

the time by his finding that pilgrimage had become enormously popular over the previous 30 years, and that all kinds of people could resonate with the metaphor of life as a journey. Oddly enough, Alastair McIntosh came to speak at the same venue in 2009 just before embarking on his pilgrimage, so the event is mentioned in his book. As Peter explains, the word originally comes from the Latin *peregrinus*, etymologically derived from *per* (through) and *ager* (field, country, land) and it meant a foreigner, stranger, someone on a journey, or a temporary resident. We are certainly all temporary residents on the journey of life. Peter defines pilgrimage as a 'journey of moral or spiritual significance, undertaken in response to deep questions and a yearning for answers from a realm beyond the everyday.' (p. ix) So an ecological pilgrimage is a 'search for an experience of deep participation with the Earth and her creatures.' This is true for both books featuring the West Coast of Ireland and the West Coast of Scotland - in Peter's case mostly on the water, while Alastair walks across his home territory of Harris and Lewis, where his father had been a GP.

The three phases of the pilgrimage are preparation, the journey itself and the return home, plus, in these cases, writing up the experience for one's own benefit and that of others. The habits of everyday life are disrupted and we subject ourselves to considerable physical discomfort and hardship. This intensifies the ups and downs of life, but such experiences are required in order to gain resilience, however challenging they are time. Both writers record their changing moods, sometimes corresponding to the weather, a source of constant concern to pilgrims, especially on the sea.

They also write about being up against their physical limits, about tiredness and exhaustion compensated by exquisite landscapes and a deeper sense of belonging.

Both writers seek and experience the sacred, what Peter calls moments of grace. Harris and Lewis are full of ancient sacred sites and wells. Overlaid on the prevalence of second sight and the thinness of the veil between realities on the island is a bleak Calvinism, of which more below. Thomas Berry wrote about the need for a new story in which we experience ourselves as a communion of subjects rather than a collection of separate

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Sacred Journeys

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IN SEARCH OF GRACE – an Ecological Pilgrimage

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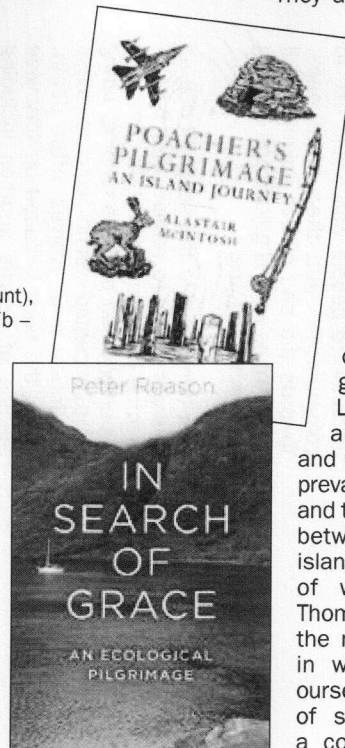
Earth Books (John Hunt), 2017, 239 pp., £10.99, p/b – ISBN 978-1-78279-486-8

POACHER'S PILGRIMAGE – an Island Journey

Alastair McIntosh (SMN)

Birlinn, 2016, 329 pp., £20, h/b – ISBN 978-1-78027-361-7

Some years ago at Falkland in Fife, Ian Bradley came to talk about his new book on pilgrimage. I was struck at



objects. Peter asks what it would take to experience ourselves fully as part of the whole, shifting our way of thinking from a world of separate objects to an interconnected whole, which is also a moral shift towards 'seeing humans as part of the community of life on Earth [the moral gaze].' (p. 10, also p. 138) Alastair's previous work in human ecology and on soil and soul resonates with this concern. This new vision is vital to generate the necessary energy for real transformation, as Thomas Berry insisted.

Part of our sense of alienation is the uprooting from more traditional cosmologies where we were contained within something larger and consequently knew our place and purpose. Peter and Alastair both refer to the work of Gregory Bateson, Alastair quoting his sentence 'Mind is immanent in the larger system - man plus environment.' (p. 17) – he could have added culture. Peter quotes Bateson to the effect that the human mind is driven by conscious purpose, which means the pursuit of short-term goals rather than long-term stability. Similarly, Bateson said that our major problems arise from the differences between the way Nature operates and the workings of the human mind - contrasting cyclical with linear. As pilgrims, the authors become aware of the rhythms and gestures of Nature - light and dark, hot and cold, sunrise and sunset, calm and storm corresponding to inner peace and turmoil. Beyond these polarities are the moments of grace and oneness where we can experience being part of a greater or wider whole. Here the boundaries of our everyday distinction between inner and outer blend, and we glimpse a greater depth as a more conscious traveller.

I reviewed Peter's earlier sea pilgrimage recounted in his book *Spindrift*. In the new book, he describes his pilgrimage in two parts over two years, spanning his 70th birthday at sea and completing the phase of his identity as a sailor by selling his boat and coming back to the fruit trees in his garden. He has a companion or companions for parts of his journey, but much of it is solo, bringing him into an encounter with himself, the boat, the sea, the weather and the landscape. Although the narrative is sequential, the chapters raise larger themes as reading and reflection intersect with episodes on the journey. Pilgrimage as homage or honouring, the relationship between tourist and pilgrim, finding the way - a lot of mapping and consulting charts is essential - dangers and difficulties, meandering and storytelling, silence and solitude, transience, fragility, Earth time, eternal now, deep time and pilgrimage at home. All this is beautifully written as the reader shares a range and intensity of experience. Just as the writer listens, so too does the reader.

Peter draws three lessons from his challenging experiences (p. 121): that the world beyond and beneath human constructions is irrefutably real and its indisputable presence will be revealed; secondly, the pilgrim is alert for signs, trying to remain awake. When we translate this into our ecological situation, we realise that many of us are 'sleepwalking into calamity.' The third lesson is about response - do we have the skill, resources and presence of mind to respond appropriately, both individually and collectively? Meandering and storytelling allows us to enter into the flow of life without imposing our own goals, it corresponds to silence, stillness and deep listening, an emptiness that is also fullness and healing.

In some ways, Alastair's pilgrimage across the land of his childhood is 'knowing place for the first time', seeing with new eyes. The bus ride at the start telescopes the island into a few hours, which extends to 12 days in reverse, a pilgrimage shorter than that of Peter, but no less intense. The land has its own history, including the 18th and 19th century croft clearances intersecting with Alastair's own work on land reform and confrontation with international business interests. Many of the colourful characters of the island are brought to life over the course of a few days, sometimes over a glass of cask-conditioned whisky. The landscape is both sacred and imaginal, the 'otherworld' ever present. The ancient Celtic spiritual heritage, as I referred to above, was overlaid by the strict and severe theological system of John Calvin, with his insistence on human depravity and double predestination - to heaven or hell. As Alastair remarks, this constitutes a theology of fear and control. However, an underlying sense of veneration still breaks through. Beside the gate of an ancient 'temple' site, he came across a plaque commemorating the burial of 400 tattered old family Bibles in 2006. Calvin might have fretted. Was this some idolatrous treatment of the paper, as distinct from its Word? The islanders had the last word in the inscription: 'the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever.'

The dualism of heaven and hell, light and dark, good and evil also informs Alastair's work over many years with the Defence Academy and other military think tanks. American defence thinking, as explained in my review of Paul Johnstone's book *From MAD to Madness in Books in Brief* below, is based on a naïve dichotomy of good and evil and the demonising of the enemy without awareness of projecting one's own shadow. Alastair explains his brief as exploring 'the moral implications of conflict that exceeds military capacity to deter or contain it; and the application of nonviolence, including its

religious basis, to achieve security in a complex world where the net results of conflict are not easy to predict.' (p. xvii). He describes various encounters with high-ranking military and the typical arguments they might deploy as Alastair insists on the courage of nonviolence and deconstructs just war theory. He confronts a number of people with the question - have you killed, lamenting the brutalisation inherent in many conflict situations. He admits his own complicity in being part of the system that destroys life more generally. Thoughtful military comment that he reminds them of their limits, encouraging them to move along the spectrum from violence to nonviolence, towards a spirituality of transformation. Here his thinking intersects with earlier reflections on Calvinism, since he sees the cross as nonviolence personified, while updating the literalistic insistence on ransom and atonement - freeing ourselves from ourselves, and reconnecting with our divine source (p. 262).

These reflections intersperse with the other side of the pilgrimage - the moor, the rocks, the sea, the wind, encounters with sacred wells and sites and with the blue mountain hare and deer, as well as the practicalities of food and shelter, with his trusty rucksack Osprey. People give him eggs and sandwiches for his journey and one can viscerally appreciate the warmth of hot drinks – also a prominent feature for Peter. The pilgrimage is an immersion not only in the landscape, but also in the otherworld of faeries and his concerns for God and war. The metaphor of the poacher comes up in a number of contexts, including the thought that we are all poachers in the flow of life: 'None of us', Alastair remarks, 'or very few at any rate, complete the cycles of gratitude and right relationships that open up to greater depths of being.' (p. 250) This includes a transformative encounter with the shadow, of which many people are still unaware, both generally and in themselves. In that sense, we are all work in progress, and pilgrimage helps us to become more conscious of this journey.

Both of these inspiring books can also turn into vicarious pilgrimages for the reader. I read many of the chapters by the fire in the evening, occasionally with a glass of good whisky to hand. The writers wrestle with central human challenges and the need for transformation, as well as personal and collective resistance to this process. If you are not planning a pilgrimage yourself, then I suggest you set aside time to read both of these books in the pilgrim state of mind as a way of opening up a deeper sense of connectedness with life and Nature and enhancing your own contribution to the current evolutionary transformation.