

# SCOTTISH CENTRE FOR GEOPOETICS

affiliated to the International Institute of Geopoetics founded by Kenneth White in 1989

## Newsletter 25

The first welcome signs of spring 2008 herald an interesting series of events and opportunities for you to learn more about geopoetics. You will also find here news, views and a review from members as far away as Canada and as near as Falkland.

### **The Adventurous Life of A Plant Hunter, a talk by Jim McCarthy and SCFG AGM on Saturday 23 February at 10.30am in the Orchard Pub Edinburgh**

This talk on the life of Archibald Menzies, who travelled extensively as a naval surgeon in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and brought the monkey puzzle tree and other plants to Britain, will present research from Jim's forthcoming book *Monkey Puzzle Man*. Jim is a highly informative and entertaining speaker and the author of many books on the geography of Scotland and the lives of explorers. Following our AGM and lunch he will also provide a guided visit to the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh to see some of the plants discovered by Menzies. The Orchard Pub is at the corner of Inverleith Row and Warriston Crescent near the RBGE East Gate. Please RSVP if you can attend.

### **Scottish Photography and the Work of Oscar Marzaroli by Tom Normand and Norman Bissell on Monday 10 March at 7.30pm in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow as part of the Aye Write Book Festival.**

### **Geopoetics Course at the University of Edinburgh Office of Lifelong Learning Buccleuch Place Edinburgh on Wednesday 16 April at 6.30–8.30 pm and each Wednesday thereafter for 6 weeks.**

Bill Eddie, Norman Bissell and Jim McCarthy will provide this weekly course which will draw for the first time on the new research published in *The Radical Field* by Tony McManus. Cost £40/£27. To book a place tel. 0131 6504400.

## February 2008

In these fully illustrated talks Tom Normand will discuss the history of photography in Scotland and Norman Bissell will read poems and show slides from his book *Slate, Sea and Sky* which focus on Marzaroli's remarkable ability to relate to the people and places of Scotland. Tickets £7/£6 from [www.ayewrite.com](http://www.ayewrite.com) or 0844 8471683.

### **The Function of Poetics in the University by Kenneth White on Thursday 13 March at 4.30pm in the UHI Executive Office Ness Walk Inverness.**

Full details of this free public inaugural lecture for the University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute can be found on its website [www.uhi.ac.uk](http://www.uhi.ac.uk).

### **Kenneth White Reading and In Conversation on Saturday 15 March from 8-10pm in the Byre Theatre Abbey Street St Andrews.**

Kenneth White will discuss his work with Drew Clegg and read from it at the StAnza Poetry Festival. Tickets £9/£8 from 01334 475000 or [www.stanzapoetry.org](http://www.stanzapoetry.org).

He has recently been awarded the Italian prize Premio Grinzane Biamonti for his work as a whole and *L'Esprit nomade* has now been published in German with *La Figure du dehors* to follow.

There is also a free Magazine Fair curated by Julie Johnstone in the Town Hall Queens Gardens from 1.30pm on that day.

**Books Still Available with free postage from Norman Bissell**

***On the Atlantic Edge* by Kenneth White at £6.95**

***The Radical Field* by Tony McManus at £7**  
***Slate, Sea and Sky* by Norman Bissell and Oscar Marzaroli at £11**

For these three books cheques should be made out to 'Norman Bissell'.

## Websites

Please check out our website at [www.geopoetics.org.uk](http://www.geopoetics.org.uk) and register as a member to take part in our discussion forum. Your views on how to develop our work and encourage participation would be most welcome as would providing details for your own pages on our site.

Other websites worth a look are:

[www.geopoetique.net](http://www.geopoetique.net)

[www.kennethwhite.org](http://www.kennethwhite.org)

[www.hi-arts.co.uk](http://www.hi-arts.co.uk),

[www.snh.org.uk](http://www.snh.org.uk),

[www.morethanus.co.uk](http://www.morethanus.co.uk),

[www.gerryloose.com](http://www.gerryloose.com),

[www.textualities.net](http://www.textualities.net)

[www.outoftheblue.org.uk](http://www.outoftheblue.org.uk) and

[www.seilnaturespaces.live.com](http://www.seilnaturespaces.live.com)

(Seil Natural History Group).

## Open an Island boxes

The boxes containing our creative responses to our Luing weekend will be sent out to participants in the near future and will be worth the wait.

**Members are invited to nominate themselves before our AGM for our Council which meets several times a year in Edinburgh.**

**The Shape and Scope of Canada and of Geopoetics by Alison Roe**

I'm not sure if I'm the only member of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics who lives in Canada, but since Scotland is where I started in many other ways, it felt like the place to begin with geopoetics as well.

So, invited to write about Canada and my interest in geopoetics... what can I say?

It's difficult to write about Canada. 'Can-ada', as the tourism commercial here happily reminds us. The word itself is like the country, wide repetitions of open-ended space, immense linguistic and geographical rhythms.

It's too huge to speak of, so I can only speak of the sense of it from the comparatively tiny area I'm getting to know, Le Haut-St-François in the Eastern Townships of Que bec. I started off on the crowded

**Grounding a World. Essays on the work of Kenneth White** edited by **Gavin Bowd, Charles Forsdick and Norman Bissell** at £8

**Geopoetics: place, culture, world by Kenneth White** at £5

For these two books cheques should be made out to 'Alba Editions'.

## Contacts:

Norman Bissell, director, Mo Dhachaidh, 51 Cullipool, Isle of Luing Argyll PA34 4UB 01852314322 [normanbissell@btinternet.com](mailto:normanbissell@btinternet.com)

Bill Taylor, secretary, 7 Wellpark Terrace, Newport-on-Tay DD6 8H

01382542462

[bill-taylor@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:bill-taylor@hotmail.co.uk)

## Subscriptions: New and Due

Please send your name, postal and e-mail address with a cheque for £10/£5 unwaged, payable to the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, to the secretary.

**Please copy this Newsletter to others who may be interested.**

come quickly, thickly and completely: day subsiding into night, winter exploding into spring, summer tipping into fall...

What's startling in summer is the biological profusion - the quick intense proliferation of life, and the brightness of its vivacity: bugs and birds and butterflies of all colours - shimmering blue dragonflies, hummingbirds in iridescent green, yellow and black swallowtails. And all the gorgeous and glorious vegetation, thronging and thrusting itself, thick and high and dense, into the heavy yellow fire of the sun.

Autumn flares briefly, all red maples and yellow birch and golden-leaved aspen, a rich wooded flame, and then it's winter. Bitterly cold, but beautiful in its pristine beginnings - the soft and steadying silence of the snow, or the clear bright days when the air sparkles with tiny crystals of ice, like diamond dust gusting in the sun. Big blue and white days

island of Montréal, however, and from there you move out south-east, past the isolated volcanic hills that rise out of the flat fields of the St. Lawrence river plain, and on into this land of low rolling hills, all tree-covered; an ocean of forest rippling over to the White Mountains on the borders of New Hampshire and Maine. After Abenaki Indians, it was apparently settled by Scots, amongst others. Now it appears to be colonised mostly by white-tailed deer (and lately a wee 'Roe').

The landscape here seems to flow slowly, in contrast to the sharp shifts of Scotland, yet what doesn't change quickly in topography changes quickly in time, and when the differences come here, they

I'm only just beginning to develop a sense of the shape and scope of geopoetics, just as I'm only beginning to develop a sense of the shape and scope of Canada, but what's striking in both cases is the evident extensiveness of the 'terrain', and the intensity and integrity of the approach that is required to properly explore it. I want to explore, and my interest in geopoetics comes from an eagerness to find others with this kind of intention, and to discover how it looks and feels from different perspectives, how it is interpreted and applied with different foci of expertise. I'm keen to find more work that is characterised by this kind of perception that is attentive and aware, specific and spacious; a huge sense of things that doesn't lose any of the detail.

Reading away in Edinburgh, I had not expected to find myself later living at the beginning of that Blue Road. I love distance and vista, so maybe I shouldn't have been surprised, but, as I tried to settle in here, what did truly surprise me was the depth of the adaptation required.

Living 'abroad' makes you realise how you've been formed and framed by a place. It throws into sharp relief the configurative forces, and you realise the enduring ones are maybe less social and cultural and more geological and geographical, even meteorological. I'm less Scottish than I thought I was, and more of

which end redly, the sky a deep pink suffusion, the snow a rosy glow.

I'd read about the blue and whiteness beforehand, when, whilst still in Scotland, a friend had improbably passed me *The Blue Road*. What captivated me in all of it was the evocation of the whole, and wholly sensual, world that involved the mental and linguistic senses as well as the physical. I've often felt that everything is simply contoured sensation – on the land, on the hand, in the mind, on the tongue - and it came as a relief and revelation to find work that invites and incites us to experience *all* of this.

edge, from any salt shore.

Yet there's something about the largeness, and largesse, of Canada that exhilarates beyond words. There's a slight feeling of chaos that goes with all that land – a delirium and giddiness evoked by the sheer solid continuity that's so different from a small island with its definitive marine threshold...The challenge is to give in to it, to let yourself go...

The process, like the landscape, goes on; yet it's made me aware that, at least in my own case, the drive to adapt to a place in particular and the attraction to geopoetics in general are both expressive of a more basic impulse: a deep desire to  *dwell*.

It may be a result of acknowledgement of this desire, but I'm also starting to notice that, amidst all this alteration, a broader sense of belonging is beginning to emerge.

Clambering about on a windy island, over rocky headlands and white sands, or wading through drifts of snow and following deer tracks through the woods... Lately, the more I feel like an inhabitant, the more I realise that I'm responding less to the specific features of a place than to the fundamental phenomena underlying them. I'm still acutely aware of distinctions between environments, such as differences in the quality of the light. (The light is stronger and flatter here, at this lower latitude far inland, compared to the fineness, the finesse, of the light in Scotland.)

Scotland than I thought I was. It's been disorientating to have relocated to country that is in many ways the opposite of Scotland: so expansive, so endlessly ongoing, it could engulf and dissipate you, and you're so far from any natural on a cold night. There's the ground under my feet, rain, wind moving through leaves... I've a feeling of easy companionship with the phenomena of the world, and though it's new to feel it like this, I realise that these are such old familiarities, and that everywhere is this intimacy, one body with another.

### **Update from Falkland January 2008 by Tess Darwin**

When members of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics came to visit Falkland in June 2005, I had only been living here for a few months, and was still full of the newcomer's enthusiasm and excitement at finding myself in such a beautiful, lively place where it was possible to explore what it means to be a 'geopoetician'. Now, after living for more than three years in the shadow of Falkland Hill, I still feel deeply thankful to have landed in this healing place at a time in my life when I needed it most.

The hill has become a reference point in my life. Each year, on the anniversary of my arrival in the first days of December, I watch as the last rays of sunlight gild the summit, until the point is reached, three weeks before the solstice, when the sun no longer climbs above the shoulder of the hill and we lie in its shadow until mid-January. Today as I write, it has a patchy covering of snow. Often it disappears into mist or is shrouded with veils of cloud. At full moon its silvered silhouette is an invitation to night walking.

a series of postcards (one featuring the Geopoetics group by the Temple of Decision). Subtle interpretation is being carefully placed in the landscape, including benches and 'singing posts' inscribed with

However, I find myself relating to them in terms of more basic recognitions...Hey, there's the sun up there, the moon, the dust of the Milky Way

When I last wrote for this newsletter about living in Falkland, I quoted Kenneth White: "A world is a place, a space that one cultivates. And in order to be up to that world-cultivation, one has to cultivate oneself".

This is the work in progress for me. Learning to read the 'writing of the earth': knowing the land through the seasons; trying to understand the language of the more-than-human beings that live here; helping to manage this place in ways that will increase biodiversity and resilience. And learning to live with my human neighbours with respect and mutual support, making the connections that will strengthen community and help us all take responsibility for wiser use of our natural resources.

A great deal has happened here in the last three years. More paths have been laid, opening up the landscape. More trees planted to replace ones that had to be felled. More red squirrels counted and now being monitored in the hope that we can protect them from grey squirrel encroachment.

Falkland Centre for Stewardship has organised two environmental festivals, *The Big Tent*, with a third this summer – long weekends of celebration, awareness raising, activism and creativity. Regular creative arts events take place. We are making a giant book with wooden covers (crafted by a local woodworker from trees that grew here), full of images and writing by local people expressing what they love and value about this place. A beautiful booklet of walks has been published, and

### **Wildness and Wet a review by Bill Eddie**

*Aig an Or*

*At the Edge - Scotland's Atlantic Oakwoods*

Text by Robert Burton, £35.00

The Society of Wildlife Artists  
Langford Press, 2005.

words by Thomas A. Clark. We've had series of talks and walks with writers and poets such as Kathleen Jamie and Gerry Loose.

There's growing interest in making Falkland part of the 'Transition Towns' movement: people getting together to reduce their individual and community carbon footprint. I know I'm privileged to be living somewhere that still has several pubs and a post office, with an organic farm, shop and café in walking distance, a passable bus service and trains within cycling distance (if only the buses connected with trains, but maybe one day soon they will!). As certainties crumble and the only constant is constant change, I am grateful to be living in a place where I can find support for dealing with the immense challenges that lie ahead as we face up to the reality of climate change. We need to seek within ourselves and our communities the skills we require to change our ways, to grow beyond the greed and violence on which our current lifestyles depend. Kenneth White says, 'Geopoetics is concerned with the cultivation of a live and life-enhancing world by self-developing individuals'. This is what we're trying to do in Falkland.

This book brings together a selection of art created by members of the Society of Wildlife Artists who took part in the Aig an Or (At the Edge) project during 2004. The aim was to highlight the work of Forestry Commission Scotland and its partners, including local communities on Skye, in Sunart and Morvern, and at Knapdale, in order to draw attention to the importance of Atlantic oakwoods in west Scotland and the efforts to preserve and restore them. The artists were invited to record their impressions of the oakwoods from three localities designated as Special

ISBN 1-904078-18-4

Rarely do artists and poets focus on the microcosm of the plant world. Perhaps Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem *Inversnaid* or Heinrich Heine's evocation of mosses in his *Journey to the Harz Mountains* come to mind. Here at last is a book that more than does justice to the exquisite but largely unsung beauty of Scotland's wet Atlantic oakwoods with their unparalleled diversity of lichens, mosses and liverworts. But the book is more than that, it is a highly subjective account of a bigger picture – the ecology of a unique and internationally important habitat that has long been ignored, marginalised, altered and fragmented. Scotland's Atlantic oakwoods form part of the original great Caledonian Forest, and are patchily distributed on the Atlantic edge from Sutherland to Loch Lomond and the Trossachs. Their affinities are with similar wet forests in south-west Scotland, west Ireland, the Lake District, west Wales, Cornwall, Brittany and Galicia.

*dappled light, Kinloch*. Importantly, human activity in the landscape has also been portrayed. It is impossible in a short review to do justice to each of the 43 artists who participated. Page after page is a delight and one is left wondering why such a project was not carried out years ago.

The book is attractive and thoughtfully produced, and, for a hardback of 170 pages measuring 31cm x 28 cm, is excellent value despite its price-tag of £35.00. The text by Robert Burton is a model of clarity and a reflection of his deep personal involvement with the landscape and the people in this part of west Scotland. The foreword by Hugh Insley, Chief Executive of Forest Enterprise Scotland is also in

Areas of Conservation: the Kinloch Hills on Skye, Ardnamurchan and Morvern on each side of Loch Sunart, and Knapdale and Taynish in Argyll.

The resulting artwork is as diverse as the woodlands themselves. Depending on the particular predilection of the artist, the subjects range from landscapes to detailed studies of mosses and fungi, in addition to sketches and portraits of wildlife, particularly the birds and mammals. A few 'almost-abstract' pictures make an interesting departure from representation, but for me, some of the most moving paintings are Chris Rose's energy charged acrylics of moss-covered trees, Michael Warren's *Bullfinches* and Peter McDermott's *Ancient oak* –

Gaelic. I personally would have preferred the whole book to be bilingual but undoubtedly this would have added considerably to the cost. However, several Gaelic poems inserted throughout the text add considerably to a truly remarkable book.

**You are invited to send us your responses to any or all of these articles for possible inclusion in our next Newsletter.**