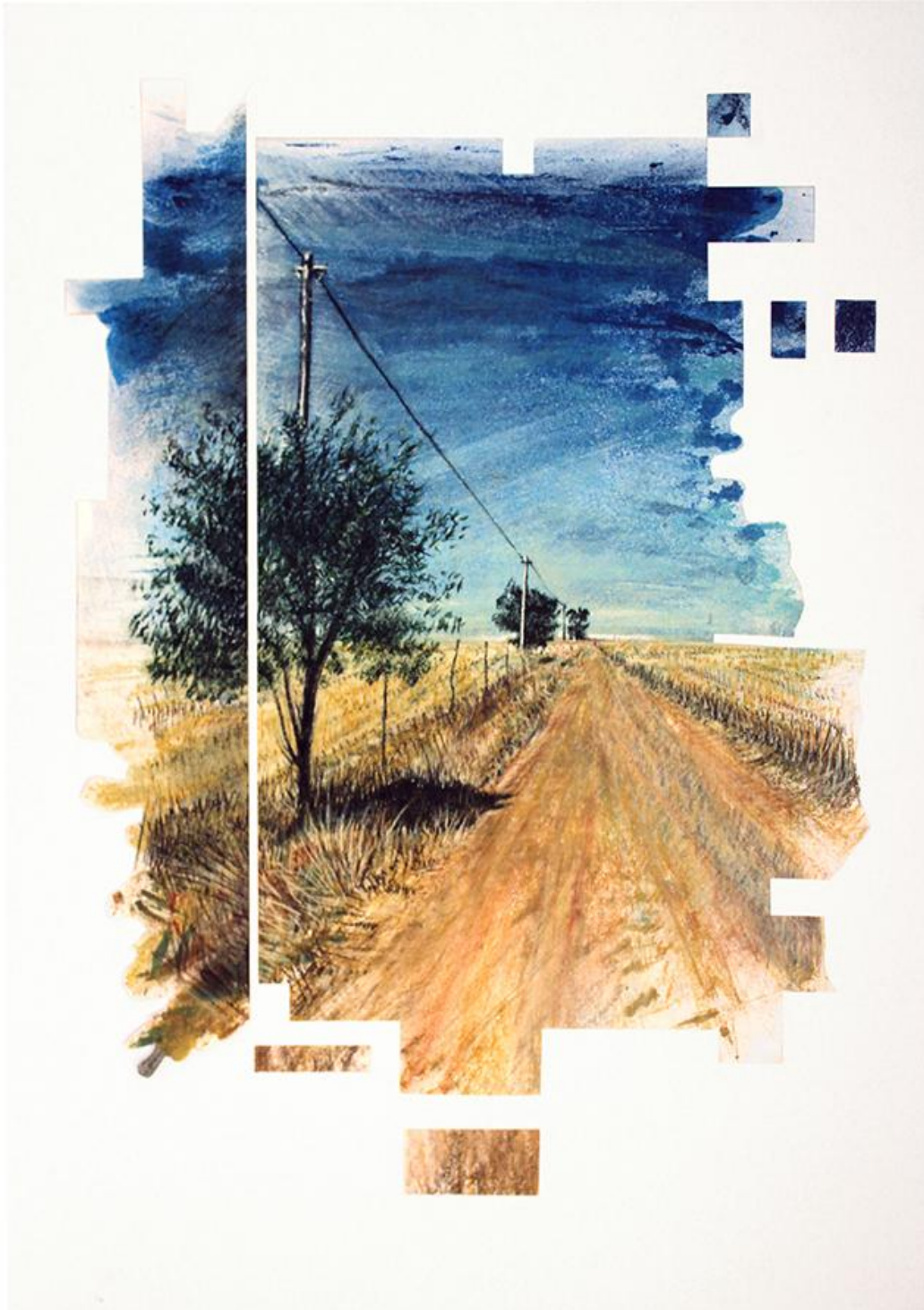


# STRAVAIG #10

From Alba to England



Poems

Art

Essays

## Deirdre (The Homecoming)

James Fenton

And you were heading for home at last, a homecoming you had put off for so many years, years in which you had been fighting other people's battles, helping them save a forest here, a coral atoll there, an ancient prairie over there... the list was endless, for there were always people wanting to tear up the planet, to impoverish its life, oft times for but small commercial gain; you had been focused on this work, it had been your whole life, consuming you with unbridled passion, a passion you had passed on to others, creating an NGO to channel all your energies into effective campaigning; your timing had been right too for, although in the early years you had seemed like a lone voice crying in the wilderness (for the wilderness!), now everyone was listening, or at least paying lip service, and there would soon come a time, you hoped, when your successes might outweigh your failures, the tide was turning and politicians were saying the right things, if not yet actually changing their ways.

But you were beginning to feel tired, your energy depleted by endless repetition over the years of the same arguments again and again to those unwilling to listen, or incapable of listening, and frustrated by people's selfish attendance to their own needs, unable to raise their heads to see the glories of the planet they were intent on destroying, destroying in ignorance (you hoped) rather than with malign intent, or perhaps just through carelessness or apathy; you were feared that your passion was waning, that, just when success was visible on the horizon, your appetite for battle was fading, that each new case was no longer a challenge to relish but a weary duty; and you had no-one with whom to share yourself, intimately that is; you never had, embracing a commitment to 'the cause' at the expense of embracing a real human being.

Always at the back of your mind rested the words of your father, a father who was always going on about 'the hame country', who had reminisced about its hills, its lochs, its glens, 'God's Own Country' he had called it; he was forever recounting its beauty, the glories of a sunset over an island-studded sea, the long, snake-like lochs that had no end, the mountains not too big and over-bearing like the Rockies, but smaller and more homely, albeit wild in the depths of a snow-blasted blizzard, the wide-open, windswept moors where there was room to breathe and space to live, an golden eagle soaring above, an antlered stag outlined against a clear horizon, the coming home to a heart-warming peat fire after a day's work during the short winter's day; and the music, there was always music to bring folk together; not the harsh music of modern times, he would say, but music in keeping with the people and the place; and you would ask your father why he ever took his family away from such an earthly paradise (you were barely five years old when you all left), "times were hard, aye, times were hard" were all you got in reply, "and I'll go back one day" – but he never did.

And you had always meant to visit, but the years had passed and you were too engrossed in Saving the Planet to give time to yourself; but now, when you needed to break loose, the words of your father were increasingly coming back to you, perhaps the time was right to see for yourself 'the hame country'...

As you took your seat on the plane you could not help but notice the occupant of the seat next to yours, she smiled at you as you squeezed past to gain your own, and at first you were too shy to talk to her or even to turn your head round to look at her; but it

was she who said the first words “Have I not seen you recently, on television, the campaign to stop drilling in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge?”, and you had to reply in the affirmative, although this campaign had been one of your (or rather ‘our’) failures – at least so far, because there were still avenues to be tried, avenues you had given to others to travel down leaving you to make your escape; and once conversation had been opened, you found that it flowed freely, you found her easy to talk to, she listened well, and you found yourself telling her about your work and then about yourself, and you surprised yourself by telling her your hopes and fears and why you were escaping to ‘the hame country’; and she in turn opened-up about herself, she was a singer, a folk-singer, ‘well-kent’ at home and abroad she said (although her name was not familiar to you), returning after a long and tiring series of concerts in the States and Canada, and looking forward to relaxing back at home, on the Isle of Skye she said, where she could be herself and not be parading herself to her fans; and she was surprised you had never before returned to your country of origin, considering its great beauty, the glories of a sunset over an island-studded sea, the long, snake-like lochs that had no end, the mountains not too big and over-bearing, albeit wild in the depths of a snow-blasted blizzard, the wide-open, windswept moors where there was room to breathe and space to live, an golden eagle soaring above, an antlered stag outlined against a clear horizon; surprised in particular as you gave her the impression that the environment was



The Black Cuillin

important to you.

And there appeared to be an inevitability about it all, as if the fates, in the original placement of her seat next to yours, had decreed that you and Deirdre should be brought together, that the plane flight was but the start of a much longer journey for you both, and you had accepted her invitation to Skye, her desire to show off her country to you; and you had cancelled your hotel and travelled north with her instead, having first been taken aback by the crowds greeting her on her arrival at the airport, and not failing to notice the puzzled glances of many at yourself; the next day you would see pictures in the papers (Read all about it!), pictures of you both under the caption “Is this the new man in Deirdre’s MacKinnon’s life?”, a question you thought unfair as you had known her less than a day (but how were they to know?).

And you still could not believe it, here you were sitting beside a beautiful woman, her long red hair glowing in the sunlight, her occasional glances to you enhanced by her smile as she concentrated on both the driving and the extolling of the scenery; at first you found it hard to listen, finding the beauties of the driver overwhelmed the beauties of the countryside, but as the journey north wore on you eventually managed to drag your eyes round to the windows and began to notice the land you were passing through; at first you saw it through the eyes of your father, the romantic view of an unspoilt land unsullied by modern intrusions, but when seen through your own eyes you began to notice a mismatch between what you were expecting and what was there; the land was smaller and more cramped than you were expecting, and you noticed little regard for its beauty, with lines of pylons traversing the landscape, a plethora of bulldozed tracks disappearing up into the hills, lakes converted to reservoirs with dams and ugly draw-down zones, miles and miles of fences

and plantations, and even, in some places great scour-lines of forestry ploughing, ripping through everything.

And you were surprised at Deirdre's surprise when you started to tell her that this was no longer the undefiled countryside of your dreams, that the landscape she was extolling was no longer untrammelled but beset with the infrastructure of the modern world, the naturalness and wildness becoming cornered to a last retreat; and at first she argued with you, defending her own land against outsiders, but you were persistent in pointing out what was hidden in plain sight: the scar of new track ascending the hill slope, a ploughed area of hill surrounded by a high fence, older plantations of Sitka spruce far away from their native land, a new phone mast placed for all to see... "Could she," you asked, "could she point out any place we can see that in America would be called 'wilderness' – wild land left to itself?"; and she looked, and she looked, but it was only when we reached her native island and neared the mountains you heard were called 'The Cuillin', that she said "There you are!"; and she was right, these hills were in keeping with your father's imagination – but it was too little too late, your image had already been shattered.

And you asked why the people were so unconcerned about what was happening to their own land, how could she be so blind to the reality?; and she had no immediate answer, saying things just happened and you accepted them, and that there was a history I needed to understand: it was a poor country and people needed jobs, and people had been badly treated in the past and now resented outsiders coming in and telling them how to look after the land; but you pointed out that the same was happening



Loch Cluanie and dam

everywhere across the world, nature was in full retreat; and when you asked her if she approved of oil drilling in a wildlife reserve, she emphatically said no! "Then why," you asked, "do you accept similar development amongst Scotland's lochs, hills and glens?", to which she had no answer...

As is of course well-known, you never left Skye and over time you realised that there were the same environmental battles to be fought in the 'hame country' as in the rest of the world, and because no-one else was doing it, you put your campaigning skills to use in order to protect what was left of the 'old Scotland of the imagination', even though it was too late to save many places; and your energy was rekindled by having Deirdre at your side, and you could not have achieved what you have achieved without her now well-known collection 'Songs of the Highlands' achieving worldwide acclaim, with its strong environmental message; and she introduced you to a whole new world of music, music with roots embedded in the Scottish soil; and you felt that the one song which encapsulated your new life was Runrig's 'Going Home': "Across the moorlands, past the mountains, O'er the rivers, beside the new streams, Something tells me that I'm going home"; and you have come home.