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A Liuthad Soitheach: Exile and the Clearances in the Writing of Iain Crichton Smith

There is no doubt that, as an episode, the Highland Clearances (and, although I do not continue to use that full term throughout the article, we must never forget that the Clearances were not confined to the Highlands alone) had a profound effect on our Scottish—and, particularly, Gaelic—consciousness. In this article, I consider that effect in relation to the writing of one very significant figure in recent Scottish literature, Iain Crichton Smith. I deal with works in both English and Gaelic here, and incorporate translations into the text where necessary.

My title “A liuthad soitheach” [“The Many Ships”] comes from Iain Crichton Smith’s Gaelic poem “Na h-Eilthirich” [“The Exiles”]. The poem is an extended image of the departing ships leaving for Canada at the time of the Clearances and since then. It is about the departure of so many Scots and especially what we can think of as the Gaelic diaspora—the scattering of the Highlands that has brought their language almost to the brink of extinction. The imagery in the poem is striking and it works as well in the English translation which Crichton Smith has also published. The imagery is important to the remainder of this paper so I quote both versions here in full:

A liuthad soitheach a dh’fhàg ar dùthaich
le sgiathan geala a’ toirt Chanada orra.
Tha iad mar neapaignean nar cuimhne
's an sàl mar dheòirean
's anns na croinn aca seòladairean a’ seinn
mar eòin air gheugan.

Muir a' Mhàigh ud gu gorm a' ruith,
 gealach air an oidhch', grian air an latha,
 ach a' ghealach mar mheas buidhe
 mar thruinnsear air balla
 ris an tog iad an làmhan
 neo mar mhagnet airgeadach
 le gathan goirte
 a' sruthadh don chridhe.¹

The many ships that left our country
 with white wings for Canada.
 They are like handkerchiefs in our memories
 and the brine like tears
 and in their masts sailors singing
 like birds on branches.
 That sea of May running in such blue,
 a moon at night, a sun at daytime,
 and the moon like a yellow fruit,
 like a plate on a wall
 to which they raise their hands
 like a silver magnet
 with piercing rays
 streaming into the heart.²

The white wings of birds and ships in the same image might make us think of the ark and we have already a very intricate image of fleeing and exile and the search for salvation, or what the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella describes as “searching the darkness for a landing place.”³ White sails themselves are also symbolic of salvation, though, with the numerous mythological oppositions between white and black sails—such as the myths of Theseus, and Tristan and Iseult, to name only two. Handkerchiefs can stand for sadness—they collect tears, after all—and also simply for parting: the waving of handkerchiefs to bid farewell to loved ones. The brine collecting in the sails is like tears that soak into the handkerchiefs, with the simile sustained nicely as another simile then moves into its place and reminds us of the wings from the second line.

I focus here especially on three texts which are very clearly of the Clearances, in the sense that they revolve around the story of one particular old woman being moved out of her home to make way for the Duke of Sutherland's sheep. I also show how an awareness of the Clearances has affected

¹Iain Crichton Smith, *Na h-Eilthirich* (Glasgow, 1983), p. 5.

²Iain Crichton Smith, *The Exiles* (Manchester, 184), p. 13. Henceforth *The Exiles*.

³Thomas Kinsella, *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (New York, 1968).

Iain Crichton Smith's writing in a more general sense. But, I hope that, in doing this, I do not engender in readers' minds a skewed impression of what Crichton Smith's writing is all about; this is only one aspect of his *oeuvre*.

There is a recurrent theme of exile in his work, and his conclusion is, consistently, that one cannot return as he says in the short story "An American Sky"—"One always brings back a judgement to one's home."⁴ The main character in that story has returned to the island of his childhood (probably Lewis) and found that, in spite of his expectations, things have changed in his absence.

This paper deals with Crichton Smith's own interpretation of the Clearances, how he imagines it affecting both the victims and the perpetrators, and then goes on to show how an awareness of this history has probably affected his own writing style.

Let us turn first to the novel *Consider the Lilies*.⁵ There is little doubt that it is Iain Crichton Smith's best-known work of fiction and, indeed, the single most famous book he wrote. It is also unusual for him in a number of fundamental ways; the main character is an uneducated old woman who lived through the Clearances. Although old women feature extensively in Crichton Smith's writing, and especially in his poetry, it is atypical of him to write a piece of extended fiction like this entirely from the old woman's point of view. What we have come to expect in terms of principal characters in Crichton Smith's long fiction is, more typically, boys who have university aspirations; or else middle-aged men who went to university in their youth and who have since become teachers or writers; and retired teachers who look back on a life with only books for company and wonder if that was the best way to have lived. Many of these main characters have left small Highland villages and gone to live in big cities. Some of them have returned to their original villages; others have gone to different small Highland villages. To focus an entire novel on someone who has never left her home and never intends to, then, adds to the irony that her story takes place in the middle of the Clearances and that she will be put out of her house against her will. The historical setting is another uncommon choice for Crichton Smith. Many of his works are set either on islands that are similar in many ways to Lewis, or else in small Highland villages. But the norm is for them to be relatively contemporary, or at least contemporary with the author's own youth. So this novel stands out even among Crichton Smith's otherwise outstanding fiction.

It is important to realize that *Consider the Lilies* is not a novel about the Clearances per se. Isobel Murray suggests that the novel is about ideology

⁴Iain Crichton Smith, *Listen to the Voice* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 297.

⁵Iain Crichton Smith, *Consider the Lilies* (Edinburgh, 1987), ed. with Introd. by Isobel Murray. Henceforth *Consider*.

rather than history (*Consider*, p. vii). By placing a deeply religious woman in the terrible situation of being cleared from her home, Crichton Smith is able to have her question the dogma she has lived by. She can come to see the village and the minister in a less positive light. For the first time in a very long time, her ideas are challenged and she finds herself asking questions. Murray also points out that there are historical inaccuracies in the novel, or at least anachronisms (*Consider*, p. vii). These inaccuracies are probably deliberately self-reflexive devices to call attention to the fact that this is just a story and that it is, in the first place, a story about an old woman and not an account of the Clearances as they happened.

The story itself is fairly simple. The setting is nineteenth-century Sutherland. The main character Mrs. Scott is an ordinary, poor Highlander, in the last few years of her life. She is visited at home by a man on a white horse (*Consider*, p. 1). This is the Duke of Sutherland's factor, Patrick Sellar, who has come to tell her that she must leave her house. In their conversation, various misunderstandings ensue and the old woman is left confused and frightened. She tries to get help from people whom she has come to rely on, the elder and the minister in particular. Gradually she comes to realize that not only is everyone else in the community being put out of their houses, but that the people she thought would defend her are actually taking the side of the factor to avoid trouble. The only person who really sympathizes with Mrs. Scott is Donald Macleod, who is an atheist whom Mrs. Scott has previously thought of as an unsavory character. Macleod and his family look after Mrs. Scott when she faints from the stress and falls into the burn, and they invite her to move in with them when they have been cleared so that she will not be alone in the new, unfamiliar place.

The novel is about communication and about people's perceptions of each other and of their own ideologies, which supplant the ideology of community spirit. Mrs. Scott's own lifelong ideology of Christianity cannot, to her surprise, halt the advance of the ideology of profit and of conformity in a British-based rather than Highland-based economy. Most of the novel is a series of encounters between the beleaguered Mrs. Scott and a variety of other characters, interspersed with some introspection in which Mrs. Scott remembers her long-dead husband and parents. One of the most memorable encounters in the book is a pivotal conversation between the old woman and Patrick Sellar. Here we see Crichton Smith highlighting tensions between different kinds of law: the law of nature and the law of the courts:

The rider was Patrick Sellar, factor to the Duke of Sutherland, and he wasn't riding his horse very well, though he felt that in his position he ought to have a horse. He was an ex-lawyer, and horses aren't used to that kind of law (*Consider*, p. 1).

Shortly after this, we have an image of the horse sheering its head away from its rider as if it finds him distasteful. Sellar is involved with thinking about his

position and status when he is engaged in the task of guiding the horse to Mrs. Scott's home. She, by contrast, is thinking of nothing when Sellar arrives; she is content to watch hens scabble around in the dust. The diametric opposite-ness of the two characters is already well established by the second paragraph. Sellar thinks too much and Mrs. Scott not at all.

The first few pages of *Consider the Lilies* establish the importance of expectations and perceptions, which then become focal themes throughout the rest of the novel. Underlying our sympathy for Mrs. Scott, we can also find some dark humor in the way the two characters talk at cross-purposes for most of their conversation. This effectively illustrates the fact that Mrs. Scott's command of English is much inferior to her command of Gaelic, while Sellar does not have any Gaelic at all. This is a clear indication that the issue is essentially a clash between two different cultures. Sellar represents urbanized, university-trained, English-speaking Britain, while Mrs. Scott represents the persecuted rural, uneducated, Gaelic-speaking Highlands. There is the danger of reading the characters thus as archetypes, which might place the novel in a Kailyard context, but this would not be accurate.

It becomes more and more clear as the conversation goes on that the problem is that characters are either unable or unwilling to see things from other people's points of view. There are a number of images to do with the eyes and vision: "She stood up very slowly and pulled the curtains across the window because the sun was in her eyes" (*Consider*, p. 5). She is unable to see clearly because the sun is in her eyes and she is dazzled. She is also dazzled by this visitor. She does not get many visitors and those she does get are her neighbors. To be entertaining a messenger for the Duke is all quite overwhelming for her, and this is especially the case when the visitor does not understand her. He does not know what it means to be old and frail: "She felt that her slow movements irritated the man. But then he didn't know what it was to be old. You had to be old to know what it was to be old" (*Consider*, p. 5).

Mrs. Scott can only see things from her point of view and Patrick Sellar can only see things from his point of view, and the narrator deliberately flags up the interchange between the two characters:

she didn't know anything about Patrick Sellar. Nor, for that matter, did he know much about her. As far as he was concerned, she was a disposable object. As far as she was concerned, he was a stranger and to be treated with hospitality even though she was old (*Consider*, p. 1).

The recurring symbol for this inability to appreciate the other's position is physical eyesight and the eyes themselves. Sellar has "small burning eyes." He also seems to have a small, passionately selfish mind. Mrs. Scott's eyesight, on the other hand, is beginning to fail with her age, just as she is also

beginning to have difficulty thinking clearly at times. Crichton Smith makes a fresh image out of the old adage about the eyes being the window to the soul.

Her eyes shuttled back and forth, following him on his frantic pacing as if he were a caged animal.

'...You people never see anybody from one year's end to another. You never see anything new either...' (*Consider*, p. 10).

There is a nice irony here in the way each thinks of the other as a kind of animal.

What Sellar can never grasp is that the house is part of Mrs. Scott's identity, part of what defines her. Not only is the house a major part of who she is, but it is also a major part of who her entire family are and have been. She cannot imagine living anywhere else, because she does not see how she would still be herself if she went to another house. She knows that leaving the house would be a kind of death for her—probably sufficiently traumatic, in fact, as to result in her physical death. Mrs. Scott's family still exist for her in the house, even though they are dead or have left. This is the place where her memories of them are.

Mrs. Scott does not understand how people can be aware of the same facts and yet feel so differently about them. This becomes evident in the flashback where she is remembering her son. The boy Iain asks her about his father, who had died many years before in the Spanish campaign against Napoleon. Mrs. Scott feels disdain for a husband she sees as immature. She tries to explain this to Iain but her efforts result in the boy's hero-worship of his dead father. Even though his mother has said the worst things she can possibly think of about her husband, this just adds to his glamour for Iain.

Being cleared from her home is a trauma which acts as a catalyst to force Mrs. Scott to think of the world in ways she never would have before. Learning to see things from another point of view is a very hard lesson for Mrs. Scott, and the way is treacherous. It is hard for her to cope as the dogmas that have provided the foundation for her thinking and her entire way of life start to shift and slip. This is also worked out figuratively as she makes the long and difficult journey to the minister's house:

There was still some water in the river but she didn't look at it much for it would dazzle her eyes with the sun flashing on it like that. There was no hand rail and though it was a reasonable width the bridge seemed to have rotted and was swaying a bit. One of the planks had a hole in it and all of them were slimy. She managed to cross, breathless and frightened, keeping her eyes away from the water and looking only at the wood of the bridge (*Consider*, pp. 68-9).

On the journey Mrs. Scott comes upon a dead sheep, the image a ghastly one as Crichton Smith brings to gear his sometimes stunningly evocative powers of

description. Like the dead sheep in his poem "Sunday Morning Walk,"⁶ this one is a symbol of mortality. Although as George Watson notes of the sheep in "Sunday Morning Walk," "it isn't 'a symbol' of *memento mori*—it is the thing itself: bare, unaccommodated dead sheep."⁷ This is an example of the ironic way Crichton Smith manipulates metaphor, employing the image in traditional fashion at the same time as drawing attention to its figurative nature.

It is similar to the way the same writer heaps irony upon irony in his great poem "Deer on the High Hills—a Meditation," where he discusses the nature of language and its relationship to reality, and where he writes:

There is no metaphor. The stone is stony.
The deer step out in isolated air

* * *

The rain is rainy and the sun is sunny.
The flower is flowery and the sea is salty. (*Poems*, p. 34)

By the time we reach this line we realize that the poet is deliberately and self-reflexively subverting his own point, and that he is using metaphor to question metaphor.

The important thing about the sheep in both *Consider the Lilies* and "Sunday Morning Walk" is that it is dead. The people who have lived on this land for as long as they can remember—and their families before them—are being moved off it to make way for the sheep. But even sheep do not last. All things pass. All things have their time. But it is ironic, too, because people are being traumatized for the sake of an industry which is not necessarily fated to last a long time or even be a success.

I am not the first to have noticed that Crichton Smith's writing style, and especially that in his fiction, is spare. It is minimalist, eschewing, for the most part, long passages of description with adjective after adjective, which would be a typically Gaelic approach. Instead, his style tends to favor starkness, the single adjective carrying all the more power for its isolation. J. H. Alexander has noted that, among those adjectives, the kinds of words that are favored are words like "*bare, tall, pale, and thin*,"⁸ and I would add "meager" and "small." In his Gaelic, equivalent words are also common, such as "lom," "tana" and

⁶Iain Crichton Smith, "Sunday Morning Walk," in *Selected Poems* (Manchester, 1985). Henceforth *Poems*.

⁷George Watson, "Double Man at a Culloden of the Spirit: Reflections on the Poetry of Iain Crichton Smith" in Colin Nicholson, ed., *Iain Crichton Smith: Critical Essays* (Edinburgh, 1992), p. 309. Henceforth *Essays*.

⁸J. H. Alexander, "The Double Vision: Imagery in the English Poetry," in *Essays*, p. 131.

“caol.” Not only is the style sparse, but the very words themselves belong to the same semantic field as “sparseness.”

In his Preface to *Consider the Lilies*, Crichton Smith explains this in relation to the novel:

I should say something about the style which is, I suppose, rather simple and transparent. The reason for this was that I wished the events to be seen as if through the mind of the old woman. There are various ways in which this problem of language could have been tackled... I decided that on balance the best thing to do would be to use a simple English (*Consider*, Preface, pp. v-vi).

Certainly he succeeds admirably in taking the reader into the mind and mindset of the old woman, and his rendering of her thought-processes is convincing. Among his other novels and stories we find the same minimalist tendency coming through again and again. Other characters perhaps do not think so slowly and simplistically as Mrs. Scott, but we find the same short sentences populated almost exclusively by everyday words. We also note simple punctuation and a general tendency to avoid inversion and the passive voice. As Alexander also notes, words for colors are usually the simple, direct red, blue, green, yellow, black rather than cyan, vermilion, cerise, indigo, etc., although these others do occur occasionally.

This sparseness of language is related to the bareness of the land Crichton Smith came from. His images are of rocks and bare stones, empty moors and single houses standing alone against the horizon. Nothing is superfluous; nothing is overly elaborate.

In his Preface to *Consider the Lilies*, Crichton Smith reminds us that the novel was based on a play he had written earlier. That play is *A' Chùirt*, which is Gaelic for *The Court*.⁹ Not surprisingly, it features a trial—the trial of Patrick Sellar. *A' Chùirt* is Iain Crichton Smith's first sizeable treatment of the Clearances, and it is an important play for a number of reasons. As in *Consider the Lilies*, the main characters are Patrick Sellar, Mrs. Scott, and the judge in Sellar's trial. In the play, which was published two years before the first edition of *Consider the Lilies*, the focus is on Patrick Sellar's character. Mrs. Scott's presence is really only a device that allows us to see into his consciousness. The court is apparently Hell, although we are never told this explicitly and are left to work it out along with Sellar as the play progresses. The reader probably works it out before Sellar does.

Sellar is portrayed as arrogant and self-assured. Even though he is being judged in some sort of court, he is sure of his own position until he slowly begins to grow fearful of the judge (*A' Chùirt*, p. 6). The judge forces him to re-enact his conversation with Mrs. Scott when he told her she would be put out

⁹*A' Chùirt* (Inverness, 1966). Henceforth *A' Chùirt*.

of her house. The conversation has much in common with its equivalent scene in *Consider the Lilies*. In this version, we also learn that events have moved on; Sellar has put Mrs. Scott out of her home and burned the house down, and she has been left to die from exposure to the elements. There is no sign that Sellar feels any compassion or regret for his actions or their consequences. This lack, more than the actions themselves, is what he is on trial for.

As in *Consider the Lilies*, much is made of dreams and dreaming. The old woman in the play thinks she is dreaming when Sellar approaches her house, while in *Consider the Lilies* Sellar accuses the people of the community and Mrs. Scott in particular of being dreamers. He accuses them of failing to face up to real life and the necessity of progress as he sees it.

Like her namesake in the novel, Mrs. Scott of *A' Chùirt* thinks that Sellar has come to give her the war widow's pension she was told would be due to her many years before when her husband died in the Napoleonic Wars. She initially sees Sellar's arrival in a positive light, and this no doubt adds to her confusion when he reveals his true purpose. Sellar, in turn, has no idea what she is talking about when she mentions the pension. This failure of communication between them leads to a breakdown in language, because they both find it difficult to express themselves, and their sentences are broken and hesitant:

BOIREANNACH – Cò sibh?¹⁰ An ann mu dheidhinn a' phension a thàinig sibh?
Tha mo dhuine air a bhith...air siubhal...bho chionn seachd bliadhna, 's e saighdear
a bh'ann 's cha d'fhuair...

SELLAR – Chan ann...air son pension...a thàinig mi. An cuala sibh a riamh mu'n
Dìuc...? (*A' Chùirt*, p. 6)

WOMAN – Who are you [pl.]? Is it about the pension that you have come? My
husband has been ...away...for seven years, he was a soldier and never got...

SELLAR – It's not...for a pension...that I came. Did you ever hear of the Duke...?

There is perhaps some irony in the old woman's choice of euphemism here. Her husband has died on his travels, and the word for traveling—"siubhal"—is also a Gaelic word for dying. The Mrs. Scott of *Consider the Lilies* thought of her husband as flighty and unserious; these were his worst failings, summed up for her in his desire to travel and seek adventure. It is unlikely, of course, that this Mrs. Scott's husband could have died a soldier's death only seven years previously, as she is a woman of seventy-five. It would seem that her memory is playing subtle tricks with time. This is important because, as in *Consider*

¹⁰Gaelic, like many languages, has a polite form of address, which is identical with the second person plural form—thus "sibh."

the Lilies, it is characters' perceptions of events that are significant, more so than the events themselves.

Sellar's use of language is notable. He confesses that his Gaelic is not what it might be (although, of course, he at least speaks Gaelic, unlike the Sellar in *Consider the Lilies*). He tries to tempt Mrs. Scott with images of a new home with the modern conveniences of the day, such as a well next door. Inverted commas, and Sellar's use of the phrase "mar a their sinn" ["as we say"] draw attention to the fact that he calques an English idiom for "next door" and he uses English phrases, such as "all right." He finds it difficult to sustain his use of the polite form of address in the language. Mrs. Scott is confused by his lapses and he admits "tha mi call na Gàidhlig" ["I'm losing the Gaelic"]. Unlike Mrs. Scott, he fails to use a euphemism for death, which is the usual Gaelic way. Instead, he comes right out with the word "marbh" ["dead"] on two occasions in talking about her husband, and she complains about this the second time.

This conflict between them over language also highlights the fact that they see death differently. To Mrs. Scott, the dead are always present. Their memory is important, and, just because they are dead it does not mean that they are disposed of. Nor, indeed, are their feelings to be disregarded. The idea of the Christian afterlife seems to be mixed up with superstition somehow here, as it is in *Consider the Lilies* where the novel's old woman is thinking about God and the Bible in the same passage where she worries about signs and portents (*Consider*, p. 64).

Sellar's main defense in this otherworldly trial is that he was just doing his duty, but the judge is not impressed with this defense. It is the great cry of the war criminal ("I was only following orders") and it is simply not acceptable. It is clear that the judge's opinion is that orders are meaningless unless someone is willing to carry them out. More than this, he is convinced that Sellar took pleasure in the job and that he does not show the remorse he should when he learns that the old woman died in the snow:

BRITHEAMH – 'S chuir thu a-mach i. Do'n t-sneachd. Thusa! Thusa! Thusa a rinn sin. Cha leig thu leas a bhith 'ga chur air daoine eile. Do làmhan-sa leis a' chuiip (*A' Chùirt*, p. 14).

JUDGE – And you put her out. To the snow. You! You! It was you that did that. You needn't be blaming it on other people. It was your hands on the whip.

The existential question here is one of choice. Duty to an employer is not greater than the duty that we have to make our own decisions. Sellar's claim that he was following orders is an empty one because it was his choice to obey those orders. This is symbolized by the disappearance of the written commission. What Crichton Smith has done with this play is attempt to address the issue of the Clearances from the point of view of a notorious participant in

those historical events. He has created a fictional character and used him as a means to investigate the motivations and justifications that the various bailiffs might have hidden behind at the time.

In the short story "Am Maor"¹¹ [the factor], Crichton Smith does this again, and this time the factor has apparently stronger justifications than Sellar does. "Am Maor" also deals with the confrontation between the factor and the old woman. In this version of the incident, the factor actually knocks on the door. He thinks afterwards, in supercilious fashion, that there was no need for him to have knocked. Nonetheless, he is a more circumspect character than either of the Patrick Sellars, even uncomfortable. He finds it difficult to broach the subject and keeps procrastinating. He allows the old woman to ramble on about things he does not understand because he does not want to offend her, and he feels awkward. In *Consider the Lilies* and *A' Chùirt*, the factor's horse-whip is a symbol of power—Patrick Sellar wishes to be in control, and he is jealous of the Duke's fortune and influence. In this story, the whip highlights the bailiff's discomfort and exaggerates his awkwardness as it allows us to see the nervousness of his body language.

As in the other versions discussed, the old woman initially sees his arrival in a reasonably positive light. She says to him:

"Ach suidhibh sìos, suidhibh sìos. Chan ann tric a bhios luchd-tadhail agam" ("Am Maor," p. 9).

["But sit (pl.) down, sit down. It's not often that I get visitors."]

As in *Consider the Lilies* and *A' Chùirt*, the old woman asks the bailiff if he has come about her pension. And, as in those versions of the story, he has no idea what she is talking about. This repetition of the same confusion in the three formats signals its importance to the author. That importance consists in the irony of the fact that the old woman's husband has given everything—his life, even—in the service of his Duke and his country, and his family's only repayment is to be burned out of their home to make way for the Duke's latest money-making scheme. Asking about the pension is one of the ways Crichton Smith points out her vulnerability. She is clearly showing signs of senility, especially in the way she repeatedly becomes muddled about time.

Again, there is misunderstanding between them, and the old woman in this story is even more confused than the Mrs. Scott characters in the novel and the play. Her inability to see things from others' points of view is even more exaggerated; for instance, she assumes that everyone will know a local man, Murchadh MacLeòid, and is genuinely surprised when the factor does not.

¹¹"Am Maor" in *An Dubh is An Gorm* (Glasgow, 1969). Henceforth "Maor."

There is a subplot in this story concerning the factor. In it we learn something about this character and his motivations, which are certainly more thoughtful than the motivation that the Patrick Sellar of *À Chùirt* claims in his defense—that he was only following orders. The factor in “Am Maor” is thinking about love, shame for his own origins and seems even to have real sympathy for the people he is evicting. He tells himself that he volunteered for the job because it would be better for the people to be put out by someone who could empathize with them rather than to be evicted by strangers. He is determined that he will not burn a single house and clearly does not approve of that method of evictions. He says to the old woman:

“Chan eil fhios am biodh duine eile cho foidhidneach. Bithidh sibh anns an tigh ùr ann an seachdain” (“Am Maor,” p. 15).

[“I don’t know if someone else would be so patient. You’ll (pl.) be in the new house in a week”]

He convinces himself that the people should be grateful to have such an understanding factor dealing with their cases: “sann a bheireadh iad taing dha fhathasd” (p. 16) [they would be grateful to him yet]. But this old woman’s reaction to him is exactly the same as the reaction of the Mrs. Scott characters to the totally unsympathetic Patrick Sellar characters. The bailiff deceives himself with dreams about wooing a noble wife and spending time in the big city. He also deceives himself into thinking it is better to break the news to people gently, but he is still culpable. Like the Patrick Sellar in *A’ Chùirt*, he has made the choice, and his introspection does no more than show up his guilty conscience. He is a Pontius Pilate and the reality he never grasps is that he cannot wash his hands of his involvement.

It may be partly resulting from the persecution of his people, and the folk memory of it, that Iain Crichton Smith had such a fascination for the theme of exile. Of course, the theme is a common enough one in literature and it is often related to the way that those of a creative or artistic temperament can find it difficult to fit in. This is certainly the case in the writing of Iain Crichton Smith. There is considerable evidence that he had trouble in his own life relating to his less bookish peers. For instance, the main characters in *An t-Aonaran*¹² (A Gaelic novel), *On the Island*¹³ (an autobiographical novel) and *In the Middle of the Wood*¹⁴ have difficulty communicating with others because their terms of reference are so different. It is not a huge step from feel-

¹²Iain Crichton Smith, *An t-Aonaran* (Glasgow, 1976).

¹³Iain Crichton Smith, *On the Island* (London, 1979).

¹⁴Iain Crichton Smith, *In the Middle of the Wood* (London, 1987).

ings of isolation to feelings of exile. I would also suggest that an awareness of the Clearances in his history has been instrumental in developing Crichton Smith's exile sensibility.

"Na h-Eilthirich" ["The Exiles"] is the title poem of the collection in which it appears, *Na h-Eilthirich* (Glasgow, 1983), and the volume features many poems about place and nostalgia. Nostalgia is never unambiguous in Crichton Smith's writing, though. He is slightly suspicious of it; this is one of the features that mark his poetry. This is particularly true in the Gaelic milieu where there are few others who can look at situations from the inside and yet maintain an objective view at the same time.

There are poems called "Ann an Astrailia" [In Australia], "Am Fear a Chaidh a dh'Astrailia" [The Man who Went to Australia], "Na h-Aboriginies," and "Vancouver"—all of them in some way drawing on the exile theme. All of them, indeed, very clearly follow that opening poem which spread the Gael to these diverse parts of the world, where he might observe the cultures that are so alien and yet so similar. The reader is reminded of the thoughts of Mrs. Scott in *Consider the Lilies*, when she thinks of "a strange new world without boundaries" (*Consider*, p. 69).

Certainly, the concerns of the Clearances are not far away in the poem "Na h-Aboriginies," where the first line tells us:

Tha iad a' cladhach airson ola
a-measg bhur n-uaighean naomha (*Na h-Eilthirich*, p. 7).

[They are digging for oil/ among your holy graves]

In "Am Fear a Chaidh a dh'Astrailia," there is imagery that is reminiscent of that in "Na h-Eilthirich," as the poet reminds the addressee that there will be different birds in another country. The important lesson in all of these poems is that what happened in the Clearances was not unique, not even original. Crichton Smith manages to remind us, in a few lines, that these injustices have been going on for an immeasurably long time and that they are international.

In the English-language collection *The Exiles* (Manchester, 1984), Crichton Smith uses the Odysseus myth as his symbol of exile and return. In the opening poem, "Returning Exile" and the third poem "Next Time" in particular, the addressee is Odysseus. In both cases, the poet is questioning him on his return home from his twenty years of adventures and hardships:

Listen, when you come home
to see your wife again
where the tapestry stands unfinished
across the green brine,
sit among the stones
and consider how it was
in the old days

before you became a king
and walked hunchbacked
with decisions on your shoulders (*The Exiles*, p. 11).

What the poet tells us is that the *Odyssey* is far-fetched, not because of its tales of monsters and gods and magical events, but because of the way the hero and his wife react to his exile. It is not possible to leave home for twenty years and then to return and slot back in to your former role. Admittedly, Odysseus must kill off Penelope's suitors before he can resume his old role, but that is a matter of routine for such an established hero. The poem asks for realism:

Simply enter the boat
and leave the island
for there is no return,
boy, forerunner of kings.

Next time, do this,
salt bronzed veteran
let the tapestry be unfinished
as truthful fiction is (*The Exiles*, p. 11).

This is not to suggest that Crichton Smith does not know the pain of exile. He can convey it most keenly, as he does in the poem "There Is No Sorrow." What makes the pain all the worse is that it is so inexpressible:

There is no sorrow worse than this sorrow
the dumb grief of the exile
among villages that have strange names
among the new rocks (*The Exiles*, p. 10).

The land is not only unwelcoming—it is downright hostile. It is personified in the third stanza as threatening the exile. But in the end the new place will become familiar to him. In the end it will become a new home of sorts. At least, home is not the place that he came from. He must learn to live in this new place until, as the poet tells him, "one miraculous day/ you will wake up in the morning/ and put on your foreign clothes/ and know that they are at last yours" (*The Exiles*, p. 10). This may not be the ideal solution, but it is a solution. Crichton Smith admires the way that people are able to adapt to circumstances and cope in whatever environment they find themselves. This positive note is an appropriate one on which to end an article on the writing of someone who has so often been misrepresented as uncompromisingly bleak in his vision. I reinforce this by ending as I began, quoting one of Crichton Smith's poems in full:

“When They Reached the New Land”

When they reached the new land they rebuilt the old one,
they called the new mountains by old names,

they carved a Presbyterian church on the hill.
Nevertheless there was a sort of slantness,

a curious odd feeling in the twilight
that the mountain had shifted, had cast off its name

and even the Christ in the window seemed different
as if he had survived deserts and was not

a shepherd whom they imagined with his sheep
and his long staff high on the rainy hills.

It was much later before they made it all fit
and by then it was a new land.

They could have changed the names of the mountains
and could have walked in the familiar streets

built by their own strivings. It was then
that their old land was swallowed by the new;

and Christ a haunter of their own deserts,
the birds the colourful haunters of their own

trees and gardens. And they were at peace
among their settled, naturalized names (*The Exiles*, p. 20).

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