“A’ Dùsgadh na Gaoithe / Waking the Wind”
Finding the Folklore of a Fragile Ecology

Raghnaid Sandilands

‘But we heard the song and we found the gold.’
Katherine Stewart[1]

‘Language is an old growth forest of the mind.’
Wade Davis[2]

The forest landscapes of Strathnairn, on the south side of Loch Ness, are a mix of conifer plantation, community owned native forest and old-growth birch forest. Higher, in the foothills of the Monadh Liath, there are fragments of ancient forest with root remnants of birch and Scots pine deep in the peat. The Gaelic names carry knowledge and resonance, named by those for whom the living world was more alive and in times when ecologies were far richer.

My exhibited piece is a stitched map on linen that traces the shapes of Doire Gheugach (branched grove). An ancient growth forest, out of sight and far from memory, its name long since excised from the maps but there was another time when these forests were known and named.

Today overgrazing by deer means that any new growth is hindered. They are casualties of an ecosystem out of balance and their real-time vanishing is a slow white flag surrender.

This map records the branching organic shape and its particular and vital colours made by the forest’s birch, heather, and lichen. The colours have a vibrancy; might that they stir some folk memory or other, light the eye and lift the heart. Mending the thread to the linen is as an act of care and the map is a record of connection as well as an invite to see.

Language and its creative expression through song, lore and naming are colourful threads by which we can mend ourselves into the fabric of a place.

They invite us to know a place by its depth.[3]

There is an old Gaelic story, mostly forgotten, whose narrative arc follows that of the sky above my head. It belongs to Strathnairn; I can see sites in the story from my door.

In correspondence with this landscape, for this essay, I would like to speak to some of the ways in which finding and retelling this story has been an expansive exercise.

Cath gun Chrìch - A never ending battle

The story is of two warring brothers, sons of a winter witch called a' Bhean Gheur (the sharp wife), an iteration of a' Chailleach, a female land goddess archetype associated with winter and elemental forces found in stories across the cultural regions of Ireland and Scotland. Both brother kings love the same woman, Gnùis àillidh (bonny face), who embodies the spirit of the strath and blesses the crops and the animals. An Rìgh Bàn (the fair king) is an expert archer with a golden bow and herald of the dawn. His brother, An Righ Dubh (the black king), portent of the night and terrific fighter who can make himself invisible but for a single red dot suspended above his heart.

It's an etiological origin myth, the type that explain natural phenomena - in this case the coming of the dawn, cycles of light and dark and the return of the seasons. The day and night revolve as one story cycle intersecting with and sharing an axis with the cycle of the seasons, symbolised by the figures of a' Bhean Gheur and Gnùis-àililidh. There is a dynamic and contained momentum to this story - an older balanced configuration of time and nature, harnessed into a never-ending battle.

I first came across the story in an essay titled 'Some Tales from Strathnairn' in The Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness. Andaidh Cuimeanach / Andy Cumming gave accounts of historical events, characters, place name lore and a brief summary telling of the story. [4] I have recently published a telling of this story as a picture book, with illustrations by Gary Dewar.

In the story the idea of darkness and winter is ever present; at once an invisible and a known force, one that is waiting. The image of a pulsing dot of red, representing the heart of An Rìgh Dubh, an oscillating point in the deep blue of the twilight, stayed with me from the first reading and the adjacent colours of red and blue that jar and appear to merge, blur and vibrate, as An Rìgh Dubh dancing in his delirium, was one of the details I loved.

The cry of the captured heroine being as the call of a 'guilbeach deireadh ràithe', a late season curlew, is another. It's a small detail but so vivid. It must have been that people readily knew the difference between the bird's early bubbling call and eerie late cry. When I hear the late curlew's cry now, its dimensions are expanded, its reverberations amplified some for knowing this story.

Creag nan Gobhar, the hill I see from my door, is the scene of the dawn's coming and the home of An Rìgh Bàn; expert archer, magical, sympathetic soul, bound to his mountain, unable to leave. He casts one golden arrow from his golden bow each day.

In the late summer, on a clear morning, the light first comes over the ridge of this hill in one fine beam.

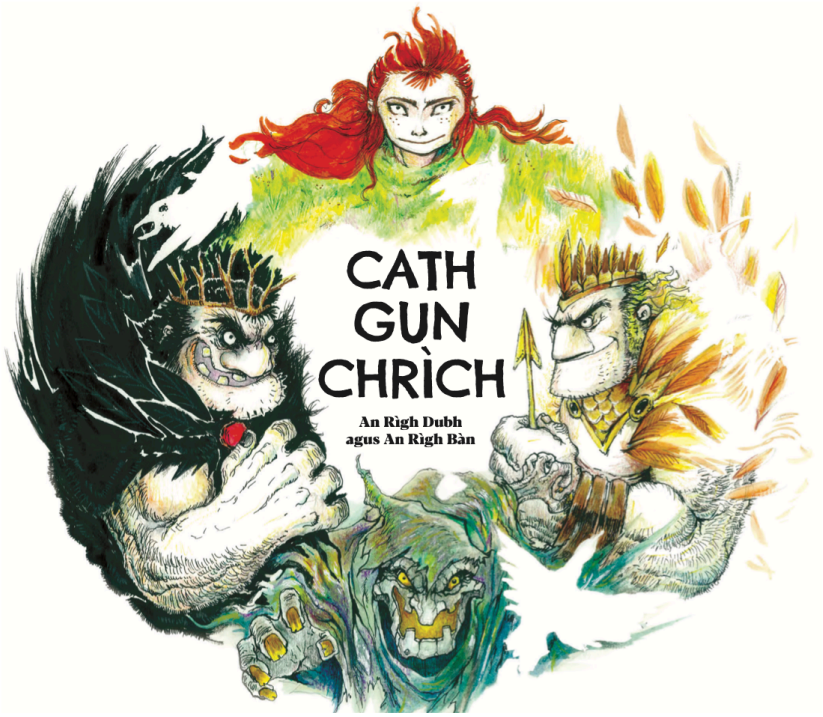
There ought to be a word that speaks to the catch of wonder, a mix of awe and recognition, I felt when standing on the doorstep early one morning. Is this what people long ago had

seen and encompassed into myth? It felt possible. This light dart as a visual echo, a start of illumination from another time, born of the dawn coming through the hills so; a fibre optic connection to other times and imaginations.

In this retelling, a' Bean Gheur's time coincides with the geese's call and the silence of the ice-muted streams. Gary Dewar's illustration is of her as part rocks, part woman and in the wintery sky, a skein of geese rising.

Gnùis-àillidh is the female figure of abundance, nourishment and warmth. She embodies the land. The illustration of her cloak is one of grasses and wild flowers and the in sky are song birds. Rowan, Scots pine and birch make up the forests.

The cover illustration has tricksy insignia, wee bird motif offerings for the children to find. The geòidh (geese) of winter, the summer smeòrach or thrush. The black of the cathag or jackdaw mirrors the black of the Rìgh Dubh and references one of the tops of his hill, Stac na Cathaig, crags of the jackdaw. My ornithologist friend tells me they are still here. The curlew is the bird that binds the characters of An Rìgh Bàn and Gnùis-àillidh, that cries late on, on the cusp of summer and autumn. The curlew is a foreteller of bad fortune in various folklores it seems. Merlyn Driver refers in his writing on curlews to the bird's 'special ecstatic sadness.' [5]



Sgeulachd à dualchas na Gàidhlig
Raghnaid Sandilands
Gary Dewar

The curlew's cry is keener now, more poignant. The light through the hill is a cue of sorts. The intense red of the nearly set sun is a more singular thing. The story enriches the world within its bounds. Here are new bearings by which to know the 'poetics of place.'

Cultural loss is ecological loss

Part of the delight of having this story is that it is different to others from this place. It is not a story of depletion or loss – such as the accounts of emptied places and sites that mark acts of historic brutality. Stories about the wreckage and fall out of the years post Culloden are many.[6]

Alastair McIntosh has written about the last wolf dispatched by a man MacQueen in 1743 in nearby Strathdearn, serving in his essay as a parable of a place bereft, depleted of both people and biodiversity. He holds that cultural loss is ecological loss and quotes Arne Naess, Norwegian philosopher, who speaks to the importance of recognising that

'... the human psyche extends into nature - what he calls the "ecological self". Such "deep ecology" finds fullest expression in an ethics inspired less by duty than by the joy of engaging in "beautiful actions". Central to such approaches is the rediscovery and expression of our creativity...'

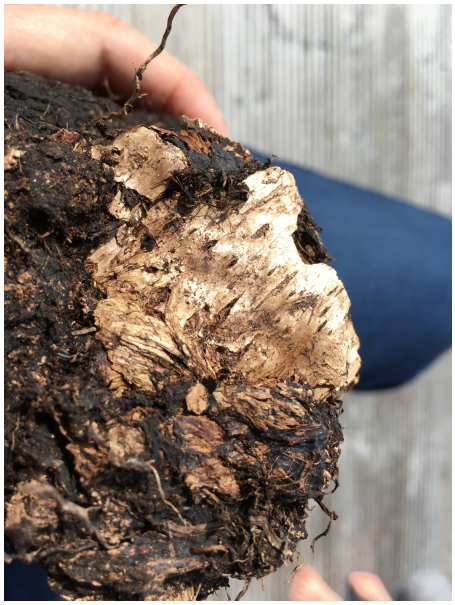
McIntosh writes, 'It is from the standpoint of this framework of interconnection with all that the loss of the wolf, or any other depletion of biodiversity, can be seen to be a loss of an aspect of our extended selves."[7]

If ecological loss is also cultural loss, culture and creativity may be a means to resist and to advocate, to expand what Robin Wall Kimmerer calls 'the circle of ecological compassion.'[8]

A known and named landscape

The cyclical story shape, significant in Gaelic culture[9], and the pairing of female Celtic earth goddess types, that in turn create and destroy, point to this being a very old story. One other clue that this story has long since been in this place is that the winds are roused from Coille Mhòr (great wood) by An Rìgh Dubh in his frenzy of having captured Gnùis-àillidh and upended his brother's happiness. The wind being roused from a wood and residing there was intuitive to my mind, and I did not appreciate on first reading the capitalised letters in the text and that this was a place name proper. The prevailing wind direction is down the strath from the direction of Coille Mhòr.

Today it is a 'vanished wood' [10] with remnants of pine roots deep in the peat - a clue to the old roots of this story. Peat accrues at 1 mm per year and they say the peat in these parts can be 6 meters deep. What drew me to go looking for ancient growth forest fragments in the hills here was the story. Were the woods from which the winds were roused like these? The children thought so.



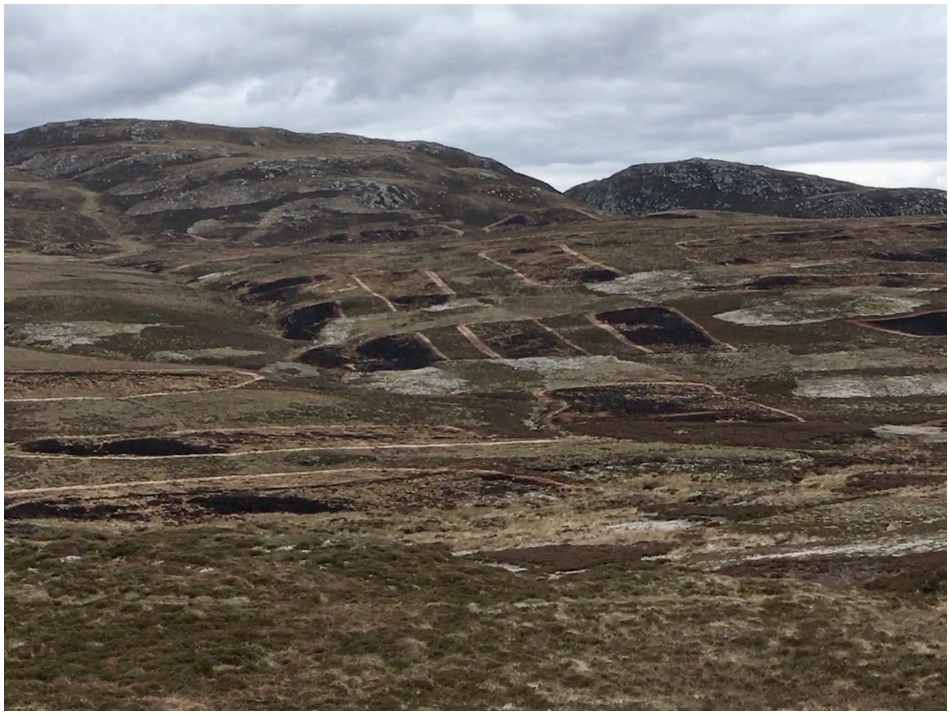
(Photo of approx.1000 year old birch bark, Strathnairn. Photo R. Sandilands)

The gold lustre of birch 1000 years old found taken from an old peat bank near the Coille Mhòr.

A glance at the Gaelic names in the Monadh Liath and we find mention of aspen, alder, pine, hazel, birch, willow. These names speak of an ecologically richer, known and named landscape. There are hollows, groves, forests and tree cover in steep river gorges - a selection of those names within a 40 mile in radius from Farr to Killin, taking in Strathnairn, Stratherrick and the upper reaches of Strathdearn are as follows;

Coille Mhòr - the great wood
Càrn Caochan Giuthais - cairn of the streamlet of the pine
Allt an Fheàrna - stream of the alder
Allt Doirean Sgealbaichte - stream of the rugged grove
Creag Challtainn - rock of the hazel
Blàr na Doire - plain of the copse
Caochan Chaoruinn - streamlet of the rowan
Caochan Seilich - streamlet of the willow
Càrn Coire an Fheàrna - cairn of the corrie of the alder
Lochan Allt an Fheàrna - lochan of the stream of the alder
Caochan a' Chrithinn - the streamlet of the aspen
Doire Meurach - branched grove
Càrn a' Choire Sheilich - cairn of the corrie of the willows
Càrn na Seannachoille - cairn of the old woods
Beith Òg - young birch
Coire Riabhach - brindled corrie
Doire Gheugach - branched grove
Allt Doirean na Smeòraich - stream of the grove of the thrush

In these places now, there are either no trees, a scattered few, depleted remnants and somehow still persisting ancient forests like Doire Gheugach. We live in an area that is plantation heavy, and the hills are covered with strange pocks, a bridling of muirburn for the sake of only the grouse and their dispatchers. In our immediate surroundings, with the silent monoculture plantations or on the near empty moor, it is hard to imagine how it might be otherwise.



(Photo of muirburn in Strathnairn. Photo R. Sandilands)

Knowing the language of the land gains you an affinity with other times, and also an understanding of what is missing. If Doirean an Smeòraich (small grove of the thrush) is no longer in existence, silence is the soundscape, not bird song.

It follows that these names are an indication of what could return. As Robert Macfarlane reflects,

'Words are not just a means to describe the world but also a way to know and love it. If we lose the rich lexicon then we risk impoverishing our relationship to nature and place. What you cannot describe, you cannot in some sense see.' [11]

Finding Fragile Forests

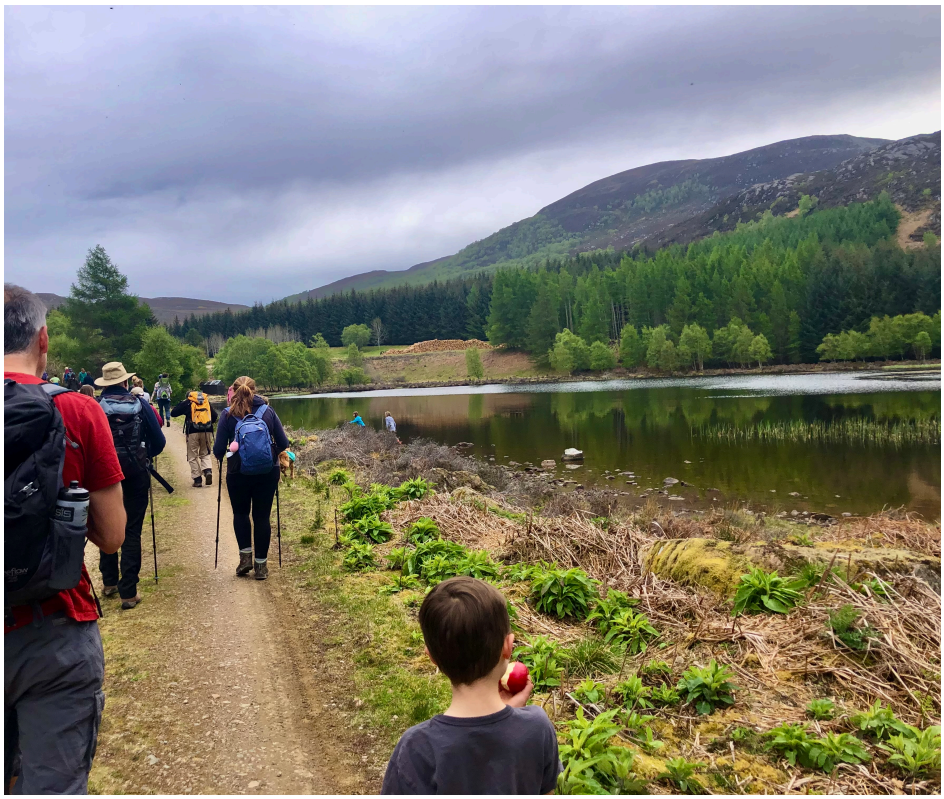
'Develop a meaningful relationship with the natural world, and you never stop seeing and perceiving news things... It's a cup that never runs dry.'[12] Eoghan Daltun

Conserving these ancient ecologies is vital. The latest IPCC report (March 2023) shows that protecting existing forests is far more important than new plantations.[13] Their diversity

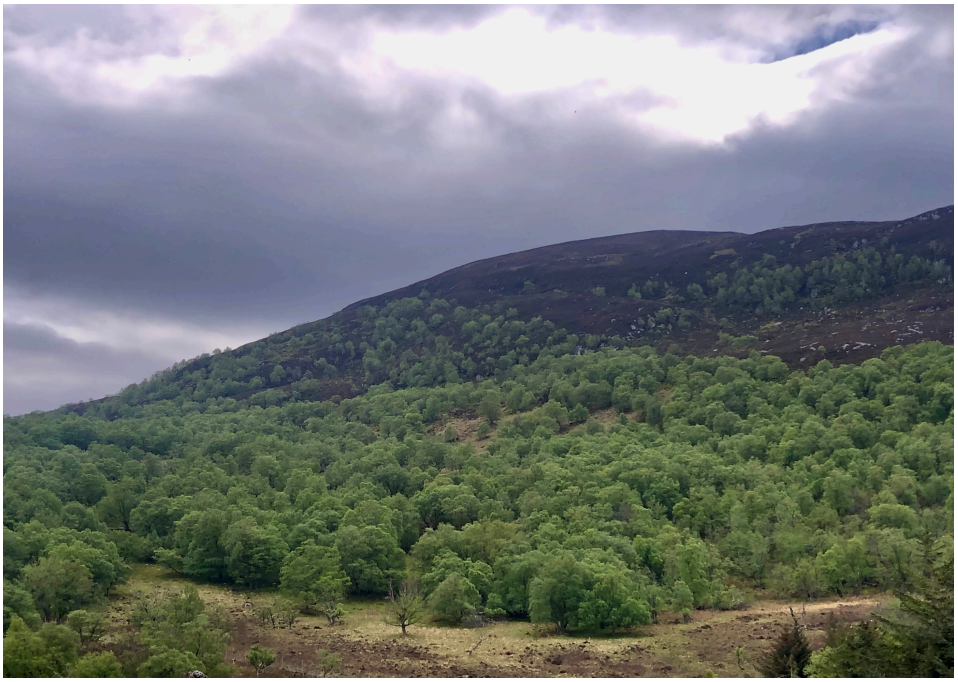
is what gifts them resilience and makes them less vulnerable to threats posed by climate change.

Thinking about the Coille Mhòr and the wealth of place names was a catalyst for a day of modest activism; a walk to an ancient forest in Coire Gart (the corrie of the enclosure) with ecologist and passionate advocate for these places, James Rainey. ‘What can we do?’ was a question I’d asked him. His reply was simple: ‘help people to see.’[14]

A simple recipe for a gathering to try and do that was as follows; a homespun poster, a call out to experts on local history, Gaelic place names and bird life, the promise of some music and song, teas and baking and a local hall to land in afterwards. The poster was a provocation, knowing many locally would ask ‘Stratherrick’s ancient woodlands...what ancient woodlands?’ There were memorable moments. Coire Gart was high off the main trail, a good hour or so walk through screens of plantation spruce and larch. There were deer fences and locked gates to negotiate but we came by those obstacles with a quiet resoluteness. There were visible lessons in how to fail to plant well or protect; a crop of empty plastic tubes on opened peatland. When we reached the edge of the old birch, some children climbed up to sit in the branches and listen, an unbounding upwards. Someone shared out greim an t-saighdeir (soldier’s bite) wood sorrel. There was an eagle in the sky and cuckoos in the forest while we took our lunch. The youngest and the oldest in the party walked and talked a while. Our eyes were hungry for that new green of May, the textures of the lichens and that absolute organic shape of the forest in the land.



(Photo of walk group setting out to Coire Gart (corrie of the enclosure) in the distance. Photo R. Sandilands)



(Photo; Ancient woodland in Coire Gart (corrie of the enclosure) photo R. Sandilands)

This day was a celebration of the human as well as the natural ecology of these places; knowing the Gaelic names, learning about the forest as shelter and source, how they way-marked older routes though the land. We kept good company; peatland, bird, and insect life experts had come. Small children were heaved over fences and out of bogs. Afterwards, in the hall, we had a story or two from Alec Sutherland, Errogie, a laden table and tunes on whistle, fiddle and accordion. To close the day young voices sang, a Gaelic song, Òran nan Craobh (song of the trees) with a verse each for rowan, oak, blackthorn and rosehips and a communal chorus, written by two young friends, just for the joy of it. [15]

Òran nan Craobh

We came and saw, as James had suggested, and any claim of care for these fragile forests can perhaps be made in chorus and with surer voices. In the words of Robin Wall Kimmerer,

‘Caring is not abstract. The circle of ecological compassion we feel is enlarged by direct experience of the living world, and shrunk by its lack.’[16]

“If you know the story you love the place, and if you love the place, you look after it,” a friend once said, after a lively night of local music, story and debate we had hosted in another village hall up the road, where land reform in Scotland was the topic in hand.

Poet and ethnologist Cáit O’ Neill McCullagh has spoken about stories of places and people as one of the ways ‘we nurture living and ongoing memories of those who stepped before, helping to both make and renew people and place.’ They can be a means to ‘call out the banal systems of place ownership that obliterate becoming and belonging.’[17] We can nurture more, we can belong more. I like Cáit’s generous manifesto.

The story of that place might be many things; what it was, what it is, what it could be or the sort of story that plays out in a landscape of mythic scale.

I asked children, “whose story is this?” Theirs, they said. In the summer they had come to the local Fèis (festival) to make a huge charcoal map of stories and their places. Perhaps in their answer, was the kindling of knowing that this was a fine and rare thing, a community’s to keep, gifted from other times, shared that day and in this place.

The story is a beautiful orientation for them, an invite to look to these hills or their sky; a story that introduces cosmic scale characters to that first world that so often nourishes memory and cheer.

The exchange between myself and one son became part of the opening frame of the book. He had stood bleary eyed in the first light and asked ‘A bheil An Rìgh Bàn air èirigh fhathast? (Has An Rìgh Bàn woken up yet?). It was hard to be annoyed even at that early hour, when the question was all poetry. The end pages show my other children clambering on the rocks and behind them all the shades of a sky revolving to meet the day. Cultural ownership might look like this - the confidence and freedom to clamber all over your place, without inhibition, to have places to go, discoveries to make, people to meet and the technicolour of such stories backlighting your space.

'Stories that guide us’

This old story from Gaelic tradition is full of sense rich details; the vivid redness of an almost set sun, the shadows lengthening as Gnùis-àllidh walks, the wind roused by fury, the cry of the late season curlew, the pre-dawn coolness, the dew drops as tears shed on the land, the first beam of the dawn, the beginning of the story....

The story plays out its timelapses in this landscape. Light, colours, sounds, reverberate with something more for knowing the story; an older love of these places, memories of a richer ecology, when the wind lived in the forest that no longer stands, when there was more time to know the distinct curlew cries. Again from Kimmerer,

‘It’s not just the land that has been broken, the land is broken because our relationship to land is broken. Healing of land, yes, and resistance to forces of environmental destruction. But, fundamental to that at the deepest level is this notion of our collective psyche. It comes to world view, right back to stories that guide us into thinking about what is our relationship to place.’[18]

This story has a world and connections forming around it again; whereby people know the story, a old friends remember Andaidh, the story keeper, we go looking for old forest and to learn about them, gather in the hall, call in favours, bake, play tunes, sing for the love of trees, make space for language, make art, make more community and living culture. The book launch itself was like a wedding - there were pipers.

Gaelic, like all indigenous languages, and stories from the culture, have much to say in terms of seeing and naming and knowing the natural world; the detail speaks of an intimacy and care.

Cath gun Chrìch is a story in praise of the cosmological shifts of the world. It's worth seeking out these stories, there are sustaining gifts; 'cho cinnteach 's a tha an saoghal a' cur car', as sure as the world turns, and the light returns, they are there. Noticing some of these same things still, and in situ, is to feel connected to the ongoing dynamics of this place, the ecology and people. It's a surround-sound multi-sensory experiential hyper-local myth. Keep the AI filtered reality goggles, I'm away out the door to meet the dawn.

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[1]Stewart, Kathrine, (1960) A Croft in the Hills Merkat Press, Edinburgh
[2]Davis, Wade, (2010) The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World UWA Publishing, Australia
[3]'To know fully even one field or one land is a lifetime's experience. In the world of poetic experience, it is depth that counts, not width.' Kavanagh, Patrick (2005, 1964) Collected Poems Penguin, London
[4]Cummings, Andrew, (1980) 'Some Tales of Strathnairn' in *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness* Vol. 50, p. 494
[5]Driver, Merlyn, 'The Curlew Sounds Project' https://www.curlewsoundsproject.org/curlewsinculture
Audio clip of curlews https://open.spotify.com/playlist/280WBEYnVz4vaE1YZhKtBz?si=d161119d450f4caf&nd=1
[6]Cummings, Andrew, (1980); Fraser, James, (1883) 'Strathnairn in Olden Times' in *Transactions of Gaelic Society of Inverness* Vol. X
[7]McIntosh, Alastair. (1998). 'Deep ecology and The Last Wolf' in *Nations Biodiversity Proceedings: Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, Cambridge University Press, England
"1743 the last wild wolf in Scotland was shot by a hunter named McQueen on the territory of my own tribal clan, Mackintosh, in the upper reaches of the Findhorn river. Three years later, and in the same region just South of Inverness, the last battle to be fought on mainland British soil, Culloden, put an end to the old culture of the Scottish Highlands in an act of internal colonial conquest by the consolidating British state. This marked the onset of the "Highland Clearances", whereby some half a million people were forced off their land to make way for sheep ranching and blood sports."
[8]Kimmerer, Robin Wall, 'On Indigenous Knowledge for Earth Healing' on 'For the wild' podcast - 2/8/2018 https://forthewild.world/listen/robin-wall-kimmerer-on-indigenous-knowledge-for-earth-healing-35-encore
[9] Bateman, Meg; Purser, John, (2020) *Window to the West : Culture and Environment in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd* Clò Ostaig, Skye
[10]Smout, T.C., (2000) 'Nature Contested: Environmental History in Scotland and Northern Ireland since 1600' in *Woods of Imagination & Reality*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh p.53
[11]Macfarlane, Robert, (2015) *Landmarks* Hamish Hamilton, London
[12]Dalton, Eoghan, (2022) *An Irish Atlantic Rainforest Hachette*, Ireland
[13] IPCC Synthesis Report, See: https://www.ipcc.ch/2023/03/20/press-release-ar6-synthesis-report/
[14]Rainey, James: "A massive thing here is actually connecting people with forests; it's getting people out to see these places. A lot of our plantations in the past have been more accessible, up tracks, they were publicly owned, so people had access. People getting out there seeing these places for themselves, taking photographs, becoming more engaged - that's ultimately the way to get people to connect and to get that message out." 'Rewilding Europe - Affric Highlands' podcast 30.1.2023 https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-i7yje-137419a
[15] To hear the song, visit www.raghnaidsandilands.scot/oran-nan-craobh
[16]Kimmerer, Robin Wall, (2015) *Braiding Sweetgrass.* Milkweed Editions,
[17]MacCullagh, Cáit O Neill, Twitter 26/05/202 and 19/06/2021
[18]Kimmerer, Robin Wall, 'For the wild' podcast - 2/8/2018