

Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity



**A Complementary Contribution to the
Global Biodiversity Assessment**



among humans, one after another, risking their lives to crossfire, to see if we have yet learned to put down our weapons, to see if we have yet learned to engage with compassion.

Psychospiritual effects of biodiversity loss in Celtic culture and its contemporary geopoetic restoration (Alastair McIntosh)

In 1743 the last wild wolf in Scotland was shot by a hunter named McQueen on the territory of my tribal clan, Mackintosh, in the upper reaches of the Findhorn River (Harting 1972). Three years later, and in the same region, the last battle to be fought on mainland British soil, Culloden, put an end to the old culture of the Scottish Highlands in an act of internal colonial conquest by the consolidating British state. This marked the onset of the 'Highland Clearances', whereby some half a million people were forced off their land to make way for sheep ranching and blood sports. Today, Scotland retains a feudal system in which nearly two-thirds of its private land is owned by only about 1,000 people – one fiftieth of one percent of the population.

It was doubtless coincidence that a significant element of ecocide, the wolf's local extinction, preceded cultural genocide. But in terms of psychohistory, it is possible that the events were connected. Gaelic traditions of (Celtic) Scotland and Ireland suggest that we must understand the psychospiritual impact of historical processes of degradation in our relationship to nature in order to create an authentic human ecology. This lies at the core of 'sustainable development' and, from a Celtic cultural perspective, it is in part a spiritual process. Spirituality is about interconnection, thus the loss of the wolf, or any other depletion of biodiversity, can be seen as a loss of an aspect of our extended selves. Such a principle of deep ecology is therefore germane to indigenous Celtic spirituality.

Celtic 'bards' or poets were in touch with the equivalent of our song-lines and dreamtime. A growing body of evidence, much as yet unpublished, points to their shamanic role and technique, including things like the use of *tigh n' alluis* or Irish sweat lodges for *dercad* meditation, leading to a state of *sitchain* or mystical peace (Ellis 1995). However, from the repressive 1609 Statutes of Iona onwards, the bards' role in maintaining cultural and ecological processes was repressed or marginalized. As in so many colonized traditional societies around the world, poetic power, by which the deep Spirit was expressed through socio-political structures, was replaced by the power of money and money as power.

Celtic nature poetry

The earliest recorded Celtic nature poetry reveals an acute sensitivity to the wild which is often intermingled with Christian devotional material. It illustrates Celtic Christianity's most distinctive feature – God and nature. The highest flowering of early Celtic nature poetry, from the eighth to the twelfth century, reveals a creation-centred theology that anticipated, by at least a millennium, modern ecotheology and deep ecology.

Consider the representative passages I have linked together here, mostly from Seamus Heaney's translation of *Sweeney Astray*. Heaney draws on a relatively late, seventeenth century Irish manuscript, but one that had probably taken shape in the ninth century, which starts with the Battle of Moira of 637CE. In it, Suibhne or Sweeney, a seventh-century Irish or possibly Scottish 'king, saint or holy fool', is sent 'mad' in battle by a cleric's curse. This was a shamanic madness or *geilt*. It projects him on a journey where he falls in love with nature and becomes a poet of deep ecology. He reconciles easily such 'paganism' with Christ, but frequently challenges the clerical efforts then being made to build an institutional church. Transformed by the 'curse and miracle' of his affliction into a bird, Suibhne flies around Ireland and the west of Scotland, where he contemplates for six weeks in St. Donan's Cave on the Hebridean Isle of Eigg. And he proclaims:

'I perched for rest and imagined cuckoos calling across water, the Bann cuckoos, calling sweeter than church bells that whinge and grind ... From lonely cliff tops, the stag bells and makes the whole glen shake and re-echo. I am ravished. Unearthly sweetness shakes my breast. O Christ, the loving and the sinless, hear my prayer, attend, O Christ, and let nothing separate us. Blend me forever in your sweetness ... I prefer the badgers in their sett to the tally-ho of the morning hunt; I prefer the re-echoing belling of a stag among the peaks to that arrogant horn ... Though you think sweet, yonder in your church, the gentle talk of your students, sweeter I think the splendid talking the wolves make in Glenn Bolcain. Though you like the fat and meat which are eaten in the drinking halls, I like better to eat a head of clean water-cress in a place without sorrow ...' (Heaney 1984: 19, 20, 43; Jackson 1971: 255)

Typical of actual historical accounts that reveal the importance of nature is a Gaelic song,

translated by Michael Newton (personal correspondence) as *'O Green Morvern of the Hills'*. It was written by Donald Mackinnon, 'Domhnall Ruadh', a West Highland bard, between 1845 and 1860. MacKinnon laments both the ecological and the social changes heralded after a wealthy Londoner, Octavius Smith, bought the 'property' in 1845 and cleared the indigenous people away to other lands on the tall ships to create space for ecologically devastating sheep ranching.

O green Morvern of the hills
 You look full of despair and sorrow
 The situation has become very desperate
 That you might turn completely into a wasteland

The reason for my sadness
 Is to be gazing at your hills
 Down beside the Sound of Mull
 Toward the ships of tall masts

It is your non-native lords
 Who left the natives dispossessed
 And who let the people who don't belong to you
 Dwell in their place ...

They called you 'land of the woods'
 And there was a time when you deserved that
 But today your woods have been denuded
 By the people of the pale-faces

A modern example, that emphasizes the need for healing such alienation or 'anomie', comes from Clydebank, an industrial town down the river from Glasgow. Here my friend, the contemporary Gaelic poet who was born there, Duncan MacLaren (personal communication), dreams of his people's Hebridean origins and yearns for rustic frugality rather than the multiple deprivation of urban decay where unemployment, during the 1980s, exceeded thirty percent:

Bruach Chluaidh. Bidh Bruadar air uair agam 's tu nad eilean air bhog eadar Barraidh 's ceann an Neimh ... Clydebank – I sometimes dream that you are an island afloat between Barra 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 bog-cotton 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 bhoichdainn chraidh.

Cauterization of the heart?

The evidence I have touched upon from the bardic record suggests that the human heart became cauterized by historical vicissitudes – broken and sealed off from its cause of suffering. Could it be that, at an unconscious level, most of us still carry such echoes of that painful past? Could it be that we accumulate the effects of bygone extinctions, degradations and colonizations, and that these inhibit our ability to act; bind us in our apparent powerlessness to resolve the major issues of our times? Is there a parallel here with other forms of 'intergenerational trauma' such as sexual abuse, addiction and violence that can be handed down from generation to generation within families?

Robert Burns (1759–1796), the most acclaimed bard of Scotland, lived in the immediate aftermath of Culloden. In his two-verse poem, *Strathallan's Lament* (1767), he brilliantly illustrates the psychology of despair that lies behind cultural genocide. I have alluded to how ecocide depletes culture. Here we see the counterpoint – repression of culture setting in place the preconditions of ecocide. Burns stands himself in the shoes of the fifth Viscount Strathallan whose Highland father was killed by the forces of the British state at Culloden (1746). He portrays this battle as having left behind an emotionally vacant modern world 'without a friend'; one in which the ravishes of neither nature nor friendship (the 'busy haunts of base mankind') could be appreciated. The ability to feel had indeed been cauterized; the very ability to perceive reality, altered. As the thatched houses of peasant farmer and fisher crofters were set ablaze by the 'butcher' Cumberland's vanquishing troops – who had been ordered to give 'Bonnie Prince Charlie's' retreating soldiers of the 1745 Jacobite uprising 'no quarter' – the soul of a people resisting the unacceptable heartlessness of the forces of modernity was dealt a near-mortal blow:

Thickest night, surround my dwelling!
 Howling tempests, o'er me rave!
 Turbid torrents wintry-swelling,
 Roaring by my lonely cave!
 Crystal streamlets gently flowing,
 Busy haunts of base mankind,
 Western breezes softly blowing,
 Suit not my distracted mind.

In the cause of Right engaged,
 Wrongs injurious to redress,
 Honour's war we strongly waged,
 But the heavens deny'd success.

Ruin's wheel has driven o'er us;
Not a hope that dare attend,
The wide world is all before us,
But a world without a friend

(Mackay 1993: 287)

Towards a cultural psychotherapy

I consider that the renewal of community and the cultural spirit comes about in considerable degree through re-connection with the deep poetics of place – that is, with the totems and their expression of underlying psychospiritual dynamics. This is broadly what the Scots poet Kenneth White (1992: 174) calls, 'Poetry, geography – and a higher unity: *geopoetics*'. Such a mythopoetic underpinning rehabilitates, after four centuries, the repressed bardic tradition. But can what amounts to a psychotherapy be effective as a change agent?

Conscientization, as Freire (1972) would call it, partly through a geopoetic approach, was used over a seven-year period in helping to bring about land reform on the Isle of Eigg in the Scottish Hebridean islands (McIntosh 1997). A community of some sixty-five people were assisted, by me, many others, and not least themselves, to waken up to their history, grasp a vision of what it could be like if seven generations of oppressive landlordism were put behind them, and develop the unity and media know-how that enabled them to repel the landlord's 1994 attempt to evict 12 percent of the population for no apparent good reason, except, perhaps, that they were starting to speak out and take responsibility for their own emancipation. The process finally resulted in the island coming into community ownership on 12 June 1997. Partners with the community in the process were both the local authority, Highland Council, and the Scottish Wildlife Trust – a unique unity of social and conservation interests.

Part of the community's empowerment process involved erecting two standing stones – one of which had last stood some 5,000 years previously when the ancient forests were at their maximum post-glacial extent. Another part entailed an only-half-joking identification with legends about Amazonian 'big women' on Eigg by some of the women activists who played lead roles. A further element was the organizing of the first traditional *feis* (music festival) to be held in modern times. This restored a respect for indigenous arts and knowledge, as communicated by some of the elderly residents who had thought it would die with them. For some, the two pairs of eagles resident on the island, and the oystercatcher associated with St. Bride (Bridgit, the Goddess

Brigh), and the little flowers through which 'God can be seen', played privately empowering roles.

I have used a similar geopoetic process in my work opposing the proposed Isle of Harris 'super-quarry'. This would turn the biggest mountain in the south of this National Scenic Area in the Outer Hebrides into road aggregate. Initially, the community were 90 percent in favour of the quarry because of promised jobs. It was clear that conventional arguments alone were not sufficiently going to shift local opinion. Working in close liaison with other objectors, I arranged for the Rev. Prof. Donald MacLeod of the Free Church College in Edinburgh and Canadian Mi'kmaq Warrior Chief and sacred peace pipe carrier, Sulian Stone Eagle Herney, to give evidence at the inquiry with me on theological grounds. This approach reached to the taproot of vernacular values in what is a deeply Calvinist culture. The relevance of Stone Eagle was that, although not a Christian, his people were also alienated from their tribal lands – ironically, in large measure, by cleared Highland settlers. They are now subject to a super-quarry threat at their sacred mountain, *Kluscap* (Kelly's Mountain). In effect, the theological testimony drew out a Judeo-Christian ecology which received extensive local, national, and international media coverage.

At the conclusion of the government public inquiry on Harris (which has yet to report its findings), the island's chosen representative, John MacAulay, summed up the cultural, economic and environmental importance of the mountain. He said, 'It is not a 'holy mountain' but is certainly worthy of reverence for its place in Creation'. ('Let the people of Harris decide on their own future', *West Highland Free Press*, 9 June 1995, 5).

Reverence towards nature and one another is the keystone of 'sustainable development'. As if to corroborate, the Irish-born Scottish-based theologian Fr. Noel O'Donoghue makes use of words almost identical to those chosen in Mr MacAulay's full statement to describe what he calls 'the mountain behind' such mountains: He writes in the context of discussing Kathleen Raine's poetry in his book which uses as its title an expression of hers, *The Mountain Behind the Mountain*:

'The mountain behind the mountain is not the perfect or ideal mountain in some Platonic sense ... [I]t is neither an ideal nor a mythical mountain, nor is it exactly a holy or sacred mountain made sacred by theophany or transfiguration. No, it is a very ordinary, very physical, very material mountain, a place of sheep and kine (cattle), of peat, and of streams that

one might fish in or bathe in on a summer's day. It is an elemental mountain, of earth and air and water and fire, of sun and moon and wind and rain. What makes it special for me and for the people from which I come is that it is a place of Presence and a place of presences. Only those who can perceive this in its ordinariness can encounter the mountain behind the mountain.' (O'Donoghue 1993, 30–31).

Thus the ancient Celtic world-view has a place even in modern political debate. It suggests that to open ourselves to sustainable life-ways, we must cut through the conspiracy of silence that marginalizes the cultural and the spiritual in modernist and postmodernist nihilism. Only then can we hope to know the wolf that remains alive in our souls; the mountain behind the mountain; the ecological self underlying the urbanized self. Only then can we glimpse the further reaches of reality, which is the sole font of values often perceived but dimly.

The ecology of animism (David Abram)

Late one evening, I stepped out of my little hut in the rice paddies of eastern Bali and found myself falling through space. Over my head the black sky was rippling with stars, densely clustered in some regions, almost blocking out the darkness between them, and more loosely scattered in other areas, pulsing and beckoning to each other. Behind them all streamed the great river of light, with its several tributaries. But the Milky Way churned beneath me as well, for my hut was set in the middle of a large patchwork of rice paddies, separated from each other by narrow two-foot high dikes, and these paddies were all filled with water. The surface of these pools, by day, reflected perfectly the blue sky – a reflection broken only by the thin, bright green tips of new rice. But by night, the stars themselves glimmered from the surface of the paddies, and the river of light whirled through the darkness underfoot as well as above; there seemed no ground in front of my feet, only the abyss of star-studded space falling away forever.

I was no longer simply beneath the night sky, but also above it. The immediate impression was of weightlessness. I might perhaps have been able to reorient myself, to regain some sense of ground and gravity, were it not for a fact that confounded my senses entirely: between the galaxies below and the constellations above drifted countless fireflies, their lights flickering like the stars, some drifting up to join the clusters of stars overhead, others, like graceful meteors, slipping down from above to join the

constellations underfoot, and all these paths of light upward and downward were mirrored, as well, in the still surface of the paddies. I felt myself at times falling through space, at other moments floating and drifting. I simply could not dispel the profound vertigo and giddiness; the paths of the fireflies, and their reflections in the water's surface, held me in a sustained trance. Even after I crawled back to my hut and shut the door on this whirling world, I felt that now the little room in which I lay was itself floating free of the earth.

Fireflies! It was in Indonesia, you see, that I was first introduced to the world of insects, and there that I first learned of the great influence that insects, such diminutive entities, could have upon the human senses. I had travelled to Southeast Asia in order to study magic; more precisely, to study the relationship between magic and medicine, first among the traditional sorcerers, or *dukuns*, of the Indonesian archipelago, and later among the *dzankris*, the traditional shamans of Nepal. One aspect of my research was somewhat unique: I was journeying through rural villages not outwardly as an anthropologist or academic researcher, but as a magician in my own right, in hopes of gaining a more direct access to the local sorcerers. I had been a professional sleight-of-hand magician for five years back in the United States, helping to put myself through college by performing in clubs and restaurants throughout New England. I had, as well, taken a year off from my studies in the psychology of perception to travel as a street magician through Europe, and toward the end of that journey had spent some months in London, England, exploring the use of sleight-of-hand magic in psychotherapy, as a means of engendering communication with distressed individuals largely unapproachable by clinical healers. The success of this work suggested to me that sleight-of-hand might lend itself well to the curative arts, and I became, for the first time, interested in the relation, largely forgotten in the West, between folk-medicine and magic.

It is thus that, two years later, I embarked upon my sojourn as a magician in rural Asia. There, my sleight-of-hand skills proved invaluable as a means of stirring the curiosity of the local shamans. For magicians, whether modern entertainers or indigenous, tribal sorcerers, have in common the fact that they work with the malleable texture of perception. When the local sorcerers gleaned that I had at least some rudimentary skill in altering the common field of perception, I was invited into their homes, asked to share secrets with them, and eventually encouraged, even urged, to participate in various rituals and ceremonies.