Ideas of Dwelling: Residence and Transport in Scottish Geography, German Folk Culture and the American post-Romantic Hinterland of John Burnside’s ‘Epithalamium’

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ABSTRACT: John Burnside won the prestigious T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry in 2012. His work is renowned for its interest in ecology and yet it is not distracted from a post-industrial landscape that informs a philosophical lyrical mode. Such lyricism is the bedrock for an inquiry into the question of history alongside both the spiritually inflected depiction of nature, and an interest in relationships on various scales between various agents over time. Humans, flora and fauna are consolidated into ideas of change and the making of home (or temporary residency on a changing earth), which draw from many sources, particularly British mythology, American modernism and European culture and philosophy with peculiar ecological resonance.

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It has to do with love, loss, despair and compassion. It has to do with depression and psychosis. It has to do with capitalism and what might exist after capitalism. It has to do with amazement, open-mindedness, and wonder. It has to do with doubt, confusion and skepticism. It has to do with concepts of space and time.

A Note on Burnside

A Normal Skin (1997) is the final collection of the early poetry of John Burnside (b. 1955), preceding the ‘dwelling trilogy’ that established him as Scotland’s leading philosophical eco-poet, and ’perhaps the most quietly and pervasively influential voice in British poetry in the last twenty-five years’ (Paterson, p. 26). This collection’s long poem, ‘Epithalamium’ alludes to the ancient tradition of celebrating the

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wedding day, in which Sappho, Pinder, and later Catullus would deploy nymphs and shepherds to offer material vision to present what a modern reader would understand as the poet’s idiosyncratic joy.

This piece crystallizes Burnside’s fluid, intertextually inflected themes of loss, of personhood and of belonging that underline his poetic stance: to give voice and accent to thresholds and to the provisional, or to offer ‘radiant meditations [upon the] transparent natural world numen’ (Paterson), one that combines ‘an ambitious metaphysical reach with a sharp attention to the detail of common things’ (Poster). I shall briefly outline how the often mistaken paradox of transcendent and immanent combined is largely due to the poet’s competing preoccupations with geography and cultural history.

Burnside’s engagement with a literary tradition concerned with wedding days is an abstraction from individual wedlock to a deeply contemplative reflection on these bonds over time, triggered as it is by the act of intimate communion in a public space to mark a calendar day. Prefaced with lines from The Boy’s Magic Horn—the anonymous German folk collection Des Knaben Wunderhorn—to suggest the negation of a divine or transcendental force, the poem speaks of the distress of humankind; it parallels the early nineteenth century collection of folktales by Achim von Arnim wherein ‘the loss of vernacular culture [is likened to] the dwindling of the forests’ (Rigby, p. 222). This ecological hinterland and high Romantic context is read by Rigby as a cultural marker, particularly for the rejection of pantheism and endorsement of ambivalent Catholic revelation still so latent in European folk culture:

The physical world of nature, unredeemed by divine revelation, was potentially more malign than divine, its ceaseless whisperings speaking siren-like to our archaic inner nature, awakening longings that continually threatened to draw us away from the safe terrain of righteous living. (222)

Rigby’s penetration into Teutonic conservative belief in the revolutionary Napoleonic age prefigures Burnside’s use of triadic poetics: the natural world’s annunciation; the lyrical ‘I’ struggling with historical consciousness; and an attempt to sustain an appropriate secular connection to presences in a world declining into ecological loss.

Presences and Memory

I’ve heard how the trawlermen harvest
quivering, sexless fish
from the ache of the sea;
how they stand on the lighted decks and hold,
the clouded bodies,
watching the absence form in those buttoned eyes
and thinking of their children, home in bed,
their songless wives, made strange by years of dreaming. (I: 1-8)

Burnside’s conflation of human subject and natural forces; ‘the clouded bodies’, moves beyond what has been identified as ‘a crisis of historical memory’ in contemporary Scottish verse: offering “a poetic confrontation with the extreme difficulty of recovering collective memory, and from that recovery a reconstruction of collective political responsibility’ (Nicholson xx).

The first section, titled ‘Shekinah’ is the first phase in diluting or secularising the spiritual presence of God denoted in the Hebrew sense of the word. This opening poem belies the pastoral blend of myth and reality in its repetition of the phrase ‘I’ve heard’ (I: 9); the personalized structural element that places the labouring community within the context of the natural environment (but distant from loved ones). Burnside’s connection to oral culture and thus cultural memory, promotes a thesis of disconnection from an invisible sustenance (fishes out of the sea; children disconnected from the world of play) that falls away to the objective pronouns indicating an emphasis on the world felt and world unseen: ‘it’s always a surprise: the stink of neeps; the malt-spills of autumn fields’ (20). This subtle shift represents a familiar move to the Burnside reader, conscious of his preoccupation, to speak of the concept of dispossession on multiple scales: from releasing the world from our scientific taxonomy and economic frameworks to a renewed and positive personal insecurity within the world unfolding before our senses. To be ‘made strange’ is to be subject to alienation; it is, as Buell has noted, ‘a kind of biocentrically-conscious aesthetic not tied to any particular landscape but as likely to direct itself to scenes of industrial blight or suburban ‘non-place’”. Burnside’s remove from the literary Scottish context is, ironically, one toward an emphasis on engineered environments over nostalgically formulated organic communities.

Industrial Change

In ‘Epithalamium’ this shift from solipsism to phenomenology follows the naming of the towns of Fife (commonly known as the Kingdom of Fife within Scotland); and the attention to geography and history prefigures the soon heightened environmental sensitivity. In four lines, the theme of secularization is linked to that of decline through the agency of four place names: Lochgelly, the deprived and isolated former mining town (1830-1960); Pittenweem, the fish market for Anstruther and only surviving working harbour of the East Neuk; the Isle of May, home to the twelfth century monastery and Scottish natural heritage site and national nature reserve since 1989; and Markinch, a settlement
traceable to the Balfarg stone circle (3000BC), famed for its sixth century preaching station, but now financially less independent since the closure of nineteenth century paper mills, bleach mills, ironworks and the Haig whisky factory. The order of these places in the poem represents an easterly shift from Cowdenbeath to Anstruther, a biographical journey reflecting on the poet’s birthplace and on a new home on his return to Scotland during the writing of this collection. It also represents the marked change in the Fife landscape from the working-class underprivileged and forgotten towns of the West to the Fife coastal tourist route and sustained industries of the East. Markinch lies mid-way between these points and brings focus upon the sustained heritage industry surrounding the preaching ground and an associated fall from religion running after the fall from industry. These well known places in Scottish history are accounted for before the ‘surprise’ that is located ‘where floodlit tractors / labour and churn’ (21-22): an image of creaturely technology providing a complex vision of man wrestling with nature that constitutes Burnside’s unique post-pastoral anxiety.

Natural Attunement: Moons and Tides

At this very juncture Burnside suggests a mechanical agitation for the differing forms of empathy that husband and wife have toward nature:

the way you feel the turning of the tide
beneath the house, or somewhere in the roof,
or how I sometimes linger on the stairs,
listening for nothing

beguiled by the pull of the moon
and the leylines of herring. (33-36, 38-39)

The partner’s subterranean yet tidal connection enfolds earth to sea and sky, while the husband’s liminal accomplicity (the stairs are between elevations) is driven by the manifest energies of moon and sea. Leylines, alleged alignments of historical places of interest, are semantically twisted from an idea of consistency (similarity) by the metaphor that carries through the sense of the fish’s disposition to forage: stasis and repetition, therefore are adumbrated within Burnside’s paradox, i.e. an acute and focused attention to that which is indistinct and provisional. These sentiments detail a sense of imprisonment in both figures; moreover, antagonism—underlined in the difference between ‘feel’ and ‘beguiled’, the intuitive and the self-deluded—is rife in this section. Conflict or opposition, the notion of dispossesssion, the fall from nature and the temporary security of industry, can all be seen as a signal accumulation that is resolved by Burnside’s structural logic.
The internal attunement of mind in the first poem (above) is transformed into an embodied subjectivity marking out his place. The figure of the husband is witnessed wandering in the second section, ‘Heimweh’, to denote remote longing and pain, or quite literally, homesickness.

I walk in this blur of heat to the harbour wall,  
and sit with my hands in my pockets, gazing back  
at painted houses, shopfronts, narrow roofs,  
people about their business, neighbours, tourists,  
the gaunt men loading boats with lobster creels,  
women in hats and coats, despite the sun,  
walking to church and gossip. (II: 4-10)

‘Heimweh’ was written, famously, by D.H. Lawrence in New Poems (1918). Burnside’s version, rather than wishing the destruction of home from his memory, replays Lawrence’s plea for destruction of home and self:

It stands so still in the hush composed of trees and inviolate peace,  
The home of my fathers, the place that is mine, my fate and my old increase. (Lawrence, 5-6)

Burnside’s external, yet convincingly domestic scene, is one charged with a different sense of loss to Lawrence’s surviving and returning soldier (‘I would give my soul for the homestead to fall with me’ 7); ‘Epithalamium’, conversely, does not wish to extinguish all relations, but wishes for experience beyond the narrow categories of being at home and beyond the life-ways of local culture. Burnside’s poem of everyday life is carefully shadowed by the critique of intellectual dehumanizing: ‘It seems too small, too thoroughly contained’ (11); the picture postcard town of ‘tidy gardens’ (14) evokes a bourgeois pastoral and a restrictive containment of larger energies: it symbolizes the poet’s frustration with shallow societal protocols of freedom.

Thoughts on Absence

Burnside’s momentary thought of leaving home and facing the sea is coterminous with a form of release or disappearance that indicates an intellectually expansive view of the subject dissolved into the ecological patterns that are indicated by the coastal locale: ‘I turn to the grey of the sea and the further shore: | the thought of distance, endless navigation’ (15-16). This existential release from cultural trappings is a fiction of the imagination that temporarily mimics the mythical figures of the town who wandered out into the sea and never returned: ‘ones who vanish | seem weightless and clean, as if they have stepped away | to the near-angelic’ (20-21). This marks a curious link to the German folk tale, in
that it suggests a denial of social consciousness (represented by the angel) in wishing to push the human spirit to its limit, while also connecting to the domain of the otherworldly.

The third poem to ‘Epithalamium’, ‘After the Storm’ explicitly evokes Hölderlin’s feast day poem (‘Wie wenn am Feiertage das Feld Zusehen’) as a means to develop this sense of connection over time. Moreover, this section stresses Burnside’s implicit theory that radical change such as an act of violence can ‘vouchsafe’ the other world that is resident within the everyday. This finds ‘the intense stillness that comes thereafter’ as a form of renewal where ‘the logic by which we live, day to day is [understood as] only a subset of a wider, more mysterious order’ (‘Travelling into the Quotidian’ 61, 69). This position derived from thoughts on freedom through violence comes troubling close to the representations of murder, rape and incest that lead to renewal in Burnside’s preceding volume Swimming in the Flood (1995); however, this poem is content with trappings of habitat, for a large sense of openness and connection is resident inside the dweller’s mind and in a particular psychological fabrication) of the house that operates as a focal point for all energies in the poem. Rather than an isolated home sheltering from the storm, Burnside views his home as a means to ‘what we might discover of ourselves’ (‘Epithalamium’ 25); knowledge:

more than a gust of rain, more than the wind,
more than the Halloween ghosts we might imagine.
Those animals that figure on the walls,
those creatures we imagine on the stairs
are real, and we must give them shapes and names,
feed them with blood and salt, fix them a bed,
make shift, make good, allow them this possession. (32-38)

Totemic consciousness charges this poem that has elevated its subject matter to incorporate cultural representation of non-human animals and presences beyond narrow anthropocentrism: working to dwell with things as a means to sustain the fiction or intuitive empathy that relinquishes human ownership of the world in which we are placed amongst others and only momentarily.

The inclusive subjective pronoun dominates the end of this poem, while the natural world is abstract and general. The emphasis is on willed action as something giving to the world: to ‘feed’ and ‘fix’ is to nurture and construct but ‘make shift’ and ‘make good’ have double registers. In the first instance, a decreated sense of a temporary schematic, ‘makeshift’—split into two words—allows arrangement to live in its poverty of order and failed union (i.e. to make ‘shift’ is to move along, is

1 Holderlin’s poem is renowned in Germany as a recasting of Pindar’s seventh Olympian ode (above, as concerning the marriage ceremony).
not to reside in one place, in one mode). It is dense poetic fabrication that instances Burnside’s deconstructive modality, or the necessity of separation and division as functional elements within an allegory of contingency and protean selfhood. In the second sense, less moral judgment than form of atonement, to hold one’s place by reparation: to ‘fix them a bed’; as an effort not to reduce energy or limit it as a secured, restrained standing reserve (paralleled by subjects pinned into a horizontal position of sleeping) but, as one notes the eleventh syllable spilling over the iambic prison, it is to give something its place in the world on its terms, so ethically enabling its ‘possession’ of self.

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Finally, ‘VIII Beholding’ suggests the sense of obligation and engagement triggered by the epigraph from William Carlos Williams for the poem ‘A Process of Separation’ in this collection. Such internal resonance and meaning located between contexts is common in Burnside’s volumes. The poet’s desire to fill the day by gathering apples and making a fire to connect to the Halloween spirits in this section is now framed by the bedroom scene where the husband is awake and his love lies sleeping. These two distinct states, however, are part of a blurred world between monologue and dialogue, between the masculinized spectatorial frame on the passive object (the partner) and the unanticipated volition of the ‘other’:

Your hair is the colour of whey  
and your hand on the pillow is clenched, like a baby’s fist  
on a figment of heat, or whatever you’ve clutched in a dream...

Now, suddenly, you’re talking in your sleep,  
your face on the pillow like one of those paper masks  
we used to make in school, for Halloween,  
talking to someone you’ve dreamed, while your white hands  
fasten on something fragile or easily lost,  
a strand of hair, a ring, a stranger’s arm,  
the promise you have to remember, that brings us home. (5-7; 34-40).

The insomniac wishes to apologize for his deliberately cruel and memory-full way of viewing things. The feminine dream-state rooted in the fluid and spiritual world is Romanticised, while yet the fabricated mask, the comparison of hair to milk, and the white hands portend a fragile, constructed surface; for these represent neither idealized images of purity nor something simply opaque. When viewed as emptiness or

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2 ‘The business of love is | cruelty which, | by our wills, | we transform | to live together.’  
transparency they bring the submerged world into relief. We are led to read in this conceptual, philosophical and abstract manner; extending the metaphor of rising to the surface of the waking state to capture the transitive world, for readers are thoughtful of the act of poetry itself, the clutch or encirclement of something foreign. Burnside’s abstraction from the idea of bonds enters difficult conceptual territory here, for it evokes an ecological sense of open relationships and deep interdependency: it speaks to the entrapment of energy into falsely constructed sense categories (nature transformed into static cultural terms and economy).

One sense of bonding is dropped for another; shortly following these lines, the lyrical voice imagines walking in the town’s graveyard as another indication of the desires to interface with things beyond as façade. The desire for entrance into another world is underlined by the conjunctive stress and contingent sense of alternative modes of living in the deliberate reuse of the grammatical conjunction (‘or’) in this section.

or wander all day in the kirkyard, reading the names
on strangers’ graves: their plots laid side by side
with those they loved and hated, those they feared;
friends who betrayed them; children who watched them die.
It’s what they meant by coming to this place
and choosing to remain, though decades fastened their hands
to kindling and wire, and the dampness that seeped through the walls
all winter long. (26-33)

Located on the coastline of Anstruther, the poet-figure turns his back to the church-yard and fronts of shops arranged neatly in the small lowland Scottish town. The eye follows the path of each poetic impression that builds to develop the sense of bonding from strangers, to kin, to offspring, to laborers in the ground.

This transference from sense experience to philosophical abstraction has been outlined as Burnside’s engagement and willed disconnection from ‘precognition and recovery’ as aspects of Catholicism’s ‘ideology of sanctity’ (McGonigal, 65). Furthermore, the neat arrangements of ‘plots’ that unfold into time-worn contracts i.e. ‘fastened’ are hard-wired to the elements that rupture all simple (human) senses of division and differences (‘walls’).³ This instances a radical Wordsworthian ‘constitutive psychology’: a state of ‘psychic freedom’ realized through understanding the necessity that humanity can be completely realized within inhumanity (Kroeber, 133). This passage prosaically imitates Wordsworth in its stress on laboring folk as material fabric that

³ The arrangement of ‘plots’ recalls Wordsworth’s reading of Robert Burns in respect of homeliness (Kerrigan 65), which opens to an uncanny sense of sharing a space with the dead in Burnside’s allusion to graveyard poetry in the first book of the dwelling trilogy, *The Asylum Dance*: ‘In ways the dead are placed | or how | they come to rest | I recognize myself’ (*Fields* I: 1-4).
meaningfully constitute ‘place’ and yet it is underwritten by subtle conceptual nuances that offer further meaning.

The poet-figure is dissolved into the landscape for the focus moves to other humans outlined within seasonal markers; it is a move beyond solipsism and yet this poem is anthropocentrically strangulated by the conceptual aggregates that too easily lead the poem into more philosophical territory. It is possible to read the concept of rambling without a fixed abode (an idea introduced earlier, above) then developing into the idea of a station of thought – a position on what it means to be at home—an attitude (i.e. stasis), which in turn leads to a self-reflexive comment upon predetermination (‘what they meant’); the move is echoed in the protagonist’s casual roaming that leads towards a certain course, particularly an intellectual beholding of terminus and continuum.

From Britain to America

Can a lyrical mode that is simultaneously anchored to self-reflexivity and abstraction trigger a move to speak beyond the self in a manner that is neither egotistical nor anthropocentric? I argue that the materiality of the poem does not need to indulge in itself here but can realize the oral potential to open out to the lyrical representation of the world of natural things. The second, third, and fifth lines of the passage quoted here are metrically more determined than others, but do not manage to underpin the sense of the whole passage. ‘Wander’ meets ‘stranger’ – an exaggeration of alienation, as pre-requisite to dwelling at home – to the same degree that ‘fastened’ meets ‘dampness’ but other than this half-rhyming concordance and emphasis on foreignness that denotes a shift to fluidity, Burnside has only played with assonance in the ‘w’ sounds to bring ‘who’ and ‘what’ further away from the interrogative or demonstrative sense and into the diversity of ‘wander’, ‘watch’, and wire’. Here, within this music, the poetic line resists constructing a grammatical field or one of lexical depth; it is an understated moment, where the covenant with world via phonetics undulates in proximity to the lexical. This is all too consonant with a theory of negative poetics.

It can be read as a form of desert music, the un-use of song, understated poetry that is more successfully meaningful in expansive verse where spatial arrangements help to underline the sense and feeling. Therein lies another loose connection to Williams:

I have eyes
    that are made to see and if
they see ruin for myself
and all that I hold
    dear, they see
also
through the eyes
and through the lips
and tongue the power
to free myself
and speak of it. (Williams ‘The Yellow Flower’ 60-70)\(^4\)

Williams’ treatise of the natural and unnatural acknowledges the mental climate of gentle appropriation of thing (nature/world) for self (individual/culture). Here, the ability to ‘tongue the power’ (accompanied by ‘Deep Religious Faith’ and ‘The Mental Hospital Garden’), now purports the sensuous inflection of the poet’s skill in this phase of contemplation of (personal) suffering. This moment in Williams’ oeuvre is unique in that the foregrounding of poetics, the verb of making something of the world—simultaneous to the poet moving away from triadic form—is one that requires a new medium to locate human life pulsating with death; furthermore, as with Burnside, Williams metaphorically details the additional impulse to ‘free’ the self and, in-so-doing, assert the self in the wake of finitude and horizons. This existential emphasis is appealing to the Scottish poet. In Burnside, the use of line-breaks and blooming loose lines instances his practice (as with Williams) of spatial form to emblematize the ‘make shift’ of the mind and its consolations and marriages: the movement of mind, its contemplation and play of association.

Originally, however, in Burnside’s poem, strict, non-patterned verse operates to collocate partner and graveyard image to emphasize terminus, roots and the will to ‘remain’. This obsession with the dwelling motif in ‘Epithalamium’—as a point of rest, and of instability or insecurity—is drawn from the fusion of the living (although temporarily disconnected from life in the partner’s dream state), to those beyond life. It is further compounded by the comparison of hair to ‘whey’ emphasized as line-ending that finds the sonic Scots stress ‘way’, which is an example of the tongue as verb (as in Williams above). One senses that it is not for the poet to sing these relations, but for the poetry to make patterns across them, finding dependencies in their co-existence within the semantic field, and these attainable either through complex stanzaic form or loose line. It is difficult poetry yet one that enables the conceptual stress to take the foreground.

Here, Burnside’s dense verse compels the reader to note a reverse in the imagery of nature and culture, from the tractor action of ‘churning’ to this less manipulated, sinuous and graceful self cradled in the song of

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contemplating the world. Moreover, the poet-figure centered as voice to the poem reading the graves as a permanent resting point is humbled by finding that each deceased figure was once aware of the time limit innate to their settling, to fire making, fencing, and gathering. It is the significant British Romantic humbling of human predicament (cf. Wordsworth)—the temporal song of the hard living of laboring folk in the landscape—while also connecting to the more Modernist suggestion of transformation and growth (cf. Williams).

The damp drawn from the sea replays water imagery once more; here, the undermining of human construction enhances an imaginatively palpable moment, which is normally not striking, for it evolves slowly and is not easily registered by our sense mechanisms. This element ties back to the shift from machine to hair, for it opens up the sense of time delivered by ‘all’ folding into ‘wall’. Division collapses between male, female, and life and death even as the noun ‘kindling’ develops into a process that delivers another noun suggesting progeneration in nature. This, as with the entire poem, is informed by the female presence and now enfolds a sense of bringing forth the young: ‘kindling’ as her bequest or willed transference of genetic makeup. This tight and understated meaning shows Burnside informing his sense of ‘beholding’ as both reference point (as obligation to dwell) and the impulse to move on, to encourage change and terminus.

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Gathering and modes of reconnection pronounce Burnside’s lyrical consciousness entering woods and rivers in A Normal Skin to enjoin the subterranean and deep impulse of life. There is neither retreat nor sanctuary from these journeys; in their discoveries they suggest that the pastoral is no longer a symbol of simple reconciliation: the intellectual centre of gravity in ‘Epitaphalum’ is uncertainty. In Swimming in the Flood there resides a post-modern vision of power, in that there is no central discernable controllable locus of subjectivity or ego from which one may gain security as the dark energy of nature abounds. In A Normal Skin Burnside journeys into the Fife heartland and coastal villages to bring the human element back into the frame; yet the journey of love and the filter of pain saves the inner drama of the self from solipsism or central union: for ultimately, transport is preferred to residence; change over nostalgia. This places the ego within the perspective of a community of human beings in turn emphasizing the difference between our social selves and how we are defined by love, wherein the latter mode the factual or superficial and fictional is displaced by mystery and
we are offered a ‘disinterested invocation’ that is part of ‘self-renewing’ (Burnside, ‘Strong Words’ 261).

**Attachment and Release**

In ‘Epithalamium’, as with *A Normal Skin* as a whole, the investigation of life is not made via categories of ‘religion, politics and sociology’, but, as Redmond has suggested, through ignoring these counters (11). Thus, the focus on the human expands into a vision of the creativity of the human spirit, and of how we continue to pair, make homes, and so acknowledge tensions created by these pacts. I read this collection as playing out Burnside’s theme of living as ‘the tragedy of attachment [that is] an essential and beautifully human predicament’ (‘Iona’ 22, 23): an aspect that love clarifies as the contours of human existence but must negotiate the undertow of violence or discrimination therein. While ‘Epithalamium’ suggests further contemplation behind life’s mechanisms, these ideas are (amongst others) wrapped into a conceptual container of the domestic arrangement, of partnerships, and of all too frequent solitude, to bring into relief the frustrations and distractions of the inhabited and relational world. It is from here that Burnside can move closer to notions of dwelling and ecology in later collections; it is interesting to measure how less explicitly the mature works evoke a moral code for man in a collapsing world.

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**Works Cited**


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### Indian Ocean Futures Conference

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This international conference is presented by the Australia-Asia-Pacific Institute Indian Ocean Futures Initiative. The Indian Ocean basin is rapidly becoming a powerhouse of economic, social, cultural and political development. The countries and populations around the Indian Ocean rim are already experiencing profound change.

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OUR UNDERSTANDING of the nature of late and post-Roman central places of northern Britain has been hindered by the lack of historical sources and the limited scale of archaeological investigation. New work at Rhynie, Aberdeenshire, Scotland (NJ 49749 26345), has begun to redress this through extensive excavation and landscape survey. This has revealed a Pictish central place of the 4th to 6th centuries AD that has European connections through material culture, iconography and site character. In addition to reviewing the place-name and historical context, this article outlines preliminary reflection on Scottish culture and traditions with information about clans and their tartans, the Highland Gaelic culture, food and drink and other aspects of cultural life in Scotland. Tossing the caber is the most spectacular and the most well known event in the highland games, when the athlete must run carrying an entire tree trunk and attempt to heave it end over end in a perfect, elegant throw. Just as important as the sporting events are the piping competitions for individuals and bands and dancing competitions where you will see young children tripping the quick, intricate steps of such traditional dances as the Highland fling. When on holiday in Scotland the Highland games should not be missed and will give you a great insight of Scottish traditions, and leave you with Scotland culture and traditions literally stretch back into the mists of time, with some of the earliest relics of Scottish life dating back as far as 8500 BC (no, that's not a typo!). Fairy Pools on the Isle of Skye. And it's not only how much history there is here that makes it so fascinating, it's how wild, colorful, dramatic and just downright magical it all is. At the heart of Scottish culture is its' people, and you might find them to be as surprising as Scotland's geography and landscape. At first impression (especially to non-Europeans), the Scottish people may seem a bit 'reserved', but they're actually very warm-hearted, gregarious and friendly - with a very sharp, if dry, sense of humor. The Scottish 'psyche' and attitudes has a lot of its' roots in an ancient, rich and varied history.