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Landscape-Mindscape: Writing in Scotland's Prehistoric Future

'How to inaugurate and develop a thinking-in-the-territory (implicated in it, not imposed upon it)? Maybe thought can be like a landscape – with fields and running waters (fluid concepts). A landscape-mindscape. That's maybe what we could map our way towards.'

—Kenneth White, 'Meditation in Winter'¹

Kilmartin Glen is located on the west coast of Scotland. The northern end of the valley drops down from a broad ridge caught between the pincers of Loch Awe and Loch Craignish and runs southwest for nearly ten miles before reaching the former tidal estuary of Mòine Mhòr, or Great Moss. There the land narrows again like the neck of a misshapen hourglass between Loch Crinan and Loch Gilphead before opening up to the peninsular juttings and splittings of Knapdale to the south. The glen itself contains terraced slopes and intricate side valleys. The hills are rucked up and folded in subtle ways. The sea lochs are deeply indented, thwarting navigation. This topography prompted Francis H. Groome, in his nineteenth-century *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland*, to describe the area as follows: 'The outlines are so exceedingly irregular, the projections of mainland into ocean so bold, the intersections of mainland by sea-lochs so great, the interlockings of mainland and islands so intricate, and the distributions everywhere of land and sea so manifold and erratic, that no fair notion of them can be formed except by examination of a map.'² Yet some notion must have been formed well before the existence of maps as Kilmartin Glen happens to contain the densest and most elaborate concentration of prehistoric sites in Scotland. Some visitors nowadays explore the chambered cairns, henges, standing stones, and rock carvings dating from the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Others climb the rocky crag of Dunadd, where the first Dál Riata kings were reputedly crowned. Most people, however, notice nothing more than a monolith or two through a rainy windscreen on the way to Oban.

Until 2007 I didn't know it at all. My approach to Scotland had begun, in a strictly physical sense, with my arrival six years earlier. As a native of Maine in the northeastern US, I had grown up with rocky seacoasts and eroded Appalachian mountains, so I found the landscape on this side of the Atlantic to be at once foreign and familiar, as if the forests of my youth had been scraped away to expose the underlying terrain and the transitional weather systems of Autumn and Spring had been spliced together in an endless loop. A dreamscape, so to speak. It felt strange to my skin, but not to my bones. I had acclimated to its islands and highlands, its whisky and weather, its accents and attitudes until I had come to feel quite settled – quite at home, in other words – by the time I was approached by Angus Farquhar, the creative director of NVA, to participate in a project called *Half Life*.

I met with him reluctantly. I was writing a novel set in Maine with Franco-American inflections, my head full of metallurgy and global financial markets and characters with specific emotional demands. I didn't want to break my stride. What was this project, exactly? He began with the topography of Kilmartin Glen itself, then explained how the archaeological sites interfaced with this topography in a highly sophisticated way. The cairns and standing stones and other similar features, he said, were located almost exclusively on the valley floor, forming a kind of linear cemetery and ritual space, while above them, at certain upland junctions, rock carvings had been found on exposed outcrops. Most of the designs were cups and rings, consisting of craters or central cups surrounded by up to nine concentric circles. Nobody knew what they signified. They were a complete mystery.

This was the context for *Half Life*, an environmental art event taking place across 100 square miles with Kilmartin Glen as its focal point. NVA's 'interventions,' as Angus called them, would join the dialogue that our ancestors had started 5,000 years ago. By day, people would visit these suggestive and enigmatic sites, and by night they would attend a performance staged on an outdoor set built from hundreds of felled logs arranged in the form of a double henge. This performance, co-produced by the National Theatre of Scotland, would involve not only actors, but also musicians and startling visual effects. Would I be interested in writing the script? The project thrilled me. The script terrified me. So of course I said yes.

Yet a few hours later I was overcome with second and third thoughts. As a foreigner, my participation in this project struck me as audacious.

After all, Angus had identified the Neolithic as ‘our’ ancestors, which was correct for him but not for me. What right did I have? I wasn’t familiar enough with Scotland’s present culture, let alone any of its past incarnations, to write about it properly. And furthermore I hadn’t visited the actual location yet. Time and space were against me. I spent a few days biting my nails and reading an armload of archaeological texts before joining Angus on an excursion to a place that, less than a week earlier, I hadn’t known existed.

My misgivings began to fade, however, as Kilmartin Glen quite literally took me in. Here was the topography that Angus had described so vividly: the flat-bottomed valley winding northward from Lochgilphead, its terraced slopes rising up on either side. Although a few odd carvings had been discovered on standing stones and cairns along the floor of the glen, almost all of others were located on exposed, earthfast rock at natural thresholds in the landscape. As we parked and hiked up to Achnabreck, arguably the most elaborate panel of rock carvings in Britain, we were following a route-way that had probably been used for seasonal migrations when agriculture was becoming a way of life. During this ‘Neolithic Revolution,’ as most archaeologists refer to it, four thousand years of hunting and gathering gave way to herding and farming in as little as a century. And this was a prime location. Arable land below, grazing land above. The carvings tended to be found in the transitional zone between them, where one thing became another. And the designs themselves – almost all of them cup-and-ring marks, or circles within circles – matched the layouts of henges and stone circles and the igloo-shaped cairns in their earliest form. There was a suggestion of cosmology in the relationship, in the grammar of the rock.

What to make of all this? At Achnabreck I approached an outcrop – one of several at that site – and gazed at the carvings. They seemed like depictions of atoms, solar systems, dartboards, raindrops with ripples fanning outward, and they looked like none of these things. Some included tails or gutters connecting with others to form compound motifs, or else they simply merged into natural cracklines and clefts in the rock. I crouched down and traced the designs, comparing their worn texture with the cracks and fissures of the rock scoured by glacial action – and with a jolt I realised the carvings had been fitted between natural breaks or rifts in the surface, incorporating its complex microtopography. These designs hadn’t been *imposed* on the landscape as if it were a blank canvas. They included the

rock itself. This was a dialogue. Saying what? Nobody knew. Nobody will ever know. It was the ultimate floating signifier. Yet strangely, I drew some assurance from this enigma. The carvings, I told myself, were no more foreign to me than they were to anyone else. These circles would take me forward.

The final production of *Half Life* involved circles great and small, both physically in form and figuratively in language, breaking space and time. One of the scenes features Jacob, an archaeologist, conducting an excavation while his daughter questions him about what he has found – and also, crucially, what he hasn't found. It leads him to consider the Neolithic practice of 'excarnation,' in which the dead were exposed until the flesh was stripped away. As the scene begins, Jacob is cleaning a sample he has just lifted from the soil.

TESSA Where's the rest of it?

JACOB Gone.

TESSA Where?

JACOB Everywhere. It disappears over time.

TESSA Oh come on. Nothing really disappears.

JACOB Well, no, technically speaking. Things are neither created nor destroyed.

TESSA The end of one thing is always the beginning of another. (*beat*)
Then we'll find the rest of it.

JACOB No, it changes form. In other words, it becomes something else.
Fragments, dust, particles.

TESSA It becomes part of the air. The air we breathe. So it becomes part of us. And then we become part of other things.

JACOB That's what they believed. They didn't have the science, but they had the insight. When someone died, they deliberately left the body exposed until wildlife stripped away the surface flesh. This was how they released the dead – by returning them to the world, where they were reabsorbed. Afterward the remains were placed inside a chambered cairn, accompanied by the next of kin. Imagine spending time with the corpse of your loved one. A visceral rite of passage. A true dialogue with the dead. How long before the body was dismembered and decapitated? How long before the bones were cracked and sorted? When did the remains no longer contain the essence of the deceased?

Later they were rearticulated or cremated. And later still they were shoved aside for the next body, the next death rite, until they all became mixed up together with the bones of animals and ancestors alike, into the collective unity of a blood line. A blood circle. A group soul. (*beat*) Sounds barbaric, doesn't it? All that exposed muscle and sinew. The viscera. The bones. Barbaric. But consider the Battle of Verdun during the First World War – one of the longest battles ever fought. Ten months. One million shells fired on the first day alone, plowing up the hills and fields, blasting soldiers apart not just once, but over and over again, until there was only a mass of femurs and skulls and shattered ribs. The Mill on the Meuse, they called it. They couldn't sort out the bodies afterward. French, German. All mixed together. So they built an ossuary on Douaumont ridge. (*beat*) Tessa? Your mother and I went there before you were born. The remains of 130,000 unknown soldiers are kept in those vaults. How is that different from a Neolithic burial rite?

The writing process had opened up a wormhole between prehistoric Scotland and France during the Great War. Rather than trying to make sense of the past from an apparently undistinguished present, I found myself using different times and places to illuminate each other. And by doing so, I confronted the fairly simple notion – that is, simple in theory, though not always in practice – that 'the' past is a misleading term. A paradox of writing *Half Life* was that its stones evoked the past not as a fixed and monolithic object, but rather as an ongoing process. Einstein once wrote, 'the separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one.'³ In this sense, the rock carvings disillusioned me. Their basic design became an emblem. The timeline was replaced by a timecircle.

Fittingly enough, after *Half Life* was over I found myself coming back to the material again and again, or, rather, it kept coming back to me. Although I didn't return to Kilmartin Glen, I began writing about it again. This time a very different set of characters began to take shape, one of whom seemed to have a southern American twang – not a deep tidewater drawl, but something closer to my native country's midsection. I knew that Aaron, as I called him, was the child of academic parents with pronounced Scottish heritage, yet had grown up in a rough-and-tumble rural setting.

Eventually I settled him in the Appalachians of North Carolina, a geographical and geological extension of Maine. Through circumstances not worth relating here, he attended the University of Edinburgh and ended up staying on as an archaeologist, falling in love with and marrying a Scottish woman along the way. As this character took shape – and indeed continues to take shape – I learned more about the geophysical process that shaped Kilmartin Glen as well as the very character of the stone itself, to the extent that I began to experience what Groome might call the ‘interlockings’ of landscape and mindscape, or perhaps the thinking ‘implicated’ in the territory advocated by Kenneth White. This work came together most notably in passages such as the following, in which Aaron drives from Edinburgh to Kilmartin Glen to conduct some fieldwork:

Scotland is geologically alien to the rest of Britain – a piece of shrapnel lodged in the northwestern portion of Europe’s skull without, fortunately, impairing upper brain function. London is fine, thanks. But how on Earth did this injury occur? The answer lies across the Iapetus Ocean about 500 million years ago as the continents of Laurentia and Baltica collide just south of the equator, buckling and crumbling and folding together to force a segment of Laurentia above water for the first time. Welcome to Scotland. At the other end of the collision a subcontinent known as Avalonia, which joined Baltica a bit earlier, has a similar experience, producing what we call England. They’ve been butting heads ever since. This first impact, though, which lasts about 50 million years, gives Scotland the West Highland and Grampian mountains and, after another 100 million years of volcanic activity, a position at the hub of the supercontinent known as Pangaea. Contrary to popular belief, Pangaea isn’t some tectonic Garden of Eden but rather a point fairly late in the Earth’s existence when all the billiard balls happen to collide together at the same time. And here’s Scotland in the middle of it all. The center of the world. Yes. This feels right. For the next 100 million years Scotland’s rough landscape is indistinguishable from the Scandinavian Mountains to the north and the Appalachians to the south. But then a plate boundary becomes active and breaks it apart, creating the Atlantic Ocean in the process. The remaining portion of Laurentia goes on to become America. Scotland, on the other hand, drifts into the northern temperate zone and experiences another round of volcanic activity that produces a fresh rash of

mountains on its western isles, followed by glaciations that gouge out glens and corries and granite ranges in the Highlands, while in the Lowlands scrubbing away at the now extinct volcanoes to expose bare crags like the one I could see from my office.

The Monday after my conversation with Graeme I drove toward peaks that had more in common with the Blue Ridge Mountains than with anything in England. The ocean that divided my homeland in half, so to speak, also plunged arthritic fingers deep into Scotland's western flanks, forcing the roads into wiry twists and coils that made my drive into a three-hour journey instead of the straight shot from one coast to another that it would have been otherwise. I went west to Glasgow, then north, then west, then south, then west, then north, and on and on and on. It ended with a serpentine run through knots of farmland and bare-knuckled fields on one side, the raw stretch of Loch Fyne on the other. The lochs all ran northeast-to-southwest in parallel slashes, filled with either fresh or salt water depending on how severely the glaciers had carved them out. Beyond the hills to my right Loch Awe had discharged several hundred Niagaras as it melted, creating a gorge that eventually silted up and became a flat-bottomed valley and tidal estuary. And as the waters sloshed in and out with changing sea levels, the steep bluffs eroded into terraces of till and gravel and marine clays. This was the anatomy of Kilmartin Glen. Or the bones of it. Like the rest of Britain, it had been deforested by the time Shakespeare was born.

While writing the above passage I often thought of my first visit to Achnabreck. That sense of assurance I had drawn from physical contact with the rock took on added significance as it turned out to be the same substance in both my native and adopted lands. I was touching clay that had been solidified into shale, then transformed by the earth's heat and pressure into schist before it was split across continents like a sandwich shared between friends. Time and space, which I had felt were against me, had in fact solved each other. It seemed especially appropriate that James Hutton, himself a native of Edinburgh and a founder of modern geology, was the one who first inaugurated a 'thinking-in-the-territory' by invoking the dynamic churning and ruptures and scrubbing of the earth to explain the apparently fixed forms around us. All that was necessary, he said, was a perspective beyond the human scale – what he called 'deep time.' With this in

mind I couldn't resist placing my main character's office within sight of Salisbury Crags and, by implication, a locality called Hutton's Section, where Hutton discovered evidence of the ongoing process that, as he phrased it, has 'no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end.'⁴⁴ I hadn't returned to Kilmartin Glen during the interval between completing *Half Life* and writing the above passage, yet my understanding of it had changed considerably. Among other things, I had come to grips with the notion that a three-dimensional landscape is an oxymoron, like a black-and-white rainbow. It simply doesn't exist without time.

Of course, this is hardly a new notion. In *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, Christopher Tilley accounts for time by approaching archaeological sites as sensory experiences rather than inert schematics with assemblages of artefacts. By walking the Dorset Cursus, for example, he reveals how its built and topographical features guide one's movement in a specific direction, providing what he calls 'a series of contrasts and surprises' that very likely had a ceremonial function. He argues persuasively that 'the experience of walking along it was an essential ingredient in its meaning,' basing his conclusions on not only excavated evidence and comparative analysis but also his own practice of walking the Cursus himself.⁵ His methodology conflicts directly with the notion put forward by Groome that a map is needed to make sense of a landscape. In fact, Tilley takes issue with this very sort of mentality:

Looking at the two-dimensional plane of the modern topographical map with sites and monuments plotted on it, it is quite impossible to envisage the landscape in which these places are embedded. The representation fails, and cannot substitute for being there, being *in place*. Similarly, an unfamiliar landscape remains invisible. You do not know where, or how, to look. This process of observation requires time and a feeling for the place. After being there, after making many visits to the same locales, the intensity of the experience heightens. Monuments that were initially hidden from view on a first visit to a place can now be seen, and patterned relationships between sites and their settings become apparent.⁶

Under these conditions the post-Enlightenment notion of 'space' as a generic and neutral container of action becomes untenable. Instead it is relational and dialectical, a 'contextually constituted' and 'socially produced'

medium which 'depends on who is experiencing it and how.'⁷ And time is, of course, inextricable from this subjective matrix:

All locales and landscapes are therefore embedded in the social and individual times of memory. Their pasts as much as their spaces are crucially constitutive of their presents. Neither space nor time can be understood apart from social practices which serve to bind them together. The human experience of encountering a new place or knowing how to act or go on in a familiar place is intimately bound up with previous experiences. Places are always 'read' or understood in relation to others.⁸

Tilley's phenomenology by necessity treats landscape as a lived experience, woven into individual and social memory. It is felt and shared. It is personal. Although the spaces may not be fixed by Cartesian coordinates, the times measured by calendar or clock, they are still framed and therefore limited by our direct perceptions, by our sense of order and proportion. Landscape occurs on a human scale.

How, then, does scientific knowledge fit into this scheme? How to account for the difference between my first approach to Kilmartin Glen, when I touched the stone and breathed the air, and the second, when I integrated that experience with some rather technical research? Does geology count as 'social memory' transmitted in the trappings scientific discourse? If so, then where does this knowledge originate? No one has witnessed continental drift or the formation of oceans, yet we know these things have happened. We have, in other words, a sense of the inhuman and impersonal – a sense of things beyond ourselves. What astronomers call deep space. What geologists call deep time. Science has brought to our skin what used to be in our bones. Lived experience leads to un-lived experience. Social knowledge is complemented by earth knowledge as the very stone itself 'speaks' to our immediate senses and, in turn, our faculties, our intellects, our minds. This is the landscape's fifth dimension. It is how we see dinosaurs, how we set foot on Pangaea, how the foreign rock at Achnabreck becomes truly familiar. It is the process of landscape best described by David Hume when he writes, 'For aught we can know *a priori*, matter may contain the source or spring of order originally within itself, as well as mind does'.⁹

To a certain degree Kenneth White shares this epistemology, particularly as it relates to what he calls geopoetics. In fact, White himself cites both Hutton and Hume as precursors, and moreover identifies Hume's statement as an 'epigraph to the whole geopoetic conception and movement'.¹⁰ Geopoetics, as he defines it, seeks a 'renewed sense of world, a sense of space, light and energy which is experienced both intellectually, by developing our knowledge, and sensitively, using all our senses to become attuned to the world, and requires both serious study and a certain amount of de-conditioning of ourselves by working on the body-mind.'¹¹ This work involves an engagement with geology, an extrapolation from the earth to evoke 'the voice of a mind integrated into the land,'¹² or in even grander terms, 'an exploratory, out-feeling poetics concerned with an undefined region or dimension, in a terrestrial context unencumbered by mythology, religion, or metaphysics.'¹³ In other words, this is a poetics free from the conditionings and garnishings of social contexts, the flourishes and fabrications of self-regard, the artificial coherence of narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends – in short, what White identifies as 'unitary symbolism'.¹⁴ Indeed, at times it seems that White distrusts metaphor itself.

There is much to admire and also much to criticise in White's project, particularly as geological considerations fade from view.¹⁵ I would find it more accurate, for example, to revise his earlier phrasing to read 'unencumbered by *someone else's* mythology, religion, or metaphysics' as these modes of thought – or perhaps 'coherence' would be a better term – are inseparable from consciousness. Put simply, what the bloke over there calls reality, I call metaphysics and you call mythology. I believe what I believe because it is true, not because it is a myth, and so does he, even though we both know his belief is really just a myth, and he knows for certain that each of us is deluded in a different way, and so forth.

Unsurprisingly, White's own poetry and non-fictional 'waybooks,' as he calls them, avoid the sort of form or plotting most of us have been conditioned to expect. In the poetry we encounter the plain workings of nature, haiku moments.¹⁶ In the waybooks such as *Letters from Gourgonnel* we learn about his *Walden*-like renovations to a dilapidated cottage in the Ardèche, while in *Across the Territories* we have excursions to places like Orkney where some rather unremarkable things happen before he returns home. Quite simply, White avoids the trappings of narrative. For him it is a construct, a fantasy of coherence in which the mind alters and reshapes the

world in its own image. To an extent this may be perfectly fair. But taken to its natural conclusion, this position includes *all* structurings of the mind – the very nature of consciousness itself. It assumes that language itself isn't ordered, that thought isn't symbolic, and that the mind exists apart from what it perceives – the subject/object split, which White explicitly opposes.¹⁷ So what to make of his approach? It might help to consider his belief in 'the possibility of a clear and powerful language, able to say a presence and a transparency' and, more specifically, 'a language freed of principal structure, a language simpler, more direct, closer to the "physics" of the universe.'¹⁸ Such an ethos implies that a difference in degree eventually becomes a difference in kind. That is, a minimal order nudges us toward a state of clarity and 'whiteness,' as he might phrase it, in which we are more likely to apprehend things as *things* rather than the instruments of our own thoughts. 'Sheer physicality,' as White states elsewhere. The artificial -isms and -ologies fall away to expose our 'earth-sense'.¹⁹

No doubt an 'earth-sense' is crucial if we are to engage as directly as possible with everything non-human. Yet equally crucial to that engagement is a 'word-sense' in which language is understood not as window dressing that distracts us from an otherwise transparent medium, but rather as an element in perception itself. Simply put, removing the window dressing doesn't actually remove the window. It just makes it harder to see. And so I stand behind some rather thick plate glass, where I hereby declare that narrative arises directly from the earth itself. Make of that what you will – that is, make your own narrative, which comes from the provocative contact of text and terrain, landscape and mindscape, black and White. This requires a new cartography, a new kind of 'map'. As a working solution, then, I propose the following: let's adopt the term Landscape-Mindscape, and let's acknowledge that it includes a load-bearing hyphen with a tensile strength of approximately $\infty - 1$ pounds per square inch. Let's go to Kilmartin Glen to find the future in the past. Let's carve the rock not in a predetermined pattern, but in a way that the grain and texture and glacial scourings suggest, following the fissures and cracklines where they lead us quite naturally – that is, into the unitary symbolism of rock itself.

Notes

- 1 Kenneth White, 'Meditation in Winter' in *The Wanderer and His Charts* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), p.63.
- 2 Francis H. Groome, *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland*, 6 vols (Edinburgh, William Mackenzie, 1882), I, p.69.
- 3 Letter to Michele Besso's family (15 March 1955), reprinted in Tabatha Yeatts, *Albert Einstein: The Miracle Mind* (New York: Sterling, 2007).
- 4 James Hutton, *Theory of the Earth*, 2 vols (Charleston: Bibliobazaar, 2007), I, p.101.
- 5 Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (Oxford: Berg, 1994) pp.197-99.
- 6 Tilley, p.75.
- 7 Tilley, pp.10-11.
- 8 Tilley, p.27.
- 9 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), pp.17-18.
- 10 Kenneth White, 'What is World Writing?' in *On the Atlantic Edge* (Dingwall: Sandstone, 2006), p.20.
- 11 Kenneth White, 'What is Geopoetics?' <www.geopoetics.org.uk/welcome/what-is-geopoetics>
- 12 Kenneth White, 'A Highland Reconnaissance' in *On the Atlantic Edge* (Dingwall: Sandstone, 2006), p.71.
- 13 White, 'What is World Writing?', p.19.
- 14 Kenneth White, 'Along the Atlantic Coast' in *The Wanderer and His Charts* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2004), p.123.
- 15 For an unsparing critique of White's work, particularly as it relates to the context of his reception in France, see Gavin Bowd, 'Rimbaud in a sporran? The French Scotland of Kenneth White,' *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 2: 1, (2008): 171-86.
- 16 Kenneth White, *Open World: The Collected Poems 1960-2000* (Edinburgh, 2003)
- 17 Kenneth White, 'Elements of Geopoetics,' *Edinburgh Review*, 88 (1992), p.169.
- 18 White, p.170.
- 19 Kenneth White, 'North Atlantic Investigations' in *On the Atlantic Edge* (Dingwall: Sandstone, 2006), p.45.