

A TASTE FOR MUNROS

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'This is all we've got, men', shouted the perspiring Canadian Army Major as he pulled a small flask from the leg pocket of his battledress. The sun blazed down from a cloudless blue sky. The brown-green landscape was dotted with darker green patches of conifers marching up the hillsides. Splashes of blue-silvery water painted the scene in strips and pools below us. The horizon was very, very distant in a faint heat haze. We imagined that we could see the curvature of the earth. The air was perfectly still, embracing a palpable silence around us.

The men he addressed were a Royal Naval Lieutenant in his cap and dark blue uniform (but with his shirt unbuttoned to his waist) , and me, a 16-year-old schoolboy, carrying a tweed jacket, wearing flannel trousers, and a shirt also flapping about. The Canadian had army boots but the other two of us wore civilian shoes suitable for pavements (when they were dry). "What's in it?" enquired the naval officer. "Rye Whiskey from Toronto" was the reply. "Here, take a swig".

The situation seemed desperate; we were all severely thirsty and had not taken any food or water since breakfast, about 5 hours and 5 miles before. The Navy and the Army had no hesitation in taking one long gulp each. I took a small gulp (the residue) and was startled by the sharp gasping taste and the column of fire that ran down inside. That was it: the Rye was all gone.

There was nobody visible in any direction; indeed we had seen nobody since leaving the loch, more than 3000 feet below us. The naval officer pulled out a small pair of binoculars to look around. He gave me a squint as well. Could that be Bell Rock Lighthouse out east? Certainly the tiny object was far beyond the Forth Bridge and the Fife coast. What about those undulations and peaks to the north? That must be Ben Nevis, for sure. The Paps of Jura were quite close, "But was that Newfoundland beyond?" enquired the Canadian. Southwards stretched the Firth of Clyde, filled with grey shipping at the Tail of the Bank. Ailsa Craig stood proud but Ulster was too far in the haze.

“Let's get down fast”, said the Canadian, “or here we die”. We had ceded leadership to him on the ascent, and were glad to follow. The path on the rocky summit was faint at first but we had no trouble with direction when we could see so far. By early afternoon with the heat at its zenith, we were low enough to find a stream to quench our overwhelming thirsts. No thought of beasties, grasses, or infections. Lower still, we reached the shade of trees and strolled along towards the jetty where we hoped to meet a man in a dinghy who had said he would come in the late afternoon to row us back across the loch to the starting point of our day's expedition.

It was July 26th 1945. We had scaled Ben Lomond – the first time for all of us – a trio of innocents devoid of any equipment or supplies (except the naval binoculars and the whiskey). We had started from the small hotel at Inverbeg surrounded by a few houses and cottages. The A82 weaved its way northwards, mostly following the line of the old military road leading to Crianlarich. Perhaps 20 or 30 vehicles, mostly military, passed by each day.

During WW2, the only holidays for my family were on Loch Lomond on Saturdays, perhaps 2-3 times per year, taking the steam train (no corridors) from Glasgow to Balloch and then the old paddle steamer up the Loch to Ardlui and all the piers en route. There was a pause for 2 hours at Ardlui before the return journey to Balloch and Glasgow, bringing us home in the early evening. At Ardlui, I usually spent the 2 hours in rushing up the hillside behind the pier as far as I could get through the vegetation without risking missing the steamer's return. A toot on the whistle echoed across the glen 10 minutes before sailing time. I looked admiringly at Ben Lomond towering over the eastern side of the Loch but we never landed at Rowardennan for me to begin an ascent. My only hill experiences at that time were cycle trips to the Campsie Hills and scrambling up the steps of Dumgoyne north of Glasgow. In July 1945 my family opted for 3 to 4 days at Inverbeg. The war in Europe had ended in May and there was a feeling of relief in the air. We seemed to ignore the continuing war against Japan in the Far East whence so many troops, ships and aircraft were migrating.

We took the well known route from home; by tramcar, past the smoke-blackened tenements to the station, then the train, then the paddle steamer in the clean air of the Loch, to the pier at Inverbeg

and the final short walk to the Hotel, nowadays the 'Inn at Inverbeg'. There were very few guests staying there. The ones that I can remember were the Canadian Major on leave from his unit in NW Europe and the Royal Naval Lieutenant and his very new bride. I was flattered to be invited to join these two men on an ascent of Ben Lomond the next day.

The ferry from Inverbeg to Rowardennan moved on a request basis that summer, so a trip had been arranged the next day at a suitably sedate time after breakfast at 09.30. We were rowed the short distance across the narrow Loch, and walked leisurely up the obvious path to The Ben. The weather was perfect and I think that we felt that all was perfect in the world. As a fit 16-year-old, I was slightly surprised to forge ahead of my two seniors. The summit proved to be a permanent, unforgettable mind-picture upon which I can reflect with pleasure today, so many years later.

Our return to Inverbeg in time for supper was a relaxed, lazy, contented – but short and hungry – journey, as the western skyline above threw long shadows across the Loch. Our nearest and dearest (except for the Canadian, who was so far from home) were looking out for us, and the naval officer was greeted in an embarrassingly (to me) affectionate way by his bride. My father said “so you got to the top?”, and left it at that. Almost the only topic of conversation at supper was the news that Winston Churchill had been soundly defeated in the electoral count that day, and was no longer Prime Minister. There was astonishment all round the table; who was this fellow Clement Attlee? The election had taken place 2-3 weeks earlier, but the counting had been delayed in order to gather all the votes from distant military units scattered over the world. There was an air of excitement and optimism in Inverbeg that evening.

I realised in retrospect that there was a surge of opinion against the possibility of a repetition of the hard times that followed WW1 in the 1920s and 1930s. As a keen Army cadet at school, I had gone to various training courses in different parts of the country in the past two years – Barry, Largs, Troon, Barnard Castle, Redford Barracks Edinburgh, and the Army School of Physical Training in Aldershot (what hard work that was!).

At all these units there were political discussions organised in the evenings when the older men talked about their aspirations for

the future structure of society (virtually all left-wingers so far as I can remember). There were no ill feelings in the audiences on the times I attended. The cadets from school had never considered these matters before. I presume that political awareness was being fostered throughout the British Forces in the second half of WW2. On the 26th of July, everything was changing! As usual after supper, a piper marched in the middle of the road outside. He was an expert. No fears of passing traffic in those days! He has been a delightful poignant memory for 65 years, a soft, warm, lemon-yellow summer evening, with the Loch and the Ben as a background.

That day gave me a taste for Munros which I failed to quench in later years. O me miserum! But a taste for Rye Whisky ---No!