

Over The Sea To Skye

Notes by Tim Yeadell

Speed Bonnie Boat, Like a Bird on the Wing, Onward the sailors cry, Carry the Lad that's born to be King, Over the Sea to Skye. Loud the winds cry, Loud the Waves roar, Thunderclaps rend the air, Baffled our foes stand by the shore, Follow they do not dare.

The Isle of Skye is indeed a wind-torn island (and when we lived there it was truly an island – since we left in 1994 they have built a bridge to the mainland) to the north-west of Scotland. Its chief claim to fame is that during the Stuart rebellion, Bonnie Prince Charlie, who was being hunted by the English, landed there in an attempt to regain the throne, but he lost, and as the English were hunting him down, he was rowed to safety by a woman named Flora MacDonald (whose cottage we have seen – it now houses a museum). Truly, however, it is bleak and stormy, and the cattle and sheep huddle with no shelter, turning their backs to the stinging hail. All year long there are storms, hail, fierce winds, and the islanders traditionally lived a frugal life. The boats from the mainland, bringing provisions, every few months, were frequently shipwrecked. The crofters slaughtered all but one cow to survive the winter, as they could not afford to feed their cattle. The two main clans (extended families) on Skye were the MacDonalds and the MacLeods (pronounced Macloud) and the history of the place is littered with blood-letting and feuds for centuries. (When we lived there, some people would still not speak to members of the other clan!) The hatred for the English was matched by the mutual hatred of the clans. Grizzly accounts of throwing children from castle towers abounded.

In addition to the violence and bloodshed in clan wars or battles against the English armies, the people of Skye suffered badly during the ‘clearances’ of the nineteenth century. This was when the rich landlords would turn folk off their crofts and seize the land. Then ordinary folk were raising a couple of cows or growing sparse vegetables, but the landowners wanted to take over all the land for sheep grazing, which was lucrative. Many thousands of ordinary people were evicted from their homes and literally driven at gunpoint down to the seashore. Thousands left Skye and travelled to America or Canada, to settle.

The first world war saw many Skye men drafted into the British army to fight in France and Flanders. The tale is told of a man who was given a week’s leave from his regiment in the trenches of Flanders, who crossed the sea and reached England, travelling by train to the highlands of Scotland, reaching a point on the mainland from where he could see the island; but, with his leave running out, he had to turn away and catch the train and then ship back to the battlefields, from which, it seems, he never returned again. As he lay dying in the trenches he apparently told a friend that he was happy to die having seen his own island from a distance but would never see it again.

The Isle of Skye, battered by gales and hail and stinging rain, is actually known as the ‘Misty Isle’, for thick mists come down suddenly, and it is impossible to see your own feet in the mist.

By the late 1980s Beryl and I, who were not then Christians, had removed our daughter Alice from school at the age of five, as we were discovering how evil British schools had become. (Albeit we were both qualified teachers, and Tim really loved teaching – and play production, drama, gardening, pond-making, besides classroom teaching itself) because we began to see for ourselves – irrespective of the Bible – how wicked society was becoming, how lawlessness and cruelty and

immorality were gripping the nation. Bear in mind, *we* had ourselves led immoral and Godless lives -we had, after all, grown up in the sixties in Britain, that decade of depravity and rampant decadence. But somehow, as we inched our way forward in life, with a little daughter, we began to see – dimly, not at all clearly – that life in modern, technological Britain, was not heading in the right direction: moreover, we knew, instinctively, that it was doomed, and that the world economy, besides world politics, was also doomed.

We got our timing wrong, and we were not then aware of the eschatological implications of the Bible. Brought up ostensibly as church attenders and ‘Christians’, we had never been taught the Ten Commandments, never knew Old Testament history, and, apart from a few sanitized texts, knew nothing of the Gospel. More of that below.

But we knew we’d got to get out of the rat-race. So we discovered that there were people who went in for ‘self-sufficiency’, and we began to look for somewhere to live away from cities and towns, somewhere where we might grow our own food and raise a few beasts and breathe unpolluted air and grow to know people as people rather than as colleagues and neighbours alone.

Having very little money, the search for properties narrowed down to just a few isolated spots in the British Isles, where properties were cheaper than the average. Finally we found a croft (i.e. a house with attached land, occupied under special laws and restrictions) on the Isle of Skye.

We understood from the outset that the thirteen acres we were buying were classed as “:severely disadvantaged agricultural land”, where the grass was so poor that two acres could support only one cow. (The first year we harvested hay we were astounded to be told by the locals that it was hay-making time. The “hay” was no taller than long grass in an English garden!) But we went ahead and completed negotiations for the croft, having seen the house, which was a ruin, but determined to buy it. We originally intended to buy a shotgun (because of stories about people who would attack us, steal our cattle, etc., etc.) but in fact we never got as far as buying one. We did, in ignorance, study all the magazines and books about self-sufficiency, and we bought a huge amount of useless and superfluous stuff to take there, including a pig harness, which we never used! We also ordered a polytunnel, but the sellers swindled us and wouldn’t send it to us, which turned out a blessing, because on the Isle of Skye it is impossible to erect a polytunnel, for the winds simply tear them to pieces – just as car-ports and barns with open ends cannot survive the gales. (The lawyer we asked to help us get our money back from the polytunnel firm finally achieved this – but he then sent us his bill, which amounted to almost as much as we’d paid for the polytunnel! He sent us the cheque and added, “If ever I come to Skye I’ll drop by and take a wee dram [of whiskey] from you”, to which we replied: “In view of the high fees you are charging us for writing a few letters and making a few phone-calls, yes, you are welcome any time – but please bring the ‘wee dram’ with you, as we cannot afford it!”)

The people who sold us the croft wrote to us and said, “We are honest people”, which immediately rang warning bells. Why would anyone need to write that sort of thing? Sure enough, on arrival, the vendors started to cheat us left, right and centre. Firtsly, there was only one room in the house which did not have rain leaking into it. “That’s where we’ll store our furniture until we find the place we’ll be living in”, they said. (They moved into a caravan just behind our house.) Then they showed us the byre (barn) and said: “That stall is where our cow will be” – the best stall. And “Until we move to a permanent home, we’ll be using your toilet”. We were not enamoured. We were even less amused when we discovered that they had “sold” us the peat rights for the property, but the lawyers said there *were no peat rights for that croft*. Finally, the day Tim decided to erect a fence between our property and the main road – because, though traffic was rare, it always came very fast, and we did not want our six-year-old daughter to be endangered by speeding traffic – the

vendors threatened to tear down our fence, as they wanted their cattle to have free access. (The lawyers said we should offer to *give* them a strip of land, free of charge, to enable their cattle to get through. We told them, “We will GIVE you this strip of land, valued at several hundred pounds. The legal transfer fee will cost you ten pounds” They refused to pay the fee. So we erected the fence. They tore it down. We consulted the local policeman. He said, next time they tore the fence down we should call the police. They did. We did. The police said, no, we must sue them in the courts... So we moved two tons of coal to block their way in. They moved the coal aside. We put it back. They moved it...on and on the stupid saga went.

But life continued.

As we settled in, we tried to meet the locals. English folk are not welcome on Skye. We were “incomers”, representatives of the horrible armies in previous centuries who had massacred the Scots and the Highlanders and the islanders. But we tried hard to prove our good intentions, and over the next few years we were grudgingly tolerated and then befriended. It wasn’t easy to begin with. We would go to ask Archie, the local shopkeeper, whether there was anyone who might teach us to erect cattle fencing – he’d suck his teeth, whistle, shake his head and then say he knew of nobody. As a matter of fact he and his brother were professional fencers! A few years down the line, we’d be paying them for fence erecting.

We’d never handled a cow in our life, but our lovely Jersey cow was heavily pregnant, and one day Alice tried to interrupt our discussions. “Mummy, Daddy...” “Be quiet, Alice! We are discussing important matters.” “But Mummy! Daddy! *Should* there be a tiny calf standing beside ‘Clover’ [the cow]?” Oh dear! Sure enough, there stood Clover, ears back, with a beautiful little calf standing beside her. What do we do next? We zoomed off to speak to the neighbor, John, with whom we’d never spoken yet. (We’d been warned he hated English people. He’d been warned that we wanted to steal his land!) We introduced ourselves and indeed everyone was friendly. He took us down his fields to see the cow and the calf. “Ach, go and pick the calf up and take her to the byre.” I hesitated. The cow was mooing and looked fierce. “Are you saying you are scared of your own beast?” “Yes, John”, I confessed. “Well, I canna help ye – she doesnae know me. She kens ye. Go and pick up the calf!” So I did. We had a long steep climb up the field to our byre. Clover kept mooing and so I kept stopping to show her the calf in my arms, expecting to be attacked by the mother’s horns. (And what John had called “the wee calf” weighed very heavily in my arms!) But we got them settled in the byre, right enough, and provided with hay for the mother. After that, it was plain sailing, except that I never knew that a cow raising its head suddenly under one’s chin would feel like a sledge-hammer and give one concussion. But I soon learned. And Beryl learned the hard way that when you want to lead a cow out of the byre, it’s inadvisable to try to get through the narrow door at the same time, as you’ll get squashed by a cow which has not yet learned the idea of “After you, Ma’am”! Not to mention the fact that when we wanted the cow and calf to go out to the water trough in mid-winter, with frost and gales and stinging hail, they refused. We’d read that they must get exercise once a day, and leading them to the trough would be good for them. But they chose to die of thirst rather than step out, so we had to bucket them gallons of water each day. We’d never realized how many bucketfuls of water a cow could drink! And then the calf, when we put her on a rope to lead her out, would simply lie down on the ground and refuse to budge, until we allowed her back. How heavy a calf is! What a dead weight!

More teeth-sucking and head-shaking when we asked the locals if anyone might teach us how to milk a cow. Nobody knew of anyone who could do so. We discovered later that every single one of them had cows and milked them! (Some years later a man did teach Tim.) So our dear cow

kicked Tim when he tried, and after a few days he gave up in despair and said the calf could drink all the milk. So much for self-sufficiency.

But later when we had more calves, at least Tim was ready for them and present at every delivery, no matter how late at night.

As for sheep – we had seventeen – when they started lambing we were on hand to assist. One early morning a ewe was having painful distressing problems as the lambing failed, so we telephoned the vet. “You don’t think I’m coming out to deliver a lamb, do you?” “Well, what shall we do?” “Just stick your hands up her and pull!” So we did. But he hadn’t warned us that sticking your hands up a sheep, to tug the lamb out, is to be scalded! Tim’s arm was red raw for days afterwards.

Most of our sheep arrived as pets from crofters who couldn’t be bothered to raise them. In gales and hail there’d be a knock on the window and a sopping wet shivering hours-old lamb would be passed in through the window. We’d make a nest beside the solid-fuel stove, with blankets and cushions. We would bottle-feed the lambs. As they grew, they would follow us everywhere, and complain bitterly if we put them in sheds. They’d sleep in the kitchen (where we also slept). We had one or two die on us, but most thrived. Even one which developed bloat, and had to have its side punctured to let the deadly gases out, lived. Unfortunately, lambs’ eyes were the favourite meal of the huge black crows, and, no matter how close a watch we kept, once or twice we’d find a lamb whom we’d been with a few minutes before, with its eyes pecked out.

The law required us to have our sheep ‘dipped’ in chemicals, and in order to do that, we had to take them to the nearby community area with troughs. Most people used sheep dogs to round up their sheep and drive them to the troughs. A friend who brought his dog to help us discovered that our sheep were not afraid of a dog, having never met one, and refused to be rounded up. His dog sat down and sulked. When we eventually dipped our sheep, then they sulked! It took a few days for them to forgive us.

Sheep shearing is a professional skilled job. We paid men to shear ours, but on one occasion we thought we’d have a go. The result was a fleece with holes in it, which stretched ten feet in a ragged line. Of course it was worthless.

As a matter of fact, the money we paid the shearers, and the money we expended on vitamins for the sheep, and healthy feed, and hay, exceeded by far the income we gained for selling a lamb.

The vet was a character. He was Irish and jovial and pugnacious. When he came to visit our cow and calf, he drove up to the top of the hill, where we were waiting for him, and ran down the field to the byre. We had told him we were concerned because the cow had jumped on her calf (called ‘bulling’) due to the fact that her pregnancy had failed. He came and gave the cow AI (artificial insemination). As he began to run up the hill, I shouted: “But you haven’t looked at the calf!” “Why should I?” “Well, she’s limping badly.” “Ach, wouldn’t you limp if your mother jumped on you? She’ll be alright in a day or two!”

When Alice was only seven or eight, the vet ran down our croft, suddenly turned and faced Alice, with raised fists, and said “Do you want a fight?” “No, sir...” All in fun, but she was alarmed!

We had a dog from an ‘animal rescue centre’, and it turned out to be schizophrenic, attacking us every time we left the room. We put up with this until the night she escaped and went to chase sheep. It’s a criminal offence in UK to allow your dog to chase sheep, and a farmer has the right to

shoot on sight. So we called the vet and he said he'd come to put the dog down. Out on the roadside, he told me to hold it while he injected the lethal stuff. (No niceties, such as privacy.) I muttered, "We didn't do her much good." But he said, "Well, she didn't do you much good, either."

We had poultry and gave Alice the job of buying their feed, feeding them, cleaning their houses and keeping accounts. She and the hens made friends, and she carried them around, played games with them, gave them names (of musical composers) and, when Tim wasn't looking, invited them into the house (where they deposited their droppings on the carpet). Beryl loved the hens, but Tim objected to being pecked. He preferred the ducks, albeit they were entirely brainless.

We had a big tough cat (huge, and an excellent ratter) who loved to chase the ducks. We were always amazed to see the ducks, when the cat got near, scattering and squawking and panicking – but if he were a certain distance away, they took no notice at all, even if he were in plain sight. Sadly, one night a weasel or ferret or stoat must have got into the duck-house and panicked them, because we found them dead, squashed up against the netting. Of course we obtained replacements.

Despite Alice's love for her hens, there was one cockerel which stood – I exaggerate not – as high as her chest, and he would attack her fiercely with talons, and we were very concerned. Our dear friend Charlie (the one whose dog would not succeed in rounding up our sheep) came one night to despatch the cockerel (named Goldie – not named after a composer). He entered the hen-house, picked Goldie off his perch, and wrung his neck. We gave him the cockerel for the next day's lunch. The person who'd sold us Goldie admitted that she had also been attacked by him! Not a word of warning to us!

(Many years later, when we lived on another Scottish island, we had hens again, but the day came when we had to despatch a cockerel, as having more than one led to fights and bloodshed. Our neighbour told Tim how to wring the neck of a cockerel, but Tim could not face it, so he walked up to a nearby house and asked Lachlan to lend him his shotgun. He went back and saw the cockerel – was it Tschaikovsky, or Mozart or Beethoven? – perched on a beam, apologized for what he was about to do, aimed the gun and pulled the trigger. The cockerel blinked. Oh dear. Try again. Fire! The cockerel blinked. Tim went back to Lachlan's house. "Couldn't hit him from ten feet away? But I thought you'd been a soldier!" Well, yes, but nonetheless, Tim couldn't succeed. So Lachlan came back to our place and shot the cockerel. Naturally, we presented him with the bird for next day's pot.

When we first moved to Skye, we had no electricity, so we had fun living by the light of paraffin lamps. We also had no telephone. We really did enjoy our year of living by lamplight, and having no phone. But the day came when our attempts to be self-sufficient left us penniless and in danger of having nothing to eat. That coincided with the time when Archie the shopkeeper and sub postmaster decided to give up his job and return to full-time crofting. So we applied for the job of subpostmaster and were given the job, but on condition that we install electricity and also a telephone. At the same time, Archie agreed to sell us the stock in his shop, put us in touch with wholesalers, and let us open a shop. (What we did not know until a few years later, when we closed the post office preparatory to leaving the island, was that Archie "sold" us various items of equipment which actually belonged to the Post Office headquarters!) We had great excitement refurbishing one room of the house and converting it into a shop / post office. We bought a deepfreeze and a fridge and scales and various other items. We also had fun buying stocks of stationery, household goods, vegetables, groceries, etc., etc. For a few short years we enjoyed

running the shop, and it proved a passport to gaining the trust and friendship of suspicious locals who had hitherto disdained English people. We also had many amusing incidents.

One involved a man named Ian, whose wife sent him to buy what he thought was “mince”. So we supplied him with a pound of frozen mince (i.e., minced beef). He returned an hour later with the now-defrosting mince, to say his wife had asked him, not for “mince”, but “mints”. So we sold him some polos!

The young men who’d been so hostile to us when we moved to Skye, were now friendly, and they came to supper from time to time. Often they would come into the shop and lounge on the freezer eating ice-creams. Their work was fencing, hay-making, ploughing and all sorts of agricultural tasks, including ditch-digging, harvesting neaps (turnips) and so on. One day an earnest German woman who lived there came into the shop and, seeing the young men, said, “Please, after you. I know how keen you are to get back to your work”. They raised their eyes to heaven. On another occasion a man wearing a suit and tie got out of his car and approached the shop. “An official!” warned one of the men. They all loathed officials, especially if they were English! In came the dapper little official, looked round, approached the men who were lounging on the freezer, and asked: “I say, chaps. Does anyone here know of a man named MacDonald?” Each one of those young men was named MacDonald. But they sucked their teeth, shook their heads slowly, pretended to be thinking gravely, and then said, sadly enough, sorry, they did not know of anyone named MacDonald. The crestfallen official left the shop with drooping shoulders.

We eventually had four cows. Our vegetable growing was quite successful. We dug the fields by hand – grueling work on a steep hill – and planted and harvested by hand. We dried out the onions on wooden racks, and then hung them in the shop to sell. But nobody wanted to buy organic onions. Thus we peeled off the outer skins and placed the shiny onions in trays, and they sold very well! We grew potatoes, but the all-terrain vehicle we’d bought was not four-wheel-drive (nobody had told us to get a 4-w-drive vehicle) and was not strong enough to pull the trailer full of potatoes up the steep hill. So we bagged them up and dragged the bags one by one. As for kale...Our neighbour John stood at the fence between our crofts one day, and asked Tim: “What’s that you’ll be growing there?” “That’s kale, John”, replied Tim, as he stood between rows of magnificent six-foot-tall kale plants. “Nonsense!” replied John. “You cannae grow kale on Skye!” What does one do in the face of such obstinacy?

“And what’s THEM over there?” “Those are onions, John.” “Onions? Ach, fancy vegetables!”

Our hayfield produced a small quantity of hay, but we had to order lorry-loads of bales of hay to get us through the winters. Our supplier, Alan, would drive over from Aberdeen on the mainland, and unload sixty or so bales in one go – usually in pouring rain and hail with fierce gales lashing us. Mostly, we carried them bale by bale, down to the byre to store them, but we also had a large garage in which we’d stack bales of hay. (Alice and a boy who was also home-educated, had great fun making tunnels in the hay.) Also, we’d stack bales at the top of our top field and cover them with sheets of tarpaulin weighed down with rocks and fence posts. (Nothing funnier than to see eight-year-old Alice struggling up a field in a gale, dragging a fence-post taller and heavier than herself, sometimes being whipped round 180 degrees in a gust of wind!) Alan would stay the night and eat supper and breakfast with us.

Our neighbor John disapproved of us stacking hay at the top of our field, but was too polite to say so outright. “You’ll be wanting to move yon hay soon, will ye not, to avoid rats...?” was his way of courteous saying, “Get rid of it!”

But poor John had kidney failure and had to have daily dialysis. The piped mains water was dangerous, and he knew we had a spring on our land, so Alice and Tim would go down to the spring every day to get a jar of fresh clean water for him. We thus formed a friendship with him and his wife. (His wife was an interesting woman. She'd grown up where they now lived, and had walked four miles to school in all weathers, bare-footed, then four miles back at lunchtime to milk the cows, back to school in the afternoon, and home again in the evening. For a woman who gave every impression of being a peasant, she proved incredibly adaptable. She had actually gone to South Africa to be governess to the children of the famous author, Nicholas Montserrat (*The Cruel Sea*). After some years she returned to Skye and resumed the life of a crofter's wife.)

John became too ill to walk up his own fields, so we agreed to go to inspect his cattle every day. One of his cows died, so he asked us to bury it. Forget any idea that the ground there is stony: it's rocky! Tim spent a couple of days digging, smashing rocks, and making a hole for the dead beast. Normally, a tractor would haul the cow into its grave, but we did not have a tractor, so it was push, shove, pull, grunt and groan, using ropes until ---hey, presto! She was in the grave. But as Tim filled up the hole he realised with alarm that one horn was too long and would stick out of the grave, so he took John's expensive state-of-the-art steel-bladed spade and hacked at the horn. The spade broke. So Tim ended up buying John a new spade!

During the first Gulf War we were feeling a bit depressed, and Beryl said to Tim: "I wouldn't mind if you threw the radio away." We'd never had television, but Tim had become addicted to the news broadcasts of the war. He took a sudden decision, went out to the dustbin and threw away the radio. We have never since had a radio, never missed it, and always felt our lives enriched by the absence of tv and radio. We've always loved books, but the day came when Tim had read and re-read every book in the house, except for the unused Bible. In desperation he began reading the Gospel of Matthew, and when he reached Matthew 24, he woke Beryl up and kept saying, "Hey! Listen to this!" Our formal upbringing in churchianity had never shown us the Gospels as they really are, except for a few short excerpts on Sundays, sanitized by clergymen who clearly did not believe the Bible themselves. In short order we devoured the Old Testament as well as the New, and, to cut short a long story, we gave our lives in repentance to our Lord Jesus, becoming believers in the literal truth of every word in the Bible. There was no Damascus Road event. No preacher or sermon or tract or book converted us, and indeed we could never name a day or time when 'it' happened. More like C S Lewis, we were almost reluctant converts. But thereafter, joined by Alice, then aged eight, we soared ahead to heights of bliss as we began to experience regeneration.

There was a price to pay. Unlike traditional Christians, we became convinced that for us, the seventh-day Sabbath, not Sunday, was to be the holy day for our family. We have never criticized others for being Sunday keepers. (Moreover, we also ceased to keep Christmas and Easter and began to observe Passover – but that's another story.)

The trouble was, Saturday had been our best trading day in the shop, and each week the accounts revealed a nice hefty profit on Saturdays, compared with far lower income on Mondays-Fridays. But we knew we must close the shop on Saturdays. We could not open on Sundays, as this would deeply offend the locals.

The net effect was that from then onwards our sales fell away, until the day came when a friendly wholesaler said, "I won't take another order from you... Your shop has failed. Be sensible, and close." So we sold off our stock at rock-bottom prices, and hordes of people who'd never been to the shop descended on us to buy up bargains. Tim sold all our books cheaply. (One smug fellow bought a first-edition biography of Oliver Cromwell for ninety-nine pence, and came in shortly afterwards to boast he'd sold it for ninety-nine pounds!) So the day came, when we closed the

doors and shut up shop. Soon enough, we realized that neither shopkeeping nor “self-sufficiency” worked for us, and we decided that we’d better head off back to England to earn a living.

Skye had been wonderful -it’s where Alice grew into adolescence. She’d studied in the winter and roamed wild in the summer. (Home education worked for her. After leaving Skye, she passed all her GCE O Levels with Grade A a year earlier than her schooled peers. She passed A Level biology and Biblical Hebrew. She gained a distinction in herbal medicine. She passed two music degrees and qualified as a teacher of English to foreigners. She passed the German government’s Certificate in German as a foreign language exam with only four per cent less than Tim. Incidentally, she’d been the youngest student on the herbal medicine course ever, and the youngest in England to attend the German course. She worked in a community café. She worked nights in a supermarket. She was a care assistant in a nursing home. She lived in as a carer for two elderly ladies. She became the leader of the London Jewish orchestra. As a home-educated child she mixed with other children, adults, old ladies and so on, rather than being confined with a ‘peer group’ in a classroom. She looked after a neighbour’s sheep. She enjoyed life! Like Tim and Beryl, she served as an unpaid volunteer on Israeli IDF bases, packing medical supplies, shelving stores, etc. And eventually she worked as a volunteer teacher in a Kerala IELTS college, and, having served as a volunteer at a music school in Bangalore, she eventually became an employee there, and married an Indian. Home education is a blessing!)

There are so many tales we could tell of our time on Skye. The funniest of all was, when we had the post office, our neighbor John on one occasion had to be away in hospital, so his wife asked us to look after their dog, Lassie. It was Christmas Day when the snow began to fall quickly and very heavily, and soon the roads were impassable. That night, Lassie, who was in our kitchen with us, where we slept, began to bark and bark and bark, so we wondered if someone was trying to break into the post office. Tim looked around, but saw nothing, not even footmarks in the snow. But Lassie went on barking, so we phoned the police. They said that due to the snow there was no way they could send out a car or officers to investigate. Lassie barked all night. Next day, Lassie continued to bark – and suddenly we realized that she was barking because mice in the walls were running behind the wooden panelling!

Another concerned the strict German lady, who never saw the humour in anything. Beryl used to make marmalade, and she gave Maria a jar once. Next day Maria came in and said, “I really liked the marmalade.”: “*Liked*”? You’ve *finished* it? “ “Yes, why not?” “Well, we spread it on bread, and a jar lasts a long time>” “But I ate it all.” “How?” “With a spoon!”

Tourists visited Skye, and one day Beryl left the shop to fill up her coal scuttle from the heap out in the yard. Because of the gales, Beryl always wore a headscarf. On one occasion a carload of tourists stopped and said, “Look, there’s a typical Scottish peasant. Let’s photograph her.” Beryl did not disillusion them.

One young woman living nearby had, like us, some pet sheep. One of her sheep used to live in the house with the family. She confessed that it would enjoy sharing their Sunday lunch. What did they eat for Sunday lunch? Roast lamb!

Our neighbor John came to the shop one day and asked, “Who is that fellow?” “John”, we said, “That’s Hamish from the cottage just down there. You will know him well.” “Ach, I’ve nae spoken with that family for fourteen years now.”

What we would call a village, on Skye is called a township. Our house was number nineteen in the township, and there were only nineteen houses there. A man we knew well came into the shop and

complained that he'd lived on Skye for forty years, but was still treated like an incomer. "But you are Skye born and bred. You're no incomer!" "Ach, I am so. I come from the next township, so I'm nae accepted here."

Beryl and Alice studied herbal medicine, but we were quietly advised not to mention that. And why not? "Ach we'eel: there'll be many who will think you are witches." What? Nobody believes in witches today. "Aye, they do so."

Up the hill near us was a huge stone wall, built by two men over a period of one year. The pay for their work was one sack of barley each.

The manse – the minister's house – was one of a very few two-storey dwellings. In the previous century the minister would "generously" allow locals to use the tap in his garden once a week to fill up their buckets, thus avoiding having to draw water from springs and wells.

When we took over the post office the people on pensions or allowances would come in once a week to cash their government welfare cheques. The minister had a disabled son, so he received a welfare benefit each week. He was a very stern and rather haughty man, wearing a smart suoit and having a gold tiepin and gold fountain pen. Tim or Beryl would count out his money in front of him, making sure he saw every note. But he would ostentatiously re-count it, note by note, just to check!

The man who delivered post was a dour man named Shaemus, who made no secret of the fact that he hated English people. "You shouldnae be here at all!" he told us. But one day he was chatting about his brother when we asked, where did his brother live? "Ach he's away doon in England. He runs a pub in Reading, Berkshire!" In the end he grudgingly accepted us. One day one of his cows was lying paralysed in a field. She could not get to her feet, and Shaemus thought she'd die in the hail and rain. We offered him a cow-coat which we sometimes used for one of our cows. He was scathing about this weak mamby-pamby English coat for a cow, because Scottish cows are hardy! But after a few hours he came and borrowed it. Later he admitted that it had saved her life.

Alice had birthday parties to which she'd invite other local children. Once we designed a treasure hunt all over our house, croft fields and byre. One local child screamed at the thought of having to walk past the manure heap and having to climb a farm gate. Her own father was a farmer, but she had never herself walked on farm land!

On one of Alice's birthdays Beryl had made the usual cake, and Alice had to blow out the candles. "Now wish... make a wish..." we said, for that's the English tradition. "I don't want to make a wish." "Oh, but really, everyone makes a wish when the candles are blown out and the cake is cut." "I WON'T MAKE A WISH!" she howled, bursting into tears, "I DO NOT WANT TO MAKE A WISH!"

The joys of parenthood!

We often went for long walks in the hills, known as the Trotternish Range, and we'd take a picnic for the day. Sometimes we'd take one of the sheep with us – no chance that a sheep would ever run away, they were devoted and would cry if ever we put them away in a field apart from us! Sometimes our cat would come on a long walk with us. He had either to turn back after a short while, or remain with us all day, and he often chose the latter. His feet would be spo sore after a day's walk that he'd lie in the kitchen for twenty-four hours until he recovered. But he never gave

up accompanying us. Once, Beryl and Alice excitedly told Tim that they'd discovered a famous but rare and very beautiful butterfly, and promised to take him up into the hills to search for it. On that particular day they howled with delight: "Daddy! Here it is! Come and see!" Tim ran over to them, but the cat got there first and jumped up to swallow the butterfly!

The hills were usually deserted of people. In fact we never met a single soul in our years living there. It was very peaceful up in the hills. Despite the usually inclement weather, we occasionally had some sunny days. Alice would often walk barefoot for miles. Sometimes after eating our sandwiches we'd lie on our backs and watch a pair of eagles, which, according to locals, had been there for twenty or more years. They were very graceful as they circled about – and then suddenly they would swoop down to the ground and grab something – probably a rodent.

We'd heard about a challenging path up one of the hills and so on one occasion we set off to climb it. Unfortunately we neglected to turn back when it became tricky, and soon enough it was a serious matter. We felt very sorry that we'd risked Alice's life by irresponsible climbing. It was impossible to turn back, so we just had to inch our way upwards, very slowly, loosening stones and small rocks as we went. Beryl was in the rear and at greatest risk from falling rocks, Tim was in front trying to be a pioneer! Alice was in the middle, being helped by Tim and Beryl. One of the hardest young men in the township later told us that we were very silly to have risked the climb: several people had died there in previous years. As a matter of fact, every year a tourist or more than one tourist would fall to his or her death there. The danger was worst when the thick mists suddenly descended, and people could not tell which way to go. One local man, greatly experienced, had taken a flock of sheep up into the hills, when a heavy mist came down. Although he'd been born and bred there, and knew the land like the back of his hand, he got lost – and several hours later turned up some five miles away!

The mountain rescue services complained every year about "stupid English tourists", who would climb the hills in ordinary shoes (one lady, believe it or not, actually went up in high-heeled shoes!) and then became stranded and had to be searched for and rescued! The helicopters were very busy each summer.

Alice went canoeing in a nearby township, and she also visited the capital to see a friend there. As we had no car, we were dependent on the twice daily bus, so if Alice went to the town we'd ask her to bring back shopping. A mobile shop came to our township once a week, with fresh fish, huge cuts of cheddar cheese, fresh bread, and other things which we could not sell in our shop.

We had given up cigarettes when we became Christians, and as the shop began to fail we could not have afforded them even if we'd wanted to. There was another Ian, who was a rough diamond, very friendly, but rather irresponsible, and workshy. He went to prison and we were able to send him a bit of money. When he came out, he used to come to the shop and get his fags on credit, repaying his debt each following week from his welfare benefit. One day he came into the shop and we had to say, "Sorry, Ian. We can't let you have credit any more. We cannot afford to." He accepted this with a good heart.

Another customer paid by cheque, and one day his cheque bounced. We wrote a polite letter asking if he could kindly pay off his debt. He kept away for several months, but eventually he turned up and said he would pay his debt in cash the next day. Meanwhile, might he please had some cigarettes on credit til the next day? We hardened our hearts and said, sorry, no more credit until he'd paid what he already owed. Off he drove, returning next day to pay the full debt. We felt so guilty that we gave him a free bottle of home-made wine!

On the day we had to leave Skye John and his wife invited us in for a wee dram. We don't like whiskey, but on that occasion we enjoyed a glass of Talisker's whiskey, and we had a very happy evening before we left. Within a couple of months John had died. By the time we left, we'd made some good friendships with several islanders.

The most stirring memory we had of the island was walking on our own land one day when the mists suddenly came down, and one could not see one foot in front of one's face; and on one particular day when the cold wet mist encircled and swirled round us we heard the distant sounds of bagpipes playing – a very eerie sound, bewitching and even a bit threatening, making one think of the days when the clansmen fought battles and ambushed each other in the mists. Not for nothing did the English soldiers in those days refuse to go alone amongst the islanders, always insisting on being in groups. The clansmen with their bagpipes and their long knives had a terrible reputation!