

A Pocket Full Of Stones: Alasdair MacLean (1926 – 1994)

The poetry of Alasdair MacLean is inseparable from the bleak beauty of the Ardnamurchan peninsula in the west Highlands of Scotland. It is an area with a harsh climate and a remarkable sparsity of soil as MacLean describes in this poem simply entitled *Stone* taken from his first collection of poems, *From The Wilderness*.

Although Alasdair's poems will forever be associated with Ardnamurchan, he was actually born in a Glasgow slum as his father earned very little money as a so called Deputy Harbour Master on the Clyde. When Alasdair left school at 14, he did a wide range of manual jobs. During his National Service, he travelled to India and Malaya and then lived and worked in parts of Canada before returning home and enrolling as a mature student at Edinburgh University.

In the 1950's, his father and his family moved to the ancestral croft in the already declining crofting community of Sanna in Ardnamurchan. By doing so, they moved from one form of poverty to another but for Alasdair it proved to be an inspired move as he grew to love the landscape of Sanna where their croft sat above the machair with its astonishing array of wild flowers in early summer and the waves of the Atlantic Ocean withdrawing to leave their salt imprints on shell sand. Even the long dark days of winter seemed to compliment the poet's mood: in one poem he writes *I live off my stored darkness*. He had a remarkably original and empathetic way of perceiving the world through the eyes of the

Stone

*A long peninsula of solid rock,
upholstered every year in threadbare green.
Stones everywhere, ambiguous and burgeoning.
In Sanna ramparts of them
march around our crofts
but whether to keep cattle out or other stones
no man can say.
And at Kilchoam there were three houses
cropped from one field.
That was when I was a boy.
The masons left the pebbles
and there's a castle now, waiting to be harvested.
God was short of soil when He made Ardnamurchan.*

animals around him: the sheep, sheepdogs, cattle and hens of the croft and the wild animals who roam this remote corner of Scotland.

The Old Dog

*Useless.
Our shouts bounce off him.
His eyes, each pasted over
with cataract,
tilt upwards
to the surreptitious claps
that span his days.
The furniture,
he finds,
is still predictable;
the people never were.
Inevitably
we get under his feet.
We curse him and keep him.*

Even that creature which so many crofters and farmers loathe: *The Crow* is depicted through childhood eyes of wonder:

*The first crow I remember
occurred when I was eight or nine.
It flew above me,
slantwise across the sky.
It called three times,
in a harsh loud voice:
'God! God! God!'*

Alasdair's father was a difficult and moody man who would sometimes go for days barely uttering a word to his wife and children when a dark mood descended upon him. He and his son, himself a difficult man, would often fall out and go their separate ways. When his father died, Alasdair felt a terrible sense of guilt that he had not treated him, worn down with years of unremitting toil, with more consideration and respect. This feeling of guilt and deep regret lies behind the beautiful and tender title poem of MacLean's second and final collection of poems, *Waking The Dead*.

*The dead man lay quietly,
beamed back by candles at his head and feet
but tired, dead tired, after travelling.
He wore his Sunday suit for us
and on his face a mild surprise
as if at last he half believed we loved him.
How we fixed him with his eyes!
But if he meant to go or stay,
to satisfy the new house or the old,
he dared not for the life of him
to either family say.
And so we sat
and gave those others glare for glare
and I sat too.
With us it was not Irish lack of care
despite the whisky going from hand to hand
and the little plates of cold ham tripping after.
This was the harder land
and not a farewell or a giving up the ghost
but a Presbyterian stare and business.
I leaned over him.
The air was was colder and more hollow there
as if I leaned above a well
and when I dropped my stone I saw him flinch,
or I did, as it passed through.
But what the difference was between us
never never would he tell.
How many years is it since childhood now?
Yet I remember well:
'Stay, Donald, stay!' my mother said
but I said 'Donald, go to hell'.*

Alasdair's long suffering mother died within a few months of his father and he wrote a moving poem for her also which is simply called *The Rain* which falls so frequently on Ardnamurchan.

*In April now I think upon the
rain.
It makes its way down through
the loosened earth.
In ooze not honest drops it
penetrates
the wooden roof of she who gave
me birth.
She is insensible, you say, being
dead,
to the passing of the seasons, how
they wheel?
Indeed you miss the point, my
friend. It does
not matter if she feels or not; I
feel.*

With the death of his parents, the crofting way of life which had continued for generations in Sanna died with them. Alasdair moved to the other side of Scotland leaving the croft house to the mercy of wind and rain and leaving the docks and bracken to choke the land in which barley once grew golden and potatoes blossomed against all the odds in soil sweetened by seaweed. It was while living in the industrial town of Kircaldy in Fife that he wrote his sublime prose account of the end of a way of being, *Night Falls On Ardnamurcham* which has become a modern classic.

Alasdair never married or lived with anyone and liked to keep a space around himself. He became increasingly reclusive as he got older and nothing is known of the last ten years of his life except

that he moved to the historic village of Falkland in the same county. It's not known if he continued to write. In his poem called *Cliff Thoughts*, he writes of that curious desire which children, in particular, have when standing on top of a high cliff to jump off it and feel their body falling through air and enter the unknown.

from *Cliff Thoughts*

*How comforting are boundaries! They define things.
Day after day I'm drawn to this cliff-top. I seek that reassurance, though I get less of it each time
or say I need more of the edge to produce it.
Today I jut my ten toes out over the Atlantic where it most is. Five hundred feet below me fish swim.*

Strange! I fear heights as I fear my own company yet here I stand and am mocked at by seagulls whose lightness overtook them a billion years ago.

Think then what it must be like to go down here, through the astonished birds and the water to a new country, for visa your pocket full of stones.

Metaphorically speaking, Alasdair took that final jump. At the enquiry into his death, the coroner reached a verdict of suicide. Although his life seemed to end in loneliness and despair, he had achieved his highest aim in that he not only spoke of the land but spoke for and to the landscape he loved most. On the final page *Night Falls On Ardnamurchan*, there is the following passage which ends with a question.

Somewhere north and west of here the clouds whirl and alter still and the mountains thrust up nakedly, shedding their rags of mist on the way, and the waves break and re-break on my beloved beach. Who will visit the hill lochans now, those remote and reed-fringed sanctuaries whose margins sometimes do not feel a human footfall from one year's end to another. How will they know they are beautiful if I do not tell them so?