Still on the Sound

Michael Faulkner

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Extract

Still on the Sound

A seasonal look at island life

Michael Faulkner

Blackstaff Press

FRONT ENDPAPER IMAGE
My parents sailing *Angelique*, a 44-foot sloop belonging to my uncle, in the early 1960s

BACK ENDPAPER IMAGE
My grandfather James Faulkner sailing *Briden* (as in 'Brian-Dennis'), a 40-foot gaff-headed cutter, Sound of Sleat, 1932

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Introduction

On a pleasant winter morning in 2007, I took the dinghy across Ringhaddy Sound and drove the three miles to Killyleagh for a working lunch at Picnic Delicatessen with Helen Wright, of Blackstaff Press.

On the table, so to speak, was a possible new writing project. A year had passed since the publication of *The Blue Cabin,* which began with our unplanned relocation in 2001 to Islandmore after the loss of my business, and consequently our home, in Scotland. My family's association with the island goes back many years. My grandfather acquired it in the 1930s, farmed it for ten years and sold it on; then my father managed to buy back just the cabin twenty years later; and when my mother, to whom the cabin passed on my father's death, offered it to Lynn and I as a base from which to take stock and move forward, we didn't have to think about it for long.

Some of my fondest childhood memories are of summer days on Islandmore in the early 1970s, and I know it was hugely important to my father, ever the family man, that during the most tumultuous years of his political career he was able to load family and dogs into a small boat and cross Ringhaddy Sound to enjoy brief – for the most part, very brief – interludes of peace and quiet at the cabin.

For many years, Lynn and I had come to Islandmore for a few days in August, but no one, as far as we were aware, had ever spent the winter there. *The Blue Cabin* chronicled our first year as full-time residents: the challenges of boat-only access, no mains electricity and a building with the insulation values of a tent; one or two close calls on the water; and the slow realisation, formed and firmed up in small but irreversible increments by the influence of this most inspirational corner of Ireland, that there is more to life than balance sheets.

Several further meetings, a draft outline and at least one more cappuccino at Picnic later, this book began to take shape. A few things, we agreed from the start. First, although to some extent a sequel, the new project should stand on its own. Also, it should be more richly illustrated. During question and answer sessions at slide shows in the year since publication, someone from the audience had invariably said, 'Have you thought of publishing your photographs?'; and I had invariably replied, without very much to go on, 'Of course.'

Another frequently asked question, 'Are you still on the island?', and the usual follow-up, 'Looking back, was it a change for the better?' provided a further requirement for the new book – that in some sense, with readers of the first one in mind, it should carry on where *The Blue Cabin* left off.

And the fourth idea, much advocated by Helen, was that rather than being simply a collection of photographs with words, for browsing, the book should have a structure – some kind of narrative progression – which invited readers to actually *read* it. So, on the basis that cabin life on an otherwise uninhabited island is shaped, more or less, by the weather, the tides and the time of year, we decided to go with the four seasons, beginning with winter.

I enjoyed that idea, if only because the change of seasons is so subjective. From the top deck of a London bus, looking down on early morning commuters, winter might be hunched shoulders, woolly scarves and a somewhat quickened pace. From the window table of a truck stop in Chilliwack, British Columbia, it might be winter tyres and snow chains. But for Lynn and I on Islandmore, winter's onset will forever be associated with one just one name: George.

From Ringdufferin, looking southwards towards the Mournes


Winter

George

When George first introduced himself, he frightened the life out of me. It was a still, cool night in December 2007. Lynn had gone to Edinburgh to deliver paintings for the Scottish Gallery's Christmas show, so the cabin was in darkness as I approached: unusual and a little unnerving, as without some light as a point of reference, the foreshore can seem to come at you quite suddenly – out of the black, as it were. Once or twice in the past, straining to make out the jetty on a dark night and a big sea, I have met the marker pole by mistake, which may account for its slightly drunken loll in any kind of weather.

I tied up using a very quick, and quick-release, knot with the quaintly romantic name of Highwayman's or Cowboy's Hitch – depending on your taste in cultural icons – slung a bag over my shoulder, grabbed a couple of peat bales and walked carefully towards the cabin, following the pale grey lines of the plank walkway under my feet. At the very top I almost took a sideways step into oblivion when a rasping and slightly guttural grunting sound came from just a few feet away, below me and to the right. I stood very still and peered down into the darkness, half expecting the head of Strangford Lough's own *Dobhar-chu*, the Hound of the Deep, to rise silently towards me and fix me with its fiery gaze. Instead, the same sound came again; but although I still couldn't see the source, it had about it a plaintive quality that made me feel curiosity rather than alarm.

Had he been a year or two younger our terrier Rabbie, who was at my feet, would have been beside himself, but he had obviously neither heard nor scented a thing – either that or he took the intruder for a big friendly dog, and with the confidence of a home player, chose to ignore it. The two of us continued across the grass, up to the veranda and along to the front door, where I fumbled with

the keys until I found one that worked, reached for the torch that always hangs behind the door on the inside, and made my way back to the jetty.

By the light of the torch, the first thing I saw was the reflection from two big eyes staring up at me from the shingle drift at the foot of the sea wall. I shone the beam to the side and knelt on the jetty for a better look. Round, fluffy, mottled and frankly adorable at such close quarters, it was a baby seal, and it wasn't about to leave just because I had turned up. On the contrary, it was sufficiently relaxed to turn its head away, and wriggle slightly from side to side, so that the shingle nest on which it was lying conformed more closely to the shape of its body. I shone the torch around, looking for an adult, but clearly it was unaccompanied: lost, abandoned – my imagination began to work overtime – perhaps sick or injured; no doubt starving . . .

Food. Water. I instinctively headed off in search of both. On my way to the fridge, which in the absence of an electricity supply to the island is a tiny gas-run caravan fridge in the generator shed behind the cabin, it dawned on me that fresh water is not something that would be available to your average seal; and also that on the food side I hadn't the faintest idea, aside from fish, what a seal – particularly a baby seal – would eat. For all I knew (later, this did in fact turn out to be the case) its last meal might have been its mother's milk. But I could think of no way to administer milk at this time of night without distressing the poor thing, and went through the contents of the fridge looking for something more substantial. What, I wondered, would *I* enjoy if I were a hungry seal pup on an unknown shore in the middle of winter? Salar's excellent hot-smoked salmon seemed ideal. I tore off a good chunk and headed back, through the gate that leads onto some stone steps to the foot of the sea wall, and crouched beside the patient. It still didn't appear in the least concerned, so I left the salmon beside its little nose, took the boat out to the mooring, rowed back to the jetty and went to bed, praying that our visitor would survive the night. Before blowing out the candle, I texted Lynn with the news, and she texted back, signing off with the typically optimistic thought that we had better come up with a name. Without



George meandering to the water on his first morning – taken on the mobile phone

knowing whether it was a boy or a girl, or indeed whether it was a grey or a common seal, I suggested Gracie.

I slept little, and got up early. Pulling on a coat, I tiptoed to the top of the jetty and looked down. No sign; just a seal-shaped indentation in the shingle, and the salmon, exactly where I had left it. I looked around. The tide was almost fully gone, so I had a clear view of several hundred yards of foreshore on either side of the jetty. Nothing at all. Ah well, she must simply have rested up for the night, leaving on the high tide in the early hours. A good result, really, though I did feel a pang of regret that we hadn't been able to get better acquainted in daylight; and indeed, that Lynn hadn't been with me the night before.

I fed Rabbie, took toast and coffee to the window seat in the living room, and settled down to write, keeping an eye on the water for anything unusual. When I did catch a movement out of the corner of my eye, it came not from Ringhaddy Sound but from the jetty – or rather, from underneath the jetty. In no particular hurry, Gracie was making her methodical way between the timber uprights, perhaps ten or twenty yards from the sea wall. When I had gone to check earlier, she must have been directly below my feet. As I watched, she emerged from under the walkway and lolloped in a most ungainly way towards the sea, pausing every so often to look around her. I couldn't lay my hands on my camera, so the series of photos above were taken using the mobile phone. They would be the first of many.

It took Gracie a good twenty minutes to make the water, and when she did, she rolled over a couple of times in the shallows – and promptly came ashore again. By this time I was standing on the jetty, and far from being shy or suspicious now that she could see me properly for the first time, she lolloped over, looked up at me with her big black eyes and grunted in a most pathetic way, as if to say, 'Any chance of a fresh herring?'

I rang Lynn and we agreed that before rushing ashore to the fishmonger, I should call the seal rescue centre at Exploris Aquarium in Portaferry, some six miles to the south, for advice. Tania Singleton came to the phone and I explained the situation and said I would send a photograph to her mobile. She called back right away. 'He's a grey seal,' she said. (Oops.) 'About three or four weeks old. It's normal for pups to be left to fend for themselves after being weaned. When they get hungry enough, they find food for themselves. I would advise against feeding him.' (Oops again.) She added that it was unusual, though not unknown, for seal pups to turn up so close to civilisation. I explained that Islandmore is otherwise uninhabited, with boat-only access, and that Lynn and I – and Rabbie – are what passes for civilisation here, and she remarked that in that case he was a lucky pup: he would be undisturbed, but we could still keep an eye. If he lost too much condition, or stayed around too long, we should let her know – they could come and collect him, care for him and release him when he was ready.

All very reassuring. I left to collect Lynn from the airport, happy that there was no more to be done and that nature would simply take its course. By the time we returned, he would no doubt be off exploring, learning from other seals how to fish – getting on with the business of survival. On the way back to the island, having discovered that she was a he, I showed Lynn the photos and we re-christened Gracie *George*. I was looking forward to showing Lynn where he had spent the night, but was careful to downplay the chances that she would actually meet him – when it comes to animals of any kind, Lynn is a veritable Dr Dolittle – and I tried to keep my own expectations low as we crossed Ringhaddy Sound.

As we approached the jetty, not only was George still there – he actually swam

out to meet us, circling the dinghy, diving, resurfacing on the other side of the jetty, and generally giving every appearance of being pleased to see us. Lynn, of course, wasted no time in getting to know him, and over the ensuing weeks, a pattern was established. Every night George would sleep at the sea wall, exactly where he had first come ashore, and every day he would kick about in the shallows or bask on the shingle, or more often, on the timber planks of the jetty itself. Lynn and he would keep up a running conversation, she sitting on the jetty and he on the foreshore below, or vice versa. Incredibly, he would allow us to step *around* him when we walked down the jetty; and when I started the outboard, I had to be very sure I knew where he was, as he developed the disconcerting habit of surfacing beside the propeller, raising his head and shoulders above the water and flapping his flippers like something out of Sea World or Disney. He very much put me in mind, in fact, of Skippy the Bush Kangaroo.

All the while, although it broke Lynn's heart, we resisted the temptation to feed him. The advice was that in the wild, so rich in nutrients is their mothers' milk, seal pups will go without food for weeks before becoming hungry enough to feed for themselves; and that to provide food, as it were, for free, would be to risk leaving them vulnerable later in their development. An adult grey seal will get through up to ten pounds of fish per day: quite a responsibility, should he ever become even partly dependent on humans in the wild.

Very logical; very hard – and we have often pondered the outcome had we succumbed.

We'll never know. In all, George stayed with us for three and a half weeks. Just before Christmas, we both had to be on the mainland for a couple of days and nights straight, and when we got back to the island he had gone. For days we kept an eye on the sound, and when he didn't appear, consoled ourselves with the thought that after so long without food, he would be out there feeding for Ireland.

But in fact he did return. I have it in my journal as 7 February. I was taking the boat out to the mooring when a young seal surfaced a couple of times near

the south entrance to the sound. Nothing unusual about that; we would see grey seals perhaps once or twice a week from the cabin, albeit normally adults and normally quite shy – typically, they surface once or twice while they progress down the sound, and then they're gone. But I called a few times, and this one swam closer. I shouted to Lynn, and she walked down the foreshore, calling as she went. I decided to stay out of it, and as Lynn stood at the lough's edge, George came into the shallows and stretched his head out of the water, turning little circles, diving and resurfacing. I suppose they chatted for ten minutes; and since that day George has done regular swim-bys, always from south to north, and always hugging the Islandmore shoreline. If we see him in time, we stop what

Top: Lynn with Shona MacDonald, aka the seal-caller

we're doing and pass the time of day.

Most recently, George showed up while our friend Shona was staying. Lynn happened to spot him first, off Eagle Point; he surfaced briefly, then disappeared. Shona, who sings with The Trufflehunters and claims to speak fluent seal, stood on the jetty, cupped her hands to her mouth and called – a single note, long and mournful; and George surfaced by the mooring and swam in zigzags towards her, staring, fascinated; wondering, perhaps, whether someone had died. Lynn walked over, clapping her hands (which confused him, surely) and shouting encouragement; and for fifteen minutes the three of them hung out. George turned over at one point and swam on his back, bending his neck forwards to keep a weather eye on the others.

I don't know whose behaviour was more eccentric, but it wasn't George's.