

ONE FOOT IN EDEN

Edwin Muir and Religion outside Paradise

Stephen Platten

'.... his unblinded eyes
Saw far and near
the fields of Paradise'.
So run the words,
Muir's own, his epitaph,
Upon the stone.¹

JOHN BYROM'S VERSE picks up not only the words on the grave of Edwin Muir at Swaffham Prior in Cambridgeshire, where Byrom was the priest at the time of Muir's death, but also an echo of Muir's most anthologized poem, 'One Foot in Eden'.² It is ironic that this epitaph Muir wrote for himself helps us to understand so much of his own personal and religious pilgrimage, for 'One Foot in Eden' is mostly set well outside paradise. Even so, both the epitaph itself and Byrom's later tribute hint at the sense of journey and of place which was never far from Muir's work, both in poetry and prose.

Not only Muir's writing, but also his own life and pilgrimage speak powerfully of the human condition and of the sometimes ambiguous and conflicted part that religion plays in it. As with any number of poets who embrace Christianity, there is a very significant element of struggle with the forces of both dark and light. This lies at the heart of 'One Foot in Eden' and, alongside the quality of the poetry itself, is doubtless one of the reasons why this relatively brief piece of verse remains popular: it captures a paradoxical element within human experience.

Within this particular piece, and within Muir's writings as a whole, the formative nature of the Orcadian landscape into which he was born, the arid religion in which he was nurtured and the general toughness

¹ J. K. Byrom, 'Thoughts on Tending the Grave of Edwin Muir', *Theology*, 83/692 (March 1980), 130. I am indebted to The Ven. Peter Townley for this reference.

² See Edwin Muir, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 227.



Cubbie Roo's Castle, Wyre

of his early life come through. These shaped not only his writing but also the late flowering of religious sensitivity he experienced. His marriage to Willa Anderson, too, helped to form both his literary output and his religious development, even though Willa herself would never thoroughly embrace the same sense of belief.

The Islands

This, then, provides the framework within which these reflections on Muir, his writings and his faith are set. The first element in this framework is encapsulated in words from his poem *Childhood*:

Long time he lay upon the sunny hill,
 To his father's house below securely bound.
 Far off the silent, changing sound was still,
 With the black islands lying thick around.³

Here Muir is recalling the uniqueness of his place of birth. The Shetlands, the Hebrides and Orkney are neither Highland nor Lowland Scotland. In Orkney the kilt is never worn and Gaelic is not spoken. It was

³ E. Muir, 'Childhood', in *Collected Poems*, 19.

colonised by the Vikings, and elements of Norse culture still peep through and break the surface. The island names, for example, come from Old Norse, one of the roots of the English language. Here it was, on the northern island of Wyre at his father's farm The Bu, that Edwin Muir spent his early childhood. The islands helped form his character.

Jo Grimond, a former leader of the British Liberal Party and MP for Orkney and Shetland, wrote of him:

Edwin Muir was a quiet man. The Orkney of his childhood was a quiet place. In all Orkney, the island of Wyre where he grew up was, and is, one of the quietest places. It lies under the bigger island of Rousay, like a log in the sea, all of it cultivated by the six or seven farms strung out along its couple of miles or so of length, except for Cubbie Roo's Castle, a green mound covered in wild grasses, where Muir played as a child.⁴

Willa also wrote a piece introducing the young Muir in one of his books:

Edwin Muir lived on a small island containing one tree (known as The Tree) until he was fourteen, avoiding school, ostensibly herding his fathers' cows (i.e. dreaming in the pasture while they ravaged the corn and turnips), and being spoiled by his mother because he was the youngest. At the age of fourteen he went to Glasgow: saw trains, elevators and streetcars for the first time in his life, learned to use a knife and fork and to wash daily. Attended church and was twice 'saved' before he struck Pascal and Nietzsche. Acquired a minute knowledge of the seamy side of Glasgow life, and a remarkable vocabulary. Developed a natural gift for 'contradictioness'.⁵

In his own autobiographical reflections, Muir did note some paradisaical elements in his childhood home:

The Orkney I was born into was a place where there was no great distinction between the ordinary and the fabulous; the lives of living men turned to legend Fairies, or 'fairicks', as they were called, were encountered dancing on the sand on moonlight nights ... all these things have vanished from Orkney in the last fifty years under the pressure of compulsory education.⁶

⁴ Jo Grimond, 'Introduction', in Edwin Muir, *An Autobiography* (London: Hogarth, 1987), 1.

⁵ Quoted in George Burns and Paul Henderson Scott, *A Scottish Postbag: Eight Centuries of Scottish Letters* (London: Chambers, 1986), 231. Originally appearing in *The Bookman* in 1924.

⁶ E. Muir, *Autobiography*, 14.



Edwin Muir

These elements of folklore and fairytale, and reflections about spirits, fuelled Muir's rich world of fantasy and dreams, to which he returned on so many occasions throughout his life. He does also mention his baptism:

My first definite memory is of being baptized. Why I was not baptized in Deerness, where there were two churches, I have never been able to find out; but the ceremony was postponed for some reason until I was three years old.⁷

Despite the idyllic aspects of Wyre and the Orkneys, tragedy came early and dogged much of Muir's childhood and youth. Economic collapse drove Muir's father first to the largest Orkney Island, Mainland, and then to Glasgow. There, over a period of just a few years, several of Edwin's siblings would die of consumption. He himself was driven to find employment in a Fairport boneyard. Artistically sensitive, he was quiet and humble but never acquiescent or compliant. So Willa writes:

Gives a general impression of quietness, gentle kindness, and a little reserve. Black hair, blue eyes, very slim, small hands and feet, looks

⁷ E. Muir, *Autobiography*, 18.

ridiculously young and won't say how old he is. Has an enormous forehead, like a sperm whale's; a fastidious, fleering and critical nose; an impish and sensuous mouth, a detached, aloof, cold eye. Witty when at his ease: elegant when he can afford it: sensitive and considerate: horribly shy and silent before strangers, and positively scared by social functions. Among friends, however, becomes completely daft, and dances Scottish reels with fervour.⁸

Christianity had helped to form Muir, but in his later teenage years he would deeply regret what he saw as the brutality of Orcadian Calvinism. Although his Orkney childhood would colour much of his writing, rarely did it surface visually. Perhaps the most famous exception to this was his reflection on religion included in his collection *One Foot in Eden* published in 1956. Titled 'The Incarnate One', it also suggests how he reacted to his early religious environment:

The windless northern surge, the sea-gull's scream,
And Calvin's Kirk crowning the barren brae

...

How could our race betray
The Image, and the Incarnate One unmake
Who chose this form and fashion for our sake.⁹

This was a later poem and there are therefore very clear echoes of his later experience in the wider culture of Europe—so Orkney is juxtaposed with Giotto's Tuscany. The second stanza of that poem is sharper still. It contrasts strongly with the religion he would 'rediscover' later in his life:

And God three angry letters in a book,
And there the logical hook
On the which the Mystery is impaled and bent
Into an ideological instrument.¹⁰

Glasgow

The uniquely poetic narrative of Muir's autobiography takes up the theme of religion and pilgrimage as he recounts the sadness of his time in Glasgow and the death of his brother Willie:

⁸ Burns and Scott, *Scottish Postbag*, 232.

⁹ E. Muir, 'The Incarnate One', in *Collected Poems*, 228.

¹⁰ E. Muir, 'The Incarnate One', in *Collected Poems*, 228.

The first few years after I came to Glasgow were so stupidly wretched, such a meaningless waste of inherited virtue, that I cannot write of them even now without grief and anger. My father and mother felt lost because they were too old, and I because I was too young. My brothers and sisters, having reached the age where adaptation becomes conscious and deliberate, stood the change better; but Willie, without our knowing it, had already succumbed.

....

After Willie went to bed his weakness increased rapidly; a few days before he died he told my mother that he was reconciled with God. He told her at the same time that a few years before he had prayed night after night for many months for an assurance that he was accepted by Christ, but that no comfort, nothing but silence, had answered him. He had told nobody his solitary struggle; at last he had given it up and later he had grown indifferent. Now the assurance he had prayed for came spontaneously, when he did not expect it.¹¹

Here the background of Christian faith imparted to the whole family by their Orcadian Calvinistic heritage still shines through. Muir writes with equal pathos and sensitivity in describing the deaths of his other two brothers.

***His emotional,
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He moved on at this time from one dreary job to another. He began work as an office boy in a law firm, and reflected that his first years in Glasgow were wretched with a continuing feeling of degradation. He moved on to a job with an engineering company, then a publishing firm. Here he notes that he made friends for the first time. Thereafter he took a post as junior clerk in the office of a beer bottling factory at 14s. a week. All the while his emotional, spiritual and political consciousness was in ferment. His experiences challenged him to review his own self-understanding and, when he was 21, he underwent a conversion to socialism which he saw as a recapitulation of his first religious conversion at the age of fourteen.

It was his time in Fairport that perhaps reads more depressingly than any other. There he took up a job in a factory processing bones. He writes:

The bones were yellow and greasy with little rags of decomposed flesh clinging to them. Raw, they had a strong, sour, penetrating smell. But it was nothing to the stench they gave off when they were shovelled

¹¹ E. Muir, *Autobiography*, 93–95.

along with the maggots into the furnaces. It was a gentle, clinging, sweet stench, suggesting dissolution and hospitals and slaughterhouses, the odour of drains and the rancid stink of bad, roasting meat.¹²

Like his siblings who died Muir was also very sick at this time. His poem 'The Child Dying' gives a feeling of the brutality and tragedy of his experience:

A flitting grace, a phantom face,
But the world is out.

...

Father, father, I dread this air
Blown from the far side of despair,
The cold cold corner. What house, what hold,
What hand is there? I look and see
Nothing-filled eternity.¹³

Marriage and Travel

Much of what we now know of Muir comes either from his autobiography or from the moving reflection by his widow simply titled *Belonging: A Memoir*.¹⁴ Marriage to Willa brought a new and broader style into his life. Muir, never having been part of the world of universities and higher education himself, encountered this world through her. Before meeting her, he had already written his first book, *We Moderns*. It had something of the self-conscious, over-stylised and over-clever feeling of a first book. Certainly it had put Willa off. But the man whom she met turned out to be someone very different from the one she found in the book. She was surprised at how much she liked him. She realised how much more fortunate her own childhood had been than his.

She had been brought up in Montrose and then gone to private school, to board school, from board school to academy and finally, with a bursary, to the University of St Andrews. By Edwin's standards, Willa's youth had been sophisticated. By the time they met both were agnostics, and they were not married in church, nor indeed in her home town, but in St Pancras' Register Office in London. She notes: 'I filled up the

¹² E. Muir, *Autobiography*, 130–131.

¹³ E. Muir, 'The Child Dying', in *Collected Poems*, 178.

¹⁴ Willa Muir, *Belonging: A Memoir* (London: Hogarth, 1968).

needful forms, booked a couple of good seats at Diaghileff's *La Boutique Fantastique* and was ready for the wedding'.¹⁵

Thereafter Willa and Edwin lived a peripatetic life, moving backwards and forwards across Europe with no money to their name. Willa describes their remarkable travels, another aspect of life 'outside Paradise' which was part of Edwin's broader spiritual and personal journey, in her book:

Went to Prague because it was in the middle of Europe, and he knew nothing about it. Perhaps also because he could speak neither German nor Czech. After eight months of Prague, went to Germany, and succumbed to its influence completely. Stayed there for a year, began to write poetry, take sun-baths and wear sandals. Tried Italy next, and learned to swim; but driven by a longing for the North (disguised mother complex) returned to Salzburg and to Vienna. Can't live in a city in spring-time; and so is at present marooned on a mountain in Lower Austria. Future movements completely uncertain.¹⁶

This amusing and sometimes moving sketch of Muir's life often skips over his inward insecurity and uncertainty, and their impact on his personal relationships (though Willa explores these things more deeply elsewhere in her memoir).

Nevertheless the relationship between them was one of very great fecundity—even though Edwin was extraordinarily sensitive and thus would go into great periods of reserve, their marriage was very rich. Edwin wrote a number of love poems throughout his life to Willa. One of the early ones was titled 'The Confirmation':

The hearth, the steadfast land, the wandering sea,
Not beautiful or rare in every part,
But like yourself, as they were meant to be.¹⁷

Their wanderings throughout Europe were fascinating and demanding. At Hellerau, Edwin had a bad dream (he was a great dreamer and explorer of the subconscious—Willa too had been much influenced by Jung). Sometimes these dreams would cause great disruptions to Edwin's life. At one point in her memoir of life with Edwin, Willa talks of the relation of 'Edwin's fable to this story' (*Story and Fable* was the original title of his autobiography before he expanded it). Willa reflects upon the poems

¹⁵ W. Muir, *Belonging*, 27.

¹⁶ Burns and Henderson, *Scottish Postbag*, 231 and also W. Muir, *Belonging*, 107.

¹⁷ E. Muir, 'The Confirmation', in *Collected Poems*, 118.

he wrote in Salzburg and Vienna, and how they captured something of the feelings that he had but how also they contrasted with the actual story of their lives. Engaging and fun as they found this time, some of the poetry is fairly melancholy. So in 'October at Hellbrunn' he concludes:

The silent afternoon draws in, and dark
The trees rise now, grown heavier is the ground,
And breaking through the silence of the park
Farther a hidden fountain flings its sound.¹⁸

There were turmoils, not least when they were in Italy; the ups and downs were both emotional and partly the result of a lack of wherewithal to keep their life going. Overall, however, this was a productive period of reviewing, writing prose and also early poems.

In 1946 Edwin became director of the British Institute in Prague, working with the British Council. It was during this period that he and Willa made an enormous number of friends and finally entered the world of high culture. Edwin reviewed regularly and Willa translated a number of Kafka's works from German. Indeed, it is thanks to the two of them that the western world discovered the extraordinary talent of Franz Kafka. Eventually they came back to the United Kingdom in 1950, where Edwin became the director of Newbattle Abbey College



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Newbattle Abbey College

¹⁸ E. Muir, 'October at Hellbrunn', in *Collected Poems*, 23.

in Scotland, which had been set up as an adult education centre. Professor John Macmurray, a Quaker philosopher and theologian, was the energy behind this and wanted Edwin to be involved.

Return

Despite all his journeyings, Muir had not left behind his bittersweet memories. Often they were captured in poetic reflections on friends such as the poem written for Ann Scott-Moncrieff, who died at the age of just 29:

Dear Ann, wherever you are
Since you lately learnt to die,
You are this unsetting star
That shines unchanged in my eye¹⁹

The elements of wistfulness in this poem capture Muir's remarkable shift from a childhood faith to a fairly critical agnosticism, moving on again from that agnosticism back to a mature and more culturally embedded faith.

We saw hints of this in the quotations earlier from 'The Incarnate One', where he talks of 'the Mystery'. Another approach to faith is implicit in this poetic reflection. The conjunction of a number of different things brought Muir back to faith. These included both his and Willa's response to the brutality and soullessness of Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy (not to mention the tragic events of the Spanish Civil War). This combined with an ever-increasing rootedness in Western European culture, which he saw had been formed by the Christian tradition. This manifests itself fairly directly in his two poems on the annunciation. So he writes:

Now in this iron reign
I sing the liberty
Where each asks from each
What each most wants to give
And each awakes in each
What else would never be²⁰

One needs to hold in the back of one's mind images of Fra Angelico's remarkable paintings of the annunciation, in San Marco in Florence,

¹⁹ E. Muir, 'For Ann Scott-Moncrieff (1914–1943)', in *Collected Poems*, 156–157.

²⁰ E. Muir, 'The Annunciation', in *Collected Poems*, 117.



*The Annunciation, by Fra Angelico, San Marco,
Florence*

and in the gallery in Cortona in southern Tuscany. In the autobiography Muir recounts seeing a little plaque on the wall of the Via degli Artisti, in Rome, depicting the annunciation:

I remember stopping for a long time one day to look at a little plaque on the wall of a house in the Via degli Artisti, representing the Annunciation. An angel and a young girl, their bodies inclined towards each other, their knees bent as if they were overcome by love, 'tutto tremante', gazed upon each other like Dante's pair; and that representation for a human love so intense that it could not reach farther seemed the perfect early symbol of the love that passes understanding. A religion that dared to show forth such a mystery for everyone to see will have shocked the congregations of the north, would have seemed a sort of blasphemy, even an indecency. But here it was publicly shown, as Christ showed himself on the earth.²¹

Within his first annunciation poem there is a very clear sense of a personal God and also of the crucial significance of relationship, in a

²¹ E. Muir, *Autobiography*, 278.

religion rooted both in the head and the heart. His later annunciation poem begins:

The angel and the girl are met.
Earth was the only meeting place.
For the embodied never yet
Travelled beyond the shore of space.
The eternal spirits in freedom go.²²

This, then, is a religion which is part of the broad historical stream of European Christian humanism. In this tradition, the Word, the Incarnate Lord, breathes his images into our own humanity. So, once again, in Muir's poem 'The Heart Could Never Speak':

The heart could never speak
But that the Word was spoken
....
Time, teach us the art
That breaks and heals the heart.²³

Towards the end of his life, Edwin and Willa travelled to the United States to spend just under a year in Boston, at Harvard and elsewhere in that part of New England. Here they met up with the Anglophile poet Robert Frost. Frost had been a confederate of Edward Thomas and the Dymock poets in Gloucestershire in England. Willa reflects warmly on their encounters and notes at one point:

Rosy and twinkling he sat at our tea-table, telling incidents from his life and assuring us that once a man is over eighty he is practically indestructible. All his nervous ailments had left him, he said. His mother had been an Orkney-woman, he insisted, and he would tease Edwin gently by repeating: 'We Orkney-men'.²⁴

This reference from Frost touched Muir, and early on in her memoir Willa notes how much his Orkney childhood remained with him. During their time in Harvard, Edwin and Willa watched from their sitting room a new church being built outside. She notes:

²² E. Muir, 'The Annunciation', in *Collected Poems*, 223.

²³ E. Muir, 'The Heart Could Never Speak', in *Collected Poems*, 296.

²⁴ W. Muir, *Belonging*, 290.

Day by day it grew, until one day the skeleton of its spire was set up, delicately pencilled against the autumn sky with a small gilt cross on top. Edwin was moved to write about it.²⁵

Rather in the way that St Francis is said to have understood the call of his Lord to ‘rebuild his church’—that is, as a call both physically to rebuild a church on the edge of Assisi, and metaphorically to rebuild the whole of God’s Church—so Muir responds to this experience in a poem which he simply calls ‘The Church’.²⁶

The poem traces the fortunes of the Church of God, from the wanderings of Jesus in Galilee through medieval times, and so towards the end, in a Dantesque fashion, he reflects:

I look at the church again, and yet again
And think of those who house together in Hell.
Cooped by ingenious theological men
Expert to track the sour and musty smell
Of sins they know too well;
Until grown proud, they crib in rusty bars
The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.²⁷

It turns out that this particular church being built was a Mormon one. That was immaterial. The final stanza runs:

Yet fortune to the new church ...
Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, may it wait
Here for its true estate.
All’s still to do; roof, window and wall are bare.
I look, and do not doubt that He is there.²⁸

Muir’s own self-perception offers a unique reflection upon spiritual pilgrimage, and Willa’s memoir clothes it with a sensitive reality. Edwin’s autobiography complements his poetry. His writing never fell into the ever-present trap of self-importance. Instead the pressures of his sometimes brutal childhood, and the opening up of a new world through his marriage to Willa and his travels across Europe, produced a generosity and

²⁵ W. Muir, *Belonging*, 298.

²⁶ E. Muir, ‘The Church’, in *Collected Poems*, 262.

²⁷ E. Muir, ‘The Church’, in *Collected Poems*, 263–264.

²⁸ E. Muir, ‘The Church’, in *Collected Poems*, 264.

liberality which never forget the element of the tragic. The autobiography reads almost like prose written in poetry. By the end of his life Muir had been reconverted to a more mystical religion rooted in the great images which underpin the Christian faith and which have been together perhaps the greatest inspiration to Western art.

**A profound
human–
divine
meeting**

The transformation of Muir's life is perhaps most perfectly expressed in the poem with which we began, 'One Foot in Eden'. Muir takes the tragedy and the brutality of human existence and places them alongside the possibility of transcendent love breaking through. He offers no saccharine sweetness nor unrealistic, easy grace, but the vision nonetheless provides a great contrast with the Orcadian Calvinism from which he began. Ultimately even those things that seem darkest and most abject can contribute to a profound human–divine meeting. He writes of a landscape sown with 'crops of love and hate', and the poem goes on to expand these images, concluding:

But famished field and blackened tree
Bear flowers in Eden never known.
....
What had Eden ever to say
Of hope and faith and pity and love ... ?
...
Strange blessings never in Paradise
Fall from these beclouded skies.²⁹

Muir lived significant periods of his life well outside Paradise. Sometimes the cause was illness, sometimes the terrifying international politics of inter-war Europe, sometimes it was self-doubt and sometimes religion itself. He saw, however that only a breadth of experience that included the landscape 'outside Eden' could provide a theological and spiritual depth capable of capturing the grace and gift that his early experience of Calvinism appeared to deny. It was not a purely personal religion without input from the wider world. The horrors of Hitler's tyranny and genocidal vision, and the dark portents of nuclear annihilation that followed, also found their place in his poetry. His dramatic poem 'The Horses' touches this note most sharply:

²⁹ E. Muir, 'One Foot in Eden', in *Collected Poems*, 227.

Barely a twelvemonth after
The seven days war that put the world to sleep,
Late in the evening the strange horses came.

....

On the second day
The radios failed; we turned the knobs; no answer.

....

And still they stand in corners of our kitchens,
And stand, perhaps turned on, in a million rooms
All over the world³⁰

For all this, however, Muir reflected we remain with *one foot still in Eden*.

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³⁰ E. Muir, 'The Horses', in *Collected Poems*, 246.