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On North Of South, Or ...

By ROBERT ALAN JAMIESON

WRITING WITH A northern frame of mind, the Editor said, as we wandered back to The Ceilidh Place after another fine session at the Ullapool Book Festival. I nodded – of course I have something to say about that. After all, I’m a writer from ‘The Northern Isles’, in ‘The North Atlantic’. Yet watching ‘Cinema Paradiso’ in Vancouver the other night, the relative nature of the term was confirmed to me by the scene in which ‘The Neapolitan’ wins the football lottery. ‘Northerners have all the luck!’ someone shouts. To a Sicilian, Naples may indeed seem northern, but it is poor – distant from the rich industrial Italy of the Po valley, and far to the south for most of Europe. I got the intended joke – and derived a broader point: the habit of thought we in the Scottish/British north have of thinking that wealth and power reside in ‘The South’. But ‘The North’ to those living in the southern hemisphere is rapacious, wealthy and lucky, as with the Sicilian view of northern Italy captured in ‘Cinema Paradiso’.

‘North’, then, is not so much a place as a direction – perhaps a kind of intention, a choice as to how we define our world, where we look to for contrast. Even when qualified by the definite article, it is still not free of its corollary, ‘The South’, but always stands in relation to somewhere else. How, then, can we begin to think about what ‘North’ or ‘The North’ may be, in and of itself, what it may mean to people, how it may influence their creative work? If we limit the question to Europe, is there such a thing as a ‘northern frame of mind’ which translates across cultures and languages, some shared experience – or more broadly, within the northern hemisphere, some kind of circumpolar commonality?

A few years ago, I attended a poetry translation event in Estonia and was a bit surprised to see that one of the local participants – Hasso Krull, professor at Tartu University – had turned up wearing, under his dungarees, what looked to me like a Fair Isle ‘yoke’ jumper, with the classic ‘Star’ pattern around its neck. I asked him about it, mentioning Fair Isle, and was told that this was an ancient Estonian motif which he believed represented a fragment of a deep cosmology shared by a pre-Christian Shamanic culture that had once stretched throughout Scandinavia, northern Russia, Siberia and the far north of Canada. I had stumbled unwittingly on one of the professor’s fields of specialization, and he presented a keenly-argued case, the finer points of which I have forgotten, for a shared philosophy and quasi-religious practice which had once crossed the political and cultural borders, indeed the very seas, that now divide us in the north.

Such a thesis is unlikely to be entirely proven or disproven. No doubt ancient peoples

did hold complex views of life, nature and the cosmos – and rituals arose around those. No doubt there were always itinerants, travellers carrying ideas and ritual practices from place to place. Peoples too migrated, followed the great herds, whether they called the beast ‘reindeer’, ‘caribou’ or some long-lost arrangement of syllables. They would inevitably have come into contact with others, shared stories and beliefs, perhaps as readily as they traded or fought. A good story always has value, if it can be translated. Perhaps there could have been a core shamanic practice or philosophical stance, a peculiarly northern view of the cosmos, as my Estonian colleague posited – yet it is recorded that those Siberian cultures which continue to practice shamanism today are extremely varied in their rituals, much as the elements of myth in circumpolar mythology – the creatures and the terrain – are alike, yet tales about them differ. So, for instance, we find the raven in Norse, Siberian and North American mythology, but with different functions: Odin’s *corvidae* companions, Huginn and Muninn, are very different mythical entities from the Raven-Creators of native North American myth. Yet shared familiarity with the same widespread flora and fauna, or natural phenomena such as the Aurora Borealis, is perhaps one way in which the human mind may be coloured in a particularly northern fashion, even if various tribes and clans shape different stories around them.

Whatever the deep natural roots or the varied human outgrowth from those, in the modern era ‘The Romance of the North’ is a concept we are familiar with – as a direction, those empty lands of expansive skies, endless birch forests, tundra and taiga, tend to engender a mood of solitude, of intense and often dangerous contact with the forces of nature. The Sublime, as it was once termed, as a notion, carries us towards isolation and the need for self-sufficiency of the spirit, in ‘the Great Alone’ as Robert Service called it.

Most of all, the north of the northern hemisphere is a place of extremes, where the tilt of the Earth brings what may ultimately seem like whole seasons of darkness and of light. Though culture and terrain may vary, this is one common factor to the ‘Far North’ experience. To those born into it, deep midwinter darkness and endless midsummer light seem normal – activities are modified accordingly. Seasonal Affective Disorder, with low winter activity and frantic summer-mania, was not an illness in the village of my youth, but a necessary response to the demands of living at 60 degrees north. Religion or whisky – or both – were important in making a passage from one year to the next. Necessary coping mechanisms.

So this is perhaps one factor in establishing a northern frame of mind which crosses all

seas, mountains and even social boundaries. Recently I’ve been making plans to visit the Yukon, part of the research for a new book, and by coincidence I’ve received an invitation to the Whitehorse Poetry Festival, held just after Midsummer. Excited by remembrance of childhood reading – gold-rush stories, those old movie or school prize-book versions of the wild northern frontier – I began to look again at Service and Jack London. I checked the gazetteer to see just how far north this trip would carry me – and then laughed to myself when I noted that Whitehorse is about half a degree south of Shetland. In my youthful imagination, the Yukon had seemed a long way beyond what I knew, which it is in many respects, but not on the northerly axis. The ‘simmirdim’ I know from my youth – the picture postcard rendition was of a man reading a newspaper outside Lerwick Town Hall at midnight – is roughly what I can expect from Midsummer 2011 in Whitehorse.

In literary terms, forms of northern-ness may be found manifest in many cultures. The great Icelandic sagas sit atop the list in terms of precedence, obviously, though whether an actual consciousness of ‘northernness’ can be attributed to the work of Snorri Sturluson is unlikely. As one of Glenn Gould’s interviewees states in his radio-documentary ‘The Idea of North’, it is necessary to leave the north in order to become aware of it, or perhaps to travel to it. Basho’s *Oku-No- Hosomichi*, ‘narrow road to the deep north’, recently reinterpreted in a Scottish context by Alec Finlay and Ken Cockburn*, or Mikhail Prishvin’s poetic-scientific accounts of nature studies among the forests of Russia, are more obviously concerned with the conscious experiencing of northern regions, with that framing outsider’s eye.

Travelling in the opposite direction are those packagers of ‘northernness’ for southern readers, such as the vastly successful Robert Service in the early 20th century. Besides Service, whose work is most often associated with Canada though he was from the west of Scotland in origin, Scotland can lay claim to the two earliest and greatest of these exporters. In the 1760s, James MacPherson’s ‘translations’ of Ossian created a world-wide fascination with the misty mounts and deep glens of Caledonia, and the act of making English versions from the raw material he gathered was a kind of insider-outsider transaction which gave high glamour to the Celtic past, sweeping across Europe as a fashion for things Celtic which would carry such as Mendelssohn to Staffa, while Napoleon bore his much-loved Italian translation round the battlefields of Europe. Half a century later, Sir Walter Scott – ‘the Wizard of the North’ – performed a similar function for more recent Scottish history, palatizing historic tales for widespread

consumption by those distant from their settings in both time and space. Both had a keen awareness regarding the tastes of their audience which allowed them to transform native ‘northern’ culture for broadest appreciation. Even if something was lost in that process, their success suggests that something intrinsically powerful remained.

Personally, the writers I found most inspirational as a young aspirant – those who made it seem possible to make literature about my native Shetland – were often northerners who wrote from the inside, about things that surrounded them – more the Burnsian model than the Ossianic. The poems and stories of George Mackay Brown, the early novels of Knut Hamsun, the Faroese and Icelandic work of William Heinesen and Halldór Laxness, all these seemed to depict recognizably familiar worlds which, despite the fact that they were not Shetlandic, had something of the social structure and the philosophy of my local people if not their language or the topography of the islands. Mackay Brown’s Hamnavoe was not so different from Scalloway in my imagination. Heinesen’s ‘lost musicians’ might well have been denizens of Lerwick. Lieutenant Glahn’s midsummer Nordland adventures might have taken place in some isolated part of my native isles. And Bjartur of Summerhouses, with his fierce independence and love of his flock of sheep, could easily have been one of the old Shetland crofters I grew up among.

So – this writing with a northern frame of mind thing, dear Editor. I suppose that I am distinguishing between intent and accident in this short essay. To travel to ‘The North’ and attempt to define it in some fashion, to bring back from one’s travels a testimony of experience for the appreciation of a readership elsewhere, is a different thing from living in the north, however defined, and writing down some historical version of it, or simply writing what one sees or knows. All would seem to be manifestations of a northern frame of mind. As writers we are governed by where we come from, but free to engage with wherever we land, and it is possible to live in ‘The North’, or indeed anywhere, and write about things quite distant in time and space, to make fantasy. Whichever way, writing always transforms reality. But the task of imagining is distinct from the task of describing. Good writing may emerge from either approach – indeed, may well require something of both. The North, it seems to me, is real yet also fiction. Boundless, yet distinct. Here, and not here. Past, present and future. ■

* www.theroadnorth.co.uk