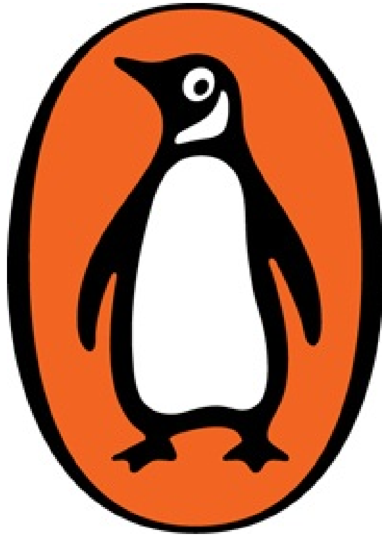
Griff Rhys Jones

Mountain



Mountain

Exploring Britain's High Places

GRIFF RHYS JONES

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Introduction

I was actually at a meeting to talk about something else entirely when somebody suggested that I could present a programme about mountains for the BBC.

‘But I know nothing about mountains,’ I bleated.

‘That’s excellent,’ the executive replied. ‘It will be a new experience for you.’

‘But isn’t there a certain amount of skill involved?’

‘Well, we can see you mastering those.’

‘And if I don’t master them?’

‘That’s good television.’

So I was recruited, or press-ganged even. This is the story of that trip, which took up a lot of 2006, but it is obviously not a mountaineer’s account. I was a virgin climber and a trembling one. I had onc crawled up the volcano Stromboli hoping to dodge fridge-sized rocks. I had been skiing in various parts of Switzerland. I had even crossed the High Atlas in a Fiat Punto. I thought I knew what a mountain was like. I was wrong. Now I have climbed fifteen British mountains, some of them three o four times in a row for the cameras. I have scrambled, bouldered and scaled. By climbers’ standards, of course, I have done nothing, but I do feel, well… experienced.

As a virgin, I was a little sceptical to begin with. Was the discomfort going to be worth the effort? Apart from a little panting, could it really make a man of me? Was I really going to walk down my flat city streets with a new glint in my eye and a swagger in my step? You can judge for yourself. There were some minor physical challenges, to which I usually failed to rise, and a smattering of minor orgasmic summiteering moments. But what began to fascinate me as an outsider was the history of the vertical world I encountered. By walking into the hills I discovered that mountains are separate environment, a different territory with their own rules, where for thousands of years people have lived, but with difficulty, where bad men have fled, where dreamers have escaped, where ordinary people have struggled to survive and where elements of everyday existence long since abandoned on the easy flat lands have hung on right up to the present age. And on every climb there came a moment when we crossed a stile or climbed a wet gully or breasted a ridge when we suddenly broke through into an undisturbed, wild place, bare, open, ravaged by previous ice ages and largely left to itself: a real wilderness on an overcrowded island.

Almost a third of our country is covered in mountains. This is a minor introduction to some of the people who have been there and lived there. It would have astonished Mr Tarrant in the fifth form bu I did become fascinated by the way that geography can affect our lives and shape our history. British hills hatched rebellions, attracted speculators, sheltered eccentrics, powered industry and prompted scientific investigation. So there is a little bit of that sort of stuff here, in among the subjective whimpers and triumphs.

Of course I didn’t go on my own. Cubby, Mark, Fraser and other experts were with me all the time They not only showed me the ropes, lovely purple ones too, but listened to my wild prattling and suffered my prickly inexperience. There were cameramen and assistant producers and directors too who struggled up slopes and sheltered in wet hotels. They are largely hidden in this account, as they were in the resulting series. But one thing rather frightened me, a portent of the new media reality, I suppose. In all our bold company I was definitely the oldest person in the unit. ‘Are you all right,

Griff?' was too common an enquiry. Yes, thank you. I'm only fifty-four,' was a grumpy common response. It took my wife to point out to me that I was in fact only fifty-two. I couldn't really hide m inadequacy behind pretend advanced old age. Damn.

But at the end of months of trudging and exploring, climbing and clambering, I have to admit that this fifty-two-year-old virgin was left with one inescapable question. 'What took me so long?' The hills were an extraordinary and unexpected experience and as I sit here writing this I find I am hankering to go back. I hope, when you read this account, you will be able to see why.

1. North-West Scotland

Crouched in a Cessna at ten thousand feet I could finally understand why blokes with preposterous facial hair called aircraft ‘crates’. The doors were aluminium straws with a shell of silver paper. If I leaned too hard against the side I was going to leave my own shape pressed in the frame. The entire plane seemed to bend and crumple as we flipped around like a paper bag in a wind tunnel.

My pilot’s company was running out of Loch Lomond. ‘We’re going to take tourists, fishermen an landowners out to the furthest isles,’ he shouted over the roar. Now he was taking me by the quickest route to the far north west of Britain.

As we crawled around massive lumps of hill and thundered laboriously along valleys neutralized with snow, I dimly realized that that thin cotton thread of a line across the bottom was the main road between Altnaharra and Inverness. On the map there was satisfying emptiness, and emptiness in our crowded island is rare, except that – and I apologize if this seems blunderingly obvious – it wasn’t empty. The space was filled by mountains – an upthrusting territory that needed endurance to cross. True, the airplane could curve effortlessly around that beetling cliff. A car, with its powerful built-in laziness, could slip straight up hills and down the other side. But the road followed the line of least resistance and added miles to a journey, snaking round the low route, avoiding heavy, difficult climb These ranges I was flying through were in truth just as inhospitable as those mid-European Alps I had crossed so many times by giant jet-liner.

Six hundred miles from London, on this white day, approaching the slinky, silver Kyle of Tongue, we were descending on the very tip of Sutherland, a place more akin to the wastes of Greenland than the rest of Europe. Beyond the mule-grey skin of the estuary itself, the freezing North Atlantic stretched away to the next hard surface – the polar cap. We breasted the western edge, turned and slewed downwards on to the water in a cascade of freezing white. At the head of the huge shallow lagoon a broken nose rose up against a darkening sky. This was Ben Loyal. Any reservations I may have felt about the status of British mountainhood were blown away in a slithering vista unfolding through a veil of spray.

I stepped gingerly on to a float and into a boat. Andy Beveridge was waiting to take me to the shor He was a razor-clam fisherman. The kyle was a silted harbour. There was a causeway bisecting it and the road ran across and off along south to Lairg. Ben Loyal dominated his working beat.

There are, of course, greater ranges in Europe. The Matterhorn is higher by two miles. But as anybody who has gone skiing knows, the route to the high slopes in the Alps happens via miles of foothills and lesser bumps. Here 2000 feet of crumpled horn rose straight from sea level. It was magnificent. Andy saw me looking.

‘Are you going up it?’

‘No,’ I shrugged. I was going to try to get up Ben Hope, out of sight and round the corner. Ben Loyal may have been imperious but at 2865 feet it wasn’t high enough even to count as a Munro, the name given to any mountain in Scotland over 3000 feet, in honour of the man who first set out to map and climb them all, Hugh Munro. There are 284 Munros. The trick now is to do them in one single month, or backwards, or without a break. Ben Hope was to be my first. But Ben Loyal, the lesser peak was enough to cow me into silence. ‘What about you?’ I asked after a while.

‘Oh aye, I’ve done it with the kids, you know, as a holiday thing. It’s a good view, if you get it.’

He meant that the mists came down and obscured the peak so frequently that we were lucky to see the mountain clearly now.

'You can see it better sometimes in the winter. But it'll be cold up there, I should think.'

This from a man who, if he hadn't been picking me up, would have been, even on this raw day, down over the side, with an air supply in his gob, sifting through the sand to drag up the long, boxy shellfish for the Chinese restaurant trade.

That night in my tiny room in Tongue I laid out my own kit and re-read my *Basic Guide to Hill Walking.* Nine hundred pages of close print – not bad for an activity I had mastered reasonably effectively since I was two. This was another testament to the otherness of the mountains. Ninety-nin per cent of the book was warning. Warning about the weather, warning about the cold, warning about the accident potential of loose stone, or hard stone (slippery), or steep grass (even more slippery). Th ease with which people can get lost. The difficulty of finding a way in fog. The foolishness of blowin a whistle for pleasure (when the tooting whistle may be the only hope of rescue). Planning, pre-planning, eating, sleeping; everything was intrinsically unsafe or deadly. The entire book seemed designed to frighten people off.

For the first time I tried to sort out what I had brought with me, under instruction, as it were. My collection of kit covered the bed, the floor and parts of the wall. I certainly didn't want to take everything up a mountain, if at all possible. The anorak was obviously useful, except that it was no longer an anorak. It was a 'shell'. The science of dressing, presumably after close consultation with the Mothers' Union, had been subject to injunctions about being nice and warm, and 'feeling the benefit'.

First there was a base layer. I had some of that. The secret is not to sweat and yet to be warm, to enclose but still to breathe. Having swathed oneself in light but breathable fabric, tight against the skin, this was covered with that woolly stand-by: the fleece, in various thicknesses, one for climbing and one for standing about in, which meant the alternative was bunged into the knapsack. (Sorry, I ca my backpack a 'knapsack' from some nagging folk memory. What is a 'knap' anyway?) There were heavy, unyielding boots with laces that went right down to the toes. There were some peculiar flappy things made of Gore-tex, called gaiters, which zipped and strapped around the boots in a simple fashion, if you allowed for about six hours of fiddling. My trousers were, even then, merely a shell, because I had some super-tight, Laurence-Olivier-as-Richard-III, black leggings to wrap over my bulging calves, and a pair of excellent nubbly socks to go on top.

I had everything I needed. My immediate problem was that I had everything I didn't need as well. Obviously I was going to be cold. So I had packed all those multicoloured thermal long underpants and woolly socks that we had accumulated skiing. They were not very scientifically packed. A numbe of them actually belonged to my wife – probably the ones with the lacy trim.

But the clothing was as nothing. There were drinking bags with catheter-like tubes for sipping at th vital supplies of water (dehydration was a great enemy on the mountainside), head-lights for descending, gloves, spare pairs of gloves, whistles, flasks for spare water, map cases, food in silvery plastic bags, compasses, emergency rations, blankets, lip salve, junk, more junk and a single ski pole supposedly important for balance and control. This was a serious business.

It snowed in the night. I woke a little light-headed. The breakfast weather forecast announced that the coldest place in the whole of Britain had been at minus eighteen. That was us. We were that minus sign.

By the immutable law of accommodation, half the film crew were staying in another hotel. ~~Somehow we had to get together. I dressed in every layer, as instructed, and waddled out into the~~ magic kingdom of crunchy whiteness, looking and feeling a little like Buzz Aldrin. Scott, my driver, ex-special forces and a former intelligence agent, heaved me into the front of the hired Vauxhall. The wheels spun excitedly. The snow rose around us.

At that moment a snowplough came thundering along. They had cleared the roads as far as Altnaharra. It was standard practice: the mail and the papers had to get through. Scott asked whether the plough could clear the back route round to the side of Ben Hope.

Alex the driver puckered his face under his bobble hat. 'Not usually, no. What are you wanting out that way?' The farmer had his own four-wheel-drive. He usually cleared the route with a tractor.

'We're going up Ben Hope.'

'Not in this weather you're not.'

'I think we'll be able to manage it.'

'No, you don't understand me. You're not going up! I work for the Mountain Rescue.'

Scott began to explain that we were all right. This was television. We had a talisman. We would be escorted by the rest of the Mountain Rescue team.

The snowplough man seemed unconvinced. The Astra was stuck anyway. But luckily the hotel owner had a four-wheel-drive, gas-guzzling behemoth. This was no status vehicle. It was essential in Sutherland. It certainly was to anyone who wanted to climb Ben Hope in a blizzard.

It was nine miles to the bottom of the mountain, through a landscape of monotone textures. Between Altnaharra and Tongue, the snow added a smoothing effect, but the lochs and burns were wrinkled ammonite at one end and sharp, frozen blue at the other.

A small wooden sign announced 'Ben Hope' and pointed the way across a trackless snow field. It seemed incongruous. We were now, I guessed, standing in what would usually be a demarcated car park for the casual rambler. A broad river valley wound away to the north. There was a distant huddle of farm buildings, but the valley was otherwise empty and blanked by the snow. It looked prehistoric except that, perched on an outcrop of high land commanding a view both ways, was a round stone fortress built originally by the Picts. So it was actually historic.

This valley had been worth defending for some 3000 years. Around the time the fort was built it would have been largely cleared of trees. The bleak, primeval emptiness was an illusion. It was empt by human choice. Indeed it would have been snowy like this, in a permanent manner, only 12,000 years ago, at the end of the last ice age. It is now believed that the huge frozen ice field that covered this place, and the sea beyond as far as the pole, the force that gouged out the valley where we stood, may well have melted in the space of a few decades around 10,000 bc. It was probably followed by a period of extremely palatable global warming, certainly warm enough to bring early hunters and nomads up here pretty quickly.

I was going up 3040 feet with Cameron McNeish, a writer, adventurer and Munro-bagger with a nice beard and an infectious enthusiasm, who laughed at my onion skins of clothing and persuaded m to take off one of my fleeces. 'It is sensible to set off feeling slightly cold,' he explained. 'You'll get hot soon enough and find yourself sweating.'

Cameron has been editor of *The Great Outdoors* magazine since 1991. He completed his first roun of Munros in the same year. This was a walk in the park for him.

He took my ski pole, showed me how to twist out the telescopic extensions to the right length and we trudged off, beginning by following, as was so often to become the case, a watercourse cutting

down the mountain and providing a handy cascade of rocks to climb.

We had bargained for bad weather and now we had it. One hundred and forty-four schools across Scotland were shut that morning. By the evening the A roads would be closed. Luckily it wasn't blowing any frosty winds as we left. There was blue sky overhead, deformed by towering, grey-black cumulus, and littered with a spattering of flakes. The stream fell down through black pools heavy wit ice and dotted with spectacular miniature waterfalls of icicles.

'It's arctic mountaineering up here,' Cameron said proudly, 'because the winds come straight from the Pole. These…' and he pointed up at the beetling broken pointed summit, 'are arctic mountains.' I stuck out my lower lip and nodded.

There were probably no more than a dozen trees on the entirety of Ben Hope and they were crouched down in the cleft where we started, frosted and sugared with snow. Cameron picked his way ahead through the rocks and ice and I followed dutifully, reminded of Good King Wenceslas as I trod in his deep foot holes.

I was like a child, though, unwilling to settle in for the long haul. Impatient and frisky, I had glimpsed the peak through a break in the clouds. It looked impressively high and alpine, but somehow I could hardly conceive the sort of journey this was going to be. I was jigging on, thrusting ahead a little, probably keen to impress Cameron with my own enthusiasm, but this was going to be a proper trek and there would be distance and effort involved.

'You always gain height surprisingly quickly,' Cameron remarked. And he was right. We had been puffing on for no more than fifteen minutes but the perspective was already changing. Other peaks were emerging above the horizon. The valley now seemed way below us. The Pictish fort had shrunk to a thimble in the white landscape. Already I was feeling exuberant. We were heading up and away from people and roads. There were no hedges to cross or gates to shut. We were up in an abandoned waste. To the west, the ledge we were on lifted up and followed the top of a huge black cliff. The win picked up. As we clambered higher, tiny icy balls of compacted snow, hard and stinging, flew in our faces. 'Graupple,' said Cameron.

Typically this was a Swiss-German term, like 'rucksack' or 'alpenstock'. The sport of climbing ha been developed and refined by the British when we were the rich and adventurous centre of the civilized world. But the tough and foolhardy young men who pioneered the sport in the 1850s had done so in the Alps. Hugh Munro had climbed these British mountains in the late nineteenth century. The Scottish Mountaineering Club was not even founded until 1889.

'God's chandeliers,' said Cameron, pointing at the bulbous configurations of icicles in the frozen waterfalls, but also God's transparent undersea creatures, or God's Polish art glassware. It was steep going. I was no longer feeling snug or smug. I was grunting for breath a bit and beginning to sweat.

'Sweat kills,' Cameron joked.

I nodded ruefully. I had started nice and warm, now I was red-faced and perspiring and fearful to stop in case I suddenly became a popsicle.

'But there's no real danger at these temperatures,' Cameron said.

Above the first stepped rock face we came to a cliff and ran at it, yomping upwards through deep snow, clutching at heather buried just beneath the surface to get a handhold, but walking as if on air, upwards to gain a ridge which would take us on and away to the left. It was utterly unsullied. This wa soft, crisp, snowball snow underfoot, good carving and building snow – 'quite unusual', Cameron tol me – supportive and totally blanketing and obliterating all the paths that might have been there befor Here in winter with the ice fields stretching out to the horizon it felt as if we were the first who ever

walked on this surface, instead of a couple of ramblers on a well-worn path.

~~But who had actually been the first to climb this mountain? All the Scottish peaks are carefully~~ recorded. Most are claimed or attributed to individuals, by no means all of them climbers. Bonnie Prince Charlie was an original Munro-bagger, heading north away from his failed coup, with the Redcoats on his trail, escaping into the hills and in the process, according to the record collectors, conquering summits across the Highlands. Botanists and geologists and map makers, especially map makers, followed. General William Roy made a map for military purposes in 1765 and this was used for the first recorded ascent of Ben Hope, by James Robertson, looking for botanical specimens in 1767.

Already we had left even the certainties of paths and heather behind. Now we were up where the rocks had fallen from the heights and formed unearthly piles and alien environments. The granite wa naturally cut into planes and squares.

The slopes themselves weren’t difficult. Each field stretched ahead like a pristine roof. We slogge on and surmounted the ridge and I stood for a moment with Cameron, savouring the inescapable trut that this was not, as I had thought, the last.

‘There’s another peak, then.’

‘Aye. Two or three more, I can’t remember.’

False summit followed false summit. The day which had begun so fresh and new had become dark and used and grimy. Snow was blowing up, down and around us and we had lost all vision beyond a few feet ahead. So much so that I failed to notice that we had reached the top. There was a slope, a field of stones and ahead of us a cairn. All sense of the massive and awe-inspiring had been lost in th grey cloud of fog and snow. Only the ground beneath our feet gave us any sense of up or down. If the were a view of seven counties or 300 other Munros, or Greenland, or my house, it was utterly obscured. We might as well have been at ground level, except for the details. There was a squared-of block with inset brass furrows at the very highest level, a trig point, and growing out of its top at a horizontal angle were little white coral sticks, with pine-cone spandrels, sharp and organic, just a few centimetres long but exquisitely fashioned.

‘That’s rime,’ Cameron explained.

The wind and the ice formed these fairy ice-lollies. So this was rime.

Cameron was already backing off through the swirling fog. ‘Come on.’

‘What! We came all this way!’

‘It’s getting dark.’

Was it? I found it quite difficult to tell. We were in danger of becoming ‘benighted’ – a word which, I now realized, meant being overtaken by the night and was a state to be avoided by any traveller, even one in nubbly socks. So we groped around in our packs, got out our miner’s-lamp head torches and headed back down the mountain almost as soon as we had got up. If we had brought some skis we could have been down in ten minutes. As it was, we plunged through the drifts and let ourselves slide on our boots and bottoms as best we could for a further couple of hours.

That night, slumped in front of a fire in the hotel, I had to accept that all this felt like an achievement, though there was none to boast about. When the first ‘sport’ climbers went up into the Alps for the sake of the experience instead of gathering useful scientific information, *The Times* raile in a leader against the ‘selfishness and recklessness’ of their enterprise. They had exposed themselve to needless danger and frightened their families, and to no good purpose (no *Basic Guide to Hill Walking).*

The next morning I went to the local Skerray post office to meet Meg Telfer and Marilyn McFadyen, both incomers. It was a pretty place with a thatched roof, held on by stones on strings, and painstakingly restored with a grant from the National Lottery. I knew this before Marilyn told me because there was a thumping great sign disfiguring one entire gable end.

‘We have to have it. It’s a condition,’ she explained.

But the girls were otherwise happy in their new role as joint postmistresses to eighty-three people, and as I write this I hope they survive the threatened cull. They were more than an indulgence for the people in this remote area. Shops which sold more than tartan tourist rugs and biscuit boxes were few in number. Meg had come to Sutherland precisely because she wanted to climb in the mountains. She had all the kit and loads of maps. Marilyn, by contrast, didn’t worry about them at all. She had no particular urge to clamber up rocks.

‘Meg tells me what I’m missing, but I know what I’m missing,’ she said.

‘What are you missing?’ I asked.

‘Sweat, exhaustion, terror, exposure, chill,’ she replied. That was what tourists like me suffered.

I was only at the post office because I was waiting for postman Paul Blackman. He drove up, delivered his sack of mail and opened the rear door of his van for me to get in. This was the ‘post bus There wasn’t much room in the back, just a couple of comfortable seats. It was a means of transportation so civilized and intelligent, generally on time and combining several vital needs, that I can only assume it will be done away with fairly shortly.

Paul was an incomer too. He came from Swindon. But he found dating someone from Altnaharra a bit of a schlep. So he moved here, and married into a crofting family. He had some sheep of his own now, so he was extremely patient with the stock that tended to wander haplessly out in front of us in the seaboard areas. He had time to be a shepherd because his rounds didn’t start until ten. I didn’t ask but assumed that he couldn’t start until ten because his post didn’t arrive until then.

The service was introduced in 1968. There are 140 routes which between them travel two million miles and carry 80,000 passengers annually.

Paul loved the scenery, how the colours and the ambience were always changing. As we talked, the did. The weather surged over the low hills. The road wound through lumpy mounds of blackened heather which had absorbed more of the snow, so they had a piebald marking. But all along the coast the mood changed in a flash, the colours pulsed like sea anemones with the passing complications of the clouds. A distant view of the mountains was translucent blue, ice blue, the same blue that glows like a gas pilot flame at the bottom of holes in the snow high on the slopes. The water of a burn was a pale slab of turquoise. There was a sudden patch of yellow reeds or exposed grass. The sky was piling up with fast-moving clouds, burning gold at their edges and reflecting in the drifts of snow blowing u on the ridges.

And if you go up to Caithness it suddenly becomes flat and completely different,’ Paul said.

Mind you, it wasn’t the flat I was there for. Paul was another one who never went up the mountains himself. He dropped tourists who did, with their backpacks, sometimes carrying bags of coal to take t outlying bothies. But he never wanted to join them. I could see why.

This was supreme happiness for me, trundling along with the daily round, with Paul chatting away in the front, and playing down his role as Santa in a red van. It occurred to me that he was the major connection with the modern world of consumer durables for a whole section of the population. We were in catalogue country and Paul was the courier.

‘I expect you’re pretty busy at Christmas, Paul.’

Paul cackled.

We travelled some fifteen miles. It was only a tiny part of Paul’s daily round trip of almost ninety miles (from Thurso to Tongue and back), taking me past Loch Eriboll, the sea loch where the British Navy had stationed frigates and submarines during the Second World War, and now a single fishing boat huddled by the remains of the old fortifications. On the far side I got out and walked the rest of the way to Lotte Glob’s house, perched on the side of the inlet.

Squat, bulbous, amorphous figures sat within a rolling enclosure and beyond the gate lay a scattering of huts, the centrepiece of which was a very fine building indeed, with a curved roof and slatted wooden sides. It was deliberately constructed to evoke the simplicity of a farm outbuilding, pure and direct – raised on stilts and enhancing the grand sweep of the loch. This was Lotte’s workshop and atelier.

I envied the house. It had a Scandinavian modern practicality. Not unexpected because Lotte was a Dane, although the award-winning place was in fact designed by a Scot – Gokay Deveci. I had probably even seen it before, in the pages of a glossy magazine. Beyond the entrance were two small rooms and a kitchen. Beyond that a narrow corridor suddenly broke out into a wonderful double-heig space, a sleeping platform at one end, and a glass wall that opened on to a balcony at the other; and th overwhelming vista of the loch itself, still streaked with snow, beyond.

Lotte had achieved her dream home on a tiny budget, paid for by her work as an artist. She was a potter. Her speciality was ceramics. But her fascination was the hills around her. She snorted at my book on hill walking. ‘I call them Munro commuters,’ she said. ‘Sometimes I pass them and they are always in such a hurry, puffing on, you know.’ She imitated a walker pumping his arms.

She would have sent a shudder through the authors of my guide. She liked to set off, armed with little more than her sleeping bag and a week’s supply of food, in order to wander at will. ‘I don’t thin these people understand the mystery of this place at all. I go to get deliberately lost.’

Lotte and I crunched across the snowy garden to her workshops. One kiln was wood-fired. It was boxed in by heaps of kindling. The other, inside a shed, looked like a large, blue, metal electric safe. could reach temperatures of 1320° Centigrade. Lotte showed me some of her ‘books’, leaves of clay cut with her writings and interspersed with flat stones, which had been fused together in the white heat, and then a piece of granite that had been through the furnace: a heavy blob of molten rock, the edges dripping like candle wax, shiny and slippery. Of course rock could melt. It had melted originally. I knew that. Up until that moment, though, looking at the splodginess of the molten granit which had squeezed out of the layers of Lotte’s firings like cream from a sponge, I had never really considered the cookery involved. The mountains I was exploring were wrinkles in a hot crust on a lav lamp suspended in space. It was this relationship between naked geology and human creation that Lotte was exploring in her pieces.

One by-product of her experiments had been to produce globes of clay, hollow inside and rock-like outside. They could float. We walked out by the side of a lochan to take part in one of her ‘interventions’, clambering over a sheep fence and bouncing over the spongy peat tussocks to get nea enough to the water to float them away.

‘What happens to them now?’

‘Oh, they just float around, and sometimes people find them and it makes them wonder.’

Not many found them, I sensed. Lotte dwelt among the untrodden ways. At least they were untrodden enough to make her launch site a soggy and wet-booted experience. I think we had started by being rather suspicious of each other, Lotte and me. She wasn’t happy with the shallowness of

television and I wondered about the propriety of coming across one of Lotte's floating balls. But, perched on my tussock in the deepening afternoon gloom, I thought these pale-grey floating rocks bobbing away across the mere seemed strangely in harmony with the open moorland. 'I also have put small pieces of pot in obscure places,' she told me. 'One was picked up by walkers and taken to a museum in Cornwall because they thought it was a prehistoric artefact.'

This wilderness thing was partly an illusion anyway. Sutherland is not the real frozen north. To some it had once been the attractive, warm 'south land', hence its name, and Lotte was hardly the firs Scandinavian settler. When lumbering about the countryside was still a challenge to an ox-cart driver adventurers from the 'viks', or inlets, a few hundred miles to the north east, had cruised into these sheltered waters in fast, efficient, long-hulled ships. It is English propagandists, we are told, who claim the Vikings did nothing but rape, murder and pillage. Revisionists believe that they mostly settled and farmed. But the sagas emphasize that these were pretty manly farmers. Jarl Sigurd betrayed his lord near here, ambushed him and cut off his head. Sigurd hung the severed head from h saddle pommel, as anyone would, for his triumphant return to base, but he rode a little too enthusiastically, jogging about on his mount. The teeth of his victim jumped up and cut his thigh. Alas, the wound festered and Sigurd died of blood poisoning. (He was laid to rest at Dornoch, about fifty miles away.) We may want to think of Vikings as misunderstood smallholders, but they certainl didn't waste precious fighting time cleaning their teeth.

It is not difficult to come across the evidence of later settlements but it was still shocking to realize the implications of what I stumbled into on the shores of Loch Naver later that day. We are perfectly used to seeing deserted shepherd's huts in all parts of Britain. Agricultural revolutions, depressions, hardship and plagues have all driven the population off the land, especially difficult land, but under the lee of the hill, by the side of the loch, I found myself walking into a complete ruined village of te or twenty dwellings. This was what remained of Grummore. Built of stone, the houses would have ha long turf roofs. The animals would have been housed down one end, the people in the other. It was a mixed agricultural world where farmers shared the common grazing on the uplands: not good grazin but plenty of it and enough to support a significant population. But these people were inconvenient, and they were cleared away.

The Duke of Sutherland, George Granville Leveson-Gower, has been fingered as the villain of the piece, though Karl Marx preferred to portray him as a dupe under the control of his wife, Anne, who was the Countess of Sutherland in her own right. She it was who, between 1810 and 1820, champione the virtues of efficiency. She saw the lands over which she had virtually feudal control as a means of paying for her upkeep, if only the inconvenient people who lived there could be got out of the way, and an up-to-date, modern, agricultural monoculture introduced – sheep, in fact. Sheep everywhere, mowing the uplands, eating any young trees and taking the bark off the rest, creating the bare, neatly shorn landscape we recognize as Scotland today. The sheep population rose from 300,000 to 1,600,00 in fifty years. Only a third of the human population remains, even today.

The Countess was not alone. The Highland Clearances were a nationwide drive for new productivity. But the Duchess of Sutherland had the zeal of a nineteenth-century Iron Lady. She achieved her ends by harrying people out of their cottages on to 'marginal lands', basically the edges of the estates, the unproductive bits, where those who didn't escape to America were encouraged to struggle for a living by fishing or crofting.

Walking through the stunted remains of the deserted village, a sharp wind drifting snow into the remains of the houses, I could understand how the Clearances still fostered resentment. Allan MacRa

was a direct descendant of the families thrown out by the wicked Countess. He still farmed the land b the ~~high road. He has 125 acres of rough ground and some of the prettiest calves in Scotland.~~ We fed them, tipping pellets into troughs and dodging their coy dinner queue barges, while he told me how h had led a successful campaign to secure the grazing rights to the hills beyond his own fenced land. A local land association, the Assynt Foundation, bought 21,000 acres, using their own money as well as government grants. The land was actually the crofters' own common grazing, which just happened to be owned by someone else. It is sparse upland. The sheep and cattle have to wander on the range. Allan works this land, and now the land association in his landlord. He hasn't even really bought the freehold. His croft still remains what someone defined as 'a small parcel of land surrounded by regulations'.

Allan made me a cup of tea in the house he had built himself and leaned across from his chair to fi me with a glittering eye.

'You know that road from Ullapool to Lochinver. What is it? It's thirty miles from one village to another. It should be farmed. There should be houses all along there and people living in those house and making that land productive.'

The urban conservationist in me bridled a bit. I leaned in myself. 'What, you mean new buildings, new houses, all along that lovely road?'

'Aye. There were people who lived there once. They should be encouraged to come back.' He delivered his killer punch. 'Listen. It's not your wilderness! It's my wilderness. It's not here for people to drive through and admire. It should be used. It's good, productive land, not like this…' He gestured at his own acres, which were part rock, part cliff and wholly a tipped-up table. 'My family were driven out on to this poor land, no more than subsistence.'

Allan sat on crofting committees. He was on the Highland Council. He battled for the Highlander with a fierce, committed pride and lived a cold, active, difficult life which he obviously relished. 'It i a hard life. They say we have to "diversify". That's the word they use. We have to find other jobs. Bu there aren't any other jobs.'

I felt guilty that I was staying that night with an incomer landlord, and doubly guilty, because Cou Adam Knuth was such a charming, civilized host, living in a delightful house, who cared deeply abou his land.

His housekeeper, Helen, welcomed me at the door of Loch Loyal Lodge. I had passed it several times, solitary and solid, a faintly suburban Victorian building, like a pointy rectory, just off the road in a small stand of mature trees.

Count Knuth had bought his house fifteen years before. It came with an oversized garden, which happened to include a mountain, the whole of Ben Loyal. We met in the porch. The count was tall. He spoke impeccable English (not rare for a Dane) and dressed more like an English gentleman than mo English gentlemen, in blue cords and a stripy shirt. The house was more of a log-cabin lodge inside than the outside might have promised, being panelled throughout in pitch pine; lovely stuff too, with dark, plain, orange glow.

The count had bought his spread when the Duke of Sutherland had been forced by death duties to sell off some of his land. A map, which covered most of the wall in the hallway, showed the parcel that he got. It ran the entire stretch of the road I had travelled. Who wouldn't have bought it, given th resources and the chance? When his aunt died and some of the forests that she owned became available to him, the count decided to sell them off and acquire a considerable chunk of wild country here in Scotland instead. 'I swapped a pension fund for a mountain. What could I do with a load of

paper pulp?’

Wilderness was rare, and he wanted to hunt. The results of this hobby were all around us. There were a dozen horned heads on the opposite wall. We went through to the small dining room, with a fire in the grate, and a selection of stuffed birds and small mammals watched us, with glass eyes, as we munched estate-reared venison. They certainly didn’t all come from the slopes of Ben Loyal, unless various exotic antelopes had been let loose up there.

The maintenance of his herd and his hobby cost the count a lot of money. For the time being, the wilderness was not my wilderness or Allan MacRae’s wilderness but Count Knuth’s wilderness, though Scottish parliamentarians may do something to disabuse him of that in the future. He seemed to have few objections to ramblers walking over the country and became quite misty-eyed over its beauty and appeal.

He also offered me a bed for the night. I climbed a polished staircase to a pretty room with yellow wallpaper, where a huge and magnificently antlered okapi mournfully eyeballed me from above the wardrobe.

It was not good weather for stalking the next morning, nor for wearing my stalking outfit, a head-t toe overall of mysteriously random zigzag leaf patterns. It gave me a headache to look at my own trousers. The hills were still covered with snow and I would be visible from iooo yards, but Ian Smar the chief stalker, was taking me out to get a flavour of the effort involved.

It was a formality, but he expected me to shoot at a target before we went. This was what everybod had to do. If a visitor could get three bullets in a circle, they could be let loose on the hill. Count Knuth himself was an excellent shot. So I was handed a rifle with the usual instructions about bolts and safety catches, and flopped down in the snow.

Reader, I hit my target. I expect you’re as startled as the director, but, long before drink and progressive music took their toll, I had spent a wasted youth training in the school CCF. Pull firmly into the shoulder, get the little sight at the end of the barrel in the middle of the V at the back (or in this case the cross-hairs on the telescopic sight straight on the wobbly bit of paper), breathe out, relax and squeeze the trigger.

Hawk-eyed as I was, I would have been permitted to help cull the herd, but I was handed a camera instead. And off we went, hunting photographs.

When there is snow in the Highlands, the deer come down to the roadside at night to lick salt. Thei golden eyes may be the last thing you see in the headlights before a twelve-point monarch of the glen joins you in the front seat of your car. We had passed plenty of them after dark, out on the roads of Sutherland. They’re limber and they usually bound straight over the deer-proof fences, but some, so they say, try to jump the headlights instead. It gives road-kill new meaning.

That morning, as a result of the snow, they were still hanging around the lower areas. A successful stag will field a massive harem, plus their young. As the young males (the bucks) grow, so they become aggressive and want a harem of their own. Then they start fighting. Humans intervene and so out the dispute by shooting a few of them for the pot. But it is not easy.

They look out for intruders, especially ones in lurid-green leafy suits walking across the snow. Dee are extremely shy. We could see them all right, but it was an effort to get close enough to effectively shoot them with my camera.

Ian led the way, trotting across the snow, with me scuttling behind, plunging into drifts and trippin over hidden tussocks and trying to control the volume of my creaking bones. Just as suddenly he thre himself to the ground and we crawled forward on our bellies, digging our own snowplough furrows fo

twenty yards or so. We breasted the hillock and peered ahead, between a few strands of yellow grass. Alas, the deer were not as stupid as they looked. They had run down the hill, along a gully, and were now about a quarter of a mile behind us, looking nervously in our general direction.

I was already freezing. I had compacted snow all down the front of my camouflage jacket and my fingers had become like frozen carrots. Thank goodness I had only to squeeze my button and not steady a rifle. But Ian was off again. He had done this before. He could propel himself along the ground like a vole. I slithered after him, scooping buckets of slush up into my sleeves on the way. We got into a frozen bog and waited. Hours passed. After a little while the herd descended into the valley ahead of us. This was my moment. I raised my site. I extended my telephoto lens to its full extent. I squeezed the trigger and popped off a few out-of-focus and wobbly shots of a startled-looking deer.

The deer were certainly part of the ancient history of this place. They ‘belonged’ there. Unlike the sabre-toothed tiger, the beaver, the wolf and the brown bear, however, they continued in residence because of their sporting potential.

I was to meet people who snorted at the hunters and the landowners and their expensive maintenance of the landscape. To them, they were the successors of the aristocrats who preferred sheep to people. The debate about ownership, control and use of the uplands is run on some very basic issues. Some talk airily of ‘Nature’ and ‘the Wild’ (I certainly do), but now I was driving south through an empty expanse of black cliff, windswept top and soggy valley which defied the notion of ‘natural’. Was it more natural to have herds of deer roaming the mountains than wolves? In the natural world the deer were kept in check by natural predators. In the natural world the valleys would have been clothed with forest. Perhaps this was a wholly artificial wild place, after all.

Suilven is a more isolated and wild mountain than most. It is called ‘the helmet mountain’ – a 2895-feet-high shark’s fin of granite that juts straight up out of a waste of ‘lochan and bochan’ near Ullapool. It is not the highest mountain in the region, but it has an unmistakable brooding outline and was used by the Vikings as a navigation point. We were still short of daylight and we needed to make an early start, so we trekked out in the late afternoon to settle into a bothy for the night. I felt a little like Doctor Johnson on his Highland tour, keen to play down the magnificence of the scenery on either side as only a weary southerner can, trudging onwards, grumbling away at the inconvenience of carrying my own coal.

The bothy, maintained by the Mountain Shelter Association, had formerly been a shepherd’s hut, six miles from the nearest village, but was in itself a symbol of depopulation, because it wasn’t a wicked countess who turned the shepherd out of this little house – it was a wicked Land Rover. The development of all-terrain vehicles during the Second World War enabled farmers to get to their sheep from further afield. Today it is a snowcat, a moon buggy with eight fat wheels, that can most easily cross the mud and the slush, and lumber up a one-in-five incline with hardly a cough. Snowcats were carrying all our filming equipment past us while we soldiered on, singing marching songs.

Eventually we came to the long, low, stone-walled hut with a tin roof. It was black inside. We lit our fire, started up our gas canister lights and I wandered round the dungeon, a frozen Count of Monte Cristo, holding up the lantern and looking at the scratched messages on the bare walls. All I found were names. There was a sort of wooden sleeping shelf to one side and a beaten earth floor, oh, and a book of instructions about digging shit pits well away from the house and clearing up afterwards so as to leave the place properly bare and unwelcoming for the next visitor.

I finally got to eat my boil-in-a-bag meal and it was utterly and surprisingly scrumptious. So much so that I wished I had brought another one. The fire glowed a fierce red but gave out no heat at all

unless I was prepared to sit on it. As the temperature plummeted, I stepped outside and found a brigh moonlit night. The frozen hump of the mountain glittered against the stars like a massive silver dome I could think of few places more satisfactory to be; certainly not inside, where it was appreciably colder, despite the fire. Presumably it would take several days, or a nuclear reactor, before the frozen boulders of the wall would do anything other than refrigerate the inhabitants.

Of course, I wasn't on my own. We were pretending. There was the bloke making the film and his assistant and the sound man and the director, the researcher, several mountain guides and Scott. And they all snored. I intended to set up a midnight creep, on camera, to show the viewer the whole troop rustling and farting like a pack of huskies in the gloom of the shed, but once I was in my sleeping bag nothing would get me out again. My head stuck out like a throbbing snowball, but the rest of me was tolerably warm.

I should have stuck at it. I got up to throw more coal on the fire at about two in the morning, and I finally dropped off to sleep around five. The next thing I remember was Scott, my ex-special-forces factotum, noisily leaving the hut. I got up too, assuming it was reveille. It was five-thirty Scott, despite his army background, hadn't been able to sleep at all. He had given up trying.

We had breakfast. I did my teeth in a cup. We waited for my guide to arrive in the snowcat. (He ha been put up in the local bed and breakfast.) We read the visitors' book, a catalogue of dope smokers and disappointed walkers. Very few seemed ever to get a view from Suilven. In summer the top was usually shrouded in a dense mist, out of which swarms of vengeful, biting insects descended to eat climbers. As a pale-red sun rose into a clear winter sky and my toes defrosted, I reflected that this co season seemed much the better option for the bothy and the wild. I began to look forward to the snow hole I had been promised the next week.

'You'll be well comfortable in that,' Scott told me. 'It's much warmer.'

I was to go up Suilven accompanied by a geophysicist Peter Nienow, who now came ambling alon the track, charming, lanky and tall. Peter is an expert on glaciation, so I showed him my face and we started walking. He walked for pleasure. His mum had been with him the last time he climbed Suilve This somewhat reassured me, though he told me it had been too foggy to look down, otherwise, he thought, she might have been frightened. This de-assured me.

Suilven looked steeper than Ben Hope. We stepped across a virgin field of crisp snow with Peter in a charming ecstasy most of the way. 'This is such lovely stuff, this snow,' he warbled. 'It's real skiin snow. Not at all the sort of thing you get around here. This is alpine snow.'

We pricked our tracks around a frozen loch and started the last approach to a sheer cliff. Peter pointed ahead to a split in the face of the mountain. It was the gully we were going to use. The cleft would give us access to rock falls and cracks.

I wanted him to explain the geological process that had formed Suilven, and waded straight into a mental snowdrift.

There were so many layers to consider. We were currently walking across Torridonian sandstone – not so much the remains of an eruption in the crust of the earth but a rearrangement of some debris o mountains that had first been thrust to the surface i ooo million years ago, somewhere else on the planet entirely, which had then been at the bottom of a long-disappeared sea. The mountains had once been higher than Everest, but that was a brain-unsettling age ago, and a series of accidents and period of frozen cold had worn away the gaps between them. Phew.

Peter was perfectly equipped to explain and annotate each and every stage of this process. He had a host of elaborate and polysyllabic names at his command. But I found a polar cap forming over my

frontal lobes.

The trouble with geology, it seemed to me, and I now set out to explain this to Peter, was that it wa an attempt to classify a continuous process. ‘Some rock has poured up from molten depths far below some has been piled up by the plates of the earth crashing together, you see, Peter,’ I started. ‘But it i not a thing in itself, so much as a stage in a thing, if you see my point. Isn’t it hopeless to try to pin down every single stage; like trying to name eddies in a stream?’

Peter smiled and nodded. (He was, after all, on television.)

Having outlined my excuse for not learning any difficult names, I explained that what interested m at that moment, apart from Peter’s rather splendid hat, was the much more simple connection betwee these desolate and wild places and the questions that they posed to anyone who walked in them. The monstrous presence of the mountains could not but make people wonder: How did they come to be? What caused this?

‘Mountains were once considered, by the medieval mind, to be “God’s mistake”,’ Peter explained. ‘Once God was taken out of the equation then something else had to be responsible. It was no longer sufficient to rely on supernatural causes.’

Mountains themselves had played a part in the development of science. They told us how old the earth was. They made us question how old the sun was, then the universe. Considering he was a professional geologist, Peter was remarkably tolerant of my ill-informed metaphysical discussion. What could be better than a walk like this, for this sort of waffle? And I hadn’t even been smoking marijuana in the bothy.

‘I can get my head around the fact that the rocks were created three billion years ago, but all that Stephen Hawking stuff is boggling,’ said Peter candidly.

The gully shut us up. This was not so easy. For most of its height we could make our own steps in the snow, but as we neared the breast of the mountain it became steeper. Peter started wielding his ic axe and I got mine out too, feeling a little silly with this unaccustomed lump of aluminium in my hand. I was expected to hold it the right way too, like a walking stick with too large a handle, the serrated point facing back, trailing it on the inside edge, poking the stick into the drift as we gingerly stalked sideways across the slope. The original ‘alpenstock’ had been a much longer thing. This anchor-shaped object seemed preposterously dwarfish, but its principle purpose, apart from providin a little extra balance, was to act as an emergency brake.

On the ice, should you slip, you can gather way at surprising speed. Imagine slithering downwards towards the precipice until you become a human avalanche. Fingers won’t stop you. A boot is ineffective. It would probably turn you upside down. The long pick-axe end of an ice axe might just arrest things, if dug in hard. So you are supposed to hug it into the chest as you topple and apply all your weight, until the point digs in and brings you to a halt. Got it? Sure?

I tried to conjure the panic that would overwhelm me if I did fall and whizz off down the slope, an the presence of mind I would need to assume the position and hold the axe against my body. All I could foresee was a spasm of flailing limbs and an axe yanked out my grasp.

Then I dropped a biscuit. This insubstantial thing bounced and plunged out of sight in a millisecon It was steep.

The last bit of the slope was vertiginous. It was like stepping up the roof of a cathedral covered in snow, without even a gutter to rely on. Underfoot I could feel that the snow lay on top of stones whic wobbled and clanked softly. I was using not just my axe, but my gloved paws, scrabbling a little at th flat wall of snow at shoulder height as the slope narrowed, and I was feeling frightened. As we

clambered up the last bit I was not entirely reassured to find that we had not surmounted a plateau, but a ridge.

Ordinarily, I imagine, Suilven feels little more than a hill with attitude – a jolly Sunday afternoon walk with your mum, or Peter's mum – but I began to find its layer of ice a touch distracting.

We had to climb now - 'a little light clambering' - and the stones were slippery underfoot. They were covered with snow and my new boots felt cumbersome, the pack on my back unbalanced and my ice axe an unhappy burden.

We stepped up across the first heap and then along the side until we came to a sort of bridge to the next col and the proper summit of the mountain. I had to lower myself down and then traverse a thin wedge of earth to get there, except that to do that I had to sit on my arse on the snow and drop myself over a muddy, slippery tussock down on to a small patch of wet, muddy ice at the edge of the precipice, and suddenly I felt horribly, horribly insecure.

The manoeuvre was no more complicated than clambering down from a rather high chair, balanced on a slippery, slightly angled platform. But error had a desperate finality attached to it. There was no margin. The ridge was no more than fifteen feet long. On either side the cliff dropped away totally. The wall of rock fell away without break for nearly 15 00 feet.

I tried to persuade myself that there was really no more chance of falling off than there might be in falling off a footpath or tumbling off a pavement into a road. 'But if you did (if you did, if you did…) the difference was extreme. If I missed, if I stumbled, if I slid slightly, if one boot sluiced out of control, if I just caught my heel, if the snow on that grassy bit was a little icy underfoot. Just one slip, just one novice's mistake, that's all it took.

I let myself slide and got my feet on to the mud. And lurched. And wavered and stopped. I waited while the iron bands around my chest relaxed a little. Then I teetered a couple of steps towards the narrow bridge.

But I had to wait. The cameraman wanted to go ahead. The director held him by the belt and while Simon balanced the camera on his shoulder and looked through nothing but the eyepiece the two of them walked backwards along the ridge, filming me as I dithered on the other side. I felt silly. A cold depression clutched at me. I will be doing this again in a minute or so, going the other way. What's the point of this? What's the point?

The point was the summit. We crossed without incident. On the other side the very top of the pillar mountain was crested with more heaped stone and we clambered up that until we reached a platform the size of a football field. It was so astonishingly flat and smooth that my whole body felt as if it had been tricked. The sky had a winter clarity. We could see range after range of mountains stretching away like a frozen, white, turbulent sea.

What we were really looking at was a series of troughs. 'You can see the direction of the glacial flow,' Peter pointed out.

The other side of the valley was striated like corrugated black cardboard dusted with sugar. The Torridonian rock we were on was iooo million years old in places but the ice cap had covered this area, way above our heads, and had unleashed great, grinding rivers of ice and rock to wear away these Highlands. It had been here only 10,000 years ago, hardly any time at all in the great scheme of things.

That night we sipped mugs of asparagus soup in the kitchen of Glencanisp Lodge, having scrambled down the hill in the dark; lighting the way with our head torches. The big house was owned by the little people these days, who bustled around us. The local land association had bought this wilderness

and everything in it. They were going to graze their sheep there and were looking into ways to exploi the tourist interest. The old order was changing.

It was changing on Skye as well. Some 120 miles further south and a little bit west, the island, looked at on the map, was far bigger than I had imagined, and stretched up to wide expanses fifty miles to the north. But at the bottom end, Skye is separated from the mainland by a tiny strait. Looking at the new bridge arching smoothly over that gap, it seemed surprising that they took so lon to build it. But half the islanders never wanted it. To them the separation was and is everything.

I wasn't going to take the bridge. I was going the ancient way. I was going to row over in a little boat. I would quite happily have rowed myself. I like rowing, but it was still a long way and a boatma had been found who had rowed the Atlantic when such things were considered utterly, utterly barmy.

Tom McClean lives and works in a little nook of a sea loch, which opens out to a view of Skye. Th opposite bank is the edge of the Knoydart peninsula. This is another proper wilderness – some 17,000 acres of forest and mountain – and I had a fierce hankering to explore it, as I watched it slip by a mil to the north.

Another incomer, Tom had been in the SAS. He had seen what Robin Knox-Johnston was up to an did a bit of that solo, mad stuff himself, in smaller and smaller boats. His camp, now disappearing o the shore behind us, had a number of his former vessels lying on the grass, like beached trophies, including a top-heavy-looking fishing boat, reconstructed in the shape of a whale, and a tiny twelve-foot sailing cruiser, a little truncated, given that, in order to go for the record for the smallest vessel t sail across the Atlantic at the time, Tom had simply taken a chainsaw to the stern.

'Well, you know yourself, Griff,' he told me, picking up on my limited sailing experience, 'the waves are not really frightening at all, because once you're out there they're just like mountains, hug hills, which you are climbing up and then going down the other side.'

Applying himself to his oars now, Tom entertained me with stories. How, after his first epic row, h had been washed ashore on the remote Irish coast on a Sunday and had had the greatest difficulty persuading an old lady in a coastguard cottage to open her door and speak to him. And how, on anoth adventure, he had managed to winch himself on to Rockall for a forty-day visit to claim it for the British Empire, despite breaking his arm in the process. These days he runs Outward Bound courses for inner-city kids. He seemed unconvinced by inner-city initiatives and outreach programmes and believed in long walks and porridge instead. 'No sugar and they soon calm down,' he said.

But, living on the edge of the wilderness, seven miles from his nearest neighbour, he knew that everyone knew about him and he knew about everyone else. 'If you want to be really isolated, then g and live in a big city.'

Tom was just the sort of man you'd need if you wanted to do something mad. He was that British Army uncle figure, always looking out for whoever he was with, seemingly incapable of panic, thoug there was nothing terrifying about our adventure now. We crept around the bottom of Skye. This was how, in 1746, Bonnie Prince Charlie had made his celebrated escape 'over the sea to Skye', rowed by Flora MacDonald.

After defeat at Culloden, the Young Pretender spent months crossing the mountains. It wasn't just that his supporters lived there. It was the terrain itself that favoured him. Skye had been his last refuge. When Boswell and Doctor Johnson arrived there twenty-seven years later, they sought out Flora, by then an old woman, to have a look at this legendary heroine of the old way, a way that their very presence in the region showed was passing.

Rowing round the bottom of Skye, I could see the island of Raasay, where Boswell finally climbed

mountain and executed a jig. Doctor Johnson stayed on the ground. Urban intellectuals had yet to celebrate the romance and adventure of rugged scenery. Johnson was still an eighteenth-century, Enlightenment, metropolitan man. He favoured the power of the human mind to control Nature. To him, *Sturm and Drang* were merely wet and noisy.

I rather hope that even the good doctor would have been moved by Loch na Cuilce had he ever rowed into it, as I did, on that flat March morning. This was pure Wagner, or perhaps more accuratel Mendelssohn. I wanted *Götterdämmerung* playing. I wanted repetitive bass notes as we drifted on ou oars and slunk inshore.

The water was black and silky. Dolorous, jagged rocks, thick with slimy weed, projected from it a bubbled with eddies just beneath the slow surge of the surface. Flabby seals broke though the heavin basin and watched us like dogs, or rolled back on their platform rocks like lazy nudists. Walls of bla granite rose up to disappear in clouds some 2000 feet above our heads. Sometimes the mists parted and revealed a broken peak, so much higher than I had expected, that I broke our self-imposed silen and grunted at the unnerving spectacle. These were the Black Cullins, the most fearsome, awesome mountains in Britain, not because they are the highest, but because they are, like the Alps, sheer pinnacles of unforgiving rock, rising in crumbling cliffs of gabbro straight out of the ground in a sinuous eight-mile-long ridge. And they are for sale.

The following morning I read the estate agent's beautiful brochure in a café opposite Dunvegan Castle. It was quite straightforward. The range came with a few small bothies and a farmhouse and covered around thirty-five square miles. It was a world-famous natural phenomenon. I was advised t make an appointment with the Edinburgh office before viewing, though it was clearly visible from almost anywhere on the island. There were several footpaths that crossed directly over the Black Cuillins which, if I bought them, I would have to maintain. The cost? About thirty million.

I was interested and went to call. Overlooking an estuary with high walls and surrounded by a drie moat, despite being prettified and expanded into a rambling country house in the nineteenth century, the castle was still a difficult place to get into. John MacLeod of MacLeod was waiting for me. Wearing a kilt but speaking with the accents of the home counties, he took me on a tour of the castle through the beautifully appointed private apartments hung with full-length portraits of his ancestors, some of whom, like him, wore tartan.

He showed me the well which enabled the place to withstand sieges. We toured the sitting rooms furnished with chintz, redolent of the comfortable age when his great grandfather had married into a American shipping fortune and brought to the family what they were beginning to lack then – money It had meant that they were able to live like the lords they were for a few more generations. But as w wound on through this huge place, the gilt became water-damaged. Striding through the upper bedroom corridors, we started to negotiate buckets. The nursery and the children's bedrooms were dripping still and great patches of ruined plaster were dangling from the ceiling.

'It's the roof,' my host explained.

He led me up a spiral staircase and outside through a turret door.

'I have acres of roof to maintain and it was originally laid in copper. It has reached the end of its life. I have to maintain this place. It is a Grade One listed monument. I have to pay for the roof somehow, so it's either lose the castle or lose the mountains. If I could just sell the Cuillins I would b able to pay for all the repairs to the castle.'

It was spitting with rain. We stared across the wet, featureless, rolling hills towards the mountain range. Perhaps some homesick exile in the States would step forward and buy these black-crested

smudges, but they have their own mountains and wildernesses in America to choose from. The sale was ~~widely believed to be a ploy. The laird wanted the John Muir Trust or a Lottery group or the~~ National Trust to buy the mountains for the nation. He was asking just enough to secure his tenure in the castle. But the nation currently found the price a wee bit steep. There had been no takers. Sadly, before the programme was broadcast, John died. He will never see that roof repainted.

The next morning, I visited a school and attended a lesson in Gaelic. Thirteen children were being taught the language in a perfectly ordinary cuboid schoolroom and they, in their turn, tried to teach m just to pronounce the names of each of the major mountains. Am Basteir, ‘the executioner’; Sgurr a Ghreadaich, ‘the peak of torment’; An Garbh-choire, ‘the wild cauldron’; Sgurr Alasdair, Alexander’ peak’; Sgurr nan Gillean, ‘peak of the young men’.

We chanted them together and I got them wrong. Then they chatted away in English to me, but the were perfectly serious about the language, which isn’t like Welsh or even Irish. Very, very few peopl speak it. Almost no one uses it as a first language. One of the boys was the son of the member of a Gaelic band, but not all of the kids were there for obvious romantic purposes. Two of the little girls were the daughters of a flying dentist who did complicated work in outlying islands. They liked speaking Gaelic because they could talk to each other without their mother eavesdropping.

The Gaelic language was something rare and beautiful. It symbolized what their parents and many others across the island were searching to retain – almost especially if they were incomers – and that was the difference. The bridges and the motorways and the tourists and the television were homogenizing the world and losing the independence of Skye.

My hotel had a pepperpot tower at one end, but was otherwise a sort of thirties resort in a moderately sized car park. As I went in, the first thing I encountered, before the extremely pretty receptionist, was a relief model of the Cuillins range, divided into the Black Cuillins and the Red Cuillins. It had been poked about enough to eat away the papier mâché in places. It was the black tha interested me, even though on the relief map they had been painted an undercoat grey. The mountain formed a sort of dragon’s back, undulating away in a sinuous line, the peaks joined by ridges.

It is highly unlikely that many souls had ventured up on to those craggy outcrops before the climbers came in the late nineteenth century. Hence the Mecca for climbers. Hence the concern of m beloved wife.

‘The Inaccessible Pinnacle,’ she gasped. She had looked it up on the internet.

‘It’s rated “severe to very difficult” in winter,’ she said and started looking through the list. ‘The Buttress, the Devil’s Chimney’ They all sounded horrible. ‘And you are so feeble.’

In the hotel, just beyond the reception and the pretty receptionist there is an exhibition which tells the story of climbing in the Cuillins. It is a stirring tale, with some significant heroes, who were excited to discover that this part of their native land compared favourably with the Alps. Foremost among them was a man called Norman Collie, who led the way up some of the more formidable peak taking a local man, John Mackenzie, as a guide and companion. Collie was a scientist and dour by reputation and Mackenzie was a silent local. They were eventually buried side by side having mappe out most of the Black Cuillins together.

I wondered whether I could, by rights, venture into the bar of the Sligachan Hotel. It was full of climbers and I didn’t even have an anecdote. The Mountain Rescue Team met me in the bar. They were gentlemen. Seonachan (Jonathan) MacLeod, Eoghain (Ewan) McKinnon and Richard McGuire. Priestly figures almost. Like three cultured cardinals. A beautiful way of speaking they had about them too, measured and musical, with a little low, fluting brogue in the tone.

Richard was younger, more the acolyte, the sharp, intelligent one. He drove the mobile library, he explained. It wasn’t always easy for him to stop and rush off, leaving in mid-paragraph, as it were. In the high season the rescue team could be called out two or three times a week. But they were mountain-loving men, all of them, and they liked going up.

I think it helped that, for them, their sport was a little frightening. They were amused by my shock at this. Surely I wanted the thrill of being close to death from time to time, didn’t I? It wasn’t just the challenge. Pushing yourself was not enough. After all, you can push yourself to the limit running – bu a failure on the track doesn’t kill you.

I think I had assumed that when they reached their level of expertise, it would be the exercising of their skill that fascinated them, but this wasn’t really the case. They wanted to get to grips with their own mortality, to hang on to it with one hand, to look down at a 2000-foot drop as their ‘fingers bega to straighten’ while they searched for a hold to take them on. And these were men who went up to fin people in trouble.

Seonachan had worked it out. In his time of service, he reckoned the Cuillins had claimed eighty lives. That’s two a year. And they smiled slightly weird, rueful smiles at the capriciousness of rocks. They talked of chipped bones and boulders bouncing down erratically, on unpredictable trajectories, from places far up above – dislodged perhaps by sheep as easily as men – and unavoidable.

One poor fellow had been found beneath a mighty stone near Knight’s Pinnacle. Hundreds of climbers had successfully negotiated this boulder in the past, but he was the unlucky one. It decided t let go of the cliff as he was crawling around its outer side. It fell, took him with it, and crushed him t death. It had been a problem. They paused silently. The solution had been to ferry in bus-jacks, by helicopter.

We started the walk up in lovely weather – slightly muggily hot – at eight-thirty the next morning; trudging the usual uneventful walk, up across a splodgy wilderness towards the base of the ‘British Alps’. The path followed a river and came quickly to a precarious Amazonian bridge spanning a gushing torrent, deep pools and rapids of stormy blue. I was glad to have James ‘Paddy’ Stephenson, Sarah Kay and, from last night, Eoghain and his Skye accent with its little tremor of Norse in the Scottish brogue to guide me, as we filed across the bridge, heading up to the magic point where the grass gave way to sheer rock.

Eoghain had the lope of an experienced hill climber. He set a cracking pace, his long strides taking us up the base of the hills, which stood out of the surrounding flats like bubbles of granite. This was the famous gabbro, or ‘grabbo’ as I kept calling it: a mental reference to its renowned adhesive qualities. Almost any surface can be slippery in wet and ice, but the stone of which the Cuillins are made is like pumice or scored rubber.

It was exhilarating to saunter up the stuff. In dry weather, and it had become a warm, clear mornin with a distant fish eagle swimming high in the ether, the lower rock almost challenges you to walk vertical slopes – satisfactorily flattening out at the top of each giant boulder so you can jump on and up to the next. And Eoghain was always pressing on ahead.

He paused and turned. I joined him and he pointed at the green sea of land below us. Unbroken by fences, it wallowed away to an estuary on the western edge of the island, some ten miles away. We could already see the sunny twinkle of Portree, far beyond the intrusive geometric blocks of Forestry Commission plantations. Beyond, over Raasay, to the north-east, the peaks of the western shore marched back towards Sutherland, where I had started.

‘See there.’ He pointed down to a speck of white. ‘That’s a little rented cottage.’ He swivelled

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