

PARISHES OF THE INFINITE

By Steve Hindley

But at least you have had a fine moment, and looked down upon all the kingdoms of the earth. And whether it was wise or foolish, to-morrow's travel will carry you, body and mind, into some different parish of the infinite.
(Robert Louis Stephenson, Walking Tours)

MOULIN. IT WAS LUNCHTIME in mid-October and the morning had trickled away in a succession of frustrating occurrences. It was a chill 1°C and the mist was almost solid but maybe I could make something of the day after all. I poured a coffee and slowly got suited and booted. As the level in the cup decreased so did the level of my frustration.

In a mountain hut, on another continent, so recent I still had the suntan, I'd had a conversation about Ben Vrackie but it was a conversation I was poorly qualified to embark upon because it was a hill I knew nothing about. I'd never climbed it. Maybe today I could put that right.

An avenue of golden leafiness led me away and since I was alone I could kick my way through great piles of leaves without fear of embarrassment, amusing the child within. I revelled in their richness and shades of colour, shades to make Monet weep, standing out vividly in a world of monochrome misty numbness, and as more leaves fell I walked on through a shower of autumn, out on to the slopes beyond.

There were people on the hill but the dampness and the gloom of the leaden sky, the weight of the mist pressing down into the ground, had the ability to subdue mood as well as noise and we passed with nothing more than a quiet hello, as if wary of disturbing the silence.

Working its way upwards the well-made and well-signposted path wriggled round little knolls and past little cliffs to a lochan beneath the final swell of the hill. I couldn't see it but the map assured me the hill was there. A couple of stepping stones hopped across the outflow and I followed them hopefully. Immediately, the path rose like a staircase. It was very steep and climbed in regular steps. Ideally I'd prefer it not to be there at all but on a hill so popular its presence is probably a necessity. From below it was invisible and having accepted its necessity I was grateful for its quality.

The pull up the hill soon started to make me feel a little warm so I stopped to remove a layer. As I did so there was an almost imperceptible lightening of the world, a hint that there was something other than mist and coldness. The sun was close. Just a few more steps took me into that world of sparkling brilliants that lives where the sun meets the mist. Go lower and all is gloom; go higher and the world shows you other things. But to be there, at the boundary of the two – now! That's the place for the jaded soul! The light plays such tricks and oh, the feeling of rejuvenation it gives! If I could've bottled it; if I could have carried it with me,

on into the rest of life, through what are usually quiet humdrum days earning a living, that feeling would have sustained me.

I'm not sure what time I arrived at the summit but it didn't actually matter. The view was all that mattered and it was both immense and incredibly impressive. To the east was just the most perfect sea of cloud, absolutely, without a doubt, the best cloud inversion I'd ever had the privilege of observing in almost forty years of wandering the hills and mountains of these blessed isles. It was dazzling in its intensity and inviting in its apparent softness.

The merest bump, complete with radio mast, gave away the location of Mount Blair. Across the trench of Glen Garry, from the depths of which the lochan occasionally winked up at me as the sun reflected from its placid surface, stood Schiehallion. The Farragon hills, the Lawers group, and Ben More and Stob Binnein, those inseparable twins, were all in view, and any other number of hills too; hills too numerous to mention. They rose clear, blue, and silent from their beds of glistening white softness and all the while the cloud-sea ebbed and flowed around and between them, repainting the picture at a moment's notice and isolating each group from its neighbour. The continuation up Glen Garry towards Drumochter was hidden but away to the west, and clear as a bell at fifty miles, stood Ben Nevis and the Glen Coe peaks, all in rather a jumble but there nonetheless. For all that, the dominant feature of the view was Beinn a'Ghlo, where all the peaks stood clear above Shinagag.

I didn't know which way to turn or where to point the camera. This was a visual feast such as is granted only rarely: and all I did, for hours, was sit and soak it all up. There were a couple of subsidiary summits and I wandered from one to the other, sitting long and drinking it all in. It was the kind of scene you wish you could implant in your memory; a scene so rich that it brings into play all the senses because it gives rise to feelings so intense all the senses are stimulated: the softest breeze that would normally go unnoticed is felt by every hair on your face; the harsh sharpness of the rock upon which you sit and the lush growth of grass beneath your feet are savoured; in places like this there's always a meadow pipit to be heard, usually at the limit of hearing, but it's there just the same and appreciated all the better for the moment; the raven's croak is a shout of joy, and if you're blessed with total silence you can hear the sound of the life flowing through your veins. And have you ever noticed how life itself has a smell? You can smell it whenever you're far enough away from the works of man and if you're doubtful on that point then take a walk in a Caledonian pine forest in the springtime or on a Hebridean beach after a summer storm.

At such times of heightened awareness all the senses are stimulated simultaneously and the poor old brain has to deal with it all. The result is a stupor, a conflict of emotions that demands the time to be savoured. Maybe this is why days like this have such a profound effect on us. I suspect, although I don't know, that I climb mountains for days like this. It's my spirituality; my attempt to connect with the unseen and to know that which cannot be known but is

sometimes shown.



'It was dazzling in its intensity and inviting in its apparent softness.' Photo: Steve Hindley.

In such a place and on such a day is silence but in that silence is a sound. It's the sound of the omnipresent pulse of life that "civilisation" seeks to drown out for fear you'll ask the big questions; it's the sound of your heart beating in time to the rhythm of the universe, and it's the sound that comes with the contentment you feel as your soul bleeds out into eternity. It's the sound of the infinite and this is your church, the church where you are the intoxicated supplicant, and on such a day you see that what you seek is not outside of you at all. On such a day you see there are infinite parishes of the infinite; that you carry them all within you, and that you are free to come and go as you please.

If ever there was a day to sit on a mountain top and wait for the sunset this was it but when I checked my bag I saw I'd not got my head-torch. I left it as late as I dared before heading off down. On the way I passed some people going up. Theirs was the prize as each one climbed alone into the sunset in search of their infinity.