

## Across the Water

by Iain Macdonald

*The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.* (LP Hartley, 1953)

Under my feet, the metal shudders as a belch of black smoke erupts from the ferry's funnel. I break away from the volcanic island, leaving Jacqueline, my Tahitian aunt, waving alone in the carpark. As the wind veers, the ferry accelerates away, churning the brilliant azure into sparkling whirlpools of bubbles. I hold firmly to the cool rail with my left hand while I wave back with my right. Like a child, she stamps her feet in petulance, smiling, beckoning me to stay, to come back. I wonder if she is humming the traditional laments, those that were sung for departing family, long before Cook, Christian and Bougainville, as they set off, neither expecting a return to paradise. The garlands of shells around my neck are there to remind me of what I am leaving behind: family found, spirits reclaimed.

Two handsome couples, radiant with *après spa* privilege, play in the wind, bending into it and laughing as their feet slip like an anchor in heavy seas. My gaze is rapt, calculating the risk of a fall as my eye follows the fine curvature of the blonde's nose, mouth, neck and down through the translucent top rippling like a warning flag on the beach. Her slender arms are outstretched, her fingertips seemingly tingling in the sunlight. My eyes shut tight at the unmistakable dazzle of a diamond.

Underneath the torn outline of the caldera, I can still see Jacqueline waving, our eyes wet. She had been quick to see we shared the same

eye colour, like Paul Newman, she said in a surprisingly perfect English accent. Set in her Tahitian complexion, she is proud of the blue-green eyes that mark her European genes. Jacqueline and I are connected, a visible thread of DNA that crosses the globe, time zones and generations. Seventy years on (and one monarch), it is as if her *grand-père*, not me, looks back at her.

The diesel turbines hum and pulsate, the young Americans are sprawled across each other, spent. There are families on the deck, too, Tahitian parents wrapped in bright functional clothes: quick drying, expandable, framing black ink tattoos in various forms and patterns, statements of heritage, place. Motifs and shapes are chosen to balance the forces in the body; on the surface, they speak a common language, but under the skin, they have more meaning, unless appropriated by tourists. A little girl props a smart-tablet in a sheltered corner of the superstructure: she's practicing her dance moves, following the traditional gyrations and arm gestures on the video. She's happy as she plays, learning another language that has deeper meaning than I can conceive.

I feel the weight of the garlands of shells – from every member of the family – steady my stance. I am drunk with love, family love, good *mana*. I feel blessed that my great-great uncle Alister has introduced me to lands where spirits roam. A man more at home amongst the volcanic bays of jagged tropical peaks than the slabbed Caithness sandstone cliffs that look down on the swirling cauldron of water known as the Merry Men of Mey.

'Came out here in 1921 at the age of sixty! Thinking my life was over. Instead one third of it had to come and another reputation made in Tahiti,' he once declared to a young American pen-pal. Now in her

late eighties, she has become my friend on social media, swapping revelations across generations, weaving new threads to complete a circle in her life.



When I knelt down and felt the cool mosaic tiles of his tomb perched on the hill overlooking Cook's Bay, breathing in scents of frangipani and vanilla, I exhaled all the stale Scottish guilt within me. The palms fluttered a reply in the breeze. The fading portrait on his tombstone faced me, eyes fixed off to one side, never to look anyone straight in the eye. Regarding the bay from this vantage point, I could see what brought him back. The drama, the serenity, the majesty of the landscape – and a climate that could sustain nearly a century-long life. He outlived all his siblings and peers. And now, I'm inching closer to knowing his secrets, flaws and attributes beneath the polite façade. My life now entwines with his, layered and sandwiched between decks and lifetimes. Like Robinson Crusoe, I am jolted to find another footprint in the sand.

Our societies are so different, I find it hard to translate the frail old man who ebbed and flowed by steamship across the globe on waves of shame. Born in a manse, orphaned aged five with his four siblings, he was brought up by a strict grandmother and uncle under rigid Presbyterian laws. While the gratitude of his father's flock endures in the polished granite marking his parents' tomb, the long abandoned church at Clynelish crumbles into the gorse as a fading record of Highland displacement. For a boy growing up on the northern limits of mainland Britain, his escape was found among the golden sand dunes and views of the North Atlantic, the dark ocean a fluid constellation of taut sails, patterned with herring boats and passing schooners. At

nineteen, his migration was southerly, seizing the opportunity of an advantaged family connection at the Bank of England. A passport from rigid manners and prayers, free of the Free Church.

In late Victorian London, an adult life opened up. Liberty. Educated in the English school of watercolour, his self-analysis was directed by a fidelity to architectural proportion and solar atmospheric. Ignoring the nascent Modernists, his expertly controlled brush refused to deviate from a verisimilitude to the landscape, boats and architecture in front of him. He sold well, left the Bank and travelled. His watercolours graced many tasteful Edwardian drawing rooms and hallways of lawyers, bankers and those familiar with Venice and other popular destinations on the Continent. Rarely at rest, compelled to paint, each day inspired a fresh view of the world. Once he set foot in Tahiti, he was captured in a watercolour paradise. Befriended by younger frontier men, the writers Charles Nordhoff and James Norman Hall, they lived simply and found bounty in their art. 'A genius', compared by some to Turner and Whistler, he was 'never seduced by fame and praise,' wrote the travel writer Enrique Bunster in 1956.



But seduced he was. His wife, Lucy Macdonald would not bow to the shame of her husband's abandonment. What emotions did their eleven-year old son Ian contend with? To maintain their respectable but modest home in Earl's Court she worked on society commissions of her miniature portraits, and through Baron Duveen's generous support, built up the fashionable reputation of her Arlington Gallery on Bond Street. Lucy was used to being discreet; her female friends were close while her husband travelled the summer months to paint. But this time

it was different. A one-way passage to New Zealand on the SS *Arawa* in 1921, through the Panama Canal, his affair with Dolly Myhill, nearly thirty years younger, made it so. Disembarking on Tahiti, mimicking 'that damned book', Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*, the comparison was scandalous.

Then, in 1934, their son Ian slipped away, a misadventure on the Thames. At the inquest, Lucy said that Ian had never sailed before. His university friend, Richard Spire, owned a small 10-foot yacht, called *Gnome*. They set sail from Twickenham on a seductive summer breeze. What a jolly jape this must have been: rounding Eel Pie island, doffing their boaters at pretty girls as they meandered past the Palladian grandeur of Syon House, disturbing the ducks feeding under the willows of Kew, then navigating under Hammersmith Bridge and on to Putney, across the Boat Race starting line – without a care, I'd wager. I have followed him along the towpath, all the way down to the City, walking or running, from a safe distance of sixty years or more. Ian and Iain in parallel: name, place, water and blood.

When my little son rolled over and tipped head-first into the river I was there beside him. In a reflex movement I hauled him out and into a warm bath, wrapping him in my towel, safe and alive in my arms. Where were you, Alister, when your son tipped overboard, with all the promise bestowed upon an Englishman in the lottery of life? A safe mooring in plain sight, the wind veered, catching them unawares as the boom swung. A dull, damp thud of an immobile barge now above them. A shout too late to prevent their yacht capsizing. Lucy had to harbour the weight of grief without her husband. At the inquest, her pity was shared. The reporter from *The Kentish Times* gave credits to the helpless

bargeman, the surviving friend, and the civic constable who, days later, had pulled Ian's sandy body, washed up on the tide from the Thames.

Oceans apart, his father was captivated by the lure of a millionaire big-game fisherman, the trophy yacht picturesquely moored amongst the palm trees. The pulp fiction writer Zane Grey, the real Old Man of the Sea, and his entourage sailed in with a splash of Hollywood glamour, hungry for adventure, and epic battles of man against fish. Finally, Alister heard the call from the shore, halfway round the world. 'Please come home!'



Shame, secrets, I prised my way in, gently, softly and deliberately. Incomplete detective work, passed down from another branch of the family tree. It is a dance of manners, connecting lineage, to stitch Scottish and Tahitian threads together. Where is the shame, the scandal today? His taboos are of his time. There was already a mountain of shame brought upon the family by his father's broken spirit, by God's judgement declared the pious. In our judgement, it was dogma that claimed his father's life, puerperal fever his mother's. In 1926, three years after Alister's English lover Dolly had returned to England, he fathered a daughter, Avril, with a Tahitian *vahine*, Tipari Tuera. What was a social norm in Tahiti was shockingly deviant in England at that time. Undeterred, or perhaps overlooking such social challenges, having lost his son, he sought to persuade his daughter to return to London with him as Europe braced itself for another war. Too cold to walk barefoot, too dark skinned to find friends at school, too French to be understood. And what did he expect the reception to be back at the Kirk in Melvich? What could he tell his family? The artist may be excused from the laws

of polite social convention, elevated as an exhibit on return of the exotic, the foreign. His sojourn back to Scotland in later life was brief, the cold, and the secrets, too hard to live with.



Off the boat, pipe clenched between his teeth, nearing eighty years old with an appearance of a 'ruined Lord', Alister clutched a folder of paintings in one hand, the other with which he wished to have held his daughter's hand, swung freely. His wife took him back, exhibited his paintings and he spent the remaining years of Lucy's life beside her, away from the Blitz in the quiet, soft undulating fields of prim Somerset pasture – a tonic for her nerves. This was but a chintz waiting room, for within a month of her passing he embarked on one last voyage: past Gibraltar, through the Suez canal, eastward crossing the tropics of the Indian Ocean, around the antipodes back to the Pacific expanse. Having devotedly arranged his French visa, Avril, a widow at twenty-four with four children, was reunited with her father. He still stood tall, crowned with a Panama hat, a polka dot neckerchief for a touch of flair, the ninety-year-old carried all his worldly possessions in his seasoned leather satchel. So Avril and her new husband built him a home, a *fare* of bamboo and palms on the shore at Paopao on the island of Moorea. Topped with a traditional pandanus thatched roof, it stood aloof on stilts raised above the beach and tidewater, fit for an artist. The Tahitian house was designed not to shut out the world, but to allow nature to enter.

For three weeks I lived on the family plot where Alister spent his last years. In our eyes, Moorea is like an enchanted island, just as J.M. Barrie envisioned. Where age is a foreign concept. As the sun rises, the shadows

play tricks on the eye. We see shapes in the clouds and contours of faces in the mountains as if the spirits are embodied in the landscape. Nearly seventy years previously on his veranda, these same mountains witnessed Alister cut the umbilical cord between his daughter and last baby granddaughter.

The bay is only a kilometre wide; a few simple houses are dotted along the shore, ringed by the sea and by heaven-piercing mountains. Looking over to the Catholic mission of St Joseph's, you can watch the sun's golden rays track down the dense tropical foliage of the steep cliffs opposite. Clouds form over the peaks of Mont Rotui, Muaputa and Tohivea. In the cool morning breeze, the dawn sky brightens, roosters crow and dogs bark, life stirs. 5am. Taking breakfast of star apple, guava and rambutan on the veranda, you can hear the lapping water underneath while watching a fisherman paddle out to the reef in his outrigger with powerful strokes breaking the glassy surface. Some mornings there might be a schooner at anchor, with voices from the crew carrying across the bay, another American writer or playboy. A new watercolour to paint. Every dawn reveals its own unique possibilities.



On the ferry from Moorea, nearing the safety of Papeete harbour, a young child whispers to her doll. Except it isn't a doll, it's a hand-carved wooden Tiki bought from the market: an icon of the ancient Polynesian race that still inhabit the Pacific islands from New Zealand to Hawaii, reduced to a tourist trinket. Like The Old Man of Hoy that watches the Orkney ferry plunge into the tidal vortex of competing waters, totem to the people who navigate the deadly. Sharks, whales, and towering waves, life and death, moments apart, respected and feared.

Although I was born nine years after Alister died, I know most of his haunts in Scotland, London and recently Tahiti. Throughout my life, my feet have found his footprints, stepped in them, and found them a fit. As I get closer to him, my appreciation of his talent deepens. I didn't grow up as an orphan under such strict religious orders. I carry no such shame or taboos. Perhaps some may think I should? Divorced, and a Catholic convert, I celebrated Mass amongst the congregation of Paopao. The joyous harmonies of Tahitian voices hit notes of ecstasy that lifted the red-pitched roof off St Joseph's, while video screens projected alternating verses in French, Latin and Tahitian. Love thy neighbour as oneself.

I hold a Tahitian candle, lit by prayers and a faith that is deeply held amongst the family of these islands. A light that they believe will offer protection from *tupapau* apparitions. It may flicker and smoke as I walk, but for now there is a silvered mirror with a vacant candlestick waiting for my light to reflect back on us all.

Running my fingers through the garland of shells like a rosary, I am not sure how far away the dock is, though it is present on the horizon, shimmering under a veil of rain coming off the mountain. Memories, brief vignettes from other lives gather and pass like the tropical clouds blanketing the horizon. Interlinked and dissolving into one another as abstract shapes, distorting and bending through telling and retelling. The ferry will inevitably reach its destination, but the time of docking is uncertain.

Should I also reach my ninety-fifth birthday, with mental and physical capacities intact, it will be with a glass of Clynelish malt whisky, distilled from the very spring of longevity that binds us, that I will toast Alister.

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Our footprints will have met the edge of the tide. The sea foaming around bony white toes. May I be blessed with his good fortune, to have grandchildren dancing and giggling freely around me, as I tumble peacefully to sleep, cushioned under the spell of the sea air.

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