
Opening Extract from...

Britain's last Frontier

A Journey Along the Highland Line

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Introduction

THIS BOOK IS INTENDED as a companion to a journey, one that can be made in the mind as well as in person. It is a journey along the line of what was British history's last frontier, a border between two cultures that ended its political life as recently as 1746 in bloodshed and genocide. At Culloden, the last battle was fought between two armies who could both claim to be subjects of the kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. And when the charge of the clans failed and the killing began, memory also began to fade, disappearing into the mists of romantic fancy. This journey aims to stir what has been forgotten, to tempt the history of what is sometimes called the Highland Line out of the shadows, to remember how divided Scotland once was and how those divisions and their unlikely legacies formed the modern nation.

This is not a straightforward story with a continuous narrative thread that weaves a sequence of pivotal events together in a clear chronological order. Instead, what follows is a gathering of impressions, of atmosphere, but continuity is served by the loose but logical geographic arrangement of a journey of discovery. The tale begins at Culloden, not far from Inverness, and proceeds in an easterly direction through the tumultuous events of the lost kingdom of Moray before turning a sharp right at Stonehaven, where the mountains almost reach the sea, and then it hugs the foothills of the southern Highlands all the way to Glasgow and the Firth of Clyde.

Occasionally the route strikes into the mountains, in a cultural as well as geographical sense. In an overwhelmingly monoglot Scotland with only 58,000 people, just over 1 per cent of the population, having any Gaelic, few are able even to pronounce the names of the lochs and the glens correctly. Locked in incomprehension, the way of life of Highlanders has been documented by many outsiders without a word of their language. It is at best opaque, at worst impossible, for Lowlanders to understand. And, more than that, there exists an atavistic instinct to brand people whose language one does not comprehend as babbling savages. Throughout Scotland's history, such attitudes have been regularly on show and this book attempts to look in both directions across the frontier.

Over the long story of this dramatic divide, perspectives have been shifted as much by the imagination as by politics or economics. For that reason, the work of four great Scottish writers has seemed more than usually important. Three lived close to the Highland Line and set some of their narratives in the shadow of the mountains. Lewis Grassic Gibbon, J. M. Barrie and Neil Munro all add colour and humour, while Sir Walter Scott has a lot to answer for.

In thinking about our history, neatness, inevitability and homogeneity ought all to be resisted. The past was never tidy and, at various turnings, it was by no means clear that all roads would necessarily lead to the present. And most importantly this story of the last frontier tells us that Scotland is only one version of history.

I

Roads to Culloden

THERE ARE MANY Scotlands. Edinburgh and Glasgow would shudder at being thought similar. Galloway is a place apart, guarded by its sheltering hills looking south to the Irish Sea. The Borders sometimes prefers to share a history with Northumberland, perhaps because the last few miles of its great river flow through England, while Tayside, Angus and the Moray coastlands all have pungent and readily recognisable identities. But the deepest, most profound internal divide in Scotland is that between Highland and Lowland. It is Britain's last frontier.

Running from north of Glasgow almost to the sea at Stonehaven, what geologists call the Highland Boundary Fault is very obvious. At the Pass of Leny in Perthshire, the road rises suddenly from the boggy flatlands of the meandering River Forth and plunges into the mountains. It narrows and winds as cliffs close in and the landscape changes utterly. Ben Ledi rears up on the left and, across Loch Lubnaig, the ranges of the Lomond Mountains dominate. Forests darken their flanks and the marks of people fade almost to nothing. Few houses or fields can be seen and the row of telegraph poles by the roadside seems somehow forlorn, holding up a fragile thread connecting two Scotlands.

From many vantage points in the south, the Highland Line can be clearly seen, a front rank of sentinel mountains rising abruptly from the plain. Commuters on the Edinburgh bypass can often

make out Ben Ledi and sometimes Ben Lomond looms out of the morning haze. And yet the high country behind the mountains is not really familiar at all. Few Scots can pronounce its geography. The lochs, rivers, passes and ranges are named in Gaelic, a language fast fading and now spoken by fewer than 50,000 Scots, many of them the wrong side of sixty. Ben Ledi is one of the simpler names but, like many Gaelic words, it is not pronounced as it is spelled. Those who named it called it Ben Letty not Leddy and behind it rises Beinn Bhreac. Deeper into the mountains, the older spelling of Beinn is now standard on maps but Bhreac is a challenge. In Gaelic, the *bh* combination is said as a 'v' and it means 'Speckled Mountain'. The English word 'freckle' is cognate with *bhreac*.

As much as geology and geography, language used to change when the Highland Line was crossed. To the north, Gaelic not only described the landscape, it spoke of a different way of life, acted as another lens through which the world could be seen. On the high plateaux and in the narrow glens, herdsmen reared their beasts and lived in a society structured around clan and kinship. To the south, ploughmen tilled the flatter and more fertile land and had stronger cultural links with England than with the north of Scotland. Road signs unwittingly acknowledge the tremendous influence of language difference when they declare *Failte do'n Gaidhealtachd*. They translate it as 'Welcome to the Highlands' but a more lexically tight subtitle would be 'Welcome to the Land of the Gaels', the people who speak Gaelic.

This is overwhelmingly a story of mutual misunderstanding – even incomprehension – between two speech communities and it is also a story of conflict between two cultures. Those who live to the north talk of the land below the Highland Line as the *Galltachd*, the 'Land of the Foreigners'. And Lowlanders who attack support for Gaelic often call it a foreign language even though it is clearly native and was probably spoken in Scotland for many generations before the coming of Northumbrian English in the seventh century. Gaels occasionally talk of *miorun*

mor nan Gall, 'the great malice of the Lowlander', while Gaels themselves are sometimes characterised as lazy, sulky and with a historic sense of entitlement. These attitudes have changed somewhat in recent times but they remain a recipe for misunderstanding and, for many centuries, supplied sparks for bloody confrontation.

History happens at the edges and a persistent theme of this book will be the exchanges between Gael and Gall, between Highlander and Lowlander, between two sets of suspicious neighbours. Too often commentators and historians have felt compelled to take sides. Guilt at the treatment of Gaels during the long period of the Clearances has informed attitudes, not always helpfully. Romance, especially the sort so brilliantly confected by Walter Scott, has wreathed the mountains in impenetrable mist and ignorance has further clouded the picture. And yet something has changed. In the last few years, many Scots have gratefully adopted the iconography of the Gaels so that most weddings now resemble clan gatherings, football crowds are tricked out in tartan and politicians feel compelled to march through the streets of New York wearing a kilt.

My own fascination with the differences between Lowland and Highland may have been an early symptom of changing attitudes and it began a long time ago and a long way away from the mountains and glens of the north.

On a sunny spring day in 1964, I travelled across that invisible frontier, from one Scotland to another, from familiarity to an epic, melancholy strangeness, from the homely geometry of the fields and farms of the Scottish Borders to the shores of the mighty Atlantic where the mountains rise out of the ocean into huge Highland skies. It was a transformative journey and a day whose memory has never left me.

Led by our Latin teacher, Mr Goodall, a party of a dozen schoolchildren departed from Kelso Station in the Easter holidays on what was to be a journey of firsts and lasts. It was the first time I had ever gone far from home without my parents and the last time passengers could catch a train at Kelso. The station

closed in June 1964 and our trip immediately became a footnote, frozen in a small corner of history.

Kitted out with rucksacks, anoraks (not yet a term of mild abuse), waterproofs and walking boots, we gathered on the platform for the great adventure, an advance into the unknown. There was a definite sense of expedition, a journey into an interior where nothing should be taken for granted. Perhaps there were no Mars Bars or chip shops, perhaps they had never heard of The Beatles and certainly not The Rolling Stones. Rucksacks were checked and rechecked by touch, fingers fumbling through the narrow neck amongst socks, a spare pullover and an old yellow sou'wester my dad had forced me to take even though I would have had to be rescued by a lifeboat before I would ever wear it. Maps flapped around as we waited on the platform and we worried about storms, gales, days of never-ending rain. Dubbin had been strongly advised by Mr Goodall. Slathered on and rubbed into dried-out boots each morning, it would keep out the wet. Rub-a-dub-dub. Pots of it were purchased by everyone except Ronald Barker. Following his father's advice, he declared that spit and polish would work just as well. No doubt about it. An Assistant Postmaster in Kelso, Mr Barker strode straight-backed past our window every morning, his shoes gleaming, his socks dry, his demeanour oozing military certainty. After a run of rainy days, we took turns to let Ronald use our Dubbin.

After what seemed like an age, a steam train from Berwick-upon-Tweed puffed into Kelso Station, hissing and grinding to a stop. 'Change at St Boswells for Hawick and Carlisle. This service terminates at Edinburgh Waverley.' The stationmaster walked up and down the platform, a whistle in his mouth. We clambered into compartments, shoving rucksacks into the netting shelves above the seats and arguing over who should face the way we were going. The whistle blew, the carriages shuddered and the journey into the unknown began.

Glamour was waiting on the platform at St Boswells. When Sheelagh Drummond and Sandra Black boarded the train, the

expeditionary force was complete and attention refocused not on the view out of the windows. By late morning, we were chugging into Edinburgh Waverley and, on the onward service to Glasgow Queen Street, those who hadn't already eaten them unwrapped their sandwiches. I'd never been to Glasgow before and it was deafening. Because our connection to Mallaig was tight and probably because Mr Goodall wanted to keep the party together, we did not leave the railway station. Incomprehensible tannoy announcements, the slamming of carriage doors, clanking trains and the jarring chatter of thousands of people in a hurry made my head spin.

After perhaps only ten or twenty minutes, as the train taking us north left the sprawl of the city, there was a sudden revelation when the Firth of Clyde opened. And across the glint of the water, not far distant, stood the mountains. In a moment, it seemed, we had passed out of the oppressive, detailed racket of Glasgow and into a place of elemental majesty. The schoolboy talk stilled as we gawped and Mr Goodall smiled. We found ourselves in a Scotland none of us had ever seen before. As the train rattled north along the shore of Loch Long, towns, villages and houses disappeared and we plunged into dense forest before crossing the isthmus to Loch Lomond. *The White Heather Club* and occasional renditions of 'The Bonnie Banks' had not prepared us for such a vast emptiness. There seemed to be nothing and no one in the landscape except a scatter of yews on a far mountainside. To children raised in the market towns, the tree-lined lanes, the tidily hedged fields and the farm places of the Borders, the grandeur we saw at Crianlarich, on Rannoch Moor and in the glowering shadow of the Nevis Range was almost intimidating.

At Fort William we were allowed out to pee and buy crisps and sweeties. Fort? What fort? Where were the Indians? Children habitually accept a great deal without question but I do recall wondering why the trains had stopped at a fort. What kind of fort? From our recently acquired telly I knew what Fort Laramie and the forts garrisoned by the US Cavalry in *Boots and Saddles* were like. And they weren't like Fort William.

Even though the train had hugged the shores of several sea lochs, our first powerful sense of the Atlantic opened before us at Arisaig. It must have been late afternoon by then and, despite a tendency to sun-tinted recollection, I do remember bright blue skies when I first looked out over the ocean. I had never seen the Atlantic before. At Morar, the sands are blindingly white and on the western horizon lie Eigg, Rum and the Sleat Peninsula of Skye. When at last we reached journey's end at the little station next to the large hotel and the even larger viaduct, we assembled on the platform, a little dazed and quietened by all that our train windows had passed. But here we were out in it, in the landscape, in the heartlands of the Highlands at last.

The youth hostel at Garramore was a half-hour walk to the south along a single-track tarmac road. I have never forgotten it. Having crossed the famously short River Morar and passed below the viaduct, we began a walk that has lived in my memory for almost 50 years. As it rose and turned to reveal white beaches or the limitless blue-green ocean, it showed me how heart-breakingly beautiful the Highlands can be. Scattered along the roadside were a few white cottages and a road end for at least one farm but we saw no one and met no traffic. And yet the land and seashore seemed friendly, always there was a sense of people and how they had shaped this utterly lovely place. Having travelled to several continents since I first saw the road from Morar to Garramore, that small stretch of coastline in the western Highlands remains, for me, unquestionably the most beautiful place in the world.

It seemed then a different, otherworldly beauty, very different from the domesticated, pleasing order of a Borders landscape. And, though the sun shone every day we were at Garramore and gales did not make the Atlantic roar on to the shores of white sand, it was, nevertheless, spare, unfussy, somehow Edenic. I had never seen anywhere like it.

After a few days, we moved on to another youth hostel. Further north, Ratagan is by the side of Loch Duich, not far

from the picture-postcard castle at Eilean Donan. Soon after we arrived it began to rain. For days. Youth hostels had a policy of expelling residents in the morning and not allowing them back in until the late afternoon. As the endless rain fell steadily out of leaden skies, testing the resilience of Dubbin-ed boots and waterproofs (but not my sou'wester – only Noah's Flood could have persuaded it out of my rucksack), we mooched around, eking out our coffees in the café at Shiel Bridge. It was closed on a Sunday so, in desperation, I decided to go to church.

A mile or two further along the shore road by Loch Duich, there stood a church and my memory is of a large corrugated iron hut. People materialised, it seemed, out of nowhere and inside it was packed. Raincoats steamed gently in the warmth. At an unseen signal, all went still and an old minister stood up and began to address the congregation in a language that was not English or a Highland version or indeed like anything else I had ever heard before. With a mane of white hair and a jutting jaw, he resembled the actor Finlay Currie when he played God in a Scottish accent in a Roman epic I had seen recently at the Roxy. And then the minister turned to me to welcome a visitor first in Gaelic and then in English. With a mischievous smile, he told me that I could find a hymn book in a pocket attached to the back of the chair in front of me.

And then it began. A tall, cadaverously thin man stood forward from the congregation and started to sing. It seemed like chanting at first and not conventionally melodious, with no recognisable tune. Each time the man completed a line, the congregation appeared to sing it back to him, except that they had made it different. And immensely powerful, almost hypnotic. It was the first time I had heard the Gaelic psalmody.

Soaring and swooping like flocks of birds, the psalms seemed perfectly suited to the land that made them, the steep mountain-sides, the limitless horizon of the ocean and the drama of the winds, the rain and the blinding sunlight. Even though it was to be many years before I understood the words, the emotion

behind them was entirely intelligible. As the rise and fall of the singing and its apparent seamlessness reverberated in the little church, it felt as though a history and a culture hidden to me was beginning to open.

Many years later I did an immersion course in Gaelic and became a supporter of the Gaelic-medium further education college at Sabhal Mor Ostaig on the Isle of Skye. It is now part of the University of the Highlands and Islands. There I met a lovely man called Donnie Campbell. Gaelic was his first language and I remember him watching Scotland play football on TV in his cupboard-sized office. When a rare goal was scored, he celebrated and exhorted the team in his native tongue, entirely unselfconsciously.

Sabhal Mor Ostaig

In English, and on a map, the Big Barn at Ostaig lies to the west of a leafy road running through the Sleat Peninsula of the Isle of Skye, surely one of the most beautiful places in the world. The Big Barn is, in reality, a small farm steading where a very big idea was made real. In 1973, the merchant banker and entrepreneur Sir Iain Noble came up with the notion of a further education college teaching through the medium of Gaelic. With the help of others, he brought Sabhal Mor Ostaig into being and it has grown in scale and importance ever since. Under its inspirational principal Norman Gillies, the college chimed its ambitions perfectly with the announcement in 1989 of a government fund to make additional Gaelic TV programmes. Expansion followed, the Scottish ITV companies contributed significant sums and SMO, as it is known, became much more than a renovated farm steading on a stunningly scenic island coastline. A large new campus, the Arainn Chaluim Chille, named after St Columba, was built across the road, beautifully located on a height above the Sound of Sleat. By 2010, there were more than a hundred full-time students and many more part-timers and people on short courses. From a small beginning, the Big Barn has inserted itself into the centre of Gaelic cultural life – an extraordinary achievement.

Once we talked of Highland history and he told me a moving story about the battle at Culloden in 1746, the last act of the Jacobite Rising. Donnie told me that, before they charged across the moor into the gunfire, the clansmen had recited their genealogy. When the government army heard the chanting of what is called the *sloinneadh* the 'naming of the generations', they believed that the Highlanders were singing psalms. Instead each man counted back through his genealogy – *Is mise macIain, macRuaridh, macIain Mor* 'I am the son of John, the son of Ruaridh, the son of Big John'. Many could count back through more than a century. And once the names had been named, once the clansman had said out loud who they were and where they came from, they prepared to charge, to defend a way of life.

Donnie Campbell's story has stayed with me as a singular and dramatic illustration of difference, of the cultural as well as the political and geographical division marked by the Highland Line. And, since our journey along it starts in Inverness, it seems appropriate to begin with the nearby battle of Culloden, the climacteric event in the 18 centuries of recorded difference between Lowlander and Gael.

In the early evening of 19 April 1746, a horseman was galloping towards Edinburgh. Three days before, he had watched the Highland army of Prince Charles charge over the heather moor near Culloden House and engage with the government troops led by the Duke of Cumberland. As the rider clattered over the cobbles of the West Port, he shouted news of a victory to those who turned to watch him pass through the Grassmarket. There the scaffolds General Henry Hawley had ordered for the execution of rebel soldiers and sympathisers only a few weeks earlier still stood and the rotting corpses of the condemned swung in their chains. Kicking on his tiring horse, the rider made for houses where he knew his astonishing news would be welcome. The Prince and his brave Highlanders had triumphed once more! The hated Cumberland had been defeated in battle near Inverness.