

## Chapter & Verse

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### Lochs Like Blue Rings: Iain Crichton Smith (1928 - 1998)

Although Iain Crichton Smith was born in Glasgow, his parents were native Gaelic speakers who came from the island of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. Iain was just an infant when his father died and his widowed mother decided to return to Lewis with her three sons. They lived in the crofting township of Bayble which, in retrospect, seems rather fitting as Iain felt divided between his native Gaelic and the English he was taught at school. Like Wittgenstein, he was also greatly puzzled by the way in which language relates to the world and to the self.

His childhood was spent in considerable poverty as his family had to exist on a meagre widow's pension. His mother was a firm adherent of the strict Calvinist doctrines of the Free Presbyterian Church where notions of guilt and sin dominated almost every aspect of life. This led to a conflict between Iain and his mother as he felt her religious beliefs were too joyless and life denying, a world in which art and beauty were viewed with suspicion. (Paradoxically, the Free Presbyterian's' distrust of artistic expression nonetheless gave rise to the most hauntingly beautiful of all church music with its metrical Gaelic psalms.) In the following poem, he depicts this bare, wind scoured island with its *exhausting prayers* and the heartbreaking loveliness of *the moor with yellow flowers*.

Although Iain left Lewis at the age of eighteen to become a student of English Literature at Aberdeen University and never

returned to live on the island of his childhood, the island followed him wherever he went.

After leaving university, he trained as a teacher and taught English at Oban High School for over twenty years. By all accounts, he was a somewhat eccentric, if inspiring teacher in an age when teachers were not restricted by rigidly following a curriculum. His mother had moved from Lewis and lived with her son until her death in 1969. In 1977, he took early retirement teaching and in the same year he married Donalda, who had two sons from a previous marriage. In order to support his new found family in their house in Taynuilt, on the shores of Loch Etive, he wrote novels, plays and short stories as well as poetry. He also wrote in Gaelic as well as English.



#### Lewis

From the War Memorial  
we see Lewis entirely.  
For this place they died,  
the new houses, the smell of seaweed,  
the rivers,  
an old woman walking about her croft,  
the wind on the Atlantic,  
a seagull lying dead on a bare headland,  
the sea breaking whitely on the long sand,  
flowers among the stones,  
a minister on a Stornoway street  
on a cold wet day.  
For this place they died.  
Prayers are exhausting  
the old sick people.  
The wind is beating against the headlands  
with its lonely song,  
the moor yellow with flowers,  
the small elegant lochs  
like blue rings, there they used to walk  
when they were children.  
The loom of the wind on the headlands  
with its eternal whine.

### from *As Time Draws Near*

As time draws near  
the end of our days  
and the plates fall

away from our knees,  
let us not be afraid  
of the unsponsored dark.

Heavy grave sin  
is weighing your head.  
There are shining in darkness

panoramas of terror.  
Each nightly picture  
is God in his ire.

But for us in autumn  
let the trees remind us  
of our reasonable sequence,

that like birds we travel  
from darkness to darkness  
briefly through the hall,

where there remains  
the clinking of glasses,  
the redness of wine,

though we lie starkly  
in our effigies  
which will not rise,

pen or sword in hand.  
It is an achieved grand  
tableau that we leave,

say, turning at the door,  
putting on a glove,  
and entering the sunset's

enormous concert.  
Surely that is better  
than on stumbling feet

in the warmth of wetness  
squalidly survive.

A friend of the writer said that Smith *lived on the edge of madness* and in the 1980's he fell over the edge and experienced periods of extreme paranoia and was hospitalized on more than one occasion. He came to believe that all those around him were plotting against him: his wife, the local butchers, the taxi driver and so on. He movingly describes these terrifying episodes in his novel entitled *In The Middle Of The Wood*. It was with the aid of a new anti psychotic that he regained a level of sanity. Indeed, he described his later years as the happiest of his life.

In one of his most moving and memorable poems, he finds a deep acceptance in the immanent prospect of *entering the sunset's/enormous concert*, he journeys far beyond the wrathful God of the 'Wee Frees'. So much of his poetry arises out of an inner dialogue with his mother and her religious beliefs. It would be quite difficult to think of another atheistic poet who writes so much about religion.

However, in this touching short poem, there is a sense that his mother and the religious dogmas of his beloved island come together. In order to live and to ultimately face death without any distorting illusions, the poet feels that he has to close his ears to certain aspects of his upbringing.

### When The Day Is Done

Sorrow remembers us when day is done.  
It sits in its old chair gently rocking  
and singing tenderly in the evening.  
It welcomes us home again after the day.  
It is so old in its black silken dress,  
its stick beside it carved with legends.  
It tells its stories over and over again.  
After a while we have to stop listening.

