

ALASTAIR MCINTOSH

## The Apocalypse of Three Great Floods

The Outer Hebrides are a storm-tossed archipelago some 30 to 40 miles off the north-west of Scotland. I grew up on one of its islands, known as Lewis in the north and Harris in the south, in the sixties and seventies. I regularly go back on holidays, business or to see old friends and family. However, in 2009 I returned for a very different reason. For several years I'd been feeling the island's call. It had been tugging like an umbilical cord that ran beneath the sea. I therefore put aside 12 days to make a pilgrimage from south to north, the direction of the prevailing wind. With 20 kilos of camping gear, food and waterproofing, I walked across the island's 800 square miles, halfway between London and the Arctic Circle. I traversed mountains, bogs and moors that are devoid of all but ancient signs of habitation. For four consecutive days I went without meeting any other person. Finally, on the home stretch through the villages of the north-west, I mingled with the familiar faces of my childhood.

The northern Hebrides are a highly Presbyterian part of the world. The islands were overtly colonised under a state commission of fire and sword at the turn of the 16th to 17th centuries, and the introduction of Protestant religion was a part of that process. Vestiges of the elder faith managed to survive mainly in the southern Roman Catholic islands, where the beautiful old prayers and blessings were collected by the ethnographer Alexander Carmichael in his six volume *Carmina Gadelica*, 'The Hymns of the Gael'.

In our northern parts, the old habits of pilgrimage were stamped out, consistent with the austere theology of the 16th century Reformation. Luther had said that such a 'vagabond life' lay at the root of 'countless causes of sin'. My ruse, my cover story by which to give account of my own pilgrimage, was to mask one sin with another. I took a fishing rod. When we were young, fishing without permission (or poaching) was the one permitted 'sin' because the big landowners were never considered quite legitimate. If asked, I could tell enquirers that I was on a 'poacher's



ALASTAIR MCINTOSH *Apocalypse of the Three Great Floods*  
*Bothan beehive dwelling*

pilgrimage', peregrinating from loch to loch. It would (and did) raise a smile, even if it failed to rise a fish.

In the Celtic world you think in threes, and I had three features of the landscape that I wanted to visit. First, the ancient *bothan* or beehive sheilings, from which we get the words 'bothy' and 'booth'. These were used into the early 20th century by maidens herding cattle when transhumance was still practiced. Next there were the holy or 'healing' wells. These were used into my own childhood. Even today there's old folks who'll go and take a furtive drink, as they'll say, 'for the health'. And finally, the 'temples' – the ruined chapels. All of these fell into disrepair after the Reformation, some of which tradition holds were built on Druid sites, and most of which are in spots of outstanding beauty. They are what would today be thought of as sacred natural sites.

While those features were the outer focus on the walk, inwardly I had another triune focus. I wanted to find space for reflection, as I came to sum it up to myself with only half a tongue in cheek, on 'God, war and the faeries'. No kidding. Let me explain. This was the island that gave birth to Donald Trump's mother. Its strict Protestant religion carries many layers of complexity and depth, but it was also used by landed power to colonise the soul. The same landowning family that evicted two lines of Trump's mother's forebears from their ancestral lands, and provided the Barbados slave colony with its colonial governor, also brought in a hard-line evangelical ministry to Lewis in the 1820s.

At the time of making the pilgrimage, I was just back from speaking to NATO officers and diplomats in Geneva. War was very much on my mind, for I regularly lecture on nonviolence at military institutions across Europe. Afghanistan and Iraq were still smouldering. The island's religion – at its best and as it mostly is today – is one of lovingkindness, grounded in a deep cultural mysticism and with a radical history of land reform. At worst, however, it has been a vestige of the hellfire faith of authoritarian religion, obsessed with personal salvation and driven by imperialists. I wanted to explore the binary worldview intrinsic to its Calvinist creed, one that divides the world into the Damned and the Elect, a creed that also laid down tramlines in the Puritanism of colonial America. I wanted to examine the insights that such psychohistory provides into the type of evangelicalism that has shaped American neoconservatism. While my focus at the time was on the Bush family, the analysis comes into even sharper focus now with Donald Trump, the island's most distinguished disconcerting son. As I see it, the religious psychohistory of Trump's wall

with Mexico finds its archetype in an inner wall projected outwards, that which results from a propensity for such authoritarian binaries as good state or bad state, with us or against us, nice or nasty.

At the risk of sounding ridiculous, what is the role of the faeries in this? Plenty of analysis of the state of the world wallows in what's wrong, but there is a lack of vision as to directions that might take us forward in our humanity. There is a failure of imagination, so imagination, and specifically the compassionate imagination, matters greatly. Faerie was the pre-Christian worldview on the islands, but one that never fully disappeared from the culture. Faerie is, as the ethnographers of the Gaelic-speaking world today maintain, an indigenous coding or metaphor of the imaginal realm of the Otherworld – the source of inner vision, poetry, music and story.

During the seven years that it took me to write *Poacher's Pilgrimage* following the walk, I chanced to share a platform with one of Gregory Bateson's daughters, Nora. Something that she said helped me to crystallise what I was working on. I'd asked about the mystical touch to her father's famous 1972 book, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. For example, the line that said, 'Mind is immanent in the larger system – man plus environment.' She thought that he was trying to say 'we don't know what we're inside of'. Her words helped me to realise what it was that I was writing. It wasn't an ecology of mind. That would be much too cognitive an exercise in the way that the word is usually used in the West. Rather, it was an ecology of the imagination. The territory traversed during the walk, the people that I met along the way had, like an impressionistic painting, opened up new vistas in my own consciousness. At times it felt as if I touched on the imagination that it takes to glimpse divine imagination. The imagination that it takes to see a way beyond war. Such is the imagination that can emerge from a 12-day tumble down into the *sithean* – the faerie hill – that is the island's own deep dreamed imagination. Neither was I the first to discover this. A significant portion of *Poacher's Pilgrimage* works with J.M. Barrie's 1920 play, *Mary Rose*, which is about a little English girl's experience of war trauma and being taken away by the faeries. It was inspired by his fishing holiday in 1912 to Loch Voshimid, the river flowing out from which I took a few casts in on the fourth day of the pilgrimage.

I work a lot with theology, because I find it is the deepest aid, at many levels, to understand the times in which we live. I'm talking here of theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Raimon Panikkar and Rosemary

Radford Reuther – the kind you never hear about from Richard Dawkins, because he only takes on straw men and not the mythopoesis of cosmogenesis that finds expression in theologies of liberation. Such mystical or spiritual theology often makes use of two closely related Greek terms, *apocalypse* and *apotheosis*. In the first, *apo* means ‘to remove’ and *kalyptein* pertains to ‘a covering’, thus to remove the cover. Properly speaking, an apocalypse is therefore a revelation of that which had hitherto been hidden. In the second term, *theo* means ‘the god’. However, the *apo* is applied here in the sense of removing that which had hitherto hidden the innermost nature of things, the spiritual nature that is the ‘god’. By removing the covering, we expose the greater God as well as the lesser gods and fallen gods of our times. These deities are the things we worship. In terms of etymology, worship is what we ‘show worth towards’, or more literally, sail towards as on a ‘worthy ship’. Ultimately, apocalypse is apotheotic. Therein lies its beating heart, the revelation of meaning and being that, in liberation theology, is thought of as ‘the irruption of the Spirit’.

An apocalyptic theology is therefore a ‘theology of insistence’. Insistence on all that gives life in the face of death. Insistence against the colonisation and silencing of the world beneath a Roman peace. For this garden world in which we live is verily the outer landscape of the soul. The prophetic cry of promise that wails from its deserts is not of forlorn optimism, but of spiritual hope. Hope, as the inner perception of reality. Hope, as the realisation that come what may in the apocalypse of the come-to-pass, our lives are on an ever-deepening journey of apotheosis.

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I’d better take the greatest care. The moor has given way to fields. They’re fenced down to the ocean’s edge in narrow strips of in-bye croft farm land. Some are fewer than a hundred yards across, and while the cliffs have dropped away to just some 12-feet high, they’re still enough to make a nasty fall.

Worldwide, the level of the sea is rising by an inch in every decade, and accelerating. Add storm surges and some natural subsidence, and that’s the reason why this coast is getting undercut so rapidly. One moment I’ll be on the path. The next, it drops away. Fences dangle off the end, maybe to a length of ten or 15 feet, giving some crude measure of the extent of recent loss of land. I cross from field to field by grabbing each

last standing post with both my hands, and swinging round across the yawning chasm to the other side.

The Butt of Lewis lighthouse stands behind me. A dozen leagues out north to sea lies the tiny island of North Rona, where Saint Ronan built his final temple. After bringing Christianity to Lewis in the seventh century, the monk decided that the people of Ness were too busy and too noisy for his prayer life. An angel sent the *cionaran-crò*, the leader of a pod of whales – with ‘his great eyes shining like two stars of night’ – and so the saint was spirited across the water. On North Rona lived a people, of whom Martin Martin writing in the late 17th century said, ‘They take their surname from the colour of the sky, rainbow and clouds.’

Some of the legends of the Hebrides go back, it is said, to the *Cailleach Bheag an Fhasaich* – the Little Old Woman of the Wild. She, ‘whose age even tradition failed to account’. Her maiden days were spent in Glen Corradale, South Uist. Her words described a kind of golden age, one where ‘the little brown brindled lark of Mary bounded to the ear of heaven to herald the dawn’, and where all the islands of the Hebrides were joined up into one.

Then came Culloden – the last battle on mainland British soil – in 1746, followed by the Highland Clearances, and in the words of Alexander Carmichael, the 19th-century ethnographer who collected so many of these stories in his six-volume *Carmina Gadelica*, the Songs of the Gaels: ‘The whole of these faithful people of Corradale, and hundreds more, were evicted and driven to all ends of the earth – many of them to die moral and physical deaths in the slums of Glasgow and other cities.’

In 1869, a South Uist woman recited to him a poem of coming cataclysm. She prophesied a continuation of the ‘overflowing of the Atlantic and the submerging of certain places’. In the end, there will come a time in which:

The walls of the churches shall be the fishing rocks of the people,  
while the resting-place of the dead shall be a forest of tangles,  
among whose mazes the pale-faced mermaid, the marled seal and  
the brown otter shall race and run and leap and gambol – ‘Like the  
children of men at play’.

Flood legends don’t need much interpretation in an era of climate change. The folk memories of many coastal peoples in the world look back to

inundation after the Ice Age, when the global sea level rose by some 120 metres.

In her book of Hebridean legends, Otta Swire spoke of the storytellers' three great floods. The first was the primordial flood, that of Creation as recounted in the book of Genesis.

The second great flood, also documented in Genesis, was that of Noah. However, what the Good Book forgot to tell us, is that as the Ark drifted past the mountain Uisgneabhal in North Harris – Water Mountain or Ox Mountain, depending on whether you go by the Gaelic or the Norse etymology – it struck the protruding summit, and ran aground. Some of the animals disembarked prematurely. This accounts for such native Hebridean fauna as the red deer and the blue mountain hare. However, Noah managed to refloat the Ark on the high tide. That accounts for why the Middle East got lions and camels.

And so, to the final flood. The third great flood, the storytellers had it, is that which is yet to come. But when it does come, 'Iona will rise on the waters and float there like a crown'. This, so that the dead 'will arise dry' to ease their recognition on the Last Day.

To me, these places that I've visited, their spirit represented by the holy Hebridean island of Iona that rolls on into the present day, are a crown no inundation can wash away. This path to keep our feet dry – its old ways preserved by collectors like Carmichael and Swire, its new ways embedded in real-life communities – is nothing less than a heritage of world importance.

That crown is the *crò*, the heart or kernel (as the Gaelic word means) of the places, the people that I've met, and what it means to be a human being. Come what may, that might help us face the apocalypse, the revelation, of what comes to pass.

'We don't know what we're inside of' – is what Nora Bateson had said to me.

So far, the 'children of men' have only glimpsed at what I've come to call an ecology of the imagination, but the changes happening in our world – these changes that are shaping the lives of every one of us alive today – represent a basic call to consciousness.

(Adapted from *Poacher's Pilgrimage: an Island Journey*, Birlinn, 2016)