

## **A Book of Silence**

**Sara Maitland**

**Granta, 298pp + x**

**Reviewed by Alastair McIntosh for *Third Way* magazine**

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Maitland starts this autobiographical study by telling how she was born in 1950, growing up partly in London and partly at her father's "enormous" mansion in SW Scotland. The family was of a social class where "we were inevitably sent off to boarding schools... a damaging, brutal experience." Silence was a punishment, "made worse by the fact that in my parents' world not to enjoy your schooldays was proof that you were an inferior human being – you were supposed to be a 'good mixer' ... and enjoy the team spirit."

She became "an Anglo-Catholic socialist feminist" partly through the experience of sharing a student flat in Oxford with American radicals including Bill Clinton. Marriage, children and a literary career were followed by relationship breakdown and the Thatcher years. Eventually, "As a writer I ran out of steam." Life itself reached a point where she feared mental breakdown.

All this is gripping stuff as she leads us on a spiritual journey with the pursuit of silence as its means and end. Interwoven with personal anecdotes are snippets of Merton, St Teresa and the Desert Fathers. She has set out to "hunt silence", she tells us, because "I am convinced that as a whole society we are losing something precious in our increasingly silence-avoiding culture and that somehow, whatever this silence might be, it needed holding, nourishing and unpacking."

After buying a house high on the Weardale moors Maitland embarks upon the reclusive life. But Weardale's silence was not sufficiently "dynamic", so she takes herself off to the Isle of Skye and rents a remote cottage from which to experience forty days of utter solitude. Skye, she tells us, with its part-Anglicised part-Gaelic culture "provided a strong sense of strangeness."

Here Maitland sheds fascinating light on the phenomena of prolonged silence – how the senses sharpen, sense of time diminishes, rich emotions well up and there's a psychological sense that "the silence itself unskinned me" – all the way to "seriously bizarre sexual fantasies and vengeful rages of kinds that I had never 'dared' admit."

She expertly anchors her own frankly recounted experiences in a comparative narratorial analysis drawn from the writings of ancient mystics, lone sailors and arctic explorers. At times she finds it hard to distinguish reality from hallucination as she undergoes her own variations of mountain madness, cabin fever, desert lassitude and raptures of the deep.

Silence, she tells us, "is the place, the focus, of the radical encounter with [the] divine... The desire to break the silence with constant human noise is, I believe, precisely an avoidance of the sacred terror of that divine encounter." This is exciting stuff, but somehow it seems to get stuck at the level of tackling her fears and we don't glimpse a lot of the divine.

Skye had mostly allowed her to evade "the promised 'dark side' of silence ... the Great Chthonic Terror." The next challenge, albeit comfortably quartered, is to confront herself with three days of going out into the wilds of Glen Affric ... replete with "treacherous moss hags, the strangely distorted trees, the somehow sinister

stillness of the loch itself and the lichens, which might at any moment reach out their cold crinkled fingers and touch me damply..."

She gets through the endurance test, but I had a growing sense of something missing. Maitland had embarked on her quest partly to escape from the dysfunctional human relationships endemic to her subculture and social class. Scotland serves to get her spooked in glens that, actually, are replete with historical presence and living presences, but with which she has not established any deep relationship. I couldn't help thinking how different it might have been if she'd joined one of the volunteer groups that plants trees in Glen Affric. Giving something back might have opened a welcoming Spirit of Place to her. Instead, it reads as if that lonely glen had become a screen onto which Maitland projected her own unresolved issues. She even expresses a "deep sense of relief that there were no wolves." To me it echoed what John Buchan wrote in *John Macnab*: "To her unquiet soul the calm seemed unnatural, like a thick cloak covering some feverish activity."

And who was this person, I wondered, who had the financial means to come in and be served by local communities whilst maintaining minimal mutuality of connection with them? At one point she complains that many people think her pursuit of silence selfish. I couldn't help feeling they maybe had a point. After all, money seems to be one of her lesser concerns. When she wants to explore desert silence, she buys herself a package holiday by camel. At one point she and her brother-in-law consider buying a Hebridean island for a retreat. Only the lack of home comforts and a sceptical sister thwart the dream. When she decides to downsize from her previous home of three bedrooms, two living rooms and a big kitchen, she builds a private hermitage out in the wilds. "I could go anywhere in the world," she tells us, but settles for Scotland partly for residual family connections but also "because property prices are lower." And even family seems to be an intrusion. Her children are virtually invisible. And in her mother's dying days Maitland grumbles: "She had little interest in or respect for silence and she seriously disrupted mine."

"You can do a surprising number of things without speaking," Maitland advises. "One of the seldom mentioned advantages of supermarkets is that you can shop without exchanging a word, smiling at the staff's mechanical greetings and fixing your eyes on your list in order to avoid eye contact with anyone."

No sooner is this said than she backs off, appending, as if in self-rebuke: "in the end there is something bogus about that, and rude." But the horse has bolted, and I was left pondering whether Maitland was writing more about a parasitic solitude than a kenotic silence. For sure, she discusses "the great hermit virtue of hospitality," but whether through modesty or otherwise, she proffers little evidence of it.

Jesus did his stuff both alone up the mountain and down in the city with the multitudes. Maitland's attempt to find God seems, by contrast, one-sided. For this reviewer at least, her silence felt busy in the head but languid in the heart. That is not an easy thing to say. But she's certainly had the courage to dig from where she stood. She's shared with us, warts and all. And the story of Sara Maitland's life is not over yet. Neither is it necessarily perceived in all its fullness by this reviewer.

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