
The Bothy King

By John Coughlan

There was a man called Clive, or that's what he said his name was, who lived in splendid wild isolation in the wild mountains between Dundonnell and Fisherfield. He appeared to us to be in hiding, not from the law but from the world and whatever demons he carried within him. As much a hermit as any Lopon lama or Hindi holy man in his Himalayan cave dependent on charitable strangers.

Of course we had no idea of what we would find when we parked the 4X4 at Corriemulzie Lodge about 5pm and began to shoulder our loads. The walk in was along the side of a river on a good landrover track of granite and wobbly boulders and our last chance to prune our kit down to the bare necessities of bothy living. Five of us; me, Des, Stevie, Boab the Boulder, and Big John. We had planned to drive into the bothy but that was cheating we thought.

We carried the route in our heads.

'Follow this track south, the Mulzie river on the left until the track forks East along a valley with a deep burn to the right.'

If we did not make the bothy by nightfall, then the moon would light our way. We shouldered our rucks and set off at a steady loping gait, soon into a silent cadence, our boots eating up the mile, back and fro through each other as we stopped for water or to rest. The light began to fail into that silvery gloaming blurred at the edges, so we rested at Alt Na Cheil then forded the river to the east, dry shod on huge stones. Seanna Bhraigh stood to our right now, dressed in silver and black. The bothy nestled tiny as a Lego brick about three miles to our front; smoke trickled from one of its chimneys.

Now there is a bothy etiquette well known to all hillmen and also a latent disappointment about not being there first. The path led us to a flat green place in

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front of the bothy falling down to the shores of Loch a 'Choire Mhoir. The building was in good repair, new roof and windows, the stonework had been repointed. Taking all this in at a glance we dumped our gear outside, called out hullo and entered the first door on our left. This was a large 'L' shaped timber floored room with a rough stone fireplace. To our right another opening took us into a small stone chamber with a set of bunks and a bare metal bed. There were mattresses but could see they would be better boiled for soup than slept upon. Rough sleeping platforms served as bed and board. We checked out the other side of the bothy. The other door was difficult to open but barged in to a strange scene. The room was furnished luxuriously by bothy standards. A real bed sat against the far wall, piled with sleeping bags and duvets. There were rows of stacked boxes around the wall marked with a WD arrow; 24-hour ration packs. To our left an iron grate housed a small fire, casting a ruddy glow across an old battered busted couch a yard before it. Here crouched the two tenants of the bothy, a man and a dog. One gave a low warning growl; the dog I hoped.

In the firelight was a Sawney Bean figure, at his ease with one arm around a dog, or at least a cross between a grizzly bear and a collie. His hair was long grey and wild, his skinny frame swaddled in umpteen coats and trackie bottoms, all stuffed into woolen socks and tied with string. A decrepit pair of filthy trainers reeking of sheepshit were on his feet. He regarded us with a total sense of himself; perfect regality. The Bothy King. Nobody spoke, till Des ventured.

'Hi there, how are you pal?'

He stilled the dog with a hand to its muzzle but stayed silent, just eyeballed us. A short awkward silence fell while we looked over the bothy penthouse.

'So!' Stevie asked, 'we'll take the other room?'

Outfaced by the scarecrow and the grizzly dog we retreated, heaving the sticking door closed behind us. We set to and began to organise ourselves. Feeding was in

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two stages; what you could shove down your neck cold while stoves heated whatever each had brought. Drinking was three stages. Cold drinks or water while coffee and tea and chocolate mixes bubbled to boiling point. Malt drinking is always till after the climb. We sat outside in the last of the light staring across the water at the route up mountain. Stevie said. ‘Why don’t we just go for it? The moon is out, visibility good, clear sky, who’s up for it?’

Ten minutes later I was trailing behind them into the knee high river muttering about bloody maniacs. I would probably have stayed except that my boots now lay on the far bank, a sure way of making sure you will ford. We dried our feet and struggled into dry socks and boots. The young greyhounds took off leaving elderly dwarfs, Stevie and me, to follow on. The night was beautiful, you could have read a newspaper on the way up. The ground was all shadow, blacks and greys and silver, the milky white waterfalls cascading into deep corries. The book time said three hours, but we made it in two fifty, shortly after the other three. They shot away almost immediately leaving Stevie and I at the cairn drinking our hot chocolate and partaking of a celebratory swallie. Below us the centre of the mountain was a collapsed volcano at the bottom of which a huge pool spilled over a cliff down towards the bothy Lochan. A dinosaur would not have been out of place. To the south a huge black weather front was developing so we didn’t loiter and shouldering our kit made off, taking the cliff path on direct line of sight to the river ford.

When we got back to the river Stevie halted to take his boots off but I just waded out into the moonlit water and ploughed across. I entered the bothy soaking and bruised much to the consternation of the rest, gathered around a pitiful fire struggling to consume damp peat bog logs. Sawney Bean sat by our chimney breast clutching an old bean tin with whisky in it. His bear, dog dinosaur collie thing regarded us much as happy meals. We stripped off and after drying ourselves

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flung on our bothy outfits, shoved some scran down our necks and began to help out the boys with the malt situation. The sheep-dip aftershave was coming from our host, The Bothy King, whom the others had discovered was called Clive.

As the pitiful fire and defective flue struggled with the damp pine knots and peat we cooied into a small group around the hearth in a cloud of smoke bullshit midgies and malt. It seemed rude not to include Clive who made polite excuses but was made to stay and join us in bothy tales. We forced our leftovers on him and encouraged him to take a dram or two with nutty bars and bikkies. A polite barter system was soon in swing, producing logs or peat as the guttering fire demanded, as long as the malt and nutty held out. Clive loosened up under our loud delivery of bothy lies while slagging nobody he knew mercilessly. Truth was never allowed to interfere with a good story, mixed with drunken lies and the odd ditty.

‘So Clive. Done any of the hills about here? You been here long?’ Des asked.

Clive glanced shyly about him. ‘Well yes. Here and other places. I got here about a month ago when the RAF Mountain Rescue were here, so I stayed around and helped them.’

‘What were they doing up here?’

‘The bothy used to be named Seanna Bhraigh now called ‘Magoos.’ There’s a plaque outside.’ He paused and eyed the chocolate digestive meaningfully. I pushed them nearer his hand and told him to keep them. He smiled and inclined his head politely, took up his story again. The bothy had been done up in memory of a young man, a pilot killed in Iraq who had walked often in the Dundonnell Hills. His call sign had been “Magoo.” and the airmen had carved the plaque and renamed the bothy after him. ‘They worked hard and made a great job of it.’ said Clive.

A gust of wind blew smoke and ash into the room and puffed out the struggling flame. We automatically set about rebuilding the wood and kindling. Boab observed that they might have been fine builders of roofs and windows but had

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made a total arse of the chimney.

The logs provided by Clive were all still damp so we gave up on the fire thing, put on more layers and wriggled into our maggot bags. Clive seemed unaffected, smiled, and I wondered if he had just got us to dry out his weeks kindling for him. Des couldn't leave it alone, just really curious or maybe because he was a member of the Scottish Bothy Lot.

‘So you're living up here, really.’

Clive didn't take offence. ‘I suppose so. The airmen left me a huge pile of ration packs and stores when they left which was a great relief. Boab asked him where he was from.

‘These days, from wherever I happen to be at the moment, but born in Exeter. I went to Cambridge and then Sandhurst. Royal Engineers, married the right girl.’ He finished the malt. Unbidden I refilled him. I felt that here was a story. ‘Then came Staff College, I was on my way. Then it all went wrong for along with my promotion came Bosnia, remote at first then on site. It was the most dreadful place I had ever been, rotted my soul. My ineptitude to influence anything drove me to despair, drink, and a woman reporter as hurt as I was. Then I fucked it all up. Never email two people at once, not when out on your feet, and halfway down a Jack Daniels bottle. I emailed the long suffering wife a raunchy reporter email and came home to locks changed, lawyers and the rejection of my family. I resigned my commission before I was pushed.’

I was reminded of Peachy Carnehan and his awful tale of survival to Kipling. His words held us rapt as a dancing cobra He spoke softly into the fire, of murder and blood and screaming children and the vast sin of standing, watching. Of huge pits and the sunlit meadows littered with men and boys unaware of the buzzing life around them. And even as they bagged bodies, the faraway chatter of automatic weapons came to them on the flower scented wind, heavy with blood.

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‘I went walkabout and came north, was in Gartnavel for a time, found wandering in Glasgow. Then I got up and just walked away, escaped everything.’ He stopped, his eyes filled with all the sick ancient sins of the world. He stood and opened the door it, the moonlight burst in silvering the smoke filled room in gossamer light. ‘Goodnight boys.’

In the morning he was not there although we saw the dog on the edge of the corrie. We left all our supplies and an old bothy fleece, some spare gloves and I surrendered an old multitool of mine. We marched out in mostly silence and ate quietly that night at Slater’s Inn at Cannich. We left a note in the bothy saying we would be back the last week in May next year, but never any sign of Clive. The Bothy King maybe went up the cliff and decided to see exactly how far he would bounce at the end of the final great fall.