



This article first appeared in the February 2017 issue of *Life and Work*, the magazine of the Church of Scotland. Subscriptions to the magazine are available here: <http://www.lifeandwork.org/subscribe/subscribe>

PROFILE

Alastair McIntosh on the Harris Hills by Verene Nicolas



Thomas Baldwin meets author and activist Alastair McIntosh, a Quaker rooted in Presbyterianism.

IN conversation, Alastair McIntosh approaches every sentence carefully, choosing his words with forensic precision.

Perhaps it's partly because he takes the same perfectionist approach to writing that it took him seven years to complete a book about a two-week Hebridean pilgrimage.

Although he now describes *Poacher's Pilgrimage* (published in June last year) as his most important book, to begin with Alastair wasn't even sure his walk through his childhood haunts, from the southernmost point of Harris to the northern tip of Lewis, would make it in to print. "I thought it was possible," he says, "But it wasn't a plan because I had no idea what kind of book could emerge from it.

"I was going to spend 12 days walking

across the moors and through the villages of Harris and Lewis but, being from there, all of that was so familiar anyway that I didn't think anything exceptional would come out of it.

"When I got back from the walk and my wife said 'are you going to write a book out of it?', I said 'I don't think I've got the material for that'. It was literally over the course of seven years of writing and rewriting that layers and layers of depth fell into place from things that I had experienced on the way, including having a number of major dreams while I was writing, that helped to reveal that depth and altered the course of what I was writing."

Poacher's Pilgrimage combines travelogue and snatches of autobiography

with musings on the meeting points of theology, mythology, history and prehistory, environmentalism, non-violence and land reform, among much else.

It is rooted very deeply both in the natural world of Lewis and Harris and the various layers of spirituality overlying and intertwined in it – from the many pagan sites of which the most famous is the Callanish standing stones, to the pre-Reformation Catholic chapels or 'temples' and the heavily Protestant culture that has dominated the last 500 years.

The impression given is of 'a thin place', as is often said about the holy islands of Iona and Lindisfarne, where the barrier between the material world and the spiritual one is especially permeable.



Reflecting on the experience now, he says: “When you’re walking on your own, as I was for four days at one stage without meeting anybody, in complete silence, what happens is your ordinary life sediments down and you feel a deeper receptivity that is very physical. You’re being receptive to very physical things – rivers and bogs, the deer and so on – and you don’t realise how profound it is until you come out.

“And that experience I had of coming out near Callanish and going to the Callanish Stones visitor centre, and looking at myself in the mirror and realising I’d become like a bogman: all my usual social composure had

gone, my face had reverted to nature. It made me realise what a strange space I was in.”

Alastair’s connection to the islands goes back to the age of four when, in 1960, his father took the job of GP in North Lochs, in south east Lewis. He was raised in the Church of Scotland (his father was an Elder), in a predominantly Free Church community. These days, he describes himself as a ‘Quesbyterian’ – a Quaker rooted in Presbyterianism.

“A big influence on me was the Rev Colin Maclean of Martin’s Memorial Church of Scotland in Stornoway. In an environment where, in those days, you were channelled

down a fairly narrow doctrinaire path, he encouraged me to see that statements of belief are not all that it’s about – it’s about the spiritual path, the journey of exploration.

“In the mid-80s, when I was about 30 and involved in the peace movement, in protests against nuclear weapons etc, I found that many of the people organising these things would often be elderly Quakers. I then read what they had to say, and I found a teaching that was not based on a creedal foundation such as the Westminster Confession with its problematic binary division of the elect and, by implication, of the damned – which



Alastair McIntosh by Matt Carmichael

“

When you’re walking on your own, as I was for four days at one stage without meeting anybody, in complete silence, what happens is your ordinary life sediments down and you feel a deeper receptivity that is very physical. You’re being receptive to very physical things – rivers and bogs, the deer and so on – and you don’t realise how profound it is until you come out.

PROFILE

is the problem I have with the doctrine of double predestination and particularly limited atonement – but rather a faith which was specifically about universal salvation, that salvation was offered to all and that the journey there was not so much what you say you believe but what you follow with your heart.

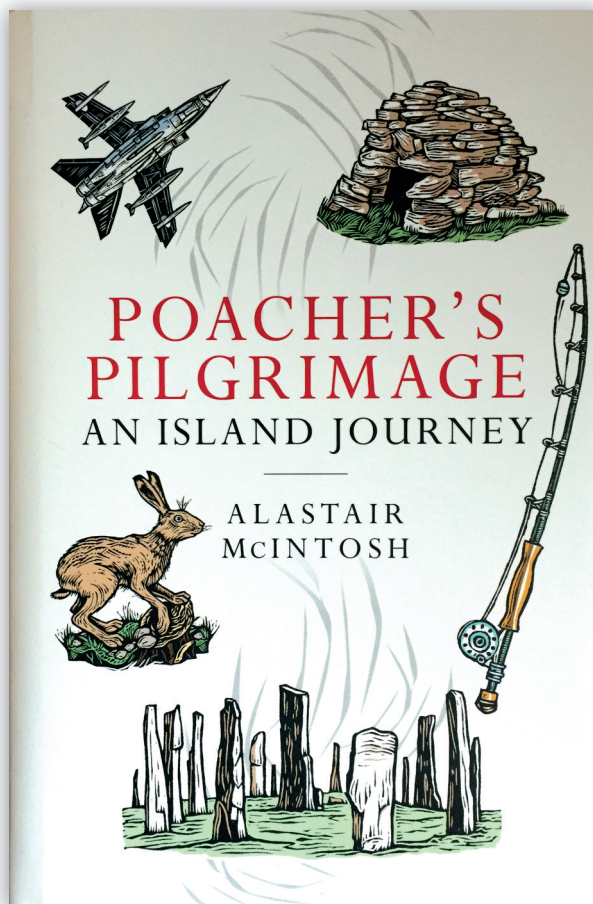
“Of course that would be the case in practice with probably the great majority of Presbyterians today, and yet we still have this problem within Presbyterianism of carrying a medieval theology in which, as Calvin put it, God is ‘armed for vengeance’, and that’s a theology that to me just doesn’t sit right with John [the Evangelist]’s fundamental axiom that God is love.”

Alastair is also an associate of the Iona Community, and has been the Quaker representative on the Community’s advisory board. “Just now I was reading Ron Ferguson’s column [in October’s *Life and Work*], and he reiterates a line that I remember having a fundamental affect on me when I heard him deliver it in a sermon in Iona Abbey [while Ron was leader of the Community], and the line as I remember it is ‘the love of God is a very flesh and blood love that will never let you go’.

“And there you see the power of the Presbyterian preaching tradition. For all I get out of Quakerism, I do appreciate the power of a good teaching ministry, and that’s where you see it – in the capacity of a good sermon to just put a finger on something which explodes in the heart.”

Another example of an impactful sermon is related in the book. Having checked in to a B&B for the weekend half way through his pilgrimage, the only place of worship within walking distance was the Free Church at Callanish.

“It just so happened that the Rev Calum Macdonald was working his way through Job and had hit on chapter 12, which is one of the most deeply ecological parts of the



“

Poacher's Pilgrimage combines travelogue and snatches of autobiography with musings on the meeting points of theology, mythology, history and prehistory, environmentalism, non-violence and land reform, among much else.

Bible. He gave a stunning sermon, tying the ecology of Job 12 in with what was happening in the world at that time, with the banking crisis and government corruption, and I thought to myself ‘this is really interesting, because the Free Church would define themselves as having an evangelical theology, but what I’m hearing here is certainly not a narrow focus on personal salvation.

“I’m hearing something that very much ties in with that Luke chapter 4 mission statement of Christ as being about good news to the poor, of proclaiming the acceptable year of the Lord.

“It opened a realisation in me that such a type of evangelical testimony and witness – rather than the American type

of the prosperity Gospel – is the kind that I was raised in, and because of the hellfire sermons and obsession with sin that some clergy were prone to venting, and the Westminster Confession limited atonement type exclusivism in which Christ is understood to have died only for the elect, I had been put off from seeing that richness on our own doorstep. It left me with a deepening urge to reconnect with these people, whose theology I don’t always agree with, but whose heart I was not just with but have been very much held within throughout my life.”

Alastair’s life took him from Lewis to study in Aberdeen, and two long spells in the 1970s and 1980s where Voluntary Service Overseas posted him to, of all

things, a Roman Catholic mission in Papua New Guinea, which also had an influence on his theology. “The mission was headed up by a retired Australian archbishop, Virgil Patrick Copas, and he was very into charismatic theology. I don’t mean a waving your arms in the air kind of charismatic. I mean his recognition of the “charisms” or gifts and movement of the spirit, which was part of what led to my opening to liberation theology.”

This theology, a mostly Catholic interpretation which emphasises concern for poverty and social injustice, is another piece of the theological jigsaw which has informed Alastair’s work since he returned to Scotland in 1990, first as a teacher at the Centre for Human Ecology at Edinburgh University, and since 1996 as a freelance – “probably unemployable,” he says – writer, speaker and independent scholar.

He made his name initially in the land reform movement, as one of the founders of the Isle of Eigg Trust, which finally succeeded in buying the island for the community in 1997.

“My principle direction in coming at that was a liberation theology of land and people. Most people thought I was bonkers, but the approach had a kind of inner power – it spoke to key gatekeepers both in and outwith the community.

“When you’re doing something radical, like trying to radically shift a land ownership system, people need a sense of inner legitimacy. Even if they think they don’t really believe in God, the idea that this might be something that is God-mandated was important. You see that very clearly in the late prophets, and in Luke 4:19 where Jesus proclaims the acceptable year of the Lord, the jubilee, with its radical land redistribution. The idea of a community returning as an exodus and reclaiming its place speaks to hard-pressed people – at least, that’s often so in my experience.”

He developed this theology in print in *Soil and Soul: People Versus Corporate Power* (2001), which took in both the land reform movement and the successful fight against the proposed ‘Harris superquarry’, which would have destroyed the mountain of Roineabhal; on his website he says ‘I think I will always consider this book to be my masterpiece’, and it garnered favourable reviews from sources as disparate as musicians Ricky Ross and Thom Yorke, activists, academics and clergy.

Hell and High Water (2008) takes a similar approach to climate change: combining science and politics with psychology, spirituality and insights into the human condition. While in many ways this book is bleaker than its predecessor – the cause of land reform has won significant victories; there is very little good news in climate change – he says it left him with ‘a strange inner joy... and deepening my sense of hope for humankind’.

It was also completed against the backdrop of a personal tragedy: the stillbirth of his son, Ossian. In a 2008 article in *Third Way* he recounts how he and his wife Véréne, then seven months pregnant, woke up on New Year’s Day 2007 to the realisation that the baby wasn’t moving. They were, they wrote, ‘astonished and heartbroken at the love we feel for this child’ and ‘found grounding in a love that transcends death’, and hope in a sense that ‘Ossian would always be spiritually with us’. At the last moment, the word ‘hope’ was added to the subtitle of the book, which is also about finding inner spiritual regeneration in the face of outwardly bleak events.

Alastair, who also has two grown-up children from an earlier marriage and Véréne have been together since 1996 and live in Govan, where he is a founding trustee of the GalGael Trust – “Which is outwardly about building boats but inwardly about helping people to rebuild themselves.” ■



Alastair McIntosh by Matt Carmichael

“

I do appreciate the power of a good teaching ministry... in the capacity of a good sermon to just put a finger on something which explodes in the heart.

Among his other engagements, Alastair will be speaking on *Poacher’s Pilgrimage at Pitlochry Winter Words book festival* on February 16, at *Augustine United Church in Edinburgh* on March 9, the *Aye Write! festival in Glasgow* on March 17 and the *annual conference of Eco-Congregation Scotland* on April 22. For more details, visit his website, www.alastairmcintosh.com

Poacher’s Pilgrimage is published by Birlinn.