

NATURAL MECHANICAL

*being a rendering
of the true life stories of
Iain Seoras Rockcliffe*

J. O. Morgan

These stories are to
Lisa & Seoras

First printed in 2008 by Reefort
This edition published in 2009
by CB editions
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL
www.cbEditions.com
Reprinted 2010

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Printed in England by Primary Colours, London W3 8DH

ISBN 978-0-9557285-9-4

Apologia

That the episodes presented here, though they do not appear in their exact chronology, are placed in a specific order and should be read, in the first instance, in that order.

That though the language of the Inner Hebrides at the time in which these events take place was primarily Gaelic, the language given here is primarily English; neither has the vernacular been used in the representation of speech.

That though the narrative is poetic in form and structure, the work as a whole is presented primarily as a biographical sketch, with the manner of its presentation secondary to that aspect.

That though the events described are all perfectly true and unembellished, the work as a whole has been approached by the author as a work of fiction.

Thanks

to Iain – that is: Rocky
whose life, at least in part, this work will show.

See this boy – this Rocky.

At three years: the back door opened.
Out he goes. Prompted. Prodded. Pushed.
Squat body. Crew-cut. Short trousers. Green vest.
Little fists clenched into little pink rocks.

He'll be a hardy wee bugger this one.

His father. Nailing the child's bedroom window open.
Four inch gap. Forever. No curtain.

The third of three children; the Benjamin.
Following the second sister by five years.
No more to come after.

*He's been up and running
for half his whole life.*

His mother. Allowing the wind to slam shut the door.

*Let him play out where my legs
are least likely to find him.*

And if he doesn't come back when called
 The father again:
then it'll be the webbing belt.
 his Victorian ideals coming fifty years too late.

And this boy – this Rocky – takes to it, quick.
 An t-Eilean Sgitheanach. The Wingéd Isle. Isle of Skye. His.

And when they later call his name
 over wind, over heath, over burn, over bog

he doesn't hear, and he doesn't come.

At home it's the Gaelic that rolls from his tongue.
 Although he need not speak it very much.

The language of streams, of rock, of wood –
 of nettles, as taught by their stings:
 that handled right can make a three-fold cord
 yet firm enough to catch a full-grown hare
 and hold it fast – is much more to his liking.

The tongue of the classroom is English.

*Read the words as you've been taught,
 or weren't you even listening.*

As in a dream the letters stay as letters.
 They are glue. Have no perspective depth.
 Their shapes mean nothing other than their shapes.
 Have no relevance to sound, to throat. Un-word-like.

*We know that you're not stupid.
 A stupid child can't hook a fish by hand.
 Your sisters aren't stupid.*

Suspicious are he might not be all there. Close.
 Frustrated taunting blinds them to the link.

So when he shakes his head and does not speak
 the teacher makes him wear a tall white hat
 then stands him by the back wall of her class
 – a remedy that's always worked before.

Beneath the narrow cone the boy
 thinks hard on what he has or has not done.

His own solution: NOT TO GO TO SCHOOL.

His teaching to be gathered from the earth.
 From scrub and thicket: *profit*, never dearth.

'I used to say he'd end up
 living in a dunce's house.
 Shock tactics. And of course they worked.
 Just look at what my boy's achieved.

Look where he's been.
 Look at his hands.
 Wash off the oil, dear,
 before you come in.'

A roundtrip ticket for the longnose bus: 1s. 6d.

The driver knows him well enough,
 charges nothing extra for his dog;
 allows the boy to help deliver post.

Back seat. Corner seat. His seat.
Dog Kim lying quiet at his feet.

And as they walk the path up to the school,
him in his secondhand McKinnon kilt,
Kim, in brown, trots noiselessly behind.

And as they reach the gate they split.
No word. No sign. The dog just goes;
out of sight around the building's walls.

Marked present on the register, the boy
at the first opportunity slips out the back.

There: his dog.
Single pat.
They go.

Later on the bus,
in quite a different region of the isle:

*Shouldn't you be at school, Rocky.
Aye, my mother kens well where I am.*

No more is said.

His grandma has a gramophone.
A rare thing. A beautiful thing.
Cased in solid oak. High polish.
Its wood from a 600-year-old tree;
gives a finer gold-flecked grain;
condenses the tone.

Beneath the brown-topped turntable
– rubber-matted, free of dust –
its internal trumpet. Extending downward.
At most times unseen within the square body.

Volume control is by way of its two front doors.
For a church hall, say, the doors can be left wide.
There, direct from the brass-mouthed gape, the sound
escapes freely, fills the hall, bounces, doubles.

At home: the doors kept closed. Thin music
is made to pass through the yellow oak casing,
picks up something from the wood, its density, its age,
carries it, piggy-backed, resonating into small space.

The gramophone's *rent-to-buy* price: £4 3s. 2d.

She pays a shilling a week, and when there are guests
only Rocky is permitted to operate the mechanisms:
palms cupping the thick black edges of a disc,
the silver node of the spindle, untouched;
his delicate drop – needle to groove;
stands military as the music plays.

His grandfather is a drinking man.
One day the alcohol will kill him.

He takes the boy to a fête in a near town. Four-mile walk.
The gramophone: carried in the bowl of a wheelbarrow.
A stained candlewick blanket, doubled over, wraps it,
protects it, from the other oddments carried alongside:
a 2½-foot-diameter aluminium plate,
a lightweight collapsible table frame,
a small gas canister with burner & pipe,
a roll of fine wire meshing – medium gauge.

And in procession, bringing up the rear:
 three Khaki Campbell ducks;
 sleek-headed, mottled plumage;
 evenly spaced along a length of string, a single loop
 fixed loose about each of their delicate throats.

At the fête, within the tent he's been assigned,
 Rocky plays the records he has brought:

Dvořák's 'NEW WORLD' SYMPHONY,
 3 SUITES FROM ROMEO & JULIET,
 that sort of thing;

is careful with each – expensive plastic at 3s. 6d.,
 available only by order through mainland post.

Outside the tent, this is the music passers-by hear
 – punctuated by the occasional quack.

Inside they see: the boy, the gramophone, the ducks;
 the grandfather being by this time nowhere present.

The ducks are set forward, on a table, on a metal plate,
 with an old sheet draped down over the table's front,
 with a high dome of wire mesh neatly caging the ducks.

The spectators are bemused at the scene
 – but the music is good, so they stay.

And when enough have gathered,
 and when it looks as though they might soon leave,
 the music stops, abrupt, as Rocky takes the record off –
 only to replace it with Herb Miller's IN THE MOOD.

Quick change. Slick. Itself a joy to watch – to some extent.
 The gramophone's doors flicked wide.

And as the solo saxophone starts off its thirteen beats,
 the boy dips down behind the ducks
 and twists the bunsen-burner's neck
 from yellow flame to blue.

His timing is immaculate.

Just as the horns and trumpets join the song,
 and in so doing hold the many listeners to the tent,
 so the plate, one yard above the burner, grows hot.

And that is when the ducks begin to dance.

Their flat feet, jagged lifting,
 shifting weight, to cool
 their bare skin for that moment
 in the air, back down,
 and lift again, their bobbing
 careful shuffle, seeking out
 that perfect spot, the heat
 not hot enough to burn,
 but never in their dancing
 do they make a sound.

The takings for the day are reasonable,
 are worthy of the effort of the trip.

As they trudge home along the narrow road
 it's the boy that guides the balance of the barrow.

Every few hundred yards he has to rest,
 just for a second or two, just from the weight of it.
 More often he is required to guide
 his grandfather's heavy drunken stagger;
 with simply worded directions saves him
 time and again from falling in the ditch.

The ducks follow close behind.
 Looped into their single length of string.
 Quacking happy at the cool of the road in the evening;
 sleek-headed, bright-eyed
 – occasional shake of a tail.

‘She was a fine woman that granny of his,
 a hardy woman – never sat on a chair.

Two beer crates, a thick plank of wood
 joining the two – with her on top.

And that’s where she’d sit, before the fire,
 bolt upright – weaving a stocking.

The boy built a cabinet for her new television;
 a tall sturdy square thing it was,
 with space below for groceries and such.

By then of course she couldn’t hear a thing.
 But she could lip-read well enough.
 That’s why she wanted the television:
 the gramophone was no use to her any more.’

Round most of the houses on Skye: a croft.
 Little patches of farmable land, but with access
 to areas outwith their ownership; grazeable hillsides,
 communal; for those who have cattle or sheep –
 though not all of the crofters have cattle or sheep.

The produce is small; a little for trade,
 a share for the crofters themselves;
 and rabbits, many hundreds of thousands of rabbits,
 them too, they each take a share.

Not that the rabbits’ cut comes from the beasts,
 but grasses thin quick under so many mouths.

As such the crofters, the men,
 the workers of the run-rig system,
 on the slopes counting stock,
 greasing the handplough’s blade,
 cold-calving in the long grass by the burn;
 they none of them mind to see the boy
 out on his rounds, crossing unlined borders,
 checking and setting his snares with such care.

They watch him, they pause, and they watch, and
 unsmiling they smile to be rid of a few more rabbits.

He uses nettles for his string,
 can’t recall where he learned it, just strips
 all the leaves from the stalk as he walks
 head stooped, eyes out wide, careful trudge;
 strips the stalk without looking, no stings,
 then splits it, his thumbnail – right down its long length,
 twice pares it, then braids the three strands,
 uneven, not caring, not watching,
 but watching the line of the barbed-wire fence
 or the hedge or the wall or the grass
 for tell-tale holes, then he stops.

Not easy to trick a creature on its doorstep.