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ag baint na gnoc (Attempting the impossible).

Celtic culture is littered with examples of a people attempting to recover its history through the archaeology of language - from James Joyce's use of 'portmanteau' words stuffed with etymologies in *Finnegans Wake* through to Seamus Heaney's efforts to slice open a verb or a noun to discover hidden memories of the race. Increasingly, as the Gaelic dialects retreat from daily usage, English becomes a language that must be embraced with deep anxiety. For Scottish Highlanders and the Irish, it is now common to be reared in English. The language sits awkwardly in their minds as it adjusts itself to local grammatical structures taken from Gaelic yet they are raised on the words of Shakespeare, Blake and Charles Dickens or just as potently Monty Python, Mark E Smith or the Goons. It is impossible not to love the language but it is equally possible to feel a sense of loss while doing so - it is a peculiar form of adultery.

In the mid-70s and 80s, the Irish poet Michael Hartnett attempted to abandon English and to henceforth write only in Irish. He declared his aim in a volume entitled *A Farewell to English* and in a poem of the same name he talked of 'finding English a necessary sin/the perfect language to sell pigs in'.¹ A few years later however, he published a new volume of poems in English, tempered slightly by adopting the Japanese Haiku form, but English nevertheless. It may have been the language of an historical enemy, its presence in his mind the result of military occupation and colonial oppression, but it was also a delicious surrender and a fact of life. At about the same time, Hartnett experienced these internal conflicts, the playwright Brian Friel staged *Translations* - a play revolving around a group of English Royal Engineers Attempting the impossible mapping Ireland and rendering Gaelic place names into English. In one scene an Irish observer comments that:

Words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen - to use an image you'll understand - it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of... fact.²

Friel was referring specifically to Ireland and the decline of Irish but clearly the idea has a wider application. In Hong Kong, for example, the 80 year-old artist Tsang Tsou Choi has been covering walls and street furniture with calligraphic graffiti since the mid-60s. Tsang, who has worked as a farmer and a caretaker in a rubbish collection station, claims to have found records proving that his ancestors owned much of Kowloon and that the land was annexed by the British Crown authorities in Hong Kong. Assuming the title 'King of Kowloon', Tsang has used his street calligraphy to overlay this landscape of power with a series of texts that challenged Crown authority and, more recently, the influence of Beijing. Like Friel's Irish characters in *Translations*, the outdated contours of his work do

not match the landscape of fact but they still manage uncover the current lines of power in Hong Kong.

Both Friel and Tsang Tsou Choi link vision to language, questioning if what we know through words bear any relation to what we see around us. This is an enterprise which goes to the heart of language and it can be found equally in the work Munros... and Tower Blocks by Neal Beggs. Situated in a narrow white corridor dominated by its diminishing perspective, the piece covers two walls - one carrying the names of all tower blocks in Glasgow over eight floors, the other presenting the names of all the Munros in Scotland. The tower blocks are listed in English while the mountains are itemised in Gaelic, still currently in use to describe this particular part of the Scottish landscape. Both elements of the work describe Scottish landscapes which are highly emotive subjects in the nation's contemporary culture and, if at first, it is the mountain names which seem to form 'a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of... fact' then closer study reveals a much more complex situation.

The Munros - peaks over 3000ft/914m - have been known as such since 1891 when Sir Hugh T Munro published tables nominating 283 separate mountains in Scotland.³ This project was the culmination of a nineteenth-century trend which saw the Highlands turned into a tourist attraction. Perhaps the Romantic movement had confirmed the landscape as a potential source of the 'sublime' but it was the rise of mountaineering as a healthy and moral pastime which ensured that scaling the peaks would remain a popular activity.

Before the mountains had gained such respectability they were the province of outlaws on the run, ordinance surveyors and the occasional visitor curious to gain knowledge of the country. The most celebrated of these visitors was Dr Johnson, the eighteenth-century writer and lexicographer, who journeyed to the Western Isles in 1773, accompanied by his future biographer, James Boswell. Johnson enjoyed the journey though, aged 63 and travelling by pack pony, it must have tested his physical limits. His acquaintance with Gaelic culture was slight and his attitude to the language was not positive. In his account of the journey he wrote:

Of the Earse language, as I understand nothing, I cannot say more than I have been told. It is the rude speech of a barbarous people, who had few thoughts to express, and were content, as they conceived grossly to be grossly understood... the bard was a barbarian among barbarians, who, knowing nothing himself, lived with others that knew no more.⁴

Johnson preferred to view the landscape in English and found it instructive - not in terms of aesthetics but in terms of linguistics. He believed that travel helped the visitor to understand the meaning of words used to describe the phenomena of nature. Studying the sand dunes on Coll, for instance, enabled him to understand more perfectly the vocabulary of deserts; while gazing on a mountain in the highlands he could perceive 'the reality behind the word'.⁵

For Johnson, this new insight into both landscape and language was linked to a sense of control and mastery. When he published his Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language in 1747, he approached the task of rationalising word usage as if it were a campaign to subdue the British Isles:

...like the soldiers of Caesar, [I] look on Britain as new world, which it is almost madness to invade. I hope, that though, I should not complete the conquest, I shall at least discover the coast, civilise part of the inhabitants, and make it easy for some other adventurer to proceed farther, to reduce them wholly to subjection, and settle them under laws.⁶

The example of Dr Johnson's tour of the Western Islands might seem to be a distraction from an examination of the Munros. But it is only necessary to look at contemporary descriptions of the peaks and the language of mountaineering to see how enlightenment strategy succeeded in taming both the language and the landscape. In a typical example of a hill-walkers guide - The Munro Almanac (1998) - this is how two peaks are catalogued:

Buachaille Etive Beag, Stob Dubh, 3143ft/958m.

Stob Coire Raineach, 3029ft/925m.

Map: OS Sheet 41: GR 179535, GR 191548.

Translation: small herdsman of Etive, black peak, peak of the corrie of ferns.

Pronunciation: booachil etiv baik, stop doo, stop kora ran-ach.

Access Point: A82 road, GR 188563.

Distance/ascent: 6mils/2755ft; 10km/840m.

Approx Time: 4-6 hours.

Follow the signpost which indicates the right of way from 'Lairig Eilde to Glen Etive'. Take the path for about quarter of a mile before leaving it for the open hillside in a southerly direction. Head for the bealach to the NE of Stob Coire Raineach, and then climb this Munro. Follow the obvious ridge onwards to Stob Dubh at the end of the Buachaille Etive Beag ridge. An alternative route climbs Stob Dubh from Dalness in Glen Etive and takes the hill's SSW ridge. National Trust for Scotland. No restrictions.⁷

The language of reason dominates this account of the mountains, domesticating the experience and placing it within the realms of the museum as it enumerates the qualities and statistics of the two peaks. The vocabulary of collecting is reinforced by the use of the term 'completer' among Munro climbers. A 'completer' is someone who has collected or climbed all of the peaks currently designated a Munro. Climbers or hill-walkers aim to 'bag' all of the peaks in the same way that a collector attempts to find or purchase a complete series of objects.

It is fitting then that Neal Beggs has brought the entire list of Munros into the art institution, collecting and inscribing the words that stand as markers for the mountains. Likewise, his opposing list of tower blocks in Glasgow form a discrete collection that highlights an enlightened, modernist enterprise which threatened to overwhelm the city in the late 1960s and 1970s. Based on the urgent need to find a solution to the inner city slums of the Gorbals and similar areas, Glasgow council began building the greatest number of tower blocks to be seen in any city in Europe. The towers formed only part of a larger scheme - The Bruce Plan - a utopian dream of a futuristic Glasgow in which monorails threaded their way through skyscrapers, glass cubes and tower blocks. Remnants of the Plan can still be seen around the city - spiral walkways that end in midair, truncated bridges that looked set to plough through tenement blocks and a centre that remains isolated by a ring of motorways.

It was the failure of the tower blocks to provide a credible living community in Glasgow which ended this particular dream. The ultimate model for the tower was Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation (1947-53) housing block in the out skirts of Marseille. Factory produced units were slotted together, individual cells creating a collective which alluded to classical notions of order and form. The impact of this impressive and relatively cheap model for housing spread across Europe and seemed to provide an answer to hard-pressed city slums. Unfortunately, lack of social amenities around the blocks in Glasgow and falling employment undercut their potential effect and this was later exacerbated as the climate eroded the more continental-style building materials.

Ironically, the original Unité block in Marseille was designed with an awareness of the surrounding landscape. One architectural historian notes of the Unité that: The first impression in early photographs is of a textured cliff towering above a dry landscape dotted with scrub, rocks and trees... In the summer, the deep crates of the brises-soleil are gashed with shadow and the concrete takes on the tawny colour of the Provençal mountains in the distance...⁸ For Le Corbusier, the towers were an abstraction of the landscape but still in harmony with its natural forms. In Glasgow, although the towers offered their inhabitants stunning views of the hills beyond the city, the buildings came to represent the degeneration of modernism into a mechanistic system of housing that bred fear and urban decay. The utopian architectural language of the towers no longer matched the landscape of fact.

It is tempting to draw out the implicit tensions in Neal Beggs' juxtaposition of the two set of names. There is the opposition of modernism and romanticism, the clash of the urban and rural or the old enmities buried in the English and Scottish languages. What is more startling, however, and possibly unique in this work is the blatant foregrounding of two 'invisible' subjects in Scotland – the unfashionable taboo landscape of the tower block and the equally marginalized culture of Gaelic.

Notes

1. Michael Harnett, *A Farewell to English*, Dublin: The Gallery Press, enlarged edition, 1978.
2. Brian Friel, *Translations*, London: Faber, 1981.
3. The first tables of Scottish mountains were published in Williams Rhind's *The Scottish Tourist*, 1825.
4. Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland and the Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides*, Introduction by Peter Levi, Penguin, 1984.
5. *Ibid.* When Boswell's wife tested Johnson on his reasons for going to Scotland he replied, "Madam we do not go thereas to a paradise. We go to see something different from what we are accustomed to see." ,
6. Samuel Johnson, *A Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, London, 1747.
7. Cameron McNeish, *The Munro Almanac*, 3rd Edition, Glasgow: Neil Wilson Publishing, 1998.
8. William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, London: Phaidon, 1996.

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