

Murder in Torridon? **A True Tale of the Mountains** *Douglas Williamson*

It was April 1961 when Iain, Harold, Douglas and Bill set out for Torridon in Iain's car. Bill worked in the drawing office of an engineering firm; the others were Ph.D. students at Glasgow University. We arrived at the SYHA Hostel at Inveralligin on the north shore of Loch Torridon, planning to climb Beinn Eighe the next day, which blew a gale with horizontal rain. After a few hours of struggling just to stand on the quartzite scree but making little progress even on hands and knees, we gave up and retreated to the joys of the 'Modern Mistress', as the stove in the hostel was named in cast iron letters. The only other occupants, a party of four, had gone home but there was now a stocky, tough chap in ex-army gear. He said he was Ian Simpson, was camping by the shore and wanted a bit of warmth and company. A doctor at the State Mental Hospital at Carstairs, he just wanted away from it all for a bit.

That evening, he spoke very knowledgeably about mental hospitals, but turned out to be argumentative, proposing that morals had no defensible basis and challenging us to disagree, which we strongly did – to our probable salvation did we but know. I, Douglas, took a few flash photographs in the hostel common room though Simpson was extremely reluctant to be included. However, he obviously knew the area extremely well and offered advice on approaching the local peaks, warning that the 'Horns of Alligin' should be treated with care as they had been the cause of fatalities in the past. The next day, Iain and Harold had to return to Glasgow in the car and, when Simpson heard this being discussed, he asked for a lift to Inverness as he needed a haircut and various provisions. This was readily agreed and the three left after breakfast, with Bill and I setting out for Beinn Alligin.

We got back triumphant but tired after a great day, made some supper and soon went to bed, the only occupants both of the hostel and its male dormitory, which was a wooden hut in the grounds. A bit after midnight, I was wakened by a person entering the dormitory and using an unusual torch with the beam at right angles to the barrel. I was annoyed at being thus wakened and pretended to be fast asleep, and Bill took a similar view. The person soon went out. In the morning, we went up to the main hostel to get breakfast, whereupon Bill discovered that his food had been ransacked. We quickly checked our belongings, spread out on adjacent beds in the dormitory, and realised that my camera was definitely missing. We both had a suspicion that the intruder might have been Simpson as he had had the same unusual pattern of torch. In the wet ground outside,

there were fresh boot-nail marks and, unusually even then, he had worn nailed boots. But surely he was in Inverness with our friends, so it couldn't be him. We reported the incident/loss to the warden, Kenny McDonald (also shop owner, grave digger, shepherd, garage man and ferryman, etc.), who phoned Kinlochewe police and had the local bus stopped but there was nobody on it.

Meanwhile, we phoned Iain and Harold in Glasgow, who told us the significant news that on the previous day, when they had reached Achnasheen, only 20 miles on the way to Inverness, Simpson had asked to be left there, since he claimed to have belongings, including a motor scooter, stashed away in a nearby ruined croft. He would make his own way to Inverness later. By now we were deeply suspicious and checked information at Glasgow and Carstairs, discovering that there was no 'Doctor' Simpson, and the police were told all this.

A couple of months later, I received a call from the police who said they had now identified Ian Simpson, "a bad lad" as they said. He had a string of convictions for petty theft, but was the self-styled pastor of his own church in Motherwell, a corrugated iron shack, which had a congregation of around 100 trusting, innocent souls. His first prosecution, indeed, had been for the theft of communion vessels from the local Church of Scotland to furnish his own. Subsequently, he had been committed to Carstairs State Mental Institution from which he had escaped and was on the run when we met him. Sure, he had a Carstairs connection but as patient not staff! If he could stay out for 28 days, the law then required that the process of certification be re-enacted. "No wonder," said the Police, "he objected to you taking the photograph, and he undoubtedly came back with the particular purpose of obtaining the camera which he would then have thrown in the loch. We have a warrant for his arrest and we'll find him." (It is another of the coincidences of this tale that Simpson, it emerged at the trial, had undertaken courses at a Bible Training College of which my father was principal administrator.)

Around Easter the following year, the action moves to Craig Youth Hostel, on the coast north of Diabaig, in a very remote spot about 10 miles from Inveralligin, only reached by an indistinct footpath over moorland. Shan, a Canadian research student colleague, and her friend Bridget, a languages lecturer, went there to survey the property with regard to summer opening, Bridget being the warden. When they arrived, they found a mathematics student from a London College, who pleaded to be allowed to stay, although the hostel was not formally open. He also said that the man who had given him a lift was on his way, having stopped to buy provisions. The girls agreed and the man duly turned up, introducing himself plausibly as 'Ian Fraser', a biologist at the Ben Eige Nature Reserve. When Shan revealed that she worked in the Chemistry Department of Glasgow University, Fraser pleasantly recalled that he had

met several people she might know the previous year at Achmelvich: Iain, Douglas and Harold! (A curious, self-defeating lie about location.) For Shan, the penny immediately dropped and she realised the real identity of 'Fraser' as she had heard our story from the previous year. The two girls went up to their room, and after closing the door, Shan got an amazed Bridget to help her move the wardrobe in front of it, while recounting the whole tale. In the morning, the girls hastened the several miles to the nearest phone at Diabaig and called the police, who said they needed to acquire some paperwork to arrest Fraser/Simpson but meanwhile to "keep him under observation" and "he's not violent". They explained their predicament with some irritation and apprehension, but nothing else could be done. They returned to discover that Fraser/Simpson had disappeared and the mathematics student knew nothing. On their return to Glasgow, we heard the whole story and told the police the details, most of which they already knew. (It is now known that Fraser actually went on to Achmelvich Youth Hostel, where he spent a couple of days then left, coolly stealing an antique chest whose considerable value he had recognised.)

About a month later, I was working in my laboratory when my supervisor came in stroking his neat moustache, a sure sign of perturbation and trouble. "Douglas, there is a Detective Sergeant Brown in my office; he wishes to see you." "Thanks John, I can imagine what that's about." "I dare say you can," he said, continuing to stroke his moustache with increased frequency. DS Brown said, "Have you seen the evening paper?" "No, I haven't been out." He held up the front page which, under banner headlines exclaiming 'A9 Killer Arrest', displayed a recognisable picture of Simpson/Fraser. For a couple of weeks, a double murder had gripped the press, following the discovery of a body in a shallow grave near Newtonmore and a couple of weeks later another, similarly, in a wood near Dumfries. Both had been shot at close range. The number of a car which seemed to be connected with the crimes (it had belonged to one of the victims) had been noticed and traced. The trail eventually led to Simpson's rooms in Manchester, where a huge amount of loot had been found; he worked as an antique dealer and may have stolen to order.

In August 1962, he was tried and convicted, but sentenced to be detained at Her Majesty's pleasure since he was found to be certifiably insane. It transpired that he believed he was God's vice-regent on Earth, with a commission to rid the world of evil men. He worked by pretending to reject morals: if you argued against him you were safe, but if you agreed you were marked down for death. Fortunately, I and my friends plus the mathematics student were either saintly or just argumentative. Piecing things together, we realised that, when he gave the lift to the student and arrived at Craig, he had just killed the man at Newtonmore, and when he left, after a couple of weeks, he went South back to

Manchester and en route killed the second man at Dumfries. So the girls (and the mathematics student who clearly argued) spent a night at lonely Craig under the same roof as the murdering psychopath (complete with gun), said to be non-violent. At the trial, for which I was cited as a witness but not required, a one time climbing friend related how on Liathach, roped to Simpson, he was brought up to the ledge on which Simpson was secured. Simpson untied the rope, smiled and pushed his partner off. He fell about a hundred feet over rough scree and boulders, sustaining severe cuts and bruises. He walked away, resolving never to see Simpson again. Aware of this story, I recalled Simpson's warning to us about the 'Horns of Alligin'. He had added "a girl fell to her death there" and then with a smile I can never quite forget, a mixture of pride and triumph, he went on "I was the one that found the body." I sometimes wonder about that.

There is a solemn and dramatically violent ending, which also had a moral dimension. Simpson was first confined again at Carstairs, and then for a long period at Craig Dunain, Inverness, where he took a distinguished Open University degree and learned to construct excellent violins. He was then transferred again back to Carstairs which contained some extremely violent inmates. Two psychopaths managed to obtain axes and broke out, but were confronted by the local policeman whom they attacked. Fraser/Simpson, hearing the cries, rushed to the assistance of the constable, but with him was also hideously done to death, his heroic and courageous defence of morality to no avail. This incident, with its characteristics of a classical Greek tragedy, took place some twenty years after the trial.

Climbing in Torridon has never seemed the same since, even after forty years. But on my first return, only five years after these events, I was back in the same hostel having resolved to do the round of Ben Eighe and visit the great Corrie Mhic Fhearchair with its triple buttresses. I had returned and was alone in the hostel when a walker arrived out of the dark. He was about my own age and not communicative. I was extremely disturbed and must have seemed very strange, I later realised. On being interrogated, I can put it no less, he claimed to be an RAF officer who had been doing a long walking trip and was heading for Kyle where he would meet friends. He planned to walk over the Coulin pass and, at Achnashellach, get the train to Kyle. All this was as innocuous as it could be; I had done a similar trip myself, but I was still deeply suspicious. I had a bad and vigilant night but in the morning, which eventually came without incident, we both caught the local bus and, to my astonishment, the chap got off the bus at the Coulin Pass road end.

Funny the people you meet in the hills. I still speculate about the girl who fell from the 'Horns'.