

Mairi Summers

Trees and Stones

This year I became the tenant of a croft in the area where I live. A croft is an area of agricultural land and crofting is a system of land tenure unique to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Over the past year my research has focused on hyper local relationship with land in the context of crofting in the area where I live, with a particular focus on my relationship with my croft land.



The theme for LiLa this year is ‘forests’ and although Scotland has lost most of its ancient forests, we still have some areas of precious woodland. One of these areas borders my croft, it’s an area of coastal temperate rain-forest, a rare habitat named Càrnach, a Scottish Gaelic word meaning ‘place of stones’.

It is thought that this woodland once extended over the land that is now designated as crofts, over the croft that I now tenant. On the croft there are many piles of stones – land clearance cairns – formed when people were preparing the land for growing crops or grazing animals, many years ago. I have been told that smaller stones would be piled on top of large stones that were too difficult to move. These land clearance cairns now provide habitat for myriad beings.

*Figure 1. Càrnach woodland,
Image: Mairi Summers, 2023.*



*Figure 2. A clearance cairn on mycroft.
Image: Mairi Summers, 2023.*

During the summer school visit to Umeå, the curators of the Västerbottens Museum shared a translated excerpt from 'Bilder från den stora flyttningen' by photographer Sune Jonsson. Jonsson had visited areas where the forestry industry had recruited people to move north and work in the industry and were given areas of land on which to sustain their families. When all the trees were logged the industry moved elsewhere, stranding these families. Jonsson speaks to one such Västerbotten 'small-time farmer' who had visited Långsele and seen that

people there were not harvesting the fields:

"When I asked why they did not cut them they answered that there was no money in it. They should have come here and seen the rock piles that we had to pile up by hand. Piling them up has been back breaking work! If they would have seen them, they would probably have understood that it would be worth it. This has never been a place of milk and honey. If they too would have been forced to work their fingers to the bone, they would probably have thought that it was really worth the effort to bring in the barley. It was as yellow as gold. It billowed against the sky." (Jonsson 1964)

The parallels of the efforts exerted by those who cleared the crofts of stones struck me as I could feel the anger and pain in this man's testimony. I began to understand more deeply the labour required to live off the land and the need people had to clear these small areas of land of stones and trees, not for profit but for survival.

My interest in stones and trees grew, and during the field trip visit to Rotsidan, an area of coastal woodland, I gathered rubbings/frottage from several places, on a large sheet of paper which I had divided into sections by folding, much like a map. This was more for the practicality of travelling with a large sheet of paper but in the process, it has taken on significance as a record of my encounters as I explored the area.

I've been interested in Tim Ingold's notion of correspondence with materials for some time. He writes, "Correspondence is about togetherness" (Ingold 2017: 41) and during the morning in Rotsidan, I aimed to develop a sense of intimacy with this unfamiliar place. Using graphite, I took rubbings of four different stones and four different trees. Pressing and rubbing brings an intimacy with the material, physically close, touch and the quality of pressure, seeing close-up detail, catching a scent.



*Figure 3.. Graphite frottage at Rotsidan,
Image: Mari Parpala, 2023.*

In my practice I am focusing more and more on what I think of as ‘attentional practices’, - activities which attune my perception to being both outward and inward simultaneously. Somehow holding the space between, as one might in a daydream. This quality of attention brings me into a ‘togetherness’ (Ingold 2017) with other. It is a difficult balance, and hard to express since it is an intangible process. In this instance I was using the process of frottage as a method of staying within that attentional space.

Another day, we followed blue way-markers up Högklinten mountain to see extraordinary, raised cobble fields high amongst the trees. The journey up drew my focus to the summit; the heat of the day, the effort involved, the unknown distance, all caused me to press on upwards. I found myself reflecting on how my creative attention was congested by these various stresses.



Figure 4. Graphite frottage on Scots Pine tree. Figure 5. Detail of ants on Scots Pine bark. Figure 6. Completed frottage map, four from stone, four from tree. Images: Mairi Summers, 2023.

On the descent I felt playful and free to explore. Along with others, I came across beautiful trails from bark beetle larvae on a fallen Scot's pine tree. Again, I used frottage to pick up the marks. There's a parallel in the process of rubbing and the larvae tracks, a feeling the way forward and something of staying in the moment. I used the blue of the trail markers to create improvised embossed prints using water from my bottle to soften the paper into the grooves and pick up the watercolour pencil.

Perhaps these are my trail-markers for land-based practice – a trail of the instinctual, attentive, and responsive. A call to become more present and attuned; as Ingold (2013) might put it, “a process of active following”.

These encounters with stones and trees invite me to attend to how I interact with the croft land. I look at the land clearance cairns differently now, with more appreciation of the effort required in their formation.

Since returning from the field trip, my focus has been on making space for myself on the croft, constructing a workshop that will be a base for further land-based activities and practice-led explorations. I am considering planting native trees on the part of the croft littered with clearance cairns; I believe I can create a balance between honouring the labours of previous crofters, whilst also restoring some of the woodland that used to exist there by growing trees from seeds gathered in Càrnach.

References

Ingold, T. (2013) *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge

Ingold, T. (2017) Correspondences [online]. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University. Available from <https://knowingfromtheinside.org/files/correspondences.pdf> [5 August 2022]



Figure 7. Bark beetle larvae trail patterns.
Image: Mairi Summers, 2023.

Jonsson, S (1964) 'The Fields of Långsele' chapter translated from 'Bilder från den stora flyttningen'. Västerbotten Museum.