agrigento on the south coast. We stayed in sight of the Valley of the Temples, a stunning series of Greek Temples in various states of preservation and decay cover a wide area stretching along a ridge, which looks out to sea. It is an outstanding example of Greek architecture, built in the 5th century BC and during its brief history it was an important settlement which flourished for around 100 years before being destroyed by the Carthaginians in 404BC. The Temple of Concordia is the most well preserved Doric temple in Sicily and one of the best preserved Greek temples in general and it features in my recent opera 'Dreaming Agracas'.

As I worked on this opera over three years I began to realise that it was a realisation of my 'inner visions' and my 'world of dream experiences'. The unfolding narrative included extracts from 'The Odes of Pindar' (born 518 B.C.), who wrote of Theron and the heroes of Agracas, my own lyrics, echoes of Sorley Maclean, who regularly cited Greek mythology in his beautiful poetry, and news reports from Reuters and the BBC World Service on the migrant tragedy unfolding in the Mediterranean where thousands of desperate families fleeing North Africa attempted to reach Europe in flimsy craft, many drowning before rescue. Sicily was at the centre of the tragic events – and I moulded these terrible visions with the ancient visions of Pindar, the Temples of Agracas and the flow of the seas from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and the remote west coast of Scotland.

And this is the key to my creation – a space where the sea mediates between the living and the dead, like the forests, the unknown, the dark otherworld – and where the trees of the west coast of Scotland become pillars of stone temples and the voices of the dead are the murmur, the rush and sweep of the sea. The solo protagonist, Anna, lives in a remote shore and is a conduit for the sea, the forest and the land, the past, the present, life and death, while a Greek chorus counterpoints her discourse – and recorded broadcasts emerge into the narrative …

Anna *'I see the trees like pillars, standing in the growing darkness, staunch but bending with the west wind, witness to the turning sea,'*

> ***Chorus '****Let Theron's name be praised: Of Agracas the staunch pillar.*

Anna ***'****Steady power, timeless, stretching out: pillars, timeless. Rustling: the wind lifting over the moor.'*

> ***Chorus*** ***'****Let Theron's name be praised: Of Agracas the staunch pillar*.'

BBC News. '*Italian coastguards have rescued 893 migrants from boats in distress off the Libyan coast and bringing them to two Sicilian coastal towns … The latest wave of refugees set out after as*

many as 400 fleeing Libya are feared to have drowned when their boat capsized…'

> ***Chorus*** ***'****Let Theron's name be praised: Of Agracas the staunch pillar. Dreaming Agracas, where ancient people have perished, and their god was in exile; The eye of Sicily; the eye of Sicily;*

And in the respite of death – the peace and optimism of dawn:

Anna *Morning, memory, shade and darkness break.*
Light opens trees and branches, life, angular.
Pillars and foundations, roots and power
Aged and weathered, standing still
Unyielding to the wind, time and seasons

The song of the bird's rings out lightens my soul; my heart sings with joy –
the sweet lark soars; the chattering finch, the light robin calls;
the blackbird's melisma fills the air with life.

I introduce the call of the Redshank on the shore of the sea in the opera; it is long associated with death and dying in the Gaeltachd, the call or caoine often imitated by pipers and singers. The Redshank winters in Africa and returns to the northlands, Scotland, in spring.

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Flooded Fields - Susannah Rosenfeld-King

Boat People

Boat being pulled with dog and swan

The Archive of Lost Woods/ somewhere nowhere

Harriet and Rob Fraser

The Archive of Lost Woods / One

pause

and from the stillness of your body

listen

the quiet of a wood is never silent

it is the busy peace of life, the floating
song of birds, the reach of trees,
the sway of leaves in wind's persuasion

a fullness of cycles, where everything is connected

imagine

what this peace becomes
when broken into pieces

when trees stand as staves
for an orchestra of chainsaws

and birds flee
into an empty sky

The Archive of Lost Woods / Two

Tick Tock // Tick Tock

choose your clock:
a pendulum's swing, sand's fall, or a digital count

Tick Tock // Tick Tock

choose your pace:
centuries in soil, years in migrations,
seasons in a spectrum of greens, days in the calls of birds
hours in shadows' reach,
minutes in a spider's weave
seconds in the passing roar of trains

Tick Tock // Tick Tock

The Archive of Lost Woods / Three

tick, tick

time and life sit layered in a wood
among a march of trees

and here we stand
on the edge
of the end
of an ecosystem
on the edge
of a line
a clash of times

who will read the roll call
of marked woodlands
that have no voice
of marked woodlands
that are ghosts before their time?

tick

Glyn Davies
Broadwells
Crackley
South Cubbington
Thorpe Rough
Long Itchington
Burnt Firs
An unnamed Wood

tick

does the raven overhead
the sparrowhawk
the rowan berry
or the aspen root
know that life is on the line?

tick

Kingswood
Birches Wood
Little Lyntus
Another unnamed wood
Big Poors
Little Poors
Blackwaste
Parkhall
Rushmore

tick, tick
count the one hundred and eight
an utterance of woodlands axed

feel the air in this shaded world
where wrens continue with their lives
and fungi spreads
where saplings push for light
and rosehips swell, where fallen trees
return themselves to soil

vitality cannot be catalogued

when the line is drawn
when all is gone
marks are all that's left, scrapings
in the soil, writing on a page,
snapshots on a screen

in a single generation
fading memories will be blurred
into the mass extinction

each woodland wound / a silent gape of loss

each woodland saved / a noisy wealth of life

now is the time to be mindful

in this one shared world
beneath a single sky

for life

each act matters

Over Time

David Hayley

where the rivers meet
a confluence of waters
viewpoint emerges

when the rivers meet
convergence of ideas
catchment of cultures

how the rivers meet
from opposing perspectives
dialogue resolves

five lakes, four rivers
a thousand, thousand deltas
a web of water

courses of action
old channels, new directions
water remembers

cutting through the land
at the confluence of time
rivers find their way

a vortex of time
drawn into the here and now
dynamic outlooks

mountains over time
strata of life and of death
water intervenes

rivers rise and fall
ash tree clinging to the point
futures become fate

halcyon rivers
the days of eels have now gone
salmon swim alone

sustainable growth
desires and aspirations
one truth too many

double bind living
in democracy and debt
the powers that be

invulnerable
safe in the time of rainbows
the unknown unknowns

its not if, but when
ubiquitous disasters
its not if, but how

living beyond stress
before, during and after
tread water or swim

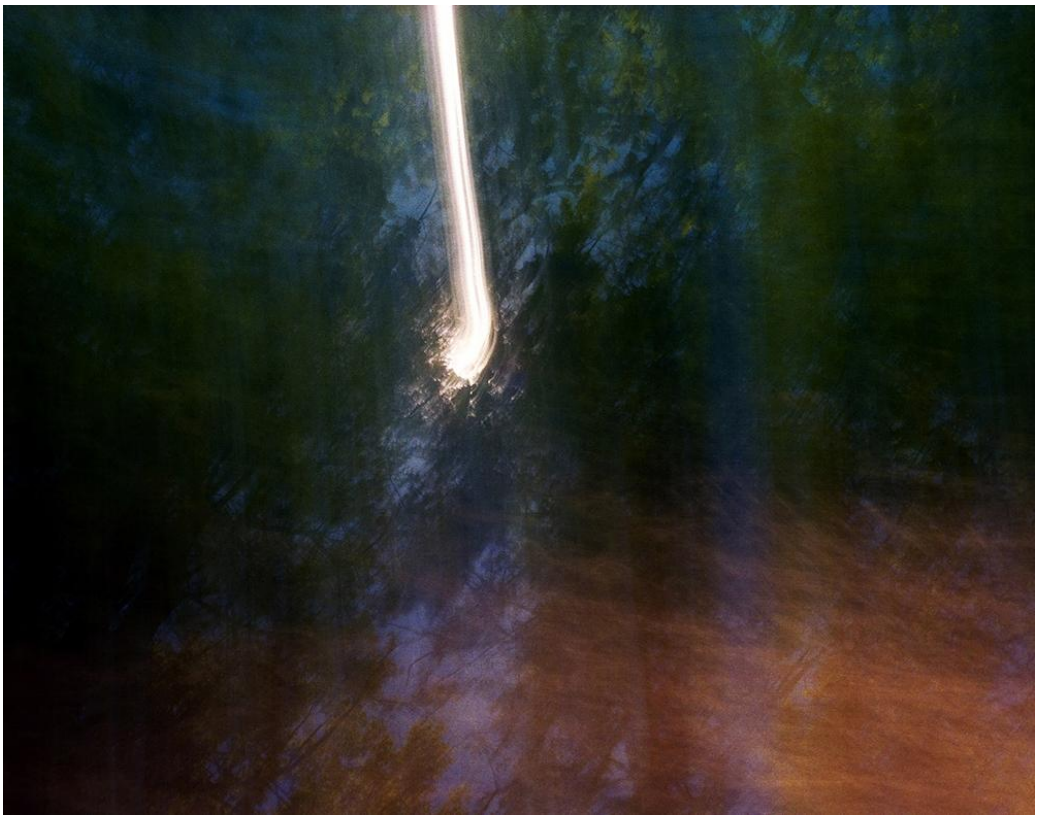
adapting to change
a time dynamic process
a new normal life

horizon scanning
foresight imaginaries
for climate futures

our eyes wide open
make way for what will emerge
remain vigilant

Transcendental Concord
Lisa McCarty

Pond Path, Walden Pond



Walden Woods Summer

Contributors

Sue Bell is a self-taught photographic artist influenced by the daily walks she takes, around her home in south-east Scotland and further afield . This practice has become an intrinsic part of her identity and affords a powerful connection to the countryside and her community. Her images are often representational, a visual attempt to capture the essence of the interaction experienced on each journey. She is drawn to the abstract—shape, texture, colour, light, shadow—offering potential for seeing beyond the obvious into the deeper patterns and rhythms that form in the world around us. www.fromfoxfield.com.

Norman Bissell is the Director of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics and a co-editor of *Stravaig*. His novel *Barnhill* about George Orwell's last years and his poetry collection *Slate, Sea and Sky a Journey from Glasgow to the Isle of Luing* are published by Luath Press. His essays, poems and reviews have appeared in magazines, newspapers and books over many years. He lives on the Isle of Luing in Argyll and is writing a memoir about Geopoetics in Scotland. His website is www.normanbissell.com.

Lesley Burr is inspired by her research of wilderness and remote locations. She is drawn to what may be considered by some as remote places, in order to research and explore land use and topography. This has inevitably led her to chronicle one of the acute concerns affecting communities in direct locale areas and to notice the plight of the natural world. www.lesleyburr.co.uk

Dina Fachin lives in St. Louis, MO with her husband and two children. She is originally from Italy and came to the United States to pursue a PhD in Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis. She is a self-taught artist: painting with acrylics, watercolours and ink, and drawing. Her work is strongly influenced by her Mediterranean origins, love for literature and former academic work in ethnic, cultural and indigenous cultures from Latin America. www.dinascolours.com

James Fenton is a botanist and ecologist brought up in Wester Ross. He has worked as a researcher on peat in the Antarctic, where things really are wild and untamed!, and thereafter he tutored ecology at a field centre in the Lake District, worked as an ecological consultant in Scotland, as an Ecologist for the National Trust for Scotland, worked on landscape policy for Scottish Natural Heritage, and been CEO of Falklands Conservation in the Falkland Islands.

Harriet and Rob Fraser work together through their practice somewhere-nowhere to deepen connections with the natural world. Using photography, poetry, land art and public engagement projects they celebrate the natural world, raise awareness of environmental issues, and encourage debate and action around the pressing need to care for the natural environment. They live in Cumbria and work across the UK. The Archive of Lost Woods project was run in 2019 in partnership with the Woodland Trust to highlight the threat to ancient woodlands along the route of HS2, and other woods that are threatened by infrastructure programmes. www.somewhere-nowhere.com Twitter: @butnorain Instagram somewhere_now.here Facebook somewherenowhereCumbria

Geraldine Green has three poetry collections, *Passing Through, Salt Road* and *The Other Side of the Bridge* (Indigo Dreams) and four chapbooks. Her work has been widely anthologised in the UK and USA. In 2015 she celebrated 10 years of poetry readings in the USA, returning to read in July 2019. In 2011 she gained a PhD in Creative Writing from Lancaster University. Geraldine is writer-in-residence at the Quaker Tapestry Museum in Kendal, Cumbria. She blogs at: Salt Road.

Mandy Haggith won the Robin Jenkins Literary Award in 2009 and is currently poet in residence at Inverewe Gardens. Her books include four poetry collections (letting light in, Castings, A-B-Tree, Why the Sky is Far Away), a poetry anthology (Into the Forest), a non-fiction book (Paper Trails) and five novels (The Last Bear, Bear Witness, The Walrus Mutterer, The Amber Seeker and The Lyre Dancers). She lives on a wooded croft in Assynt and teaches Literature and Creative Writing at the University of the Highlands and Islands.

David Haley PhD HonFCIWEM makes art with ecology to inquire, learn and teach. He publishes, exhibits and works internationally with ecosystems and their inhabitants, using images, poetic texts, walking and sculptural installations to generate dialogues that question climate and species crises, urban resilience and community self-determination for 'capable futures'. David is a Visiting Professor at Zhongyuan University of Technology; Vice Chair of the CIWEM Art & Environment Network; Mentor/Advisor (founder) of Futures' Venture Foundation; Trustee of Chrysalis Arts Development; member of the ecoart network and UK Urban Ecology Forum.

Jane Kelly is a visual artist based in Argyll. She was educated in Glasgow and Dublin. She has a wide range of practice coming from her traditional Fine Art education at Birmingham College of Art and by later work in Cultural Studies. She has collaborated with architects, engineers, landscape architects, artists and enlightened clients in education, healthcare and horticulture across the UK. She makes images, objects, gardens and land works inspired by the immediate environment of a project and also in response to wider ecological issues. www.gildingthelily.info

Dr Ullrich Kockel is Professor of Cultural Ecology and Sustainability at Heriot-Watt University, a Visiting Professor of European Ethnology at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Emeritus Professor of Ethnology, University of Ulster and former Editor-in-Chief, Anthropological Journal of European Cultures. His overarching research interest is sustainable local/regional development, especially the appraisal, planning and management of cultural resources, approached from an interdisciplinary perspective. In 2017 he was elected as a Council member of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics and to the editorial group of Stravaig.

Maria Lalić is a textile artist and writer whose work reflects upon landscape history and the ancient tracks and trails she encounters on her walked journeys. These are mostly in Wales but occasionally in Scotland. Maria is particularly drawn to finding ways of mapping a metaphysical sense of place and uses a variety of creative techniques including free form knitting, poetry, stitchery and the making of transient land art. Details about her current project (Unlost Places) are documented on her website (www.marialalic.co.uk) and Instagram page (@unlostplaces).

Lisa McCarty is a photographer and academic based in Dallas, Texas, USA where she is Assistant Professor of Photography at Southern Methodist University. McCarty has participated in over 80 exhibitions and screenings, in the United States and internationally. Her submissions are from her recent book, *Transcendental Concord* published by Radius Books in 2018. http://lisamccarty.com

Ian McFadyen Ex English teacher. Lives Peebles, sometimes Sutherland. James McCash prize for poetry in Scots back in 1986. Wee book *Tom's Boat and Other Poems* (Peebles Arts Festival 1996.) Poems in *Jorum*, Scottish Borders Arts 2000. Submit stuff to *The Eildon Tree* and *Northwords Now* these days. Other than "Expressing the Earth", my last major outing was a music-and-readings show, "Why the Birds Sing", for Tradfest 2017 and the Edinburgh Fringe 2018, with kind and talented friends. Next to McGonagall on SPL Website. Embryonic website: www.ianmcfadyen.scot

Susannah Rosenfeld-King is a visual artist and lecturer with a BA from Central Saint Martins, a PGCE from the Institute for Education and a Masters Degree from Middlesex University . Her creative practice is multidisciplinary. Inspired by real locations and events, she produces an interpreted account of their reality – exploring connections formed between surface and image, subject and context. The original photographs were printed in the Guardian Newspaper in January 2014 and manipulated in response to UK flooding and exhibited in London in 2014 as part of an international group show responding to the 1983 French documentary film 'Sunless', directed by Chris Marker.

Mark Sheridan is a composer, musician and educationalist with interests in Music Education, Creativity and Composition. Compositions include: 'Dreaming Agracas', 2017; 'The Flight of the Arctic Tern' 2009; 'Paracas' with Fred Morrison, 2005; When they lay Bare', 2003; 'The Curve of the Earth', 2002. Previously - Reader in Music and Creativity, the University of the Highlands and Islands: Interim Director of the Centre for Rural Creativity, 2018-19; co-chair of the Humanities and Arts Research Cluster. He established the BA in Applied Music and the MA Music and the Environment. 1990 -2011 he was senior lecturer at Strathclyde University.

Anne Shivas has an MFA in poetry from Drew University in New Jersey. Whit Grace, her first book, was published in 2017 by Word Poetry, of Cincinnati. Her poetry has been published in Lallans, Causeway, Northwords and Voices, Israel, and has been published in anthologies in New Zealand and the USA. Her poem "An Old Woman Cooking Eggs" was selected as one of the 20 best poems of 2017 by the Scottish Poetry Library. She is currently sequestered in Vermont, but is otherwise often found around the woods and beaches of East Lothian with her husband and dogs. www.anneshivas.com

Leela Soma was born in Madras, India and now lives in Glasgow. Her poems and short stories have been published in a number of anthologies, publications. She has published two novels and two collections of poetry. She has served on the Scottish Writers Centre Committee and is now on East Dunbartonshire Arts & Culture Committee. Some of her work reflects her dual heritage of India and Scotland. One of her poems was nominated for Pushcart Prize 2020.

Callum Sutherland is a research associate in the Geography Department at the University of Glasgow. Specialising in geographies of religion, spirituality, and politics, his current work explores emerging conceptions of Acid Communism - a term coined by the late cultural theorist, Mark Fisher - at the nexus between academia and activism. He recently published a book with three colleagues entitled 'Geographies of Postsecularity: Re-envisioning Politics, Subjectivity and Ethics'. In his spare time he is a songwriter, often drawing inspiration from geopoetic themes, and an attender at a local Quaker meeting.

Jan Sutch Pickard is a poet and storyteller living in the Isle of Mull. Previously Warden of the Abbey in Iona, she has also been an Ecumenical Accompanier (peace monitor) in the occupied Palestinian territories. She is published by Wild Goose and self publishes as Oystercatcher/GilleBrighde).

Caroline Watson is an artist working in drawing and mixed media and interested in light, space and our relationship to place. She is a Canadian Scot working and living in Paisley with a strong commitment to her local cultural community. Caroline has exhibited in Canada and Scotland including RGI, VAS and PAI, and is a recent recipient of Creative Scotland VACMA. www.carolinewatsonart.com @carolinewatsonpaisley.

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 to approach and creatively respond 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, Sweden, Poland, Ireland, Australia, Wales and England as well as throughout Scotland.

Further information is available from normanbissell@btinternet.com and at www.geopoetics.org.uk.

If you join or renew your annual 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.
- newsletters by e-mail.
- advance news of and discounts on books relating to geopoetics.
- advance news of Kenneth White and geopoetics events.
- invitations to all our meetings and field visits.
- the satisfaction of assisting the development of our geopoetics work and publications.
- 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. Or you can pay by standing order or bank transfer to the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics account no. 00694888 sort code 80-02-24.

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MAY 2020

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