

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a vast, deep fjord. In the foreground, dark, craggy rocks are visible on the left side. The water is a deep blue, and several small islands and peninsulas are scattered throughout the fjord. In the distance, layers of mountains are visible under a clear sky. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, greys, and greens.

NEW EDITION

Poacher's Pilgrimage

A Journey into Land and Soul

'Beautifully compacted writing . . .
a fortnight's walk that contains a universe'

Nick Hunt, *Dark Mountain*

Alastair McIntosh

Foreword to the New Edition

Is it possible for a landscape photograph to be both geographical and psychological? I'm with those who think so. This new edition's cover picture of the Isle of Harris by Peter Edwards is a case in point. Taken from high above Amhuinnsuidhe Castle, it brings out both the beauty and the abyss. It evokes afresh the outer journey of the Hebridean pilgrimage that I made by foot in 2009. But it also carries a numinous quality that nods towards a plunge into the inner life; and to something greater than us all.

Poacher's Pilgrimage is a book that I delighted in both the walking and the writing of. In poetic terms, I consider it to be my most beautiful work. Yet, as I weaved my way through the valleys and the mountains, through haunts familiar and remote, I found myself drawn into themes abysmal. Themes of both our individual and our common lives that trouble the surface of the world, such as the psychology of trauma across cultures and time, the politics of authoritarian religion, the drivers of war and, behind them all, the yawning spiritual chasms of alienation.

However, this was not to wallow in the misery. My books are not written to depress my readers. The immersion that a wallow gives can help to develop feeling, but too long in the mire obscures the vision and puts a dampener on action. Rather, what I share is driven by a passion to seek what I think of as 'openings of the way'. To approach, by the most pleasurable of nature's scenic paths and reservoirs of human warmth, some of the darkest underlying issues of our times. And this, led by the call that so many of us feel in our bones today to deepen in our shared humanity.

I can give a sense of the range that *Poacher's* encompasses

from the types of venues where the first edition had its various launches. In Scotland, the launch took place in Glasgow University at the annual conference of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies. The theme that year, 2016, was the interweave of literature and religion. In North Carolina, the launch of the Wipf & Stock 'Cascade' edition was held at the Ashville Wordfest, a community arts event that bridges across the lines of colour in a yet-segregated city. Then, in South Carolina, I spoke to a student audience that included Donald Trump supporters. At first, they caused some noisy disturbance. They wanted all to know that they were there. One of them pitched a prickly question. I answered, robustly but respectfully, at which they settled down more restfully.

It was actually in England that the first launch event took place. Its improbable setting was the UK Defence Academy in Shrivenham. I'd just delivered a regular guest lecture to senior officers on the Realities of Conflict module in the Advanced course. That's why, amongst other motifs, the original hardback cover sported a Tornado jet fighter. It thrilled the airman thereby honoured. Of that, more later; but my speaking brief there? To address '... the application of nonviolence, including its religious basis, to achieve security in a complex world ...'

That challenge – the question of how and where true security might arise – has come ever more alive in the collective psyche over the seven years since *Poacher's* appeared. It feels as if the bombs are dropping all around. We see it in the United States, with gun-toting threats to democracy. In Europe, with the renewal of war both hot and cold. At home, where poverty's shadow drags behind the politics of greed. And looming over all the Earth, we see it in dangerous climate change that is driven, substantially, by the consumerism with which we try to fill those empty inner spaces. Through all of these, the chameleon of violence rears and leers its hydra head. By violence, I mean the violation of that which gives life. And what is it that gives life? What salves injury to people and the planet alike? I look towards the affairs of soul, to the deepest levels of the mind.

This is what distinguishes a normal hike from pilgrimage; and it matters how we comport our minds, our inner bearing. As Russia stormed Ukraine in 2022, my thoughts dropped back to 1945 and the establishment by the United Nations of UNESCO, the educational, scientific and cultural organization. There is no ambiguity about its celebrated opening constitutional declaration: ‘Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed.’¹

Such is the outlook from the precipice, the edge where beauty and the abyss meet. True beauty takes us deeper than the merely pretty. It cuts beyond outrageous fortune; it cuts through time and opens up to Being. It does not leave the suffering of life splayed out, abandoned, ‘on a green hill far away’. Rather, it transfigures what has come to pass with inner light, because a way of being is a way of seeing. And later in these pages I quote the playwright J.M. Barrie, who spent the summer of 1912 at Amhuinnsuidhe Castle. ‘Sometimes’, he remarked, ‘beauty boils over and then spirits are abroad.’

It is with laughter that it overboils; with T.S. Eliot’s ‘unheard music hidden in the shrubbery’, the laughter of the children in the leaves and, ‘go, go, go, said the bird . . .’² And with Beethoven; the Sixth of nature’s grandeur, with the laughter of coquettish pirouettes along the way. And then the choral Ninth, in which the abyss and the beauty resolve into creation’s Ode to Joy.

But, let me come back down to sea level and share some lovely moments since *Poacher’s* first appeared. On a return visit to Leac a Lì, one of the village women who had sent me off to find the Blacksmith’s Well sat me down before a bowl of mutton broth, then sent me off again – this time, to fetch a bottle of the water ‘for the health’. One of the others described how somebody had phoned and wondered how she felt about my description of her ‘as if you were from out of yesterday’s world’.

‘I told them’, she chuckled, ‘that I wouldn’t change a word!’

Further north, in the Isle of Lewis, Sandra MacLeod, the niece of the island’s most notorious atheist, ‘Dr Finlay’, sent

footage of him with a neighbour re-opening the blocked St Andrew's Well. I have it on good authority that when the water flowed afresh, Finlay danced three times around it – sunwise. But enough of such coquettish levity! At a book signing in the Tarbert public library, four of the Harris tradition bearers turned up. Sammy Macleod, now sadly the late high chieftain of the island's salmon poachers, dropped by for just a quick hello. The other three had come with an artefact. So it was that John MacAulay the boatbuilder and David Cameron of the garage joined John Murdo Morrison of the hotel as he held open the guest book where Barrie had signed-in during his 1912 visit.

As I explore in Chapter 12, the fishing holiday inspired his psychodrama *Mary Rose*. Imagine, then, my delight when David found in the family archives a document revealing that the ghillie in the play, Cameron, who rowed the boat on Loch Voshimid, was modelled on his paternal uncle, the physician Dr David Rose Cameron.³ I find it incredible that the nephew of the lad who ferried Barrie around in 1912 is not only still very much with us but is a leading light in land reform. When I said earlier that the cover image of this new edition, taken close to Amhuinnsuidhe Castle captures 'both the beauty and the abyss', I had in mind that *Mary Rose* explores the effects of war trauma on children.⁴ A photograph, in my eyes, both geographical and psychological.

As *Poacher's* was taking shape, Donald Trump was laying ground to take power in the United States. I gave him only passing mention. Back then, few believed that such a man could ever be elected. It embarrasses the island that his mother came from Lewis. But some insight might shed light. She had emigrated at the age of seventeen in hard times in 1930. In *Riders on the Storm*, my latest book on climate change, also published by Birlinn, I list seven layers of cultural trauma that would have shaped her childhood. They include family evictions by rapacious landlords, the decimation of the island's young men by the First World War and the loss of a further 200 returning home when their ship ran aground in a storm near

her village. She was six years old. As Mary Trump, the president's only niece and a clinical psychologist, has written, she rarely spoke about her childhood. As a mother she was unstable, selfish, prone to flights of martyrdom, and in her frequent absences, both literal and emotional, she 'created a void in the lives of her children'.⁵

But this wounded and therefore, unsurprisingly, narcissistic family psychology is not just about Trump. It is also about his electoral base, and as I draw out in *Poacher's*, about the wider political psychology of Britain and America. It has been said that the most perceptive analysis of the Trump phenomenon is J.D. Vance's bestselling novel, *Hillbilly Elegy*. Taking his home Appalachia as a scratchpad, Vance describes a culturally entrenched 'spiritual and material poverty'. This is a part of the United States where, no matter how slim the genealogical evidence, white folks commonly identify as 'Scots-Irish'. As I show later, the Hebrides have got a tale or two to tell in this respect. 'There is a lack of agency here,' says Vance. 'The fact that hillbillies like me are more down about the future than many other groups . . . suggests that something else is going on . . . The demons of the life we left behind continue to chase us.'⁶

Poacher's Pilgrimage is a book that invites my reader to join that chase – and I hope with care and an endeavour to understand. It is not primarily a political or even a religious book. Rather, and with lots of sharing about nature and people along the way, I have tried to write a book of spirituality. I have tried to capture something of the pilgrimage of life on which we all, in different ways, might find ourselves. Perhaps even, a redemptive journey on which we're all 'walking each other home'.⁷

I have made a small number of tiny editorial changes to the original hardback text. These can be viewed on my website. But I did make one addition of consequence. A single, short sentence. 'The cross absorbs the violence of the world.'⁸ Words leave me at this point. The layers of story wait to be experienced. Come with me if you care to.