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Conference report

How to Cite: Hale, D and Lafarge, D 2017 *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Little Fields, Long Horizons*, University of Edinburgh, 13–15 July 2017. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 9(1): 12, pp. 1–13, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.59>

Published: 04 October 2017

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Ian Hamilton Finlay: Little Fields, Long Horizons, University of Edinburgh, 13–15 July 2017

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The *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Little Fields, Long Horizons* symposium, organised by Greg Thomas and Alex Thomson at the University of Edinburgh, sought to explore new critical and interdisciplinary perspectives on Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925–2006), poet, artist and avant-gardener. The event brought together lifelong friends and dedicated scholars of his work with artists, poets, architects, postgraduate students, and early career academics still in the emergent phases of encountering, thinking through, and responding to his art and poetics. The symposium took place over two days, and over three anniversaries, spanning the 219th anniversary of Wordsworth's preliminary composition of 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13 1798', also the 224th birthday of John Clare, and the 228th anniversary of the Storming of the Bastille on the 14th. Given Finlay's fascination with the history, ideology, and legacy of the French Revolution, and his interest in those poets of the English tradition like Wordsworth and Clare variously engaged in responses to Virgilian pastoral, this coincidence was either a case of radical serendipity, or exceptional planning.

Thursday 13th July

The first day began auspiciously with a presentation from Nancy Perloff, the curator of Modern and Contemporary Collections at LA's Getty Research Institute, opening a panel on Finlay's relation to and experimentation with concrete poetry which explored the creative exchanges he enjoyed with contemporary practitioners in the 1960s. Her paper compared the work of Finlay with that of the Brazilian concrete poet

Augusto de Campos, drawing on the extended correspondence sustained between the two poets in the 1960s and 70s. Perloff stressed that the differences between their distinct iterations of concrete poetry ultimately outweigh their affinities, presenting an account of the two poets' separate poetics as divergent trajectories or possibilities. She alighted on de Campos's observance of 'verbivocovisual' technique (a Joycean neologism coined in *Finnegan's Wake*) which analogises the semantic, aural and visual, and positioned his São Paulo-based urbanity in antagonism with Finlay's pastoral minimalism and prioritisation of the Eclogues. Perloff was followed by Nicola Thomas, presenting her similarly comparative paper "auf dem land": Space, Place and Nation in Ian Hamilton Finlay and Ernst Jandl'. Finlay and the Austrian poet Ernst Jandl began their twenty-year correspondence in 1964, and Thomas underscored the equivalences between their experiences of post-war Scotland and Austria respectively, in their shared need to assault and reconceptualise the sutures binding nation, culture, and art in the aftermath of conflict. Where for Perloff the aesthetic distinctions between Finlay and de Campos were foregrounded, Thomas maintained that Finlay and Jandl were politically and ethically united in their desire to move past nationalism (symbolised for Finlay, Thomas suggested, by Hugh MacDiarmid's poetics). The panel concluded with Greg Thomas ventriloquising an absent Natalie Ferris and her paper on Finlay, Dom Sylvester Houédard and abstract art. The essay examined Finlay's 'new cohesive element' insofar as it was grounded in an engagement with abstract art, particularly that of the German artist Josef Albers, a grounding which led Finlay to expand his practice beyond the printed page while Houédard and his 'typestracts', startling and beautiful as they are, remained there.

Panel 2b was organised under the rubric 'From Concrete to Landscape: New Materials and Media for Poetry in the 1970s and Beyond', and opened with Fiona Becket's paper 'Poetry in the Public Space'. Comparing Finlay with Bob Cobbing, who together she regards as the 'twin cardinals' of post-war British experimental poetry, Becket observed how language is always inseparable from *techne* in the poetics of both. She contended that Finlay's works are not explicitly environmental, but that they are ecological in form as objects in the landscape inviting readers to enter

into a transformed (public) space and read and respond to it in new-fangled ways, intimating a nascent ecopoetics. Camilla Nelson's presentation 'A Concrete Coalition of Language Environments' then picked up where Becket's ended, venturing a necessarily corporeal reading of Finlay's 'Little Fields, Long Horizons' wall texts (the version of the poem in Little Sparta). Nelson examined, with recourse to Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), the contradistinctions between page and garden work, and Finlay's reversal of the 'enclosure' of meaning by virtue of the fragmentation of the dry stone walls, gesturing towards Charles Olson's 'open field' poetics as one possible touchstone. She contrasted the tactile experience of reading the physical book with the non-verbal semiotic exchange of our embodied reading through, past, and around Finlay's walls. Utilising his background in cultural geography, Charlie Jarvis's paper 'Word-Things in Time-Space' brought Deleuze's *Logic of Sense* (1969) to bear on Finlay's dialectic of language and materiality. Jarvis put forward a Deleuzian analysis of sense, as the measure of the space separating bodies and language, alongside an emphasis on poetic impersonality, in order to intimate non-human perspectives on and bio- and eco-centric models for reading Finlay's work.

In parallel panel 2a, on 'The Early Work, Its Contexts and Legacies', Calum Rodger offered an ambitious rubric for engaging with Finlay's oeuvre as whole, using a diagrammatic key referred to as the 'Compass of the Non-Secular', whose four points represented the 'poetic', 'homely', 'classical' and 'modern' aspects of his aesthetics. This provided an interesting framing device for the more microcosmic aspects of Finlay's early poetics covered by the following papers. Alistair Peebles considered the influences which Finlay's early lyric poetry drew from the landscapes, cultures and characters of Orkney, his sometime home during the late 1950s, while Viviane Carvalho da Anunciação focused on Finlay's interactions with Edwin Morgan, and brief flirtation with technologically-influenced modes of poetic composition, immediately following his turn to concrete in the early 1960s.

Alex Thomson then chaired a third panel, billed as 'Battles, Flytings, Revolution', with organiser Greg Thomas delivering a presentation entitled 'Walled Gardens: Little

Sparta and Spandau'. Thomas faced head on Finlay's infamous appropriation and reconfiguration of the iconography of the Third Reich, and the martial imperatives and fascistic satiation of his work. Springing from Finlay's correspondence in the late 1970s and 80s with the imprisoned Nazi architect and favourite of Hitler, Albert Speer, Thomas oriented his discussion around Finlay's unpublished book *A Walled Garden: A History of the Spandau Garden in the Time of the Architect Albert Speer*. The project focused on Ian Gardner's watercolours of Speer's 'sunken gardens', built in the grounds of Spandau Prison where he was incarcerated after the war. Following Heidegger's essay 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935–36), which argues that artworks delineate the limits and contours of being in a given culture, Thomas disputed that Finlay's Walled Garden endeavours towards a redemptive aesthetics emblematised by Gardner's representations of Speer's gardens, asserting the need to establish a post-war Romanticism which sublates the terrible lessons of fascism and recent history, rather than simply ignoring or well-meaningly purifying itself of them. He also alighted on the probability that Finlay meant to bait secular liberals into antagonistic reactions to his work, foregrounding the 'battles' which punctuated so much of Finlay's public artistic life.

Thomas was followed by Yves Abrioux, the author of *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (1985), delivering his extended discourse 'Revisiting the Third Reich: Affects, Ethics, Poetics' which consolidated our estimation of the disturbing problems raised in the previous paper while continuing its defence of Finlay's poetics. Abrioux contemplated the so-called 'French War', the systematic public defamation of Finlay in the 1980s by such figures as Catherine Millet—editor of the Parisian magazine *Art Press*—in response to his work *Ossu*, which assimilated the lightning insignia of the SS. In April 1987, Finlay was commissioned by the French government to construct in Versailles a commemorative garden memorialising the Declaration of the Rights of Man on the site of the National Assembly Hall. This would have opened in 1989 to coincide with the bicentenary of the French Revolution. However, as a result of these misrepresentative attacks, and the *acharnement* orchestrated by Finlay's antagonists in the French press, the commission was withdrawn in March 1988.

Drawing on a Spinozan distinction between ethics and morality, Abrioux criticised what he deems a process of public and scholarly normalisation of Finlay's work in the decade following his death, stressing that it is imperative to continue to restore in our encounters with his work the confusion, incomprehension, and resentment with which it recurrently met across the sweep of his vocation, and with which it seems he often intended it to be met.

The day concluded with the first keynote lecture of the symposium, with Stephen Bann delivering 'Finlay's Battles: A Cultural and Historical Context'. Able to draw, like Abrioux, not only from extensive research but from his friendship and personal correspondence with Finlay, Bann speculated that Finlay's 'wars' against public and private institutions and corporate entities (such as the Arts Council) exemplify a radically divergent interpretation of the nature of artistic vocation and practice from that which seemed accepted in the contemporary art world. Bann illustrated a vision of the quality of the relation between artist and culture industry, a kind of brittle, fractious co-dependency in which conflict is difficult to avoid when an artist of the commitment and vision of Finlay is involved. Of particular interest was Bann's discussion of the French revolutionary Louis Antoine de Saint-Juste, so emblematic for Finlay: famously, in 1983 some of his friends and supporters were forced to organise themselves as the 'Saint Juste Vigilantes' to defend Little Sparta from the sheriff officer attempting to seize artworks from the Garden Temple. The lecture was interleaved with several luminous anecdotes, with Bann recounting for example how he once sent Finlay an olive branch from Delphi as a symbol of reconciliation after a private quarrel. His keynote made a historically restorative and movingly personal finale to the first day.

Friday 14th July

The second day began with Drew Milne's keynote on 'Symbiotic Poetics', calling our attention to the overlooked collaborators with Finlay's sculptures at Little Sparta: the various lichens growing on their surfaces. Milne reminded us that lichens were the organisms responsible for oxygenating the earth during the 'boring billion' Pre-Cambrian years that yield no fossil record. By positing lichens as a 'substrate'

of Finlay's practice, Milne allowed for a fascinating consideration of Finlay's work within broader historical and environmental processes. In terms of evolutionary development, lichens indicate *longevity*, calling us to reconsider the lichen-encrusted sheep folds of the conference's title work *Little Fields, Long Horizons*.

The 'lichenisation' of Finlay's work led into a discussion of intentionality, collaboration, and symbiotic poetics. Are the Pentland lichens an encroachment, an unacknowledged presence, or 'sympathetic rivals' to Finlay's poetics? Milne suggested that while Finlay's neo-classicism privileges art over nature, resistant to environmental readings, lichenisation both unsettles this hierarchy and reinscribes the extant symbiosis of Finlay's methods: language, material, weather, history, human (and lichen) collaborators all working together mutualistically. As lichen grows over to obscure the engraved word, does it unsettle the sovereignty of language – or man – over nature?

In a *détournement* of Finlay's own playful reworking of quotes and aphorisms, Milne proposed 'Four Interpolations' to his practice. First, Finlay's reflection on Poussin, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, became 'Et in Arcadia: Lichens', removing not only anthropocentric 'ego' but offering a retort to the image of a tank imposed in Finlay's re-rendering; lichens pre-exist – and will likely outlive – the annals of human conflict. Second, the inscription on Finlay's ruined pillars via Saint Just, *The World has been Empty since the Romans*, became 'the world has been full since the lichens', remarking on the lichens' inherent 'community' of two or more organisms, and their creation of conditions for human and animal life. Third, 'lichens against the picturesque' responded to works around Lochan Eck – *Nuclear Sail* and *Picturesque* – as well as the 'picturesque' photographic legacy of Finlay's own work; this raised an interesting question as to whether the lichens grown over works should be scraped back to be more photogenic. The fourth interpolation offered another reworking of Saint Just via Finlay; *The Present Order is the Disorder of the Future* became 'the present oxygen is the carbon of the future', reorienting the focus from human civilisation to multispecies existence.

Milne concluded that Finlay's poetics to some extent dehistoricise nature and neglect the politics of their immediate environment, for example farming practices

in neighbouring Pentland fields. The detached sentences are philosophical and therapeutic, but fail to add up to a cohesive politics. He suggested 'lichenisation' as a way to read Finlay's work in the social and environmental terms it seemingly eschews. This provocation prompted a rich series of audience questions, focusing on acknowledged or invisible labour in classical pastoral categories; the absence of science in Finlay's works; historical class politics of the 'gentlemanly' scholar-gardener and his attendant disdain for city life. The discussion ended with Milne reminding us that lichens have a particular significance in Scottish pastoral practice, having been harvested in the highlands to colour tweed. The discovery of lichens 'blew open' Linnaean classification, given that they cannot be categorised as plants, and are combinations of two or three different biological kingdoms. The foregrounding of lichens proved a memorable start to the day; we were sure we were not alone in picking out traces of lichenisation in the slides of subsequent presentations.

An appropriate follow on, panel 4 explored Finlay's relation to ideas of the 'political pastoral'. Architect Adrian Evan's 'Voyage Home from Modernism to Myth' began with the premise that modern architecture – from Alberti, through Descartes, until now – is predicated on a fundamental 'separation' from its landscape, and conducted us on a search for methods of mending this rupture. From contemporary building projects on the West coast of Scotland, Evans' talk travelled eastwards to Little Sparta, where he hoped to find terms of re-engagement between architecture and landscape. Whilst definitions of 'separation', 'engagement' and 'landscape' were sidestepped, Evans touched on some interesting literature around place-making, invoking Tim Ingold and Robert Macfarlane's writing on walking as meditation. The presentation was directed by details noticed on Evans' first arrival to Little Sparta, and was followed by a discussion of his developing 'embryonic manifesto: seven ways architecture can engage landscape'. Amongst these seven were seductive terms like taxonomy of place, tattooed buildings and encystment; unfortunately, the talk was brought to a close before these could be further explored.

In her presentation 'Gates and Stiles: Reading Finlay's Boundary Poetics through the long Eighteenth Century', M.C. Hyland refocused our attention on the boundaries within, and means of departure from Little Sparta. Concerned with the

crossing of space/time through gates and stiles, attention was first drawn to the *Rousseau/Citoyen de Geneve* gate, by which the visitor leaves the garden. The other side of the gate reads 1727, the date of Rousseau's own departure (or exile) as a young man, yet to be published and celebrated. Hyland likened this to a prelapsarian Adam; in passing through the gate we cross the time and spaces of Eden, Geneva and Little Sparta. Other gates and stiles – both literal and inscribed – offer ways of traversing the garden and conjuring 'a deep continuous present'. Finlay's grouping of various authors in the categories of 'gates' and 'stiles' were explored as authors we either 'pass through' or 'clamber over'. The long eighteenth century lens featured fairly late in the presentation through an engaging focus on legal and literary histories; Hyland linked in two important laws passed in 1710: the first copyrights given to authors, and the first enclosure of a village green. From there Hyland expanded on the simultaneous and subsequent privatisation of both the field and the page, through a comparison of authorship and gardening/farming, raising the question of who is entitled to the fruits of either labour. The presentation cycled back round to the *Rousseau* gate, which we were able to approach with a renewed vocabulary of questions: if footpaths and stiles provide a way through private land, what might their literary equivalents look like?

Stewart Smith's 'Et in Arcadia Ego: Ian Hamilton Finlay's Complex Pastoral' attended to a number of pre-Little Sparta works, revealing Finlay's conception of the pastoral as multi-layered, and one that developed over time. Smith called on Leo Marx's differentiation between the 'sentimental pastoral' that presented a simplified, idealised view of pastoral life often instrumentalised as false ideology – explored by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973) – and the 'complex pastoral', in which idealism is circumscribed by reality. Smith argued that Finlay's pastoralism aligned with this latter category, as evidenced by his depiction of weapons and machines irrupting into pastoral space. The complex pastoral constitutes a dialectic that runs throughout Finlay's work, Smith posited, expanding on Alec Finlay's claims that his father's work constitutes a lifelong dialogue with oppositions. While Finlay's early work in the 1960s began with a search for the rural idyll, the (often overlooked) short stories he wrote during this time show an engagement with politics of land

ownership, such as *The Sea-Bed & Other Stories* (1958). Smith contrasted the binomial status of Finlay's garden as further indication of the complex pastoral: Stonypath as a recuperation of the domestic; Little Sparta as its imperialistic, militaristic reaction.

Presentations recommenced in the afternoon with panels 5a and 5b running simultaneously, both exploring and showcasing creative responses to Finlay's work. Alice Tarbuck's paper, "Ecology is Nature-Philosophy Secularized": Ecologies of Form in the Garden-works of Thomas A. Clark & Ian Hamilton Finlay', focussed on aesthetic and philosophical connections between Finlay's later garden-works and those of fellow Scottish poet and contemporary, Thomas A. Clark, with whom he became acquainted in the 1970s. Tarbuck introduced Clark's work as similarly replete with references to philosophers and poets, including the clear influence of Gertrude Stein on *Tansley Buttons*, and aphoristic style inherited from William Shenstone. Where Clark's practice differs from Finlay's in this sense is a preference for indirect allusions over direct references; the quotations, nods and derivations in Clark's poetry are more difficult to ascertain. Tarbuck explored their shared investment in the figure of the 'gardener-poet' through the 'secularisation' of Nature-Philosophy, the principles of which she argued are not dismissed altogether, but rather diffused throughout the poets' works. Conceptions of 'transcendent' nature from Goethe, Hegel and Schelling are tempered and subject to fragmentation through the medium of sculptural garden-works and Clark's publishing endeavour, Moschatel Press. Through this diffusion Tarbuck suggested the work of both poets offers new and engaging ways of refiguring Nature-Philosophy for contemporary culture.

Continuing the theme of Finlay's influence, Jack Thacker's "Detached Sentences on Gardening": Ian Hamilton Finlay and Alice Oswald' began with an anecdote concerning the two poets, in which Oswald visited Little Sparta in 1990 to be interviewed for the role of head gardener. The interview, related from an interview with Oswald in *Harper's Bazaar*, comprised rowing side by side over Lochan Eck, with Finlay asking such questions as 'What is the difference between a fragment and an aphorism?'. While we don't know how Oswald answered, she didn't get the job. Thacker acknowledged differences between the poets – notably Oswald's championing and Finlay's dislike of Ted Hughes – before glossing further connections and overlaps.

Following the gardener interview, their correspondence continued for seven years, and Oswald cited him as a major influence for her first collection. Thacker forged further comparisons, declaring them both garden-poets in the Georgic tradition – embracing the violence of nature – and their mutual treatment of language as ‘physical object’. The influence of Finlay’s aphoristic style on Oswald can be charted, Thacker argued, by tracing the increasing presence of fragmentation in her work.

The poet nick-e melville then delivered an artistic response to Finlay’s work, presenting a series of concrete poems created from Finlay’s initials: IHF. melville broke down and rearranged the letters of Finlay’s name into suggestive images and poems, before reading from a hilariously and provocatively redacted version of Yves Abrioux’s *Visual Primer*, in which every word except those beginning with I, H, and F had been deleted. The performance called back pleasingly to Drew Milne’s détournements from the morning keynote.

Panel 5b, entitled ‘Models of Order: Finlay, the Visual Arts and Craft’, placed Finlay’s work in an art-historical context, but developed into a fascinating discussion of the importance of collaboration to Finlay’s oeuvre, and its attendant gender politics. Kendra Sullivan explored Finlay’s practice in relation to the ‘Oceanic Turn’ in western cultural imagination, touching on his sculptural pieces produced around the word ‘wave’, and bringing to light connections between Finlay’s maritime works and those of his artistic contemporaries. Lila Matsumoto then delivered a highly engaging account of Finlay’s long-term creative relationship with embroiderer Pamela Champion. In part a detailed factual survey of that relationship, Matsumoto’s paper quoted from an intimate but at times disquieting correspondence, which laid bare the various dichotomies imposed upon their collaboration: between male artist and female craftsperson, the former the work’s animating spirit, the latter a faithful aide or auxiliary bringing it to physical realisation. Leaning on ideas from Rozsika Parker’s 1984 text *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Matsumoto pointed out that much of Champion’s collaborative input, notably on Finlay’s French-Revolutionary swags and flags, went unacknowledged, unlike that of his ‘artist’ collaborators. She also noted the speed and efficiency with which Champion, a ‘non-artist’, was expected to complete her assignments, which

were sometimes presented to her in the language of domestic feminine duty. The paper, and the animated discussion that followed, pointed to the possibility of a multifaceted engagement with the gendering of collaboration in Finlay's practice, one with particular implications for his working relationships with Wild Hawthorn Press co-editor Jessie McGuffie and, pre-eminently, his collaborator on Little Sparta Sue Finlay.

Panel 6 began with the architect and Saint Juste Vigilante, Malcolm Fraser, delivering a moving presentation entitled 'Circumnavigation: Ian Hamilton Finlay at Little Sparta and Rousay'. Having worked at Little Sparta in the 1980s, Fraser talked about the significance of exile in Finlay's work, while speculating about the poet's influence on his work as an architect, having designed the Scottish Poetry Library and Stromness Pierhead. Following Fraser, a paper by the composer John Purser, who couldn't attend, entitled 'Music, Time and the Suspension of Disbelief – Collaborating with IHF' was adroitly delivered by Alice Tarbuck. The presentation discussed Finlay's film *Carrier Strike* (1977), which Purser scored, and the panel finished with a screening of the piece.

Susan Stewart's concluding keynote 'Between Spoils and Gifts' applied an art historical lens to Finlay's practice. Expanding on his place in twentieth-century art history, Stewart situated Finlay's work within wider artistic traditions stretching back to antiquity. An outline of Finlay's generation was sketched, including Yves Klein, Andy Warhol, Robert Indiana, Cy Twombly, Claes Oldenberg, Joseph Beuys, and the Art & Language movement. Examples of other artists' text works proved fascinating comparisons, identifying overlaps and departures from Finlay's work. Where Warhol et al. sourced texts from commercial culture, paving the way for 'appropriation' as practice, Finlay revised Roman traditions of epigraphy and inscription. Stewart discussed Finlay's work in terms of 'spoliation', a common practice in late antiquity of repurposing material remains of other (usually religious) buildings for new constructions. Spoliation went beyond mere thrift to serve an ideological function, conveying the power of the new religion over the old. Finlay's spoliation, Stewart proposed, was similarly ideological in nature. Retrieval and judgement of the past (as opposed to nostalgia) characterised the Roman sentiment, which in turn

spoliated Greek, Egyptian and Etruscan culture, repurposing religion, philosophy and aesthetics. Reading Finlay's work in this classical context sheds light on another shared thematic: an obsession with war and conflict. Stewart explored this both through Finlay's myriad war-themed poems and sculptures, as well as the previously mentioned 'wars' with the Scottish Arts Council in the 1970s and 80s that would lead Finlay to abandon the Hellenistic idyll of 'Stonypath', and rechristen it 'Little Sparta'. Stewart concluded by raising a pertinent point: if Little Sparta is a civilisation in microcosm, it is one with no place for women, and therefore, it offered her no acceptable ideal.

Saturday 15th July

Following the conclusion of lectures and panels, delegates were invited to travel together to Little Sparta, near the village of Dunsyre in a crook of the Pentland Hills. We walked together up the long drive in the grey content of the weather, and nothing could have seemed more fitting. There is a great spirit of place at Stonypath, a deep historical and botanical imagination cultivated by Ian Hamilton Finlay and Sue Finlay, only accentuated by the fresh memory of the intensive discussions of the preceding two days. And it was profoundly affecting to navigate the garden in the intermittent drizzle, singly or in groups, uncovering artworks seen previously in slides and on hand-outs, or only described in lectures, papers, and presentations. The monolith of the Nuclear Sail standing blackly against Lochan Eck; the decapitated golden head of Apollo gazing enigmatically from amongst low grasses and ferns; the faithful stepping stones and impish dead-ends; the inscribed benches lining the shielding hedges down Huff Lane. In the library of Stonypath we were treated to another fine presentation from Nancy Perloff, and introductions to the work of The Little Sparta Trust by trustees Andrew Patrizio and Alexia Holt. A recently established programme, 'Sharing Little Sparta' accommodates (non-residential) artist residencies in the garden and library, and we were presented with contributions from two recent participants. Firstly a recorded reading from resident artist Sarah Rose, and then a series of moving, meditative readings by the poet Peter Manson, excerpted from the blog written during his residency at the garden, including speculations

about the future of Little Sparta as we hurtle into the deep end of the Anthropocene. 'That's how influence works, of course', said Manson, 'you don't start writing in a particular way because you've read somebody's poetry, you find yourself reading and responding to that poetry because you've arrived at a point in your own writing where you're able to understand how it works from inside.' This idea would, we think, have resonated deeply with many of the people present at Little Sparta that day, whether encountering for the first or for the hundredth time the work of Ian Hamilton Finlay.

Competing Interests

Please Note: The two paragraphs discussing Panel 2a and Panel 5b were written by the symposium organiser, Greg Thomas (rather than the named authors), in order to cover the symposium's parallel sessions.

How to cite this article: Hale, D and Lafarge, D 2017 *Ian Hamilton Finlay: Little Fields, Long Horizons*, University of Edinburgh, 13–15 July 2017. *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry*, 9(1): 12, pp. 1–13, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/biip.59>

Published: 04 October 2017

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