



Riach, A. (2016) New eyes on old questions. *National*, 2016, 22 July.

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/151637/>

Deposited on: 14 November 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

## **As Others See Us: John Keats, Herman Melville and Arnold Bax (Part 3 of 3)**

**Alan Riach (Friday 22 July 2016)**

An English poet in Ayrshire in 1818, an American novelist in Glasgow in 1856, and an English composer, adopted son of Ireland, then adopting Scotland, on the west coast in 1928: three visitors to Scotland seeing the country in different ways, thinking about it with different sets of priorities, bring to our 21st-century sensibilities new ways of returning to familiar territory: quickenings, new eyes on old questions, fresh perspectives.

John Keats (1795-1821), writing to his friend J.H. Reynolds from Maybole, 11 July 1818, pulls back from describing what might be predicted of Scotland, “a dream” that might run: “mountains, rivers, lakes, dells, glens, rocks, and clouds, with beautiful, enchanting, Gothic, picturesque, fine, delightful, enchanting, grand, sublime – a few blisters, etc. – and now you have our journey thus far”! Now, he says, “I am approaching Burns’s cottage very fast.” It will be a 9-mile walk to Ayr for tea, he comments, but things are not as he expected. Two days later he continues: “We were talking on different and indifferent things, when on a sudden we turned a corner upon the immediate county of Ayr. The sight was as rich as possible. I had no conception that the place of Burns was so beautiful. The idea I had was more desolate, the rigs of barley seemed always to me but a few strips of green on a cold hill – O prejudice! It was as rich as Devon”. Keats notes: “the mountains of Arran Isle, black and huge over the sea. We came down upon everything suddenly – there were in our way, the ‘bonny Doon’, with the brig that Tam o’ Shanter crossed – Kirk Alloway, Burns’s cottage and then the Brigs of Ayr. First we stood upon the bridge across the Doon, surrounded by every phantasy of green in tree, meadow, and hill. The stream of the Doon, as a farmer told us, is covered with trees from head to foot – you know those beautiful heaths so fresh against the weather of a summer’s evening – there was one stretching along behind the trees.”

Keats would have come along what is now the B7024 from Maybole, and you can easily imagine his eyes taking in the rural scene in its odd gentle pleasance. The unpredicted wealth of Ayrshire’s rolling landscape, more like Devon or the home counties than the Romantic wilderness, evidently surprised him. If this was delightful, though, his visit to the cottage delivers an unwelcome shock, and he seems to foresee the exploitations to come: “We went to the cottage and took some whisky. [...] The man at the cottage was a great bore with his anecdotes – I hate the rascal – his life consists in fuz, fuzzy, fuzziest. He drinks glasses five for the quarter and twelve for the hour, he is a mahogany-faced old jackass who

knew Burns. He ought to have been kicked for having spoken to him. He calls himself ‘a curious old bitch’, but he is a flat old dog. [...] O the flummery of a birthplace! Cant! Cant! Cant! It is enough to give a spirit the guts-ache.”

Keats’s notes on his visit to Ayrshire are poignant reminders of the liabilities of public fame, and the weight delivered by crudity, commercialism and exploitation. Such things weigh on all the sensitivities required and cultivated by great art, whether of Keats or Burns. They are a prophetic warning about the “celebrity culture” we inhabit today, and that we should never take for granted. We might not agree that a birthplace is always “flummery” but it demands something more nuanced and subtle in its interpretation and appreciation than the leaden words of a mahogany-minded jackass. Equally, if Scotland in Keats’s time was becoming internationally familiar in caricatures of wilderness and ideas of the sublime and picturesque, his apprehension of the complexities of reality is salutary. No cliché does justice to reality. Keats’s poems of the time, on Burns, Ailsa Craig, Staffa and the Highlands, demonstrate that.

Thirty-eight years later, five years after the publication of *Moby-Dick*, or, *The Whale*, and twenty years before the publication of *Clarel*, the longest poem in American literature, and possibly the least-read, Herman Melville (1819-1891) made a grand tour of Scotland, England, Europe and the Mediterranean, then east, to Constantinople and Jerusalem. In the seaside town of Southport, north-west England, he met up with his old friend Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wrote in his journal: “Melville, as he always does, began to reason of Providence and futurity, and of everything that lies beyond human ken, and informed me that he ‘pretty much made up his mind to be annihilated’; but still he does not seem to rest in that anticipation; and, I think, will never rest until he gets hold of a definite belief. It is strange how he persists — and has persisted ever since I knew him, and probably long before — in wandering to-and-fro over these deserts, as dismal and monotonous as the sand hills amid which we were sitting.”

Melville had just come south from wandering in Scotland, arriving in Glasgow on October 26 1856. His aunt, Mary A.A. Melvill, noted: “doubtless he will while in Scotland visit the places that have long been the homes of his name & family.” As he travelled up the Clyde, he saw “places for building iron steamers” and once in the city, wrote this: “went to old cathedral, - tombs, defaced inscriptions – others worn in flagging – some letters traced in moss – back of cathedral gorge & stream – Acropolis – John Knox in Geneva cap frowning

down on cathedral – dimness of atmosphere in keeping – all looked like the picture of one of the old masters smoked by Time – Old buildings about the hill, stone walls & thatch roof – solid & fragile – miserable poverty – look of the middle ages – west end – fine houses – the moderns – contemporary. The University. The park – the promenade (Sauchiehall street) – at night population in the middle of the street. High Street.” The next day, he took a steamer down the Clyde to Loch Lomond, in a thick mist, which allowed him to see just the outline of Ben Lomond: “came back & stopped at Dumbarton Castle – isolated rock, like Ailsa – promontory at the juncture of the Clyde & Levern – covered with sod & moss – a cleft between – stone stairs & terraces – W. Wallace’s broadsword – great cleaver – soldiers in red coats about the Rock like flamingos among the cliffs – some rams with smoky fleeces – grenadiers – smoked by the high chimneys of furnaces in Dumbarton village – ” He travelled on to Edinburgh, noting the “steep & crooked” streets, and visited Walter Scott’s home, Abbotsford, before heading south.

What is so intrinsically curious about Melville’s jottings regarding his visit to Scotland, brief as it was?

Perhaps it is that these notes, collected in *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life*, edited by Jay Leda in two volumes (The Gordian Press, 1969), prompt more questions than they answer. His aunt’s speculation that he was looking for some traces of his ancestral identity seems fair. His visit to Abbotsford marks his knowledge of Scott’s significance. Certainly, Scott’s epic novels are in many ways important precedents for the epic imagination, annotation and sense of ultimate dramatic confrontation embodied in *Moby-Dick*. The white whale is Melville’s Culloden for Ahab. What persists, and escapes, alone, to tell the tale, empowers Melville in his urge to find out more and pick up the traces, just as it drove Scott to write so voluminously of his country’s history and geography. Melville’s later influence on the late-Victorian Scottish poet Robert Buchanan (1841-1901) is quoted by Hugh MacDiarmid in *A Drink Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), as if to pick up on that sense of comprehensive scale: “‘Melville, sea-compelling man, / Before whose wand Leviathan / Rose hoary-white upon the Deep,’ / What thou hast sown I fain ’ud reap / O’ knowledge ’yont the human mind / In keepin’ wi’ oor Scottish kind...”

Just as Scott’s fiction and MacDiarmid’s poetry ranges from the Borders to Shetland, and then across Europe and further afield, so Melville, in *Moby-Dick*, crosses all the oceans of the world to bring us to a kind of final ending on the rim of the equator, after the ultimate

chase. Of course, the whale evades capture, escapes, and in fact may still be out there, a phantom, ungraspable. We'll meet that phantom again.

Seventy-one years after Melville's visit, someone else visited Scotland and perhaps we could say that he found answers to some of the questions he'd been asking about his own quest. Long before the classic film *Local Hero* (1983) made them familiar on screen, the composer Arnold Bax was looking out over the rocky shores, the seascapes, and the white sands of Morar, on the west coast of Scotland.

In his invaluable book, *Dear Sibelius: Letter from a Junky* (Kennedy & Boyd, 2008), Marshall Walker gives an account of all the major works of the great Finnish composer not in academic terms but in a quest to answer the question, How does the life's work of a great artist help people to live? He takes us through his own experiences and those of others, encountering Sibelius's music for the first time, finding it sustaining in different ways, what it means in itself and in its many interpretations. Other composers, poets, artists, natural phenomena in particular places, political imperatives, come into the story: Scotland, America's deep south, apartheid South Africa, and New Zealand are all in the narrative. Chapter 5 is largely devoted to Arnold Bax, whom Sibelius called "my son in music".

Walker describes what Bax delivered through the medium of his Third Symphony: "The village of Morar sits in its stone houses on a ridge in Invernesshire above the silver sands. The young Bax had sampled the coasts of north-western Scotland and found in them echoes of his beloved Irish landscapes. So in the autumn of 1928, in the youth of middle age at 45, he packed the sketches for his Third Symphony and took the train from London to connect with the West Highland Line, bound for Morar. In summer it's the tourists' photogenic dream: the sands flash silver across the Sound of Sleat to the isles of Eigg, Rum and Skye. But Bax went there at the end of the year, when the sands would be pock-marked by rain, episodically visible in the mist or coldly lit by the short flare of a northern sun. In Room 11 of the Station Hotel he sat in polar conditions, wearing a heavy winter coat, looking across another ebony sea to the purple isles while he orchestrated his most frequently performed symphony."

This, Walker tells us, is his "most Sibelian symphony". He had worked out a three-movement structure in his first two symphonies, but both ended with passages that moved out, pulling away from the argument of the symphonies into something else, summations perhaps, or retrospective contemplations. Now, in the Third, after the "broodings and

upheavals” of the first movement, “the sea-music of the slow movement brings detachment without resolution” and the third movement, hammering out new questions and resolving them in a dance of forced optimism, the music subsides and we are “impressed by the effort, wish we could be convinced. The music subsides. What next?” The epilogue to the symphony brings us the answer, a final part extending, something going further. There have been hard questions, difficult answers, work of real conviction, deepening commitment, but now, somehow, this transformation. The heavy air has lifted off, the sands return to white, the sea is calm, the melody floats out on clarinets and oboes and through “the endorsing pulse of a softly swinging rhythm”, entering gently another world of harp, horn and solo violin.

Walker’s conclusion is this: “If we’re to be fully human we are doomed to probe the mysteries of brutality and beauty in the world and in ourselves. We must exercise our wills in the quest for what Herman Melville calls ‘the ungraspable phantom of life’. We won’t grasp the phantom, of course, but if we’re true to the quest, grace and repose may come at last from beyond the scope of human will, perhaps mystically from nature, like this.”

And perhaps it may come in a place like this, overlooking the white sands of Morar, or in Ayrshire, or even in Glasgow: somewhere in Scotland.

**[OFFSET:]**

## **Melville in Glasgow**

**By Alan Riach**

**from Homecoming: New Poems 2001-2009 (Luath Press, 2009)**

Consider it a sketch: charcoal on grain, white paper, black ash,  
clouds and the Necropolis, the perfect size and shape of that Cathedral,  
to see it from the south side of the Clyde and think of modesty and reach,  
the country all around; to think of what was there, and what

that man was looking for, a past that might say more than all the risk  
he'd known before he stepped up on that quay: what did he want?  
A family? A line? A net? A country? A link in a chain he couldn't put down,  
to haul up something far too deeply rusted out of sight; yet not too far:  
he knew it was there, went looking for it, crossed the country, walked and rode and  
came back in to Glasgow: his place, his port. The first and last he saw, of some-  
thing then he must have thought ancestral, real as all the things he knew had happened  
to him, in the South Pacific, visceral, in blood and muscle, yielding to delight,  
yet also always fictional: build on that. On what? Where was he then?  
What strength and what uncertainty, and what desire to know, dared push that pen?