Scottish Texts and Contexts in Karen Solie's 'The Caiplie Caves'

By Paul Robichaud

The Caiplie Caves, published in 2019, is the fifth original collection by the Canadian poet Karen Solie. A native of Moosejaw, Saskatchewan, Solie won the Griffin Poetry Prize for her 2009 collection, *Pigeon*, and is also the recipient of numerous other Canadian literary awards. In a *London Review of Books* essay on *The Living Option: Selected Poems* (2015), the poet and critic Michael Hofman – with characteristic hyperbole – praised Solie as 'indeed the one by whom the language lives', quoting Joseph Brodsky on Les Murray.[1] For Hofman, both Solie and Murray are poets of a deterritorialised English, writing of 'edgeland atmospheres and experiences and conditions you don't find anywhere else, settled, unsettled, resettled, unsettling.'[2] Solie's poems recognise Canada as 'a frontier, an enterprise zone that frays to the north and very rapidly gets very thin on top.'[3] In one sense, the Scottish setting of *The Caiplie Caves* takes Solie out of the fraying zone of northern enterprise that she documents so powerfully in her earlier collections; yet her most recent poems are also preoccupied with 'edgeland atmospheres and experiences', and Scotland is also the north.

Reviews of *The Caiplie Caves* have generally been positive. Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Camille Ralphs describes the individual lyric poems in the collection as 'uniformly excellent.'[4] In a brief notice for *Canadian Literature*, Katherine McLeod recognises Solie's deft exploration of the theme of irresolution: 'While carefully deconstructing and deliberating indecision, Solie writes the earth as abundantly clear in its roaring call for action.'[5] For Ange Mlinko, in *The New York Review of Books*, Solie's collection raises the question of 'whether lyrical poetry, too, as a contemplative practice, is worthy of an honourable person living wisely and well in this plasticine Anthropocene.'[6] She praises the sensuous detail of the collection, noting that 'Solie's powers of description have never been so acute, her senses so greedy.'[7] Less enthusiastically, in a review for *The New York*

Times, David Orr questions the care with which Solie writes her verse, observing 'that while Solie's speed can be a virtue, it can also lead to lines that look hurried and unhelpfully baroque.'[8] As this paper will show, however, the 'baroque' or difficult aspect of Solie's poems itself mirrors a central thematic concern of the collection as a whole – the difficulty of achieving certainty.

The Caiplie Caves of the title are located in the East Neuk of Fife on the Coastal Path that runs between Anstruther and Crail. Though Solie suggests the name means 'Cave of Horses', it is likely derived from the Gaelic *capa,* meaning a head or point of land. According to Peter Yeoman, the Coves, as they are locally known, 'are historically associated with St Adrian by Wyntoun in his *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland*, written around 1420. This group of sea caves feature man-made modifications to walls and entrances, and there are antiquarian records of the discovery of Pictish symbols within the caves, which are now almost obliterated.'[9] In addition to Pictish symbols, the cave walls are marked with 'roughly incised crosses, which are characteristic of later medieval pilgrimage activity.'[10] Solie notes in her Preface that the Caves are not just part of the past, 'but are very much lived in […] People still build fires in the caves at Caiplie, drink, and camp there.'[11] The Caves are also significant as a place associated with an early medieval missionary named Ethernan, whose imagined voice brings unity to the collection as a whole.

Solie's account of the saint in her Preface emphasises how little is known of the historical Ethernan, noting that Scottish tradition confuses him with another religious figure associated with the region: 'Sometimes conflated with Adrian of May, murdered with his fellow monks during a Viking raid on May Island in 875, Ethernan is also supposed to have been the 'Itarnan' who 'died amongst the Picts' in 669, as entered in the Annals of Ulster.'[12] Solie's main source for Ethernan is a 1998 article by the archaeologist Peter Yeoman, who quotes the brief entry in the Annals in its entirety: '*Ithernan [and Corindu] died among the Picts.*'[13] Beyond this, little is certain. That Iona showed interest in him suggests that Ethernan may have trained there before engaging in missionary work among the Picts.[14] Apart from this one entry, '[t]he only other contemporary records, probably from the seventh or eighth centuries, are four symbol and other stone crosses with inscriptions that translate as *Ethernanus*.'[15] The name itself is Irish or Pictish,

‘derived from a Latin loan-word meaning “eternal” or “the eternal one,” reflecting a core belief of the Christian faith.’[16] Ethernan’s legacy also survives in the form of several place-names, notably that of Kilrenny, likely meaning ‘church/chapel of Ethernan’, a coastal village in Fife north of the Isle of May, a central location in Solie’s collection.[17]

Though frustrating for historians and archaeologists, the absence of information on Ethernan creates an open space for Solie’s poetic imagination. She notes in her Preface that even Ethernan’s surmised journey from Iona to Fife, either through the Great Glen or via Lindisfarne, cannot be proven. More fruitful for her poetic project is the suggestion in later sources that Ethernan retired to the Caiplie Caves sometime ‘in the mid-seventh century to decide whether to commit to a hermit’s solitude or establish a priory on May Island.’[18] Solie also notes ‘Ethernan’s poverty of supernatural accomplishments’ – the absence of any miracles or supernatural feats attributed to him. Instead, Ethernan ‘is said to have survived for a very long time on bread and water.’[19] He is thus a more credible and recognisably human figure, struggling in a material environment to make sense of his place in the world through the modes of understanding available to him. Camille Ralphs questions ‘the sequence’s plot, in which nothing much seems to happen, but, given the relatively quotidian nature of Ethernan’s experience, the ennui must be intentional.’[20] I would argue that not only is that ennui ‘intentional’, it is inseparable from Ethernan’s own failed spiritual quest.

Solie gives voice to Ethernan in an introductory poem and three series of poems placed in each of the sections of the collection as a whole. Each series is introduced with a poem identified by spatial co-ordinates, locating Ethernan in a specific location. Formally, each of the Ethernan poems is right-justified and double-spaced so that each free-verse line is surrounded by the white space that dominates the page. The distinctive layout separates them from the other lyrics in the collection, while the isolated lines suggest Ethernan’s own attempt at isolation in a forbidding landscape. (Ralphs suggests that the shape of the poems evokes ‘immediate airy retreats.’)[21] In the first poem written in his voice, Solie presents Ethernan as a doubtful figure who describes his retreat as an ‘apprenticeship to cowardice’, wondering if his ‘fulfilment will be the fulfilment of an error.’[22] He contrasts his own life with that of his spiritual forebears, noting

the absence of miracles: 'no leeks sprang where I walked / no stags bore beams for my house.'[23] Left to his own inner resources, the outcome of Ethernan's retreat is far from certain.

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Fauna of the Firth of Forth, Part 2, 1881.'

The first part of the poem arranges language from this nineteenth-century text by George Leslie and William A. Herdman into two columns, endowing it with the ghost of a narrative:[49]

We've dredged it frequently on the oyster bank in 14 fathoms off Longniddry	and took it last summer
The *Salicornaria farciminoides* *Flustra foliacea*	of Johnston, and others in 4 fathoms, at Aberdour
F. carbasea	last summer, off Fidra
M. pilosa	cast ashore after storms

Solie's poem delights in the Latin names even as its white space comes to register a gap between the cool beauty of scientific taxonomy and the embodied presence of the speakers in specific places with distinct environmental conditions. In the second part of the poem, arranged as unrhymed couplets, the researches of Leslie and Herdman become even more clinical ('We have dredged it. We have taken this species') even as Solie finds phrases of rhythmic beauty and delicate description ('well preserved, but not living; they lie in a bed of blue clay').[50] The nineteenth-century search for invertebrate fauna and the twenty-first-century making of the poem act as metaphors for each other, both grounded in the same geographical space. In the third and final section, a blank-verse sonnet, local place-names take their place alongside scientific terminology: Elie, Seafield, Crail, Fifeness, Prestonpans, Portseaton, Fidra, May and several others. Taken together, Solie's poem suggests the importance of naming, but also the potential violence inherent in the way we impose ourselves on the material environment through language. The poem ends with a vision of scientific enquiry as quest liable to failure: 'But *Ophiocomina negra*, a specimen / from Mr Damon marked "Black Rocks, Leith," I have sought / at the lowest spring tides, without success.'[51] Taken in the context of the collection as a whole, this failed secular quest mirrors that of Ethernan.

I would like to conclude by briefly considering one final poem from the collection that brings both Canada and Scotland into view, focusing on the impact heavy industry has on people and landscape. 'You Can't Go Back' returns to the kind of landscape described by Michael Hofman as 'edgeland':

> *On Medicine Hat's industrial verge, Dominion Glass released at intervals balloons of black smoke with fire inside, like ideas*
>
> *off the top of its head, that like ideas, were more impressive*
>
> *after dark. Never did it not answer the question posed by its existence.*[52]

The simile imagines the releasing of pollutants into the atmosphere as analogous to human thought. Unlike the doubtful figure of Ethernan, this factory has clarity of purpose, which it relentlessly fulfils. Solie contrasts this purposefulness with 'second thought's intuitive logic, / which has undoubtedly saved the ass of more than one glass factory.'[53] Her example of this 'intuitive logic' at work is a man named Archie Young, who saved the United Glass of Edinburgh factory when he 'crawled through its bowel with a rope around his waist.'[54] This example of individual heroism is a counterpoint to both the ceaseless activity of the factory in Medicine Hat which, Solie recalls 'operated around the clock', and the impersonality of corporate decision making: 'Rough men cried in '67 when United Glass received its closure notice // despite the apparent health of its enterprise, no-one could understand it.'[55] The poem concludes by returning to the theme of error explored in the Ethernan poems: 'Rumours of a clerical mistake that spared a factory in England // at United's expense trickled down from management, but error had long since crystallised in the system, and it was too late.'[56] The 'system' of capitalist industry replicates the relentlessness of the factories it controls, unable to check its own 'crystallised' errors, polluting the environment and exploiting workers in both Scotland and Canada.

As this preliminary exploration of *The Caiplie Caves* suggests, Solie brings thematic unity to her collection by repeatedly exploring the nature of failure and error in individual lyric poems as well as the Ethernan sequences. Her attraction to the coast of Fife is consistent with the 'edgeland' focus of Solie's earlier work, and she brings a fresh Canadian eye to the particularities of Scottish landscape and history.*The Caiplie Caves*, published in 2019, is the fifth original collection by

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F. carbasea	last summer, off Fidra
M. pilosa	cast ashore after storms

Solie's poem delights in the Latin names even as its white space comes to register a gap between the cool beauty of scientific taxonomy and the embodied presence of the speakers in specific places with distinct environmental conditions. In the second part of the poem, arranged as unrhymed couplets, the researches of Leslie and Herdman become even more clinical ('We have dredged it. We have taken this species') even as Solie finds phrases of rhythmic beauty and delicate description ('well preserved, but not living; they lie in a bed of blue clay').[106] The nineteenth-century search for invertebrate fauna and the twenty-first-century making of the poem act as metaphors for each other, both grounded in the same geographical space. In the third and final section, a blank-verse sonnet, local place-names take their place alongside scientific terminology: Elie, Seafield, Crail, Fifeness, Prestonpans, Portseaton, Fidra, May and several others. Taken together, Solie's poem suggests the importance of naming, but also the potential violence inherent in the way we impose ourselves on the material environment through language. The poem ends with a vision of scientific enquiry as quest liable to failure: 'But *Ophiocomina negra*, a specimen / from Mr Damon marked "Black Rocks, Leith," I have sought / at the lowest spring tides, without success.'[107] Taken in the context of the collection as a whole, this failed secular quest mirrors that of Ethernan.

I would like to conclude by briefly considering one final poem from the collection that brings both Canada and Scotland into view, focusing on the impact heavy industry has on people and landscape. 'You Can't Go Back' returns to the kind of landscape described by Michael Hofman as 'edgeland':

On Medicine Hat's industrial verge, Dominion Glass released at intervals
balloons of black smoke with fire inside, like ideas

off the top of its head, that like ideas, were more impressive

after dark. Never did it not answer the question posed by its existence.[108]

The simile imagines the releasing of pollutants into the atmosphere as analogous to human thought. Unlike the doubtful figure of Ethernan, this factory has clarity of purpose, which it relentlessly fulfils. Solie contrasts this purposefulness with 'second thought's intuitive logic, / which has undoubtedly saved the ass of more than one glass factory.'[109] Her example of this 'intuitive logic' at work is a man named Archie Young, who saved the United Glass of Edinburgh factory when he 'crawled through its bowel with a rope around his waist.'[110] This example of individual heroism is a counterpoint to both the ceaseless activity of the factory in Medicine Hat which, Solie recalls 'operated around the clock', and the impersonality of corporate decision making: 'Rough men cried in '67 when United Glass received its closure notice // despite the apparent health of its enterprise, no-one could understand it.'[111] The poem concludes by returning to the theme of error explored in the Ethernan poems: 'Rumours of a clerical mistake that spared a factory in England // at United's expense trickled down from management, but error had long since crystallised in the system, and it was too late.'[112] The 'system' of capitalist industry replicates the relentlessness of the factories it controls, unable to check its own 'crystallised' errors, polluting the environment and exploiting workers in both Scotland and Canada.

As this preliminary exploration of *The Caiplie Caves* suggests, Solie brings thematic unity to her collection by repeatedly exploring the nature of failure and error in individual lyric poems as well as the Ethernan sequences. Her attraction to the coast of Fife is consistent with the 'edgeland' focus of Solie's earlier work, and she brings a fresh Canadian eye to the particularities of Scottish landscape and history.

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