

# Walker's heaven in a fence post

David Chillingworth savours a pilgrim's rugged pathways

**Poacher's Pilgrimage: An island journey**  
Alastair McIntosh  
Birlinn £20  
(978-1-78027-361-7)  
Church Times Bookshop £18

THIS is a lovely book. Alastair McIntosh tells the story of a return to the landscape of his childhood, the remote Outer Hebridean islands of Lewis and Harris. Over a 12-day pilgrimage — a tough landscape in often appalling conditions — he walks from the most southerly tip of Harris to the northerly Butt of Lewis.

It is a linear journey. But it is also an exploration of the vertical strata of the history and culture of the islands. History and ecology are interwoven with a rich exploration of faith and culture — Christian, Gaelic, Celtic, and pre-Christian. McIntosh manages to be both deeply knowledgeable and poetic in a way that enables the reader to share something of the personal reintegration that he found on his pilgrimage.

The map at the front of the book is just the starting-point for the journey. He describes pilgrimage as a “conscious invitation to unconscious experience”, and sets off into a primal world, reminding us that “civilisation is only four days deep.” I smile at McIntosh’s quotation from his friend Dr Finlay, who describes the present rigorous Calvinism of the islands as “the more strident forms of belief which arrived on the islands during subsequent centuries”.

So his pilgrimage continues. He leaves behind what Yeats described as a “society which has cast out imaginative tradition”, and begins to travel through a more mythic world. That mythic world is a place that we lose if we try to “drive too sharp a wedge between fact and fable”. The charm of this book is that it somehow manages to reveal

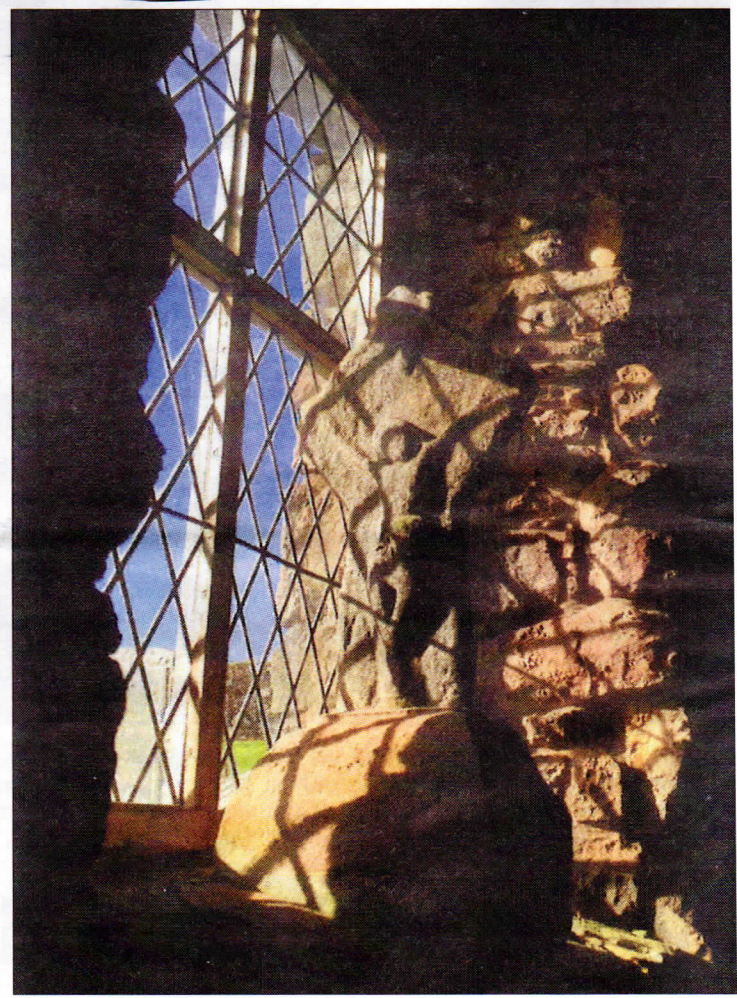
what we think of as the objective and empirical as being a limited and flat-footed way of thinking about, and experiencing, the world.

And yet, as he walks through this landscape of the spirit and the imagination, he is also capable of pausing to focus on just one thing. The most memorable for me was “heaven in a fence post”: a description of an entire eco-system in the top of a rotting post. There are mosses, lichens, and weird transparent jelly with “all manner of wee critters that creep and burrow”.

All this could be dismissed as whimsy and nostalgic escapism. But, if that was all to be said for it, it could not bring about the healing and reintegration that he was seeking on his pilgrimage. It is as if our secular society has battered down the hatches on anything of the poetic, or mythic, or fairies, or anything of other worlds or other ways of experiencing things. And yet McIntosh manages to be multilingual in all these worlds in a way that allows some measure of creative translation between them.

In another of his micro-descriptions, he struggles in the dark and finally crosses a fence, saying: “I’ve crossed the threshold through both land and mind.”

This is a book to savour, and a book to give. It is remarkable and



unusual in its deep knowledge and its spiritual versatility.

*The Most Revd David Chillingworth is the Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld & Dunblane, and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church.*

Hebridean crucifix: Christ of St Clement's Church, Isle of Harris, carved in the sparkling hornblende schist found locally. It was dug up in the churchyard during renovation works. From *Poacher's Pilgrimage*

TIMOTHY KELLER, the Presbyterian pastor and popular author, has written a short hardback gift book that covers a great deal of ground: **Hidden Christmas: The surprising truth behind the birth of Christ** (Hodder & Stoughton, £12.99 (£11.70); 978-1-473-64258-4). Keller, noticing how the New York stores now play “Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas” rather than “Joy to the World”, seeks to expound the Good News of the season biblically. His references to the *New York Times*, his life in the US, and Hollywood films will easily translate to the UK. He begins with a light dawning, continues with figures in the story, and concludes with “The Doctrine of Christmas”, where he emphasises “the most simple and ordinary act of humble asking”.

With academic rather than homiletic content, Simon Yarrow's **The Saints: A short history** is a pocket hardback with plenty of well-written text but slightly disappointing black-and-white photos. One chapter is on the Virgin Mary; others cover the Early Church, the Middle Ages, gender, hagiography, “Globalizing Sanctity”, and the modern period (with an emphasis on Roman canonisation practice up to Pope Francis). There are an index, suggestions for further reading, and

Diarmaid McCulloch's endorsement (OUP, £10.99 (£9.90); 978-0-19-878438-8).

**Pause for Thought** is a collection of brief reflections on modern life originally broadcast in the mornings on Radio 2. In a foreword, the DJs Chris Evans and Vanessa Feltz testify to the value and popularity of this strand (Watkins, £12.99 (£11.70); 978-1-78028-980-9). Contributors include Richard Coles, Kate Bottley, Joanna Jepson, Pam Rhodes, Julia Neuberger, Paul Kerensa, Malcolm Doney, Mike Starkey, and many others. The scrapbookish design includes listeners' photos of “wow” moments, sent in to an online gallery.

A traditional hardback from Watkins is **Prayer for the Day, Volume II: More reflections for daily inspiration**, originally broadcast in the early morning on Radio 4. Contributors (brief biographies are given) are mainly but not exclusively Christian. They include Sheila Watson, Richard Chartres, Barry Morgan, Jane Wootton, David Chillingworth, Tina Beattie, Joe Aldred, and Tom Wright — and some overlap with *Pause for Thought*. There are a reflection and a prayer for each day of the calendar year, plus James Jones's foreword (£12.99 (£11.70); 978-1-78028-966-3).