

I Can See For Miles

By Nick Bullivant

The din of the rush-hour is beginning to die down. The day is drawing to a close. The breath from the open window is still mild and warm. I feel the same myself sitting here beside it with a dram on the table. The window looks north west over the city to the low hills and outer suburbs. Light starts will soon be picking out the streets and the tower blocks will be putting on their night show.

I can see clearly now the light is gone.

Beyond the plain, with its myriad human concerns stands the unmistakable cone of a mountain. The mountain is always there. Anyone with eyes to see can usually discern it beyond the chimneys and suburbs and tower blocks. Beyond the low hills and the haze. A reminder, if you like. A clarion, if you need one.

As the city roar dies away and light ebbs from these busy plains the mountain enjoys the afterglow and radiates its presence. A beacon. A warning: There is a whole world beyond this city, a whole civilisation outside this here-and-now. Forget this at your peril.

My family knew the mountain, and many others. Yours did, all our ancestors did. They hunted. They fished. Travelled. So many knew well the outlands beyond the edge of the city.

Were they afraid?

It is night soon. The hills will be bathed awhile in the last of the afterglow, the first of the starlight. Towards midnight a shadow will fall across the crags and folded pleats of the hill as a new moon adds its infinitesimal light to the stars. The deer will stir but will not need to move far to graze the sweet summer grasses, still lingering late on the quiet, high meadows. A meteor may cross the sky. The hill will be vast and deep. Would you be afraid?

Too dark to move, you would be alert to the slightest sound of night on the mountain. A hill-sheep's cough, a trickling stone, the footsteps of a deer across the scree.

At last the light will come breathing back into the eastern sky. The starry blackness will turn so slightly to darkest blue, with a hush of pink as the uppermost haze is touched. Then a halo of rose dropping slowly to the west as the colours of the east still change. The oranges, yellows, and finally - hard, searing, omnipotent - the sun with its orange light, to throw into deep gloom the places not favoured by its unwavering gaze.

..... craving the alms of the sun.

I shiver in the shade of myself. The thin cold draught that plays around me accentuates the feeling of looking outward from the cold reality into the bright world beyond my reach. Into what might have been, might yet be. Will the sun's path bring it round to me?

Of course they were frightened, those ancestors of ours. How long would it take to travel from, say, Lochaber? Days? With a good chance of meeting caterans, driven out from society to the inhospitable Highlands, making easy pickings of the exhausted traveller, there might be no way back at all. What of the delays? The strength-sapping wind and cold, drenching rain, when the only pleasure is in keeping going, the warmth of movement preventing the cold from clutching the very innards. The detours, the swollen floods and impassable fords. How did they cope? They were hard. They didn't need to climb mountains to find their challenges and difficulties, the hard times came and found them.

I've known all these - and more. The deep snow that makes every step an effort fit to be my last. The glazed rocks that would admit friction to no mere rubber soled boot. The wind! The main enemy. The wind that has thrown me down like a bolt from the sky.

Those whom the gods would destroy...

Madness. It's madness, creeping into wild places. Arrogance, heaping more and cleverer manifestations of our engineering prowess, our impatience and our greed. The towers and cables. The concrete holes that drain the rivers and flood the straths. The latticework that keeps the mobile phone fraternity in touch, important. The whirring, droning, snarling machinery designed to make it easier to go up so that by a dead-end adaptation of the most beautiful way to traverse and travel the most inhospitable terrain, one may slide down again to the bottom. All in the name of fun, fame, fortune and local employment.

While I am grieving - where are the trees that should populate our hills? Where are the oakwoods with ash and hazel in Glen Coe, or the pinewoods in Glen Banchor? Where are the silvery birchwoods that should overlook Glen Brittle, where stand only deep blankets of conifer, hard, dark and uniform, or vast tracks of ragged stones and despairing heath plants clinging to shreds of peat?

Where are the people too, come to think of it, who might revitalise the glens, the Highlands, the country?

Where have all the young men gone?

It is not the fault of the red deer and grey sheep that they are the cause of so much that is wrong. They, too, are survivors, sitting out the filthy black night of lashing rain and cuffing wind. But it is they who will be culled. One day, in their thousands. Their eyes will close, if they are lucky, on the same dun moorlands they have always known, to which they have been excluded. The forests are no more, they are plantations, and, except at lambing time, the fields are closed.

The prize for surviving must surely go to the ptarmigan and the white hare, and to the great persecuted, hooked beak, clawed talon, golden-eyed eagle. Their bodies are warm when all about them is utterly frozen, buried and white. They seek no artificial means of keeping warm or fed. They bed in the snow or on the cliff without any equipment whatsoever, and wake in the morning to breathe another day of white upon white.

I am, with the eagle, a carnivore, sharing that comfortable feeling, living off the last feast until the next one arrives. Not for me the constant search for food endured by the mountaintop shrew or snow bunting.

On my high wire traverse of the ridge my eye would soar to the peaks and scan the glens in an instant. I would spy the coloured tents far below and calculate how many hours it would be until the occupants awoke to the perfect day and how many more before they hauled their heavy bodies up to my stance, my eyrie.

By then I would be miles away, tiptoeing cheekily along the narrowest cockscomb of the ridge, edging round impassable sections, climbing down the tricky bits, feet reaching below me, handholds low, balancing, looking down, reaching down, move by move. I would be gliding up the easy ascents, laughing at the exposure, striding over the summits on a day long adrenaline high. This is the prerogative of free spirits - eagles, ravens and mountaineers.

.....led by cloud and fire to the land of promise.

Beyond so many peaks, beyond so many days of my life lies the Ben. It is the definite article. The Ben has it all. A big, bald, hard-headed mountain with a heart of granite. A dizzying multitude of flying buttresses, narrow connecting ridges, steep gullies, appalling screes, greasy chimneys, boulders the size of mini-cabs, boulders the size of office blocks. In winter it is decked out to kill. It nearly did for me, but I love it still, even though I shall never see it again.

Of course they came for me. Brought me down. Patched me up. Sent me home. Asked me why. I am nearer the answer now. Sometimes I glance it behind the shifting clouds of doubt. The hidden hold that would transform the crux pitch into a pleasurable challenge, not the doubtful greasy scabble that so often confronts our guilty minds.

The Ben is still there, thank God. Look after it, please. I do still see it, despite these sightless eyes. Do still climb it on the legs I can feel yet. I can move among the mountains without fear or failing, perhaps even more so now that I must be still.

All those years. Those memories are now paying me back in my mind. I may be an absentee lover but I still regard these mountains as mine. They are part of me, and that is part of what it means

to understand Scotland.

Let no-one demean them. They are, together, a national icon as potent as the Saltire.

The light has faded now. The warmth of the dram has faded, too. I give a slight shiver and close the window on the world.