

PART TWO: SKYE

Thursday, 14th May



Wonderful sunny morning, enhanced by fine breakfast. Delightful drive south to Tarbert. Magnificent views of mountains in Harris which we couldn't see last Sunday. Really hot weather waiting for ferry and a gorgeous crossing to Skye. Greeted by the massive headland in the harbour at Uig. Drove north, visited Flora Macdonald's grave and monument (see 8th May). Coastline of Harris in the distance.





Continued round the coast as far as Brogaig and then took the road to Quiraing. Splendid views and scenery of strange volcanic rock formations.





Back to Uig for snack and pressed on to B&B in Portree. Wonderful position overlooking the bay. Weather still ideal so set out to see the Cuillins, those mystical and mysterious black (basalt) and red (granite) mountains, so beloved by walkers and climbers.





Take road past Raasay Island as far as Loch Ainort, then back to Glen Sligachan, which separates the black and red ranges, and on to a beautiful road through Glen Brittle. Magical sunset on the Cuillins. At the end of Loch Brittle look out to the islands of Rum and Canna.



Return to Portree by Duvegan Road, taking a right turn over the lonely desolate moors. Really fabulous day.

Friday, 15th May

Bad weather threatened, so decided to make the most of the morning and head out to see the Old Man of Storr, a high column of basalt among other jagged stacks. Stopped at view point called Kilt Rock to see the waterfall on the rock formations folded like pleats on a kilt. The hexagonal rocks are the same as those on the Giant's Causeway and also in Fingal's Cave on the Isle of Staffa, the inspiration for Mendelssohn's *Hebrides Overture*.



Wind blowing hard and icy. Took refuge in the Art Café at Elishader and warmed up with delicious fruit scones washed down with first class coffee. Coffee in the B&B was instant! By this time the rain was pouring down, the mist rendered the mountains invisible, and it looked bad for the rest of the day. So indoor activities in Dunvegan Castle – ancestral home of the Chief of the Clan MacLeod – fitted the bill.

When we got there, found the car park a fair walk to the Castle, not an attractive proposition in the torrents descending from the heavens. So in the unsure and uncertain hope of improvement, took lunch in the adjacent café. Pretty nondescript surroundings but the soup and baked potato were hearty. In the end had to run, or

rather splash, through the gauntlet of the downpour and the running river of the path to the front door of the castle, which miraculously opened to our touch. Fortunately there was a room to leave dripping mackintoshes and umbrellas. Castle not too large and mercifully free of antlers and deer heads.



The moving light was the 28th Chief, Dame Flora MacLeod, who opened the demesne to the public and turned the estate into a going concern. Our guide was Sarah Walker from Dublin. Before she got married and went to live in Skye she was in a music group called Masamba, who had played with Kila, the band in which our daughter Dee plays fiddle. So of course she knew Dee. The leader of Masamba is called Simeon and Sarah thought Dee would remember him better – ‘All covered in tattoos and earrings’. Isn’t it extraordinary to encounter this musical connection just out of the blue? After leaving the castle the weather was still ghastly, so headed back to the B&B and had a frugal tea of cheese and oatcakes in our room.

Later we had an interesting and educational conversation with our hostess about the various shades of Presbyterianism. As far as I could gather there are at least four main strands:

1. The Church of Scotland – the historical body, St Giles Cathedral and General Assembly in Edinburgh.
2. The Free Church of Scotland.
3. The Free Church of Scotland – Continuing. Like we saw in Scalpay.
4. Free Church

It would appear that none of these have any official connection with the Rev. Ian Paisley’s Free Presbyterian Church in Northern Ireland.

In the Free Churches all singing is unaccompanied, strictly no instruments. Only in the Gaelic services are the Psalms sung with the Precentor – the person who leads the music – singing each line alone, which is then repeated, sung in unison by the congregation. In the English service the psalms are sung in unison by the Precentor and congregation together. There are no hymns in the Free Churches, only psalms, similar to the Calvinist Churches on the Continent. As a footnote, I can add the

musical tradition of one Free Church in the Ballymena area of County Antrim. There the psalms are sung unaccompanied in *four-part harmony*. Moreover, at rehearsal, only 'practice words' are used. The actual words of the psalms are considered too sacred to be sung other than on the Sabbath! It would appear that the disagreements occurred largely over matters of governance, not doctrine. Coincidentally, on the radio news this evening, the Church of Scotland has voted to allow gay Ministers with a partner to continue in their Ministry. I imagine the splits will only deepen.

Saturday, 16th May

The forecast being for a showery day, got away early and drove to the west of Skye. Ferocious bouts of hailstones peppered our car, but in between the attacks enjoyed bright sunshine and superb views. Went as far as possible and ended up at the Trumpan church on the Waternish peninsula. On the way back, took a little road down to Stein, a pretty little harbour with a row of fishing cottages tastefully restored as holiday houses, and a fish restaurant that proclaimed itself as the oldest inn in Skye, 1790.



Needless to say, couldn't leave without having lunch there, which was marvellous. Crab sandwiches and rhubarb crumble swimming in cream.

Then on to Dunvegan Head, or at least until the road ran out. Looked in vain for the MacKrimmon piping centre and not a solitary wayfarer to ask. Can't help thinking of conductor Sir Thomas Beecham's advice:

Mother: 'What instrument do you think my son should learn?'

Sir Thomas: 'The bagpipes madam.'

Mother: 'Goodness, why Sir Thomas?'

Sir Thomas: 'After five years' tuition he will sound just as good as at the first lesson!'



Even though it was the Sabbath, found a little coffee shop open for business

The rain was starting to fall and we had to return to Broadford by the same road.



The road continued round the coast. Lots of new houses, built and being built, many of them architect designed. Joined the main road at Kilbeg right beside the third-level Gaelic College. Rain started to fall heavily so travelled on to the ferry port at Armadale, arriving two hours ahead of schedule. Passed the time in the ferry office by looking at boat timetables to the Small Isles. Chatted with a very kind man in the office called Sam, who couldn't have been nicer. I think he was glad to see us and have some company.

The half-hour crossing to Mallaig was quite rough and we were glad to reach the mainland. Took a wrong turn and found ourselves heading towards Fort William. When we tracked down the location of our B&B, we found it perched high above the harbour on the steepest hill we had ever encountered. Our hearts were in our mouths as our little car shuddered up the acute incline in first gear. But we made it, and the panoramic view from our bedroom window was wonderful, with the Isle of Rum highlighted in the evening light.



