

EILEAN A' CHEÒ : AN ENCHANTED ISLE.

BY R. PARK YUNNIE.

“ Lovest thou mountains great,
Peaks to the clouds that soar,
Corrie and fell where eagles dwell,
And cataracts rush evermore ?
Lovest thou green grassy glades,
By the sunshine sweetly kissed,
Murmuring waves and echoing caves ?
Then go to the Isle of Mist.”

SKYE begins when you leave Inverness, at least that is where the wild, exultant atmosphere of the West first enters into your blood, for then you leave the last outpost of modern civilisation on the winding road to the Isles. As you skim along the road beside lovely Loch Ness a strange excitement fills your mind, the blood runs more quickly in your veins, and you seem to hear the clash of claymores in the wind and the wild cries of the Jacobites. At Invermoriston you take the hill road over to Cluanie and down to Shiel Bridge, where you go to the left over the famous hill to Glenelg and Kyle Rhea Ferry. The road leads down to the edge of the sea, and before you, across the narrow strip of wind-tossed water, lie the beckoning hills of Skye. Here the winds blow fresh and clean and you can feel the sweet tang of the Isles. Eilean a' Cheò is within your grasp.

No boat is moored to the rough stone pier. You sound the car horn, whistle, and excitedly wave white handkerchiefs to attract attention on the other side, but your only reward is the soft murmur of the waves lapping on the shore and the sighing voice of the wind. For one horrible moment you think the ferry is perhaps no longer running. Then, after what seems an interminable period, so impatient are you to set foot in Skye, you hear the faint but unmistakable chug-chug of a marine engine and you can dimly distinguish

the ferry-boat moving slowly out from the opposite shore. Slowly the boat rides across the choppy kyle and glides gently up to the pier. A bronzed Skyeman jumps nimbly ashore and gives a rope a few turns round one of the iron rings cemented into the pier. The gang-planks are lowered with a clatter and, at a sign from the ferryman, you drive gingerly aboard. Wooden chocks are kicked fore and aft the car wheels, the gang-planks are pulled up, and the ropes untied. With a splutter the engine whines into life and the boat backs slowly away from the pier. As you lean over the deck-rail watching the dancing waves breaking and foaming against the bows and the mainland gradually receding a song bursts, spontaneously, from your lips and you are surprised to find yourself singing "Over the Sea to Skye."

Portree is the main centre of commercial activity in Skye. It is the chief port of call for the steamers from the mainland. From Portree roads lead out in all directions to Dunvegan, Uig, and Staffin in the north, to Bracadale in the west, and by Sligachan to Broadford, Kyleakin, Armadale, and Sleat in the south. Portree itself is a busy little place. No other township in Skye has quite the same air of business. You cannot call it bustle, for in Skye no one hurries. One day is as good as another. The Skyeman goes about his work with an unhurried directness which, whilst no doubt irritating to the more impatient tourist, has that fascinating quality about it you find everywhere in Skye. The Skyeman seems to embody in his thoughts and movements the very characteristics of the land in which he lives, the quiet philosophy of the hills, the unhurried march of the wind across the heather, and in his voice you can hear the soft murmur of lapping waves and the tinkling of burns through the bracken.

Portree lies under the eye of a steep escarpment at the head of a natural harbour. The houses jostle one another as they rise, terrace upon terrace, up the hill-side above the blue waters of Portree Bay, where the red and white funnelled steamers tie up at the little pier. Here are rows of white-washed cottages, a church, the yellow-walled Royal Hotel, bank offices, shops and garages, and here and there a thatched

shieling from which the blue peat smoke curls gently upwards. Like most of the other townships of Skye, Portree conveys the subtle impression that it was never built on purpose. A shieling grew up there leisurely followed by another and another, until in time it assumed the proportions of a town much to its own surprise.

Skye is a land of strange contradictions. Wild, primitive desolation, the haunt of eagles, unchanged in a thousand years, is found side by side with many of the comforts of civilised life. Gaunt, grey telephone poles stretch across the bleak moorland connecting the lone shielings with the luxury hotels of London. In the shadow of an ancient Celtic monolith a vermilion petrol pump with white leering face gazes unseeing across the placid waters of Loch Dunvegan. But let us leave the comforts of Portree for a time and penetrate the wilds of Skye.

At the head of Loch Snizort Beag the road splits into two, one branch continuing westwards to Dunvegan and the other north to Uig and Duntulm. The Uig road winds gently in and out along the lochside, rising and falling as it follows the contour of the hills. Beyond Uig, with its toy-like white pier jutting out into the loch and its clusters of white-washed cottages stuck on the hillside, the land flattens out and here is one of the few stretches of agricultural land on the island. Events took place here which altered the history of Scotland. On a dark and windy night in June, some 200 years ago, the traveller along this very road might have descried two shadowy figures with flapping skirts making their way furtively across the moorland to the old grey-walled farmhouse of Monkstadt, for it was here that Bonnie Prince Charlie was rescued by Flora Macdonald after the disastrous '45 rebellion. Farther along the same road you come to an old graveyard on the brow of the hill near Upper Duntulm. Flora Macdonald is buried here, and a beautifully carved monument has been raised to her memory. Her resting-place is fitting for so brave a Highland lass. The unfettered winds of the Atlantic blow over her grave. Across the heaving waters the blue peaks of Harris reach up to the sky and the sun salutes her each night with

waving banners of fire as he dips into the western sea. On a rocky promontory near by the crumbling ruins of Duntulm Castle—the ancient stronghold of her clan—stands a grim reminder of the relentlessness of Time. As the westering sun drops slowly nearer the sea it casts a shadow athwart a tottering gravestone. The flat top, mossy with age and lichen-covered, is carved in the shape of a kilted warrior. As you wander among the grassy mounds, the graves of long-departed heroes, strange thoughts cloud your brain and a Voice speaks to you across the waste of seas. You seem to hear the weird stirring music of the fairy pipes calling the clansmen from their hoary graves and their ghosts brush past you on noiseless feet.

The ruins of Duntulm Castle stand on the very edge of the cliffs at whose feet the waves continuously roll and break. The water is blue-green and clear, and you can see as you look down from the giddy height of the castle walls where the crumbling stones have fallen. Nothing now remains of the castle but a corner of the ancient keep. Coarse grass and thistles grow where once stern battlements reared their proud heads. It was from this hoary pile that the chiefs of the Macdonalds, Lords of the Isles, directed the bloody clan feuds that ravished the Western Isles for hundreds of years. What scenes of wild devilry and ghastly slaughter these tumbling walls could tell could they but speak. And, as if in contrast to this grim reminder of days now past, a crofter and his wife are stacking sheaves of corn in the field which runs up to the castle walls. We question them about the old castle, and the woman, leaning on her pitchfork, points with a gnarled forefinger to a grassy mound high up on the hill. "Where that telephone pole stands," she says in her soft Highland accent, "they used to hang them in the old days. Aye, and they used to roll them down the hillside in barrels," and she nods her wise old head, saying, "Ach, ach, but they were wicked in the old days."

From Duntulm the rough hill road winds round the headland of Kilmaluag, through the Quirang, a group of fantastically shaped pinnacles of rock which rear themselves up against the sky like the statues of forgotten men. Soon the

road drops to pay homage to Flodigarry, the beautiful home of Flora Macdonald after her marriage (now a modern hotel), and then rises again, winding on and on past mirror-like lochs, over roaring torrents, now crawling snake-like across the moor, now climbing steeply up the hillside, past the Old Man of Storr—an outjutting monolith of rock which, seen from a distance, bears a strange resemblance to an old man crouched, brooding, on the hillside staring out to sea—past lovely Lochs Leatham and Fada, silver mirrors in their frames of vivid green moss, and so round the headland where it finally runs down into Portree. We stop before rounding the bend and look about us. It is an unforgettable sight. The sea is a sheet of throbbing silver across which bars of molten gold quiver and run before the light breeze which caresses the green-topped islands scattered like a handful of emeralds on a silver tray. In the distance the peaks of Torridon stand softly blue against the rose-tinted clouds lining the horizon turning to crimson even as you watch as the sun sinks farther into the sea. The Old Man of Storr is sharply reflected in the clear waters of Loch Leatham. A soft opalescent haze now subdues the outline of the hills and a strange hush creeps over the island as the breeze dies away. Softly the wavelets croon along the shore. It is time for the fairies to be abroad. To the south the great peaks of the Cuillin stand clear against the skyline. Thin wisps of white cloud vapour entwine themselves about the pinnacles like frail ghosts at play. A medley of colours play about the jagged ridges of Sgurr nan Gilleann, grey, mauve, blue, and rose, changing every second. Suddenly for one glorious moment the Cuillins are on fire as the blood-red flames of the dying sun dance along the peaks before quenching themselves in the sea.

Wherever you go on the uplands of Skye your eyes are irresistibly drawn to the Cuillin. This great mountain mass, its peaks torn and riven into a thousand fearsome shapes, dominates the whole island, indeed the whole of the Hebrides. Sometimes the peaks stand out blue and serene against the sky in the clear morning light, or cruel and forbidding on a day of storm when the wind howls down the

gullies and the clouds twist and rend themselves on the brutal ridges. But even when you cannot see the Cuillins, you know that they are there watching and recording your every movement.

No holiday in Skye is complete without a visit to Dunvegan Castle, the ancestral home of the Clan Macleod. And while you are at Dunvegan it will repay you to climb either or both of Macleod's Tables, above Borreraig. The Tables are two flat-topped hills commanding the surrounding moorland, so called because of their obvious likeness to table tops and their situation in the Macleod country. From either of these summits, if the weather is kind, you obtain what is probably the most magnificent panorama of Skye and a vivid impression of the true grandeur and majesty of the Cuillin range. At your feet lie the glistening waters of Loch Bracadale, throwing arms of silver mail far into the hills; green-topped dream islands, the haunt of fairies, beckon you with a siren's smile, and out in the far-flung Atlantic the blue haze of the Outer Hebrides enchants you.

No doubt it is the historical associations of Skye that give it its atmosphere of glamour and romance, the Norse invasions of King Haco, the clan feuds of the rival Macleods and Macdonalds, the fugitive wanderings of Bonnie Prince Charlie after the '45, and the touching story of Flora Macdonald. But apart altogether from these associations Skye has in itself an indefinable air of mysticism the like of which cannot be found elsewhere in Britain. The wild natural beauty of the island, its position of isolation from the mainland, its kindly people, its rocky glens and winding sea lochs, its homely peat stacks, its white-walled cottages like doll's houses, each with its little strip of cultivated land stretching like a green carpet down to the loch side, its towering blue mountains, its fine air, all combine to give it the atmosphere of unreality. Wherever you go in Skye you have the feeling that you have stumbled upon a fairy island from which, at any moment, you may be rudely whisked back to reality. The very place-names intrigue and torment you. Kyleakin, Snizort, Kilmaluag, Borreraig, Skeabost, Talisker, Vaternish, Macleod's Maidens, to name but a few,



GLEN BRITTLE

W. J. Middleton

and when you see on the signboard of a bus the words *To Fairy Bridge* you rub your eyes and pinch yourself to see if you are awake.

You cannot get the real feel of Skye in a motor car. A car, however slowly driven, takes you too quickly in Skye. You must walk on your own two feet to appreciate the goodness of Skye. You must tramp mile after weary mile over the bleak moorlands of Skye and let the salt winds of the Atlantic blow against your glowing cheek; you must wander in the strange hush of evening through the old graveyards in the quiet glens of Skye and let the mossy stones whisper to you of the days that will come no more; you must scramble across the wild mountains of Skye and try to wrest the grim secrets from their rocky hearts; you must feel the utter desolation of Skye when, day after day, the island lies hidden in damp leaden clouds and the grey mists creep right down to the water's edge; you must awake of a morning in Skye when the sun is shining in the high blue heavens and the soft breezes sweet with the scent of drying bog-myrtle come sighing over the moorland, when the white gulls wheel and dive over the dancing blue waters. On a day like this Skye is a veritable fairyland, and you wonder that so much beauty can really exist on earth. It is as if the God of all Creation had been inspired to build there a paradise of mountain, moor, and loch that the spiritually weary from the cities of the world might come here to find their souls in the peace and solitude of its everlasting hills and glens, finding each day sufficient unto itself and taking no thought for the morrow.