

CILIPS COVID-19 Book Reviews – At the Loch of the Green Corrie

Reviewer name: David Kenvyn

Book title: At the Loch of the Green Corrie

Author name: Andrew Greig

Genre: Non-fiction tribute

Overall Rating: Excellent

Brief summary: Andrew Greig has written an elegiac account of his relationship with Norman McCaig, one of Scotland's most important poets of the C20th and one who is not very well-known outside his own country, and possibly not as well-known as he should be in his own country. Norman McCaig is the poet of Assynt, which is north of Ullapool on the west coast of Scotland. To describe it as remote is like saying that hell is hot. It would be off the beaten track if there was actually a track. At their last meeting, before McCaig died, he asked Andrew Greig to go fishing for him in the Loch of the Green Corrie. McCaig did not make it easy because the Loch of the Green Corrie is not its real name. It is a translation from the Gaelic. The loch is remote even by Assynt standards, and McCaig does not make it easy. He tells Andrew Greig to seek out a man called McAllister who may tell him where the loch is, if he likes him. Greig does not set off immediately. He has to have a near-death experience, and a time in hospital, before he decides to set off with two friends to find the loch and to go fishing for trout there. What follows is an extraordinary description of Assynt, interspersed with poems by Norman McCaig about the area. There is a helpful map that helps the reader to get to grips with the geography of the area, and there is a glossary of Gaelic names and how to pronounce them. This latter is helpful, but ultimately does not matter unless someone is actually going to hear you attempt the pronunciation. I was able to work out that the Loch of the Green Corrie is really called Loch a Choire Ghuirm, but I haven't got a clue about how to pronounce it. Andrew Greig, before his illness, was a climber in the Himalayas and was therefore used to the hardships of walking in difficult terrain. This is important because, although he does not make it sound easy, the unskilled may be tempted to set out on the walk, and it may be necessary to call out the Mountain Rescue. Nan Shepherd would not be amused, and nor would Andrew Greig. It is much easier to read the book and to enjoy the scenery at one remove. It is also important to remember that this was not always an empty country. The population was forcibly removed by the orders of the Duchess of Sutherland, to be replaced by the much more profitable deer. Across Assynt, you will see the ruins of cottages. Greig tells us about the successful efforts of the Assynt Crofters' Association in buying back the land from the estate of Lord Vestey, which encouraged others throughout the Highlands and Islands to do the same. This is not an easy history. What it is, is simple. It is a book imbued with the love of the place. It is full of understanding for what has happened to the land and its people. It is inspired by the poetry of Norman McCaig. It is simply extraordinary and you should read it.

What you liked: A loving tribute to Norman McCaig. An exploration of the meaning of friendship.

Who should read this book?: Anyone who likes poetry, anyone who wants to learn about north-west Scotland or the literary scene in Scotland over the last half century or so