

## **The Croft on the Flowe**

### **By Eddie Barratt**

If you ever decide to walk amongst the Galloway Hills you will find wild areas as remote as anywhere in Scotland. I'll not try to describe the land, whoever it was that named those features in the first place was far more capable than I am of evoking their character; The Dungeon Hills, The Rig of the Jarkness, The Range of the Awful Hand.

Generally soggy underfoot, there's no easy way in. Loch Enoch is a bonny spot; it seems perched amid the mountains, a long walk in or out. The wind rakes up a spray and a constant rain blasts its surface. Water continually oozes from boggy soil into trickles and streams that find their way to feeding the Loch. It's a lovely spot if you like the wild.

On occasion the wind doesn't blow, sometimes the rain doesn't fall. The air can be still, the sky more white than grey, and slowly a river of mist will flow up the valleys from below and meet you. It will be white as snow, as white as the buds of cotton growing in the grass around you. Everything will be silent.

It was my great fortune, some time ago, to find myself walking in the hills a short distance west of Enoch, when the weather calmed and the mist came in. I couldn't see much more than a few feet, but the scene was enchanting, and I knew the way, so I continued on my way.

Loch Enoch was carved by ancient ice out of the tough Granite that gives this area its barren look. It's a deep cold loch that hides a more domestic, or at least agricultural secret. Loch Enoch granite sand once had a reputation as the hardest, finest agricultural sharpening sand available. The Rag and Bones men used to walk the lonely trails out to Loch Enoch, fill a sack with this sand, and traipse out again to sell the sand to local farmers.

It's barren all right, but not holey inhospitable, a few crofters made their livelihoods out in these hills. You can visit, and stay in, one of their old cottages today at Backhill Of Bush, it's a bothy now but until the beginning of the last century it was a farm croft. The family there lived a hard life off the land, with their small group of animals and their crops. They had a pony that was sent for supplies over the trails to Carsphairn, and could be trusted to make the journey its self. It knew the way to go, and it knew by animal instinct never to cross Silver Flowe. Everyone knew not to cross Silver Flowe.

I walked through the mist that evening. The hills stood above me, but all I could see was mist and cotton topped grass. I stumbled upon a wild goat, which looked up, then cantered away out of sight. I walked on.

Silver Flowe: it rises from the shore of the Black Water of Dee gradually up the valley beside the Dungeon Hills. Its half loch, half bog. It's over grown by grass and heather and reeds so that the surface looks almost as though it could bear weight, but it can't. No animals larger than a rabbit venture onto the Flowe, it's unlikely that any that do ever get back. No one knows if any people have ever fallen through. The occasional hiker does go missing up here, but what could make them head for the Flowe?

Somehow though I'd reached the Flowe. I must have veered off course, not that it mattered, now I knew where I was all I had to do was follow the shore until I reached the Loch, then follow it until I reached the track, it was a longer walk but I was well equipped. Twilight was falling and the silent fog was becoming tinged with a smoky blue.

As I trudged along beside the Flowe, light glistening on its watery surface, the cloud enclosed me. I felt isolated, alone. I was in a twenty meter cocoon, the hillside on my right and the Flowe on my left. The air was damp and cool; it smelt of peat, it was almost silent except for the sweetest whisper of a breeze upon the Flowe.

The light was falling. I thought maybe the wind was picking up; the noise across the Flowe seemed to be rising. The sound was all but imperceptible, a gentle melody, it seemed to dance and jig to a playful tune. I sat down for a moment to savor the sound; it seemed to beckon me out onto the Flowe. I must have sat to listen for a while but I'm a rational man so I got up eventually, I wiped the dew off my face and pressed on.

A halo of light glowed ever stronger out of the mist, it was on my left, so maybe this wasn't the Flowe I was walking beside. Was I more lost than I thought? I could swear I could hear a flute now. No, it was the Flowe, I know these hills, and it must be a trick of the light and the wind. It was beautiful though. Eerie. Enticing.

Was it a torch? Was someone stuck on the Flowe? Did they need my help? It was so peaceful, why didn't they call me? The music was so sweet it could melt your heart; it could swallow your soul.

I don't know how this story will escape this place but I'll remind you again; I'm a rational man and I know what I saw. There was a light there, and the music was calling me. I didn't bloody imagine it is what I'm saying. This is real. I couldn't ignore it. I walked out onto the Flowe.

As I approached the light grew brighter, and the music grew stronger, more distinct. I could hear laughter, talking, singing? I seemed to be on a raised passage of grassland amongst the marsh, it meandered a little but it led to the light.

An elderly man approached me; I don't think I was surprised, you know like in a dream? He shook my hand and smiled apologetically up at my face. He wiped the mist off his beard and called behind him, "Here's another one, I think he'll fit in just nicely."

The old man wore tinkers clothing from a bygone age. Hobnail boots and a worn jacket. We approached a small stone croft; candlelight glowed from inside its windows. At the door crowded the strangest assembly I could have imagined, they smiled out at me. They looked so pleased to see me! I was very welcome.

"Oh your home now" a pleasant looking lady said with a grin, she came out and hugged me, she was dressed like an old style photograph of the Scottish peasantry, turn of the century style, "it's so good you made it!"

"Aye, drop yer sack off there" said the old man, then spying my daysack murmured to himself "I could of carried a bit of sand in that canny thing." The croft was whitewashed stone, it radiated warmth, I was weary and inside looked comfortable, comforting.

Inside the cottage was gathered a small group, they seemed to be from all times; the tinkers from when industry was young, a couple of shepherds, had they been looking for lost members of their flock?

The lady stood by a younger girl, she caught my questioning eye and answered "Morag ran out here the one time, I went to get her back, but well, we found this party and we thought we'd stay a while." Morag grinned, and her mother gave her a squeeze around the shoulder.

One man was dressed in furs. He couldn't have been more than sixteen, but looked like he'd seen enough to call himself a man. It must have been his bow and quiver of stone tipped arrows I'd seen outside.

A nymph played flute, she was young and lissome, and she was gorgeous! She was pale, almost white but with chestnut hair and freckles on her cheeks. She was dressed in white. Her flute was made from starlight. Trust me I could see it! I can still see it. Her music fluttered around the room, it raised the heart, she danced lightly, playfully, seductively, she looked at me and blushed a greeting. She continued to play; I don't think she'll ever stop.

"Have yerself a wee dram" I turned around and took a mug from a man dressed more like myself. I took him as a hiker, from perhaps twenty years ago. "Don't you worry yourself; we'll have this party the now and we'll head on in the morning. Time flies here, it really does"

I looked out the window to where I'd walked in, where was that path? I couldn't see it now.

"Oh don't worry no," said the hunter "We're all going to leave when the morning comes." I took a drink and stayed.