

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## ‘Lithogenesis’: Towards a (Geo)Poetics of Place

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**Abstract:** Stone and geology have proved themselves appealing to twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors concerned with place-writing and the development of place-consciousness more widely. The austere presence of materials which have emerged from a scale of time difficult to relate to our own has offered a humbling corrective to our modern experience. Such encounters have also been resistant to a particular intersection of environmental and Romantic traditions of thought that searches for a ‘reunion’ with nature. In so doing they may present a useful way forward for thinking through place in a modern context. Stone and geology are explored in the work of three authors here – Kenneth White, Tim Robinson and Alastair McIntosh. In texts by each of these authors we can read a consistent effort to reimagine the cultural geography of place by turning toward a deeper understanding of the stone beneath their feet. Far from regarding stone as a source of stability and reliability, these three find themselves accommodating unstable, vertiginous, precarious and plural truths that can be drawn upon as a source for, what White calls, ‘cultural renewal’. Realising the impossibility of being fully reconciled to such a non-human scale of presence also leads to the opening of what Heidegger calls a ‘clearing’ (Lichtung), both in terms of an aesthetic space in the poetics of topographical writing but also in terms of a lived place and the dynamic creativity at the heart of place identity.

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‘All is lithogenesis’: the opening phrase from Hugh MacDiarmid’s 1934 poem ‘On a Raised Beach’ sets out a relationship between stone and the written word that will serve as a starting point for this paper.<sup>1</sup> It is a poem thought to have been written during a three-day stay alone on the uninhabited West Linga in the Shetland Isles, an area composed largely of gneiss and schist with some intrusions of granite, much of which has been dated at around 420 million years old (Lyll 2006: 121). The *OED* defines ‘lithogenesis’ as ‘the production or origin of minerals or rocks’ but, as the poem goes on, the word takes on other meanings as well, though all of them in one way or another revealing the stones as, to quote Alan Bold, ‘the embodiment of a creative intensity’ (Bold 1983: 183). On one level this creative intensity broadens out toward some kind of theological manifestation, gesturing toward the ‘Genesis’ in ‘lithogenesis’: ‘These stones go through Man, straight to God, if there is one’ (MacDiarmid 1993: 179). On another there is a narrowing in on something more human and writerly, gesturing toward the poet’s own (relatively) inadequate creativity: ‘My fingers over you, arris by arris [...] / Bringing my aesthesis in vain to bear’ (11-13). The ‘All’ of ‘All is lithogenesis’ suggests an immanence and inclusiveness that is, in the end, profoundly humbling for the poet. Human history shrinks under the combined glare of a geological and theological sense of deep time: ‘Cold, undistracted, eternal and sublime’ (192).

MacDiarmid continues with a passage that addresses the stones’ resistance to language, setting a gulf between himself, the poet and writer of language, and the silence of the stones:

Deep conviction or preference can seldom  
Find direct terms in which to express itself.  
To-day on this shingle shelf  
I understand this pensive reluctance so well,  
This not discommendable obstinacy,  
These contrivances of an inexpressive critical feeling,  
These stones with their resolve that Creation shall not be  
Injured by iconoclasts and quacks. (25-32)

This is a poem of the highest reverence for Creation, but for Creation *as Creation*, for stone as stone, beyond the ways in which we have used and reconstituted it. In a later line that calls to mind Christ’s temptation in the desert, MacDiarmid claims that: ‘Bread from stones is my sole and desperate dearth’ (68). The line refers to the Gospel of Luke in which Christ declines to turn stones to bread in the desert at the behest of Satan after fasting for forty days (Luke 4:3). It is crucial for MacDiarmid (as for Christ) that there remains this negative capability, this ‘dearth’. Temptation to make the stones anything else would be dark magic, the work of ‘iconoclasts and quacks’: ‘We must reconcile ourselves to the stones, / Not the stones to us’ (MacDiarmid 1993: 219).

This article takes the struggle for this kind of inner ‘reconciliation’, so vividly evoked here by MacDiarmid, as a starting point and, following a brief discussion of some relevant philosophical and critical contexts, it explores the creative power of stone in two ways. Firstly, I discuss the poetics of place writing in prose works by Tim Robinson and Kenneth White, suggesting ways in which their texts have attempted to perform this inward-looking reconciliation with stone (attempts that have not always succeeded). In fact, it will be argued that their failure to achieve reconciliation nonetheless opens complex, plural and self-reflexive modalities of place writing that generate their own dynamic forms. Secondly, I consider the idea of a poetics of place more broadly insofar as it might suggest a more general, cultural geographical place-making involving people and their environment with particular reference to the work of Tim Robinson and Alastair McIntosh. Here, too, any representation of ‘oneness’ or ‘wholeness’ between people and an environment is rejected in favour of the recognition that place too is fundamentally a dynamic and self-reflexive act, what Edward Casey has described as ‘an ongoing cultural process with an experimental edge’ (Casey 1993: 31). In both parts there is an exploration of Kenneth White’s description of ‘geopoetics’, an idea (and in fact a word) that has much in common with the idea of ‘lithogenesis’ explored above. The sense in which we must ‘reconcile ourselves to the stones’ becomes, for White, an imperative for wider ‘cultural renewal’ responsive to the ground beneath our feet.

### Clearings

In thinking about this relationship between people, place and writing we might turn to Heidegger’s writings on aesthetics, which differentiate between the concepts of ‘earth’ and ‘world’. Exploring the spaces generated and produced through the entanglement of, and the tension between, these two concepts, Heidegger developed the idea of a ‘clearing’ (*Lichtung*). In ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, he suggests that the materiality of the work is brought to the fore in all its obstinate presence (unlike, for example, the materiality of a tool, the effectiveness of which is measured by how much it vanishes to us through its use) (Heidegger 2002: 9-10). This intrusive material presence brought forth in the work of art is what he calls ‘the earth’. ‘[T]he earth,’ Heidegger suggests, ‘is openly illuminated as itself only where it is apprehended and preserved as the essentially undisclosable, as that which withdraws from every disclosure, in other words, keeps itself constantly closed up’ (25). In fact the metaphor he uses for earth is actually one of stone (24-5). ‘World’, however, is quite the opposite and is inextricably bound up with human consciousness and actions: it is ‘the self-opening openness of the broad paths of simple and essential decisions in the destiny of historical people’ (26). In fact, ‘world’ becomes a verb for Heidegger meaning a human-led opening-up: ‘*World worlds*’ (23). ‘World and earth are essentially different,’ he suggests, ‘and yet never separated from one another. World is grounded on earth, and earth rises up through world’ (26). But, for Heidegger, the relationship between the two in the work of art is always ‘intrinsically belligerent’ and based on ‘strife’ (*Streit*), each tangling to pull the other in its opposite direction (31). The space produced by this difficult entanglement, and hence

the space of the work of art, he calls a 'clearing' (*Lichtung*). In the idea of the clearing, the physical presence of the work of art is crucial to its effect as it '*lets the earth be earth*' in quite the same way that MacDiarmid is struggling to do in 'On a Raised Beach' (24).

Central to the 'strife' or struggle that brings forth this 'clearing' is what Onno Oerlemans has called the 'material sublime'. This is a 'recognition that it is possible to see at once how thought and existence are estranged from a clear awareness of the physical world, and that they are yet inexplicably rooted in it' (Oerlemans 2002: 4). The written word, the poem itself, becomes the medium negotiating a relationship between the two, neither thought alone, nor matter, form, but a little of each. This is no easy reconciliation, though; in fact, no reconciliation at all. Oerlemans continues to suggest that '[a]lthough we can know much about the natural world, and can trace our cultural biological roots to natural objects and processes, we nevertheless experience consciousness as distinct' (11). This leads him to claim that: 'Thus any desire we may also feel for a reunion, for knowing our connection with the world, must be to some degree suspect' (11). For Oerlemans, this is 'the fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of environmentalist thinking, and forms its central conjunction with Romanticism' (11). In what follows, I will argue that recent literary relations to stone and geology have proved particularly resistant to the kinds of Romantic and environmental 'reunion' of which Oerlemans is so suspicious, those feelings of interanimation and reciprocal subjectivity that can lead to a lazy sense of 'oneness' rather than to an existentially struggled-for relationship between two states that remain other to one another.

An encounter with stone or geology, like MacDiarmid's 'On a Raised Beach', and others in prose that I will go on to examine, is an encounter with that quality of the earth that Heidegger describes which is most overtly resistant to us; an encounter with that which maintains the integrity of its otherness most strikingly. The writing occurs in an unbridged and unbridgeable gap but it is all the more interesting for this. It becomes a struggle, at the heart of which, is not *mimesis* but *poesis* insofar as this denotes 'creating or producing' (*OED*) in the original Greek; but also in the sense that the 'clearing', for Heidegger, becomes a matter of announcing and generating an originary truth: 'Art is, then, a becoming and happening of truth' (Heidegger 2002: 44). Such a 'clearing' becomes a space of immense creativity, a genesis in its own right, producing the space of a work of art. It may also be possible to think in this way about the creative production of a geographical space of human inhabitation. Such a space suggests an interesting connection between the poetics of place-writing and the creativity of place-making.

The aim here is to make an argument for the understanding of place from the perspective of literary geography, and thereby think beyond that conjunction between environmental and Romantic thought. The term 'literary geography' is taken in preference to 'textual geography' bearing in mind Angharad Saunders' distinction between the two modes of analysis: literary geography directing us toward the 'spaces in the text' and textual geography to 'the spaces of the text' (Saunders 2010: 437). Because the genre being considered in this article is non-fiction place writing, there is an inevitable interest in the interplay between these two critical perspectives. Nonetheless, my focus on the difficulty,

complexity, plurality and creativity of writing place, chimes importantly with Saunders' description of the distinctive modes of truth and knowledge in 'imaginative literature' (442). Unlike more scientifically geographical texts, literary texts are 'not searching for public endorsement of accuracy, but rather self-awareness of life's uncertainties and possibilities', for 'plural ways of knowing which reveal and celebrate the ambiguities of "truth"' (441-2). The literary poetics or aesthetics of place generate and communicate experiences of place that are in themselves 'true' in the sense that Heidegger suggests, for art itself is 'a becoming and happening of truth' without necessarily having to be the final word (Heidegger 2002: 44).

This article draws upon the critical perspective of literary geography, then, but also seeks to move from the literary to a more broadly cultural reconsideration of place. It is concerned with what the 'ambiguities of truth' derived from a literary poetics might tell us about the ambiguities of place itself. Place-making, like place writing, might be a more self-reflexive art than is often popularly assumed and one for which the acknowledgement and revelation of non-human presences and agencies can be a cultural resource. I will seek to demonstrate how a literary geographical perspective remains particularly open to the recognition of place as an ongoing process of discovery, development, consensus and creation perpetually emerging out of rich and dynamic entanglements of the human and the non-human.

### Geopoetics

In 1785, after delivering his second lecture 'Concerning the System of the Earth, Its Duration, and Stability', to the Edinburgh Royal Society, the 'famous fossil philosopher', Dr James Hutton set out on a series of field trips (Repcheck 2003: 146). He was going in search of evidence to support his claim that the Earth was far more than 6,000 years old, a period arrived at from calculations made through interpreting the Book of Genesis and commonly accepted among natural philosophers at the time. It was a controversial proposition, demanding as it did a Copernican leap of the imagination and, unsurprisingly, it was met with scepticism and misunderstanding. Little did even Hutton know that the planet would later come to be dated at closer to 4.6 billion years old. However, perhaps equally as significant and equally as radical in its dismantling of a prevalent world view, Hutton was suggesting, also contrary to popular understanding, that geomorphology was *ongoing*, that the 'fracture, flexure and contortion' of the earth was still at work beneath our very feet (Hutton, qtd. in Repcheck 2003: 152).

After the lecture he travelled to Glen Tilt just south of the granite massif of the Cairngorms, to Cairnmore of Fleet near the west coast, where great veins of granite may be seen intruding into the schist and sandstone from below. He took with him the artist John Clerk of Eldin who made sketches of the rocks that would serve to illustrate Hutton's theory. He travelled along the coast of the Isle of Arran looking for violent disruptions in coastal strata. In the following passage, he is looking south from Arran towards the smaller

island of Pladda, and to Ailsa Crag beyond that, wondering if these diminishing islands were ever connected by land to Arran, Britain, and even Europe behind him:

By thus ascertaining the first step in our cosmological speculation, we advance with some degree of certainty into the annals of a continent which does not now appear; and in tracing these operations which are past, we foresee distant events in the course of things. We see the destruction of a high island in the formation of a low one; and from those portions of the high land or continent which remain as yet upon the coast and in the sea, we may perceive the future destruction, not of so little island only, which has been saved from the wreck of so much land, but also of the continent itself, which is in time to disappear. Thus Pladda is to the Island of Arran what Arran is to the island of Britain, and what Britain is to the continent of Europe. (Hutton 1899: 261-2)

It is an unsettling idea, a reminder of the tenuous hold such a vast enterprise as Britain (then only eighty years a united kingdom) might have on the Earth. Extraordinary that a vision founded on stone could suggest so vividly that the archipelago was on the move, that islands, nations and even continents were in such fluid relationship with one another.

Geology as an intrusion of the earth onto a prevailing worldview, as a destabilising cultural influence has been a driving force behind the essayist Kenneth White and the Franco-Scottish literary movement known as ‘geopoetics’ that he has spear-headed. White established ‘L’Institut International de Géopoétique’ in France in 1989 and a Scottish Centre for Geopoetics was opened by Tony McManus in 1995. In an echo of Heidegger, White claims that geopoetics is ‘concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and with the opening of a world’ (White 2004: 243). Geopoetics sets out with the intention of opening our limited, human world view onto the scale of the earth in all its depth and instability as a source for ‘cultural renewal’ (243). It is meant not as a singular act of opening, but rather as an initiation of the continuous process of world-opening in relation to the earth. But this is not an opening in the pure sense of ‘worlding’ as Heidegger might put it. Because it is an opening *onto* the earth, attempting to preserve the earth as earth, it is closer to the idea of a ‘clearing’. The forgetfulness of a world’s opening which, for MacDiarmid, becomes ‘iconoclasm’, is refused by grounding it on the material presence of earth, consciously involving it in that ‘belligerent’ wrestling forth. White quotes Hutton: ‘We are not to limit Nature with our imbecility’ (White 2006: 18).

White is a Scottish poet, professor, and man of letters who has been living and working in France and travelling extensively for several decades in what he calls a ‘little transnational atopia’ (White 2004: 45). He does not see this as exile in the tradition of so many displaced modernists as much as a certain Scottish ‘extension and expansion’, a ‘wanderlust’ that he suggests is ‘to do with a continentality that is Unbritish, Unenglish.’ (White 2006: 56) But he does not mean this to assert a sense of Scottish national identity, however nomadic. Quite the contrary, White’s geopoetics thrives on the fluid uncertainty

that comes with a national identity crisis: 'it's when the national culture is broken up,' he has written, 'that the individual can emerge, relieved of history's heavy weight, and open new space' (White 2004: 45). Once again, the archipelago is on the move here. We might imagine him reading Hutton's passage above about the disintegration of the European coastal shelf as a stirring call to creative action, an imaginative emancipation through which the individual is encouraged to explore and assert identities beyond any static understanding of community, nation or region.

In 2005, in a lecture given in Inverness, White attacked the word 'region' as a description of the Highlands and Islands for its connotations of 'administration' and 'Empire', for the way that, he suggests, regionalism as a cultural policy threatens to 'replace a field of creative energy' with 'identity ideology' (White 2006: 59). Raymond Williams has also gestured to the way 'region' or 'regional' (both stemming from *regere* to direct or to rule) are terms that, politically, 'are within this assumption of dominance and subordination' (Williams 1976: 265). In place of 'region', White suggests the term 'territory': 'Every territory, while maintaining its presence and compactness, is open, if one knows how to read it' (White 2006: 76). Geology, zoology, linguistics, even hydrography, all come into White's argument for the use of the word 'territory' because they all ignore national or regional fixity by straying over borders, thereby contributing to his idea of an 'open world poetics' (76). Fault lines or escarpments, migrating animals, loan words or folktales, or rivers that meander, all ignore the political administration of bordered units with their own distinctive patterns of space and mobility.

However, at no point does *place* disintegrate into generalised space for White either. In fact, geopoetics allows him to intensify a particular aspect of place as distinct from the ideas of region and nation. The very location of the lecture itself is important here and White is aware of this. Inverness sits at the top of the Great Glen Fault, the line of lochs terminating in Loch Ness. It is a fault that around 500 million years ago connected to its North American counterpart, the Cabot Fault, which runs just below the St Lawrence River between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in Canada. As White reminds his audience, all of the land to the north of the Solway Firth was once attached to the North American continent divided by the Iapetus Ocean. This is a transcontinental fault in the heart of Scotland, on which White has chosen to contemplate such terms as region and nation. Again, the earth beneath is summoned up to be read and brought to bear on the world above it, pulling a little at its self-certainty and offering an alternative spatial order. There is something of the geologist's flair for theatrical presentation about White's lecture, given its venue (O'Connor 2007).

Geopoetics is primarily a poetics of the essay, rather than that of a finished poem, story or novel; though it may also be conceived and expressed in other forms as well. White explicitly favours the essay in his writing on geopoetics, describing it as a form that is 'creative of new space' and often implies 'abandoning established genres' (White 2004: 76). He goes on to remark that: 'The essayist is out on his own, working in the open. Knowing very well that the last word will never be pronounced, maintaining a distance both from

dogmatic totality and the detailed report, he makes attempts, *essays*, he tries out ways, he takes surroundings' (58). These remarks direct the reader back to Montaigne, who coined the term 'essay' itself (*essai*), which literally means 'an attempt' or 'a try'. It is this 'trying out' with its emphasis on creativity that goes to the heart of the poetics of the essay and, of course, the *poesis* of geopoetics: making new, opening a textual and mental world *onto* an underlying, expansive, geological earth, wrestling to arrive at that 'clearing' which Heidegger himself describes as a form of '*poesis*'. However, although many of White's own essays map out a fascinating canon of marginalised and overlooked non-fiction works, they are typically less effective in their exploration of place and the earth than the work of Tim Robinson, to which I now turn.

### **Stones of Aran**

The author and cartographer Tim Robinson begins *Stones of Aran*, his two-volume study of the Aran Islands, a small archipelago in the mouth of Galway Bay off the west coast of Ireland, with a vertiginous and unsettling view of their geological foundation. The limestone on which Robinson stands, so he tells us, was laid down 320 million years ago as the floor of a tropical ocean. 50 million years later it was raised out of the ocean by tectonic plate collisions that created the mountains of southern Europe, from which moment on its soluble stone began to be eroded, shaped and 'polished' by the elements, and later by the bite of glaciers (Robinson 2008: 7). 'So the geographies over which we are so suicidally passionate,' he reflects, 'are, on this scale of events, fleeting expressions of the earth's face' (7). But the instability of the Aran Islands is not just a matter of projecting back into deep geological time. The much more immediate erosion of, in particular, the largest island's western cliffs is a well-known fact. Fishermen talk of the *aragaint* (the ledges and pavements near the water's edge) and the *strapáí* (or stairways) down to them, and many are used to discovering old ways blocked or new ways suddenly opened by rock falls (113). In one extreme case, a boy from Oatquarter goes back to retrieve the line he has set overnight only to find that not only the line but a whole section of the clifftop has disappeared (113). Fields, archaeological remains and folktales all allude to projections of land on the southern edge that are no longer there, fallen victim to the ever deeper undermining motions of the Atlantic waves at the foot of the cliffs. In this the islands offer a particularly magnified sense of planetary time, 'disconcertingly open to non-human immensities' (27). Robinson concludes: 'Unless vaster earth-processes intervene Aran will ultimately dwindle to a little reef and disappear' (28).

This extreme instability draws the eye down to the earth. It prevents Robinson's own literary work from becoming too lofty, too inattentive to the tenuous grasp that he has on the place. But what, precisely, might be the virtue of this attention to earth and stone? Certainly it is one of Robinson's main aims, almost, in fact, the whole ambition of the book – to ensure that his writing does not betray its inspiration, to remain as faithful as possible to the ground underfoot, searching out the possibility of a congruence between the human world of culture and the earth on which it is set. Robinson has described his aesthetic as driven in part by a 'romantic-materialist' impulse (Robinson 2003: 51), which begins to

sound rather like the desire for that ‘reunion’ between thought and matter of which Oerlemans suggests we should be suspicious (Oerlemans 2002: 11). But Robinson is aware of such risks, and in his writings on Aran there is a carefully articulated failure to achieve that ‘reunion’ akin to MacDiarmid’s above.

In the following passage from a chapter called ‘The Difficult Mile’, Robinson is walking back home on the north side of the island where the coastline is not cliffs but a sloped beach consisting of heavy rubble. In it we read the performance of precisely this entanglement of earth and world that Heidegger described but played out with a self-reflexive, poetic subtlety. It is an existential struggle in consciousness, in the mind of a solitary, introverted author. It is a struggle for a version of the ‘material sublime’, but one that is candid about its own failure to arrive at any ultimate reconciliation between earth and world:

Then if a sea mist annuls the beatific vision of Connemara and the waves turn leaden and the sky hangs low, the generalizing monotony of the rock-bank is suddenly replaced by a dreadful multiplicity of individual boulders, each an ugly confusion of angles and edges. With every pace one’s mood darkens. These endless ankle-twisting contradictions underfoot, amorphous, resistant, cutting, dull, become the uncountable futilities heaped upon one’s own shores by the surrounding ocean of indifference. If then one could elevate gloom into metaphysical despair, see the human race as no taller than that most depressing of life-forms, the lichen that stains so many of these bare stones black, one might, paradoxically, march on with a weightier stride that would soon outwalk the linear desert. Instead, the interminable dump of broken bits and pieces one is toiling along stubbornly remains the merely personal accumulation of petty worries, selfish anxieties, broken promises, discarded aspirations and other chips off a life-worn ego, that constitutes the path to one’s own particular version of nowhere. (Robinson 2008: 168)

What is performed here is the failure to conciliate psychology and geology beyond a metaphor in which the human mind projects its ‘petty worries’ out onto the stone; but it is an *interesting* failure insofar as it articulates a reflection on this failure, for through it we learn something about the relationship between the mind and language. All the difficulty and indifference of the stony landscape remains difficult and indifferent, uncompromising in the extreme and though the intellect searches over its surface for a way in, for an opening, finally it is forced to concede defeat and we are left with its helpless metaphor. In fact, as vehicle and tenor are reversed all of sudden, the image of the ‘chips off a life-worn ego’ has even absorbed something of the quality of limestone into the mind in the process: an ego exposed like a weathered limestone island alone in the Atlantic. This is an interesting example of the entanglement that Heidegger describes in which both earth and world struggle to maintain their own integrity as they wrestle against one another. But this is also the origin of the work of art, the *poesis* in which something new is made.

What Robinson's exploratory essays achieve in their articulations of failure is a difficulty at the point of entanglement which seems richer in its linguistic inventiveness, in its toing-and-froing over the impossible point of interface, than a less strenuous mode of writing might be. Ways of knowing and writing and thinking about place begin to proliferate endlessly from this point of incongruence out towards what he calls an 'unsummable totality of perspectives' (Robinson 2008: 8). In a chapter on the mysterious limestone ruin of Dún Aonghasa which sits high up on the cliff edge of the main island, he concludes: '[O]nce again I have failed to *be* in this strange place, this knot of stone from which the sky has broken out. So I promise to come back and try again, to approach it from a different angle, take it by storm or moonlight, bring a measuring tape or a bottle of wine' (109). The failure to find a conciliation between self and earth means that a labyrinth of possible ways of knowing the earth opens up, each way inadequate but each nonetheless interesting and plausible in its own right. There is an echo here too of Samuel Beckett's mantra from *Worstward Ho!*: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. *Fail better*' (Beckett 2009: 81). Eventually, Robinson concludes, or confesses: 'Having now acted out to the best of my capacity the impossibility of interweaving more than two or three at a time of the millions of modes of relating to a place', that the goal is in fact, and always was, 'inconceivable' (Robinson 2008: 363). And yet he has continued to write about the modes of relating to place in another long book on the interior of the Aran Islands, *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* (1995), and in a trilogy of books on Connemara. Robinson declares that he has failed, though he also suggests the 'impossibility' of the task at hand. Rather than reconciling his feelings of alienation to the kind of oneness that Oerlemans suggests is suspicious, the impossibility of perfect congruence becomes a very rich site for writing itself and for the generation of a poetics of place. As John Wylie has argued in his Derridean reading of Robinson, there is 'a displacement of land and life from each other' but this displacement is also, crucially, why 'we have something to say' (Wylie 2012: 375).

### Places, Maps and Names

In this folding together of failure and creativity in Robinson's *Stones of Aran* there are other stones lurking in the background as well. The book takes its title from Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (though note the telling loss of the definite article) and shows the influence of, in particular, Ruskin's attack on industrial labour and its dehumanising effects. Ruskin also describes a poetics of failure in which something more interesting occurs than it might if a forced and compromised perfection is achieved. Speaking of the stonemason making his individualistic carvings on a medieval cathedral as an alternative to the factory worker following orders and copying a design, Ruskin suggests: '[O]ut come all his roughness, all his dullness, all his incapability; shame upon shame, *failure upon failure*, pause after pause: but out comes the whole majesty of him also' (Ruskin 1853: 161, my emphasis). For Ruskin, as for Robinson, the honest failure of the individual in all his or her roughness is more valuable for

its creative autonomy than machinic perfection produced under a scheme of work in which the human becomes a tool in a larger system of design. Ruskin continues:

If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cogwheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them [...] The eye of the soul must be bent upon the finger point, and the soul's force must fill all the invisible nerves that guide it [...] and so soul and sight be worn away, and the whole human being be lost at last. (161)

For Robinson, though, it is not 'the whole human being' that will be lost, but the whole of the place (we might imagine a connection between Ruskin's ideal 'whole human being' and Robinson's own ideal of an 'unsummable totality'). This is a theme that begins for him in his first role on the island as cartographer. In fact, for Robinson, the essay has always been a counterpart to the map. As he says early on in *Stones of Aran*, the maps were really 'preliminary storings and sortings of material' that would always give way to 'the world-hungry art of words' (Robinson 2008: 19).

In their early years on the island, Robinson and his wife planted a potato field outside their house, orienting it by the lines of the paths and the field walls. These paths and field-walls in turn followed the fault lines in the limestone underneath which run parallel along an *almost*, but not quite, north/south line. Fault lines such as these can be seen all over the island, so many of them following the same north-north-east by south-south-west line that they come to represent the islands' own north and south. That 'almost' is a key to understanding the islands' orientation to a wider world though, and was so significant, in fact, that Robinson has preserved and published the original map of the potato field as a limited edition four-colour offset and letterpress print with Coracle Press. The whole island is a grid of walls enclosing over a thousand tiny fields that are, generally speaking, all in alignment with the limestone faults underneath. Such an alignment obviously appeals to Robinson in search of that congruence between a culture and the earth that bears it. Highly aware of, and fascinated by, this local orientation, he suggests, 'nevertheless the unchanging abstractions of official cartography insensibly penetrated the time-bound little domain, and I was always conscious of the angle, the argument, between so-called True North and our Garden North' (Robinson n.d.). There is an echo of Ruskin here in that 'insensibly penetrated', a surprisingly violent image of some anonymous system reaching a controlling arm into the human being.

However, this subtle and seemingly insignificant 'argument' reveals its significance through the islands' (and Robinson's own) history of cartography. Robinson's first means of making a living on the island was through making a map for tourists after Máire Bn. Uí Chonghaile, the local postmistress, pointed out that there was none readily available. But in doing so he had found numerous disparities between the long-out-of-date Ordnance Survey maps, drawn up in the nineteenth century when Ireland was under British sovereign rule, and the local knowledge he was learning in visiting and walking with his neighbours. The

disparities were observed on the whole in the recording of place names, their mistranslation, their Anglicisation and their misplacement, a phenomenon memorably dramatized in Brian Friel's play *Translations* in conversations between the English surveyor Lieutenant Yolland and his Irish translator Owen (Friel 1981). In fact, in 1996, a short essay of Robinson's appeared, appropriately enough, next to an excerpt from *Translations* in a slim volume dedicated to community-led mapping, or 'parish mapping', by the arts and environmental charity Common Ground (Clifford and King 1996).

As Robinson describes in a later essay, he came to realise that the Ordnance Survey had handled the island's place names 'with a carelessness that reveals contempt', betraying the fact that 'rents and rates came before any other aspect of life' and that to the surveyors the 'language of the peasant was nothing more than a subversive muttering behind the landlord's back' (Robinson 1996: 3). In fact, the Ordnance Survey had set up a Topographical Department charged with the collection of heritage information in 1835 but this had been brought to an end in 1842 on the basis that it was 'stimulating national sentiment in a morbid, deplorable and tendentious manner' (Hewitt 2010: 287). Subtle as the 'argument' might be then, 'True North' here carries the connotations of imperial north and the north of English administration while geological north, or 'our Garden North,' suggests a politically-loaded deviation from the standard that is more grounded and locally useful, perhaps even an aspect of the island's heritage in need of conservation. Geological north here *fails* again to find congruence between the English world and the stones of Aran, but it achieves something much more interesting in doing so. It makes its own truth, its own 'Garden North'. We might see in this 'argument' a shadow of the difference between 'region' and 'territory' for Kenneth White, where region is a definition that reaches into a place from the outside while territory offers that 'bottom-up' definition based on an engagement with the geology beneath. But we can also see Ruskin's argument for the autonomy of the creative craftsman here too. What is opened up in the use of geological or 'Garden North' then, might be called a 'clearing', but less as the origin of the work of art than as the origin of a kind of place-making. Awkwardly caught in a tension between the open world of imperial space and the closure of the earth beneath, the orientation here somehow necessarily fails both but at the same time succeeds in realising an autonomous poetic space of inhabitation.

### **Place-Making**

In June 1991, a Scottish businessman began making inquiries on behalf of the multinational building materials company Lafarge Redland Aggregates about the opening of a 'superquarry' near the southern tip of the Isle of Harris in the Scottish Western Isles. A large quarry in Britain is thought to extract, on average, around 200,000 tonnes of stone each year, but what was being proposed here would extract between 10 and 20 million tonnes each year once it reached full production (McIntosh 2001: 148). It would use around 36 tonnes of explosive per week and leave a hole in the side of a mountain called Roineabhal that would be the largest of its kind in the world, covering several square miles and rising to the height

of 'six times the white cliffs of Dover' in order to serve the needs of aggregate for such things as road-building and the construction of sea defences (148). What ensued was a thirteen-year battle between the islanders and various charitable NGOs and the lawyers of Lafarge Redland, the longest land development battle in Scottish history. Author, academic and campaigner Alastair McIntosh has documented the struggle in his book *Soil and Soul* (2001) and was himself instrumental in encouraging the islanders (who were at one point ninety percent behind the development) to fight for the conservation of the island (160).

At the heart of the book is an account of a form of environmental activism, inflected both by McIntosh's Christian faith and his own sense of place-based identity as a Hebridean islander. He describes the campaign both as 'liberation theology', looking in particular to the Quaker tradition, but also as a form of pragmatic 'consciousness raising' associated with the felt attitude to place and the sense of identity drawn from it, one that helped to shift the community from that ninety percent in favour to outright opposition (166). McIntosh tells the story of the fight in parallel to another narrative about the inhabitants of Eigg and their battle to become the first autonomously owned Scottish island, struggling to buy the land as a community from an absentee landlord. In both instances the 'consciousness raising' that the communities undergo is a quite practical and creative sense of place-making as a community-driven, bottom-up form of identity construction. This McIntosh links to the *poesis* of 'geopoetics' (he describes Kenneth White as the island's 'absentee bard'), 'the making and fresh upwelling of reality' but one founded on place itself: 'Sociologists have used the word *autopoiesis*,' he suggests, 'to describe an ordering of social reality that arises out of itself' (153).

Referring to this process as 'autopoiesis' serves to demonstrate the resistance to both private companies and absentee landlords. However, the concept of autopoiesis can also be called into question, especially when considered from the perspective of recent work on posthuman ecologies. Kathryn Yusoff has challenged the idea of discrete, autopoietic subjects in relation to human-nonhuman interactions such as this crucially place-based assertion of identity. For Yusoff, a more complex understanding of identity emerges particularly through an awareness of the human relationship with the geological and the often overlooked agency of stone. In a study of rock art and the pivotal role it plays in conceptions of 'becoming human', she opens up the formation of human subjectivity to reveal a nonhuman excess that is both 'anterior and interior' at the same time (Yusoff 2014: 7). Such an excess could also be said to be vital to precisely this 'autopoiesis' that McIntosh describes, founded as it is on the relationship to the island's geology. By recognising this 'anterior and interior' nonhuman agency, Yusoff draws attention to the possibility of 'an identification with the earth' the likes of which we can see at work on Harris, but it is one that, importantly, 'does not start from a point of alienation *or* whole-ism (Gaia), but recognizes an entirely different mode of production' (17, my emphasis). Here, a third way emerges by drawing attention to the creativity of the aesthetic and the way human agency is involved, in this case literally, with lithogenesis (i.e. the formation of shapes in the cave wall).

Bringing the 'auto-' of 'autopoiesis' into question, then, only serves to emphasise human and nonhuman entanglements in the generative idea of 'geopoiesis'.

Of particular interest here is the way such entanglements relate to the perception of the mountain Roineabhal itself. In a chapter titled, 'The Mountain Behind the Mountain', a phrase borrowed from the poet and critic Kathleen Raine, McIntosh asks: 'What is a mountain actually for?' Obviously the perception by Redland of its value of a few pounds per tonne is at odds with the value it comes to have to the islanders (McIntosh 2001: 155). 'The Mountain Behind the Mountain' is a phrase that suggests the perception of the mountain as a place as well as a material, as 'a place of Presence and a place of presences. Only those who can perceive this in its ordinariness can encounter the mountain behind the mountain' (154). McIntosh himself describes the epiphany he has that sets him on his campaign when he visits the church of St Clement's at the foot of the southern slope of the mountain and finds, halfway up the stairway of the bell tower a rock coming through the wall, 'bedrock protruding from the hill outside' (155). The ordinary history and culture of the parishes around the mountain is bound up with its silent presence here in a very striking example of the mountain's being both 'anterior and interior' to the human community, as Yusoff suggests. This awareness stands in stark contrast to the reduction of the mountain to a knowable, quantified and monetised aggregate. The place itself – the church wall built around the stone – was *letting earth be earth*, to borrow Heidegger's phrase. The idea of the mountain behind the mountain is less concerned with knowing a place than with contributing to its production as a lived environment.

However, perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of the fight for the mountain is the visit from Nova Scotia in Canada of the Mi'Kmaq Warrior Chief Sulian Stone Eagle Herney in 1994. He was invited by McIntosh and the people of Harris to come and give testimony at the British Government's public inquiry into the superquarry. The connections are multiple and quite curious. Stone Eagle had been fighting the Kelly Rock Co. in Canada who had, since 1989, been attempting to site a large quarry in the side of a mountain in the Gulf of St Lawrence deemed sacred to the Mi'Kmaq people. The mountain is situated in an area very near the coastal edge of that geological fault (the Cabot Fault/the Great Glen Fault) shared by Canada and Scotland. As White mentions in his lecture at Inverness, geologically, these two territories were once part of that same landmass with the Iapetus ocean dividing them from the rest of the British archipelago. Such similarities and geological connections encouraged the islanders in the campaign to see themselves as an indigenous people fighting for their land which, though much more tentatively, they come to realise might be sacred to them as well. If we are to read such a development in place consciousness as 'geopoiesis' (with an echo of 'autopoiesis' haunting the word) then it need not be entirely an insular or local development. In fact, geopoiesis may be understood in terms of the more extrinsic and relational constellations of meaning that geographer Doreen Massey has suggested place is always involved with (Massey 1994; 2005). What is interesting here is that these connections within and between places emerge by thinking down into the earth beneath us.

Following the public inquiry, at which Stone Eagle gave evidence alongside a Calvinist minister, one of the old men of Harris passed a gift to McIntosh to give to the chief to take back to Nova Scotia. The previous evening this islander had climbed to the top of Mount Roineabhal and chiselled off a six inch pyramid, the summit stone, and wrapped it in cloth as a way of saying thank you. He offered it fully aware of the significance of the act of damaging the mountain with the words: ‘it’s better than having a superquarry’ (McIntosh 2001: 239). Stone Eagle initially refused to accept this gift, aghast that the islanders could have ‘decapitated’ the mountain (239). After some discussion, though, he eventually agrees to take the fragment of Roineabhal ‘into sanctuary’ on behalf of his people (McIntosh 2001: 241).

If this old man was a character in a novel or a sculptor engaged in a work of conceptual art, how might we read the giving of this gift? The stone is transported a thousand miles away and placed among stones that might well be more like it than the stones of the rest of southern Britain. This act of giving and relocation aligns the two peoples’ fights for land with the movements of deep geological time, reaching out beyond the scale of the Anthropocene, discovering something in their relationship that is, again, ‘anterior and interior’ (Yusoff 2014: 7). It does so in such a way that, by contrast, the quarrying company comes to seem like the ‘iconoclasts and quacks’ that MacDiarmid describes as ‘injuring’ stone, those who would reduce a place to a cog in a productive machine (MacDiarmid 1993: 32). A clearing is opened between the world of corporate interests and the earth itself, the struggle for Roineabhal that McIntosh describes failing to conform to either absolutely. ‘Decapitating’ the mountain suggests a certain alienation from it; in fact, it almost prevents the greater crime by recreating it in miniature. It takes possession of the mountain, but it does so in order to let the mountain be a mountain and in this there is the ‘intrinsically belligerent’ but fundamentally creative opening of a clearing which, in this case, is the renewal of the meaning of a place. For Heidegger, this is a form of *poesis*, ‘a becoming and a happening of truth’ (Heidegger 2002: 44-6). For McIntosh, such place-making is a form of social creativity, one that reflects and tentatively reconstitutes a place and a place-consciousness among the people living there. It does so through an attempt to reconcile the people to a deeper and more dynamic understanding of the mountain, the stone itself. There is an attempt to accommodate its instability, its deep time and its vast scale, and to recognise its already dynamic presence in their midst. Such an attempt yields the possibility of what Kenneth White would call ‘cultural renewal’.

## Conclusion

One of the advantages of thinking about place from the perspective of literary geography is, as Angharad Saunders has suggested, its ability to be self-reflexive, to explore ‘plural ways of knowing’ and to be open to the ‘ambiguities of “truth”’ (Saunders 2010: 441-2). Exploring these things at work in a poetics of place writing, such as that offered in Tim Robinson’s Aran writings, prompts and encourages a more self-reflexive consideration of place itself,

one that might acknowledge alternative perspectives and agencies. Extraordinary circumstances such as those that faced the people of Harris in their battle with Redland Aggregates can force, or can inspire, such alternatives through a form of social and cultural transformation.

The truth of place becomes a matter of articulation, generation, *poesis*; a clearing in the Heideggerian sense. It is a renewal, part discovery, part creation, an opening up, but one that, in the process of opening up, can reveal itself to be deeply involved with the earth, with the earth *as earth*, the mountain behind the mountain. The truth of place, in this sense, is plural in that there are infinite ways to open things up, infinite ways for world and earth to inflect one another. This is what Tim Robinson calls that ‘unsummable totality of perspectives’ (Robinson 2008: 8).

Stone has perhaps been turned to in this context because our understanding of it has undergone a similar shift towards dynamic instability since James Hutton. Stone represents the solid foundation beneath our feet, security and durability like nothing else on the Earth; and yet, at the same time, a deeper knowledge of it has revealed a planet on the move: magma becomes granite, calcite becomes limestone; islands erode, continents drift. The very earth beneath our feet becomes that ‘creative intensity’ that Alan Bold reads in Hugh MacDiarmid’s ‘On a Raised Beach’ (Bold 1983: 183). Our own self-reflexive meditations on place and the new forms they articulate might never truly *reconcile* with creation, but in struggling to do so they nonetheless can seek to *emulate* it. It is in this sense that something beyond either alienation or oneness appears in our relationship to the earth, something closer to the process of lithogenesis itself.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> References to the poem are given by line number to the 1934 edition as published in (MacDiarmid 1993: 423-33).

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