

SCOTTISH CENTRE FOR GEOPOETICS

A RELATIONSHIP TO THE EARTH AND THE OPENING OF A WORLD



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Some Contributions of Geopoetics to Modern Scottish Land Consciousness: Alastair McIntosh

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*The following is written as if spoken. It is, however, a reconstruction from subsequent memory, plus some elaborations to what I said at the conference – Expressing the Earth, organised by the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics and the University of the Highlands and Islands on the Isle of Seil, 23 June 2017. The pictures are a small sample of what were used during the talk. For greater detail, including my use of Kenneth White's poetry in my activist work, see *Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power, Aurum, 2001*. My latest book, *Poacher's Pilgrimage: an Island Journey (Birlinn 2016)*, shows in an implicit way the impact of geopoetics on my work in the course of exploring what I think of as "an ecology of the imagination".*

I have just come back from speaking on the Isle of Eigg. There, on June 12, we celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the buyout into a community land trust. It is the second such birthday this year. A few months earlier, we had celebrated the twentieth year of the GalGael Trust in the Greater Govan area of Glasgow. Our people there build wooden boats. These reconnect an urban people with their wider coastal heritage. We see our work as geopoetics applied, and since the early days, have been honoured to have had Kenneth White as our patron.

One of our strap lines is "Reconnecting coastal communities", and we see our boats and the River Clyde as metaphors for life, metaphors for building or rebuilding human life. It happens that "Reconnecting with the River" is the title of one of White's short poems that opens with a quote from the sixteenth century Scots poet, Alexander Montgomerie.¹

"As I looked me alone/ I saw a river rin"

White's words that follow speak to the condition of so many of our folks – lives that have been blighted by poverty, but uplifted by humanity; the dreich offset by glory.

*A late afternoon in Govan
at the junction of the Clyde and the Kelvin
rain falling on sullen stone

floating on the dark, dank waters
one lone mute swan.*

It rather thrills me that Hilda Ibrahim, the mother of Gehan Macleod who co-funded the GalGael Trust in 1997 with her late husband, Colin, is today the retired schoolteacher who chairs the Eigg Residents' Association. There we glimpse the Möbius strip that turns the urban to the rural, the rural to the urban, reconnecting the flows of life between our communities.



Veteran land campaigners at Eigg's 20th Anniversary Celebrations, 12 June 2017: Camille Dressler, Maighread Foxley, Karen Helliwell, Michael Foxely, Michael Hutchison and vintage Talisker (Picture: Alastair McIntosh).

Eigg's Part in Modern Scottish Land Reform

Today, however, my focus is to be rural, for I was one of the four trustees who founded the original Isle of Eigg Trust in 1991. My swansong in 1997 was to sign over the balance of the £1.6 million in trust funds that had been raised in a worldwide campaign by the resident community. With this, the island was purchased by the

more fit-for-purpose Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, set up to represent a partnership between the islanders, Highland Council and the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

Eigg was the first full scale modern community buyout – full scale in the sense of being more than the crofting (or small scale agricultural) tenants alone, such as had been the case with the Assynt Trust. The drama that unfolded on Eigg helped to set a pattern and example that has inspired many buyouts since. Today, it receives visitors from all over the world who come to learn about its community-run renewables electricity grid, social and ecological housing, the ecological regeneration of nature, small business development such as the micro-brewery and an ever-growing wealth of experience around the gritty task of doing community. In that task one is, not least, forever on a learning curve of recognising and processing the conflicts that are inevitable in being human. “Towards the human”, to borrow from the title of Iain Crichton Smith’s collected essays, is always (in the work of making community) the guiding star that nods to incompleteness, yet points towards an opening of the way.

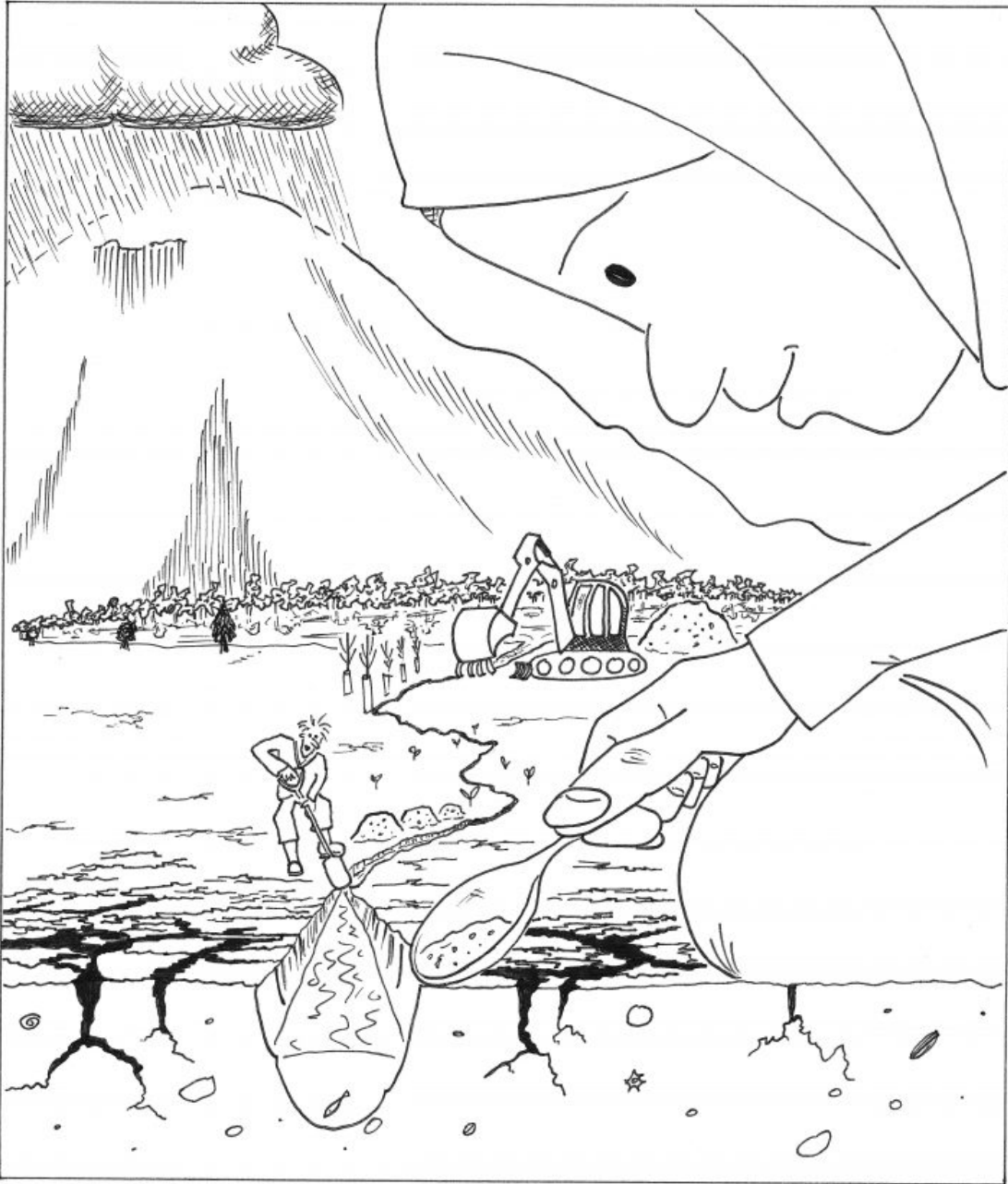
On a national scale, twenty years on, we now have land reform legislation in place, a £10 million per annum government Land Fund financed by imposing business rates on sporting estates, and over half a million acres of Scotland now held by dozens of local land trusts. That’s getting on for three per cent of our land area, and the Scottish Government has set the goal of doubling it by 2020. The tiny channels that campaigns like Eigg, Assynt and Gigha opened up have become the conduits through which a much more mainstream political flow has followed.

Understanding Bardic Politics

That brings me to the poetics, to Hamish Henderson’s dictum that “poetry becomes a people.” As activists for social, environmental and perhaps other forms of change, ours can be a bardic politics. The politics of a people resourced by their poetry. Ours is not to stand in the mainstream, but to open out fresh conduits of the mind. We may not have much to dig with. We may only have a teaspoon. But that can make a start upon the most compacted soil.

I remember, back in the days when I worked in a remote area of Papua New Guinea, a dear Australian priest called John Flynn who was building an airstrip. It was to serve the village of Hauabango, to which he had devoted a large part of his life. Fr John had no mechanical diggers with which to level a slither of the mountainside. Instead, he used a technique that he nicknamed “water mining”. He got the people digging narrow channels using spades. Into these, the local stream was diverted. When it flooded to a spate, the channels widened and the water also carried off unwanted earth.

That’s how poetry too can function. It whittles out the tiny runnels into which a greater flow of political process can subsequently follow. It is why, as Morton Bloomfield and Charles Dunn have shown, both in the Celtic world and in African tribal societies the function of the bards has been to work a “verbal magic”. Daniel Corkery has shown how the bardic schools thereby saved the soul of Ireland during the centuries of British colonisation. As Colm O’Baoill puts it, speaking in a Scottish Highland context, the bards were “the political brains” behind the chiefs. To that, I would only want to add that they were also spiritual conduits of the people.²



"We may not have much to dig with. We may only have a teaspoon" – Cartoon courtesy of the Leeds activist, Matt Carmichael.

Now, the cynics say "you can't eat poetry", but I want to put it to you today that land lies at the base of the food chain. As a storyteller once said long ago, "Man shall not live by bread alone." Whether with the Assynt crofters' buyout, or in the example involving Kenneth White that I am about to give, poetry has played a role in modern Scottish land reform. Personally, I would call it the lifeblood. I use the term "poetry" to mean both poems, but also, the wider sense of creative quiddity that infuses all true arts. And by "true" art forms, I mean those that come from somewhere deeper than the ego – those that emerge from the collective levels of consciousness. Those which are, as the Hebrew prophets might have said as they railed against the injustices of landlordism, moved by inspiration from beyond our conscious ken. Moved by the echoes of a distant tide that draws us into ever-deepening openings of life's way.

I think of a time during the Eigg buyout campaign – it was in 1996 – when, to get the fundraising rolling, the broadcaster and activist Lesley Riddoch organised a gig called *Not the Landowner's Ball*. It was held in the Assembly Halls of Edinburgh. The late (as is now) Angus Grant of Shooglenifty whipped his fiddle into spindrift spirals of shamanic ecstasy. The crowd responded. I have never before, nor never since, danced in such a frenzy. This was the magic happening. This, we knew, was Eigg “happening” – manifesting from some realm invisible before it manifested outwardly. That, by the way, is how the spiritual materialises, how poetry becomes a people. I doubt that any who were there that night would not have felt the bedrock skirl of Scotland's metamorphosis.

Not the LANDOWNER'S BALL

Featuring **Karen Matheson**
and friends
from **Capercaillie**

Dick Gaughan
Michael Marra
The Belle Star Band
Shooglenifty

Plus surprise guests

Tickets
£10
Concs £6
from the
Assembly
Box Office
0131-220 4349

The Eigg Benefit Ceilidh
Saturday 2nd November, 8pm
The Assembly Rooms
George Street, Edinburgh

All proceeds to the
Isle of Eigg Appeal

Not the Landowner's Ball.

Geopoetics and Landed Power

The irony of my setting this framing is that I once asked Kenneth White if he considered his work to be political. He said not. But poetry can be a seed crystal in a saturated solution. Such was so to the four of us who founded the original Isle of Eigg Trust in 1991. We were the Scoraig crofter Tom Forsyth, the artist Liz Lyon, the Lochwinnoch sheep farmer Bob Harris and myself. As we drew up the manifesto, Liz drew our attention to one of Kenneth's poems, and he kindly gave permission for it to be included in the published booklet that was distributed to all homes on Eigg and far beyond. Here it is.³

My Properties

I'm a landowner myself after all –

I've got twelve acres of white silence

up at the back of my skull.

Now, a poem like that, a Haiku or however it would be classified, is more than just a ditty. It is a power cable. Its effect, for the four of us at least, was to mainline legitimacy. As Bob is no longer on this Earth, as Tom is in an Ullapool care home, and as Liz drew back from the Trust soon after it was launched, let me speak for myself. What emerges from the latency of that white silence comes a claim of right. A clean sheet of paper on which to write a different title deed. A claim that we, in our claim of right to freedom, are all the “owners” of the land; or as I prefer to say, “landholders”.

Landed power can lay its claim to no such charter. It lacks the moral authority of standing, to borrow from Hamish again, in the “carrying stream” of the cultural flow.⁴ For me at least, Kenneth’s poem became a white steed on which to ride into the fray, from which to perpetrate our tactic of buying Eigg cheaply through market spoiling. After all, what rich man would want to buy a holiday island stuffed with restless natives?

There was something else that Kenneth’s work gave me. It was a sense of what Tom Forsyth, drawing on the work of the quantum physicist David Bohm, called “the implicate order”. The implicate order is the underlying realm out of which the “explicate order” – the material world of particles and energies – might be said to emerge. With his permission, I quoted often, including when I came to write *Soil and Soul*, from his poem, “Walking the Coast”.⁵

*for the question is always
how
out of all the chances and changes
to select
the features of real significance
so as to make
of the welter
a world that will last
and how to order
the signs and symbols
so they will continue
to form new patterns
developing into
new harmonic wholes
so to keep life alive
in complexity
and complicity
with all of being –
there is only poetry*

(Unfortunately the original formatting of the poem cannot be reproduced here.)

If the “landowner” poem affirmed legitimacy, these lines from “Walking the Coast” affirmed the emergence of vision. Put it like this. Imagine trailing up and down between the Central Belt and Eigg for meetings, sometimes

hitchhiking on very little money, sometimes secretly crashing out for the night in the unlocked St Bride's Church at Ballachulish to break the journey. And imagine Tom Forsyth, sleeping literally in ditches wrapped in his yellow oilskins as he criss-crossed the country doing drystane dyking work to raise some £3,000 legal and other costs of setting up the Eigg Trust.

Imagine being ridiculed in the press for proposing that ordinary people, functioning as healthy communities, could be landholders. Imagine walking into Glencoe at night, just off a ferry late back to Arisaig, wondering if you'll get another lift before night falls. And then, imagine that white horse cantering from out the skull, complicit in complexity, "to form new patterns ... with all of being."

Sure, you can't eat poetry. But you can ride it. And ride it hard we did.

Continues - this space is caused by picture formatting in having lifed from the website.



Trustees of the original Isle of Eigg Trust, back in our Taliban days – Bob Harris, Tom Forsyth, Alastair McIntosh & Liz Lyon (Glasgow Herald, 1991).

Superquarry Poetics

What's more, in the last couple of decades of the 20th century we were in a climate in Scotland when poetics were quickening at the grassroots. The music of Runrig, Dougie MacLean, Karen Matheson and some of the Irish groups were wake-up calls. On Eigg, as in many other small West Highland communities, the *Fèis* ("feast") movement had spread out from Barra and was reconnecting people to their cultures, their music and

their untold stories.⁶ Partly inspired by a worldwide resurgence in the consciousness of indigenous peoples, this sat comfortably with “world music” and was inclusive of whoever chose to belong by participating.

For me, as Eigg was unfolding as the weft of this wider leap in warp speed, so too was the Isle of Harris superquarry campaign. Roineabhal is the highest and most majestic mountain that graces the National Scenic Area that covers South Harris. In 1991 it fell under the threat to turn it into the biggest roadstone quarry in the world. For me, and I must stress that this is a personal take, what was happening on Eigg interwove with what was happening on Harris, and also with campaigns like the M77 “Pollok Free State” motorway campaign that evolved into the GalGael Trust.

It took until 1997 for Eigg to come under community landholding, and 2004 for the superquarry campaign to be decisively won as the result of a massive, multi-layered environmental campaign with many actors. Throughout that decade-and-a-half, however, geopoetics was exploding into consciousness in Scotland. Kenneth White himself was resident in Brittany, but his patch was held and cultivated largely thanks to the efforts of the late Tony McManus and Norrie Bissell. Other figures who breathed life into geopoetic events of that era include Rachel Blow, Richard Browne, John Hart, Nanon McManus, Bill Taylor, Jennie Renton and Graham Urquhart.

I remember how my Quaker friend, the wooden boat designer, Iain Oughtred, plied me with copies of the publications of the Open World Poetics group and bootlegged recordings of White’s recitations. Similarly so, Colin Geddes, the grandson of Patrick. I had been a science student in my youth. I was ignorant of poetry, but friends like Iain and the botanical writer, Tess Darwin, took it on themselves to complete my education. Whether it was Alice Walker, Adrienne Rich, Walt Whitman, the emergent young Gaelic poets in translation or Kenneth White, the blue touch papers that they lit went off as rockets in my mind.

Neither was it a solitary experience. During the 1990s there was a positive buzz around geopoetics, largely stimulated by Tony’s and Norrie’s events and publications that put a saddle on the galloping back of poetry such as amateurs, like myself, could mount and use to get a grip. It was not just the written word. It was also the remarkable tonal qualities of White reciting his work, and the mind-boggling span of his talks during his fairly frequent visits back to Scotland.

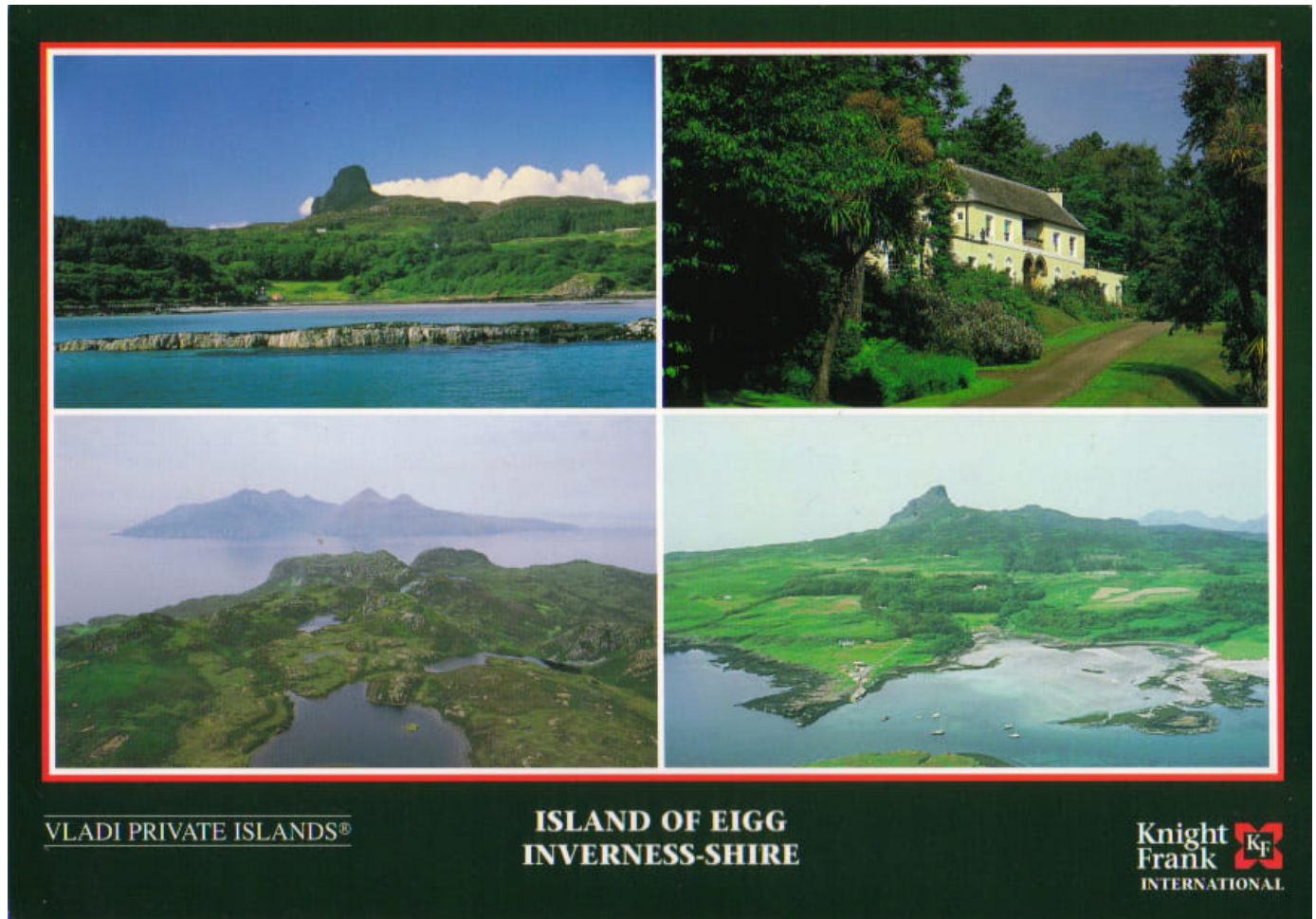
I had just started teaching at Edinburgh University’s Centre for Human Ecology. Murdo Macdonald, later to become the professor of History of Scottish Art at Dundee University, was another mentor who led me to draw deeply upon geopoetics. Issue 88 of the *Edinburgh Review*, of which he was the editor, carried my Isle of Eigg Trust launch address. The article that immediately follows was White’s essay, “Elements of Geopoetics”. Reflecting on the work of Henri Pourrat and Walt Whitman, White said:

“There you have almost pure geopoetics.... What matters is what’s there, it’s in it – in those rock-piles – that the poetics lie.”

Over on the next page stands a single line, ending ineffably in an ellipsis. I have used this many times as a proxy definition of the world to which White opened up our minds:

“Poetry, geography – and a higher unity: geopoetics...”⁷

It was to me a balm of inspiration. The superquarry scene was looking grim. The major environmental agencies – the Friends of the Earth Scotland, WWF, RSPB, and all the rest of them were trying all the conventional means – the economic arguments against the quarry, the ecological ones, the social and you name it. Somehow the rationality of the impending government public enquiry wasn't going deep enough. White and MacDiarmid ran side-by-side in my mind. "I lift a stone; it is the meaning of life I clasp," says MacDiarmid's "On a Raised Beach". And there, in the old master's footsteps, White the shaman monk weaves his spirit with the Celtic monks as he wanders, as a nomad, into "Labrador".



Eigg sales brochure – it really was marketed by an islands brokerage called Vladi Private Islands.

My reader today must forgive me if this sounds a heady mix. It was. Geopoetics became pivotal to the curriculum of the MSc degree that I directed. We had White visit us in the human ecology classes at 15 Buccleuch Place. Other times, I'd play extracts of him reading from his epic poem, "Scotia Deserta". It changed lives.

I had a science background, proof matters, so indulge me if I give an example. My then student, now an environmental lawyer, Jamie Whittle, wrote up his MSc dissertation as a book, *White River*. It is about the human ecology of his native bioregion, the catchment valley of the River Findhorn. As he reaches the end of a pilgrimage in which he walked up to the source, then paddled back down to where the Findhorn meets the North Sea, Whittle reflects:

What I am beginning to sense is that consciousness is infinite. Looking back at how trapped inside the glass bottle of my own ego I used to be ... [I now see that] it is only by quieting the ego that we may have the awareness to experience the world more deeply, more groundedly and more colourfully.

It was the poem "Labrador" by Kenneth White that summed up much of this outward, expansive, exploratory movement to me most coherently:

*I lived and moved
as I had never done before
became a little more than human even
knew a large identity*

*the tracks of caribou in the snow
the flying of wild geese
the red Autumn of the maple tree
bitten by frost
all these became more real to me
more really me
than my very name*

*I found myself saying things like
'at one with the spirit of the land'
but there was no 'spirit', none
that was outworn language
and this was a new world
and my mind was, almost, a new mind*

Whittle reflects how *Labrador* "captures those first footsteps into a transpersonal world." It had carried him into an age "beyond rampant industrial growth and collateral environmental damage." It opened to "a new space beyond neurotic frenzy." Such is the space, he concluded, "that can be found when we connect with the larger non-human world."⁸ Some would call that ecopsychology. Others, ecopoetics. Naess called it Deep Ecology. Whittle found it here in Scotland through White's geopoetics.

As part of Jamie Whittle's studies, he and I had gone to Harris and climbed Mount Roineabhal together. The eagle has its eyrie there. In my dreams and visions the eagle of Roineabhal had grown in an imaginal realm. One day, as I struggled with my small contributions to the superquarry campaign, a colleague from America had said, "Why don't you call Stone Eagle?"

Poetry precipitated necessity. Sulian Stone Eagle Herney, then the war chief of the Mi'Kmaq Nation in Nova Scotia, had been credited with stopping a similar superquarry at Kluscap Mountain, the sacred mountain of their territory. To cut a long story short, he answered my call and agreed to give testimony at the Scottish Office (government) public inquiry in 1994.

The media went ballistic. "Stone Eagle flies in to stop superquarry" ran the headlines. The detail can be read elsewhere.⁹ Suffice to say here that the chief's testimony, along with mine, and that of Professor Macleod of

the Free Church College all on the same platform – all that triple whammy – merited a single paragraph in the inquiry's multi-volume report.



Stone Eagle Flies in to Roineabhal (courtesy of Murdo Macleod, 1994)

We had zero legal traction. But that was not the point. We were doing poetry, and theology; not law. We were quite consciously seeking impact in a different universe of discourse. It had massive traction, both in PR terms as the TV and press cameras zoomed in, and in terms of deepening local thinking about the issues at stake. Much of the Isle of Harris is now owned by community land trusts. The place has moved from falling derelict, to thriving. The young are coming back. There is affordable social housing, business units, renewable energy and jobs created by a newly energised economy and culture. All that, without the superquarry. Who said “you can’t

eat poetry”? Who ... said it? I'd like to know who tried to lead us astray with that put-down. Who tried to close our eyes?

To borrow from Allen Ginsburg's Howl,

“What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?”¹⁰

The sphinx failed. The superquarry, like landlordism on Eigg, was thwarted. Why? There are many reasons, many winds that blew in different directions at different levels of the stratosphere. But one reason stands out for me. The sphinx failed, because it never knew that we, too, were landowners.

We, too, had twelve acres of white silence up the back of our skulls.

The Shaman Dancing on the Glacier

In appreciating White it is not my intention to set him on a pedestal. As with all prophetic figures, there are criticisms. There is in any generalist, who sets specifics into the context of greater wholes, always the question of intellectual overreach; of what, as Pierre Jamet characterises it, “his detractors call mere name-dropping.”¹¹ I have heard it suggested that White is perhaps over concerned with his own legacy, and I have noticed a fastidiousness in how he likes his work to be described. But those flaws, if flaws they are, can arise from artistic necessity, and from out of faithfulness to that which is being carried. To me, it is striking that White's middle name is Dewar. It means, “steward”. In Scottish tradition the Dewars were the stewards, or custodians, of holy relics. The name derives from *deòiridh* or *deòraidh* which means “pilgrim” or “nomad”. White, now an octogenarian, has long championed “intellectual nomadism”. One of his books has the evocative title, *Pilgrim of the Void*. In the course of writing this piece I needed to confirm his middle name. I mentioned these interpretations, and he answered: “I am aware of that Gaelic meaning and tradition.”¹²

Anent the cost and even the peccadilloes that may result from the gravity of what we carry, I recall an incident when Chief Stone Eagle came to Scotland. I had taken him to several of the isles. At one point, I felt the need to apologise for the behaviour of a certain tradition bearer who had let us down by having had too much to drink. “Don't you apologise for old (so-and-so),” the chief rebuked me. “You'd be drinking too if you were carrying what he carries.” As Cairns Craig has remarked, “White remains somewhere in the margins of modern Scottish literature and yet if there is one Scottish writer with a truly European reputation, it is him.”¹³ There may be ways in which he has contributed to that marginalisation. A prophet finds it hard to work from home, just as “home” finds the prophet trying in its midst.

That said, White's work would never have reached so many of us were it not for the people and movements that surrounded him. I have observed an immense generosity of spirit in the geopoetics movement. I single out what I know best, specifically, the graciousness that has characterised the endeavours of Tony McManus and Norrie Bissell. Norrie, after Tony's untimely passing, has carried forward the earlier work of Open World Poetics into the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics with its online journal, *Stravaig*. That word, delightfully, means, “to wander aimlessly”; and one glimpses here a Labradorian aimlessness where aims themselves are stripped back down as “outworn language”.

From where might this nomadic *stravaig* come in White's psyche and his writing? I sense a clue within the title of his essay, “A Shaman Dancing on the Glacier”. It appears in the collection, *On Scottish Ground*, but the

version I had long worked with first appeared in the arts newspaper, *Artwork*, in 1991 just as Eigg and the superquarry campaigns were born. That title alone was enough to impact heavily on me. Why? Because always for the activist, a pressing question when the going gets costly, is: “Why am I doing this?” With issues that concern the land, one answer is the chthonic imperative, the calling of the Earth itself, working through the chambers of an ecology of the imagination. That is the field, the grounding, of shamanic awareness.

White opens the said essay by telling how, at one point during a symposium on *Burns, Beuys and Beyond – the figure of the artist in (modern) society*, he was asked for the title of his impending lecture. He says that the shamanic imagery “leaped in to my mind with all the inevitability of dictation from the subconscious.” That, he concedes, “is another way of saying that my title may sound a bit surrealistic. I didn’t understand it very well at first myself, but, as I worked away, I came to understand it more.”¹⁴ Such are the dynamics of shamanism; here, the antithesis of plans of action, performance indicators and managed outcomes. Such shamanic stravaiging is of the essence of art. Issues such as land reform, superquarries or motorway protests become the stages of much wider dramas, a deeper and more basic call to consciousness of what is human, and to that in nature which is not-just-human .

In his essay, “The Archaic Context”, White tells how the first poem that he wrote – he was around nineteen at the time – was called “Precentor Seagull”. A precentor in a Scots Presbyterian context is the leader in the singing of the Gaelic Psalms. He muses,

“That first poem of mine was a shaman-poem. I was a shaman without a tribe.”



Kenneth White (from Wikipedia, by Esby, at the “Comédie du Livre”, Montpellier, 2009)

Like MacDiarmid at his best, it is the shamanic calling that White shares with his readers; that of the nomad walker between the worlds, the worlds of materiality and spirit, where one foot stands in each realm, held in equipoise. In his classic study, the Romanian ethnographer Mircea Eliade concludes that “the shaman’s essential role” is “the defence of the psychic integrity of the community.” It is, indeed, a dewar’s role. She or he, Eliade surmises, “is able to see [in the supernatural world] what is hidden and invisible to the rest.” Here, “poetic creation still remains an act of perfect spiritual freedom,” in which “the purest poetic act seems to re-create language from an inner experience that ... reveals the essence of things.”

As such, the shamanic function is to “stimulate and feed the imagination, demolish the barriers between dream and present reality [and] open windows upon worlds inhabited by the gods, the dead and the spirits.”¹⁵ The American mythologist Joseph Campbell arrived at the same conclusion through his study of the heroic archetype. “The effect of the successful adventure of the hero,” he concluded, “is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world.”¹⁶ That is what distinguishes shamanic art, sacred art, from narcissistic forms of self-expression.

How far is White aware that his work might answer to this function? I can imagine him smiling, shyly, with slight embarrassment at the suggestion. I can imagine his unease at my emphasis here on “the spirit”, and at my crediting his work with having a political impact. In other ways, I suspect that our “dewar” is very aware of these things. Everyone who walks between the worlds feels the tension between what is safe in being rarefied, and what can have a power upon the material plane that can be frightening in the responsibility that it carries. Think of the slow, deliberative, swings of energy from one foot to the other in the piper’s gait when playing pibroch. Think of the gaze of onlookers from the dress circle – bemused, puzzled, discombobulated – as evening dawns the dreaming of the call of great migrations. They can stone the prophets, you know, as well as cheer them on.

In another of the essays, “Into the White World”, our stravaiger notes that “what Chinese taoist thought offers us is ontological re-sourcing.” This, the nature of *being*, is with what “we are concerned in poetry, which is why poetry, in its higher instances, has always seemed to be on the edge of Western civilization, not an integral part of it.” Here is Kant’s “noumenal world” in counterpoint to the uncontested “phenomenal world”. It is, says White, this noumenal (based on the *experience* of the ontological) ...

which is absent from so much of Western poetry ... but which is forever present in the poetry of the East. ‘The ultimate excellence of poetry’, writes Yen Yu (China, thirteenth century) ‘consists in one thing: entering the spirit. If poetry can succeed in doing this, it will have reached the limit and cannot be surpassed.’ To enter the spirit is to enter the world (the ‘real life’, the absence of which Rimbaud was to decry in the West.) We are badly in need of poetry that ‘has a world’.

To have a world! There stands the reason why the politics of land reform is bound in with the poetics of consciousness. “Again, I am not suggesting that we celebrate any mountain goddess,” writes White, in an almost anxious breath; a wariness, perhaps, of transgressing one boundary too many as he draws his “Shaman” essay to a close. Rather:

“I am suggesting that we try and get back an earth-sense, a ground sense, and a freshness of the world such as those men, those Finn-men, knew when they moved over an earth from which the ice had just recently receded.

This is the dawn of geopoetics.”

In that line we hear the piper stepping at the gates. A paradox of White is that Precentor Seagull’s very act of precenting seems at odds with his “professed atheism”; an atheism, observes Jamet, that “still remains dialectically attached to what he professes to have emerged from long ago” of his Presbyterian upbringing.¹⁷ That paradox for White, like with some of the Gaelic poets of the 20th century, must perhaps remain unresolved. However, a generation or two further down the line a way has cleared that lets the sun climb higher in the sky. To be a nomad is one thing. To return as prodigals from the wandering is another; yet that is what is happening when the younger generations of today reconnect, as they are able to do, with lands from which their forbears had been alienated.

That is why, in 2018, Eigg is to be given a special focus in *Celtic Connections*. As the festival’s director, Donald Shaw told *The Herald*: “It is good for us to celebrate Eigg, quite an amazing achievement ... in stabilising a community ... and they have used music in a powerful way.”¹⁸

What Will We Leave?

I close with a cameo. In 2016 a group of women issued an album that they composed together on the Isle of Eigg. Called *Songs of Separation*, one of them, called “Soil and Soul”, was written by Rowan Rheingans after reading my book about the Eigg and superquarry campaigns.¹⁹

In her lyrics we find no reticence of celebration of the mountain goddess. Here, from Eigg “the Island of the Big Women”, the spiritual feminine is freed of self-conscious reticence.

*There’s a woman in the mountain
there’s a woman in the hill
there’s a woman in the mountain
who knows this place well*

*There’s a bird that’s circling
and then roosting and watching
every trickle unfolding
every stream separating*

*Into soil and soul
soul and sea
what will we leave, when we leave?
What will we leave, when we leave?*

I think how Moses glimpsed the Promised Land from the mountaintop, but was not himself allowed to enter. So might it be with Kenneth White’s nomadism. That was the demanding task of his generation. It is for a younger

generation to take the final steps. Theirs is the future for the making. Theirs to choose, “What will we leave ...?”



Eigg residents symbolically walk ashore to their own island, Independence Day, 12 June 1997 (Photo courtesy of Murdo Macleod)

I started off this lecture by telling that I'd just come back from the twentieth anniversary celebrations on Eigg. My part, and Kenneth White's indirect part, were but tiny fragments of a massive undertaking involving many actors, most of them unsung. There was one thing from the week of partying that left me feeling incredibly satisfied. In the original Isle of Eigg Trust launch address, the one that was delivered on the island on Friday, 25th October, 1991, and was later published side-by-side with White's essay, "Elements of Geopoetics", in the *Edinburgh Review*, I had said:²⁰

"This Trust offers the prospect that when a future visitor asks your children who owns Eigg, they will reply, not a German factory magnate, English pop star, Swiss banker, Saudi oil sheik, Dutch syndicate, aristocratic heir, racing car driver, insurance company or any other sort of "laird", but simply, "Us ... held in trust for people and nature".

The back page of the islanders' anniversary brochure, handed out to guests on the 12th June, 2017, has a picture of the school. A dozen or so children are playing football in the foreground. Emblazoned across the page is the proud caption:²¹

"The current island directors on the Trust were all children at the time of the buyout."

I ask my question, one last time.

I ask it in honour of the work of Kenneth Dewar White, and in honour of all those who have aided the study and practice of geopoetics.

Who said “you can’t eat poetry”?

Who ... said it?

Endnotes

1 Kenneth White, *Open World: The Collected Poems 1960-2000*, Polygon, Edinburgh, 2003, p. 47.

2 Full discussion and references in *Soil and Soul: People versus Corporate Power*, Aurum Press, 2001, chapter 6.

3 We misquoted “skull” as “mind”, and that misquote has subsequently been replicated many times elsewhere. Apologies, Ken. It was Liz’s artistic eye that found the poem, and I’ve often wondered if she might have given it a subtle tweak to tone down the elemental rawness. The original is in White’s *Open World, ibid.*, p. 99.

Addendum: On 27 March 2018 I received a response to this paper by email from Kenneth White. Anent this point, he wrote: “No Liz (Lyon) is innocent of tweaking that line in the poem. ‘At the back of my mind’ is a common enough phrase, and I like using common phrases while loading them at times with uncommon names. So ‘up at back of my mind’ was what stood in the original text. Then I realised two things, one, that ‘skull’ would be more elemental, going right into the bone. And ‘skull’ also gave me a neat little rhyme, or half-rhyme if you like, with ‘all’. I don’t go out of my way to rhyme (the poetics I’m interested in leaves that to songs) and never overdo it, except for fun, but if one slips in quietly on the side, it would be ungracious to sniff at it. So ‘up at the back of my skull’ is now, the definitive, canonical version.”

4 “Hamish Henderson (1919 – 2002)”, *Scottish Poetry Library*, <http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/hamish-henderson>.

5 “Walking the Coast” in Kenneth White, *The Bird Path*, Penguin/Mainstream, London/Edinburgh, p. 42. I have also used this poem in the exploration of “meaning” in the theory of social science research, see the second of my chapter contributions to *Radical Human Ecology* (Ashgate/Routledge), Farnham, 2012, p. 253; online at <http://www.alastairmcintosh.com/articles/2012-Radical-Human-Ecology-McIntosh.pdf>. I see this as a paradigmatic stanza of poetry, one that could be seen partly as an outcome of postmodern fluidity of thought, but also as a restraint upon it, even a rebuke to soulless deconstruction; a calling to a higher and Zen-like sense of the ordering of reality. I first encountered the quoted stanza in a publication of Scottish Churches’ Action for World Development, thus providing a nod towards the tangential religious impact of White’s work.

6 See <http://www.feisean.org/en/feisean-en/what-is-a-feis/>.

7 Kenneth White, “Elements of Geopoetics,” *Edinburgh Review*, 88, Summer 1992, pp. 163-178.

8 Jamie Whittle, *White River: a Journey up and down the River Findhorn*, Sandstone Press, Highland Scotland, 2007, pp. 144-145.

9 Primarily, in *Soil and Soul* where the superquarry saga runs in parallel with that of Eigg and the searching issues of our times.

10 Allen Ginsberg, *Howl*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1956, p. 21.

11 Pierre Jamet, “Kenneth White and Religion” in *Grounding a World: Essays on the work of Kenneth White*, ed. Gavin Bowd, Charles Forsdick & Norman Bissell, Alba Editions, Glasgow, 2005, pp. 96-108.

12 Pers. com. 12 Sept. 2017. According to MacLennan's Gaelic Dictionary, it can also mean a destitute person, which can be fitting to the artistic predicament. I should love to see some suitably qualified student make a study of Gaelic spiritual terms, and in particular, to gather what might still be out there in the old religious folks, before it disappears into the sphinx of "Gaelic with business studies".

13 "Intellectual Nomad," Cairns Craig, *Scottish Review of Books*, 28 June 2013, <https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2013/06/intellectual-nomad/>.

14 Kenneth White, *On Scottish Ground: Selected Essays*, Polygon, Edinburgh, 1998. The essays I refer to here are "A Shaman Dancing on the Glacier", pp. 35-48, originally published in *Artwork*, June-July 1991; "The Archaic Context", pp. 15-34, originally written in 1967 and first published in *La Figure du dehors*, Editions Grasset, Paris, 1982; "Into the White World", pp. 58-67, originally written 1966, first published in *Raster VI/I*, Amsterdam, 1972; and "The High Field", pp. 165-180, originally written in 1975, first published as "Taking off from Hugh MacDiarmid" in *Scottish Literary Journal*, Vol 17:1, May 1990.

15 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Arkana, London, 1989, pp. 508-511.

16 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Fontana, London, 1993, p. 40.

17 Jamet, *ibid.*. In the traditions of the Highland church, according to John MacInnes, the role of precentors developed in part out of bardic tradition (pers com, c. 1996).

18 Miller, Phil, "Eigg's historic community buyout to be celebrated in Celtic Connections 2018 25th anniversary festival", *The Herald*, <https://goo.gl/wh3P9i>, 25 October 2017.

19 *Songs of Separation*, Proper Music Publishing, Navigator 094, www.songssofseparation.co.uk, 2016.

Addendum: Kenneth's email of 27 March 2018 (see note 3) took issue with my metaphor in this section of Moses and the Promised land. It does so in a manner with which I am, to a considerable extent, happy to stand corrected. Specifically so, on the presumption that he means "genius" not in its colloquial sense of celebrity or IQ, but in its etymologically correct sense of a generative, procreative or tutelary guiding "spirit". He wrote: "End of 2017, after reading your fine essay ... I started scribbling a cluster of notes under the title: "A Pointer or Two for Alastair – maybe for future use." But I got interrupted and pulled away from this embryo of text because of an oncoming avalanche of work from up the mountain. Glancing through those scattered notes, some hardly legible, I see I wanted to take you up especially on a paragraph near the end of your essay where you speak of one generation glimpsing the Promised Land and the task of another to "take the final step". Here's the note: *'It's never a question of generation, but of genius. Native genius and nomadic genius. And of the work of large minds, scattered across time and space, often done in margins that can include exile. Apprehension of such work can be partial, minimal, even non-existent. But if there's going to be any real moving ahead, sight should never be lost of the original field, with all its energy, co-ordinates and precision.'* You make of that what you want." What I make of it, is that to move in the deep "carrying stream" of a culture entails looking not just to where the river is flowing, but raising one's eyes to the mountains from whence it rose. "Genius" is cognate with Genesis, with beginnings. We must not forget our roots, our lineage, the ancestors, in our concern for nurturing the children's future. Like when pulling at the oars, we row forwards while looking backwards.

20 Eigg Trust Launch Address, *The Edinburgh Review*, Edinburgh University Press, No. 88, 1992, pp. 158-162.

21 See <https://goo.gl/KEBTxR>.