The Lie of the Land

By The Unreliable Narrator

> *It requires great love of it deeply to read*
> *The configuration of a land*
> *— from 'Scotland', by Hugh MacDiarmid*

Scotland is the land of the Scots. To what extent are the Scots the people of the land which bears them? It is a multitudinous terrain, from the lowing depths of the Devil's Beef-tub in Annandale to the billion-year ruins of Stac Pollaidh's Torridon ramparts. It's clothed in thick dark loams and sharp red peats and thin sweet machair. Even Scotland's cities stand each quite unlike the other: Edinburgh teeters, stilted, from crag to cleft; Glasgow's dear green places nestle among soft estuarine hills; Aberdeen's silver granite glisters pristine through the haar. And all of it is wrapped up within ten thousand miles of coastline, girt in black basalt or salted mire or white sugar sands.

Loch Torridon [Wikimedia Commons]

Tiree floats in endless hours of summer sunshine; the plunging depths of Braemar's winters grip the BBC's chittering classes. And while sun-stunned families guddle in the glens, scarce a Highland summer passes without a clutch of plimsoled trippers, foil-wrapped like their sandwiches, being sherpa'd off some adjacent hypothermical Cairngorm … it's as if it was some whole other country, up there, up here. There's a lot of environment to go around, inside these small borders.

Which is maybe one reason why Scottish writing is so diverse, so unpredictable and full of change. Landscape settles into language, hills and lochs and stones are

built up into stories. Moods shift like wind on water: clouds scud, sun gleams, snow falls, ice cracks. Environment informs us, infuses us: quite literally, from our bones on up, it is the making of us.

In this issue, we go for a stravaig into Scotland — Caledonia stern and wild, that fairyland of poesy, deer on high hills, shipyard, kailyard, fernie brae and all — in search of its natural heart. David Borthwick takes a dauner, and returns with **On Walks on Various Ways: Some Field Notes**; Linda Cracknell steps out as **The Indoor Outdoor Writer**; Magnus Linklater sends back despatches from **Little Sparta**, the living life's work of Scotland's avant gardener, Ian Hamilton Findlay; and Sara Maitland gets blown away by **The Beauty and the Terror** of raw nature. Gerry Loose comes bearing precious fruit in **Travels With a Tree**; Elizabeth Elliott looks to future growth in **Planting the Unsunned Hillside: A New Season for The Evergreen**; and Tom Bristow looks for human space in **Motion and Emotion: Urban Affect in John Burnside's *Gift Songs***. Maggie Scott sweeps up with ***besom* as the Scots Word of the Season**, and Alison Grant explores the shades of meaning in ***uaine, gorm* and *glas***. All this and J. L. Williams' **Unconveyable** poetry column and our regular **Book Reviews** too.

Here, in June, where the sun swings north and we hold out hope for summer —

> *And then a queer thought came to her there in the drooked fields, that nothing endured at all, nothing but the land she passed across, tossed and turned and perpetually changed below the hands of the crofter folk since the oldest of them had set the Standing Stones by the loch of Blawearie and climbed there on their holy days and saw their terraced crops ride brave in the wind and sun. Sea and sky and the folk who wrote and fought and were learnéd, teaching and saying and praying, they lasted but as a breath, a mist of fog in the hills, but the land was forever, it moved and changed below you, but was forever, you were close to it and it to you, not at a bleak remove it held you and hurted you. And she had thought to leave it all!*
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> *— from Sunset Song, by Lewis Grassic Gibbon*

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