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This Savage Wood: George Campbell Hay in North Africa

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In early November 1942, George Campbell Hay (1915-84) sailed from the Clyde on a week-long voyage to Algiers, one of the many soldiers taking part in Operation Torch, the American-British advance against Rommel's desert army. While Sorley MacLean was wounded at El Alamein, Hay's company ventured further east, crossed the North African desert into Tunisia, where the fighting continued through to May 1943. Hay was to encounter civilians in Tunis and Bizerta and witnessed how they were caught in the crossfire and bombing.

Hay's time in the desert war began in frustration and despair. The frustration was first because his duties were, as he described them, those 'sometimes of an office-boy, sometimes of an amateur charwoman, sometimes of an unskilled stevedore.' He was 'loading and unloading lorries', 'filling away forms in number order', 'ruling lines on sheets of paper', 'looking after the Oxygen and Acetylene supply' and keeping records. His facility with languages, he knew, should have made him eligible for more appropriate work but the Intelligence Corps and the War Office had rejected him. He was an unofficial interpreter for his unit in French, Italian and Arabic, having picked up the last two languages since arriving in North Africa.

His status as a private soldier may have been because of his history of avoiding conscription and his continuing concern with conditions in Scotland, where he had heard that women were being forcibly removed to armaments factories in England. This led him to anxiety and bitterness: 'I think that the maiming or extinction of the Scots as is intended...I think of her as a nation against whom a white war, biological and economic, is being waged under this bloody war against Germany.'

Hay had grown up familiar with Gaelic, Scots and English, becoming a brilliant linguist and translator from Welsh, Irish, French, Greek, Italian and Arabic. His poetry in English, Scots and Gaelic crosses more boundaries and engages more forms and tones than any modern poet. This is what lies behind his unfinished epic 'Mokhtar and Dougall': an approach to questions of cultural difference and identity through the profound understanding of the languages of its characters. Written 1944-47, it begins with the two title characters dead on an African mountaintop, mouths filled with 'hot dust' after the 'hard voice of the mortar' ended their songs 'with splinters, roaring and smoke'. That emphasis on mouths, voices, sounds, is important.

What survived of this poem gives an account of Mokhtar, his immediate ancestors and the Arab world they inhabited in North Africa, including a searing narrative describing a journey across the Sahara by Mokhtar's ancestor, Omar. It's worth noting that Hay's poetic evocation of the desert has its counterpart in the modernist Scottish composer Erik Chisholm's one-act opera *Simoon* (1952; DCD34139 Delphian, 2016), in which the oppression of the sandstorm and the psychological as well as physical aspects of cultures at war, Arab and French, is incomparably powerful not only in the libretto from Strindberg's play but horrifyingly in the music itself. What is unfinished in Hay's poem is largely the history and story of Dougall, Mokhtar's Scottish counterpart. It's as if the evocation of the desert was intensified by the

memory of his own Scottish childhood, and when coming to write the poem, that part of his own personal history which would have informed the poem was neglected and ultimately drifted away into silence. We'll return to this point.

As a boy, Hay lived in Tarbert, on the shore of Loch Fyne, going out with the fishermen and wandering in the woods and hills around the village. He was intimately knowledgeable and precise in his descriptions of the natural world, animals, birds, flowers and trees, and his literary and linguistic expertise was tempered by a social understanding of people in the community he belonged to. The fishermen grew to be close friends and their working economy was deeply familiar to him. In October 1940, in his twenties, Hay went into the hills of Argyll, avoiding conscription. He was stopped in Arrochar on 3 May 1941, imprisoned until reporting for service in June in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. At Catterick, he met Sorley MacLean and according to MacLean, they 'had two splendid afternoons and evenings when we talked Gaelic poetry the whole time.'

'Why did the poets go to the desert?' The question is the opening of Edwin Morgan's poem 'North Africa' in his sequence *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984). He goes on to list Hay, MacLean, Hamish Henderson, Robert Garioch, G.S. Fraser and Morgan himself, all moving through the North African theatre of war. 'Africa is admirable,' Hay wrote: 'there is a general air of life and a tolerance in small details (probably due to poverty) which are lacking in industrialised N.W. Europe. There is none of the ugliness which is the rule by the Clyde or the Tyne: there is more of natural good manners and less of convention and there are also some very bizarre smells to be dodged here and there...' And further: 'With French, Italian and Arabic I can always find a welcome and interesting company wherever I go...'

Hay, MacLean and all these Scottish poets crossed each other's trails in the desert, and their very different stories after Africa belie the shared fact of their experience of that Dead Ground. Hay's experience there, though, is in one crucial respect distinct: for Hay, North Africa yielded a sense of a complementarity of cultures, cognate across differences, which doesn't so much polarise or neutralise anything as partialise it. It is not simply that death levels all, but that languages deepen and extend humanity. In this perception, Gaelic, English, Scots, Italian, French and Arabic, the African language-worlds he encountered, bring another dispensation, different from the arbitrary absolutes and polarities of war. The language-worlds of Gaelic, Scots and English made social life possible for Hay in his childhood and upbringing, and act as correctives to the polarising singularities of military engagement.

For Hay, no language could have absolute power. Writing his own poetry in Gaelic, Scots, English and other languages, Hay knew profoundly and intimately the value of complementarity brought to bear by different cultures, and that any one language was only a partial realisation of humanity's potential. This is what made his war so terrible, as he witnessed the destruction of Bizerta having heard the voices of people there, people he could imagine, unbearably close, their languages silenced in the bombs exploding in city streets and bringing the buildings down. Inevitably for Hay, the blitzing of that city would later recollect similar devastation at home in Scotland, both literally, in Clydebank, and more generally, in the ruination of Gaelic culture and the world he knew as a boy and young man.

So for Hay, the 'Dead Ground' was not only, or not simply, the African desert but rather the destruction of living human culture most evidently practised in silencing the variety of languages by which people of different identities might convey a common humanity to each other. If there is one poem from the whole era which delivers the sense of the devastation of

human potential such warfare generates it is Hay's 'Bizerta': 'The blaze, a horror on the skyline, / a ring of rose and gold at the foot of the sky, / belies and denies / with its light the ancient high tranquillity of the stars.' The killing of people of other cultures and other languages is what carries the rage of 'Bizerta' and keeps Hay's poetry an unfailing resource of resistance, refusing surrender or acquiescence.

War polarises. One of its primary functions is to define otherness. In Hamish Henderson's phrase, 'There were our own, there were the others.' Henderson's *Elegies for the Dead in Cyreneica* begins with the question, 'Why should I not sing *them*, the dead, the innocent?' He identifies a collective, unifying mortality in 'the brutish desert'. A similar sense of levelling death preoccupied Sorley MacLean (1911-96).

MacLean arrived in Egypt in December 1941 and was wounded twice before more serious injuries from a landmine explosion at El Alamein on 2 December 1942 sent him to hospital and then home. He talked to me once of his time in the desert, saying he did not mind so much the constant condition of war or the exceptional volume of sound produced by the explosions but the memory of the cold clear water of a particular loch on the Isle of Skye had never been in his mind and sensual memory more intensely than during that period. In his poem 'Under the Ruweisat Ridge' he depicts a German soldier lying killed in the sand, noting that none of the vaunted pride in death is visible in the corpse of the Nazi. Robert Garioch, taken prisoner at Tobruk, talks of his experience of the desert war and his memories of imprisonment are recounted in his prose memoir *Two Men and a Blanket* (1975) and his long poem, 'The Wire'. 'Letter from Italy' ends like this:

Perimeters have bounded me,
Sad rims of desert and of sea,
The famous one around Tobruk,
And now barbed wire, through which I look,
Except above – the Pleiades.

All these poets settle on the equalising facts of mortal being and the cosmic context but Hay's poetic expression of common life in the Dead Ground is different.

Angus Calder once noted that the Scots' poems stand comparison with those of the major participant-poets such as American Jarrell, German Bobrowski, Russian Slutski, Greek Elytis, Hungarian Radnoti and English Douglas, and that each one focuses sharply on particular events in a vision where irony and tragedy come together. For MacLean, three different histories and imperatives are brought together in the war poems: 'that of a war fought needfully against Fascism and Nazism by a British Empire which MacLean detested, that of the Scottish Gaels, saturated in military tradition, and that of Scottish Calvinism, which had come to overlap so largely with Gaeldom.' The contrast with Hay is striking: for Hay, the same human drive to power was as characteristic of British as of German imperialism, and the military tradition of Gaeldom held no appeal. Hay's father was a Church of Scotland minister and a novelist but Calvinism, with its notions of the elect and the damned, was not part of Hay's sensibility.

His understanding of the common life of communication in the desert of modernity was earthed in his understanding of the dynamics of human nature in expression through different languages, and the sense of different cultural histories happening across generations and informing present life. This understanding opposes the polarisations of war.

In 'Mokhtar and Dougall', his broken epic, this is the structuring principle. It's revealing that the completed parts of the poem recount the lives of Mokhtar's immediate ancestors, father and grandfather, while those parts of the poem dealing with the Scotsman Dougall are unfinished, sketched, only suggested. It's as if Hay's own early biography and his subsequent, post-war long-term distress and long silence might have supplied the story that the mere cypher of Dougall's name implies. For Hay, the polarisations of war were meaningful because they introduced him to other cultures whose people he met and talked with, whose languages he learnt and absorbed, whose affinities across difference he endorsed. He embraced Muslim 'others' by learning their language and understanding how the articulation of consciousness in that language differed from and complemented his own Gaelic – as well as the Scots and English languages in which he also wrote his poems. The tri-lingual nature of his poetry intrinsically rejects the colonial purchase of the world through a monolingual apprehension and expression of it. In itself, it relativizes and opens dialogue.

This makes him a very different character from the poets of action, Hamish Henderson, Keith Douglas, and Sorley MacLean. They are poets of contemplation too, of course, but Hay's contemplative depth involved others in a different way.

In June 1944, his unit moved to Italy, based around Salerno and Naples. Ideas that had begun to take shape in Algeria found expression in an abundance of poems written at this time, including the beginnings of 'Mokhtar and Dougall' (with the grim opening and the vivid depiction of Omar's journey across the Sahara). In spring 1945, Hay was promoted to corporal then sergeant, and in January 1946, was posted to Greece. He was a familiar figure among the local people in Macedonia, where political divisions and factions meant that such company as he was keeping proved a liability. Ironically, it was because he was fluent in Greek, talking with working-class people, that the right-wing authorities suspected him of communist sympathies and grew suspicious. In 1946, in Kavalla, he wrote later, 'there was a terrific to-do, knives and carbines and all the rest – and that's the origin of my getting my pension... I wasn't shot. I missed it narrowly.' He was back in Scotland soon after this, and the long-term effects of the war were only beginning to take their toll.

For Hay, the idea of Dead Ground in North Africa was matched by the living terrain of the Tarbert and Argyll, its forests and fishing, that he knew so well. His experience was consolidated in the poetry that followed, some of it written very quickly and brilliantly in the war's immediate aftermath, like 'Seeker, Reaper', a breathless, unstoppable celebration of a motor fishing boat in a state of constant action and the crew in their exercise of expertise.

When my gunnel's worn wi' raspin' nets,
 and my sides are white wi salt,
when my ropes unlay wi haulin'
 and my steerin's aa at fault;
when my seams are chinked and strakes are crushed,
 and the decks are tramped tae spales,
when the length o me is sterted
 wi hammerin intae gales,
when my motor scarce can drive me
 from off some loud sea-shore,
then anchor me in Tarbert,
 gie me chain. And no afore.

Aa the points o Scotland
 Wi their wheelin' lights in turn
I've raised them bright ahead,
 and I've sunk them fast astern,
scourin' by the heidlands
 where new lights burn.

Despite hospitalisation and increasing exhaustion, Hay's poems of this period are a reclamation and re-enactment of the energies of youthful appetite.

Hay's father, John Macdougall Hay, set a literary precedent with his novel *Gillespie* (1914), a dark and violent depiction of a fishing village like Tarbert devastated by the monomaniacal greed of the title character. One of its most vivid scenes is the burning of the fishing fleet in the town harbour, which may have haunted his son's vision thirty years later: 'It had a rhythmic movement which fascinated the eye. Its flat, jagged head oscillated backwards and forwards slowly, like the head of a snake. This was the main sheet of flame, whose splendour and terror mesmerised. It took a hundred fantastic shapes [...] In greater gusts of the wind the wall swayed, bellied and broke, and great golden balloons hovered in the air.' But Hay senior's poetry of the First World War set a precedent for his son as well. If George Campbell Hay's poetry would be intrinsically modern and forward-looking, his father's poem 'The Call' seems prophetic:

Do not think of them as soldiers as they pass by, the companions of horses, living among
 steel and explosives.
They were men like you.
They had their own burdens, anxieties and cares;
A mother to support; children the leaving of whom behind was the first death.
To none is home dearer than to those who go forth to fight for home.
They left that sanctuary behind.
Never was war more merciless than then; never were they braver than in that hour of
 renunciation.
They, too, had heavy thoughts as they drilled and entrenched.
They did not put off humanity when they put on a uniform.
They could weep, too.
They also had bad news in letters, and cried at nights in their dug-out or billet—those devoted
 lads.

Perhaps this sense of human struggle, the pathos of the epic effort, to reach across the silencing and polarising priorities of war, was what Hay understood most terribly in the destruction of Bizerta, in Tunisia, and it matched in his vision the burning of blitzed Clydebank and prophesied the deracination of Gaelic Argyll.

C'ainm a-nochd a th' orra,
na sraidean bochda anns an sgeith gach uinneag
a lasraichean 's a deatach,
a sradagan is sgreadail a luchd thuinidh,
is taigh air thaigh ga reubadh
am brionn a-cheile am bruchdadh toit a' tuiteam?
Is co a-nochd tha 'g attach

am Bas a theachd gu grad 'nan caintibh uile,
no a' spairn measg chlach is shailthean
air bhainidh a' gairm air cobhair, is nach cluinnear?
Co a-nochd a phaigheas
seann chis abhaisteach na fala cumant?

What is their name tonight,
the poor streets where every window spews
its flame and smoke,
its sparks and the screaming of its inmates,
while house upon house is rent
and collapses in a gust of smoke?
And who tonight are beseeching
Death to come quickly in all their tongues,
or are struggling among stones and beams,
crying in frenzy for help, and are not heard?

In Africa, Hay understood in the Arab world a world to balance that of his native Gaelic Scotland, not opposed to it. The complex, multiple, partial, complementarity of cultures and languages he experienced in Italy and Greece, confirmed this understanding. When he returned from the war, he tried to recapture in his poetry the qualities of speed, authenticity of engagement and immediate experience he had known before the war. But the devastation of the war left him shattered, living reclusively in Edinburgh, sometimes in conditions of mental disturbance. We would call it post-traumatic stress disorder, the long-term result of the Dead Ground his mind had to cope with, decades after the experience of North Africa, Italy and Greece.

Only after meeting Derick Thomson in 1978 did he reveal the long poem he had begun decades before, allowing Thomson to publish what there was of it in 1982. His poems and songs, now collected and thoroughly edited with scholarly annotation by Michel Byrne, constitute a major body of work, still not fully assimilated into the history of modern poetry. Byrne describes one of the essential themes of 'Mokhtar and Dougall' as 'the pursuit of new horizons, physical and metaphysical.' Ahmed sets out to oppose the colonial oppressor; Omar for adventure; Obayd searches for spiritual truth; their descendant Mokhtar is driven towards 'the mouth of the mortar' and the silence of what becomes literally his own Dead Ground, as it is that of his dead companion, Dougall. In his poems, in Byrne's memorable phrase, we have 'the harshest indictment of war by any Scottish poet.'

In 'Esta Selva Selvaggia / This Savage Wood' Hay wrote:

Today's no ground to stand upon –
unstable fiction balanced on
to-morrow and the day that's gone;
the hair of midnight, finely drawn
between last evening and the dawn.

He brings his whole experience of 'Dead Ground' in Scotland and Africa together:

The swaying landmines lingering down
between Duntocher and the moon
made Scotland and the world one.

At last we found a civilization
common to Europe and our nation,
sirens, blast, disintegration.

The poem ends:

We, having seen our yesterday,
blasted away, explained away,
in darkness, having no to-day,
guess at to-morrow dawning grey,
tighten our packstraps for the way.

Hay was a witness, an observer, and distanced in the end from any opposition, either to the vaunted 'greatness' of Britain or the clear deprivations of Nazism, but seeing so clearly, in horror and sympathy, humanity's responsibility at the heart of it all. Towards the end of 'An Lagan' / 'The Hollow' he asks, 'Where are there green waves of purer foam?' and answers:

Whatever the coast they break on,
Their chill whiteness is corrupted
Even to-day, as, sparkling,
They send the pitiful dead to the land.

This reflects not only upon the Dead Ground of North Africa, of the Second world War and all wars, but also upon the cultural identity and language of the Gaelic world, in which even Hay's intrinsic optimism and faith in regeneration ultimately could not rest easy or secure. The battle continues.

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