

Affect in Peter May's Lewis and Harris Novels

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The Affect of Place

I am writing the first draft of this chapter on the Isle of Lewis in Scotland's Outer Hebrides during a tempestuous October and November when the island's elements are at their most volatile and its ecology is in a state of seasonal change. A thunderbolt on my first night cut my internet connection for my entire stay. I have watched snow buntings touch down on the Butt of Lewis, its most northerly point, whilst rainbows are a daily unexpected surprise almost anywhere. My son Tom, partner Sally and granddaughters Islay and Elsie, have missed a day of school in Lincoln after half-term because the ferry off the island was port-bound for two days by Storm Aiden (see *The Chessmen* 91). In my rucksack I have brought four crime novels by Peter May which are set on Lewis and Harris. I intend to conduct research on the affect of their ever-present awareness of the island's ecology in the mode of narrative scholarship by acquiring for myself a sense of place, its materiality and culture, that Peter May knows so well. My cottage in Ardroil looks across Uig Sands to Uig Lodge where May spent months between 1992 and 1996 filming the Gaelic language series he produced for Scottish television, *Machair*, before eventually moving to live in France. It was when looking at the images of the Isle of Lewis that hung on the walls of his house in south-west France that May decided to set his next crime novel here: "A wild, wind-swept corner at the extreme north-west of Europe that no one had ever used as a setting for a crime novel. A place I knew so intimately it was almost part of me" (*Chessmen* 103).

Those two sentences raise several questions concerning affect, ecology and the crime novel for me as I sit in that "wild, wind-swept corner" myself. Central to them is whether the narrative of May's crime novels is itself influenced by its 'setting', whether the social ecology is shaped by its natural ecology, whether character and ethics presented by the author are defined by the affect of weather, land and sea upon him. Is what he thinks of as 'a setting' for a genre narrative, actually driving that narrative, even in ways of which he may be unaware? And what are the limitations of his exploration of his 'intimacy' with this distinctive more-than-human ecology that is actually under threat from industrial-scale mining, windfarms and fishing? "Within ecocriticism, the figure of the detective is richly suggestive", write Jo Lindsay Walton and Samantha Walton in their Introduction to the 'Crime Fiction and Ecology' special issue of *Green Letters* (2). What are the limitations to Peter May's detective's 'apprehending totality', as they put it, on the island of Lewis?

In a Zoom interview with Hugh Topping for Topping's Bookshop on 26 March 2021, May revealed that he became a writer of crime fiction because of an environmental concern in a global context that might exemplify a kind of 'apprehension of totality':

I didn't choose crime fiction; it chose me. I wanted to write a first novel set in China about genetic food modification, but how to tell it? If I had a body found at the beginning that would be a good start (*The Firemaker*, 1999). I was trying to make a living as a novelist. After that first book my publisher offered a deal if I wrote about the same characters in the same setting. So I fell into the genre.

Asked whether he believed that people were shaped by their natural environment and whether that might be explored to raise his readers' awareness of ecology and even climate change, May confirmed this as a continuing interest in his work:

Crime fiction is a broad church. I've tried to push the boundaries of crime fiction. I've a great interest in environment and I wrote a novel based upon bee colony collapse (*Coffin Road*, 2016). I was stopped by the pandemic from going to the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard to research my next novel, a place which has been much affected by climate change. Yes, I believe that people are affected by their environment. In a place like the Outer Hebrides you develop a way of living that is influenced by weather and geography that is influencing your culture. A sense of place is always important to me. I never write about a place I've never been to.

Indeed, in 2023 May published a novel titled *A Winter Grave* set in mainland Scotland ravaged by climate change in the near future.

'Islandness' in *The Blackhouse*

In the first novel of Peter May's trilogy set on the Isle of Lewis, *The Blackhouse* (2011), that feature his detective Fin Macleod, Fin says to his former girlfriend, "The world's like the weather, Marsaili. You can't change it. And you can't shape it. But it'll shape you" (153). The challenging and fast-changing weather of the Atlantic seaboard has a continuing dramatic and forceful presence throughout all three novels of the trilogy, *The Blackhouse*, *The Lewis Man* (2012) and *The Chessmen* (2013), together with the stand-alone novel set on Harris that followed them, *Coffin Road* (2016). The way the weather, a force of ecology that May's characters think of as beyond human influence, can 'shape you' is clearly a matter of affect. The weather is one aspect of what May calls 'the elements' in his novels and reading the trilogy the reader might be forgiven for wondering how many different forms of discourse the author might deploy to characterise the pervasive presence of rain. People in these novels are clearly 'shaped' by rain, but are also aware of the state of the tides, the bleak appearance of peat bogs, the resistance of gneiss, the recurrence of rainbows, the different qualities of beaches that appear to be simply of sand, and the particular configuration of beaches, bays, cliffs, machair (grassland behind Marram-grassed dunes), moorland and mountains that define the Isle of Lewis and its attached 'isle' of Harris to the south. Quite how that 'shaping' has come about, and its consequences for character formation, home making, working life and social interaction, are at the centre of these narratives.

But in saying this, already a sense of social ecology is at work, as in the statement that 'the world's like the weather'. The world these islanders inhabit is of a sharply defined culture that is full of tensions. In a crime novel such tensions are revealed in a constant

implicit reference to ethical positions. In crime novels set on the Isle of Lewis these ethical tensions are located in a culture that is defined, like the ecology, by a particular kind of 'islandness'. One might say that an archipelagic set of ethics is at play in these crime novels that is itself derived from the tensions of growing up, leaving and returning to this distinctive island culture. Inevitably this particular 'islandness' also shares some characteristics and issues discussed by archipelagic studies.

'The world' is enlarged in *The Lewis Man* as the story ranges through 'the long island' of the Outer Hebrides to the island of Eriskay in the south and ecological differences are crucial to this narrative. And 'the world' beyond these islands is modified in its reception and influences by the world of 'islandness' in the novels. If the narrative moves to Edinburgh, as it does in *The Lewis Man*, its different ambiance is compared to that of the Isle of Lewis (355). The material ecology of Lewis affects the social ecology, which, in turn, affects the ethical positions of the characters in Peter May's Lewis trilogy. Against a sense of determinism that might be implicit in this analysis of the novels' context is the possibility of human agency, of the detective's potential for changing 'the world' as given, by bringing a changed state of 'justice', or at least of an empowering understanding of its complexity. Actually, in May's narratives, a sense of complexity is available from a sensitivity to the material ecology of the islands which plays a key part in the narrative structure - the unfolding of following the clues in the islands' material and social ecology. This is in contrast with the Shetland detective novels of Ann Cleeves (her Northumberland novel *The Crow Trap*, the subject of the next chapter, is a different matter.) Peter May's crime novels are richly and absorbingly driven by his interest in the material and cultural ecology of the Isle of Lewis. In Cleeves' novel *Raven Black* (2006), for example, the issue of overgrazing on Shetland is only mentioned sarcastically by a teenage daughter as a radio "party piece" (192) of her father, a conservationist whose work is not discussed beyond his monthly "beached bird survey" on which he once takes his daughter. (A daughter in May's *Coffin Road* has a father whose "hobby horse" is GMOs (104).) But at bottom their value is in the mysterious connection between place and values, sensitivity to the dynamics between people that are, in their turn, affected by their sensitivity to the dynamics of living on Lewis. This is not to say that the Isle of Lewis is a character in the novels, but that characters in the novels are 'shaped' by all that is Lewis. Battling against the elements, battling in poverty to earn a living between the land and the sea, battling, in May's characterisation, against a puritan culture, are all somehow at one with Fin Macleod's battle for truth and for justice in these social and elemental conditions. These are complex novels written in a simple, accessible style within a familiar genre, that, in a hard-nosed manner, convey a compassion and humanity that is also hard earned. Their achievement as explorations of archipelagic nature-culture is not to be underestimated.

It was a truism of early ecocriticism that what had formerly been regarded as the 'setting' of a novel was now the foreground of critical attention. In his early and influential book *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), the American ecocritic Lawrence Buell's chapter on 'Place' now reads like a historical turning point. Rejecting Eudora Welty's "subordination of place to the role of handmaiden" (255) in her famous essay 'Place in

Fiction' (1942), Buell argues that "we do not think about our surroundings, and our relation to them, as much as we ought to" (261). More recently cognitive ecocritic Alexa Weik von Mossner has drawn attention to the neglect of "aspects of the narrative strategies that writers use to create immersive environments for readers" (12). In Peter May's trilogy anyone living on Lewis cannot but be always aware of the subtle shift in the seasons, the present and oncoming weather, the conditions underfoot and on the roads, and the state of the tides. However, what Buell says of American nature writing may well remain true for the plot-driven crime novel, that their ecological "stature is not recognised [...] because we have not learned how to read them" (270). What D. H. Lawrence wrote in the first version of his essay 'The Spirit of Place' in 1918 remains true for May's novels: "All art partakes of the Spirit of Place in which it is produced" (16). In May's novels that spirit combines breath-taking beauty, in rainbows and beaches, with life-threatening storms and seas, and persistent rain and wind. Lawrence went further: "Every great locality expresses itself perfectly, in its own flowers, its own birds and beasts, lastly its own men, with their perfected works" (30). If the "guga" is this place's Gaelic name for young gannets, their annual hunt, which becomes the focus of *The Blackhouse*, might be regarded as the dangerous and skilful "perfected works" of the twelve men from Ness who not only hunt but process the food for their islander neighbours. Some conservationists, who are represented in the novel, would challenge this hunt as "perfected works". But the point is that this storm-bound island which certainly "expresses itself perfectly" has produced people who struggle, not only for the means of survival, but also for decency, neighbourly compassion, community solidarity and ethical behaviour. Indeed, the "imperfect work" of a murder that launches a crime novel demands the drive for the "perfected works" of justice and resolution.

May's own explicit example of the way a "great locality expresses itself perfectly" in the "perfected works of men" and women would be Gaelic psalm-singing, which Fin reflects upon in precisely this way:

A strange, unaccompanied tribal chanting which could seem chaotic to the untrained ear. But there was something wonderfully affecting about it. Something of the land and the landscape, of the struggle for existence against overwhelming odds. Something of the people amongst whom he had grown up. Good people, most of them, finding something unique in themselves, in the way they sang their praise to the Lord, an expression of gratitude for hard lives in which they had found meaning. (*Blackhouse* 85)

The "overwhelming odds" are, of course, the Lewis ecology, and Fin's celebration of the Gaelic psalm-singing of Lewis is undercut by its being an expression of the resilience of "hard lives". Throughout the novels May endorses not just the "struggle for existence", but the economic poverty of most lives engaged in this elemental struggle as crofters. There are pervasive casual references to this heritage in characterisations such as those of "pale, mean faces born of generations of island poverty" (*Blackhouse* 357). Nevertheless, communal improvised singing reflects, in this passage, a sense of lives, hard as they are, "in which they had found meaning". Despite Fin's hatred for the meanness and rivalry of the puritanical churches, of which there are "five different Protestant sects" on Lewis we are told, in this

passage he recognises that there is not a spiritual poverty in communal religious life and language on the island (*Lewis Man* 228).

Perhaps one aspect of Lawrence's notion of "locality" producing distinctive "works" might be Ralph Crane and Lisa Fletcher's assertion that "places produce stories". More than an issue of the personification of landscape for symbolic effect, this view of the island signals the agency of place. Not only can islands function as settings, they can operate on the "level of character, and influence plot" (Crane & Fletcher 6). There are two ways in which major features of the plot of *The Blackhouse* signal the agency of place. The first is that, for young people especially, the boundedness of an island and its insular culture can seem a limitation to be transcended by leaving. The obverse of this is the lingering, often unconscious, desire to return. For a novelist this is an example of what Pippa Marland calls "an archipelagic-ecological heuristic" (2020: 223). May's detective, Fin Macleod, was born and brought up in Ness, the northern tip of Lewis, by parents who spoke Gaelic and neglected to teach him any English by the time he went to school where he found it was the language of instruction. A little girl, Marsaili, offers to translate for him. Later, she becomes his teenage girlfriend and eventually shares a flat with him as a fellow student at Glasgow University. Fin treats her badly, by his own later admission, and she returns to Lewis whilst he also drops out and eventually becomes an Edinburgh policeman. In the idyllic summer before Fin leaves the island he has a conversation on a beach with his best friend, Artair, who is depressed about a bleak dead-end future on the island working as a welder at an oil rig construction yard: "I can smell it already. And then there's all the years of travelling that fucking road from Ness to Stornoway, and a hole in the ground at the end of it all" (162). Due to the nature of the land there is no direct road between Ness and Stornoway. Fin tries to cheer his friend by saying, "Hey, look around you. It doesn't come much better than this" (162). Here is a rare moment when May celebrates island ecology as aesthetics. Artair replies, "Yeh, that's why you're in such a fucking hurry to leave". So here, in its role as both trap and release, is the agency of the island at play, as it is in Fin's reception and adjustment on his return to investigate a murder that has strong similarities with one in Edinburgh which Fin has been investigating.

As Fin investigates the murder, his revisiting people and places is charged with a tension derived from his not having returned since he was a teenager. This is a recognisable archipelagic angst, but it lends May's crime novel a degree of tension particular to place which is a key to the plot. The murdered man was a bully who, as a fellow schoolboy, victimised both Artair and Fin. When Marsaili returned to Lewis from Glasgow she married Artair, but told him in a moment of bitterness that their son Fionnlagh, born soon after, was actually Fin's, although later she admits that she is not sure. Actually Artair has committed a murder in imitation of the Edinburgh murder in order to bring Fin back to the island. His intention is to have Fin watch his son thrown from a cliff during the annual guga hunt, partly in revenge for Fin's leaving in the first place. Thus the plot turns towards the second major feature of the *The Blackhouse* to signal the agency of place: the traditional killing of young gannets (the guga) for food. Men of Ness have been drawn to the island of An Sgeir (really Sulasgeir – gannet rock) for generations each August to cull two thousand young gannets for food on Lewis. In recent years they have been granted a licence to do so, with the approval of

the RSPB, despite protests from some conservationists. It is a privileged rite of passage for young men chosen to be part of the twelve men of Ness (nowadays actually ten men). In his authoritative book *The Guga Hunters* (2008), the Ness-born writer Donald S. Murray points out that harvesting birds for food has been common practice in subsistence communities around the world and documented in journeys to Sualsgeir “since at least the sixteenth century” (8). Robert Macfarlane agrees in his chapter following the hunters in *The Old Ways* (2012), although Pippa Marland has some nuanced reservations about Macfarlane’s commentary in her book *Ecocriticism and the Islands* (2023: 188-196). Half a mile long and two hundred yards at its widest, the ecology of this barren rock is marked by its two hundred feet high cliffs as nesting sites for a variety of seabirds. Apart from its lighthouse, the only structure on the island is the remains of a blackhouse that gives the book its title, walls on which an improvised roof of tarpaulin (turf or thatch roofs on stone walls mark a blackhouse on Lewis; modern roofs on concrete walls define a whitehouse) is made for the two weeks each year by the guga hunters. The current leader of the hunters in the novel, Gigs, explains that in this experience they are “reaching back through the centuries, joining hands with our ancestors” (201). Later, he admits that “It’s not the tradition. That might be part of it, aye. But I’ll tell you why I do it, boy. Because nobody else does it, anywhere in the world” (216).

The novel’s men of Ness are also a closed community within an insular island community. What happens on the rock, and what is said on the rock, stays on the rock (371). Fin’s idyllic last summer on Lewis was darkened only by his dread of joining the hunters together with Artair Macinnes and his teacher father who had been coaching both his son and Fin for their exams. In a drunken state Fin was rescued from a ditch by Gigs to whom he confessed that Mr Macinnes had been sexually abusing Artair and himself. On the rock Gigs confronts Macinnes and bans him from the blackhouse to survive in the sea caves below the cliffs. So Artair’s anger at Fin’s escaping the abuse by leaving Lewis is deepened by Fin’s confession having resulted in ten men knowing this appalling secret, with whom he is condemned to live whilst Fin is not. May’s continual reminder to the reader of Lewis’s island ecology through references to weather, tides, ferries, foghorns, peat-cutting, beaches and bogs reinforces the archipelagic experience on which a key plot motivation turns. But the final twist is contributed by one of the processes of crime investigation. On the last page of the novel, DNA evidence proves that Fionnlagh is actually Fin’s son. When Fin had left Edinburgh he had recently lost his eight year old son in a hit and run car accident. It is a mark of May’s compassion that he ends *The Blackhouse* by restoring an unknown son to his detective.

Culture Shaped by Nature in *The Lewis Man*

May’s compassion is perhaps most in evidence in the second novel of the trilogy, *The Lewis Man*, which takes as its central narrative structure the journeys of ‘homers’ who were ‘boarded out’ by childless Catholics in South Uist from orphanages on the mainland. Following on chronologically from the first novel, Fin returns to Edinburgh to realise that his marriage had only been sustained by the son he had lost and, resigning from the police force, he accepts his wife’s prediction that he will return to Lewis when she says, “You can never escape the island. It was there between us all those years, like an invisible shadow. It kept us

apart. Something we could never share” (17). Fin’s island identity does indeed draw him back to restore the abandoned croft house of his parents. When a body is discovered by turf-cutters and its DNA links the body to Marsaili’s father, Tormod Macdonald, Fin realises that he has a week to establish whether Tormod, as number one suspect, is really the killer, before a detective is sent over from the mainland. But Tormod is suffering from Alzheimer’s and the novel is partly narrated in his voice, recounting the death of one of a family of bullies at the orphanage, the Kellys, in a bridge-walking challenge at which Tormod’s younger brother Peter is held responsible by the bully’s remaining brothers. They have misread Peter’s reaching out to help as a push that killed their brother. Fin’s quest to find out more about Tormod leads him south through the archipelago to the island of Eriskay, where Tormod and Peter were taken in as child labour by Catholics on a croft. It emerges that the avenging Kelly brothers eventually found Peter there and killed him. A distraught elder brother stole the crofter’s van, loaded Peter’s body in a blanket and drove as far north as he could to bury the body in a peat bank outside Ness. There he adopted the name Tormod Macdonald (he had originally been John McBride), came to be married, and settled on a croft where Marsaili was born and raised. When Marsaili discovers all this she says, “I don’t know what to feel about him any more, Fin” (371). Fin makes a case for compassionate respect and interest in the elderly that reveals his deep and articulate humanity.

This humanity has been forged, readers are reminded from time to time, by an archipelagic upbringing in an ecology that is ever-present in the novels. In *The Lewis Man*, Fin is returning to Ness passing peat-cutters out in a rare “dry afternoon” that produces a rare lyrical moment when “sun slanting across the bog to the east spun gold in the dead grass” (169). But the shadow of the bleak church at Cross reminds him that he is nearly home.

Home? Was this really his home now, he wondered. This wind-ravaged corner of the earth where warring factions of an unforgiving Protestant religion dominated life. Where men and women struggled all their lives to make a living from the land, or the sea, turning in times of unemployment to the industries that came, and went again when subsidies ran out, leaving the rusting detritus of failure in their wake. (169-170).

However, an archipelagic upbringing amidst this struggle with the ecology of Lewis produces personal qualities that are derived from that ecology: “But if here wasn’t home, where was? Where else on God’s earth did he feel such an affinity with the land, the elements, the people?” (170). Culture, formed in part by nature, and a particular Lewis nature engaged by culture, produces ‘an affinity’ in Fin. This is an essential factor in May’s characterisation of his investigator whose complex, island-formed, nature-aware humanity holds the reader throughout the trilogy. What readers witness in Fin’s character is the subtle past and present play of affect, from ‘spun gold’ to ‘rusting detritus’ to the ‘dark shadow’ of an ‘unforgiving church’.

It would be easy to dismiss this discourse as merely contributing “atmosphere” to May’s crime novels. But in these novels physical, elemental atmosphere, produced by both natural and cultural ecologies, has an affect upon characters that might be understood through the ecological aesthetics of Gernot Böhme, as translated and explained by Kate Rigby in

Reclaiming Romanticism (2020). Böhme moves from suggesting that “spatial atmospheres feature whenever the moods or motivations of characters are shown to be inflected by their surroundings” (65), to a reciprocal experience of agency since “sensual perception means participating in the articulate presence of things” (63), to a social experience “with others, by whom, like it or not, our psycho-physical state of being is inflected” where atmosphere “can also acquire a moral force” (63). This, in turn, is experienced by the reader since such discourse “performs the work of ecological aesthetics not so much by representing the experience of atmosphere but by actually producing it [...] eliciting an actual affective response to the virtual space of feeling” (65). These might seem to be rather over-theorised claims for crime fiction, but May’s punchy prose of short direct sentences can easily be seen to be working in “the virtual space of feeling”, and not just in the case of Fin.

Early in *The Lewis Man* we hear Tormod’s voice, sitting in his care home:

The rain is hammering on the window. It’s making some din! When you were out on the moor you never heard it, of course. You heard nothing above the wind. But you felt it all right. Stinging your face when a force ten drove it at you. Horizontal sometimes. I loved that feeling. Out there in the wild, just me and that great big sky, and the rain burning my face.

But they keep me cooped up inside these days. Not to be trusted outdoors, bad Mary says. (59)

It is surely hard for the reader not to have some empathy from the production of elemental exhilaration and the ultimate feeling of entrapment here. Fin’s stoicism in the face of such weather is also part of his character as an investigator: “It was a filthy morning [...] He had grown up with this. It was normal” (387). Even in Edinburgh, where Fin and Marsaili go to find her father’s orphanage, the island normality is present in its absence: “It was almost dark by the time they stepped back out onto the street, earlier than it would have been up on the islands” (355). When Fin and Marsaili walk on a beach at Ness, where they had made love as teenagers, May makes a conventional use of atmosphere as metaphor that anticipates their kissing for the first time since Fin’s return: “The night was filled with the whispering sound of the sea. It sighed, as if relieved by the removal of its obligation to maintain an angry demeanour” (329). Less conventionally, May can be inventively playful in describing ecology. Tormod looks through the car window travelling south through Harris: “It hardly seems familiar at all. Not sure if it’s grass bursting through the rock, or the rock bursting through the grass” (380). May is occasionally more explicit in using nature as metaphor, as when Peter’s death is imagined by Fin above the very beach where he died: “Almost as if mirroring the moment, nature turned the sea the colour of blood as the sun sank on the horizon” (405).

The attention to nature that these examples reveal in May’s Lewis trilogy exemplifies a primary requirement in Böhme’s ecological aesthetics: “An aesthetic relation to nature consists in allowing oneself to be spoken to by it” (63). When Fin first went to Eriskay on his quest to discover the real identity of Marsaili’s father he remembered a detail from the

post-mortem report on Peter's body: "the pathologist had found fine silver sand in all the abrasions and contusions of the lower body. Not golden sand, as found on the beaches of Harris. But silver sand as found down here, on what Tormod had called Charlie's beach" (261). May has one of his clues be dependent upon Fin's being spoken to by differences in ecology because he has "allowed himself to be spoken to by it". It is no coincidence that Fin is able to form a sympathetic relationship with the confused Tormod, not only by listening to his partial recall, but also by taking him to a beach where they are both "spoken to" by its ecology. They walk together barefoot in the sea: "The wind blew Tormod's coat around his legs and filled Fin's jacket. It was strong in their faces, and soft, laced with spray, blown uninterrupted across three thousand miles of Atlantic ocean" (161). Tormod is invigorated and "happy, as in childhood, to delight in the simplest of pleasures" (162). Here a corporeal connection with nature temporarily eclipses culture: "The sound of the wind and the sea filled their ears, drowning out everything else. Pain, memory, sadness. Until finally Fin stopped and turned them around for the walk back" (162). They walk back into the narrative of crime fiction, but moments of humanity and ecological connection like this make Peter May's Lewis crime fiction specially moving and reconnective with a nature-culture depth.

Natural and Social Ecologies in *The Chessmen*

The third novel in the trilogy, *The Chessmen*, begins with an unusual ecological event and sustains more of an environmental sense than the previous two novels through the issue of poaching and land ownership. Fin and his old school friend, Whistler, awake after spending the night sheltering from a storm in a mountain 'beehive' stone shelter. They look down to where there had been a loch to find that it has disappeared. The heavy storm has broken a long spell of dry weather during which the peat had dried out to form a hard, deep layer lying on the Lewisian gneiss. Whistler helpfully explains that the rain has run down the cracks in the peat to form a layer of sludge beneath it. The pressure of the water in the loch has forced the peat retaining the loch to slide over the sludge in what is known as a "bog burst" (5). So the loch has drained down to a lower level, revealing an undamaged aircraft in which a body has been hidden under water for seventeen years, strapped into the pilot's seat. Thus is initiated the crime to be solved, for a head injury suggests that this man could not have piloted the plane and was probably dead before the plane landed on the water and sank. The ID on the body identifies Roddy Mackenzie who led a band for which Whistler played the flute and Fin was roadie in their teenage years.

Fin has taken a job as head of security on an estate where poachers are threatening the viability of its rod fishery, which is its main source of income from salmon and sea trout, plus brown trout in hundreds of lochs. As a former detective and local man he believes that he can solve this problem within two months. The estate owner knows that Whistler poaches the odd fish and is not part of the organised local gang who are netting, smoking and selling large numbers of salmon with supply lines into Europe, but asks that Fin makes an example of Whistler by stopping his poaching. The five water systems on the estate provide fishing rights shared with five other estates. Fin is told that "if they put us out of business, a lot of local people are going to lose their jobs" (54). Whistler earns a living by carving and selling large replicas of the famous Lewis chessmen carved by Vikings from walrus bone, found not far

below his croft, in the dunes at Uig by a cattle herder in 1831. Whistler does not recognise Highland estate ownership of wild moors, rivers, lochs and mountains, and the creatures that live in them: “A man’s entitled to take from the land that the Lord gave us. And he gave it to us all, Fin. You cannae take it with you when you die, so how can anyone think they own it while they’re living?” (29). This is an argument with which May himself appears to have some sympathy. Evoking the still-remaining memories of cruel clearances on Lewis in the mid-nineteenth century (see Craig 297-303), the narrator says, “a landowner continued to be seen in a strange reluctant way as being superior. A regard landowners also had of themselves” (53). Fin eventually quits his job because of this attitude in the estate owner.

But as teenagers Fin and Whistler discover that they are linked by one of the greatest tragedies not only in the history of Lewis, but of British maritime history. At 2am on the first of January 1919 the HMY *Iolaire* hit rocks yards from Stornoway harbour entrance whilst returning Royal Naval Reservists to the Outer Hebrides. Over two hundred island men who had survived the First World War drowned in the dark and stormy conditions. John Finlay Macleod managed to swim ashore with a line by which Whistler’s great-grandfather saved the life of Fin’s grandfather. May has an explicit repeat of this rescue between the two boys when Fin steps back off a wooden bridge into a torrent when they are fishing for brown trout and Whistler manages to throw him a line to save his life. In a typically subversive May touch, Whistler steals the Land Rover of the water-bailiff parked nearby to drive them home before returning it to the bailiff’s house. “No one ever did find out who took it, or why” (189).

The role of Lewis’s ecology in *The Chessmen* is wide-ranging in technique and significance. From casual references (“He had not heard Gunn approach over the noise of the wind” (190)), to the historic tragic storm of the *Iolaire* disaster, to the famous riparian economy (Ted Hughes made two fishing trips to Lewis, staying at the expensive fishing lodge at Grimersta), to pure aesthetics (“The tide was in, emerald water a foot deep over acres of golden sand, splinters of distant sunlight stabbing through breaks in the cloud, firing light in fast-moving flashes across the far machair” (193-4)), May integrates nature and culture with a delight that goes beyond the vehicle of a crime novel. Indeed, at times the narrative drive slackens for moments, and even chapters, of sheer archipelagic celebration. As though aware of this, May takes the final denouement of his narrative to a villa above the Mediterranean near Malaga in Spain where Roddy reveals why he did not die in the plane discovered in the drained loch. Over a paella - with prawns, Roddy jokes, “probably shipped from Stornoway” (316) - he explains to Fin that, having learned to fly in later life after losing touch with Fin, Roddy had been pressured by his girlfriend’s family into making drug runs to land on Solas beach in North Uist. Wanting to escape from this lifestyle he got into a fight on the beach with his girlfriend’s brother who was killed. Roddy then flew away with the body to ditch the plane on a remote loch in Lewis. He dragged the body into the pilot’s seat with his ID planted on it and then disappeared to Spain, with the loyal help, it turns out, of Whistler. In May’s Lewis novels, loyalty to school friends who have been boarding together during the week at the Nicholson Institute or Lews College in Stornoway from disparate parts of the island, features more than family feuds. Writing about the cultural affect of the *Iolaire* tragedy, John

Macdonald says that it “put a new iron into the Lewis soul; inspire[d] young men to press for change, resist manipulation and dead traditionalism” (230). In the late decades of the twentieth century the survivors found an interest in their voices being heard on Lewis, expressing what Macdonald calls “a tenderness of fellowship” (230). But in Fin’s case “fellowship” does not override his commitment to fairness and justice, his fiercely secular morality which has developed in the Lewis context of a predominant religious morality.

Ecological Anxieties in *Coffin Road*

A few years after completing the trilogy of novels centred upon Fin Macleod, May turned to the Isle of Harris in what has been characterised by one reviewer as an “eco-thriller [...] making the atmospheric most of his isolated locations” (O’Connell). *Coffin Road* carries an intriguing epigraph from Jeff Ruch, Executive Director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility: “Scientists ... submitting works on neonicotinoids or the long-term effects of GMO crops, trigger corporate complaints ... and find that their careers are in jeopardy” (np). Neal Maclean has been secretly conducting research on neonicotinoids with eighteen beehives hidden on the “Coffin Road”. But in the dramatic opening of the novel he has been washed up on the beach in front of his cottage in Luskentyre with memory loss. As he pieces together the evidence he that he finds about himself he realises that he appears to have been writing a book about the disappearance of the lighthouse keepers on the Flannan Isles. When he borrows a boat to visit the Isles he discovers a body in the old church there with an instinctive fear that he might be the murderer. In what he knows to be his house, he finds a map with a line marked on it which he is told is the old coffin road. When he walks up it he is drawn aside to find hidden bee hives and finds that he knows a lot about bees. On his hands are bee stings, as there were on the hands of the body he found. It is eventually revealed that Neal is actually Professor Tom Fleming whose research in Edinburgh was funded by “a Swiss agrochemical company” (140) hoping to be vindicated in the matter of the damaging effect of neonicotinoids on bees. In fact his research found the opposite, so Fleming has gone rogue to conduct conclusive research with two other scientists at three secret sites. All data is sent to Fleming. When published it will, as one of the scientists says, “blow the agrochem industry out of the water” (303). The Swiss company is seeking this data, which Fleming hides in the Flannan Isles’ famous lighthouse, and will commit murder in order to capture the data on the hidden hard drive.

The book acknowledges the research of Dr Christopher N. Connolly at Dundee University’s Centre for Environmental Change and Human Resilience, “on whose research the science of my book is based” (391). But this science has been challenged by Dr Rebecca Nesbit in an online magazine that considers representations of science in literature (the ‘Lab Lit’ genre) called LabLit.com: “The scientific reality is also far more complex than the one May portrays, and the neonicotinoid debate is surrounded by uncertainty”. Whilst admitting that “neonicotinoids are almost certainly a factor in the decline of wild bees”, Nesbit wants a recognition of other contributory factors. She also objects that scientists have not, so far, been killed by corporate interests. By her own admission, however, her final conclusion is not justified: “This book seems intent on fuelling the powerful environmental lobby by using “evidence” which is, unsurprisingly in a novel, a work of fiction”. The suspicion here of “the

powerful environmental lobby” is a giveaway of her sympathy for the corporate production of a chemical which she has to admit contributes to the decline of pollinators in a global environmental crisis. May’s ecologically based plot may be a work of fiction, but in *Coffin Road* the environmental concern that he highlights is certainly not.

Against such ecological anxiety, matched in May’s narrative strategy by the identity anxiety of the central character, is the aesthetic of landscape and the repeated toponymic trigger in the text of the famously beautiful location of Luskentyre. The Stornoway policeman, George Gunn from the Lewis novels, arrives wondering “if there could be any more beautiful spot on earth” (156), although he knows that generations of local kids have taken it for granted (167). It is significant that this idealisation comes from a character who is not a native of Harris. With the exception of DS Gunn, all the main characters of *Coffin Road* are not natives of the islands. For this reason, although the novel’s plot hinges on an environmental issue, there is less sense of Marland’s “archipelagic-ecological heuristic” in this novel. May has chosen an international environmental issue for this novel rather than one specifically located in the islands’ ecology, such as the proposal for a Harris superquarry at Lingeabhagh, the decline of the Atlantic salmon, or the overfishing of the islands’ coastal waters. Only in his photographic book, *The Hebrides*, does May comment on current proposals for huge windfarms on Lewis: “If planners have their way, this landscape will shortly be marred by forests of wind turbines” (108). However, it is not the first priority of the crime novelist to be responsible for addressing these environmental issues. One might argue that May’s achievement is both a greater and more subtle one that renders his Lewis and Harris novels of importance beyond the confines of genre. But in doing so May also demonstrates that crime fiction can be a vehicle for insights into the role of affect in our understanding of the intertwining of natural and cultural ecologies in archipelagic literature.

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