

SMALL MIRACLE IN TARBERT

BY Iain Fraser Grigor

I AM sitting on the top of a nameless hill, one of hundreds that surround me, and I have just witnessed a miracle. As far as the eye can see are the blue tops of Knoydart and Morar, and at the foot of these tops the blue sea stretching away to Skye. And last night, I witnessed a miracle. It was not perhaps one of the great interventions of history or religion - perhaps it was less believable, more fantastic, than any of these. But miracle, or something like it, it certainly was.

Let me explain to you why I think this - and why we must have more of these miracles, soon, in the Highlands.

A thousand or two feet below me is the tiny settlement of Tarbert on the shores of Loch Nevis in western Inverness-shire. It lies at the head of a little bay, six miles by sea from Mallaig - for no road comes here, unless you count the very rough track that runs over the saddle and some six miles down the side of Loch Morar, to civilisation at the village of the same name. Tarbert gives a new shade to the often-overdone meaning of the word remote.

Once, of course, it was a busy little place, when the sailing drifters worked the loch for herring, and Tarbert was the metropolis for the humble people who occupied the surrounding hills. There was even a little church here, to tend their spiritual needs. And until the years before the Great War, there were - it is said - enough people at the head of Loch Morar to form two shinty teams of men and boys.

But inexorably, savagely, the native population drained steadily away: and when I tramped these hills with fishing-rod as a boy, they were all but empty. Stoul, up the loch, which had in living memory been ploughed, was empty. Tarbert too was all but empty, for the drifters and the shinty players had long gone and the church had closed, and what had always been a community of great fragility stood helpless on the very brink of oblivion.

For long enough, nobody lived here but Donald MacDonald and his sister, on the croft. Then there was just Donald. In the mid-seventies he wrote to the student council at Glasgow University, to ask if there were any students who would come up and help him work it (for even then, he was elderly). I still have that letter somewhere, though I know for certain that it was never replied to. With all the misplaced responsibility of youth, I took the view that it was better to protect Tarbert from noisy, opinionated, lazy and loose-living students like - well, like myself, I suppose, among one or two others.

But times change, do they most assuredly not? And sometimes, they change for the better. For there is once more something of a community at Tarbert, albeit a small one. A full-time stalker and his wife live here, while the newborn community of Inverie is just over the loch. And the local laird (whose name I will spare you, for he must by now be heartily sick of media intrusion) has also built himself a modest house here, which he frequently visits between his adventures in the world of musical theatre. He has even brought a couple here to Tarbert, to help old Donald look after himself.

And this is where the miracle comes into my story.

I arrived here yesterday at noon, after a Saturday morning of rain that was torrential even by the standards of Loch Nevis. And then the rain - the smaller miracle of the day - stopped in an instant and the sky even looked as if it was thinking of trying-out a shy smile or two. Almost at once, a small armada of boats could be seen approaching: dinghies, yachts, fast inflatables, estate launches, a miniature landing-craft, the local lifeboat, the Western Isles herself, and the redoubtable men of the Mallaig Coastguard.

And then the Games themselves, with the liquor - naturally in small and sternly judicious quantities only! - stored in the cooling and handsome length of the Tarbert burn. There was a piper, of course, and some crazed Strip the Willows and Eightsome Reels on the grass. There were some of the Inverie Ozzies too, who contrive to live in Inverie and work in the Caribbean, when their ocean-racing commitments allow them. And there was the Mallaig harbourmaster, barbecuing prawns and chunks of monkfish to a standard that will never be matched by the very best of restaurants. Ever.

In all, there might have been one or even two hundred people in this sacred little place that so recently stood on the edge of destruction - and among these people, even, a horde of children!

And afterwards, there was - of course - the Games dance in the old church building, now converted to a bothy, and decorated with the faraway postcards of all who have stayed there. After some traditional stuff, things got down to a robust disco complete with ambitious tape-deck and DJ, up in what had once been the gallery. The Knoydart Ozzies introduced Caribbean-style dancing, of the sort that would get you arrested anywhere else. Everybody else danced too.

Even old Donald - pushing ninety now and surrounded by girls - was up on the floor, giving it laldy to Abba. He looked fine, right enough, in the blond and curly shoulder-length theatrical wig someone had put on him: though after a while he carefully replaced it with his more-usual bonnet.

Then it was all finished, as all good things must. It all wasn't much more than six hours ago, and as I look down on Tarbert this fine Sunday morning, with an eagle quietly turning and twisting out over the loch, everything is quiet and still. It still seems like something of a miracle. And it is a miracle with a message too: that the small places of the Highlands might yet be home once more to their own wee communities - and that the trash who patronised and Cleared them for so long, are lost at last in the mists of time.

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