Sea of Memories
By: Kathryn Lang

The man…who first spoke of a 'smiling sea' must have had a peculiar notion of joyousness. The smile of a giant would be a formidable thing.[1]

Our relationship with the sea is eternally complex. Water proves to be simultaneously life-giving and death-dealing, a contrast that explains once common belief in petulant sea-gods like Poseidon. Henry David Thoreau, accustomed to contemplating the power of nature in our lives, was struck by the ocean's ability to literally shape coastal inhabitants. Upon meeting a Cape Cod man "with a bleached and weather-beaten face" like "an old sail endowed with life," Thoreau described a character "too grave to laugh, too tough to cry" and "as indifferent as a clam."[2] Having spent his long years along the shore, this man seems to have actually merged with the sea.

As an island nation, the influence of the ocean on Scotland's people and heritage is likewise inescapable. Even a cursory analysis of Scottish literature and folklore reveals the sea's enduring presence. J.P. Smitton, a 19th century magistrate who traveled from Edinburgh to Wick on Scotland's northern coast, spoke of his experience with mercurial waters. "How the storm howled in the mighty deep through the tempestuous night! Placid as a child on its mother's breast while under the influence of the sun's bright beams, the sea when the winds rage high becomes a very demon, scattering destruction and death all around."[3] This unbridled force has made its way into Scottish verse, often told through the eyes or experiences of women waiting on shore for their loved ones' return. In the first song below, offered in Scottish Gaelic and English, the heavy-hearted woman is eventually reunited with her partner who returns safely. Yet, in the second, we learn that the sea has stolen another beloved fisherman.

Chualaim rìbhinn òg 's I deurach
'Seinn fo sgàil nan geugan uain
Bha a' ghrian 'sa chuan gu sìoladh
'S result cha d' èirich anns an iarmailt

I heard a tearful young maiden
Singing beneath the shadow of the green branches
The sun was setting in the sea
And no stars yet graced the sky

Nuair a sheinn an òigh gu cianail *When the young girl sang sorrowfully*
"Tha mo ghaol air àird a' chuain" *"My love is on the high seas"*

Brown-haired Allan,
I heard that you had been drowned,
Would that I were beside you,
On whatever rock or bank you came ashore,
In whatever heap of seaweed the high tide leaves you.[5]

A perilous profession to this day, fishing represented a danger that was particular to coastal inhabitants and contributed to a sense of identity that was proudly inseparable from the sea, just as that of the weather-beaten Cape Cod man. After his intimidating ocean journey, J.P. Smitton settled in Wick. However, despite calling this littoral town home for four decades, he never truly felt like a local. He viewed the men there to be "a strong people – bold…as the massive rocks that guard their native coasts, and fearless as the old Norsemen."[3] Smitton concluded that "people born near the sea must be different in some respects from those born inland…the surging, ever sounding sea can scarcely fail to develop qualities of energy and even daring, unknown to dwellers in the interior of the island."[3] Though these may be romantic musings, the concept of an indelible human-sea bond is not merely a fanciful thought from a bygone era.

In 2007, the community of Cromarty, in Scotland's Moray Firth, released a publication highlighting local perceptions of life near the ocean. Evelyn Sutherland contributed a thoughtful piece entitled "Contrasts," in which she reflected upon the rewarding, yet uneasy partnership with the sea surrounding the Shetland Islands.

> *[The sea] was our umbilical cord to the mainland. It put food on our tables. It provided employment. It entertained us as children. It helped forecast our weather. It gave up seaweed to provide nutrients for our land. It brought ashore timber – a valuable commodity in our treeless landscape. It carried home our relatives. It brought our visitors. It reminded us regularly of how lucky we were to be able to share it and its beauty…*
>
> *Whipped by the wind the gigantic waves crashed onto our beaches, clawing furiously at our shoreline. Spume, like thick cream, was thrown high into the air to shatter into millions of droplets. The wild sea with no respect, grabbing, chasing, tossing everything in its way, taking what it wanted and spitting out what it rejected with awesome force. The sea was a respected partner to our island community."*[6]

Of course, maritime themes expand far beyond regional culture and have made their way into national folklore. After all, it was the ocean who ferried Bonnie Prince Charlie away from danger after defeat at the Battle of Culloden.

Speed bonnie boat like a bird on the wing
Onward the sailors cry.
Carry the lad that's born to be king
Over the sea to Skye[7]

Despite carrying Prince Charles Stewart to safety, the sea would also soon transport thousands of Scots in reluctant or forced emigration during the social upheaval of the Highland Clearances, the painful legacy of which remains to this day. Following these journeys, the ocean would come to represent a physical and figurative barrier to migrants and their descendants, commemorated in The Proclaimers' "Letter from America." Released in 1987, the band continued a centuries-long tradition of laments about exile, coerced or voluntary, across the ocean.

I've looked at the ocean
Tried hard to imagine
The way you felt the day you sailed
From Wester Ross to Nova Scotia…[8]

Although the authorship remains unknown, the "Canadian Boat Song," dating from at least the mid-19th century, expresses this same sense of sorrowful longing.

From the long shieling of the misty island
Mountains divide us, and the waste of seas
Yet still the blood is strong, the heart is Highland,
And we in dreams behold the Hebrides[9]

Indeed, the theme of being parted from Scotland, particularly by a seemingly impassable Atlantic Ocean, was common enough to attract playful ridicule from the Glaswegian comedian Billy Connolly: "the Scotsmen have this great habit of singing about Scotland when they're still there. You know, they sing 'though I'm far across the sea'…No you're naw. You're in your living room!"[10]

Ultimately, Scottish perception of the ocean has been tinged by the enduring impact of tough coastal life and a history of emigration. The sea thus acts as a repository of Celtic history and culture, providing a contrast with the wider colonial boast that "Britannia rules the waves." This is not to suggest that Scotland only looks to these waves with pain and regret. On the contrary, the ocean has offered its people resources far more abundant than those of the rugged land. Rather, this lingering folklore reveals that a body of water can hold deep significance that is bound to regional experiences and cultural elements. This connection between culture and environment is

often consciously bolstered, with Scots laying claim to a singular landscape that is connected to and indeed inseparable from national identity. Often portrayed through Highland sites of indescribable scenic and historical importance, such as Glen Coe, this sentiment of distinctiveness is nevertheless apparent in Scotland's coastal periphery as well.

Sources:

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3. J.P. Smitton. *Reminiscences of Forty Years in Wick (With Some Reflections Thereon)* (Wick: Daniel Ross & Co., Ltd., 1911), 4.
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10. Billy Connolly. *The Pick of Billy Connolly*. Cambridge Theatre London. 1982.