

SIXTY YEARS AGO

BRODIE LEWIS

I had portaged from Loch Eil, using two pairs of pram wheels, descended a mile of the river Callop and Loch Sheil lay before me. It was my intention to canoe to Skye. Towards evening I was half way down the loch, and seeing a croft on the south shore, asked the owner for permission to camp on his land. He and his family were speaking Gaelic. At last, I thought, I can learn how to pronounce the names of these mountains on the map. But he kindly explained that though they spoke the Gaelic - and everything I said to his mother by the fire had to be translated, they could neither read nor write it. When they needed to write a letter they wrote in English. At the time the steamer Clanranald plied between Glenfinnan and Acharacle - her mast eventually became the caber used at the Glenfinnan Highland Games - and while I was there they rowed out into the loch and handed a letter up over her bows. They told me they provisioned twice a year in spring and autumn. The goods came by rail to Glenfinnan and then by steamer. The rest they provided for themselves.

Next day I bade them farewell, continued down the loch to Sheil Bridge and pitched to await an appropriate tide. Needing provisions, I went to the local shop. Never had I seen clothes so patched as those worn by the man who served me; there were even patches on patches. He put what I needed on the counter and when I came to pay, apologised for having to charge me - a traveller. He said as they had to buy these items, he had no choice, but the potatoes were home grown and there would be no charge.

Next morning I descended the River Sheil, entered Loch Moidart and took the southern route round Eilean Shona to the open sea. There, for the first time I saw the islands of Eigg, Rum and Skye and the magical effect the light, sea and sky made together, with a tinge of green just above the horizon. It was a memorable journey, but my keenest memory is of the kindness and hospitality of the people I met.

