

THE VOYAGE OF THE “KELPIE”

A Canoeing Cruise in Scotland

From “The Road to Rannoch and the Summer Isles” by T. Ratcliffe Barnett

The true principle of sport may be summed up in the words “Do it yourself.” Whenever we begin to hire other people, the strenuousness, the initiative, the pleasure, and the knowledge become second-hand, and the whole adventure of brain, health, and even muscle suffers. This applies to stalking a stag, landing a fish, sailing a boat or walking the world. As a wise modern essayist puts it-I have two doctors; the first is my right leg, the second is my left. That is the quintessence of the spirit sport. You cannot buy it. Do it yourself.

It was a long time ago, and canoeing has gone out of fashion since then. But I have just been over the old ground, the old waters, the old haunts-and I have found only one grey-haired Highlander at Inversnaid who remembers the *Kelpie* and her owners.

To begin with, we built her ourselves in the old coachhouse at home, where there never was a coach in our time. The skipper calculated her weight to a pound when he drew the plans, and the cook smiled incredulously. But when the long, shapely, wooden, flat bottomed canoe was finished, with her centreboard, her two masts and sails, her watertight compartments and lockers all varnished to a glossy mahogany in which you could see your face well enough to shave, we took her to the great scales at the mill, and she turned them only four pounds over the calculated weight. I can understand it now, for the skipper was afterwards to design and build floating palaces for millionaires and to stand before kings-whereas the cook only did what he was told, hammering nails and doing the drudgery of a common carpenter or orraman⁽¹⁾. However, at long last, in the early days of June (1890) the *Kelpie* was finished and photographed. A pair of light wheels with an adjustable axle, which could be stowed away forward; two snow white lug-sails, a couple of white sailor bags with a change of clothing, one in the forward hatch, the other in the after hatch; a little blue silk Scots flag with a white St Andrew’s Cross sewed by the dear old lady, and we were completely furnished for an inland voyage through Scotland’s lochs, rivers and roads.

When we set off for a two weeks' cruise the *Kelpie* had never even been in the water. We lived two miles from the launching place. But our faith in her was not misplaced, and she fulfilled all our expectations on river, road, or sea. It was four o'clock one fine June morning when we trundled her on the axle and wheels out of the front gate, and along the road for some miles, to a spot near Linwood, on the River Cart in Renfrewshire. No champagne bottle was broken at that launch, for we simply grasped our paddles and stepped in. Then, slowly we caught the current, and avoiding a snag here and there we passed down the Cart by Renfrew, and came into the Clyde when the great shipyards were waking up to the new day with the noise of a thousand rivets and hammers.

A tiny little ship of fourteen feet with two men sitting face-forward in a square well, mutually dependent on every movement of body, with an instinctive knowledge of ropes and paddles and sails, for a whole fortnight, in rain and shine, squall or calm-that was our daily world. With the right men there was no danger-with the wrong men death from drowning or misery from incompatibility was an hourly possibility. Thus do two men in one canoe make a complete test of disposition, nerve and commonsense.

Our first adventure began as we rounded Dumbarton Rock to ascend the River Leven. For the Leven is a tidal river, and we were half an hour late for the tide! So we paddled bravely up to the town with bare arms, and muscles strained like whipcords, until we saw that the river had already begun to race below the bridge, on which were standing hundreds of workmen from the yards. It was a toss-up whether we could beat the current-but we were both gymnasts-so foot by foot we held our own, until we passed triumphantly below the bridge to the cheers of the crowd on the parapet. The general public may not know that the Vale of Leven is famous for Turkey red calico works. The cook found that out as he was walking up stream with the towing rope over his shoulder, literally wading through the thickly died water which was polluted by the overflow from the mills. But by the mercy of heaven, a horse was towing a launch up the river to Balloch, on Loch Lomond, and the owner very kindly threw us a line. Once the rope broke. But soon our troubles were over, and we were floating on the limpid waters of that queen of lochs where we were to spend days of idyllic pleasure with paddle and sail.

Balloch, Luss, Inverbeg, Tarbet, Inversnaid-we stayed at all these pleasant hostelries. We visited all the islands, paddling when there was no wind, hoisting our sails when the breeze was favourable, centre-board down, and sitting on the windward combing of the well as the *Kelpie* raced along under double lug sails, like a white winged spirit.

Happy memories crowd on one another still. The cook carried a banjo, and on which he serenaded many an astonished damsel, like the maid of Inchmurrin, the girl at Luss, the ladies on the road near Inverbeg. Ah me! They must all be old women now. For is not the cook turning grey? But there was a real tone of pathos (or was it laughter?) in his voice as he sat forlorn on the roadside in the rain and sang "Home, Sweet Home!" while the skipper turned his face to the trees until the ladies were past. One sight lingers with me still-it was the island of Inchcailleach near Balmaha, seen from its highest point

on a perfect June day, with its woodland glades one mass of hyacinths, reminding one of Tennyson's beautiful figure in Guinevere-

“sheets of hyacinths
That seemed the heavens upbreking thro’
The earth”

But it was not always sunshine. There were days of storm, when we were unable to launch the *Kelpie*. There is a spot above Tarbet where dinner had to be cooked in a pine wood amid torrents of rain. The rain got into the soup, the bread was sopping wet, and the greasy tin dishes had to be washed in cold water with Monkey Brand⁽²⁾.

But our hearts were warm as we paddled in oilskins all the way to Inversnaid through sheets of rain.

The road from Inversnaid to Loch Katrine begins with a very steep hill by the hotel, and for this steep brae we hired a cart. At the top of the hill the *Kelpie* was set on her own wheels, and we set off on our five or six miles trundle over the hills. Midway across the moors we halted for a rest near Loch Arklet⁽³⁾. The cook sat on the canoe amidships, twanging his guitar and singing-

“The beautiful isles of Greece,
Full many a bard has sung,
But the isles I love best lie far in the west,
Where men speak the Gaelic tongue.
Jerusalem, Athens, Rome,
I would see them before I die;
But I'd rather not see any one of the three
Than be banished for ever from Skye.”
-Sherriff Nicolson.

A shooting party came over the heather, crossed the road, stared open-eyed at the sight of a boat high up among the hills, and listened to the song with a smile. Later on we were to meet the shooters in very different circumstances.

Launching our craft again at Stronachlachar, we sailed and paddled down Loch Katrine in the sunset. We had a delicious supper by a burn on the lochside, with new-laid eggs which were bought at a little farm. While we cooked the eggs and sat at our evening meal the farmer's wife came to the door again and again, and shading her eyes in the sunset light, looked down the road. She told us that she was expecting her old mother. At last a cart came rumbling along the shore with a country kist in it, and on the top of the kist sat a sweet old woman in a mutch⁽⁴⁾, with the young farmer walking by her side. The resplendent light of evening was all aglow on her expectant face. It was exactly at this part of the road that Wordsworth long ago met a country traveller in just such a sunset hour, and was greeted by the ever memorable words which became the subject of one of his poems:-

“What! Are you stepping westward?”

The meeting of the old mother and her daughter at the farm door was a holy thing to see, and added a touch of mystical wonder to the radiant sunset. The memory of that lambent⁽⁵⁾ poem, after a lapse of fifty years moves us still.

While paddling down the loch after our simple supper, a large steam launch called the *Goblin* passed us, with the shooting party on board, and field glasses were turned on the tiny canoe. The only place likely for us to stay the night was a gamekeeper's cottage, of which we had been told, so we made for the beach at Brenachoile Lodge. No sooner had we landed than the skipper of the *Goblin* came along and handed us a letter addressed “To the Gentlemen of the Canoe.” It was a kind invitation to spend the evening at the lodge. So having made our toilets at the gamekeeper's, we were soon ushered into the lodge living-room-a large octagonal apartment full of eastern rugs, and lamps and hangings. A very old gentleman in a velvet coat lay on a sofa. His son-a striking looking man with a long black beard, was dressed in blue evening jacket and trousers, with blue silk cummerbund round his waist. There were several others-men and women-in the house party, and the talk was soon of boats and sport, South African rivers, and Indian canoes. Kindness, like a heavenly memory, stays with us all our lives. But alas! On a sunny Sunday, but a few weeks ago, I saw the wreck of the old *Goblin*. I attended worship in the beautiful little parish church at the Trossachs, and there I saw memorials to all the friends of that evening at Brenachoile⁽⁶⁾. The east window is in remembrance of the old gentleman; the memorial outside is for his black-bearded son; the newly-erected brass is in memory of the two brave lads, his only sons, who were killed in the Great War. Three generations completely wiped out, and none now to carry on the name of those who loved their lands from Glenbruach to Inversnaid. *Sic transit Gloria mundi.*⁽⁷⁾

The glow-worms in the wood at Brenachoile had all their lamps lit that night. But next morning it made our Scots hearts laugh to be charged 16s. for a bite of breakfast and the privilege of sleeping on the floor of the gamekeeper's cottage. We paddled slowly past the beautiful silver strand (now completely submerged), and landed on Ellen's Isle. The cook, in his romantic search for the ghostly maid, found a yellow rose lying crushed and faded. On a summer day the Trossachs end of Loch Katrine is a very lovely bit of Highland scenery.

A trundle on wheels brought us to Loch Achray, down which we raced with the lugsails drawing famously. Between Loch Achray and Loch Vennachar the river was navigable, but gave us some exciting moments. Boots and stockings off, the cook sat stride-legs across the bow with a paddle in his hand-the skipper sat likewise across the stern-and between careful paddling and a good deal of foot work against dangerous rocks, the rapids were shot, and Loch Vennachar was reached in safety. At the eastern end of this loch we cooked a big supper in a fir wood, secured the *Kelpie*, hid some luggage up a tree, and trudged in the dark to Callander for a bed. Next morning, when we walked back, the canoe was easily found, but we could not locate the tree. After an anxious search, we found it, and breathed freely again. Then the rain came down in torrents, and for five weary miles we hauled our craft through the Pass of Leny to Loch Lubnaig, almost parboiled in oilskin coats, trousers and sou'-westers. An afternoon sail in clear weather up Loch Lubnaig brought us to Strathyre, where we rested pleasantly over a never to be forgotten weekend, being the first visitors at a newly-opened hotel.

But, having brought a boat into the heart of Scotland, the problem was how to get it out again. So we ordered a carriage truck from Oban⁽⁸⁾, shipped the *Kelpie* on the train, and disembarked her at Stirling Station. Next morning we began the long, tortuous journey down the links of Forth⁽⁹⁾. The wind and tide were with us, and we raced full sail down the river with a strong breeze and fiery sun burning our bare arms. That was long before the great docks at Grangemouth were made, and in the furious race down-stream between high mud banks we were blown past the old entrance to Grangemouth canal at the Carron River. Sail was lowered, and soon we were paddling right across the wide estuary towards a distant town of smoke and chimneys⁰. All of a sudden in the midst of the angry waste of seas the *Kelpie* was nearly wrecked on a hidden sandbank a mile or two from land. But we shoved off into deep water again, and made for the unknown town. It was Bo'ness-where twenty years after, strange to say, the cook was to make his home for eight years. I can remember the old harbour, the vennel, the quaint tavern at the quayhead where we had a ham-and-egg tea. At the turn of the tide we paddled back to Grangemouth. Hundreds of people crowded round us as we landed at the old canal basin. Next day we began the long journey through the Forth and Clyde Canal, working every lock, spending one night in Kilsyth, and another at Kirkintilloch-with creepy memories of an inn in Kilsyth. It was a Friday afternoon when we reached Bowling on the Clyde. After a good nights sleep at home, we returned next day and trundled the *Kelpie* ten miles over Renfrewshire roads to a little loch near Bridge of Weir-having covered over two hundred miles by land and water in a fortnight⁽¹¹⁾.

Would that it all might come again! It meant a lot of work before setting out. It meant hard exercise and perfect health while we were on the cruise. But it left us with undying memories of a land glamorous with history and beauty which draws the heart of a Scot with a love that is better than life.

Notes

1. Orraman – an odd job man, Scots C18th
2. Brookes Monkey Brand soap, a scouring soap for pots and pans.
3. There is no mention of paddling on Loch Arklet, only launching at Stronachlachar, Loch Katrine but they could have paddled 2 ¼ miles rather than walking had they wished.
4. A close-fitting linen cap formerly worn by women and children in Scotland.
5. Flickering, softly bright or radiant, marked by lightness or brilliance especially of expression from the latin: lambere to lick
6. Brenachoile was the fishing Lodge for Glenbruach House, built by the Dunsmure family in 1875. For many years the lodge was owned by Glasgow Corporation Water Department and its successors before being sold and is now privately owned. The pier and boathouse are in good shape. The keeper's cottage to the East has been much extended.



Brenachoile Lodge and post box

The main memorial in the Trossachs churchyard is near the east window. It reads:



The Dunsmure grave

In Memory of
Wm Henry Henderson Dunsmure
Died 27 Sept 1914
And of his sons
Henry Alistair H Dunsmure
Lieut. 2nd Cameron
Highlanders
Killed in action
Near Dickebushe
20 Feb 1915

Colin H Terrot Dunsmure
OC 2nd MG Team
5th Cameron Highlanders
Died of wounds
On battlefield Loos
25 Sept 1915
and his wife
Alice Mary

Terrot Malcolm
Died 26 Dec 1942
“In the furnace of affliction
I have chosen thee”

In grateful memory
Hugh Thomson
5th Cameron Highlanders
Who gave his life to shield his master
He prayeth best who loveth best.



Trossachs Church with the Dunsmure grave in the distance

This spelling 'Dunsmure', not Dunsmuir, I take to be correct having been copied from the memorial. It is also confirmed by Wm Henry Henderson Dunsmore's marriage notice in South Africa Magazine May 9 1891.

7. Thus passes the glory of the world.
8. The Caledonian railway ran from Stirling to Oban along the west shore of Loch Lubnaig, crossing the River Balvag at Strathyre to the village side. The line joined the Stirling line at Dunblane. The track bed is now a cycle path and the station under new houses. A carriage truck was a flatbed wagon for carrying horseless carriages and such.
9. To launch at Stirling town quay is a ten minute walk from the station. Why the "tortuous journey" I don't know, they seem to have enjoyed it, having a fair wind and the tide.
10. Bo'ness "a distant town of smoke and chimneys". At the turn of the C19th there were fifty coal pits within a mile of Bo'ness town centre. Coal fuelled the town's blast furnaces, pottery kilns, salt pans, railway locomotives, heated buildings and powered steam ships in the docks. It was a coal economy, no wonder a town of smoke and chimneys.
11. One presumes crossing the Clyde to the White Cart and paddling up its branch, the Black Cart, as far as was navigable. The little Loch by Bridge of Weir was probably the Goldenlee.

Paul Shave
yacht Blue Spindrift
31 March 2008