

PART THREE: THE SMALL ISLES

Monday, 18th May

Had a constructive discussion over a good breakfast as to what to do next. Reached a consensus that, notwithstanding the dark clouds and unquiet sea, we would take a voyage to the Small Isles of Eigg, Rum and Canna. A round trip of seven and a half hours. Amazingly, we bypassed all the squalls and had a magnificent day.

Eigg has a rugged coastline all along its eastern side, culminating in a great rocky spur – An Sgurr – overlooking the harbour. It looked like an instant challenge for rock climbers. Nice sheltered harbour where a large colony of seals were sunning themselves; some, presumably the younger ones, swimming and diving. Eigg is community owned and looks well developed. Much fertile arable land and lots of cattle, horses, and sheep – and a rising population, to judge by the number of dwellings.



Stopped for only ten minutes to discharge passengers, before sailing on to Rum, the largest of the Small Isles, clearly outlined by several 2,500-foot peaks.



Rum has a fine harbour with the dark Edwardian pile of Kinloch Castle bearing down on it. We didn't like it or the atmosphere it created, but it does look commanding both from afar and up close. Crossing the Sound of Rum, Muck, the smallest of the Small comes into view – we don't land there. Out of the shelter of Eigg, the swell is quite considerable.

A quick turn around and on to Canna which, in direct contrast to Rum, is very small and quite flat. We had an hour to spend here, so that gave us time to wander and explore. It was enchanting and we thought we would like to come back some day and stay longer.



The return journey was just as exhilarating. We hadn't seen rain all day and now these wonderful wide vistas opened up to us, not only of the Small Isles, but also Skye, Mallaig and the Ardnamurchan peninsula. Drunk with scenery, sea, and satisfaction, we collapsed into bed and sank effortlessly to sleep.



Tuesday, 19th May

Today, the only island where we can spend some time is Muck – something we couldn't do yesterday. Rough sea and strong chilling wind. Muck is only two miles long by one mile wide. Its 1,500 acres are owned and farmed by one family, who must have some employees as there are several houses.

As luck would have it, the rain started just as we got off the boat and we were fairly wet before we got to the shelter of the tea room run by the owner's wife. Piping hot coffee and a succulent lemon drizzle cake restored vitality.



Set off to walk to the other side of the island, from where we were rewarded with splendid views of Rum and Eigg.





The sun came out and the breeze soon dried our clothes. The captain of the ferry stressed that we had to be back by 1.30 p.m., which gave us only ninety minutes. So within sight of the dazzling white beach, where the hotel lodge is situated, we turned back. Passing the craft shop the notice on the door said, 'Open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Honesty Box'. There was a big choice of attractive items, so we bought a multi-coloured hat for granddaughter Rosie and were more than honest. The box sagged with the weight of the coins that we inserted. Although we obeyed the injunction to be back by 1.30, the boat didn't depart until 1.50. No matter, as Muck is a pleasant place to dawdle. Tucked into a good lunch in the ferry café, which we had virtually to ourselves. Macaroni cheese Scottish style.

Back in Mallaig, drove to Bracara by landlocked Loch Morar, and then along the coast road to Arisaig where Eigg could be clearly seen. Gillian took the wheel to make a final assault on the dangerous hill to our lodgings and we survived to tell the tale.

Wednesday, 20th May

Apart from one occasion, all the breakfasts have been superb and this was no exception. Proceeded at a leisurely pace on the road to Fort William. Stopped to look at St Finnan's Church at Glenfinnan, designed by Edward Pugin, son of the celebrated architect Augustus Pugin. In the grounds the church bell, cast by Thomas Sheridan & Co. Eagle Foundry, Dublin 1875, hangs in a roofed metal frame.



Just round the corner was the Glenfinnan Centre where we enjoyed viewing an excellent exhibition which chronicled the events of the 1745 rebellion of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Much to our pleasant surprise our National Trust membership gave us free admission to the car park, exhibition, and monument. Who says the Scots are mean? Pressed on to Fort William, stopping a few times for Gillian to photograph Ben Nevis, the top still covered with snow, and roadside bluebells.



Pulled in at the start of Neptune's Staircase, a series of no less than ten locks at the beginning/end of the Caledonian Canal. Watched a boat make its ascending journey which takes one and a half hours to negotiate. Beginning to wilt, so kept

going until we reached our B&B at Ballachulish, located in a sweet position on Loch Linnhe. Ballachulish is a lovely sounding word. I was familiar with the name as it is mentioned in *Kidnapped*, Robert Louis Stevenson's thrilling tale of Jacobean times. For the first time since Barra, kippers are on the breakfast menu!

Thursday, 21st May

Luxuriate in having breakfast at the sinfully late hour of 9.00 a.m.! Very jolly hostess Pat, who laughed uproariously at all my Oscar Wilde jokes. Kippers not quite up to *Isle of Barra* standard, but who's complaining? A young Swiss couple were at another table and we had a chat about the referendum system in their country. Any citizen can call for a vote if:

1. he/she can obtain 50,000 signatures within 60 days for a less important question.

OR

2. he/she can obtain 100,000 signatures within ninety days for a more important question.

Of course we told them about the same-sex marriage referendum which was going to be held in Ireland the following day, just as we return home.

North of Inveraray at the head of Loch Awe, took the time to visit a most unusual and fascinating building (St Conan's Kirk). It looks like a Catholic church of a great Monastic Order, but is in fact a Church of Scotland (Presbyterian), built between 1881 and 1886, in an eclectic mixture of styles (Romanesque, Norman, Renaissance, and Celtic). It even boasts a cloister. The altar area looks like a Chapter House. Apparently Walter Campbell, the rich man who financed the construction, wanted to restore the spiritual ambience of the Early Church, which he felt was lacking in contemporary church architecture. He conveniently placed the church close to where he, his sister, and mother lived, so that they didn't have too far to travel for Sunday service.





Passed the Duke of Argyle's still unpleasing castle at Inverary, and drove to Dunoon for lunch in a wayside hotel before boarding the ferry to Gourock. Pulled into a car park with a good view of the Clyde for a post-prandial nap. Roused by a dutiful policeman driving a squad car, who asked us to move. This was providential as the traffic was rapidly increasing, so didn't make any further detours and headed straight to Troon, arriving about 5.00 p.m. We were first in the queue, but knew from experience that this doesn't mean we will be first off.

Checking in was delayed as the computer system broke down and we were directed to another kiosk. However the boat departed on time and the crossing was completely uneventful, except that I won *two* consecutive games of Scrabble. One, or is it two, for the records book? Disembarked on the dot of 9.30 p.m., and reached sister Dorothy's house, pretty tired, an hour later.

Friday 22nd May

Before going back to Dublin, thought it would be courteous and considerate to call to see cousin Jim and wife Ethel for 'a quick cup of tea and a biscuit' in Ethel's words. What a spread! The most luscious apple tart, pancakes, scones, clotted cream, jam, and lashings of filter coffee. After a feast like this my father always used to say, 'Well, that will do us till we get something'. Well, that something did us until long after we got home just before 4.00 p.m. After entering our house I flopped in an armchair and started to feel as if I was jet-lagged. After all, we had driven almost 1,650 miles and taken eleven boat journeys, all in two and a half weeks. Not bad for a couple of 'young at heart' septuagenarians.