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Scotland: drawing a line

In *Here Is Where We Meet* (2005), John Berger remembers his mother saying to him, 'Everything in life, John, is a question of drawing a line, and you have to decide for yourself where to draw it. You can't draw it for others. You can try, of course, but it doesn't work. People obeying rules laid down by somebody else is not the same thing as respecting life. And if you want to respect life, you have to draw a line.'

Scotland, in the course of the twelve issues of *Archipelago* from 2007 to 2019, has had its share of lines drawn and crossed, lines of demarcation, lines of association, connections made and promises broken. Commitments have been renewed and investments have been taken further, both in what people put into the country and what others take out of it. Yet increasingly the idea of the archipelago has deepened and enriched our sense of what Scotland is in the global or even the universal context. I mean this literally. The Caribbean laureate Derek Walcott in 'The Schooner *Flight*' says it like this: 'Open the map. More islands there, man, / than peas on a tin plate, all different size, / One thousand in the Bahamas alone…' Then he says this:

The bowsprit, the arrow, the longing, the lunging heart –
the flight to a target whose aim we'll never know,
vain search for one island that heals with its harbour
and a guiltless horizon, where the almond's shadow
doesn't injure the sand. There are so many islands!
As many islands as stars at night
on that branched tree from which meteors are shaken
like falling fruit around the schooner *Flight*.
But things must fall, and so it always was,
on one hand Venus, on the other Mars;
fall, and are one, just as this earth is one
island in archipelagos of stars.

For if looking out and up shows you 'the cold sea rippling like galvanize / and the nail holes of stars in the sky roof' and gives you the prospect of journeys and connections and navigation by the constellations, then standing firm on the earth also gives you a sense of

compass points, of responsibilities, of time's currents and the borders of our deepest concerns and loves.

Walcott in the West Indies knew that archipelagic world intimately, just as Sorley MacLean, Iain Crichton Smith, Aongheas MacNeacail, Derick Thomson and Meg Bateman know the Outer and Inner Hebrides, Edwin Muir and George Mackay Brown know Orkney, and Hugh MacDiarmid, William Tait, Christine De Luca and Jen Hadfield know Shetland. Taking ourselves around the borders of Scotland, from what Norman MacCaig called the 'capital-in-waiting', Edinburgh, to the northern then the western isles, returns us by another Celtic 'commodious vicus' beyond Joyce's remit, to the Solway's tidal estuary and what it might portend.

Let's say it starts with what's given, in that Gaelic word dùthchas, which is threefold: land, people and culture. And here 'land' includes islands, seascapes, whale roads. There is no Gaelic word for nation, prioritising the legal limits of the nation-state, but dùthchas gives you a relational identity: three things that work with each other to create something unique to a place, related across time to what we would call a nation, open and porous to the coming and going of people, over time, for better or worse, and characterised by, interpreted by, represented to others by its own cultural production, things to be accepted and approved or resisted and changed.

A series of evocations, to remind ourselves of this various terrain and its different seas, is what Alexander Moffat, Ruth Nicol and I began with in the work that has gone into the touring exhibition *Landmarks: Poets, Portraits and Landscapes of Modern Scotland*. The show opened in the Lillie Gallery, just north of Glasgow, in January 2018, then went to Montrose on the east coast, and then to St Andrews, and further. Moffat's portraits of the great Scottish poets were complemented by Nicol's landscapes, each evoking their respective territories, and poems of my own, along with biographical essays and 'encounters'. The literary authority of the poets was itself complemented by the oral, folk traditions of music and song, collectively evoked in Moffat's painting 'Scotland's Voices' (2017), a partner to the famous 'Poets' Pub' (1981) from the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. The central point about the show was that the work of the poets should be understood in the contexts of the places where generations since them have lived and live now, the carrying stream that runs into futures we'll never know. Some of the inhabitants of these various places honour their poets and artists by reading and looking at their work, drawing what lines they will to connect them, to keep them distinct from others, and fresh for the future.

Yet 'Scotland's Voices' complements the literary tradition of the poets with the oral and folk tradition of the singers and musicians, many of whom were women, and these considerations open and extend our sense of the lines of connection and the distinction of the patterns they help generate, the cradle they become of the life of the future.

This is what makes the nation. It arises, not from rules laid down or imposed from above or outside and obeyed, but through reading performing and respecting what life is, what these lives were and continue to be, and give. And if it is a nation, it exists because of its distinction. So let's take all that as a given, a place or condition from which everything arises.

Within this place or condition, this variously populated, geologically differentiated, historically rich area or terrain or territory – call it what you will – there are co-ordinate points. That's why we called the exhibition 'Landmarks': these are the most secure places, sites from which you can navigate your way around the country from place to place, and explore its history, and go back in time through different languages. In Gaelic, Scots and

English, these depths of time and distances of space are held in a perpetually changing, somehow stable equilibrium. Demographics are never enough.

In Edinburgh, the city MacDiarmid called ‘a mad God’s dream’, look north from the Castle terrace to Columba’s other island in the Firth of Forth, not Iona but Inchcolm, where the music of the Inchcolm Antiphoner was probably written at the end of the thirteenth and beginning of the fourteenth centuries, drawing on a whole archive of Celtic Christian plainchant. This marks the first of our locations. Inchcolm was founded in 1123 by Alexander I and the Antiphoner contains music commemorating Columba which would have been performed in the monastery there dedicated to him, and which may have come from inherited material originally sung and perhaps recorded in older manuscripts from Iona itself. The two islands balance each other on either side of the country, and take us from the sixth to the twelfth centuries. Now come forward and go north. Take a line north-east to Catterline, Joan Eardley’s seascapes, paintings we cannot neglect. Looking at ‘January, Flow Tide’ (1960), ‘The Wave’ (1961) and ‘Summer Sea’ (1962) can leave you breathless.

It’s difficult to say why without becoming pedantic, talking about technique, the clutch of the paint at grasses, blown straw, scraps of living things, or melodramatic, talking about the scale and overwhelming authority she is acknowledging here. Eardley, like Turner and McTaggart, both confirms and defies the authority of nature. This is maybe most apparent in the sequence of five small pastels, ‘Approaching Storm’ (1963), tiny sketches on paper, not dependent upon the scale of the great seascapes, but equally urgent and dramatic in their rapidly executed depictions of cloud and sea. Once seen, these are permanently lodged in the visual imagination. They are works which remind you of an absolute imperative, just as Wallace Stevens’s ‘Snow Man’, winter-minded, a listener, listening in the snow, ‘beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.’ In his book, *Dear Sibelius*, Marshall Walker describes what the great composer captures in the icy chill of the tone poem ‘Tapiola’: ‘spears of wind and shards of light glittering from icicles, reflected by snow-caked branches along interminable corridors of quintessential cold.’ Stevens and Sibelius evoke winter forests but Eardley turned to an even greater austerity, the sea, ‘an apotheosis of unpeopled nature’: ‘purely and impersonally itself, as far from considerations of human reason as the iceberg that sank the Titanic’. That’s what Eardley saw, looking at the North Sea off Catterline.

Go further north, and the line crosses over the edge of the sea: Orcadia. The cobbled streets in deep dark winter and the high, eternal skies of long warm breezy summers. Here’s George Mackay Brown, recording the voyages of his people, living till, at the very last, in the hours before his own death, he said that he could see all the ships now leaving the harbour. He wrote: ‘The children of time, their roof-trees should be strong.’

And further north, to Shetland: to the farthest limits of what Scotland means, to Unst, to Yell and Whalsay, where MacDiarmid lived in the 1930s. You can walk down from the house where he and his wife Valda and their young son Michael lived, and come to the well in the field, down the slope from the bod. It was covered over when I was there but still you

could lift the stones and panels, wave the green weed to the side and drink the replenishing water.

Come back south now, cross the sea again, to Sutherland, Lochinver, and Assynt like a sugarloaf shouldering high, with its unmappable streams and lochs and lochans and elusive little trout. Norman MacCaig's favoured territory. This is walkable land, where the whole shapely skyline changes every hundred yards, as if you were on a ship at sea. Horizons are deceptive. The schoolmaster looks through the classroom window and reads the land and sea out there with one Greek eye and one Latin one, while 'a boat rounds the point in Gaelic'.

Go south-west now, to Skye and over to Raasay, the waterfall below Hallaig, with flat-topped Dùn Cana rising above. Then back to Skye, to Braes, round the winding valley road from Portree, the Cuillins in the distance in their dignity and imposition. And Sorley MacLean, looking over the sea to Screapadal in north Raasay, saying of the factor Rainy, who cleared fourteen townships, that he left the place without people, without houses or cattle, only sheep: 'but he left Screapadal beautiful; / in his time he could do nothing else.' Seals lift their heads, a basking shark its sail,

but today in the sea sound

a submarine lifts its turret

and its black sleek back

threatening the thing that would make

dross of wood, of meadows and rocks

that would leave Screapadal without beauty

just as it was left without people.

The threat is vivid here, of tragic, irreparable loss, the fact of the loss that has happened, the worst of things that have been and may come. And in the Outer Isles, in Lewis, Derrick Thomson's 'An Tobar' or 'The Well', tells us of 'an old woman' who speaks to the poet, and asks him to deliver some water from the well to her, 'even a thimbleful / to bring back the colour to my cheeks' – but going to the well, the poet finds 'only bracken and rushes, / and the old woman's eyes are closed / and a film has come over their merriment.' This is the territory, Iain Crichton Smith reminds us in 'Poem of Lewis', where people 'have no time for the fine graces / of poetry, unless it freely grows / in deep compulsion, like water in the well' – begging the question, how deep must such compulsion be? Will 'the barren rock' still give 'a value to / the bursting flower'? Liz Lochhead describes this, in 'Another life' in her second collection, *islands*:

From each dour house

always this always black

and white dog comes to stand stock still.

He's only ruffled by the wind.

He doesn't waste a bark.

From such true austerities, resilience and resistance arise. These strengths are measured and tested by the vulnerabilities and sensitivities of the living, women and men. So south, now, to Oban and Taynuilt and Glen Etive: the landscape of the lovers, Deirdre, Naoise, beautiful in sunshine, hard in the snow. The deer on the high hills show you where to go. As Deirdre sings in her last farewell to Scotland, 'I would never have come here and never have left, were it not for my one true love'.

Anyone wishing to discover more of the sense of this in music might find John Purser's CD, *Dreaming of Islands* (JWP010) and listen to 'Creagan Beaga', a setting of a MacLean poem for soprano, clarsachs and cello, and 'Tha Thu Air Aigeann M'Inntin' / 'You are at the Bottom of my Mind', a setting of a Crichton Smith poem for two cellos and soprano. And there is an unforgettable setting of 'Deirdre's Farewell' on the double CD set, *Scotland's Music* (LINN CKD008). The music itself takes you deeper.

The poets and writers and artists and composers of modern Scotland, to some degree like Derek Walcott in the Caribbean, engaged with a diversity of terrains, a range of different seascapes, a world of archipelagos as vividly realised, as closely explored, and as essential to our understanding of the human story as those of Homer and the ancient Greeks. There was Philoctetes, with his suppurating wound, waiting with his bow, knowing that in time, Odysseus must return for him, for without him the war will never end. This world had been divided. The dividedness conjured hostility, as it always does. In Scotland, maybe more than elsewhere, this happened over centuries. But all the arts welcome otherness, make enquiries into it with all the intrinsic optimism of curiosity.

Whatever the hand holds: camera, paintbrush, pencil, pen

the fingertips upon the laptop's keys, the paper, screen or canvas

and the air the senses carry in – make traces, tracks, a patterning

that moves out from the place and its location on the clock,

to be caught, glimpsed, held on, whatever that may be,

and at whatever time, but never trapped. That is what work we do.

The lines that connect differences are what all of us make, as we write, draw, paint, score, as surely as we make the attempt to keep these worlds safe and accessible to those who respect the life of them. And protect them against those who don't.

Mountains are permanence. Rivers are change.

Rocks and stones will build your bones.

Words are what we live by.

And water is what moves us all, even now, the carrying stream.

So to the Border, where we draw the line. MacDiarmid saw and heard three lines, in Langholm, three long rivers, moving, and said he could tell where he was, as a boy, just by the sounds of the water moving, running fast and walloping, or flowing slow and charming. Still, you can turn your head and one ear leaves the sound behind, while the other picks up another. You know where you are, you can navigate between the vital, vitalising, liquid co-ordinates, the points and lines that give co-ordination.

These poets of modern Scotland lived in the tidal wake, receding, of the First and then the Second World Wars. And Ireland, and Russia. And another tide advancing, the rising of another war, on knowledge, on reason, on life. The truths these poets give us are perennial but each has its own geography, and place on the cosmic clock. And they bring us back. Something unplanned, intuitive, relaxed, working in the bones and muscle, way below the memory of things: abstraction, yet as real as salt spray that hit you like a shower switched on when the ferry smashed the cross-wave and a blast of blue and green turned white as frost and drenched you in a sudden cold – as if all resolution, steel and ice were sensitised. This is what sharpens your vision, allows you to see what has changed and what remains, and by whatever chance and will should be, what's drawn back by magic.

Edwin Morgan, writing in the 1960s, in 'Glasgow Green' tells us that 'the beds of married love / are islands in a sea of desire': the rare things that need to be valued and the vulnerable things that need to be cared for. Which brings us to the Solway, at last.

In a recent excellent collection of critical essays all related to the central concerns of *Archipelago*, *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, edited by Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom and Jos Smith, Fiona Stafford has a remarkable essay, 'The Roar of the Solway',

provocatively connecting Walter Scott, John Ruskin, Matthew Arnold and Ciaran Carson. I'd like to draw to a close with her reading of a key passage in Scott's *Redgauntlet* (1824).

To quote Fiona Stafford, 'Much of the action of *Redgauntlet* takes place around the Solway, but the most dramatic moment occurs *in* the Firth itself, when Darsie [the central character and narrator of much of the novel] is forcibly taken at night from a fishing hut on the Scottish coast. He is injured, bound and helpless, lying in a cart in the darkness and only able to guess where he might be. Gradually, the slow movement of the cart, "sinking" and "sticking", makes him realize he is in "the formidable estuary which divides the two kingdoms", mired in the mudflats, surrounded by quicksands. This is a place of meeting and division – where rivers meet the sea, where earth meets firth, where Scotland meets England, north meets south – and where the estuary divides all. In the darkness, Darsie's normally sharp sight becomes redundant, and as the surrounding sounds are accentuated, he hears first the sudden, alarmed dispersal of his mysterious captors, and then the terrifying approach of the tide'.

Stafford then quotes Scott, and these are Darsie's words: 'There lay my native land – my own England – the land where I was born, and to which my wishes, since my earliest age, had turned with all the prejudice of national feeling – there it lay, within a furlong of the place where I was; yet was that furlong, which an infant would have raced over in a minute, a barrier effectual to divide me for ever from England and from life. I soon not only heard the roar of this dreadful torrent, but saw, by the fitful moonlight, the foamy crests of the devouring waves, as they advanced with the speed and fury of a pack of hungry wolves.'

Stafford comments: 'There is nothing reassuring about the sound of the Solway. The ancient impulse to animate the physical phenomena seems as natural as the fear inspired by the sound of the approaching tide. This is an image of terrifying inundation, as the waves are transformed into a wolf pack, roaring hungrily. The vivid focus on the hapless figure, whose struggle for personal identity against overwhelming external forces drives the entire narrative, enables Scott to convey the formidable power of the estuary, where at one moment the waters part to allow crossings, but at the next, the unstoppable sea charges inland, engulfing everything in its path.' Scott's Solway, she notes, 'is a border region, a place of the in-between, dangerous, full of secrets, where strange things shift over sands by night.'

Edwin Morgan, in his sequence *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984), evokes a different picture. This is another vision of the Solway and its potential to establish Scotland itself, with

all its various voices, as part of a literal archipelago that it takes a leap of faith to make more than imaginable. ‘The Solway Canal’ is not the first nor last in the sequence but it was the first to be written and its symbolic power is both a memorial to past lives and a prospect of future possibility in a Scotland where the line has been drawn literally.

Morgan’s space- and time-travellers sail on their hydrofoil slowly through the Cheviot hills at dawn, under the high steel bridge at Carter Bar, in fog, quietly, past wet rock walls on either side ‘and scarves of dim half-sparkling April mist’:

> a wizard with a falcon on his wrist
> was stencilled on our bow. Rough waterfalls
> flashed on that northern island of the Scots
> as the sun steadily came up and cast
> red light along the uplands and the waves,
> and gulls with open beaks tore out our thoughts
> through the thick glass to where the Eildons massed,
> or down to the Canal’s drowned borderers’ graves.

We are with these voyagers, cruising along this humanly-created border, not a wall but a waterway, not an end but a source of renewal and a form of connection, respecting life, honouring the dead, touching nature, valuing warmth, sensitive to the wet, wild, wilderness world, but confident enough to draw the line, to take the risk, to delineate, to inhabit such a territory, a modern, future fiction with commitment strong enough to one day make it real. That line has not reached its endpoint yet. And when it does, it will be only another beginning.