

Who looks and looks again

Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner
by Alastair Reid
Collier Macmillan, \$25.75

Reviewed by W. GEORGE LOVELL

AT A TIME when so much in the world of journalism is done too quickly and too imprecisely, dictated in large part by an editor's deadline or the fashions of the hour, it is exhilarating to know of someone who operates according to fundamentally different principles of readiness, commitment and focus. Alastair Reid tells us that he had "never thought of being other than a poet, of writing other than poetry" until, in the 1950s, arrival in Spain nudged him towards prose and the beginning of an ongoing relationship as a writer of "prose chronicles" for, among other journals, the *New Yorker*. *Whereabouts: Notes on Being a Foreigner* is a captivating collection of seven "prose chronicles" in which poetry figures either as formal stanzas within an individual essay or, more characteristically, resonates throughout an entire sentence or paragraph. In structure, balance and quality of expression, Reid's pieces are polished examples of journalism as a means to truly creative writing.

If the settings of these essays are scattered and diverse — Scotland and Spain, real-life apartments in New York and the fictional landscapes of Latin America — the thread that ties them together is Reid's ability to write lucidly, no matter where he is, about people and place, about what the geographer Carl Sauer called land-life relationships. Indeed, Reid's talents in this sense must be the envy of any geographer, or writer of geography, whose primary aim is to pare down a real complexity in order to decide what is important and what is not, what needs saying and what can be left out. Reid is the most interesting kind of writer: one who travels widely and often, who looks and looks again, who is not afraid to leave behind his native tongue in order to discover another self in a second language, in his case Spanish. Above all else, Reid is always on the alert, curious and reflective, someone who never ceases to learn from the mysteries of what different people do in different places.

Despite his far-flung wanderings, one place to which Reid always returned was a remote mountain village in Spain where he visited or lived for part of each year for some 30 years. The essay *Notes from a Spanish Village* is a reconstruction of Reid's experiences and observations there, in which he depicts with moving insight the constant struggle between tradition and modernity, between continuity and change. In this unnamed refuge Reid "watched babies grow up and marry, and friends grow old and die." He writes about village life honestly, always with empathy and tenderness, never with know-it-all aloofness or, worst of all, alien sentimentality.

Somewhat ironically, Reid was accused in the American press three years ago of "distorting facts" and creating an "imaginary" locale when writing for the *New Yorker* about his Spanish microcosm. The inability of some American journalists to distinguish meaningfully between disguise and deceit prompts

Reid to observe that the accusation "would have delighted the flesh and blood inhabitants," some of whose conversation Reid merely "distilled from long acquaintance" when shaping pieces for publication.

Were Reid the least bit interested in academic laurels, *Notes from a Spanish Village* could be considered a model of interpretive anthropology in the style of Clifford Geertz. That Reid wants his writing primarily to reach a less self-absorbed audience comes out unequivocally in a poem called *The Academy*:

It is illusion, the academy
In truth, the ideal talking-place to die.
Only the landscape keeps a sense of growing
The towers are floating on a shifting sea
You did not tell the truth there, nor did I.

It anticipates my dying, turns to stone
too quickly for my taste. It is a language
nobody speaks, refined to ritual:
the precise writing on the blackboard wall,
the drone of requiem in the lecture hall.

This poem, along with three others, is woven neatly into the fabric of two essays about Reid's homeland, Scotland. In *Digging up Scotland and Hauntings* he grapples with going back to his roots in a manner totally devoid of nostalgia and expatriate romance: no swing of the kilts here, nor skirl of the pipes of the Edinburgh Tattoo. He does not subscribe to a vision of Scotland mythically engraved on the lid of a tin of shortbread. What Reid does treat us to are lyric descriptions of the Scottish countryside, inspired reflections on Scottish weather (especially Scottish rain), and pungent ruminations on the Scottish character. One day in St. Andrews, Reid greeted a local woman by extolling the virtues of a "heady spring day" only to be admonished: "We'll pay for it, we'll pay for it, we'll pay for it." To him this response is as quintessentially Scottish as the old parishioner who once informed Reid's father, a Church of Scotland minister: "Oh no, Mr. Reid we've tried change, and we know it doesn't work."

Although Reid remains inextricably attached to Scotland, certain attitudes and mores cause him never to feel "at home in the wariness of its human climate." Like many Scots, he realized early on that his adult life would not be spent in the land of his birth. Far from his native Whithorn and "the kindest of people in all that flinty country," Alastair Reid now writes fondly of the view from a small house he built "on a remote peninsula in the Dominican Republic." Who knows? Maybe even a literary tinker from Galloway will stop roaming eventually. And come to rest, on a foreign shore, at ease in the mode of memory. □

The whereabouts of W. George Lovell, a teacher of geography at Queen's University, cannot always be ascertained. He is presently on a family visit to Scotland.



Illustration by Alan B. Herriot

Tales of the little people

The Broonie, Silkie and Fairies:
Travellers' Tales of the Other World
by Duncan Williamson
Crown, \$22.90

Reviewed by JOHN WALKER

IN AN INCREASINGLY materialistic, mechanized and complex world, memories of a past simple life — in which the "other world" and its supernatural phenomena had an integral role to play — have become hazier in the face of more pressing problems, like the survival of the environment and mankind. In many parts of the world, therefore, attempts are being made by folklorists and the like to preserve, if not the old ways and beliefs, at least a record of them.

In Scotland the traditional belief in elves, broonies, fairies, gnomes, leprechauns, goblins and such manifestations of the wee folk, especially in the highlands and the islands of the west coast, is long standing. Nature still conserves there the remnants of fairy hills, enchanted forests, and woodland pools where the little people have lived since the beginning of time. In *The Broonie, Silkie and Fairies*, Duncan Williamson, with the help of his American editor/wife, has collected 12 stories, compiled from a store of more than 3,000 that he has committed to memory, most of them products of his early years (1935-43) in Argyllshire when he associated with the travelling people, the tinkers and the crofters, and listened to the tales of older friends and relatives.

Several of the best stories in this collection are about the seal-folk, or silkies, seals that have the ability to take human shape and live in society e.g. Sallie the Silkie, The Silkie's Revenge, and The Lighthouse Keeper, all fascinating and instructive "true" parable-stories of a world of seal-people, in which the travelling-folk believed and wanted to share. The broonie, who can take any

form he wants, usually appears as an old tramp with a long white beard and blue eyes, in order to test people's characters. The Broonie on Carr, Torquil Glen, The Broonie's Curse, and The Broonie's Farewell, for example, are not meant to have happy endings but simply to teach a moral lesson to those who ill-treat the lowest of God's creatures. The fairies too come in many shapes, on the first of May when the King of the Fairies frees his subjects for three months to work and play amongst the flowers and plants of woods and dales and hills. Woe betide the human who trespasses on fairy land or offends the fairies during this time. In Archie and the Little People, and The Tramp and the Boots, for example, we have demonstrations of the beneficent work of the little people, who reward the kindly behavior of humans with magical gifts. The Taen-Awa (Taken Away) reveals the maleficent fairy custom of substituting defective fairy babies and taking away a healthy human baby.

Fascinating and informative as they are as examples of the supernatural world and its creatures, all the stories in this collection have a moral purpose and none is invented. Duncan Williamson documents exactly the circumstances of their composition, and how, where and when he first heard the stories. If they were merely fictions of his imagination, he confesses, he could not believe them, and credibility, for him, is an essential criterion of these stories. The 12 narrated here, plus 30 or more similar stories have been recorded for posterity in the archives of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. We are indebted to Duncan and Linda Williamson (and their illustrator Alan B. Herriot) for the survival of these travellers' tales of the other world. □

John Walker, professor of Spanish at Queen's University, is the author of The Scottish Sketches of R.B. Cunningham Graham.