ALASTAIR MCINTOSH

A Sermon to the English on Land Reform

Preaching Text: 'We Live by Lifelines'
(*The Lost Gospel of the Sìth, 1:2*)

My most Dearly Beloveds.

As I address you at the invitation of this journal's editors, observing you stretched out in multitudes across the plain beneath my pulpit on Dark Mountain, and knowing that the reprobates amongst you harbour pagan tendencies: let me structure this Service according to an editorial commentary by the Reverend J.C.G. Greig to John Buchan's *Witch Wood*, published in 1927.

Set in 17th-century Scotland, amidst heathen goings on in the hamlet of Woodilee, this swashbuckling novel follows the life and times of a young Presbyterian minister, replete with the aristocratic laird's niece 'dressed all in green, with a kirtle which scarcely reached her ankles'. Greig justifies what he calls Buchan's 'incorporation of the world of faerie into a structure where it is historically in place' and, amidst such intrigue, an endnote dourly reminds us that a proper Scots kirk Sermon should be triune: comprising 'three *heads*… and an *application*'.

Now, the theme for which I have been asked to take the pulpit today is *the land*. And in accord with due Sermonic protocol, I shall set out three heads of what I call the *Rubric of Regeneration*, and then the application, thus:

- **First Head:** *Re-membering*… that which has been dismembered;
- **Second Head:** *Re-visioning*… how the future could be; and
- **Third Head:** *Re-claiming*… what is needed to bring it about.
- **Application:** *By lifelines, we live.*

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(This pdf corrects a late typesetting gremlin that had repeated "duthchas" for "dualchas", top p. 62)

A Sermon sits within a Service of *Worship*, a term from the Old English *weord-scipe*, meaning that to which we show worth: a 'worthy ship' by which to sail our lives. You are therefore going to get the full whammy. Are you sitting comfortably? Then we'll begin.

Opening Song of Praise: *Loch Lomond*

It was at that first Dark Mountain festival in 2010, 'Uncivilisation', at Llangollen in Wales. The theme was *Time to Stop Pretending*. Time to stop pretending that we'll fix the planet only with the master's tools. Time, as the apocalyptic *Uncivilisation* manifesto had put it the previous year, to 'make the pilgrimage to the poet's Dark Mountain'.

Paul Kingsnorth had invited me to follow on from Dougald Hine's fireside chat with George Monbiot. They offered contrasting views. George, more the realist; Dougald, more the idealist. It put me in mind of the Loch Lomond song. Two Scottish soldiers are in an English gaol after the failed Jacobite Rising, or 'Rebellion', against the Hanoverian forces of the British state in 1745. One is to be set free. The other, to be hung, drawn and quartered at dawn, and therefore his refrain: 'O, you'll take the high road and I'll take the low road / And I'll be in Scotland afore ye.'

Here we glimpse the old shamanic bedrock breaking through. The High Road is of this world: practical, political, but foot-sloggingly pedestrian. The Low Road is of the Otherworld: the Spirit Path, quicksilver, but bereft of mortal traction. Hence the dénouement; and let us join bucolic, as our first Song of Praise: 'But me and my true love will never meet again / On the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond.'

Prayer of Approach: *Beseechment*

Few walk only the High Road or the Low Road. To generalise: the politician, manager or planner walks a path of worldly practicality, one that results in works of outer productivity. The shaman, bard or prophet walks a path of calling back lost soul; one that restores the vision of inner direction to an individual or a community. But as artists, activists and cultural creatives, we may find ourselves called to walk with a foot straddled on both

paths. This may be a challenge to understand and reconcile. However, scholars have a term to bridge such seeming ambiguity. An *antisyzygy*, a yoking of the opposites.

The *Caledonian antisyzygy* reflects what Professor G. Gregory Smith, in his 1919 book *Scottish Literature*, saw as 'two moods' apparent in the nation's psyche. The one extols the 'grip of fact' and 'sense of detail', the qualities of the engineer or of the accountant, for whom there is 'no mood for fun or faery'. The other flings us on 'the fun of things thrown topsyturvy, in the horns of elfland and the voices of the mountains'. There you have it. Realism and idealism. The High Road and the Low Road.

I told Paul and Dougald that my theme would be 'Finding Hope in Getting Real'. For despair is not an option if it's 'time to stop pretending'. We might be tempted to give up, and from the fastness of Dark Mountain, indolently to brood. But alternatively, it is precisely at such times that the human spirit can awaken. I therefore offered to explore the inner life, that both lightens and enlightens outer life.

Spiritually, the Low Road charges and recharges the High Road. It refines, sanctifies and restores meaning.

How so?

Said T. S. Eliot: 'By the purification of the motive / In the ground of our beseeching.'

May such be found acceptable, our opening prayer.

Amen.

The Reading – *from early Bible translations*

> 'Woe unto them that add house to house, that join field to field, until there is no more room, and that ye dwell yourselves alone in the midst of the land!'
>
> – Isaiah 5:8 (Darby)

> Therfore shall ye not sell the londe for euer, for the lode is myne [sayeth the Lorde]. And ye are straungers and indwellers before me.
>
> – Leviticus 25:23 (Coverdale)

Second Song of Praise: *MacCrimmon's Lament*

In 1991, I was one of four activists who set up the Isle of Eigg Trust for modern Scottish land reform. So began a six-year struggle of quasi-biblical proportions. Prospective playboy purchasers soon got wind of what old colonials might have called 'a little spot of bother up-country', by which 'the natives were restless'. The Trust raised £1.6 million from 10,000 donations worldwide. Spurred by their revolutionary spirit's market spoiling, the community bought the 7,000 acre island at a knock-down price, leading to affordable housing, renewable energy, small enterprises and eco-restoration, all unto their own democratic control.

The seed for Eigg's purchase had been sown by Tom Forsyth, a crofter (or smallholder) on the Scoraig peninsula in the West Highlands. Given his mentoring role towards me, I had the idea to have him join me at Llangollen. Moreover, to stage it as an intergenerational triple act, I also invited Iain MacKinnon, one of my former students of human ecology, of an indigenous crofting family in the Isle of Skye. With a position at the University of Coventry, Iain's research has exposed how slavery proceeds from the Caribbean colonies had often financed the commodification and purchase of indigenous clan lands during the 18th and 19th centuries. This helped fuel the mass evictions of the peasantry in the notorious Highland Clearances.

Curiously, as I began to prepare this sermon, a Caribbean woman of mature years came to me in a dream, and emboldened me, saying: 'Tell them about the church.' Not 'church' in the creeping Jesus sense, but in the engaged sense of liberation theology. Her provenance reminded me of Paulo Freire's humbling words in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: 'This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.'

During my hour-long slot at Llangollen, Tom would represent the values being handed down. I, the present day. And Iain, the younger generation's hopes. This, a feedback loop more than a linear progression; for Iain is both a bearer of old Gaelic song, and a piper in direct descent from the MacCrimmons. The MacCrimmons were the hereditary pipers to Clan MacLeod at Skye's Dunvegan Castle. Tradition holds them to have been the greatest pipers of all time. Let us, then, join in their Song of Praise:

MacLeod's wizard flag from the grey castle sallies
The rowers are unseated, and moored are the galleys
No more, no more, no more forever
Shall love or gold bring back MacCrimmon

The Children's Lesson: *Fifth Commandment*

Dear Girls and Boys…

Before you all go running off to rewild the cemetery… there are truths that I can render only unto little children. Now, the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan keep the skeletons of their MacCrimmon pipers under the stone slabs of St Clement's Church in the Isle of Harris, next door to Skye. This sacred natural site has an oral history dating back to *drùidh* or 'druid' times. It lies just south of the *Sruth nam Fear Gorma*, the Straits of the Blue Men, the fearsome sea faeries that ride the stallion waves of the Hebridean archipelago.

Tradition holds that the first MacCrimmon was given his charism, his spiritual gift, by a girl from out the *sìthean*, the faerie hill. Now, in the Gaelic language, *sìth* means both faerie and peace. If your mummies and daddies ask what the children's lesson was today, do me a wee favour. Just tell them: 'He preached about the King of Peace.' For verily o verily, the MacLeods are descended from a faerie wife. She left us with two gifts. The Cradle Spell: 'Sleep, my little child, / Dream, my little child, / Ho-ro veel-a-vók, / Ho-ro-aily.' And the cradle quilt. On our Sunday School outing to Dunvegan Castle, you will see it displayed – the Faerie Flag or 'wizard flag' that yet protects the clan.

Such is our *dualchas*, the cultural heritage of families, hand in hand with our *dùthchas*, our deep ecology of heritage in oneness with the land. Pronounce them right! Like 'doooal-chh-as' and 'doo-chh-as', the 'chh' as in *loch*.

'The earth belongs unto the Lord', not the landlord, sayeth the Psalms. Let me leave you with the Fifth of the Ten Commandments, that the Lord gave unto Moses. As Norman MacLeod, a Free Presbyterian lobster fisherman of Bridge House in Harris told me, Exodus 20:12 is about your 'father and mother' as heritage in the land.

'Honour your *dualchas* that your days may be long in the *dùthchas* which the Lord your God is giving you.'
We give thanks for the fullness of community.
Amen.

Main Prayer: *Car a' Mhuiltein*

The late Hebridean scholar, Dr John MacInnes of Edinburgh University, wrote: 'We could take the fairy knoll as a metaphor of the imagination, perhaps an equivalent of the modern concept of the Unconscious.' And then, his thunderclap. 'From this shadowy realm comes the creative power of mankind.'

Our prayer today is from *Agus Mar Sin Car A' Mhuiltein*, 'And So Somersault,' an epic poem of a night away in the faerie hill, by the Skye bard, Maoilios Caimbeul. The Foreword to the bilingual 2021 edition is by me, with Iain MacKinnon and the official Isle of Skye archivist, Catherine MacPhee, whose surname in the Gaelic is *NicDuibhsithe*: 'The Daughter of the Dark Faerie.'

> And this girl said the girl with love in her eyes You will accept it
> and I said 'I will accept what?' and she said again in the same calm
> voice 'You will accept it accept the flood accept the calmness
> accept the Otherworld people and accept human beings'

Amen.

Third Song of Praise: *Let it Be*

In his study of that same 'creative power of mankind', the great Islamic scholar, Henry Corbin of the Sorbonne, concluded that for the medieval Sufi mystic, Ibn Arabi: 'Prayer is the highest form, the supreme act of the Creative Imagination.' He added that we pray to God, but equally, 'God prays for us.'

Similarly, George Bernard Shaw's play, *Saint Joan* (of Arc), has the girl's inquisitor suggest that her voices 'come from your imagination'.

'Of course,' she replies. 'That is how the messages of God come to us, through our imagination.'

The root of our word 'poetry' means to make or to create. It appears in Greek translations of the first verse of Genesis. When God 'created' the world, the Holy Spirit 'hovered' over the waters of the void, and in *poesis* loosed the primal thunderclap of cosmogenesis: 'Let there be…'

Saint Mary spoke so, likewise, in the Gospel of Saint Luke. And so, to borrow from our bards, in all its double meaning: 'Poetry becomes people.' Let us ponder in our hearts such Low Road mystery, that transfigures High Road rationality. Let us join the Song of Praise that, in a dream, came unto Paul McCartney.

> 'And when the broken hearted people living in the world agree /
> There will be an answer / Let it be, let it be.'

The Sermon – First Head – *Re-membering*

Be attentive, gentle congregation, that I address you primarily as artists, activists and cultural creatives; thus my Low Road emphasis. At the start of *Puck of Pook's Hill*, Rudyard Kipling describes 'a large old fairy Ring'. Puck emerges from it and tells Una and Dan, the children who are playing there: 'I'm the only one left… the oldest Old Thing in England.'

Why so? Because 'you've broken the Hills… the Hills are empty now… the People of the Hills are gone.' The giants, the trolls, the kelpies and the imps; the brownies, the pixies, gnomes and all the rest – they're all '… gone, all gone!' The People of the Hills began as Gods, but 'England is a bad country for Gods'.

I share this, mindful of having been born of an English mother and a happy first four years of life in Doncaster. But Puck provides no quarter! The Old Things 'couldn't get on with the English for one reason or another,' and 'when Oak, Ash and Thorn are gone I shall go too.'

It startles Una. It reminds her of a 17th-century poem, a rhyme by a maverick bishop of how the Puritan religion had broken the common folks' connections with their earlier faith, with the faeries, and with the land itself. Thus, 'Lament, lament, old abbies, / The Faries lost command;' to the point where, now, 'they never daunc'd on any heath / As when the time hath bin.'

The thought awakes nostalgia in Dan – *nostos-algia* – a 'homecoming-pain', a sense of estranged belonging. To Puck and Una he confides: 'When I was little it always made me feel unhappy in my inside.'

Kipling here bears out that Fifth Commandment imperative, that if we lose our *dualchas*, our archetypal roots of cultural heritages (plural), our days will not be long in our *dùthchas*, the land that Providence has set before us. Dan's hankering for something in his roots – his *cianalas* ('kee-an-a-lass') as an evocative Gaelic term has it – is more than individual. It is transpersonal. It invites that which I think of as a cultural psychotherapy. Trauma is the Greek for 'injury'. Psychic trauma comes about when an injury to the psyche was too great to have been processed – integrated into consciousness and agency – when it happened. Just as individual psychotherapy can invoke remembrance to make sense of suffering, so, too, at the collective level, to *re-member* social history, and to decode its residual feeling-toned libidinal complexes of psychological power, can help us to restore what was once dismembered.

How does Puck do this? He tells the children stories of their people and their land; a rumbustious history, for sure, marred in the ways we might expect from such an arch-apologist of Empire. But his aim is laudable. He helps them to understand how both their social and their natural ecologies are interwoven in their psyches.

If I might widen our aperture: from Brazil, Paulo Freire deftly defined such 'conscientisation' – such activation of both sentient conscience and social consciousness – as the process by which people can '*emerge* from their *submersion* and acquire the ability to *intervene* in reality as it is unveiled'. And to narrow the aperture back again to England: in 2019, the pre-Starmer Labour Party published a groundbreaking report, *Land for the Many*. In its Preface, George Monbiot remarked: 'The sense that even in discussing land we are trespassing is so strong that this critical issue remains off the agenda.'

Trespassing!

Why so?

Because 'it always made me feel unhappy in my inside.'

The Sermon – Second Head – *Re-visioning*

Land-based displacements of people such as the Enclosures in England, or Scotland's Highland and earlier Lowland Clearances, were collectively traumatic. The evidence is abundant at the Celtic edges of the Empire, where these events are historically closer to the surface of collective consciousness than in England. Writing in 1929, in *The History of the Working Classes in Scotland*, Thomas Johnston cites the evictions of my own Clan MacLennan forebears in Strathconon, displaced by the 'nabob' Indian wealth of the Balfours (of the eponymous Declaration). Vast swathes were emptied in the 1840s 'in a most barbarous manner' to appropriate the glen for sheep-ranching and deer-stalking. Johnston testified: 'To this day the spot is shewn where the dispossessed men and women crouched together, praying rather for a merciful death than that they should be driven farther from the strath of their birth.'

Widening our aperture a second time, Yolanda Gampel, an Israeli psychotherapist to descendants of Holocaust survivors, likens intergenerational trauma 'to indigestible stones, that rattle around the belly of the world'. It unconsciously shapes our experience, inclining us to be reactive rather than responsive to life. For on its own, to remember is insufficient. We may merely wallow in a Groundhog Day of sentimental memorialisation. Whether as individuals or in national, ethnic, religious or other groups, we may select and project what the Turkish Cypriot psychiatrist Vamik Volkan calls 'chosen traumas'. Here, irrespective of historical truth, events real, elaborated or fabricated from the past, are unconsciously selected and projected in an effort to make sense of present-day suffering. Time itself may psychologically collapse, and 'an ancient enemy will be perceived in a new enemy'.

Justice is one half of resolving such rattling discontent, thereby bridging between *re-membering* and *re-visioning*. The other half is forgiveness; *for-giveness*. In his remarkable essay 'Nine Sutras on Peace', the Hindu-Christian scholar Panikkarji suggests: 'Only forgiveness breaks the law of karma.' Only what absorbs the violence of the world can thaw the frozen heart, and free up the flow of life from Low Road through to High Road. Such forgiveness is not an act of will. It is a charism of grace, a fruit of prayer, and that, as the practice that can hold a person or a situation in God, and allow ourselves to be so held. Then we can *re-vision*, because we receive the eyes to *see* beyond the fractured ego's mirrored halls. This is why – and here it

becomes politics – in the early days of the Eigg campaign, Tom Forsyth constantly quoted Proverbs 29:18: 'Where there is no vision, the people perish.'

What might that vision *sound* like? In Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* there is a chapter title, later borrowed by Pink Floyd for their 1967 album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. Led Zeppelin also pays homage with the lines: 'It's whispered that soon if we all call the tune / Then the piper will lead us to reason / … / And a new day will dawn for those who stand long / And the forests will echo with laughter.'

In Grahame's tale, young Otter has gone missing. Fearing the worst, the Rat and the Mole set out in search by boat. Just as the moon sinks into mystery below the horizon, Rat hears the strains of distant music. Tears well up, and he cries out: 'O Mole! The beauty of it! The merry bubble and joy, the thin, clear, happy call of the distant piping.'

They row on until they come upon the place of the 'song-dream', the place of holy presence. Now Mole, too, can hear 'the liquid run of that glad piping'. It breaks upon him as 'an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, and rooted his feet to the ground.'

Mark those words: 'Rooted his feet to the ground'!

The Sermon – Third Head – *Re-claiming*

Drawing on her roots in South Korea, Chung Hyun Kyung describes how 'Asian women view God not as an individual but as a community.' As Gustavo Gutiérrez of Peru sums up such liberation theology: 'To liberate = to give life'. Land rights are pivotal, for land is the 'parish' – the *para-oikos* or 'parochial' – that which sits 'alongside the home'. The land is both the resting place and the arising place of community. Community is more than just 'society'. Community is profound interconnection, through love, in membership one with another and with all of being. It stems from the flows of Providence – 'provide-ence' – deep down in deep time's foundations in the Low Road. As the benediction of an old hymn might remind us: '…which wert and art and evermore shalt be'.

Here is the promise of *re-claiming* what is needed to *re-vision*, so as to *re-member* or restore what has been dismembered. From any spiritual path that is rooted in cosmic *karuna*, or love, we can 'taste and see' and be One World. Scholars such as Professor Donald Meek writing historically, and

my own work in writing such as *Soil and Soul*, show how liberation theology has played a legitimising and enabling role even into modern Scottish land reform. Today's legislation assures a 'right to roam', and grants communities first refusal to buy land that is on the market at a set economic valuation. According to Community Land Scotland, some 500 land trusts now account for very nearly three per cent of our nineteen million acres.

For English land rights activists, an excellent springboard is Christopher Hill's *The World Turned Upside Down*. This documents the 17th-century Diggers, Levellers, Ranters and early Quakers. Indeed, Scotland's vision was substantially inspired by two English writers. The London-born John Prebble wrote *The Highland Clearances* in 1963, and a decade later, the Merseyside-born John McGrath's 7:84 theatre company toured village halls with *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. It goes without saying that such English writers as Wiliam Blake, John Clare and Mary Webb both nourish and give social legitimation.

My knowledge of England is limited, but if I may, I'd urge you to treasure home-grown movements like the Right to Roam campaign, 'Three Acres And A Cow', the London-based Community Land Trust Network, and The Land is Ours with its fine biannual magazine, *The Land*. Animate communities of place, feed the hungry, set up local enterprises and social housing, care for the bones and blossoms of old cemeteries, and in short: rejoin your human ecology with the natural ecology. That's how to go about *re-claiming*. Then, 'the forests will echo with laughter'.

Sermon Application – *Lifelines*

A likely Gaelic derivation of Tom Forsyth's name is *Fearsithe*, 'the Man of the Faeries' or 'Man of Peace'. But getting him to Llangollen had been anything but irenic. It had been a complex two-day journey by small boat, bus and trains. Being in his eightieth year, and with reduced agility, we struggled with the tightly-timed connections between stations. Finally, the two of us were seated on Dark Mountain's stage.

I spoke. Tom held silent presence. I invited his contribution. But he just sat.

After what seemed an age, he reached into his shirt pocket and held up on a chain an antiquated watch.

'I see that here you live by deadlines', he said, referring to the journey.

'Where I come from, we live by lifelines.'

And then, he just sat there: slowly shaking his head, as if beguiled in wonderment.

At length, he added a little more. The butterfly may look as if it's wandering aimlessly through the garden. But don't be misled by the butterfly mind. It's following its nectar to the source. That was Tom's message, to *Time to Stop Pretendin*g.

I thought: 'Is that it?'

Then, of course: *that's it!*

And I raised my eyes to the balcony that ran around our seated auditorium. In full Highland Dress, appeared MacKinnon of MacCrimmon.

And I *rooted* my feet to the ground. And I shouted at the top of my voice.

IAIN, WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

And the pipes skirled. And then he burst into an ancient Gaelic song.

And the assembled bards…
and the Old Things on Dark Mountain…
…stirred at the Gates of Dawn.