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Authors: Norman Bissell

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Kenneth White and the Development of Geopoetics in Scotland

Norman Bissell

I was fortunate to have Kenneth White as my tutor in French in my first year at the University of Glasgow in 1963–1964, the year he became a lecturer there. He set up the Jargon Group that year which I and other students joined, and some others from outwith the University.

He would give talks to stimulate discussion on a wide range of subjects and afterwards some of us would go back to his and his wife Marie-Claude's flat to continue the discussion into the night. He also organised some walks/field visits by the Group, for example, over the moor to his parents' home in Fairlie on the Ayrshire coast where he grew up, or for a weekend on Arran in the Firth of Clyde.

I learnt recently that the American poet Jonathan Williams also set up a Jargon Society as a small press publisher in 1951 and published many of the Black Mountain poets but the names were coincidental. At the Jargon Group I was exhilarated by Kenneth White's talks on a wide range of writers and themes such as Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau, The Beat Poets, Poetry and Revolution 1917, Friedrich Nietzsche and Taoism.

His influence on me was a life-changing experience. He wrote the first Jargon Paper which said 'It is the animation to life with which we are concerned, and with those more-than-literary-books that pull the doors of the mind off their hinges.'

And in the second Paper he said 'There is an experience of life which Blake called "delight" and which Coleridge called "joyance". It depends on the presence of self-energy and on a living, creative relationship to the world, people and things ... the cultural revolution would mean a movement towards the general living of such a life.'

Looking at the University of Glasgow crest which bears the legend *via veritas vita*, the way, the truth, the life, I can't help but think that I didn't really get that from the institution of the University, but I did get it from White. Of course, it was said by Jesus Christ in the Bible John Chapter 4 verse 6, and I'm not comparing him to Jesus, but it might also not be a bad motto for

geopoetics. At least that was the kind of impact White had on me at the time. It was a life-enhancing experience and in the BBC film *Nomad*, made in 1983, other students in Paris expressed something similar.

Around that time White was contacted by the Scottish writer Alexander Trocchi who proposed to establish a network to create ‘an insurrection of a million minds’ in his Project Sigma. The Jargon Papers were included in the Sigma Portfolio, an A2 sheet which Trocchi distributed to his many worldwide contacts. From 1952 to 1954 when he was living in Paris he edited the magazine *Merlin* which published many of the leading writers of the time such as Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, Pablo Neruda and Jean-Paul Sartre, so he had quite a network.

However, perhaps partly because of Trocchi’s drug addiction, Project Sigma didn’t survive except in Holland and, for a variety of reasons, White decided to live and work in France from 1967 onwards. This led to our parting of the ways, he to lecture at the University of Pau and I to remain in Scotland and become a teacher and political activist.

But each year I had the urge to reconnect with him and I even knocked on the door of his former Glasgow flat in Hamilton Drive to ask if the new occupants had a forwarding address for him. They didn’t. I was missing that “living, creative relationship to the world”. Twenty years later I came across an essay of his in *Cenchrastus* magazine which said that he was a Professor at the Sorbonne in Paris. So I wrote ahead and went there that summer to see him – but he wasn’t there! However, I met him in 1987 and 1988 in Brittany where he had moved to from Pau and we discussed the possibility of my setting up a discussion group in Glasgow to coincide with some of his books being again published in English by Mainstream Publishing based in Edinburgh.

That happened from 1989 onwards with the publication of *The Bird Path* and *Travels in the Drifting Dawn* in hardback and then in paperback by Penguin. I wrote reviews of them for the *Glasgow Herald* and his other books as they came out and Catherine Lockerbie gave them rave reviews in *The Scotsman* calling him “an intellectual genius”. He came to Scotland regularly from then on to launch more books and give lectures and readings, and at these I would circulate a sheet to collect names and addresses of those interested in future events and in joining a discussion group.

We had our first meeting at the Glasgow School of Art in November 1989 and then in January 1990 I gave a talk on *The Dialectics of Nature* which was attended by about 40 people. I called the group Open World Poetics,

a concept that White has used a lot, and Tony McManus gave the second talk as an introduction to White's work the following February. We held talks and discussions regularly after that on geology, Patrick Geddes, Gary Snyder, ethnopoetics, John Cage, Taoism, conservation, Edwin Morgan, Chinese poetry and many more.

We also organised residential weekends at Allershaw Lodge near Elvanfoot and elsewhere for about ten years after that, as well as fund-raising words and music nights in the Scotia Bar and The Clutha in Glasgow. With the help of Joe Murray, we produced 3 issues of *Open World* magazine which, as well as poetry and artwork, included articles by and about White, Gary Snyder and others.

On Burns Night 1995 the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics was founded by Tony McManus, myself and about 30 others at a meeting in Waterstones in Edinburgh. Tony was in regular close contact with White and in 1992 he had written and spoken an introduction to the *Into the White World* cassettes of White reading his poems which were produced by Scotsoun. He also interviewed him for a whole hour on 'The Usual Suspects' programme on BBC Radio Scotland.

Things have gone a bit downhill at the BBC since then. Tony also wrote a whole series of essays about geopoetics and White's work which were published in magazines like *Cenchrastus*, *Chapman* and *Radical Scotland*.

In 1996 Tony curated the *White World* exhibition and *The Radical Ground* conference on the eve of its launch at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh and the exhibition subsequently toured throughout Scotland, including to Largs near Fairlie in Ayrshire where White grew up. It was subsequently translated into French and was exhibited in many parts of France.

Tony McManus took part in the work of the International Institute of Geopoetics, went to some of its conferences in France and translated the whole of the first *Cahier de Géopoétique* into English, which remains unpublished. He also ran courses on geopoetics at Edinburgh University's Office of Lifelong Learning which, along with regular talks, meetings and field visits, helped to recruit members to the Scottish Centre. He worked tirelessly with folk like Archie Macalister and Jennie Renton on promoting geopoetics and responding to criticism of White from some reviewers and literary circles.

Tony was able to read many of White's books in French, particularly his essay books like *L'Esprit Nomade* and *Le Plateau de l'Albatros*, and in many of his articles he argued strongly and persistently that publishers should bring

out White's essay books in English. When this didn't happen, the Open World Poetics group decided in 1996 to publish *Coast to Coast: Interviews and Conversations 1985–1995* from our Open World imprint as a way of introducing and outlining some of his ideas and work.

In 1998 the essay book *On Scottish Ground* was published by Polygon which included essays going back to 1966 and talks he'd given in Scotland since 1989. The range and depth of his thought in this book was outstanding. One of the many remarkable things about it is that in the essay 'Into the White World' written in 1966 he prefigured many of the ideas which became geopoetics.

When Catherine Lockerbie became Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival in the year 2000, the first name on her list to invite was White's and he gave an annual series of inspirational lectures and readings there, including in 2001 the Consignia Lecture *The Remapping of Scotland* which the Book Festival published as a pamphlet.

In April 2002 Tony McManus died after a brave struggle against a rare form of bone cancer. It was a huge blow to us all and to the geopoetics movement in Scotland, especially since he was at the heart of it and was its best mind. In August that year some Centre members met with White in Edinburgh and we decided to try to keep Tony's work and the Scottish Centre going. We held follow-up meetings, elected Office-bearers and a Committee, adopted a Constitution and began to issue regular Newsletters to our mailing list.

In October 2003 a two day Symposium took place at St Andrews University organised by Gavin Bowd and Charles Forsdick to mark 40 years since the publication of White's first poetry book *Wild Coal*. It was a successful event and also that year *Open World, Collected Poems 1960–2000* came out from Polygon and we published *Geopoetics: place, culture, world* from our new imprint Alba Editions and held a weekend event at Wiston Lodge in South Lanarkshire.

In 2005 Alba Editions published *Grounding a World: Essays on the Work of Kenneth White* based on the papers given at the St Andrews Symposium. We also held our first weekend event on the Isle of Luing in Argyll after which essays, poems and artwork from the weekend were published in a booklet by the *island* journal from Essence Press.

As well as bringing out a regular Newsletter, we decided to hold meetings and our AGM mostly in the Edinburgh area, and to organise field visits to places like Dunbar, the Isle of May and Aberlady, and residential events every second year. Peter Gray, Graham Urquhart and Bill Taylor in turn volunteered to be our secretary and helped to develop our work.

Bill Eddie and I provided a weekend course in geopoetics at Edinburgh

University's Office of Lifelong Learning in 2006 and a day course in 2007, picking up where Tony had left off.

We went back to Luing for our second weekend event in 2007, called 'Natural Life on Luing', and produced an *Open an Island* box out of the creative work that came from that. That was also the year we launched our website www.geopoetics.org.uk which was created by Steve Pardue, and Sandstone Press published *The Radical Field* by Tony McManus which remains the most comprehensive and best introduction to Kenneth White and Geopoetics in English. One of the things we've done on our website is to answer the perennial question 'What is Geopoetics?' I scoured the essays and other writings that had been published in English and outlined the main elements of geopoetics for those new to the concept. With Kenneth White's input, I think they've helped to clarify the various strands of the theory-practice of geopoetics.

Our most ambitious event to date was the week-long Geopoetics Summer School and Atlantic Islands Festival on Luing in 2009. It involved film makers, writers, leading musicians and others in a series of events which locals and visitors took part in which are on our website www.atlanticislandsfestival.com. It created collaborations in music and poetry with Mark Sheridan and Mairi Macinnes which the three of us subsequently toured to Mull, other parts of Argyll and to the Moray Art Centre.

The Festival was followed in 2010 by a geopoetics weekend on Islay with members of the Seil Natural History Group, and another Going Outward weekend in 2011 at Brantwood, the former home of John Ruskin in the Lake District, which was mainly focused on the visual arts and geopoetics.

From 2012 onwards we started publishing our annual online journal *Stravaig* on the themes of Henry Thoreau, coast to coast, geopoetics in practice, intellectual nomadism and expressing the earth which you can read on our main website. We've also held joint meetings with the International Futures Forum based at Aberdour on the Fife coast and with the Falkland Centre for Stewardship. Jim McCarthy gave a talk about geopoetics in Gatehouse of Fleet, Gordon Peters gave one at a geology conference in London and I've given talks introducing people to geopoetics in Stromness, Ullapool, Nairn, Cromarty, Durham University, Oban and on Luing and other parts of Argyll.

White continued to give lectures and readings in Scotland as a visiting professor at the University of the Highlands and Islands, at the University of Aberdeen, where he was invited by the writer Alan Spence, and at the StAnza International Poetry Festival. Since 2013 four Kenneth White books have been

published by the University of Aberdeen and last year it started publishing his *Collected Works* beginning with *From Underground to Oberground*. This is a crucial project for the intellectual life of Scotland. The translation of some of White's essays into English on his website and on that of the International Institute of Geopoetics is also a very welcome development.

2017 was a watershed year for the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics. Our *Expressing the Earth* Conference in partnership with the University of the Highlands and Islands was held in June on Seil in Argyll and attracted 70 participants. We received so many proposals for talks and workshops the conference had to be extended to 3 full days. Many of those who attended subsequently joined the Scottish Centre, including Scottish Government Brexit Minister Mike Russell MSP who gave a keynote address at the conference which can be read on our website.

Some have become Office-bearers and Council members and many attended our AGM and the first Tony McManus Geopoetics Lecture by Jim McCarthy on Nan Shepherd at Heriot Watt University in November. Our Assistant Director Mairi McFadyen has written some excellent essays about geopoetics and our Treasurer Dave Francis has a great essay about traditional music and geopoetics, both of which are on our website.

The conference in 2017 also led to an invitation to Alastair McIntosh and myself to contribute to *Wordfest* in Asheville, North Carolina in April 2018, which was on the theme of geopoetics. About 50 people attended our keynote talks on Geopoetics, Land and Cultural Renewal and around 30, including poets and staff from six different universities, came to a meeting at 9 o'clock on the Sunday morning to set up an American geopoetics group called Geopoetics Appalachia.

More recently, our *Highland Stravaig* event organised by Mairi McFadyen, along with Moniack Mhor Creative Writing Centre and the Abriachan Forest Trust, was a major success, with about 40 people attending. We currently have members in Australia, Ireland, France, Germany, Sweden, Poland and the USA as well as different parts of England and Scotland. There is increasing interest in geopoetics in Scotland and elsewhere and that is being reflected in a growing awareness of it here and in greater participation in our activities. We are planning to reprint *Geopoetics: place, culture, world* and are looking into other possible publications and another geopoetics conference next year.

We have more work to do on the theoretical side of geopoetics in Scotland but we are now attracting more members from a younger generation of the calibre and ability to undertake that necessary work. We may not be talking

about the need for cultural revolution these days but we are talking about the need for radical cultural renewal – which pretty well comes to the same thing!

Another important development is that we have closer active partnerships with members in Universities like the University of the Highlands and Islands, Heriot Watt University and the University of the West of Scotland, and I trust we will also be able to participate in the Existential Philosophy and Literature Network at the University of Glasgow.

Despite the doubt expressed by Stuart Kelly in an essay in *Grounding a World*, I'm pleased to report that geopoetics in Scotland is thriving. Much of that is due to the consistent, dedicated work that Tony and I, and other Office-bearers and Council members of the Scottish Centre have put in over the last 23 years. It's also due to the intellectual inspiration that Kenneth White's writings and lectures have been to the growing geopoetics movement in Scotland. I'd like to thank Kenneth for that and Marie-Claude White for her translations and for all the support she's given him over many years. I'd also like to thank everyone who has contributed to making the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics a force for good in the world of geopoetics.

If you'd like to join our mailing list or become a member of the Scottish Centre for Geopoetics or order any of our books, you can do so via our website www.geopoetics.org.uk.

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