

*This was written originally in 1999 for 'Cross Key Notes', the magazine of Peterborough Male Voice Choir, following its concert tour of the Isle of Arran.*

## **Mountain and Flood**

As the Caledonia Isles steams slowly into Brodick Bay, the peaks of Arran are hidden in a bank of heavy cloud. Thirty years and more roll away in a moment.

It was often like that in the old days, I reflect, - the island shrouded in a Highland mist that threatened to cast gloom over the most intrepid holidaymaker. It rained. We donned our mackintoshes, sou'westers and wellingtons. We went for walks along muddy tracks and across wet fields, splashing in the puddles and squelching through the sodden grass.

Suddenly, the rain stopped, the mist lifted and the sun came out. The lower hills became visible, the dark green of the forests contrasting vividly with the rich meadowland below. Off came the rainwear. We paddled in the sea. On warmer days, we ventured further out to cool ourselves in the breakers.

Then we could see the mountains in all their grandeur, Goatfell, *Beinn Tarsuinn* and, beyond them, the forbidding crags of *Cir Mhor*.

When I was about three or four years old, my parents rented a cottage at Whiting Bay. It probably still stands, though I have no idea where. I have only a hazy childhood memory of a long low building, painted white, with a sloping expanse of lawn in front. Later, I came to enjoy holidays with them on the island, walking, cycling and climbing, whatever the weather; scrambling over rocks; watching crabs, and tiny fish trapped in the rock pools; exploring caves and abandoned shepherds' cottages; listening to Arran's legends. However, it was that view of the mountains from Brodick Bay that stayed firmly in my mind when everything else began to fade.

The ferry docks and we wait patiently for the stern door to open. This is not like my last visit in the sixties. Then, I stood on the tilting deck of a small steamer watching the dockers sling the ropes, smelling the seaweed and salt air, listening to the screech

of the seagulls as they hovered hopefully above the pierhead. Now, there is only the smell of warm metal and rubber with a hint of diesel and sweat, the sound of slamming doors.

At last we are in the daylight again, clanking over the gangplank to the slipway and up onto the pier tarmac. Somewhere on the island the sun is shining. The clouds that masked Goatfell are being whisked away in the early summer breeze. The age-long fabric of nature is the same: the smooth cone of the mountain framed by a blue sky; the plantations of firs, crowning the hills above Brodick Castle; the sweep of sand along the northern side of the bay.

I wonder how the island has changed in other respects. What has happened to the whitewashed cottages on their patchwork of green? Elsewhere, the world has moved on. Modern tourism has destroyed many an idyllic setting. Are the villages of Arran now dominated by four-storied hotels and holiday chalets?

And the people? In our age of violence, crime and prejudice, surely their trusting, open house habits have given way to a more practical, cautious approach to visitors from the outside world. Has their celebrated northern canniness been replaced by a cynical tolerance of the 'townies' who invade their shores?

Unhurried, we drive south out of Brodick. A heavy goods vehicle from the ferry slows to let us pass. There are no skyscrapers and no road rage here! Kosovo, Eastenders and the Internet seem a million miles away.

Along leafy lanes, the colour and texture of the foliage changes as the sun bursts through the clouds. Everywhere, the gorse is in full bloom; carpets of wild hyacinths spread through the woods; the gardens are filled brilliant azaleas, pieris and rhododendrons that defy the efforts of gardeners in the Shire Counties.

The sun roof is open and, as we cruise slowly downhill towards Lamlash, the chirped greeting of a family of thrushes is just audible above the purr of the engine.

'Welcome to Arran,' they seem to say. 'Come and go as you please. We never lock our doors here.'

Nothing has changed after all.

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