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Where the bridge now leaps

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Raghnall MacilleDhuibh

"IT MAY be permitted to a lover of nature," wrote J A MacCulloch in 'The Misty Isle of Skye' of 1904, "to hope that it may be many a long day before the iron horse will leap the channel and come shrieking through the valleys and glens of beautiful Skye."

Well, a bridge now leaps the channel, and from Monday onwards many a horseless carriage, and many another monster undreamed of by MacCulloch — articulated lorries, caravans, 52-seater coaches — will come roaring and snorting over it.

When MacCulloch wrote, just seven years had passed since the railway had been extended from Strome Ferry, the pier and the station built at Kyle, and the regular, timetabled ferry service to Kyleakin established. So it has been not a hundred-year ferry service, but a ninety-eight-year one.

There has always been a ferry of sorts at Kyleakin, mind you, but until 1897 it was less important than the much narrower crossing at Kylerhea. Martin Martin, writing about Portree Fair in his 'Description of the Western Islands' of 1703, said that "all the horses and cows sold at the fair swim to the mainland over one of the ferries or sounds called kyles — one of which is on the east, the other on the south side of Skye". The 'eastern' one is Kyleakin, the 'southern' one is Kylerhea, as he then makes clear: "That on the east is about a mile broad, and the other on the south is half a mile. They begin when it is near low water and fasten a twisted *with* about the lower jaw of each cow."

By *with* Martin means a withe, withie or Gaelic *gad* — simply a slender rope of twisted willow wood, very strong but also very flexible when thoroughly wet. He goes on: "The other end of the *with* is fastened to another cow's tail; and the number so tied together is commonly five. A boat with four oars rows off, and a man sitting in the stern holds the *with* in his hand to keep up the foremost cow's head; and thus all the five cows swim as fast as the boat rows; and in this manner above a hundred may be ferried over in one day."

A R B Haldane, in his 'Drove Roads of Scotland', says that although the almost unanimous evidence of other contemporary writers shows that the great bulk of cattle traffic used the Kylerhea crossing, local recollection and tradition confirm that some droving traffic went by way of Kyleakin. Where Martin is reasonably specific about the Kyle of Lochalsh, it is with reference to sailing not across it but through it, but his compass-points are again confusing. Skye, he says, "is naturally well provided with variety of excellent bays and harbours. In the south of it lies the peninsula called Oronsa, alias Island Dierman. It has an excellent place for anchorage on the east side, and is generally known by most Scots seamen."

We can certainly recognise Eilean Iarmain in 'Island Dierman', and what follows refers I think to a rock called the Sgeir Ghobhlach close to the entrance to Loch na Dal on the Sleat coast. It is marked by a little cross on the map by Herman Moll which was published as part of Martin's book. "About a league more easterly on the same coast there is a small rock, visible only at half low water, but may be avoided by steering through the middle of the channel."

Most of us would have thought that the next decent anchorage on the Skye coast is Loch na Béiste just short of Kyleakin, but Martin points out that there is sheltered shallow water in the bay south of Kylerhea. "About a league more easterly on the same coast," he says, "there is an anchorage pretty near the shore." Firm identification of this as Bàgh an Dùnain Ruaidh is provided by Thomas Pennant in his 'Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides' of 1772. Pennant is sailing north from Rum, and says: "The channel between the shire of Inverness and Skye now contracts; and enlarges again to a fine bay opposite to Glenelg, between the mainland and Dunan Ruagh, where is good anchorage under Skye."

Martin goes on: "Within less than a mile further is the narrow sound called the Kyle, in order to pass which it is absolutely necessary to have the tide of flood for such as are northward bound, else they will be obliged to retire in disorder, because of the violence of the current; for no wind is able to carry a vessel against it. The quite contrary course is to be observed by vessels coming from the north."

This is clearly Kyle Rhea, which lies north-south, not the Kyle of Lochalsh, which lies east-west. Martin, and all the map-makers of his day, were well aware of this. The curious thing is that he then goes on to describe Sgeir na Cailliche in relation to the Kyle of Lochalsh and not to Kyle Rhea. "A mile due *east* from the Kyle," he says (the italics are mine), "there is a big rock on the south side the point of land on Skye side, called Kaillach, which is overflowed by the tide of flood; a vessel may go near its outside."

Now Sgeir na Cailliche lies at the northern mouth of Kyle Rhea, and is marked by a cross on Moll's map. As one looks east from the Kyle of Lochalsh, it lies hidden to the south of the Rubha Buidhe. Is there something missing from Martin's text? I have checked both his editions (1703 and 1716), and they are essentially the same.

Finally he has me baffled completely. He goes on: "Above a mile further due north there are two rocks in the passage through the Kyle; they are on the castle side, and may be avoided by keeping the middle of the channel." This sounds like the Kyle of Lochalsh, given the mention of a castle. My first thought is that he is referring to the double islet called the Eilean Bàn where the bridge now crouches in readiness to leap the channel. But it is not on the castle side. My second thought is that he is referring to the much smaller Eileanan Dubha, east of the ferry crossing, since they lie in two portions. But they are not on the castle side either. And are there any crosses hereabouts on Moll's map? No.

Martin was a Skyeman, and must have known what he was talking about. Can any readers suggest the answer?

The exuberant Pennant enjoyed his visit to Kyleakin in July 1772. He praised everything, even the rain, his only complaint having been that Kylerhea "is the great pass into the island but is destitute even of a horse-ferry". Rounding the Cailleach on the 15th, he says: "The ruins of an ancient castle, seated on the pinnacle of a

rock, and some little isles, formed our western view. The violent squalls of wind darting from the apertures of the hills teased us for an hour, but after various tacks at last Mr Thompson anchored safely beneath MacKinnon's castle, amidst a fleet of busses, waiting with anxiety for the appearance of herrings, this year uncommonly late." Pennant's busses are, of course, boats.

"The hard rains," he goes on, incredibly, "were no small advantage to our scenery. We lay beneath a vast hill called Glais-Bheinn, clothed with birch and oaks, inhabited by roes: cataracts poured down in various places amidst the woods . . ."

Next day, Pennant and Captain Thompson landed at Kyleakin, then joined in the exciting task of swimming eighty horses across the Kyle. "They were taken over by fours, by little boats, a pair on each side held with halters by two men, after being forced off a rock into the sea. We undertook the conveyance of a pair. One, a pretty grey horse, swam admirably; the other was dragged along like a log; but as soon as it arrived within scent of its companions before landed, revived, disengaged itself, and took to the shore with great alacrity."

As we all do while waiting at a ferry, Pennant took an interest in those around him. "Some very gentleman-like men attended these animals, and with great politeness offered their services." Among the crowd was a lad with sticking-out ears. "His ears had never been swaddled down, and they stood out as nature ordained; and I dare say his sense of hearing was more acute by this liberty." It is hard not to be reminded of Martin's solemn statement that "a weaver in Portree has a faculty of erecting and letting fall his ears at pleasure, and opens and shuts his mouth on such occasions".

As far as I can make out, the only celebrated traveller who speaks of entering Skye by the Kyle-Kyleakin route was Alexander Smith from Kilmarnock (1830-67) — Johnson and Boswell, for example, came and went through Armadale. But Smith's description, in his great prose poem of a book, 'A Summer in Skye' (1865), is wonderful, and I will finish by quoting it in full.

"The ferry is a narrow passage between the mainland and Skye; the current is powerful there, difficult to pull against on gusty days; and the ferrymen are loath to make the attempt unless well remunerated. When we arrived, we found four passengers waiting to cross; and as their appearance gave prospect of an insufficient supply of coin, they were left sitting on the bleak windy rocks until some others should come up. It was as easy to pull across for ten shillings as for two!

"One was a girl, who had been in service in the south, had taken ill there, and was on her way home to some wretched turf-hut on the hill-side, in all likelihood to die; the second a little cheery Irishwoman, with a basketful of paper ornaments, with the gaudy colours and ingenious devices of which she hoped to tickle the æsthetic sensibilities, and open the purses, of the Gael. The third and fourth were men, apparently laborious ones; but the younger informed me he was a schoolmaster, and it came out incidentally in conversation that his schoolhouse was a turf-cabin, his writing-table a trunk, on which his pupils wrote by turns. Imagination sees his young kilted friends kneeling on the clay floor, laboriously forming pot-hooks there, and squinting horribly the while.

"The ferrymen began to bestir themselves when we came up; and in a short time the boat was ready, and the party embarked. The craft was crank [unstable], and leaked abominably, but there was no help; and our bags were deposited in the bottom. The schoolmaster worked an oar in lieu of payment. The little Irishwoman, with her precious basket, sat high in the bow, the labourer and the sick girl behind us at the stern.

"With a strong pull of the oars we shot out into the seething water. In a moment the Irishwoman is brought out in keen relief against a cloud of spray; but, nothing daunted, she laughs out merrily, and seems to consider a ducking the funniest thing in the world. In another, I receive a slap in the face from a gush of blue water, and emerge, half-blinded, and soaked from top to toe. Ugh, this sea-waltz is getting far from pleasant. The leak is increasing fast, and our carpet-bags are well-nigh afloat in the working bilge.

"We are all drenched now. The girl is sick, and Fellowes is assisting her from his brandy-flask. The little Irishwoman, erst so cheery and gay, with spirits that turned every circumstance into a quip and crank, has sunk in a heap at the bow; her basket is exposed, and the ornaments, shaped by patient fingers out of coloured papers, are shapeless now; the looped rosettes are ruined; her stock-in-trade, pulp — a misfortune great to her as defeat to an army, or a famine to a kingdom.

"But we are more than half-way across, and a little ahead the water is comparatively smooth. The boatmen pull with greater ease; the uncomfortable sensation at the pit of the stomach is redressed; the white lips of the girl begin to redden somewhat; and the bunch forward stirs itself, and exhibits signs of life. Fellowes bought up the contents of her basket; and a contribution of two-and-sixpence from myself made the widow's heart to sing aloud for joy. On landing, our luggage is conveyed in a cart to the inn, and waits our arrival there. Meanwhile we warm our chilled limbs with a caulker of Glenlivet. 'Blessings be with it, and eternal praise.'"

Spare a thought for Martin's cattle, Pennant's horses and Smith's sodden companions when you cross the bridge on Monday. "Blessings be with it, and eternal praise."

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