The Islands Are Not Lost, The Compass Is

By Kevin MacNeil/ Caoimhin MacNèill

Recently, in my home island of Lewis I spent some life-enhancing time with two writers who were doing novel-related research in the Hebrides, one a Booker Prize winner at the dizzying apex of his career, the other, an American writer earnestly researching her first novel, demonstrating her commitment by starting to learn Gaelic. I am impatient already, hungrily looking forward to both books. During a conversation about how life is changing on these islands, Douglas Stuart, whose debut *Shuggie Bain*[1] won the Booker and hearts and minds globally, recommended I read *The Colony*[2] by Irish novelist Audrey Magee. I can see why. As the *Financial Times* describes it, this terrific book tells 'a story about language and identity, about art, oppression, freedom and colonialism … a novel about big, important things.'[3] These timely themes are every bit as pertinent to the Scottish islands as to the Irish.

I contend that a small island is a dramatic crucible, that cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation are nuanced areas, that awareness, intention, and identity form a complicated nexus. In *The Colony*, an English artist, Mr Lloyd, visits an unnamed Irish island to paint, promising to accede to the islanders' wishes not to paint them, a promise he swiftly and repeatedly breaks. Meanwhile JP Masson, a French linguist (with an Algerian mother) arrives to continue his studies into Irish, a language he wishes everyone to speak, a language in which the Englishman has no interest. The flowing, stylistically exquisite past-tense chapters that offer the primary narrative are interspersed with sparse, present tense reports on sectarian killings ('documentary interludes', the *New York Times* called them) which are all the more potent for being so resonantly understated. *The Colony* is at once the most relevant and the most admirable novel I have read all year:

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It was an enriching visit home, giving me the chance to privately as well as publicly honour and explore the achievements of Douglas Stuart, and to enthuse over and discuss the future novel of Jane Ainslie, the American writer. Past, present, future, emic, etic,[5] fictional, actual – all these elements came thrillingly alive in harmonious dialogue, as dedicated authors shared vital truths.

I really believe in fiction. On Monday, 15 May 2017, I found myself sitting on a seat thirty-five thousand feet up in the air, barrelling through the sky on a flight to Buenos Aires, overworked and grateful for the opportunity to travel to a new country. I had never been there, yet Argentina was not really new to me, for a specific form of mind-to-mind transmission, reading, had established an Argentina within me already. In particular, the works of Jorge Luis Borges had created in my mind a complex and captivating land, one that simultaneously owed much to global literature, Borges being surely one of the most well-read writers of his or any other day. He had a great love of Scottish literature and proclaimed frequently that he considered Robert Louis Stevenson a personal friend, no matter that Stevenson died before Borges was born. One of the sincere marvels of literature, then, is that it proves friendship, travel, and time alike exist in ways that outshine their mundane definitions; literature bestows upon the engaged reader further dimensions.

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The literature that lasts offers us insight – this is partly why it endures – and insight is not necessarily the same as solace. Think, for example, of Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* or of English poet Jamie McKendrick's excellent and prescient poem punningly titled 'Et in Orcadia Ego',[9] which begins: 'Having heard the Orkneys were like Eden / we sold up everything and bought a farm.' I cannot be sure if McKendrick is erring intentionally when referring to 'the Orkneys', something no Orcadian would do, just as no Shetlander calls Shetland 'the Shetlands', but I assume so. The poem describes a couple moving north to set up a new, self-sustaining life. Tellingly, the poem makes no allusion to local culture or people, the housing crisis, language erosion, nor to the thing that best defines, sustains, and exemplifies Scottish island life: community. An island is not a static piece of land surrounded by water: rather, because time exists, an island

is a boat. A small island is a lifeboat. That the people onboard are in some degree of harmony is as good as essential. In the post-pandemic, post-Brexit, currently cost-of-living-impaired islands of Scotland, television celebrities are 'discovering' us, AirBnB greed is making people homeless and pricing locals out of the island where they grew up and would prefer to stay. These social problems have visited upon many people from all backgrounds unprecedented levels and types of stress. Meanwhile, the intrepid protagonist of McKendrick's poem sets up a goat-breeding project, which fails. The poem ends memorably:

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My contentions are: that civilised society requires a balance of emic perspectives and etic ones; that the Scottish islands deserve a much better equilibrium in this regard; that active effort is required to negotiate this re-balancing (and so, because creative writing is my vocation, I include literature in this endeavour). It need hardly be mentioned that there is nothing remote about any Scottish island to those who abide there. ‘Getting away from it all’ implies that the islands are not part of everything else, a form of othering (impossible, incidentally, in an interdependent world), while ‘getting away from people’ suggests that islanders are not people. Indeed, some people, authors included, have treated islanders as a very inferior type of person. We islanders, however, *are* people – ‘real people in a real place’, as Iain Crichton Smith put it.[10] He wrote eloquently about one of the most painful and deep-rooted and inordinately difficult challenges of being a writer from the islands: we simply do not set out on an equal footing. What Smith maintained was true for me (working-class islander, born to islander parents and grandparents, etc) and for many other writers like me (marginalised, disempowered). We who grew up belittled, misrepresented, erased, have little experience of agency; our understanding of power is generally imbued with a sense of ‘power is what other people have’ and ‘we have no voice’ in a country that, for example, routinely expresses anti-Gaelic sentiment when Gaelic’s existence is acknowledged at all. We can resolve to work hard to make progress, to assert ourselves as people who have a right to exist and to be in appreciable alignment with our own heritage, our own languages.

During my visit home, I went to Museum is Tasglann nan Eilean, the local museum in Stornoway, which is generally excellent – lucid, informative, compellingly designed. The permanent exhibition does quote some poets – I noticed only male ones are represented however, and this recalled an experience I had once when I was doing a reading tour of Ireland. A renowned poet showed me around his local museum. The exhibition had a decent focus on the arts, principally music but also literature. 'Did you notice anything about that museum?' the writer asked me afterwards. 'Yes,' I said. 'It doesn't mention you. Doesn't so much as acknowledge your existence.' He smiled ruefully and nodded, without needing to explain why he, a gay man, the most famous living poet in the area, was not represented in his local museum while other living artists were.

Was the museum representing an area or representing a distorted and dishonest (more fictional than fiction) version of an area? Although that poet's work was not 'allowed' into the museum's narrative, his writing is nonetheless received with acclaim in the wider world, and the area where he is based exists proudly in his poetry; indeed, his landscape thus becomes a living element in the mind of his readers around the world. The relationship between poet and 'official' local perception in that sort of situation might not exactly seem a reciprocal arrangement, but it is one that cultural curators can surely work to change, because really this is about balance, fairness, and the just recognition of voices that are often quieter not because of lesser talent but because of – to give just a few examples – being part of a minority (or a minority within a minority), possessing a greater innate humility, living out the sore consequences of being ground down by the iniquities of 'othering', and so on.

One wall of the museum in Stornoway is devoted not to a rich piece of Gaelic poetry or an excerpt from one of the island's prominent writers (Anna Frater or Murchadh MacPhàrlain, say) but rather to an inelegant and banal quotation about the weather from Peter May, which reads in its entirety, ellipsis and all: '…where the weather has so dominated daily life. Not because of any extremes of temperature… but because of its changeability.'[11]

It is strangely impossible to discuss the islands' cultural inheritance without mentioning something that is naturally and thankfully alien to them: murder. Malachy Tallack is just one writer from Shetland who takes umbrage. Writing about the tv series *Shetland,* based on the Ann Cleeves books, he says:

> *The show's producers, it seems, have found that sweet spot between scenery and slaughter…For despite seeming to be embedded in the place, the success of Shetland relies … on a feeling of mystery and menace that only make sense from afar.*[12]

Murder is dodo-rare in the Scottish islands, for manifold reasons (from inherently/culturally well-calibrated moral compasses to the logistical difficulties of getting away with murder in a place where, when you step outside the door, your neighbours usually know where you are going before you do). Every place begets its writers and in a principled world the writers who are from that place are allowed for their voices to be heard *alongside* those who are not from there but have elected to write about it. Indigenous writers are frequently and inexplicably sidelined, as if to render them irrelevant. A memorial bust of Iain Crichton Smith does exist – in Edinburgh.[13] There should also be a memorial to him in Lewis. James Joyce has benefitted Dublin enormously, both in human terms and in relation to the only area some people appreciate: money. In Edinburgh, Waverley Station, as befits its name, is pleasingly suffused with quotations from Walter Scott. Even Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* has spawned everything from guided walks[14] to a forthcoming musical.[15]

I do not shy from the tourist's gaze. Most people are, at some points in their lives, tourists, as I was in Argentina, and after all, '[t]ourism is one of the world's largest industries and the UK's literary heritage draws many visitors here. It is important, both economically and reputationally, for their experience to be a positive and authentic one.'[16] How authenticity is manifested, presented, interpreted, or even adequately defined constitutes a book in itself. But for my part I believe that: literature is important and meaningful; books set in marginalised areas by writers from marginalised areas and by writers not from marginalised areas are equally valid; it seems to be a symptom of marginalisation that the latter are privileged; we can all do something to rectify this.

Meaning and intention are of the essence, even and especially in fiction. When banal nothingnesses and harmful otherings are given public precedence over intelligent and meaningful literary contribution, all of us lose out, because we are sacrificing deep truth in favour of making the trite ostensibly important and the trivial lastingly, and detrimentally, influential, plus we are, unconsciously or

otherwise, being taught moreover that this devaluing is okay, acceptable, correct, even while it is specious. Perhaps it seems strange that authenticity can derive from fictions, but as I have sought to illustrate above, this is indeed the case. After all, who we are, both individually and collectively, is inextricably predicated on narrative, and who we are, as novels are uniquely qualified to demonstrate, is fallible, human, vulnerable – and worth protecting.Recently, in my home island of Lewis I spent some life-enhancing time with two writers who were doing novel-related research in the Hebrides, one a Booker Prize winner at the dizzying apex of his career, the other, an American writer earnestly researching her first novel, demonstrating her commitment by starting to learn Gaelic. I am impatient already, hungrily looking forward to both books. During a conversation about how life is changing on these islands, Douglas Stuart, whose debut *Shuggie Bain*[17] won the Booker and hearts and minds globally, recommended I read *The Colony*[18] by Irish novelist Audrey Magee. I can see why. As the *Financial Times* describes it, this terrific book tells 'a story about language and identity, about art, oppression, freedom and colonialism … a novel about big, important things.'[19] These timely themes are every bit as pertinent to the Scottish islands as to the Irish.

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During my visit home, I went to Museum is Tasglann nan Eilean, the local

museum in Stornoway, which is generally excellent – lucid, informative, compellingly designed. The permanent exhibition does quote some poets – I noticed only male ones are represented however, and this recalled an experience I had once when I was doing a reading tour of Ireland. A renowned poet showed me around his local museum. The exhibition had a decent focus on the arts, principally music but also literature. 'Did you notice anything about that museum?' the writer asked me afterwards. 'Yes,' I said. 'It doesn't mention you. Doesn't so much as acknowledge your existence.' He smiled ruefully and nodded, without needing to explain why he, a gay man, the most famous living poet in the area, was not represented in his local museum while other living artists were.

Was the museum representing an area or representing a distorted and dishonest (more fictional than fiction) version of an area? Although that poet's work was not 'allowed' into the museum's narrative, his writing is nonetheless received with acclaim in the wider world, and the area where he is based exists proudly in his poetry; indeed, his landscape thus becomes a living element in the mind of his readers around the world. The relationship between poet and 'official' local perception in that sort of situation might not exactly seem a reciprocal arrangement, but it is one that cultural curators can surely work to change, because really this is about balance, fairness, and the just recognition of voices that are often quieter not because of lesser talent but because of – to give just a few examples – being part of a minority (or a minority within a minority), possessing a greater innate humility, living out the sore consequences of being ground down by the iniquities of 'othering', and so on.

One wall of the museum in Stornoway is devoted not to a rich piece of Gaelic poetry or an excerpt from one of the island's prominent writers (Anna Frater or Murchadh MacPhàrlain, say) but rather to an inelegant and banal quotation about the weather from Peter May, which reads in its entirety, ellipsis and all: '…where the weather has so dominated daily life. Not because of any extremes of temperature… but because of its changeability.'[27]

It is strangely impossible to discuss the islands' cultural inheritance without mentioning something that is naturally and thankfully alien to them: murder. Malachy Tallack is just one writer from Shetland who takes umbrage. Writing about the tv series *Shetland,* based on the Ann Cleeves books, he says:

> *The show's producers, it seems, have found that sweet spot between scenery*

> *and slaughter…For despite seeming to be embedded in the place, the success of Shetland relies … on a feeling of mystery and menace that only make sense from afar.*[28]

Murder is dodo-rare in the Scottish islands, for manifold reasons (from inherently/culturally well-calibrated moral compasses to the logistical difficulties of getting away with murder in a place where, when you step outside the door, your neighbours usually know where you are going before you do). Every place begets its writers and in a principled world the writers who are from that place are allowed for their voices to be heard *alongside* those who are not from there but have elected to write about it. Indigenous writers are frequently and inexplicably sidelined, as if to render them irrelevant. A memorial bust of Iain Crichton Smith does exist – in Edinburgh.[29] There should also be a memorial to him in Lewis. James Joyce has benefitted Dublin enormously, both in human terms and in relation to the only area some people appreciate: money. In Edinburgh, Waverley Station, as befits its name, is pleasingly suffused with quotations from Walter Scott. Even Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* has spawned everything from guided walks[30] to a forthcoming musical.[31]

I do not shy from the tourist's gaze. Most people are, at some points in their lives, tourists, as I was in Argentina, and after all, '[t]ourism is one of the world's largest industries and the UK's literary heritage draws many visitors here. It is important, both economically and reputationally, for their experience to be a positive and authentic one.'[32] How authenticity is manifested, presented, interpreted, or even adequately defined constitutes a book in itself. But for my part I believe that: literature is important and meaningful; books set in marginalised areas by writers from marginalised areas and by writers not from marginalised areas are equally valid; it seems to be a symptom of marginalisation that the latter are privileged; we can all do something to rectify this.

Meaning and intention are of the essence, even and especially in fiction. When banal nothingnesses and harmful otherings are given public precedence over intelligent and meaningful literary contribution, all of us lose out, because we are sacrificing deep truth in favour of making the trite ostensibly important and the trivial lastingly, and detrimentally, influential, plus we are, unconsciously or otherwise, being taught moreover that this devaluing is okay, acceptable, correct,

even while it is specious. Perhaps it seems strange that authenticity can derive from fictions, but as I have sought to illustrate above, this is indeed the case. After all, who we are, both individually and collectively, is inextricably predicated on narrative, and who we are, as novels are uniquely qualified to demonstrate, is fallible, human, vulnerable – and worth protecting.

(c) The Bottle Imp