



Hugh's News

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The Friends of Hugh Miller

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Warmest festive greetings!



Ali Smith - a 'potted biog'

Ali Smith was born of working class parents in Inverness, and as a teenager took chore jobs - one at the city's tourist board mentioned here - before embarking on her glittering literary career.

She is an author, playwright, academic and journalist, and has been described as "Scotland's Nobel-laureate in waiting." Since her first collection, *Free Love and Other Stories*, won the Saltire First Book of the Year Award in 1995, she has won many accolades for her fiction, including *The*

(continued on p2)

We present a special treat for our readers, an essay on Miller by multiple prize-winning author Ali Smith. It was originally published in a collection on landscape and tradition, and is reprinted here with her copyright permission. Ali describes how she first discovered the glories of the Black Isle, encountered Hugh's story, and delved into his folklore.

Hugh Miller's voices

by Ali Smith

It is 1969. I'm about seven years old. I am sitting in my parents' bedroom on the ottoman at the end of their bed, upstairs in our house in St Valery Avenue in Inverness. We live in the capital of the Highlands, I know, because my mother told me. My mother says we are descended from Rob Roy McGregor, a famous cattle thief and outlaw who stole from the rich to give to the poor. My mother, although she is northern Irish, is very proud of her children being Scottish. So is my father, though he is English, from near Lincoln. My father says he bought a ticket to come to the Highlands and has never been able to afford the return ticket home.

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& best wishes for the New Year

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I'm reading a book I picked up downstairs in the living room, it's called something like True Tales of the Highlands. In it, I'm about to read a story that I will find so haunting that I won't be able to sleep for several nights, and when I pick up cutlery at the dinette table before every meal for what will be months, I will drive my parents mad by asking them, every time - until they lose their patience with me completely and I'm made to stop it - to tell me what the knife and the fork I'm holding in my hands are made of.

Two young men, two friends, are out on a walk through a wood, and they come upon a hoard of money just lying there on the ground. They can't believe their luck. They decide to split it between them. But on their way home, one of them picks up a large rock and hits the other one over the head with it. When his friend falls to the ground he hits him again, until his skull is broken. Then he takes the money out of his friend's pack, and buries him and the stone he killed him with under a pile of similar stones.

Ten years later and he is a rich and respected man. Every day he wakes up and looks in the mirror and shakes his head, unable to believe the secret he knows about himself.

One day he sits down to eat at a grand restaurant in the city. He orders the most expensive thing on the menu. But when he looks down at the finely carved bone handles of the knife and the fork in his hands, he finds his hands are covered in blood.

(continued from p1)

Accidental, 2005, which won Whitbread Novel of the Year, three Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year awards, and short listings for both the Orange and Booker Prizes. Her latest novels, have been four seasonal 'state of the nation' works. The first, *Autumn*, was widely regarded as the first 'post-Brexit novel' dealing with the issues raised by the 2016 Referendum voters' decision. It was followed by *Winter*, *Spring* and *Summer*.

Ali has brought four plays to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and has lectured in many countries. She has been enrolled in the Royal Society for Literature and has been honoured with a CBE for services to literature.

Then the bones in his hand speak.

What do the bones say? I can't remember. I had completely forgotten this story, and the very profound effect it had on me at the time, until a couple of Decembers ago when I'd gone up home to see my father (who is now in his eighties and who now lives out on the Black Isle), who'd had to go into hospital in Inverness. So I was staying at home, but not at home - in a hotel, and it was surreally mild for December



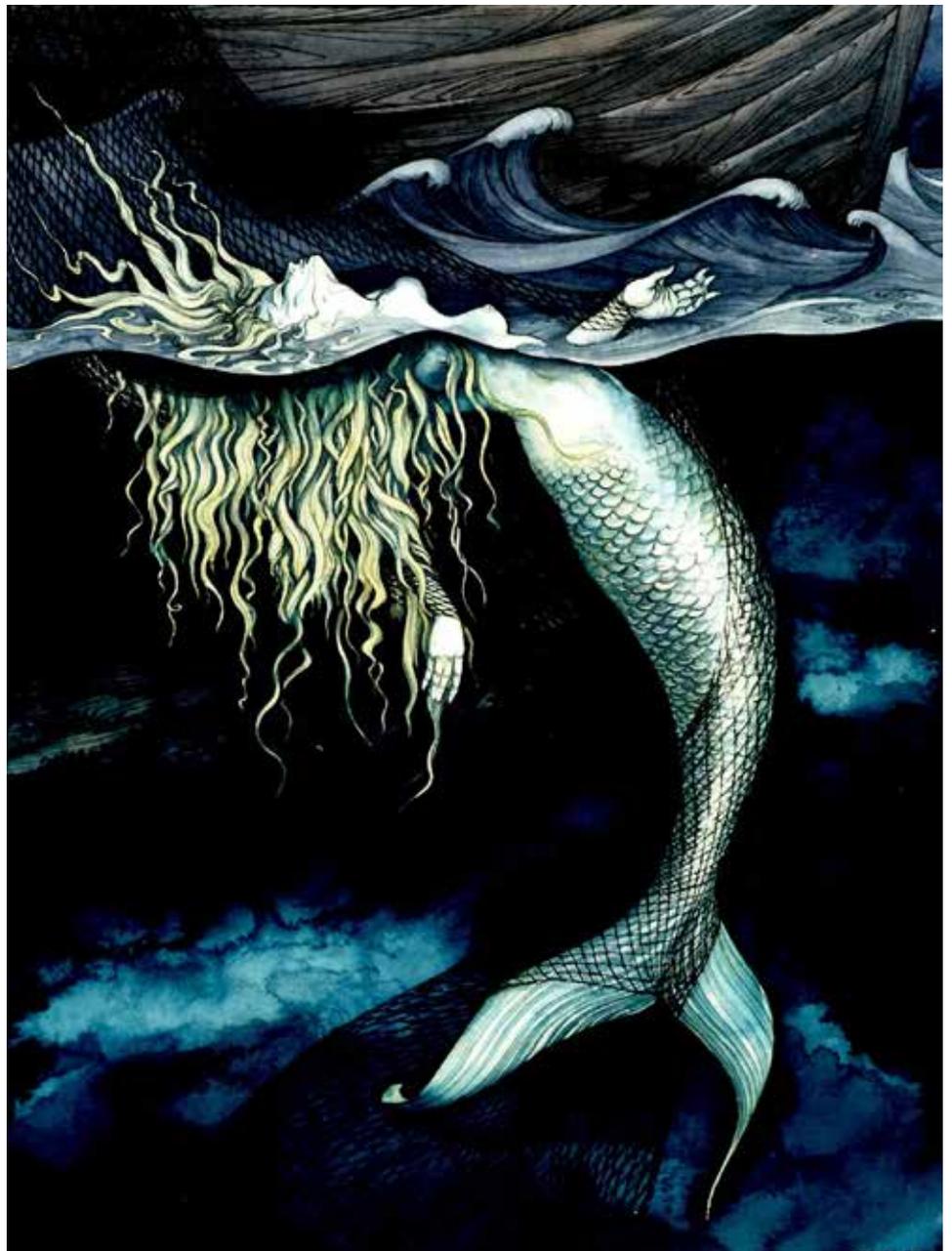
Ali Smith

in Inverness, thirteen degrees most days, and I was hanging around the haunts I used to visit and the places now totally gone, and I went to the museum, to see if the stuffed wildcat was still there. It was.

In the Museum shop, I picked up and flicked through *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland* (1835), the first book written by Hugh Miller, the geologist, when he was the manager of the tiny bank in the town he was born in not far from Inverness, in Cromarty, on the Black Isle (a few miles from where my father now lives).

A small boy's father is a sea-captain. He is caught in a bad storm and is about to drown at sea.

The boy, his two infant sisters, and his mother, who's sitting there sewing away at the fireplace, have no idea, are miles away, safe at home. The boy's mother is a seamstress. She does a lot of the local sewing, especially shroud-work. (Soon both her daughters will die



"Of all the old mythological existences of Scotland ... there was none with whom the people of Cromarty were better acquainted than with the mermaid." Thus Hugh begins Ch XX, going on to describe sightings of her sitting on a stone in moonlight, singing among the rocks, or braiding up her tresses on the shore. He goes on to narrate the legend of Capt Reid outwitting the mermaid to win the hand of his beloved, still a popular favourite..

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too, both very young, and her son will be distraught when he hears her tell an acquaintance that she'd rather have lost the boy and kept one of the girls, that it would have made for a different life for her.)

She feels a draught. Go and shut the door, Hugh, she says.

Her son is five years old. When he gets to the door he sees, in the air, a disembodied hand and arm, reaching out. It seems to be a woman's hand and arm, though it has no body attached to it, and it is lit up, dripping with water, floating in the air by itself. The boy is terrified.

The Black Isle isn't an isle at all; it's an isthmus, a peninsula, nearly ten miles wide, over twenty miles long, just north of Inverness. Is it called the Black Isle because of the colour of its good dark farming soil? Or because of something to do with black magic and witchcraft? Or because at certain times of the year, if you look at it from across the other side of the Moray Firth, it looks a deep black colour? Black's not the only colour the Black Isle goes; one hot and perfect summer I saw richer purples and deeper golds in the fields of the Black Isle than I've ever seen anywhere in the world.



*One of Cromarty's surviving marriage lintels; this one is in Hugh Miller's Birthplace Cottage. It clearly shows the carved set of initials, top line J F, below J G; they are those of his great grandparents, John Feddes and Jean Gallie, and between them the date 1711. The love story of the red-haired buccaneer and Bonnie Jean is itself a cracking yarn in *Scenes and Legends*, and one which the boy Hugh made his mother tell him over and over again.*

This picture was taken before the walls were re-plastered and the lintel blacked over for purposes of conservation. It gives an impression of how the walls and inglenook might originally have looked when the couple lived there three hundred years ago.

copyright: National Trust for Scotland.

It sounds lyrical. Actually the Highlands, it strikes me, are an impossible blend of lyricism and measured austerity, patrolled by hooky-beaked seagulls the size of Jack Russell dogs; the kind of place where someone has shot the faces off the angels in the Catholic part of Tomnahurich cemetery with an air rifle. When I worked at the tourist office in Inverness when I was a teenager, we were regularly at a loss as to what to tell tourists they could do on a Sunday because everything shut, religiously, on a Sunday, and we used to suggest they drive themselves out along the Aberdeen road just to get a good view of the Black Isle; even then, when we were adolescently callous about the sheer beauty of the place, we knew it was a sight to see. My father has lived on the Black Isle now since my mother died in 1990. When I visit I see its sheer impossible versatility, its cliffs and moors and beaches and woods and marshes and heaths, how it's studded in its beautiful little bays with village after village protected by the dolphins and seals in the firths, and strung between a faerie glen, a tree above a well where the people in the know come to hang rags so that what they want will come true, and, of course, church after church after church.

A fisherman was walking home happily to Cromarty on the Inverness road, after visiting a friend in the upper parish. "The night was still and calm, and a thick mantle of dull yellowish clouds, which descended on every side from the centre to the horizon, so obscured the light of the moon, though at full, that beyond the hedges which bounded the road all objects seemed blended together without colour or outline." Out of nowhere he heard a terrible noise, like a huge pack of maddened, snarling hounds somewhere very near him, just beyond that hedge; he put his hands in his pockets but there was nothing but the last of the crumbs from the food he'd had on the boat. He held the crumbs out anyway, thinking they might appease the dogs. But there were no dogs; there was only a man, walking beside him beyond the hedge, keeping up with him, and the baying noise had stopped. Good, he thought; the dogs must belong to him, so I'm fine. But when he reached the gap in the hedge, he saw the figure grow and grow until it dropped on four legs and turned itself into a huge black horse.

He quickened his pace. The horse did too. He slowed, stood still. The horse did too. He walked his usual speed. The horse walked beside him. He saw it was an ugly kind of a horse, black-shaggy and limping, and when he reached the cemetery, a couple of hundred yards out of the town, the creature stopped, the air filled with sudden blinding light, like lightning, and "on recovering his sight, he found that he was alone."

Or how about this one:

A spring lay between two farms. One hot day two farmworkers came, from their opposite directions on the different farms, to drink from it. One reached the spring first, drank from it, and, when he

saw the other approaching, grabbed up a handful of mud and threw it in the water. Try drinking that, he said.

But the spring began to boil, and sank into the ground right in front of their eyes. "Next day at noon the heap of grey sand which had been incessantly rising and falling within it, in a little conical jet, for years before, had become as dry as the dust of the fields; and the strip of white flowering cresses which skirted either side of the runnel that had issued from it, lay withering in the sun. What rendered the matter still more extraordinary, it was found that a powerful spring had burst out on the opposite side of the firth, which at this place is nearly five miles in breadth, a few hours after the Cromarty one had disappeared."

The farmer who'd flung the mud in the spring found that no one would speak to him anymore. Everybody thought he was cursed. So he went to see an old person who lived in a nearby parish and was known locally as a seer. You've insulted the water, the seer told him. Go back at exactly the same time as you did so, clean the place with a clean piece of linen towelling, then lie down beside it and wait.

The farmer did as he was told. He lay above the hollow on the ground where the cresses were withered, until the sun was almost down, and the water came spurting back with a force, then settled down and ran as before. "We recognise in this singular tradition a kind of soul or naiad of the spring, susceptible of offence, and conscious of the attentions paid to it."

The latter of these stories is one of the first in *Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland*, which Hugh Miller wrote in his thirties and which brought him the start of a great deal of success. He died in Edinburgh on Christmas Eve in 1856, aged only fifty-four. He committed suicide, shot himself with a revolver. He had become hugely famous, a Victorian renaissance man: a folklorist, historian, poet, newspaper editor and writer; a geologist to whose lectures in the Scottish and English capitals thousands of people thronged; a rhetorician keen to modernise Church legislation; a central figure in the troubled and fiery formation of the Free Church; and most of all, a theologian determined to reconcile, as intelligently and scientifically as possible, ideas on creation and evolution with biblical tract. He died just a couple of years before Darwin would send much of his theorising the way of all flesh, with his *Origin of Species*; it is truly terrible not to know, not to be able to see, how Miller would have responded to Darwin.

Everything Miller worked on, everything he wrote, reveals his keenness to reconcile things which he knows are simply irreconcilable. "It is possible", as he wrote in his autobiographical volume, *My Schools and Schoolmasters*, "for two histories of the same period and individual, to be at once true to fact, and unlike each other in the scenes which they describe and the events which

they record."

An old, old shepherd was totally deaf - so deaf that, though he was a pious man, it was simply not necessary for him to go to church on a Sunday anymore since he couldn't hear anything anyway. One Sunday, having sent his herdboy to Church, he took his sheep and his Bible and went down to a grassy hollow, and "with his Bible spread out before him on a hillock of thyme and moss, which served him for a desk, and sheltered on either hand from the sun and wind by a thicket of sweetbriar and sloethorn, he was engaged in reading," when he heard something.

He raised his head, looked at the leaves. They were waving in silence, as usual, in the light wind.

He began to read again, and again he heard something - a low airy rush of noise. He looked up.



The old shepherd's deafness is pierced by the sylph's low sweet voice, but his Bible helps send her packing. The episode takes place in a ravine just outside Cromarty known as Morial's Den, long since completely overgrown.

Piety is a frequent, strong theme in these tales, especially in overcoming supernatural evil or, in this case, temptation.

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A lady in a long green dress was standing in front of him, a dress that covered her feet but that left her incredibly beautiful shoulders and breasts completely bare. "The old man laid his hand on the book, and raising himself from his elbow, fixed his eyes on the face of the lady.

"Old man," she said, "I see you are reading the Book. Please tell me. Is there anything in it to help or to save us?"

"The gospel of this book," said the man, "is addressed to the lost children of Adam, but to the creatures of no other race." The lady shrieked as he spoke, and gliding away with the rapidity of a swallow on the wing, disappeared amid the recesses of the hollow."

Miller is a great storyteller. Off she goes, *a swallow on the wing*. The power of his storytelling leaps over its own moral import, wiry as a fox. The power lies in the detail which makes the supernatural - and the fierce challenge between the supernatural and the righteous - as real as day. Never mind that the lady in green is banished - she exists; and the old man, all hands and elbows, saw her beautiful nakedness. In the same way, a water naiad can be apologised to with clean linen, and the visual effect of a moonless night will be described every bit as fully and carefully as, and possibly even more carefully than, a devilish beast.

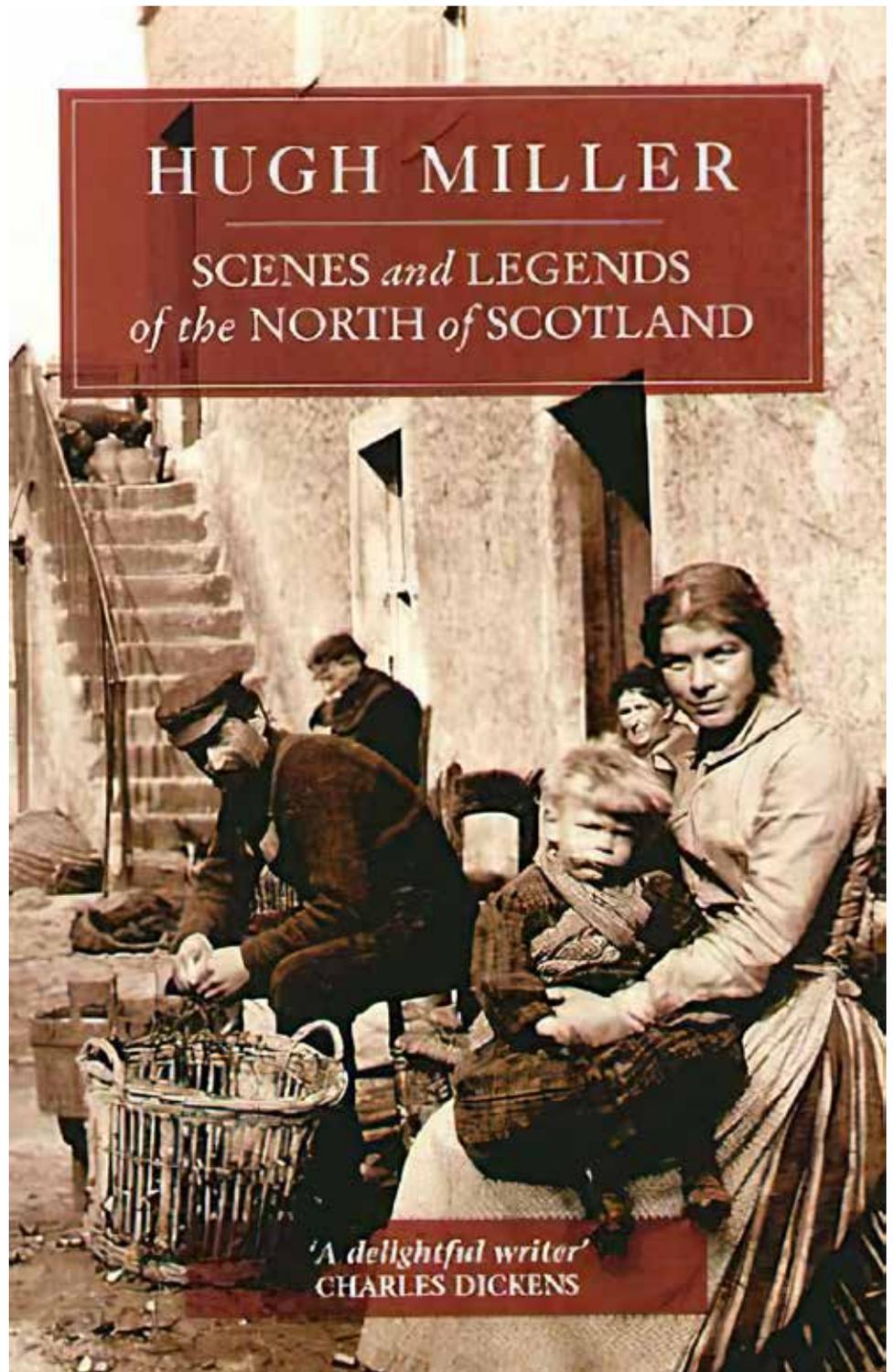
He grew up in Cromarty, which was at that point a quite prosperous port (and prosperity is cyclic in Cromarty, which was most recently buoyed up yet again by the lucrative oil industry in the 1970s). He was a clever but troubled child who never settled to schoolwork. He took an apprenticeship early, as a stonemason, which made him ill for life, ruined his lungs. Some of the gravestones in Cromarty churchyard were carved by him.

Scenes and Legends is a formidably layered history of the place and its irreconcilabilities and versatilities of spirit - a collection of written and oral histories, especially the latter, into a stratification of stories and voices which make up Miller's own. "Old greyheaded men, and especially old women, became my books" in the research for it, he says, and fills it with recordings he sees as not just similar to a perennial plant-life, "but also as a species of produce which the harvests of future centuries may fail to supply."

I read this book between visits to my father in Raigmore Hospital in Inverness, where he was being treated because his skin had turned incurably scaly, wouldn't stop flaking off. Nurses were moisturising him heavily every day then wrapping him tightly in linen to rebalance his skin. I would go up and spend the afternoon with him, chatting, or looking out the huge hospital windows over the dusk shadow of the Black Isle as he dozed. (My father is a keen angler. "I'm maybe turning into a salmon," he said and we laughed.) Then I'd go back to the hotel I was staying in Inverness, and lie on the

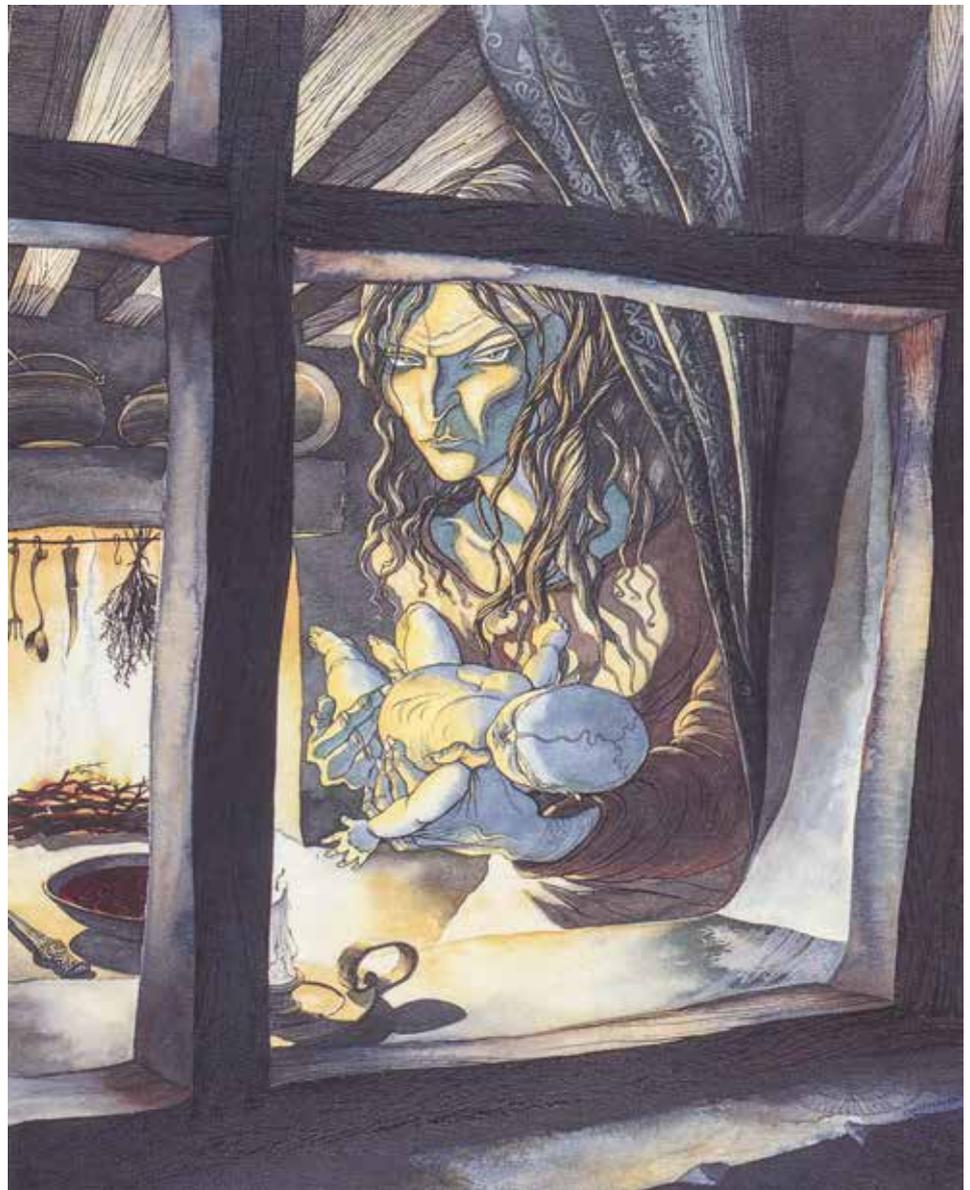
bed, choose (easily) between Anne Robinson being mean to people on The Weakest Link on the hotel TV and Hugh Miller's Scenes and Legends in my hands.

Cromarty, Crummade, Chrombhte, the crooked bay, a town between two Sutors, "turrents built to command a gateway." A land dug out of the sea. A town built again, after its first version was deluged by sea. "In a burying-ground of the town, which lies embosomed in an angle of the bank, the sexton sometimes finds the dilapidated spoils of our commoner shell-fish mingling with the ruins of a nobler animal; and



in another inflection of the bank, which lies a short half mile to the east of the town, there is a vast accumulation of drift-peat, many feet in thickness, and the remains of huge trees."

Miller records talking with men who saw farmed land where now you can only see sea. He tells the story of the bones of what must have been an old burial yard coming out of the sea, all blown ashore in a storm, and the local people who picked them up and carried them carefully to the new churchyard, buried them "beneath the eastern gable of the church." He tells stories of local stubbornness, restless local ingenuity, local brilliance, the local writers who've gone before him, Thomas the Rhymer, and Sir Thomas Urquhart who invented his own alphabet and linguistic system, among other unbelievable ingenuities. He bares the roots, etymologies, meaning and foundations of the place, its "savage magnificence," the "sublimity of desolation on its shores, the effects of a conflict maintained for ages, and on a scale so gigantic." He details its



The Green Lady, supposed in local legend to have been a child-stealer. High infant mortality in olden days may have given rise to this appalling spectre.

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superstitions, its religions, and the argument between both in a way that puts Cromarty at the thriving heart of contemporary religious and philosophical struggle, "every tree of the wood, every tumulus of the moor. But I daresay I have imparted to the reader more of the fabulous history of Cromarty than he will well know how to be grateful for."

Miller the theologian - how Highland - could hear illegitimate spirit. He believed that the very rocks and earth have as important a voice as any afterlife. He was a connoisseur of fossils, an expert on time and its ravaging, a believer in the Great Chain of Being who was consumed by fragile stratification. I picked his first book up out of a little display of books all about where I'd grown up, and opened it at page 82:

"From the manner in which the bones were blended together, it seemed evident that the bodies had been thrown into the same hole, with their heads turned in opposite directions, either out of carelessness or in studied contempt. And they had, apparently, lain undisturbed in this place for centuries. A child, by pressing its foot against the skull which had been raised entire, crushed it to pieces like the other; and the whole of the bones had become so light and porous, that when first seen by the writer, some of the smaller fragments were tumbling over the sward before a light breeze, like withered leaves, or pieces of fungous wood."

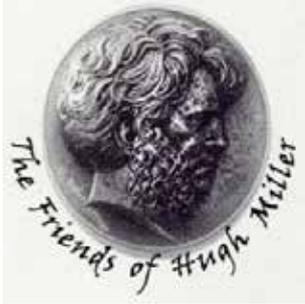
Sublimity and desolation. The bones spoke.

Footnotes:

Ali's essay first appeared in Common Ground, Around Britain in 30 Writers, Cyan Books 2006)

Scenes and Legends of the North of Scotland appeared as a paperback (B & W Publishing, Edinburgh 1994) edited by James Robertson, but is now sadly out of print, though copies are available to order online. . A Victorian edition can be read online as a free Ebook.

Ali recounts the apparition at his father's death which Miller related in his autobiography My Schools and Schoolmasters. She has chosen four tales from Scenes and Legends also in slightly edited, abridged form. Using the paperback edition for reference, they are successively, the fisherman followed on the other side of a hedge by a snarling beast is in Chapter XI, ps 159/60; the Spring of Sludach, Ch I, ps 5/6; the shepherd and the naiad, Ch V, ps 70/71; and the Witch's Hole, Ch VI, p82.



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