

I write this from the Greater Govan area of Glasgow. The room from which I do much of my work looks directly on to a wire-tangled telephone pole, a tall Victorian chimney, and the red brick back end of a factory with a gleaming corrugated iron roof.

That and the sky are all I see. Yet I grew up on the moors and lochs of the Isle of Lewis. What drew my wife, Vèrène, and I here nearly five years ago was involvement with a local community regeneration group, the GalGael Trust. Participants in our training programme develop skills for life by learning to work with natural materials. Even though we're all living in the heart of a city, it's the wildness, the connection ultimately to wilderness beyond, that makes the difference in the magic breaking through.

For me, the wild starts beneath my window. We've two compost bins there, seething with tiger worms, millipedes and countless little critters of the soil. By digging garden ponds, we've successfully brought frogs back to the area. A local housewife wasn't too impressed to find them hibernating in her house, but the kids love it. One little girl cast her eye mischievously towards Vèrène and asked, "Alastair, what's a French woman doing with frogs in her garden?"

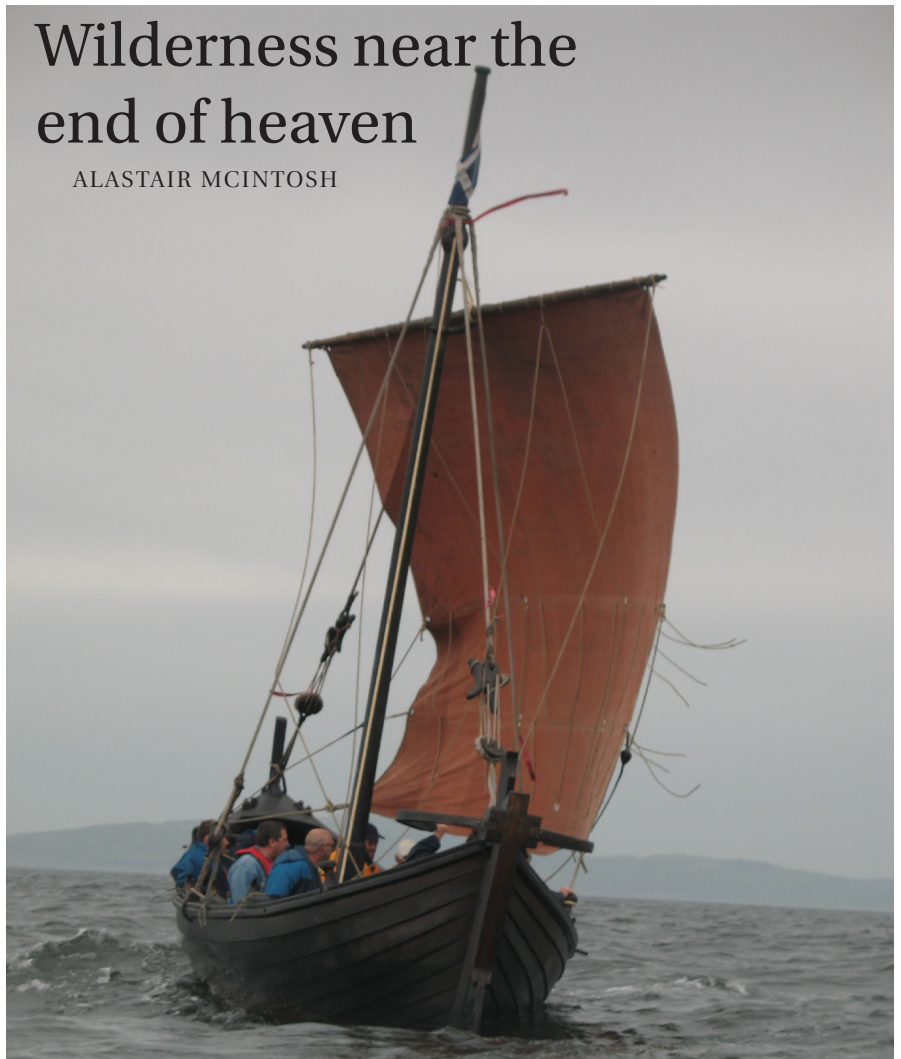
From my window I run my eye down the garden. That factory wall is great for the cherries, plums and pears. The telegraph pole's a summertime tangle of morning glories. And the other day I watched three swans in majestic procession pass high over the Victorian chimney. For beyond all the human frenzy of poverty-torn Govan winds the River Clyde. And once, when out in one of the traditional boats built in our GalGael workshop, I even watched a salmon leap as we tied up alongside the Braehead shopping centre to go and fetch Irn Bru.

For many people who grew up in an area like this, the river was never accessible. Most of it was blocked off, an estuarine ooze fished from time to time by police frogmen. But getting out in a boat changes that. You enter into the river's life in a way that's just not possible from the scenic heights of a traffic jam on the Kingston Bridge. As one of the crew said, "GalGael gave us back our river."

The truth is that a TV up a high-rise is a travesty of the real world. People need to see that no city is an island, entire unto itself. All cities are nested into the wildness and the wilderness beyond. There's an asymmetry here, for the city relies ecologically on its rural hinterland in a way that the hinterland does not rely upon the city.

## Wilderness near the end of heaven

ALASTAIR MCINTOSH



Not infrequently at academic conferences, I meet people better used to handling pencils than oars, who come out with statements like, "Nature is just a social construction, created by people who mostly live in cities."

Recently I heard a scholar use precisely those words at a conference hosted by the University of Ulster. She taught postmodern something-or-other in some city somewhere, and we'd been wryly pitched together on the panel for a rip-roaring debate. I'd heard this idea expressed before, but it still leaves me gobsmacked every time.

"Madam!," I replied, in a voice like a Monsanto manicured lawn about to undergo a volcanic eruption. "If that's what you really think, would you kindly stop drinking from your plastic bottle, because water's no social construction . . . it comes from real nature in real places somewhere out there."

"Oh," she protested, "but the city produces water! It rains on cities too, you know."

Those were her actual words!

"Well cities don't produce much oxygen," I replied, abandoning all decorum now and letting rip to the blizzard within. "So would you kindly speed up the experiment, and hold your breath? Then we'll see how long this particular 'social construction' of nature lasts!"

We made it up afterwards, but in my view such notions betray the poverty of perspective that comes about when folks get cut off from the elemental truths of fire, air, earth and water. That's why a river helps. We need contexts in which to take bearings on reality and find anchor points on solid bottom.

In his classic study of Celtic place names, Professor W J Watson suggested that the name, 'Clyde,' pertains to the Brythonic river goddess, also known as Clud, Cludoita, Clutha or Clwyd. Some believe that her waters are good for treating seizures. In the GalGael's experience that is very true. For

1 GalGael in their birlinn, the Orcuan, on the Firth of Clyde (Photo: Andy Bowman)

2 The GalGael in the Orcuan, on the Clyde (Photo: Bernie Whyte)

as people row down through the tresses of this particular Goddess in all her moods of silver and blue, golden and green, and sail out into the wildness beyond, seizures at the core of being start to loosen their grip.

I'm not worried whether a gateway to reality like the Firth of Clyde is technically 'wilderness' or not. It's enough that it feels so in a small boat. What matters is that when people get to experience natural wildness in a properly supported context, their own inner elementality - those swirling strains of fire, air, earth and water - settles to a greater harmony. The poet Iain Crichton Smith said, "Scenery after all is only a reflection of the psyche." For evidence of this ultimate commonality of human and wild nature, listen to Gaelic song and examine, too, old photographs of people who have lived lives well settled into their place. These reveal a people grounded in their natural ecology. But when this diminishes, little wonder the human ecology gets dysfunctional too.

That's why it is important, wherever we can, to connect to real-life communities of place. It helps a person to develop all-round responsibility - the ability to respond to life. That, too, is what makes it vital to understand and respect the 'elders' of community - those who embody the spirit of a place.

It is not just the plants and wildlife adapted to a place that are special. It's also the people rooted there. They, too, must not be trampled. Every time I go back to the north and west it vexes me to see how divided between indigenous and incomer some

of our communities have become. In my opinion, the need to reconcile this is the greatest challenge facing environmental organisations in Scotland today.

I side with the indigenous on this. They are the guardians of place. If the guest behaves insensitively and prematurely takes over the guesthouse, it short-circuits deeply held cultural principles of hospitality for the short term and fostership for permanence. That breaks a sacred gift and spoils it for everybody.

The type of incomer who comes only to buy the view, or to speculate in what they rudely call 'property,' pours poison on how local people can thereafter relate to their own environment. It jaundices the very notion of nature and environmentalism. Because 'the environment' is all that 'they' - the incomer - sometimes seems to care about, it becomes a proxy for 'them,' for 'their type,' and for what too often comes over as their loud, pushy, patronising and colonising ways.

And that's something that I can say, indeed, must say, for I've seen it from both sides. I was born in England and raised in Scotland of a Scottish father and an English mother.

Happily, there are positive signs of organisations and individuals starting to face such divisions and work towards greater cohesion of community for the future. I see it, for example, where environmental agencies put their weight solidly behind community land buy-outs. I see it also in that other type of incomer

- the one who comes to share and not just take - offering perhaps considerable skills in the cause of local community regeneration.

Let me draw this discussion back to the city and its rural context. In the early 1980s, unemployment in Clydebank rose to 30% as the shipyards closed. My friend, Duncan MacLaren, a Gaelic poet of that town, wrote:

"Bruach Chluaidh. Bidh brudair air uair agam 's tu nad eilean air bhog eadar Ceann Bharraidh agus Nèimh ... Clydebank ... I sometimes dream that you are an island afloat between Barra Head and the end of Heaven and that the only speech on the tongues of your people is the language of the Hebrides and the mists would put a poultice on your stinking houses and it wouldn't be vomit on the street but bogcotton and your rusty river would be a dark-green sea. And, in the faces of your people, the wrinkles of their misery would only be the lash of wind and waves and your grinding poverty would somehow be diminished ... agus thigeadh lughdachadh air do bhochdainn chràidh."

Such vomit and bogcotton is no social construction. And yet, people are integral to it. Their identity, perhaps like that of us all to varying degrees, flows as an umbilical tide between the worlds of 'civilisation' and 'wilderness'.

Nobody here tries to usurp the elements. Nature is accepted on its own terms, with humility, indeed, with a grace that unfolds into Providence.

The wrinkles on people's faces and the waves on the sea are of one ordering.

For this is true nature wild. And near the end of Heaven, where the lash of sorrow's waves dissolve to tears of tenderness, this is human nature too. ☐

#### THE AUTHOR

■ Alastair McIntosh is author of *Soil and Soul*. His most recent books are *Rekindling Community and Hell and High Water: Climate Change, Hope and the Human Condition*.

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