

Presentation by Dr Peter Mackay at a meeting of the Loch Computer networking group, University of St Andrews, January 8, 2015.

Beware any writer – or comedian – who begins by talking about where they come from. This will likely involve a sleight-of-hand, an origin myth: that one is, in an uncomplicated way, the product of a place; or that you can be seen now in your physical presence as representing a place, a people. The comedian makes fun out of the ‘otherness’ of where they come from, or the ‘otherness’ of their audience; the writer tends to equate this otherness with a kind of (uneasy, perhaps unearned) authenticity. Nevertheless, here I am going to talk about where I spent the first 17 years of my life, the Isle of Lewis.

From the first I had a sense of Lewis, not as isolated island, but as an international meeting-place or departure point. The only history lessons I remember from primary school were about the Vikings, the *Iolaire* disaster, and the enlightened teacher that sent us out into the village with cassette recorders to interview older people about their childhoods and – perhaps inevitably – the Second World War. After this was the discovery of more of Lewis’s (salubrious and insalubrious) historical encounters with the wider world. The Irish settlement of Scotland that brought Gaelic to the country. Molucca beans that washed up on the beaches of the island, carried from the Caribbean. James Matheson (1st Baronet) of the Hong Kong based conglomerate Jardine Matheson, and erstwhile owner of the island, behind the First Opium war, and described as the Foreign Secretary, the Duke of Wellington, as a ‘stupid and arrogant man’. The *Metagama* and the many other ships that left these shores. Uncles and distant cousins in Auckland, Melbourne, the States. That Donald Trump’s grandmother was from the island. What a ‘Donald Trump’ was. And the strange presence of the Klondykers, guarding the route to Ullapool.

With this came a sense that the contemporary notions of geographic connectedness did not map particularly well onto the historical ones. For a land-based culture, yes, Lewis is quite far from the centre of a land mass. For a sea-based one – a thalassocentric culture, say – Lewis was an important stopping point between Scandinavia and Ireland; and beyond Ireland down into the Mediterranean. A map created by Colmcille (an agency whose purpose is to reforge links between Gaelic Ireland and Gaelic Scotland), attempted to reframe this perspective:



© Colmcille

This map risks, however, being exclusive in its reimagining; not just towards the south-east of this archipelago, but also in its broader, European, perspective. In the distant past, in a lecture at the Irish Institute for Hellenic Studies, I attempted to identify some threads of influence between Ancient Greece and Gaelic Scotland and Ireland, influence that flowed across those inviting swathes of blue that connect as much as separate:



© Google Maps

The gesture towards connectedness suggested by this map, and its blue roads, was the important thing. Repeatedly, Scots have drawn parallels between the martial and

maritime cultures of the Scottish and Greek islands; as in 'Am Bàta Dubh' by the 20th century Gaelic poet Sorley MacLean:

luingis dhubha b' ealanta
a sheòl Odysseus a nall á Itaca
no Mac Mhic Ailein a nall á Uibhist,
cuid air muir fion-dhorcha
's cuid air sàl uaine-ghlas.

skilled black ships
that Odysseus sailed over from Ithaca,
or Clanranald over from Uist,
those on a wine-dark sea,
these on a grey-green brine.

The European sea-roads, across the 'wine-dark sea' or the 'grey-green brine', are what Robert MacFarlane describes as 'old ways'. These are routes that barely register on the contemporary consciousness (unless you work in shipping or fishing). There are other 'old ways' on Lewis – traces of old paths, and old ways of life – that dot and criss-cross the surface of the island. From above, you can – just about – make out tarmac road, peat roads, sheep tracks, as well as sheilings, abandoned cars and trucks (if not the bird skeletons your tairsgeir would find preserved in the peat-bogs):



© Google Earth

These ways suggest historical absence as much as presence. This is driven home by the mysterious archaeology of the island. Most famously, the stones of the Calanais circle stand on the west coast of the island, defying interpretation. But just five

minutes walk from my mother's house there is, well, *something*: a some-place which goes by the name of Stein-a-Cleit. For years in the 20th century it was believed to be a chambered cairn. Now current archaeological thinking won't be more definite than that it was a 'building' or 'settlement', or two different settlements:

'The site is difficult to interpret and has variously been described as a ruined chambered cairn, stone circle and homestead. What is clear is that the visible ruins represent at least two distinct phases of use.' [Dutton 2003]:



'Settlement' is perhaps the best we'll ever have, and the most fitting: the village is named Shader, from the Norse *soetr*, which just means 'settlement'. Other place names on the north-west of Lewis suggest the difficulties of settling, as well as linguistic overlaps and repetitions. The next village is Borve / Borgh = the 'fort'; the northern tip of the island is 'Rubha Rubha Nis' – 'the point of the point of the point' – with Gaelic words settling on a Norse word, each finding the same truth.

Various strands of connectedness continue to the present day. The coast just up from the stony beach in the village – Mol Eighre, 'the gravel beach of the shingle beach', two Norse words strangely laid over each other – is earmarked for renewable energies: wave power, and tidal arrays. When the interconnector comes – (a phrase that is by now almost proverbial) – this power will be dispatched across to the mainland. Also, many of the people from the island still work out on the sea, in the rigs of the North Sea, in the merchant navy. Many island eyes keep track of the ships passing offshore, identifying them and following on them websites, or – in the case with the grey ships of the military, ghostly presences of a recent past – tracking where they were weeks, months ago, never where they are now.

These strands of connectedness do not, of course, all meet and join up into a single neat picture or artefact. And this is useful for poetry. I often think of poems as tools or machines for making connections, for exploring a universal interconnectedness,

but in ways that are imperfect, that do not fully cohere. Rhythm and rhyme bring things together, but not into complete identity; there must always be holes that you can – will – drop through, into the unexpected, the not previously connected. Many of the connections I've been sketching here lie behind –at one, two removes? – this poem:

Ma tha thu air ruighinn cho fada seo

Ma tha thu air ruighinn cho fada seo,
cinnteach gun d'fhuair thu iasad air baidhg
gus rathad na moine a ghabhail, seachad
air a loch 's a chrannóg, tro na muilleanan-gaoithe,

's tarsainn nam mointich gu far a bheil na Klondykers
gu bràth air acair far a' chosta,
far an do chuir thu romhad fhàgail,
le do mhàla-droma làn ìomhaighean d'òige –

pacaid *Space Invaders*, briogais corduroy,
catalog *Freeman's* agus *Great Universal*,
faclan mallachd Ruiseanach 's Ghearmailteach
ann an leabhraichean Sven Hassel –

agus tro theudagan optic, cheanglaichean trèan deann,
theicneòlas chomputair 's saideal,
bhriseadh casgan astar, agus *doublethink*,
fhuair thu lorg air an sràid seo, sràid bhaile làn sgudal;

air a chabhsair taobh a-muigh an dorais
bidh thu air a' bhaidhg fhàgail, a chuibhle
a' dol tuathail ann an tàmh an adhair,
anns a' här, ann an eachdraidh chultarail a' här.

Ma tha thu air ruighinn cho fada seo,
cinnteach gun do dh'atharraich thu gu tur
cò thu, do chàinain a mhalairt air adhart 's air ais
aig chiad chomharra bagraidh no cunnairt
gu rudeigin còltach ri cainnt do mhàthair

rudeigin air an robh thu eòlach o d'òige,
agus tha agad ri aideachadh ann an tais
an sior-chiaraidh nach do leig thu leat fhèin

le na h-uidhir de dhaoine a bhiodh tu 'g iarraidh.
Bidh do chraiceann na bhròth le luasganan
cuimhne 's cionta airson peacaidhean
agad fhèin no acasan an aghaidh na sòlais.

Ach seo uile 's urrainn dhut caith a-mach
mar dhearmail mhòr mu rud beag:
ma tha thu air ruighinn cho fada seo
thu air ionnsachadh a bhith dèiligeadh

ri leòntan fhosgailte mar dh'eàrran,
gun a bhith a shùileachadh an còrr.
Leig seachad na tha càr, na tha rèidh.
Ma tha thu air ruigsinn cho fada seo, sin fada gu leòr.

If you've got this far

If you've got this far, you must've borrowed
a bike to make it past the loch and its crannógs
on the peat road through the turbines over the moor
to the bay where klondykers lie anchored off-shore

your backpack full of childhood icons -
a packet of *Space Invaders*, corduroys, a rusted 3-iron,
Freeman's catalogue and *Great Universal*,
the Russian and German swears of Sven Hassel -

and through optic fibres, high-speed train-links,
computer and satellite technology, speeding and doublethink
found this trash-filled street. On the kerb outside the door
you'll have left the bike, one wheel spinning in dead air,

in the unrelenting haar, in the cultural history of that haar.

If you've got this far, you must've utterly changed who you are,
switched languages and switched back
at the first sign of threat or attack

into something that will pass for a mother tongue,
something you think you remember from when you were young.
But now in the night-damp of this forever evening air
you realise you've let fewer people than you'd care

to admit possess you: ripples welt up under your skin
from the memory of your and their sins
against the undimmable light. But all of this you can dismiss
as the creating of unnecessary fuss

for if you've got this far you've learnt to treat
open wounds as scars; learnt not to hope for the sea.
Ignore the smooth, ignore the rough.
If you've got this far, that's far enough.