
Opening Extract from...

Wild Voices

Journeys Through Time in the Scottish Highlands

Written by Mike Cawthorne

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Preface

In the anonymity of a hillslope above Loch Monar in Wester Ross is a water-filled cleft. I stumbled across it one blazing hot day in April. It was cool and shady in there. I sat for a while, then I began to follow it upstream, picking over polished stones and feeling along water-smoothed sides. It went deep into the hill and at the same time opened out. A small waterfall spilled onto a great angular rock that had once belonged to the side of the mountain. The whole world was there. The story of a stream and a hill in its making. Though I have searched I never found it again, but it runs clear in my mind and I know that out there somewhere the stream still goes around rocks and over pebbles and collects in pools and sings in voices and holds in its watery palm the sun and sky.

Which is how I remember it at any rate. Probably the great conundrum of outdoor writing, maybe any writing, is to bridge the gulf between what we see and feel and what we are able to capture on the page and present to the world. In that spirit are undertaken the journeys in this book, tales of adventure on foot and by canoe through some of the last wild places in Scotland. Each journey is haunted by another writer, someone whose passion for a region was for me a large part of its appeal. I wondered how my experience would differ from those of, say, Iain Thomson, or Rowena Farre. In the case of novelist Neil Gunn the experience I am sharing is that of the fictional Kenn. Gunn's lyricism chimes with his subject matter – a boy seeking the source of a river, and himself. I hoped that

by entering into the spirit of a similar journey – on this occasion by following the River Findhorn – I might have an insight not only into the character of Kenn but discover a truth about the river, and maybe even about life.

The exploration of the lochans of Assynt deepened my belief that, regardless of ownership, here is a place so beautiful and unspoilt it cries out for legislative protection. We cannot any longer rely on benevolent landowners to keep out developers with their wind-farm and hydro proposals. Canoeing the extraordinary loch system there was an adventure partly inspired by the poet Norman MacCaig, who wrote prolifically about this area and often passed his long schoolteacher's holidays here. A part of Assynt was one of the first in the Highlands to come under community ownership when it was purchased by local crofters in 1988. But MacCaig in his long poem *A Man in Assynt*, which predates the community buyout, asks whether something so ancient in provenance and beautiful and open to all can in fact be 'owned'. This raises the question, does ownership matter? It certainly does to cash-strapped crofters.

In Ardnamurchan there is probably no greater dichotomy than that between how locals view a place and the experience of visitors. Or at least there was. It is about as far west as you can reach in mainland Britain, a peninsula of achingly beautiful beaches and a stark rocky coastline. But don't worry it for a living. Alasdair Maclean's parents were the last crofters here to try and it nearly broke them. The author needs metaphors when weighing his own and his parents' experience, and perhaps to make it palatable for the reader he somehow manages to elevate their story to the level of a fable, though underlying his elegant narrative are sweat and

tears and crushed hopes. It informed deeply my own trek around the wild Ardnamurchan coast.

Rowena Farre's tale of growing up with her aunt Miriam on a remote croft in the shadow of Ben Armine in Sutherland before the war, along with a menagerie that included a seal, a pair of otters and a pet squirrel, is altogether happier. She and her aunt embraced their isolation and revelled in the solitude, drawing what they needed from the land, and Miriam's allowance. The idyll painted by Farre was lapped up by reviewers and thousands of readers, but a few questioned the book's authenticity. A copy had lain for years on my parents' bookshelf, and later in life I realised I knew the empty moorland of the story's backdrop. Setting out to uncover its truth or otherwise would also give me an opportunity to revisit, perhaps for the last time, a truly wild area before its industrialisation by huge wind turbines.

Like many who love wild places I am torn on the issue of wind farms. To do our bit to moderate the effects of global warming probably requires the expansion of this form of energy, yet I am saddened when our diminishing portions of wildland are used for this purpose.

It is a dilemma that author and environmental campaigner Alastair McIntosh is only too aware of. Focusing largely on his native Hebrides, he catalogues our appalling history of disconnection with the natural world, but he offers hope as well, with tales of opposing the corporate interests behind the Harris superquarry and supporting the Isle of Eigg community buy-out. McIntosh's vision is for humanity to readjust its relationship with nature. I'd long wanted to explore the lochs of Lewis, close to where McIntosh had lived as a child. What, I wondered, did his message hold for these quiet, rarely-visited backwaters?

Maybe a deep attachment to any one place can only be nurtured through a prolonged stay in that place. Iain Thomson spent five years in the mountain fastness at the west end of Loch Monar, living with his family in a small croft that was then one of the remotest dwellings on mainland Scotland. Thomson's memoir has an overriding elegiac quality, for reasons that become apparent.

Living remotely and usually self-sufficiently in the Highlands had been the norm for millennia, though it was unusual by the time Thomson took up his posting in the mid-1950s, and virtually unheard of when his book appeared some twenty years later. Readers, including this one, were fascinated. I wondered if books like Thomson's tap into an age-old yearning for the wild and lonely places, whether our present day stravaigings there are just that. And I discovered something else. The land the author so lovingly portrays and was forced to leave is now more developed, more moribund and emptier than at any time since prehistory.

Thomson is a great watcher of the seasons, but what if that ability is denied you? Does it lessen the hill experience? The mountaineer and poet Syd Scroggie believed not, and we have his words as proof, vivid accounts of his extraordinary blind walks and climbs. On these journeys Syd found something beyond the visual or physical. He loves wildness, but would have been unaware of the huge turbines that now press against the boundaries of his beloved Cairngorms, unless he happened to bump into one. Syd's focus is on an inner, almost mystical experience, triggered by sounds and textures and the elemental, that he attempts to distill in his poetry. When attempting to follow in his footsteps, I was led astray. Much to Syd's delight I am sure.

So on each journey, alone or with a friend, I travelled with a ghost, a literary companion if you like, who offered a fresh perspective and a different story. All these writers enriched my experience, adding layers to my understanding. They made me laugh and gasp and nearly cry and sometimes be annoyed. If at times they struggle to convey the depth and meaning of their attachment to a place then they share that failing with the rest of us. We all struggle. Our offerings are painfully incomplete.

Note on Authors

All authors are referred to by their surnames, with two exceptions: when referring to Alasdair Maclean I use 'Alasdair' to distinguish him from his father, and I use 'Syd' for Syd Scroggie because I knew him personally.

Wild River

It's difficult to know where the river ends and the sea begins. Probably there isn't such a place.

Two of us and the ghost of a third were standing on a kind of peninsula at the edge of Findhorn Bay, the river opening out from behind and to our left, the bay ahead. The ground was sun-dried that day, but water would soon be there from the front and back – more from the back – greater amounts of tree debris and brash had been dumped by the river than styrofoam and plastic left by the sea. A place at the margins, unsure of its future, like the lands beneath the man-made Culbin Forest a mile across the bay.

Late in 1694 a huge storm swept the coastal sand dunes and sent them across the surrounding farmland, which was then an alluvial and high-yielding area known locally as the 'granary of Moray'. The storm was just the tipping point, and in a few weeks the entire estate comprising sixteen farms and a mansion house became a wasteland of drifting sand. Fresh dunes blocked the River Findhorn, damming its waters into a huge lake. With no way out, the waters rose and after some years broke through and carried away the small port of Findhorn, a centre for shipping and mercantile trade. Today not the slightest trace of it remains.

Neither of us could visualise such ruin as we gazed over the bay on a warm sunny morning, the air lively with gulls and oystercatchers, families of ducks bobbing on the water, white-sailed dinghies moving slowly at the opposite

side. On the coast beyond the narrow entrance to the bay and the present-day village of Findhorn is a substantial sand bar, and I suppose at the start of this journey we should have been there, not here, facing out to sea, looking across the Moray Firth to Sutherland and beyond to Caithness, 'land of exquisite light', which is how the writer Neil Gunn described his home country. Gunn was born there in 1891 and lived his early years in the village of Dunbeath; the river rising on the moors and flowing through its small harbour became the central focus for one of his most evocative works, *Highland River.*

Highland River haunted me from its first reading. At its core is the story of a boy, Kenn, and his relationship with a river. A pivotal event early in the tale is when nine-year-old Kenn lands a huge salmon with only cunning and bare hands, and from then on, as Gunn writes, 'the river became the river of life for Kenn'. It grew in his consciousness and was like a thread that joined somehow the delight and wonder of his world, the goodness of his life, the unspoken love of his parents and the close-knit community of the fisher village. Even during the depths of horror of the First World War, amid the mud and blood and bombs of the trenches, the river rose before him 'with the clearness of a chart'. Two decades later, with his parents now dead and their old home lived in by strangers, he returns to the river of his youth, this time in a bid to reach its source in the distant moors, a place he'd dreamed of but never seen. A final journey of aching sadness and discovery takes him not only to the source of the river but into the mystery of his own heart.

Like the best literature, *Highland River* reaches beyond its own time and sings in the memory. In ways I couldn't altogether fathom, it swayed my view of the world. Kenn

came out of the pages and into my life, a ghostly companion on many trips, a figure who grew in my mind until he shadowed my footfalls across the Highlands and beyond; yet he was also someone about whom I had misgivings. I thought he might join me on another exploration, this one on his own familiar ground. To what extent, I wondered, would my experience of a river grant me a glimpse into Kenn's world, and bring something imaginatively drawn from the page into the bright, sharp-edged world of the senses?

My desire to follow the Findhorn from its outspill here to its beginnings deep in the Monadhliath Mountains would also provide a chance to solve a small riddle. Writers about the Findhorn have long disagreed on the exact location of the river's source. I thought that by simply following the riverbank, always taking the larger branch wherever the channel divided, would eventually get me there. A few lines hidden away in *The Old Statistical Account of Scotland* claim that the fountainhead lies close to the summit of Carn Ban, 3,045 feet, where a stream issues from Cloiche Sgoilte, a 'cloven stone', a large rock with fissures in it.

It was an image to hold onto, at least, and I carried it as we turned away from the bay, leaving the briny marsh and rot, and followed a river that ran gently, making little sound beyond a murmur of tiny bubbles. After a mile or so we eased around a bend and it was suddenly fast; not quite rapids but with an urgent swirl on its reddish surface, the water hurrying past stony banks with an unending clucking and something lower – a stone-roll coming from deep. So close to the sea and crossing land that was virtually flat I'd expected a broad and lazy spill, but it was narrow and jumpy and bristling. Small drifts of foam spoke of a

tumult higher up, and when I stopped to place my hand in its current I felt the icy cold of recent snowmelt.

The Findhorn chugged through a corridor of alders and birch, all green with new leaf, as were the giant hogweed that were uncoiling along the bank. White-flowering anemones brightened the shady places and the sward by our feet was lush and thick with wild flowers. At some distance from a main road and with only the sound of water in our ears it was peaceful walking, and we felt buoyant in ourselves at the start of this journey, if a little cumbered with our loads. The path was wide and well-beaten, from the endless footings of fishermen we assumed, but fresh tyre marks in the mud told another story. Sure enough, after a few minutes there came the rising pitch of a revving engine, a sound that in seconds drowned all others. A trail bike sped towards us. We pressed against a bush as it flew by, upriver, the noise receding, then rising again as the rider gunned down and back along the opposite bank, bumping and whining past an angler who looked resignedly at the water. When something choked the noise there was a second of absolute silence before the river and bird-sound and soft whorl of breeze came back to us.

Crossing the footbridge at Broom of Moy, we skirted regular fields of oilseed rape and more stands of hogweed, reaching a railway bridge where we spoke to a man and woman who lived a short walk from this spot. 'Ah, the bikes.' The lady's face hardened and she told us a modern tale of young teenagers who built fires by the river, drank themselves stupid and shouted obscenities into the night. We'd seen the charred driftwood and ash piles.

A mile further on we waited out a shower beneath the flood arch of Forres Bridge and listened indifferently to