

A narrow road north

Following Basho around Scotland

KEN COCKBURN

'It is sweet to think that I was a companion in an expedition that never ceases, though centuries pass away.'

The Road North was a project I undertook with Alec Finlay in 2010–11, when we 'translated' Basho's *Oku no Hosomichi* into contemporary Scotland, by way of a series of journeys, a blog and a long poem.

Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) is probably the best known Japanese poet, both in Japan and in the West. He spent much of the last ten years of his life travelling, and describing his journeys in a form called haibun, a mix of prose and short poems. *Oku no Hosomichi* is his masterpiece. Best known in English as *Narrow Road to the Deep North*, it describes a journey made in summer 1689 by Basho and his companion Sora on foot, on horseback and by boat around northern Honshu, the largest of the four main islands which comprise Japan. It's concise, at less than 50 pages in the Penguin Classics edition, including illustrations. Sora kept a journal too; purely factual and without literary ambitions, it's useful in highlighting Basho's elisions and elaborations – his artistry.

I've worked with Alec since the late 1990s, when we published *Pocketbooks*, a series of poetry and art anthologies we described as 'offering a contemporary generalist view of Scottish culture'. I worked on his public art commissions in education, health and garden settings, and we wrote renga, or 'linked verse', together on the Renga Platform – a portable structure set up outdoors (and, when it rained, indoors) for communal writing. But this was our first travel project, and our first long-term writing project.

Many years previously Alec had realised how easily Basho and Sora's route could be overlaid on Scotland: leaving the east-coast capital, Edo/Edinburgh, crossing the mountainous Shirakawa Barrier/Highland Line into the north country/Highlands, then heading for the west coast to gaze at the island of Sado/the Hebrides. Thanks to a Creative Scotland Vital Spark award, a scheme specifically funding collaborations, that long-dormant seed germinated.

To guide our journey, we used the translation entitled *Back Roads to Far Towns* by Cid Corman and Kamaike Susumu. This version presents Basho's text as 53 'stations' or short chapters. Soon we'd paired each with a location in Scotland, and allocated each a tea and a whisky to drink there. Basho and Sora visit famous castles, temples, mountains, viewpoints, sites known from literature and legend; sometimes they just visit friends. Their Matsushima – 'a magnificent vista... all sorts of islands gathered here' – became the Isle of Luing, with its vista of small islands between Jura and Mull. Yamanaka's 'hot springs' became

the ancient sacred well on Isle Maree. Tsuruga harbour became the Oban ferry terminal.

Each pairing was made individually: we didn't attempt to make a Scottish journey following Basho's stations sequentially; rather, we picked the locations, then worked out our itineraries. The main 'groupings' were Perthshire, Argyll, the western Highlands (including Skye) and the Western Isles. In the end we made five road trips of between one and two weeks, plus some day trips, between May and October 2010; then, in April and May 2011, we made further day trips and a concluding road trip.

We planned to write a renga for each 'station', with help from friends and hosts when that was feasible. Renga is a sequence of three- and two-line verses in which each links to but also shifts away from its predecessor, creating a very varied long poem. Renga are sometimes written solo, though Basho preferred writing with at least one other poet; he refers to writing several 'sequences' in the course of his journey. We planned to publish our renga at each 'station' via QR code (a kind of barcode readable by mobile phones); scanning it would access a recording of the renga read aloud, so you could listen to a poem about a landscape *in situ* – Alec had done something similar in the Peak District the year before.

It soon became clear that renga wasn't right. Too tidy, too constrained, too polite, too reflective; the joy of the field trips was the way connections and associations spiralled out. Basho describes writing – or, given his implements, 'brushing' – a poem as a keepsake for a villager on a strip of stiffened paper called *tanzaku*. We wrote our verses on parcel tags from the post office, pinned on fenceposts or tied on trees along the way, and photographed with our mobiles. Sometimes visual artists talk of having a 'practice' – drawing perhaps – poets less so, though much of the art falls into daily activities. For us, 'the thing with the labels', which eventually we came to call simply 'poeming', became our practice – what we did when we stopped somewhere we felt a connection to.

We were accumulating these along with other kinds of poems and photographs, plus journal entries and general reflections, sound recordings, drawings, extracts from our reading. The blog, unlike the renga, was both capacious and structured enough to accommodate this proliferation.

It became a process of celebrating *here* and remembering *there*; the starting point for the latter was Basho, but it came to take in our wider reading, and our wider circumstances. As I wrote on the blog, 'The simplicity of living out of a suitcase, of studying a library of a dozen books and maps, of going for walks. Ever generous, the days unfolded their delights – river-swimming, hill-walking, poeming outdoors – Basho and Sora prompting us all the while from the wings, encouraging us to speak and act beyond what we might have done alone, nudging us towards

ginko, “walking to write poems”.’

Neither of us speaks Japanese but, along with ginko, a few words from Basho became measures for our understanding of Scotland, separated into *edo* and *oku*:

Edo to the east
in the orderly market-town,

Oku to the west
in twilit deer, pheasants
lacking road-sense,
tumbledown gardens
and close-ranked pines.

The division between the two was *Shirakawa*. To Basho, this was a mountain pass beyond which the songs change, while for us it was more an idea than a single place, in keeping with the long, fluid ‘Highland line’ stretching from Stirling to Inverness. And we relished our own *hosomichi*, those B, C and ‘uncategorised’ roads, preferably single track, that wind their way through the highlands and islands; any road, in fact, where

you let the wheel turn
through the glen
with all your attention
on the encounters and minor
dramas of PAS-
SING PLACES

Basho’s text is littered with *nadokoro*, ‘places of name’, and he often draws on the literal as well as associative meaning of place names. Neither of us speaks Gaelic, but as we researched Scottish place-names, we learned a little. At the Perthshire watershed, a stream running south is a ‘burn’, while one running north is an ‘allt’. On Skye, seeking Basho’s Mount Nikko, meaning ‘sunlight’, we found *Grianán nam Maighdean*, sun-bower of the maidens (a rugged peak, though wreathed that August day in low cloud). We traced the saints via places beginning ‘Kil-’ (‘cell’, in the monastic sense) – Kilmartin, Kilmichael, Kilbride, Kilmarie. Scottish Gaelic today is in a fragile state, but looking back 1,000 or more years down Glen Lyon, Alec could write: ‘the Gaelic names are incomers, and young; waymarkers of the New Irish, emigrants who overwrote the names of the Picts’.

While we describe the project as a mapping of contemporary Scotland, we were drawn deep into the past. We marvelled at the cup-and-ring marked rocks at Achnabreck, Argyll; climbed to vitrified hilltop duns with extensive views; sat within the solid shelter-circle of the Glenelg brochs on low ground by the river; sought and sometimes found the hermitages and chapels of early Celtic saints. It was striking how similar these were to certain contemporary structures, in location, materials and intent – Chris Drury’s Hut of the Shadows (a *camera obscura*) on North Uist, James Turrell’s breathtaking Skyspace near Kinloch Rannoch, the ‘mountain hut’ Outlandia near Fort William, all carefully sited and inviting both a retreat from and an engagement with their immediate environment.

This wasn’t an explicitly political project, but our last trip in May 2011 coincided with the watershed moment of the SNP victory in the Scottish parliament election. My own sense of localism developed as we travelled to rural and indeed remote places and communities. And the project has continued after the conclusion of the road trips, and the completion of the blog. There have been three exhibitions of poem-labels attached to whisky miniatures, and parts of a jointly-written long poem about the journey have been published in periodicals and online. A recording of the poem will be available online shortly.

Alec and I were on the road again last summer, tracing Boswell and Johnson’s 1773 Tour to the Hebrides. We called the project Out of Books; near the end of their tour, Johnson complains to Boswell that too many people ‘talk from books... without any originality of thinking,’ whereas ‘you and I do not talk from books’. But they do, all the time, and their journey is made all the more enjoyable and meaningful for them – and for us – because of it. They have a penchant for the Latin and Greek classics, so this time we’ve taken Virgil, Ovid and Sappho along for the ride.

The opening quotation isn’t by Basho, I should add, but comes from Czeslaw Milosz’s ‘Report’ (1993). Another line sums up the strange solidarity living writers can find with the dead:

‘Fraternally, we help each other, forgetting our grievances, translating each other into other tongues, members, indeed, of a wandering crew.’

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