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Geologies

'All is lithogenesis.' The opening phrase from Hugh MacDiarmid's 1934 poem 'On a Raised Beach' sets out a relationship between stone and the written word that will serve as a starting point for this chapter's exploration of a growing interest in geology in British landscape writing.¹ The poem is another work from the periphery of the archipelago, thought to have been written during a three-day stay alone on the uninhabited West Linga in the Shetland Isles, an island composed largely of gneiss and schist with some intrusions of granite, much of which has been dated to around 420 million years (Lyll 2006: 121). The scale of the poem and of the poet's stay on the island seem impossibly insignificant against the scale of geological time, but it is in precisely such incongruity and discord that much of the poem's drama arises. The *OED* defines 'lithogenesis' as 'the production or origin of minerals or rocks' but, as the poem goes on, the word takes on other meanings as well that bring this chthonic force into relation with the writer's work. Alan Bold has described the stones of the poem as 'the embodiment of a creative intensity' for MacDiarmid (1983: 183). On one level this creative intensity broadens out towards the theological, gesturing to the 'Genesis' in 'lithogenesis': 'These stones go through Man, straight to God, if there is one' (MacDiarmid 1993: 179). On another level there is a narrowing in on something more human, gesturing to the poet's own (relatively) inadequate capacity for creation: 'My fingers over you, arris by arris ... / Bringing my aesthesis in vain to bear' ('arris' describes the sharp edge formed by two connected planes) (11–13). The 'All' of 'All is lithogenesis' flattens the boundaries between these meanings and grounds them on the presence of this ancient stone. It humbles the poet and human history shrinks

¹ References to the poem are given by line number to the 1934 edition as published in MacDiarmid (1993: 423–33).

under the combined glare of a geological and theological sense of deep time: 'Cold, undistracted, eternal and sublime' (192).

MacDiarmid continues with a passage that addresses the stones' resistance to language, setting a gulf between himself, the poet and writer, and the silence of the stones:

Deep conviction or preference can seldom
Find direct terms in which to express itself.
To-day on this shingle shelf
I understand this pensive reluctance so well,
This not discommendable obstinacy,
These contrivances of an inexpressive critical feeling,
These stones with their resolve that Creation shall not be
Injured by iconoclasts and quacks.

(25–32)

This is a poem of the highest reverence for Creation, but for Creation as *Creation*, for stone as stone, beyond the ways in which we have quarried and reconstituted it. In a later line that calls to mind Christ's temptation in the desert, MacDiarmid claims that 'bread from stones is my sole and desperate dearth' (68). The line refers to the Gospel of Luke in which Christ declines to turn stones to bread in the desert at the behest of Satan after fasting for forty days (Lk. 4.3). It is crucial for MacDiarmid (as for Christ) that there remains this negative capability, this 'dearth'. Temptation to make the stones anything else would be dark magic, the work of 'iconoclasts and quacks': 'We must reconcile ourselves to the stones, / Not the stones to us' (MacDiarmid 1993: 219).

Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jamie Kruse, the editors of a recent anthology of writing and artwork about geology published in the United States, have described what they call 'the contemporary geologic turn' in an 'emergent cultural sensibility' (2013: 18–19). It is a turn that draws its inspiration from a modernist tradition, to which MacDiarmid's poem here belongs, as it has been inherited by those concerned with the shifting relations of place and planet in a state of environmental crisis. It is concerned with fracture and discord, uncertainty and instability, a withdrawal of human primacy and a cautious self-reflexivity. Responding to the identification and naming of the Anthropocene among scientists, social scientists, historians and philosophers – in particular

to the recognition that we as a species have become ‘agents of planetary geologic change’ (8) – Ellsworth and Kruse began to gather together work that deployed ‘methods, models, ideas, and aesthetic experience ... that seek to recalibrate “the human” in relation to the “the geologic”’ (9). Environmentalism of the 1970s, they argue, was concerned with biosystems, our impacts on wildlife, forests and living ecology, whereas more recently attention has also been drawn deeper into the planet and further out into the sky.

The identification of anthropogenic climate change, superstorms like Katrina and Sandy, the earthquake, tsunamis and nuclear fallout of the Fukushima disaster, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and a new ‘sedimentary layer’ (24) of space debris floating above our heads have all encouraged us to expand the purview of environmentalism from the bio- to the geo-, to the whole planetary system: ‘No longer the inert matter outside of ourselves that is there to support us and our buildings, the geologic is a cascade of events. Humans and what we build participate in their unfolding’ (25). Reconciling ourselves to the stones today does not mean quite what it did when MacDiarmid was writing. On the one hand, the urgency of the challenge has increased. On the other, with human beings as ‘agents of planetary geological change’ now, we may have already bent the stones too far to our own collective will. That flattening totality of ‘All is lithogenesis’ suddenly takes on a vertiginous and sinister connotation as the level of human agency no longer looks so small and insignificant.

As Timothy Clark has argued, one of the great dilemmas in understanding the human species as a geological force arises from the question of scale. It is *as a species* that we have altered the composition of the planet, not by way of intention, not even by way of any straightforward accident, but as the result of vast, cumulative and chaotic processes of emergence (2015: 8–9). As our individual actions get scaled up towards the complex species agency that puts pressure on earth systems a degree of interiority is lost. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, ‘Humans are biological agents, both collectively and as individuals. They have always been so. ... But we can become geological agents only historically and collectively’ (2009: 206). The challenge facing us now, as Clark suggests, is to recognize a ‘new reflexivity as a species’ through which the ‘human Leviathan achieves some kind of responsible consciousness’ (2015: 16–17). This is, of course, easier said than done. Considerable obstacles stand in the: at the scale of government and administration, we have political

short-termism incapable of regional and national planning up to fifty years into the future (Chakrabarty 2009: 212); at the scale of the individual, we have what Clark calls a 'withdrawal of affect' bringing on a kind of paralysis, an instinct for self-preservation in the face of seemingly insurmountable goals (2015: 160).

One contributor to *Making the Geological Now*, the Canadian poet Don McKay, suggests a way forward through an alliance between poetry and geology which chimes with the austere perspective of MacDiarmid's 'On a Raised Beach'. The effect of geology on poetry and the effect of poetry on geology determine a response that he considers instructive. 'Geology inhibits the tendency, most common in romantic poets, to translate the immediate perception into an emotional condition, which is then admired or fetishized in preference to the original phenomenon – fossil, bird, lichen or landform' (2013: 49). At the same time, however, poetry's capacity to slow things down, 'to experience astonishment and to stop in that astonishment for a long moment or two' (he is quoting Adam Zagajewski here) 'counteracts the tendency, perhaps most common in scientists in the grip of triumphalist technology, to reduce objects of contemplation to quanta of knowledge' (49). Together, poetry and geology bring on a hiatus in these patterns, a space for reflection on our conscious relationship, and unconscious entanglement, with the earth. It might not be what Clark ambitiously calls for in a 'new reflexivity as a species' but it does nonetheless stretch these Romantic and scientific sensibilities, enlarging our existing individualist reflexivity through a relationship to geology, and this might be a start. Ellsworth and Kruse conclude their introduction by arguing that the geologic in its vast scale of deep time, and in its dauntingly unpredictable, uncontrollable, seismic force, might be 'capable of instructing not only architecture and design practices, but everyday life as well' (2013: 26).

But what might everyday life look like under the instruction of the geologic? What might be different about a life attempting to reconcile itself to the stones in the twenty-first century? This chapter takes the possibility of this instruction, this hiatus and this elusive reconciliation as a starting point and explores 'lithogenesis', or the creative power of stone, in two ways. First, I discuss the 'geopoetics' of place writing in prose works by Kenneth White and Tim Robinson, suggesting ways in which they have attempted to engage with these kinds of relations to geology; attempts that have not necessarily succeeded.

In fact, I will argue that their failure to conciliate the human and the geologic nonetheless produces complex, plural and self-reflexive modalities of place writing that generate their own dynamic forms. Second, I consider the idea of a 'geopoetics' of place more broadly, insofar as it has inspired a place culture involving people and their environment on the Isle of Harris, with particular reference to the work of Alastair McIntosh, but also Tim Robinson. Here too any conciliation between people and environment is complicated in favour of the recognition that place too is fundamentally a dynamic and self-reflexive act. The sense in which we must 'reconcile ourselves to the stones' becomes, for White, an ongoing imperative for wider 'cultural renewal' that responds in ever more creative ways to the ground beneath our feet. In McIntosh's *Soil and Soul* (2001) we see a practical example of this in a project that revivifies a local community's sense of place and identity, grounding it and opening it up at one and the same time.

Clearings

In thinking about this dynamic and creative relationship between people, geology and writing we might turn to Heidegger's work on aesthetics, which differentiates between the concepts of 'earth' and 'world'. Exploring the spaces generated and produced through the entanglement of, and the tension between, these two concepts, Heidegger developed the idea of a 'clearing' (*Lichtung*). In 'The Origin of the Work of Art' he suggests that the materiality of the work is brought to the fore in all its obstinate presence (unlike e.g. the materiality of a tool, the effectiveness of which is measured by how much it vanishes to us through its use) (2002: 9–10). This intrusive material presence brought forth in the work of art is what he calls 'the earth'. 'The earth', Heidegger suggests, 'is openly illuminated as itself only where it is apprehended and preserved as the essentially undisclosable, as that which withdraws from every disclosure, in other words, keeps itself constantly closed up' (25). In fact, the metaphor he uses for earth is actually one of stone.

What is the earth, that it reaches the unconcealed in just this manner?
The stone presses downwards and manifests its heaviness. But while this
heaviness weighs down on us, at the same time, it denies us any penetration

into it. If we attempt such penetration by smashing the rock, then it shows us its pieces but never anything inward, anything that has been opened up. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull weight and mass of its fragments. If we try to grasp the stone's heaviness in another way, by placing it on a pair of scales, then we bring its heaviness into the calculable form of weight. This perhaps very precise determination of the stone is a number, but the heaviness of the weight has escaped us. (24–5)

'World', however, is quite the opposite and is inextricably bound up with human development: it is 'the self-opening openness of the broad paths of simple and essential decisions in the destiny of historical people' (26): in fact 'world' becomes a verb for Heidegger meaning a human-led opening up: *World worlds* (23). 'World and earth are essentially different,' he suggests, 'and yet never separated from one another. World is grounded on earth, and earth rises up through world' (26). But the relationship between the two in the work of art is always 'intrinsically belligerent' and based on 'strife' (*Streit*), each tangling to pull the other in its opposite direction (31). The space produced by this difficult entanglement, and hence the space of the work of art, he calls a 'clearing' (*Lichtung*). In the idea of the clearing, the physical presence of the work of art is crucial to its effect as it *lets the earth be earth* in a similar manner described by MacDiarmid in 'On a Raised Beach' and that McKay is arguing for in the alliance between poetry and geology (24).

More recently Jane Bennett has argued for what she calls 'a kind of geological affect or material vitality' that acknowledges an agency (or more specifically an 'actancy') to *things* and that explores our own emergence as beings in the middle of complex assemblages, or nature-culture entanglements (2010: 61). To do so is to expand the tensions at work in the idea of 'the clearing' from the realm of art and art alone, in Heidegger, to a broader and more urgent cultural work that responds to the disturbing diagnosis of the Anthropocene. But for such an acknowledgement of the agency of matter, Bennett argues, there must be a 'perceptual style congenial to the possibility of thing power' (2004: 350) which involves a certain 'naivete', a belief that we might encounter something of the material earth beyond its appearance as a collection of 'mediated' and 'humanized objects' (357). 'Yes,' she concedes, 'there is a sense in which any thing-power discerned is an effect of culture, and this insight is a valuable counter to moralistic appeals to "nature." But concentration on this insight

alone also diminishes any potential we might possess to render more *manifest* the world of nonhuman vitality' (357). Rendering manifest in this way, she suggests, is 'both to receive and to participate', to become responsively involved, intellectually and culturally, in the struggle that for Heidegger produced the work of art (2010: 17). We might contrast the difficulty and slowness of 'receiving and participating' that is at work in the opening of a clearing with the ease of *using and consuming* that is at work in the more familiar opening of a world. In Bennett, we can detect the development of the materialism of Heidegger's earth to see it not just as inert matter worked into art but as, in Ellsworth and Kruse's phrase again, 'a cascade of events' with which we are involved in ordinary life and which it endangers us to ignore.

Also central to the recognition of the earth as earth is what Onno Oerlemans has called the 'material sublime'. This is a 'recognition that it is possible to see at once how thought and existence are estranged from a clear awareness of the physical world, and that they are yet inexplicably rooted in it' (2002: 4). The written word, the poem itself, becomes the medium negotiating a relationship between the two, neither thought alone, nor matter, form, but a little of each, composing that very 'perceptual style congenial to the possibility of thing power' (Bennett 2004: 350). This relationship is no easy conciliation though; in fact, no conciliation at all but more like a brokered compromise. Oerlemans continues to suggest that 'although we can know much about the natural world, and can trace our cultural biological roots to natural objects and processes, we nevertheless experience consciousness as distinct' (2002: 11). This leads him to claim that 'thus any desire we may also feel for a reunion, for knowing our connection with the world, must be to some degree suspect' (11). For Oerlemans, this is 'the fundamental paradox that lies at the heart of environmentalist thinking, and forms its central conjunction with Romanticism' (11). Recent literary relations to stone and geology have proved particularly resistant to the kinds of Romantic and environmental 'reunion' with 'Nature' of which Oerlemans is so suspicious, those feelings of interanimation and reciprocal subjectivity that can lead to a sense of 'oneness' rather than to an existentially struggled-for relationship between two states that remain other to one another. The naive realism that brings us closer to Bennett's notion of vibrant matter, and the restraint put on the human tendency to open worlds in the work of art in Heidegger's notion

of the clearing, both emerge from the creative potential unlocked when we nurture a sensibility more alive to the intricacy and complexity, the difficulty and opacity, of the earth at our feet.

An encounter with stone or geology, like MacDiarmid's 'On a Raised Beach,' and others in prose that I will go on to examine, is an encounter with that quality of the earth that Heidegger describes which is most overtly resistant to us; an encounter with that which maintains the integrity of its otherness most strikingly. The writing occurs in an unbridged and unbridgeable gap but it is all the more interesting for this. It becomes a struggle, at the heart of which is not *mimesis* but *poesis*, an original articulation or presentation ('poesis' as 'creating or producing' (*OED*)) rather than an imitation or representation of something else. In this sense, the 'clearing,' for Heidegger, becomes a matter of announcing and generating an originary truth: 'Art is, then, a becoming and happening of truth' (2002: 44). Such a 'clearing' becomes a space of creative generation, a genesis in its own right, producing the space of a work of art. It may also be possible to think in this way about the creative production of a geographical space of human inhabitation. Such a space suggests an interesting connection between the poetics of place writing and the creativity of place culture. Like place writing, place culture might be a more self-reflexive art than is often popularly assumed and one for which the acknowledgement and revelation of non-human presences and agencies can be a resource helping us to understand place as an ongoing process of discovery, development, consensus and creation perpetually emerging out of dynamic entanglements of the human and the non-human (to which we will return in the final part of this chapter).

Geopoetics

In 1785, after delivering his second lecture 'Concerning the System of the Earth, Its Duration, and Stability' to the Edinburgh Royal Society, the 'famous fossil philosopher' Dr James Hutton set out on a series of field trips (qtd. in Repcheck 2003: 146). He was going in search of evidence to support his claim that the Earth was far more than 6,000 years old, a period arrived at from calculations made through interpreting the Book of Genesis and commonly

accepted among natural philosophers at the time. It was a controversial proposition, demanding as it did a Copernican leap of the imagination and, unsurprisingly, it was met with scepticism and misunderstanding. Little did even Hutton know that the planet would later come to be dated at closer to 4.6 billion years old. Just as significant, in its dismantling of a prevalent world view, was Hutton's suggestion that geomorphology was *ongoing*, that the 'fracture, flexure and contortion' of the earth was still at work beneath our very feet (Hutton qtd. in Repcheck 2003: 152).

After the lecture he travelled to Glen Tilt just south of the granite massif of the Cairngorms, to Cairnsmore of Fleet near the west coast, where great veins of granite may be seen intruding into the schist and sandstone from below. He took with him the artist John Clerk of Eldin who made sketches of the rocks that would serve to illustrate Hutton's theory (Furniss 2014: 568–71). He travelled along the coast of the Isle of Arran looking for violent disruptions in coastal strata. In the following passage, Hutton is looking south from Arran towards the smaller island of Pladda, and to Ailsa Crag beyond that, wondering if these diminishing islands were ever connected by land to Arran, Britain and even Europe behind him. A startling vision of the archipelago on the move emerges:

By thus ascertaining the first step in our cosmological speculation, we advance with some degree of certainty into the annals of a continent which does not now appear; and in tracing these operations which are past, we foresee distant events in the course of things. We see the destruction of a high island in the formation of a low one; and from those portions of the high land or continent which remain as yet upon the coast and in the sea, we may perceive the future destruction, not of so little island only, which has been saved from the wreck of so much land, but also of the continent itself, which is in time to disappear. Thus Pladda is to the Island of Arran what Arran is to the island of Britain, and what Britain is to the continent of Europe. (Hutton qtd. in Furniss 2014: 582)

It is an unsettling idea, a reminder of the tenuous hold such a vast enterprise as Britain (then only eighty years a United Kingdom) might have on the Earth. Extraordinary that a vision founded on stone could suggest so vividly that the archipelago was in dynamic flux, that islands, nations and even continents were in such fluid relationship with one another.

Geology as just such an intrusion of the earth onto a prevailing worldview, as a destabilizing cultural influence that can open its own worlds in us, has been a driving force behind the essayist Kenneth White and the Franco-Scottish literary movement known as 'geopoetics' that he has spear-headed. White established 'L'Institut International de Géopoétique' in France in 1989 and a Scottish Centre for Geopoetics was opened by Tony McManus in 1995. In an echo of Heidegger, White claims that geopoetics is 'concerned, fundamentally, with a relationship to the earth and with the opening of a world' (2004: 243). With geopoetics, White sets out with the intention of opening our limited, human world view onto the scale of the earth in all its depth and instability – just as Hutton did before him – as a source for 'cultural renewal' (2004: 243). It is meant not as a single act of opening, but rather as an initiation of the continuous process of world-opening in relation to the earth. But this is not an opening in the pure sense of 'worlding' as Heidegger might put it. Because it is an opening *onto* the earth, attempting to acknowledge the earth as earth, it is closer to the idea of a 'clearing'. The forgetfulness of a world's opening which, for MacDiarmid, becomes 'iconoclasm', is refused by grounding it on the material presence of earth, consciously involving it in that 'belligerent' wrestling forth. White quotes Hutton: 'We are not to limit Nature with our imbecility' (2006: 18).

White is a Scottish poet, professor and man of letters who has been living and working in France and travelling extensively for several decades in what he calls a 'little transnational atopia' (2004: 45). He does not see this as exile in the tradition of so many displaced modernists but as a certain Scottish 'extension and expansion', a 'wanderlust' that he suggests is 'to do with a continentality that is Unbritish, Unenglish' (2006: 56). But he does not mean this to assert a sense of Scottish national identity, however nomadic. Quite the contrary, White's geopoetics thrives on the fluid uncertainty that comes with a national identity crisis: 'It's when the national culture is broken up', he has written, 'that the individual can emerge, relieved of history's heavy weight, and open new space' (2004: 45). Once again, the archipelago is on the move here. We might imagine him reading Hutton's passage above about the disintegration of the European coastal shelf as a stirring call to creative action, an imaginative emancipation through which the individual is inspired to explore and assert identities beyond any static understanding of community, nation or region.

In 2005, in a lecture given in Inverness, White attacked the word 'region', as a description of the Highlands and Islands, for its connotations of 'administration' and 'Empire', for the way that, he suggests, regionalism as a cultural policy threatens to 'replace a field of creative energy' with 'identity ideology' (2006: 59). Raymond Williams has also gestured to the way 'region' or 'regional' (both stemming from *regere* to direct or to rule) are terms that, politically, 'are within this assumption of dominance and subordination' (1976: 265). In place of 'region', White suggests the term 'territory': 'Every territory, while maintaining its presence and compactness, is open, if one knows how to read it' (2006: 76). Geology, zoology, linguistics, even hydrography, all come into White's argument for the use of the word 'territory', because they all ignore national or regional fixity by straying over borders, thereby contributing to his idea of an 'open world poetics' (76). Fault lines or escarpments, migrating animals, loan words or folktales, or rivers that meander, all ignore the political administration of bordered units.

However, at no point does *place* disintegrate into generalized space for White either. In fact, geopoetics allows him to intensify a particular aspect of place as distinct from the ideas of region and nation. The location of the lecture itself is important here, and White is aware of this. Inverness sits at the top of the Great Glen Fault, the line of lochs terminating in Loch Ness. It is a fault that around 500 million years ago connected to its North American counterpart, the Cabot Fault, which runs just below the St Lawrence River between Newfoundland and Nova Scotia in Canada. As White reminds his audience, all of the land to the north of the Solway Firth was once attached to the North American continent divided by the Iapetus Ocean. This is a transcontinental fault in the heart of Scotland, on which White has chosen to contemplate such terms as region and nation. Again, the earth beneath is summoned up to be read and brought to bear on the world above it, pulling a little at its self-certainty and offering an alternative spatial order. There is something of the geologist's flair for theatrical presentation about White's lecture, given its venue.²

Geopoetics is primarily a poetics of the essay, rather than that of a finished poem, story or novel (though it may also be conceived and expressed in other

² Ralph O'Connor has shown that geology in the nineteenth century was not shy of a little theatre and that as much as the Romantics learnt from geologists so the geologists also learnt a lot from the picturesque essay and the philosophy of the sublime (2007).

forms as well). White explicitly favours the essay in his writing on geopoetics, describing it as a form that is 'creative of new space' and as 'abandoning established genres' (2004: 76). He goes on to remark that 'the essayist is out on his own, working in the open. Knowing very well that the last word will never be pronounced, maintaining a distance both from dogmatic totality and the detailed report, he makes attempts, *essays*, he tries out ways, he takes surroundings' (58). These remarks direct the reader back to Montaigne, who coined the term 'essay' itself (*essai*), which literally means 'an attempt' or 'a try'. It is this 'trying out' with its emphasis on creativity that goes to the heart of the poetics of the essay and the *poesis* of geopoetics: making new, opening a textual and mental world *onto* an underlying, expansive, geological earth, wrestling to arrive at that 'clearing' which Heidegger describes as a form of *poesis*. As we saw in the introduction, this sense of the essay as a form of creative experiment is also a helpful way of understanding the whole variety of collected writings this book has explored as a genre, both proposing possibilities and brokering new relationships. However, although many of White's own essays map out a fascinating canon of marginalized and overlooked non-fiction works, they are typically less effective in their exploration of place and the earth than the work of Tim Robinson, to which I now return as a way of elucidating some of these thoughts on geopoetics.

Robinson begins *Stones of Aran*, his two-volume study of the Aran Islands in the mouth of Galway Bay off the west coast of Ireland, with a vertiginous and unsettling view of their geological foundation. The limestone on which the author stands, so he tells us, was laid down 320 million years ago as the floor of a tropical ocean; 50 million years later it was raised out of the ocean by tectonic plate collisions that created the mountains of southern Europe, from which moment on, its soluble stone began to be eroded, shaped and 'polished' by the elements, and later by the bite of glaciers (2008: 7). 'So the geographies over which we are so suicidally passionate', he reflects, 'are, on this scale of events, fleeting expressions of the earth's face' (7). But the instability of the Aran Islands is not just a matter of projecting back into deep geological time. The much more immediate erosion of, in particular, the largest island's western cliffs is a well-known fact. Fishermen talk of the *aragaint* (the ledges and pavements near the water's edge) and the *strapái* (or stairways) down to them, and many are used to discovering old ways blocked or new ways suddenly opened by rock falls (113). In one extreme case, a boy from

Oatquarter goes back to retrieve the line he has set overnight only to find that not only the line but a whole section of the clifftop has disappeared (113). Field names, archaeological remains and folktales all allude to projections of land on the southern edge that are no longer there, fallen victim to the ever deeper undermining motions of the Atlantic waves at the foot of the cliffs. In this the islands offer a particularly magnified sense of planetary time, 'disconcertingly open to non-human immensities' (27). Robinson concludes: 'Unless vaster earth-processes intervene Aran will ultimately dwindle to a little reef and disappear' (28). The sense of finitude, precariousness and vulnerability that comes with this realization is the outcome of a careful consideration of, not just geology in the abstract, but the distinctive quality of this local geology on the edge of the European coastal shelf. Intriguingly, these particular qualities also suggest that Robinson's writings might be read productively with the Anthropocene in mind. Not a place that is in itself more damaged or developed than other places by any particular margin, nonetheless there is a powerful sense of the earth intruding on the human world on Aran, an undeniable precariousness that chimes with the environmental precariousness of this modern epoch. Isolated as this island experience is, its concomitant exposure suggests an upwelling and intensified sense of planet, but one that comes through the author's response to the island's local geology. Again, as with MacDiarmid, there is a discord in the senses of scale between the individual author's minute insignificance and the vast sense of deep time and continental geography. But once again the discord, the interesting point of tension and drama, arises precisely through a close attention to local detail.

Robinson's alertness to the instability of Aran draws the eye down. It prevents his own literary work from becoming too lofty, too inattentive to the tenuous grasp that he has on the place. As we saw in Chapter 4, it is one of Robinson's guiding interests – in fact, the whole ambition of the book – to ensure that his writing does not betray its subject. The writing endeavours to be as faithful as possible to the ground underfoot, searching out the possibility of a congruence between the human world of culture and the earth on which it is set, in the form of that 'good step'. It is the qualities that he reads in the stone itself that brings this on but these are also what make him wary of too simple a solution. Robinson has described his aesthetic as driven in part by a 'romantic-materialist' (2003: 51) impulse which begins to sound rather like the desire

for that 'reunion' between thought and matter of which Oerlemans suggests we should be suspicious (2002: 11). But Robinson's work comes predicated on an underlying difficulty, uncertainty and, in the end, an important sense of impossibility when it comes to that 'good step'.

In the following passage from a chapter called 'The Difficult Mile', Robinson is walking back home on the north side of the island where the coastline is not cliffs but a sloped beach consisting of heavy rubble. In reading this passage, Heidegger's description of the 'intrinsically belligerent' entanglement of non-human earth and human world can help us to explore Robinson's self-reflexive negotiation between thought, experience and language. The passage describes an existential struggle in consciousness, in the mind of a solitary, introverted author. This is a struggle for a version of the 'material sublime', but one that is candid about its own failure to arrive at any reconciliation between earth and world (he is looking across the sea towards the mainland from this rubble beach):

Then if a sea mist annuls the beatific vision of Connemara and the waves turn leaden and the sky hangs low, the generalizing monotony of the rock-bank is suddenly replaced by a dreadful multiplicity of individual boulders, each an ugly confusion of angles and edges. With every pace one's mood darkens. These endless ankle-twisting contradictions underfoot, amorphous, resistant, cutting, dull, become the uncountable futilities heaped upon one's own shores by the surrounding ocean of indifference. If then one could elevate gloom into metaphysical despair, see the human race as no taller than that most depressing of life-forms, the lichen that stains so many of these bare stones black, one might, paradoxically, march on with a weightier stride that would soon outwalk the linear desert. Instead, the interminable dump of broken bits and pieces one is toiling along stubbornly remains the merely personal accumulation of petty worries, selfish anxieties, broken promises, discarded aspirations and other chips off a life-worn ego, that constitutes the path to one's own particular version of nowhere. (2008: 168)

What is performed here is a graphic failure to conciliate psychology and geology, and in the same breath a graphic failure to 'elevate' individual consciousness to species consciousness (to 'see the human race as no taller than ... lichen'). Instead, out of the failure emerges a tangle of metaphors in which the mind projects its 'petty worries' out onto the stone, each already undermined by the confession of failure. But this makes it an *interesting* failure, layered, expressive

and self-reflexive. All the difficulty and indifference of the stony landscape remains difficult and indifferent, uncompromising in the extreme, and the human energy is directed instead towards adapting itself to such indifference. But he cannot do it, so lapses into a projection of his own emotions onto the landscape in a pathetic moment almost of self-parody, in full knowledge of its futility. There are layers of expressive meaning here that dramatize the self struggling to relate to something much grander in scale.

What Robinson's exploratory essays do achieve in their failure and discord is to articulate a self-reflexive difficulty at the point of our entanglement with the earth, one which seems richer in its linguistic inventiveness, in its toing-and-froing over the impossible point of interface, than the Romantic mode of writing Oerlemans is concerned by. This too is a way of rethinking place in response to the Anthropocene. Ways of knowing and writing and thinking about place begin to proliferate from this point of difficulty. In a chapter on the mysterious limestone ruin of Dún Aonghasa which sits high up on the cliff edge of the main island, he concludes: 'Once again I have failed to *be* in this strange place, this knot of stone from which the sky has broken out. So I promise to come back and try again, to approach it from a different angle, take it by storm or moonlight, bring a measuring tape or a bottle of wine' (2008: 109). The failure to articulate the final word on the place and the refusal to endorse a belief in a reconciliation between self and earth means that a labyrinth of possibilities remains open, each way inadequate but each slowed to what Bennett describes as 'receiving and participating' (in contrast to a lazier use and consumption). There is an echo here too of Samuel Beckett's mantra from *Worstward Ho!*: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. *Fail better*' (2009: 81; my emphasis). As John Wylie has argued in his Derridean reading of Robinson, there is 'a displacement of land and life from each other' but this displacement is also, crucially, why 'we have something to say' (2012: 375).

Place-making

In this folding together of failure and creativity in Robinson's *Stones of Aran* there are other stones lurking in the background as well. The book takes its title from Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (though note the telling loss of the

definite article as architectural features recede and geological features come to the fore). It shows the influence of, in particular, Ruskin's attack on industrial labour and its dehumanizing effects. Ruskin also describes a poetics of difficulty and failure in which something more interesting occurs than it might if a forced and inauthentic perfection is aspired to. Speaking of the stonemason making his individualistic carvings on a medieval cathedral as an alternative to the factory worker following orders and copying a design, Ruskin suggests: 'Out come all his roughness, all his dullness, all his incapability; shame upon shame, *failure upon failure*, pause after pause: but out comes the whole majesty of him also' (1853: 161; my emphasis). For Ruskin, as for Robinson, the honest failure of the individual in all his or her roughness is more valuable for its creative autonomy than machinic perfection produced under a scheme of work in which the human becomes a tool in an authoritarian scheme of design controlled from the outside. We might imagine that for Robinson, such an idea must have struck a chord with his investigation of the islands' postcolonial cartography and heritage. Ruskin continues:

If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cogwheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them. ... The eye of the soul must be bent upon the finger point, and the soul's force must fill all the invisible nerves that guide it ... and so soul and sight be worn away, and the whole human being be lost at last. (161)

For Robinson though, it is not 'the whole human being' that will be lost, but the wholeness of the place (we might imagine a connection between Ruskin's ideal 'whole human being' and Robinson's own ideal of an 'unsummable totality of perspectives' as discussed in Chapter 4). This is a theme that began for him in his first role on the island as cartographer. In fact, for Robinson, the essay has always been a counterpart to the map. As he says early on in *Stones of Aran*, the maps were really 'preliminary storings and sortings of material' that would always give way to 'the world-hungry art of words' (2008: 19).

In their early years on the island, Robinson and his wife planted a potato field outside their house, orienting it by the lines of the paths and the field walls. These paths and field walls in turn followed the fault lines in the limestone underneath which run parallel along an *almost*, but not quite,

north/south line. Fault lines such as these can be seen all over the island, so many of them following the same north-north-east by south-south-west line that they come to represent the islands' own north and south. That 'almost' becomes a token of the islands' distinctive identity, and was so significant that Robinson has preserved and published the original map of the potato field as a limited edition four-colour offset and letterpress print with Coracle Press. The whole island is a grid of walls enclosing over a thousand tiny fields that are, generally speaking, in alignment with the limestone faults underneath. Such an alignment obviously appeals to Robinson in search of that congruence between a culture and the earth that bears it. Highly aware of, and fascinated by, this local orientation, he suggests, 'Nevertheless the unchanging abstractions of official cartography insensibly penetrated the time-bound little domain, and I was always conscious of the angle, the argument, between so-called True North and our Garden North' (n.d.). There is an echo of Ruskin here in that 'insensibly penetrated', a surprisingly violent image of some anonymous system reaching its controlling arm into the human being.

Subtle as the 'argument' might be then, 'True North' here carries the cultural connotations of imperial north and the north of British administration, while geological north, or 'our Garden North', suggests a politically loaded deviation from the standard that is more grounded and locally useful. It is also an aspect of the island's particular heritage, an example of an intriguing intersection of geology and history. 'Our Garden north' *fails* again to find a perfect congruence between the British world and the stones of Aran, but it achieves something nonetheless highly interesting in doing so. As an idea, 'our Garden north' makes its own truth, in that Heideggerian sense of instantiating *poesis* but in this case not with a work of art but with the culture of a place. We might see in this 'argument' a shadow of the difference between 'region' and 'territory' for Kenneth White, where region is a definition that reaches into a place from the outside while territory offers that 'bottom-up' definition based on an engagement with the geology underneath. But we can also see Ruskin's argument for the autonomy of the creative craftsman here too. Awkwardly caught in a tension between the open world of imperial space and the closure of the earth beneath, the orientation here somehow necessarily fails both but at the same time succeeds in realizing a geopoetic 'clearing', a space of inhabitation that instantiates its own truth.

Grounded as such a place culture is locally, and engaged once again in that argumentative, archipelagic relationship with colonial Britain, there is a question left hanging. Does such a grounded sense of place culture and heritage close itself off from the outside world, denying what White argues for in the idea of an 'open world' geopoetics? Do frictions between a desire to protect and celebrate local distinctiveness and an anxiety about extrinsic influence risk closing off the geologically grounded place culture to wider senses of community? Certainly, Robinson's recognition with a European Conservation Award in 1987 suggests otherwise but so too does an essay by the American nature writer John Elder. In 'Catchments', Elder explores what he calls a 'dialogue' between a river catchment near his home in the United States below the Hogback Ridge in the Green Mountains of Vermont and the broad and complex catchment of Roundstone Bog above Robinson's home in Connemara (2016: 43). The dialogue he explores is with Robinson's Connemara writings in this case, rather than his Aran writings, but it is one similarly founded on a curious 'correlation between the bedrocks' of the respective areas (49). 'The intricate mix of rocks in the Dalradian schist Robinson describes is closely replicated in the composition of schists in the mountains of Vermont' (Elder 2016: 49). He goes on to describe the deep geological processes that once saw the continental shelves on either side of the Atlantic a part of the same continent and how his Hogback Ridge is a part of a long line of mountains that then ran from western Ireland down through Newfoundland, New England and south into the Appalachians, explaining these surprising 'geological parallels' (50). Once again, the 'fracture, flexure, and contortion' of geology's movements in deep time seem to open these places up, and even to connect them, through this 'dialogue' with one another. The geological correspondence informs a further reflection on the relationship between what Robinson has done for the place lore of Connemara and the loss of such place lore in the United States. Elder describes the way both those descended from the native tribes and those descended from the European settlers in Vermont have been 'impoverished by a general oblivion to the names and stories woven into the land over many centuries by the Western Abenaki' by the violent history of settlement and colonization (47). He describes how the discovery of this 'geological parallel', for him, 'seems to express a longing for values too often neglected in the modern conversation of nations' (51).

We might think of this as an example of what Ursula Heise calls ‘ecocosmopolitanism’, a form of outward-looking alliance or exchange based on the ‘more-than-human-world’ that casts them in the light of ‘planetary “imagined communities” of both human and non-human kinds’ (2008: 60–1). This is not to argue that the connection between these places is ‘natural’ if ‘natural’ is to suggest a static and essentialist form of identity (that which Heise challenges in the ‘ethic of proximity’). Instead, it shows that a close attention to the slow unfolding movements of even the earth beneath our feet ought to remind us that places are protean things, and that they are intertwined in all sorts of ways with the wider world. Recognizing this can help to bring on place cultures that are similarly protean and intertwined.

Another example from an island further north in the Atlantic may help to address this question more fully. In a very surprising case of dynamic cultural change on the Scottish Isle of Harris, described by Alastair McIntosh in his *Soil and Soul*, an instance of rethinking the community’s relationship with geology encourages a similar very open sense of international transatlantic alliance. And it is one that occurs at the same time as the islanders are resisting the proposals of an extrinsic agent in the form of a global corporation. In June 1991, a Scottish businessman began making inquiries on behalf of the multinational building materials company Lafarge Redland Aggregates about the opening of a ‘superquarry’ near the southern tip of the Isle of Harris. A large quarry in Britain is thought to extract, on average, around 200,000 tonnes of stone each year, but what was being proposed here would extract between 10 and 20 million tonnes each year once it reached full production (148). It would use around 36 tonnes of explosive per week and leave a hole in the side of a mountain called Roineabhal that would be the largest of its kind in the world, covering several square miles and rising to the height of ‘six times the white cliffs of Dover’ in order to serve the demand for aggregate in such fields as road-building and the construction of sea defences (148). What ensued was a thirteen-year battle between the islanders, who were supported by various charitable NGOs, and the lawyers of Lafarge Redland. This became the longest land development battle in Scottish history. Author, academic and campaigner Alastair McIntosh documented the struggle in *Soil and Soul* and was himself instrumental in encouraging the islanders

(who were at one point 90 per cent behind the development) to fight for the conservation of the island (160).

At the heart of the book is an account of a form of environmental activism, inflected both by McIntosh's Christian faith and his sense of place-based identity as a Hebridean islander. He describes the campaign both as 'liberation theology', looking in particular to the Quaker tradition, and also as a form of pragmatic 'consciousness raising'. The latter he associated with the felt attitude to place and the sense of identity that the islanders drew from it, one that helped to shift the community from that 90 per cent in favour to outright opposition (166). McIntosh tells the story of the fight in parallel to another narrative about the inhabitants of Eigg and their successful attempt to buy the island as a community from an absentee landlord. They were responding to the new Scottish land law, brought in post-referendum in 1997–8, in which local communities are offered first refusal on any sale of land (as discussed in Chapter 2). In both instances the 'consciousness raising' that the communities undergo is a practical and creative sense of place-making as a community-driven, bottom-up form of identity development. This McIntosh links to the *poesis* of 'geopoetics' (he describes Kenneth White as the island's 'absentee bard'): 'the making and fresh upwelling of reality'. 'Sociologists have used the word *autopoiesis*', he suggests, 'to describe an ordering of social reality that arises out of itself' (153).

Referring to this process as 'autopoiesis', McIntosh is emphasizing its groundedness in place and its emanation from the community itself. However the concept of autopoiesis can be called into question, especially when considered from the perspective of recent work on post-human ecologies. Kathryn Yusoff has challenged the idea of discrete, autopoietic subjects in relation to human–non-human interactions such as this crucially place-based assertion of identity. For Yusoff, a more complex understanding of identity emerges through an awareness of the human relationship with the geological and the often overlooked agency of stone. In a study of rock art and the pivotal role its history is thought to play in conceptions of becoming human, becoming the cultural beings that we are today, she reveals a non-human excess within the substance and processes of the rock that is both 'anterior and interior' to the story of cave art (2014: 7). In doing so, she is arguing that, even at such moments when humans set themselves apart from

the world, there is a non-human presence, even an agency, at work. Such an excess could also be said to be vital to this 'autopoiesis' that McIntosh describes, founded as it is on the relationship to the island's geology (and McIntosh would be the first to concede this). By recognizing this 'anterior and interior' non-human agency, Yusoff draws attention to the possibility of 'an identification with the earth' the likes of which we can see at work on Harris, but it is one that, importantly, 'does not start from a point of alienation or whole-ism (Gaia), but recognizes an entirely different mode of production' (17). Here, a third way emerges and Yusoff draws attention to the creativity of this cultural work and the way human agency is involved, in this case literally, with lithogenesis. Bringing the 'auto-' of 'autopoiesis' into question, then, serves to emphasize human and non-human entanglements in the generative idea of 'geopoiesis'.

Of particular interest here is the way such entanglements relate to the perception of the mountain Roineabhal itself. In a chapter titled 'The Mountain behind the Mountain', a phrase borrowed from the poet and critic Kathleen Raine, McIntosh asks, 'What is a mountain actually for?' Obviously the perception by Redland of its value of a few pounds per tonne is at odds with the value it comes to have to the islanders (2001: 155). 'The Mountain behind the Mountain' is a phrase that suggests the perception of the mountain as a place as well as a material, as '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' (Noel Dermot O'Donoghue qtd. McIntosh 2001: 154). McIntosh himself describes the epiphany he has that sets him on his campaign when he visits the church of St Clement's at the foot of the southern slope of the mountain and finds, halfway up the stairway of the bell tower a rock coming through the wall, 'bedrock protruding from the hill outside' (2001: 155). The history and culture of the parishes around the mountain is bound up with its silent presence here in a striking example of the mountain's being both 'anterior and interior' to the human community, as Yusoff suggests (2014: 7). This awareness stands in stark contrast to the reduction of what would have been nearly half the mountain to a knowable, quantified and monetized aggregate. The place itself – the church wall built around the stone – was *letting earth be earth*, to borrow Heidegger's phrase again. The idea of the mountain behind the mountain is less concerned with knowing the geology of a place, of putting

it to work to serve our ends, than, to paraphrase Bennett, with 'receiving and participating' in its presence (2010: 17).

However, perhaps one of the most surprising aspects of the fight for the mountain is the visit from Nova Scotia in Canada of the Mi'Kmaq Warrior Chief Sulian Stone Eagle Herney in 1994. He was invited by McIntosh and the people of Harris to come and give testimony at the British government's public inquiry into the superquarry. The connections are multiple and quite curious but look back to the same geological shifts that excited John Elder. Stone Eagle had been fighting the Kelly Rock Co. in Canada, who had, since 1989, been attempting to site a large quarry in the side of a mountain in the Gulf of St Lawrence deemed sacred to the Mi'Kmaq people. The mountain is situated in an area very near the coastal edge of that geological fault (the Cabot Fault/the Great Glen Fault) shared by Canada and Scotland. As White mentions in his lecture at Inverness, geologically, these two territories were once part of that same landmass, with the Iapetus Ocean dividing them from the rest of the British archipelago. Such similarities and geological connections encourage the islanders in the campaign to see themselves less as Scottish and more as an indigenous people fighting for their land, which, though much more tentatively, they come to realize might be sacred to them as well. If we are to read such a development in place culture as 'geopoiesis' (with an echo of 'autopoiesis' haunting the word) then it need not be entirely an insular or local development. In fact, geopoiesis may be understood in terms of the more extrinsic and relational constellations of meaning with which geographer Doreen Massey has suggested place is always involved (1994: 2005). What is interesting here is that these connections within and between places emerge by thinking down into the earth beneath us.

Following the public inquiry, at which Stone Eagle gave evidence alongside a Calvinist minister, one of the old men of Harris passed a gift to McIntosh to give to the chief to take back to Nova Scotia. The previous evening this islander had climbed to the top of Mount Roineabhal and chiselled off a six-inch pyramid, the summit stone, and wrapped it in cloth as a way of saying thank you. He offered it fully aware of the significance of the act of damaging the mountain with the words, 'it's better than having a superquarry' (McIntosh 2001: 239). Stone Eagle initially refused to accept this gift, aghast that the islanders could have 'decapitated' the mountain (239). After some

discussion, though, he eventually agreed to take the fragment of Roineabhal 'into sanctuary' on behalf of his people (241).

If this old man was a character in a novel or a sculptor engaged in a work of conceptual art, how might we read the giving of this gift? It is, in so many ways, an act full of the dense and expressive meaning of a work of art. The stone is transported a thousand miles away and placed among stones that might well be more like it than the stones of the rest of southern Britain. This act of giving and relocation aligns the two peoples' fights for land with the movements of deep geological time, reaching out beyond the scale of the Anthropocene and discovering something in their relationship that is, again, 'anterior and interior' (Yusoff 2014: 7). It does so in such a way that, by contrast, the quarrying company comes to seem like the 'iconoclasts and quacks' that MacDiarmid describes as 'injuring' stone (1993: 32). A clearing is opened between the world-opening development of corporate interests and the austere refusal of the earth itself. The struggle for Roineabhal that McIntosh describes fails to conform to either such world-opening or such refusal but emerges in the tension between the two. 'Decapitating' the mountain suggests a certain alienation from it; in fact it almost prevents the greater crime by recreating it in miniature. The act takes possession of the mountain, but it does so in order to let the mountain be a mountain and in this there is the 'intrinsically belligerent' but fundamentally creative struggle and the eventual opening of a clearing which, in this case, is the renewal of the meaning of a place and the intertwining of it with another place across the Atlantic. For Heidegger this is a form of *poesis*, 'a becoming and a happening of truth' (2002: 44–6). For McIntosh such place-making is a form of social creativity, one that reflects and tentatively reconstitutes a place and a place culture among the people living there. It does so through an attempt to reconcile the people to a deeper and more dynamic understanding of the mountain, the stone itself. There is an attempt to accommodate its instability, its deep time, and its vast scale, and to recognize its already dynamic presence in their midst. Such an attempt yields the possibility of what Kenneth White would call 'cultural renewal'.

What the authors above show is that a certain scepticism towards Romantic ideas of reunification, wholeness and oneness can lead not only to a more intricate understanding of the earth but also to an opening up of the world view as well. In such an expanded world view, we can detect Heide's

'ecocosmopolitanism' again. Disparate communities are connected through an engagement with the non-human, or more-than-human, aspects of the earth. However, this is an openness that comes *through* the local, not as an alternative to it, when we see these communities thinking about locality in more dynamic terms (Heise 2008: 60–1). Such open thinking and ecocosmopolitan alliances might not quite extend to Timothy Clark's call for a 'new reflexivity as a species' (if we recall, this is a reflexivity in which the 'human Leviathan achieves some kind of responsible consciousness') (2015: 16–17). However, what is clear is that if such a species reflexivity is to emerge, it must emerge grounded on a damaged earth and it must be capable of acknowledging inequality, difference and distinctiveness. In this sense, this is a step in the right direction. It is unlikely that this reflexivity will come as a homogeneous totality, and we should be suspicious of any such claims.

Such a reflexivity will not be easy. It must recognize and struggle with difficulty. Like the reflexivity that these authors have explored in conciliating psychology, language, culture and community to the earth it will no doubt fail, but in its failure there may nonetheless lie the opportunity for productive and thoughtful responses that can move us forward. In this reflexivity, a sense of planet is concomitant with a sense of place. What this geologically minded work shows is that a movement of cultural renewal from below can also be a movement of cultural renewal with the planet in mind. The truth of place, far from being a question of identity and authenticity, becomes a matter of articulation, generation, *poesis*; of 'clearing' in the Heideggerean sense of struggle. The ongoing work of a place, thinking geologically, becomes an ongoing inflection of its relationship to the wider planet and to others undergoing the same process of renewal. Our own self-reflexive meditations on place and the new forms they articulate might never truly reconcile *with creation*, but in struggling to reconcile *themselves to creation*, they might nonetheless begin to emulate it. It is in this sense that something beyond either alienation or oneness appears in our relationship to the earth, something that moves in the spaces between lithogenesis and geopoiesis.