

## **Monument** **By Roderick Manson**

I was born in the hamlet of Rosal in the broad and beautiful Strath of Naver. Or so I have heard. I have no memory of the place beyond the fact that it was the place of my birth. I have heard, too, that on the day of my birth beauty fled from that place, burned out in the flames of two hundred and fifty houses and that the man who told that tale counted them all, one by one, from a nearby hillside. The whole conflagration was orchestrated by that man of wickedness, Patrick Sellar, who even now roasts on a spit in that darker reach of hell reserved for those who betray their own for personal gain. That I have heard said many times.

I was parted from my parents when I was very young. I have heard tell that my mother was very beautiful but are not all mothers beautiful to those that love them? My father, it was said, was the envy of many for his strength and good nature although many may have that said of them also. The truth of it I know not save that they were my parents.

In time, I came to this place. Golspie. It lies on the coast barely a mile from Dunrobin Castle, the seat of the Chief of Clan Sutherland. When I was born the Chieftaincy had descended to the Countess but she scorned her ancestral duties to her people and gave the running of her estates to her husband. Being English he had no notion of what it meant to be the father of a clan, of the obligations it imposed to protect and nurture his people, for such they now were. He cared even less. His universe was property, profit and power. Those who did not share his vision were "barbarians" to be treated with rigour and severity and the men to whom he delegated the clearing of the barbarous from "his" lands knew well the meaning of mercy. They must have done, so completely to do the opposite.

Some years after the day of my birth, I stood here and watched at the great column of stone erected by a grateful tenantry to the memory of that kind and judicious intruder into our lives. The words, you may be sure, were not ours. What choice did the ragged remnants of our race have but to contribute to this memorial for such a man of vision? Those that had trodden the dark road to exile were fortunate this final indignity could not be imposed upon their broken backs.

In the years since, I have heard many debate what should be done with this statue on a stick of stone. Many have argued that such a man deserves no memorial but his own infamy and the monument should be torn down; others that it should stand as an indictment to heaven of that very infamy. None, I am pleased to say, holds to the view that it should stand as a monument to a great man who made this land what it is today.

I have been here now for more years than I can count, not that I was ever taught. From time to time I see the young (for everyone now is to me the young) walk up the path on Ben Bhraggie to see the monument that dominates the skyline as that man dominated and destroyed all our lives. Sometimes I follow them up. I am still too afraid of the legacy of evil it represents to venture up alone. This is foolishness but this is how I feel and there is little enough I can do about that. Always they look with detached curiosity but no true understanding then go down having seen what they came to see. How can I be easy in my mind when all our suffering is a mere historical curiosity to so many? How can they not feel for what was done in this man's name and by his command?

It is not yet morning when a car draws up and parks in the main street. I sleep light at my age so I watch with interest as a thin-set, dark-haired man of perhaps thirty summers gets out. He has a face that speaks of these parts, or so it seems to me. He is wearing a kilt. Not the plaid that the true Highlander would wear, a single length of cloth that would keep a man warm in the coldest of winters, but the skirt designed by a romantic novelist for a fat German usurper to wear when he deigned to visit his Scots dominions. I have heard he even wore pink stockings to complete the effect. I have heard many things, some of them true for all I know.

He puts on a sturdy-looking pair of boots, the like of which were never used in the old days. Then clansmen walked freely among their hills and wore little or nothing on their feet in the doing of it. But times change and there are many prices to pay whether they do or not.

I do not find these woods a comfortable place, even in the light of day. They seem to me contaminated as if the darkness imbued in that monument has leached into the soil and poisoned the souls of the trees themselves, if trees could have souls. It does not bid me welcome, this forest, as it rightly should. There is a small church in the village, a place sacred to the good God and his Son. There are places elsewhere sacred to another. The adversary of our Lord is worshipped by many as a God, whether they know it or not, and this place is sacred to him.

I am more content in the open ground, even in this place. It is the native soil of my past, the place where I and mine were meant to be. Where we should live our lives and die in the time set forth in whatever book such things are pre-determined. It is a long time since I have seen the sunrise. Often clouds hide it from my sight. More often, it is the closing of my ancient eyes that has the same effect. Perhaps it is this place itself that blocks out the light from my view.

When we reach the top he regards the monument then bows his head. To a man who would have hacked his off in a moment if it served his purpose. Or at least he would have given the order. His delicacy was legendary. This was, after all, a very civilised man, this man who ruled over us.

He brings his head up with the same studied ease then grasps his kilt. Raising it just the required degree, he pisses on the monument for an impressive duration for one so slight. Replacing his kilt just above his knee, he stands for a moment with every appearance of satisfaction so that I fear I am in the presence of a man with no character or manners to speak of. Then he spits on the monument as well and I realise that the gesture is not of manners but of meaning, an impression which is reinforced when he takes a small bottle of whisky from his rucksack and hurls it at the figure on top. It shatters on the masonry and he steps back with a smile, muttering under his breath, "That is the trinity reserved for bastards like Your Grace". His accent is strange but there is no mistaking his meaning or the depth of his intent.

My mother has been dead for many years. The giving of life to me in the open on such a cold night in such circumstances of trial was too much for her and if I did not live to see the light of a sunrise on my face then certain it is that she did not live long with her grief. I do not know for sure why I came to this place, to the heart of the evil that befell our clan and to the symbol erected to mock its many tribulations. Even now, I cannot tell the why or the how of it, but I fancy that tonight both she and I will rest easier knowing that we are not alone, even now.