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***Remembering Iain Crichton Smith***

Those of us fortunate enough to have known Iain Crichton Smith as a person will remember his daft puns and the donkey-bray of laughter: 'I was brought up on Lewis in a close-knit community .... The women were knitting closely all the time ... HEE-HAW, HEE-HAW, HEE-HAW'. His humour was infectious but in the healthiest possible way. It was spontaneous, innocent, never vindictive, self-mocking, inclusive, and full of insight and verbal playfulness. I remember him recounting with glee an encounter on a visit to Stornoway. He was accosted in a bar by a youngish man, very drunk, who asked aggressively: 'Are you the silly bastard who wrote that book we had to read in school, *Consider the Daffodils*?'

Indeed, a whole generation of Scottish children has had to read *Consider the Lilies* since it was published in 1969. In some ways, this has been a pity, in that the novel is not his best work; worthy yes, but not inspired as some of his work certainly is. In fact, Iain's sense of history was strong rather than reliable. Events in the past tended to be shapes in his mind more than they were sequences in actuality. And, indeed, his grasp of the physical world was not very secure: he saw objects, plants and animals with an odd innocence or ignorance, as if he was meeting, say, a bramble bush or a telephone, for the first time. This 'ignorance', however, was crucial to his poetry; it was the ignorance prescribed for the poet by Wallace Stevens:

You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Crichton Smith even has his imitation of Stevens; the thirteen haiku sections of 'The TV' mimic Stevens' 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'. His fresh apprehension of the world was compounded, I think, by his bilingualism, as if he saw everything double with two terms for everything or as if he had to translate that thing there into this world here. It is no coincidence that he wrote an English poem called 'The Notebooks of Robinson Crusoe'; he understood the feeling of foreignness and naming a new territory.

I first encountered his poems in an anthology, *New Poems*, where Edwin Muir had been invited to introduce three new poets whose work impressed him. Iain was one of his choices. That was in 1959 when I was a student. In 1961 I bought his *Thistles and Roses* (hardback, 10 shillings and sixpence). The very first poem arrested my attention:

And she, being old, fed from a mashed plate  
as an old mare might droop across a fence  
to the dull pastures of its ignorance.

The 'ignorance' here is utterly different to the 'ignorance' discussed in the previous paragraph. He had grown to detest the ingrown, stultified norms of emotion and intellect in Highland communities but he also understood why they had developed. In conditions of bare survival, there was no place for glamour or fancy or panache, and the absolutism of Calvinism made a virtue out of dour tenacity and plainness. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the population of the Highlands and Islands had been depleted as a result of clearances, disease and massive emigration. The First World War cut a cruel swathe through the young men, and many villages had difficulty in sustaining life, far less growth. Women found themselves widowed or with no hope of marriage or, if married, left for long periods on their own because the men had to find work elsewhere. The lines quoted above come from one of Crichton Smith's first poems centred on older women (In the *Collected Poems* there are eight poems with titles such as 'Old Women' and 'Old Lady'). The title of his next collection, *The Law and the Grace*, paralleled *Thistles and Roses*. My own upbringing in the West Highlands was opened up, investigated and occasionally celebrated in these volumes.

I met Iain in the sixties but not till the seventies when I was back working in Scotland did I become friendly with him. In the earlier years he was awkward, intellectually jerky and socially unadept. At home in Oban, living with his ageing mother, he read books with a lonely ferocity alongside his teaching; his visits South sometimes felt like missions to find minds to match his own intensity. He was extraordinarily prolific even while he was a teacher. Norman MacCaig was once heard to express concern that something was wrong with his fellow poet: 'He hasn't published a new book for ... days.' After he got married and when he stopped teaching, he became a much more comfortable person. His wife Donalda, in a most wonderful way, domesticated him (up to a point), indeed humanised him, and her natural sociability and ability to drive made expeditions and engagements much less fraught and even enjoyable. Iain owed an enormous amount to Donalda and so do we, his reading public. She encouraged him, opened up areas of life new to him, taught him much about trust and love, and nursed him through some dark, bleak times (the worst of these recounted in fictional form in *In the Middle of the Wood*, 1987).

There was always some element of the misfit in him. It gave him a binocular vision and allowed him to feel possession and dispossession, the warm room and the gate shut against him. It drew him in his early work to thinkers such as Kierkegaard:

Forced theologian of the minimum place,  
the Copenhagen of the hunchback soul  
eclipsed yet strengthened all his natural rays.  
Imagine him daily taking his cramped stroll  
by sniggering windows to a North Pole  
where his wit spawned its cold rainbow oil.

Later, it found hilarious expression in the antic disposition of Murdo, the stories of whose exploits are possessed by a relentless logic but a logic oblique to the world in which most of us function: 'Nor in fact has anyone found an answer to my logic and I do not think anyone will.' For Iain, sanity was a precarious balancing act, not a state to be taken for granted or with any guarantee of continuation. The creative mode had a vital or vitalising part to play:

The narratives overwhelm us, they have no meaning, they have  
no connection with each other  
We need the sacred light of the imagination.

We need the sacred cell and the pen that lies on the table.  
We need the paper, the cool rectangle of white.

Few poets have shown with such directness their existentialist awareness of emptiness in any ultimate value: 'O see Man as he really is / In all his frightened nakedness'. These lines occur in the long poem *The Human Face* (1996), written in the Burns stanza but sombre and without any of Burns's levity and jinkings. He confronts the inhumanity of this past century without any rescuing *deus ex machina*, political or religious. According to his philosophy, we are on our own in the world and we have to make what consolations we can among ourselves on an earth of great beauty. We make consolatory gestures against the conclusions of negative thinkers. As he says in a much earlier poem, 'Predestination' (translated from his Gaelic): 'Calvin tells us that we are lost. Freud tells us we are deceived. O my long thin hands why then are you writing?' He admired Larkin's similar honesty and Beckett's.

Although Iain Crichton Smith lived and wrote so near the precipice, there is often a brisk cheerfulness even if heavily ironic at times. He took a gleeful delight in incongruence and discrepancies. When the rational, the bureaucratic, the predictable was cheated by the unexpected, he revelled in the defeat as if the variousness of life was actively defying some imposed order. I remember many years ago an incident which gave him inordinate pleasure. We had arranged to meet in the cafe next to the Bus Station in Fort William. I, realizing that I was going to be late, phoned the Bus Station, and asked the woman on duty if she

could possibly go next door and let Iain know. She agreed to do so but she did not know who Iain Smith was. I said that she would recognise him by his bald head and horn-rimmed glasses. When I arrived Iain was there. I asked if he had received my message. He replied that a woman had prowled around the customers and had eventually asked him if he was called Smith. When he said he was, she looked surprised, even bewildered, but gave him my message. She said that my description was not very helpful and she repeated my details. BUT Iain was not wearing his glasses and he was wearing a hat. His mirth when relating the incident was uncontrollable. This story is of no consequence but illustrates his pleasure in disturbed routines and wires getting crossed.

His poetry moves abruptly. Usually there is no build-up or demarcation of a special poetic territory. Rather, there is vertical take-off and a series of fast swoops and raids, moving on before the critic can focus and take aim. His public readings were similarly paced as if he was determined not to make a fuss, or strike any poetical poses. His audience could be confident that they'd be out before the pubs closed. His sudden openings can be arresting, disconcerting, cryptic, for example: 'Power is amazing theatre/ even in another language'; or 'It is a day without dogma'; or 'We walk on mirrors today just like Hamlet'. And who could deduce a title from these opening lines?

This is impossible. Though I know  
(and have been told) the world's absurdity  
(a dewdrop poised on nothing,  
a zero  
containing continually our comic seething)

The title of this poem, and it has only fifteen lines in all, is 'School Sports, at the Turnstiles'. He became a master of surprise, a connoisseur of juxtaposition:

The unpredicted that I prize  
blossoms in a furious  
dishevelled spring.

The lineation itself creates suspense and revelation; 'blossoms' sits curiously alongside 'furious' and 'furious' does not allow us to anticipate 'dishevelled spring.' Although he was vigilantly alert to discrepancies around him, he could be curiously unaware of oddities and suddennesses in his own behaviour. One year in an hotel in the west of Ireland the waitress was taking our orders for dinner. She asked Iain what he would like for his main course. He responded, 'Have you any interesting carrier bags in these parts?' Somehow, he seemed to assume that everyone would know that Donald (in Taynuilt, Scotland) was

collecting unusual carrier bags and that this was an opportune moment for him to make some enquiries on her behalf.

In response to the early death of his father, the hard struggle of his mother, the rigors of life on Lewis in the thirties and forties, he developed a stoical, exclusive, extruded stance, in line with some notion of a Classical model. In *Deer on the High Hills* (1962) he constructs an image of the deer, aloof, independent, durable, graceful and aristocratic, against the drab, craven, materialistic world of humans. For all the worked symbolism, there is a separation between the world of the deer and our lives but also, on the poet's part, an aspiration towards the poise of the deer:

There is no metaphor. The stone is stony.  
The deer move out in isolated air.  
We move at random on an innocent journey.

Something of the Gael, the Highlander, in him identified with the deer.

It is a commonplace that education deracinates the individual. In Iain's case the process was unusually thorough: when he went to primary school he had to learn English; then he had to travel from his village to the town of Stornoway for his secondary education, also in English; and then he left the island to study in Aberdeen, a very unGaelic city. The various moves offered their own excitement but each of them cut something of his family, social, landscape, and linguistic connections. It was as he approached middle-age that the enormity of the dislocation became apparent to him. The heart of his dislocation was linguistic but, as he taught himself what has not been taught in the educational process — the history and culture of his people — he became painfully aware of massive anomalies in the situation of the Highlands and of himself. In 1982 he wrote:

And when one considers the multiple ironies of making Stornoway a NATO base one is staggered and bemused. What exactly is the NATO base defending? Is it defending the values of materialism which divided the islands themselves? Is it defending the many exiles who have already left? Is it defending us against opposing mirror images of materialism? And this in the very centre of a religion which converts life itself into rigidity: truly the roundabouts of history are salt with irony. Far from these divided islands will fly planes which will defend us against those who are, it is said, attacking the Jews for clinging to their own culture instead of to a larger more imperialistic one. No wonder that deep in the hearts of

the islanders, in their very bones, must resound the laughter of the absurd. In these dizzying multitudes of ironies the mind is lost and confused: one is bewildered by the spectacle of friends of one's youth drowning in seas which they only knew as belonging to a globe inhabiting a classroom in which they were taught in an alien language by those who could themselves speak Gaelic.

The title of this passionate essay is 'Real People in a Real Place', an echo and a rebuttal of Marianne Moore's famous description of poetry as 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'. For Iain Crichton Smith, his reality was in Gaelic. The essay concludes with a translation of his Gaelic sequence poem, 'Shall Gaelic Die?' and this irony of the necessity of translation is not lost on him.

In that same essay he advances an affirmation:

And yet history is not an inevitable machine. The English mariners who set out against the Armada did not believe in the inevitability of history, nor did the Greeks who combed each other's hair at Salamis. To say that history is inevitable is to submit to the creed of those whom we oppose. History is not a natural force like electricity.

History is composed of decisions. It is unfortunate that the Calvinism of the islands is an ideology that weakens the will and complicates even more a situation that is still salvageable.

Although written back in 1982, even if not published until 1988 in a collection of his essays, *Towards the Human*, the essay anticipates the major push of his late poetry. He followed no political or religious ideology but believed that the 'situation' is 'salvageable' through human choices, as he says at the finale of *The Human Face*: 'ourselves the kings, ourselves the No / or yes of this immense tableau / we're busy at.' His last book was published in the week in which he died, and when I saw him for the last time a fortnight earlier and he gave me a copy 'with love and best wishes', there was a sense of culmination, of concurrence not of incongruity. *The Leaf and the Marble* is a luminous paean to life in all its uncertainty against the certainty of death, and to the redeeming power of human love against the mechanical and the competitive:

Out of the dead  
ideas of Rome,  
of Pompeii

the fresh leaf trembles.  
Its brilliant twinkles  
keep us alive

in our hazy days.

‘Love is not an act of the will.’ After all his difficulties, a bravery pulled him through to a generous, humanist vision. What Yeats calls ‘fitting emblems of adversity’ are everywhere present in Iain’s work but there is a quiet victory ... of sorts.

Over the years his output was prodigious. Novels, short stories, plays, poems, reviews, work for children poured out of him. His translations of Sorley MacLean’s *Dàin do Eimhir* (*Poems to Eimhir*) in 1971 opened MacLean’s work to a readership beyond Gaeldom for the first time. In reviews he was eager to applaud ambition in new writers and his essays on Scottish literature, particularly on Gaelic poets but also on MacDiarmid, have helped to make Scottish criticism a more mature activity. I regret that he did not, as far as I know, complete what he discussed with me on several occasions, an anthology of translations from earlier Gaelic poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But he gave so much and still had time to read more detective stories than possibly any other person. Another paradox there. Scottish literature has lost so many of its finest writers over the past few years. Sorley MacLean used regularly to ask me, ‘Have you seen the blessed Iain recently?’ Now there is no longer the question and there can be no answer:

This is a coming to reality.  
This is the stubborn place. No metaphors swarm  
around that fact, around that strangest thing,  
that being that was and now no longer is.

(‘On Looking at the Dead’)