

Chapter & Verse

James Knox Whittet

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Kathleen Raine (1908 – 2003) A Lost Eden

Kathleen Raine's poetry was inspired by a vision of a land she had glimpsed but never really known. She felt ill at ease in the 20th century. It was as if she had been exiled in an alien age. Despite this, and despite the many personal disappointments in her life, she reached the age of 95 and her death was the result of an accident, not age or illness.

She detested what she contemptuously called the Sherlock Holmes view of life: the belief that life's mysteries can be solved by powers of rational deduction and the gaining of empirical evidence. This is a widespread assumption which has led to the declining influence of poetry in the western world. For her, the fullness of life can only be glimpsed in rare moments of revelation. In her 80's, she wrote:

For most people today, to say that one has seen sublime or beautiful things is seen as some sort of hypocritical self-aggrandisement, even though it is only moments when we transcend ourselves that we can know anything of value.

For her, the writing and reading of poetry was a means of breaking free from the egotistical self in order to achieve a larger vision of life – she would have loathed the infantile exhibitionism of performance 'poetry'.

Her formative years were spent in the nineteen twenties and thirties, but her sensibility and her poetry is a world away from the political consciousness of Auden and Spender.

She was born in Ilford where her father was a teacher and Methodist preacher. However, Kathleen spent a significant part of her childhood with an aunt in Northumberland and the contrast between suburban Essex and the moors of the north struck her forcibly. For her, as for Tolstoy, the contrast between town and wild countryside was a spiritual gulf. The Northumberland countryside was for her a lost Eden which one recalls in early childhood but one loses this sense through time. She would have agreed with Wordsworth that *heaven lies all about us in our infancy*. This belief was expressed by many of the poets who Kathleen came to love most: Thomas Traherne, Henry Vaughan, William Blake, John Clare and Yeats.

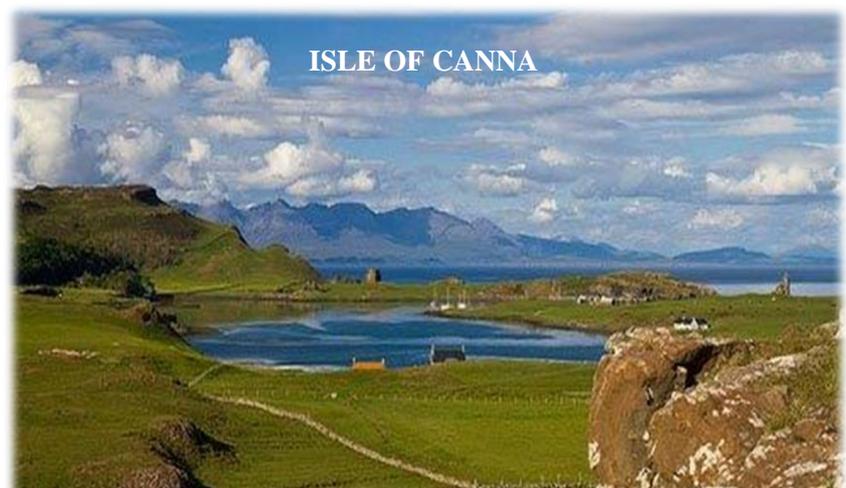
Kathleen had two failed marriages and although she had a son and daughter, she could never reconcile herself to motherhood and her children were often left with friends. It was in 1949 that she met the great love of her life, Gavin Maxwell who shared her mystical passion for the natural

world. The title of Maxwell's most famous book *A Ring of Bright Water* was taken from the poet's *The Marriage of Psyche*

*He has married me with a ring, a
ring of bright water
whose ripples travel from the heart
of the sea.*

Sadly, Kathleen's love was largely unrequited as Gavin only felt passionate about young men. For seven long years, Kathleen hoped that he would agree to marriage but her hopes were groundless. One night during a storm in Sandaig, Wester Ross in the Scottish Highlands where Maxwell lived and which was the setting for *Ring Of Bright Water*, they had a quarrel and Kathleen was thrown out of the house. She took shelter under a rowan tree – traditionally grown near Highland cottages to keep witches at bay – and in her anger she laid a curse on Maxwell. Within a few years, his beloved otter was killed by a local workman and Maxwell was to die in agony of stomach cancer. The resulting feeling of guilt stayed with Kathleen for the rest of her life.

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However, her relationship with Maxwell and her friendship with the artist, Winifred Nicholson introduced Kathleen to the Highlands and Hebrides where she experienced a spiritual homecoming to a purer way of being. She could echo the words of Winifred when she described the Hebrides as *a place after my own heart*. Both women had a particular attachment to the Inner Hebridean island of Canna which at that time was owned by the famous Gaelic scholar and folklorist, John Lorne Campbell. Before his death, he gave the island to the National Trust – a decision he soon came to regret, with good reason.

Just as some of Winifred's most beautiful and delicate paintings are of the ever altering seascapes and landscapes of Canna, some of Kathleen's finest poems are inspired by this small island.

After a period of spiritual exile, she returns in the following poem to an old beginning in this loved *remembered place* whose every detail is engraved upon her heart. It's as if the Eden she had lost as a child had, at least partly, been restored in age. But to return to the beginning is to return to its future loss.

Return to Canna

Long distances of land and sea
Have brought me once more to the gate
Sheltered by its gale-bent trees,
The escalonia avenue,
As if an old beginning were
With each return rehearsed anew
And I had travelled back through time
Towards the welcome of this house.

And in the drawing-room, where all
Is as it was, or little changed,
As in a dream some small detail
Betrays, and warns us, when we wake
That we in sleep had not returned
In truth to the remembered place,
Only almost this now seems then,
The self I am the self I was.

Or as the pictures on a screen
That make a story seem to run
Continuous, one unbroken theme,
Are images that may be seen
Each a still photograph, so here
The abiding present of the past
So clear, I half expect to see
Again the friend who brought me here.

On that cloudless day in spring
So many stormy years ago
When I first sailed into this bay,
Was all my future course laid down,
Was I already what I am
And all the evil I have done
Enfolded in my happy heart?
I called it love, that seed of harm.

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