

Finding My Way Home

I'm standing by the derelict remains of Eldrig farmhouse,
Its roofless shell the symbol of a heritage that's lost. I'm looking South.
A mile or two away, the headland called the Mull of Galloway
Brings Scotland to its end.
To my left the sun is glinting on Luce Bay
And to my right there is the Irish Sea.
This lush green ridge no more than half a mile in width,
Was home to generations of my clan.

I lift a stone, about the same size as my hand
And set off with it down the sloping field.
The cattle raise their heads and then continue grazing.
My destination is the village of Portnessock
On the rocky coastline of the Irish Sea.
I'm following the path my father took to school.

Before I leave the farm and reach the muddy road
I stop to climb a mound on which there is a cairn,
A pile of stones to which my father added one each day,
A practice learned from those who went before him.
I place my stone and wonder if this tor was meant
To be a marker to some person or event, or was it just to see how high it got?
To me it points to continuity, to permanence, to everything I've lacked.
My father's aspirations took him far from here; his roots were left to wither.

At boarding school before the age of eight, I had no sense that I belonged
In that grim town which housed our school.
We descended in our hundreds, like a flock of shouting gulls,
And like the gulls we lodged there for a term.
We lacked the seagulls' grace, but shared their haughtiness.
We scorned the native children; we referred to them as 'keelies'
Which my dictionary tells me is a 'Scottish urban thug'.

I spent three-quarters of my childhood in that town, but we were kept apart,
Its premises were out of bounds to us.

I'm back in Galloway once more.

I'm sitting on a stone wall in the churchyard at Kirkmaiden

And the gravestone I've been seeking is close by.

It has a look of modesty among its neighbours.

They're mostly made of granite and their deeply incised letters

Will recount their family stories till the end of time.

Our weathered sandstone slab will not much longer tell us

That my ten-times great grandfather died in 1757.

This was Peter, tenant in the farm of Eldrig,

We can still read on the stone.

The landscape spread before me from my perch upon the wall

Was all the world that Peter knew. I'm seeing through his eyes.

And I could tell you who was here to bury Peter on that day.

I know their ages and their names and sometimes a bit more.

I'm standing there among them, in my mind.

In seeking out these people I've been trying to repair

The disconnection of my family from its past.

I wanted to recover its lost lore, but now it seems

That as I got to know the folk from whom I sprung

I wanted more than anything to know

That here at last was somewhere I belonged.

Jim McMurray