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“Through the Trance of Silence”

Hill walking the history of Glen Coe

Katy Dycus



“THIS IS A PLACE WHERE THE BIRDS DON’T SING,” JEN SAID.

I stopped. This didn’t sound like the Scottish Highlands of Robert Louis Stevenson, “where the old red hills are bird-enchanted.”

“What happened here?” I wondered.

We had come here in early March. The valley welcomed us with tidings of winter reluctantly giving way to spring, winter’s icy tentacles loosening their grip on the moors. Blue peeked out from behind low-hanging clouds draping the high mountain pass, before transitioning into lightly wooded strath. Clouds held rain that wouldn’t quite fall. A mere two words captured the visual drama of the scene: *rionnach maoim*, Gaelic for “shadows of cumulus clouds moving across the moorland on a sunny, windy day.” Every hour held something new in landscape and weather.

We were in Glen Coe, a valley, as *glen* in Scotland refers to a valley. At the foot of the valley lies the village of Glencoe. We would visit both. The clean Highland air invigorated me as I breathed in the freshness of a new season that added a flush of green to the natural woodland: green infused into a gradient of light brown to forest-green brown to dark-driftwood brown to rusty brown.

We didn’t come across any other people for quite some time, nor did we catch much of a glimpse of any wildlife, such as the deer, otters, or seabirds that normally inhabit the area year-round. All was silent except for the water that ran along an occasional brook, or the wind ruffling up brand-new foliage. It was almost eerie how alone we were in the valley.

When I first arrived in Scotland to earn my master of letters degree at the University of Glasgow, I was told that hiking was not hiking but “hill walking.” I remember buying my first pair of Merrell Moab 3 walking shoes (with Gore-Tex, the sales associate insisted) along Byres Road, the road connecting the university to the Botanic Gardens.

Everyone warned me of the rain before moving to Scotland. The dull, relentless rain—as characteristically Scottish as haggis. “Umbrellas are useless,” a Scot once told me. “They don’t do any good when the rain goes sideways.” What no one prepared me for was the endless walking I would do in Scotland. I had no car, and I wasn’t exactly a fan of the subway. But this was a good thing. My feet would get me where I needed to go, and that forced me to pay attention. What started out as predictable routes to and from campus—with minor detours to museums, pubs, or antique shops—grew into further explorations of my new city. Pollok Country Park, with

Loch Leven flowing toward Glen Coe. BRIAN GILLMAN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

its sprinkling of Highland cows, gave me my first dose of countryside in the city. Loch Lomond offered an enticing landscape just an hour away from Glasgow's bustling city center. And in the following months, my walks would take me further still: to the ruined cemetery on St. Andrews's North Sea, to Ben Nevis—Scotland's highest peak—and to the Isle of Skye, where a missed bus near the Old Man of Storr turned me into a hitchhiker.

Soon after I had begun my studies, I befriended a group of international students, one of whom, Jen, was earning her PhD in Renaissance literature. Also an American, soft-spoken Jen was the bridge from my home culture to this new world. Plus, Jen is particularly attuned to features in the natural world and to the mechanics of language itself. She had spent a couple years in Scotland before my arrival, so you could say she smoothed the path for me and helped make the unfamiliar familiar. She introduced me to the works of Scottish architect Charles Rennie Mackintosh and to cozy Tchai-Ovna House of Tea on Otago Lane, its name and atmosphere inspired by the teahouses in the Czech Republic—*čajovny*.

We soon started meeting Thursday afternoons for tea in Jen's salon to discuss our writings. Jen taught me that writing and walking are about teaching yourself that everything is interesting. Our natural inclination as humans is to edit every confrontation, to determine what's interesting and what's not, but when you're writing, you have to reverse that desire to edit. You have to be patient with every encounter and know that it has something to teach you.

Until the day Jen and I boarded our bus from Glasgow's Central Station to Glen Coe, I'd only encountered the Highlands through the literature I was reading for my program. First, Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* books, which all deal with several phases of Scottish history and were noted for their portrayals of ordinary people and their use of regional Scottish dialect.

Credited for having invented the modern historical novel, Scott was interested in the contrast between heroic traditions of the past and practical visions of the future. *Waverley* (1814), the first in his series of 28 novels, features the mounting tensions between the Jacobites and the Hanoverians in the mid-eighteenth century. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689, the Stuarts were replaced by William of Orange and the Hanoverian dynasty. Many Scots, especially Highlanders, remained loyal to the Stuart monarch and wanted him reinstated as king. Referred to as Jacobites, these individuals viewed The Acts of Union of 1707—Scotland's joining with England—as grounds for further resistance, leading to several uprisings in support of Prince Charles Edward Stewart, or “Bonnie Prince Charlie.”

Waverley served as my introduction to the Scottish clans, to a way of life that threatened to disappear following the Highland Clearances, when Scots were forcibly removed from their lands in the Highlands and Islands. I remember the day my professor took some classmates and me to Sir Walter Scott's home in Abbotsford, in the Scottish Borders, on the south bank of the River Tweed. We marveled at his estate, his extensive library and writing desk. The home was more a feudal castle, an echo to those Highland clans whose traditions centered on family and fealty.

On the drive back to Glasgow, I recall my professor telling us that he made a conscious decision to return to his native Scotland after graduate study at Cambridge. "Why?" we asked. Because he wanted to "raise his children Scottish, not English." This sentiment carried over into his research. He authored a seminal text on Scotland's national bard, *Robert Burns and Pastoral: Poetry and Improvement in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Nigel Leask, Oxford University Press, 2010), and each year on January 25, he presides over a Burns supper.

"My heart's in the Highlands," I said out loud, hoping Jen would catch my reference to Robbie Burns, that "heaven taught ploughman" who wrote 200 years before our hill walk in Glen Coe. Burns lived as an Ayrshire tenant farmer who supplemented his income through poetry. Transforming a dialect of Scottish peasantry into high poetry, Burns expressed compassion for vulnerable beings and a longing for humanity's deeper connection to nature. In "To a Mouse," part of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, commonly known as the Kilmarnock Edition (1786), the poem's speaker regrets accidentally destroying the nest of a mouse, leaving the creature homeless and hungry.

To a Scot, reading Burns is like wrapping your arms around someone who feels like home. Burns wrote the poem "My Heart's in the Highlands." The last two stanzas read:

Farewell to the mountains, high-cover'd with snow,
Farewell to the straths and green vallies below;
Farewell to the forests and wild-hanging woods,
Farewell to the torrents and loud-pouring floods.

My heart's in the Highlands, my heart is not here,
My heart's in the Highlands, a-chasing the deer;
Chasing the wild-deer, and following the roe,
My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.

In Glen Coe, every branch, every rock, every thin stretch of moss seemed to know something of the story of that place that we didn't. The pathways in this glen of volcanic origins connect us to these geological processes. It's easy to feel romantic about the landscape, sculpted by Ice Age glaciers and studded with lochs and soaring mountains. The immediacy is intoxicating. We were close to the elemental forces, bare and raw.

I'm reminded of Robert Macfarlane, a British nature writer, who is fascinated by what geologists call "preferential pathways," grooves carved by the solvent motion of water on limestone. The path of a raindrop millennia ago can set the stage for a modern-day walker. Waterfalls can leave marks on rocks, and when you look at the rocks, you can see a hundred colors in them.

Here, I thought, some stories are literally walked into being. In *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (Penguin, 2012), Macfarlane writes that "a walk is only a step away from a story, and every path tells." Exploratory in its change of pace, its bends, its tone, and its rhythm, the walk moves along much like a poem. My heart's in the Highlands, wherever I go.

And "my eyes were in my feet," to quote Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (Aberdeen University Press, 1977). When I think of Glen Coe, the story I tell myself begins as the remembrance of the act of walking through its wild and melancholy terrain. In *The Old Ways*, Macfarlane says to ask two things of any landscape: "What do I know in this place that I know nowhere else?" and, "What does this place know of me that I cannot know myself?"

I was eager to get at that first question and asked myself, "What do I know of this place?" I only knew the transitory atmospheres, those countless impressions that give rise to a given place at a given moment. I knew the coolness of the temperature and moisture on my skin, that it smelled of ancient woodland, and at times, of burning peat. Jen told me how the clean air, moist climate, and woodland cover combined to produce the lichens, mosses, and liverworts skirting our path. In wetter places, mountain sorrel. We were too early to catch the primrose and bluebells that light up the spring.

We walked past an abandoned town on our way toward the woods, where, across the road, a group of cows were grazing in a pasture. Jen remarked that in that town the trees seemed to grow through the houses without restraint. It was as if nature were competing with human presence. I imagined slicing through one of those tree trunks and counting the pattern of rings growing out from its center as the trunk lay down new woody tissue with every passing year.

Beyond the town, stacks of timber formed a border between road and countryside, where particular stretches were marked by ancient boundaries,

some left to crumble. These dry stone walls, called dry stane dykes in Scotland, are built without earth or mortar and have defined the landscape for thousands of years. Larger, heavier stones lie at the bottom and lighter stones balance on top, with carefully chosen rocks in between. Building these walls is a bit like creating a jigsaw puzzle.

Macfarlane writes that thoughts, feelings, and sensations might be said to grow in certain places as plants do, or to be found in certain places as minerals are. The more time I spent on the landscape, the more I thought about how this landscape affects the way I think, having to trust what is and isn't there. When the mist blows through, I lose the land. Light and shadow flicker to a mysterious air.

"This is a place where the birds don't sing," I remembered Jen saying. She didn't give a reason, but I soon found that the path itself offers up clues.

IT'S HARD TO CREATE A FOOTPATH OF YOUR OWN. PATHS ARE SCULPTED BY people who have come before, much as canyons are sculpted by flowing rivers. Footpaths represent the people who have literally made a way for you.

As we came to a leg-burning incline in the woods, I decided to take off my Salomon jacket and wrap it tightly around my waist. I veered off a stretch of path to scope out gentler options; there were none. So, I continued along the footpath, aiming to keep my heels on the ground as long as possible in an effort to not burn out my calves. With my chest open and back straight, I leaned forward into the challenge of an ascent.

After a few minutes, I heard Jen breathing hard—or maybe it was me—so I suggested we stop and admire the scenery, while I finished off a flapjack I had buried in my pocket. To my right was an enormous boulder, parts of it covered in lichen. I climbed to the top of it to broaden my outlook. That's when I spotted another boulder further below, with the words etched into it: "No Campbells."

I'm fascinated by the things you find when no one's looking. Isn't it amazing how an object tells stories, and how literature fits at this intersection—smoothed and polished throughout time? I wondered aloud, "Who were the Campbells?"

"They're the reason the birds don't sing," Jen said.

The Campbells were the Highland clan who once lived in Glen Coe. After William of Orange became king in 1689, Highlanders were regarded as an obstacle to the complete political unification between England and Scotland, and many believed that their independence of spirit had to be broken, quite literally.



This rock face on the Isle of Skye is called the Old Man of Storr. To some it looks like a man's profile. MATT THORNHILL/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Highland clans were seen as a threat because they backed the deposed Stuart monarch King James II and saw the new monarchs as illegitimate. That much I knew from *Waverley*. What I didn't know was that to secure support, King William ordered that Highland chiefs sign an oath of allegiance to King William by January 1, 1692, or risk severe punishment. The MacDonald clan of Glen Coe eventually surrendered to the new political regime, and MacDonald chieftain MacIain took the clan's oath to Fort William but was told on arrival that there was no magistrate to receive it.

He would have to travel some 70 miles to Inveraray to complete the task. Yet, because of inclement weather and misguidance, MacIain arrived after the deadline. Secretary of State John Dalrymple rejected MacIain's oath and gave strict orders for the MacDonalds to be slaughtered and "cut off root and branch." His words would have held great meaning for these Highlanders, their very lives bound up in the natural world around them.

More than one hundred representatives of the Campbell clan—three commanders and their soldiers from the Argyll regiment and one from Fort William—were ordered to carry out the dreadful deed. For twelve days, the

Campbell soldiers lived with the MacDonalds, enjoying their company and hospitality before the slaughtering took place on February 13.

After the massacre, 38 MacDonald clan members were left dead in their own homes. The events shook a nation with fault lines running deep—dividing Highlanders in the north from Lowlanders in the south—and became a powerful mouthpiece for the Jacobite cause. Sir Walter Scott later wrote the poem “On the Massacre of Glencoe” and described the betrayal as such:

The hand that mingled in the meal
At midnight drew the felon steel,
And gave the host’s kind breast to feel
 Meed for his hospitality!
The friendly hearth which warmed that hand
At midnight armed it with the brand,
That bade destruction’s flames expand
 Their red and fearful blazonry.

The infamy of the massacre isn’t so much in the numbers as in the way the deed was done: It was “murder under trust,” murder of those who had offered hospitality. Although you could say that the Campbells aren’t entirely to blame because the officer in charge was technically following orders that had to be obeyed or risk death, to this day “No Campbells” signs can be found in the Highlands. We spotted one outside the inn where we had lunch, as shadows darkened the valley floor.

Glencoe is Gaelic for “Valley of Weeping.” From the inn, the mist embraced the hills softly and silently like a vale of tears—metaphorically, that span of life between the peaks of birth and death. Straight ahead, I could just make out the silhouettes of three mountainous peaks called the Three Sisters of Glencoe, those road-facing peaks of Aonach Dubh, Beinn Fhada, and Gearr Aonach. Moments later, clouds and mist shifted to reveal parts of a road stretched out in either direction, alternating visibility, obscurity. Doesn’t it feel eerie when something is present that shouldn’t be, or when something should be present but is missing? Like the absence of birdsong?

IS IT POSSIBLE TO MISS A PLACE BEFORE YOU EVEN LEAVE IT? I’M REMINDED OF the Welsh word *hiraeth*, an acute longing for a home, place, or time to which you cannot return and without which you are incomplete. My heart’s in the Highlands, wherever I go.

At one point during the day, while wandering around Glencoe, I needed a bathroom, so I knocked on the nearest door I could find. It happened to be that of a local resident, and surprisingly, she let me in. “Hospitality hasn’t left the valley,” Jen said, ironically.

Each walk is shaped by close encounters, and like narrative, it has a beginning and end. Jen and I walked for hours and hours that day without realizing the passage of time, soaking up all we could, breathing in a type of air we couldn’t get anywhere else. It’s fresh, but there’s that undercurrent of ancient civilization, of death. We knew it was sacred space.

All in all, we walked about ten miles that day, nearly missing the last bus back to Glasgow. The moor’s wildness had enveloped us completely. At sunset, we crossed over alluvial alder woodland of the lower reaches of River Coe, walking to its confluence with Loch Leven. We saw a couple fish, their heads bobbing just beneath the surface, and I remembered something: Fish have growth rings just like trees.

Making our way back to Glencoe village before nightfall, we stopped at a pub at the base of a steep hill and ordered a couple “smoked Scottish salmon with crowdie cheese” sandwiches, topping them off with *Uisce beatha* (Gaelic for “fire water” or whiskey) from a local distillery. For the first time all day, I felt warm. By the end of our meal, the sun was quickly descending and the windowpanes fogging. We paid our tab and headed outdoors for one last, chillier hill walk, this time going our separate ways but never venturing too far from one another.

It started to rain. (It would have been wrong if it hadn’t.) And more time passed, marked only by the coming and going of rain showers, the fall of light and its rebounds, until it finally grew dark. Too dark to see.

I heard echoing footfall across a brook. Jen told me it was time to go.

KATY DYCUS completed a master of letters in British literature at the University of Glasgow, where she wrote about women, music, and performance in Jane Austen’s novels. She writes for the anthropology journal *Mammoth Trumpet* and has published essays and reviews in *The Wild Detectives*, *Huffington Post*, and many others. Visit her at sketchesbykaty.com.

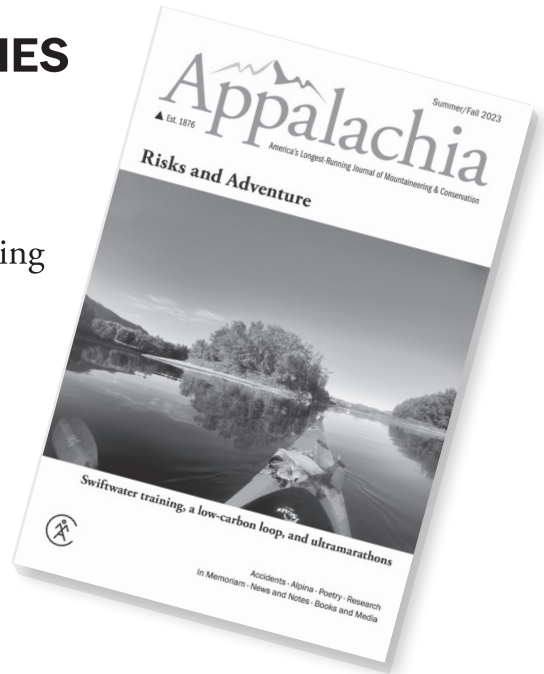
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