

the Wire

AUTUMN EDITION

61

SOMETIMES WHEN YOU JOURNEY

AMERICAN TRAVEL WRITER, DAVID KESSLER, CAME UPON THE SONG *THE SUMMER WALKERS*, AND IT SET HIM ON A REMARKABLE JOURNEY. HERE, HE RECOUNTS HIS TRIP TO THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS THIS SUMMER, TO FOLLOW IN THE FOOTPRINTS OF BOTH THE SONG AND THE BOOK THAT INSPIRED IT.

Words/Photographs: David Kessler



The first time I heard Runrig's song, *The Summer Walkers*, I wondered about the places it mentions. None of my previous trips to Scotland had been to Sutherland and I thought to myself, "I bet I could map that song." I'm always looking for good ways to see more of Scotland. There were parts of the song I didn't understand (all that stuff about pearl fishing, tin, and "a land that we have lost"), but I focused on the parts I could understand – travelling through a beautiful landscape, and the rocking good chorus that I imagined singing in a room of powerful voices. Trips to Scotland always involve Ordnance Survey maps, and I poured over these (and some mapping websites) to find the places mentioned in the song. Then I started connecting the dots and dreaming.

A couple of months before the trip I saw a flier for a recital of Scottish songs at MIT (The Massachusetts Institute of Technology), where I work. I recognized the place names in one of the songs the woman sang from the maps I had been studying. It was *The Waters of Kylesku*, and after the recital I asked if she would teach it to me. A few days later she sent me the words and at the bottom of the xeroxed page she had written the name of the book it came from; *The Summer Walkers: Travelling People and Pearl-Fishers in the Highlands of Scotland*. I saw that title and instantly knew that this was what the song was about. I ordered a copy of the book and spent the next few weeks waiting for it and hoping that I would still want to do this walk after reading it and finding out what the song was really about.

The book arrived and I devoured it whole. Then I went back and read it a second time, piece by piece. I loved the stories and how they added up to a larger window on a world I didn't know existed before. I wanted to take this walk more than ever. Email to author Timothy Neat gave me another piece of information: Travelling People were alive and well and still going strong up in the Highlands, though living more settled lives these days. I didn't imagine that I would have time in my trip to both walk the roads AND meet Travellers, but knowing that the culture still had its representatives made the story more exciting.

The day came and I flew from Boston to London to Glasgow. Then a bus to Inverness where I paused a few days to give a talk at the College there and to

meet the man who wrote the song that started this for me. Calum asked about the route I was planning so I scribbled a quick outline of the Highlands on a scrap of paper and started putting dots on it. As soon as I labelled the first dot, "Lairg", he jumped in, identifying all the others. "What about the Crask? You have to stop there!" he said. He also looked at my mark for Lochinver and said I had to see Achmelvich beach. He gave some suggestions, but The Crask and Achmelvich were imperatives – he wasn't wrong.

Calum gave me one other marching order – I had to meet Essie Stewart, the Traveller Storyteller, before the trip was done. I did meet her, just a couple

days before returning to Boston, and spent a fantastic evening listening to her stories. Like Calum, she wanted to know something about this odd American who was walking a song, and I lost track of time sitting in her living room and talking about everything from the technical details and romantic sweep of Traveller life to these same things in my own trip along the same roads.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Three weeks earlier I took the train north from Inverness to Invershin, where I stepped off onto the platform, adjusted my pack, and began my walk through Sutherland as a snail, with my home on my back.

My plan was at once detailed and vague: I would walk north to

Lairg to Alt Na Hara (a bend in the road where Runrig would send me a care package), and to Bettyhill. Along the way I would see Ben Klibreck, the Shin, The Naver, and the Strathnaver Trail – covering several things mentioned in the song. Then over to Aird, Strathan, Sleitel Rocks, Coldbackie, and down to Tongue where I would somehow find and pitch my tent at the "King of



ABOVE: THE AUTHOR, DAVID KESSLER, MEETS ESSIE STEWART.
OPPOSITE PAGE: OLD TRAVELLING ROAD, SUTHERLAND.

Campsites". From Tongue I would walk to Melness and then either walk or bus (as time permitted) to Durness, Kylesku, and Lochinver. I had great plans to climb a few bens along the way, all of which disappeared in favour of the stories, songs, and people I met along the way. I can't possibly do them all justice here, so a few vignettes will have to do.

I mentioned the Crask Inn. Several people insisted I stop there, just for a quick drink and to see an old fashioned Inn. When I arrived there it was 2pm. I left at 11am the next morning! While there I met owners Mike and Kai (wonderful people, who, when I told them what I was doing in Sutherland, insisted I sing *The Waters of Kylesku* with them), then stashed my backpack in the corner by the bar and spent a few hours walking in the fields around Ben Klibreck before dinner. A few days later I was walking on the Strathnaver Trail when a passing car offered me a ride. As I got in, the man behind the wheel said, "You're from Massachusetts" in a matter of fact manner. I was shocked and before I could recover and ask how he could possibly have guessed this, he explained that they recognized my backpack from the corner of the Crask – they had stopped in for a quick drink while I was out walking around Klibreck and asked the bartender about it. The song may be called the *Summer Walkers*, but you don't turn down a ride like that.

In Strathan I met a wonderful old man who was moving a handful of escaped sheep down the road ahead of his car. His border collie did not accept that the car could do his job for him and ran back and forth behind the car, checking that no sheep had managed to get past it on the right, then on the left, then on the right... They drove slowly past me in this way, and I caught up with them a short while later and struck up a conversation. After I explained what I was doing and had satisfied his requests for songs, I asked him to sing me one. It took some prodding, but he sang a Gaelic song for me, in a beautiful and clear voice that belied his age. Both the song and the heart that he put into singing it was beautiful and a few days later I was introduced to a Gaelic teacher in Tongue who helped me learn it.

Neither the song nor the book gave enough clues to find the 'King of Campsites', but Calum had put me in contact with two of the ladies who organized *Summer in the Straths*. Discussing map coordinates over the phone narrowed the location down to two small fields, and a bit of camper's logic and a rainstorm helped me narrow it down further. When I met Essie I told her how I had chosen where to pitch my tent and she said I got it exactly!

I passed the weeks of the trip alternately walking at 2mph and riding at 30. Each speed had its uses, but the long stretches of walking were both the best and the most tedious. Best, because of how the scenery progressed so slowly allowing me to breathe with it and notice every change, and tedious because, well, walking all day with 30 pounds strapped on your back does things to your brain. Sometimes my mind was quiet and the time and miles disappeared, other times I talked to myself (internally or aloud), sang, or made up strange chants to the rhythm of my feet and walking sticks; I did terrible things to some songs during those walks, including the waulking song from Runrig's *Recovery*. Thankfully, I've forgotten most of this so I can claim it was brilliant. The slow miles made me appreciate the parts of the scenery that moved by, and even more the parts that moved with me – the mountains. On the long day walking from Kylesku west to Lochinver, I saw a new mountain slowly peaking out above the horizon to the south of me and knew from the song that it was Sullven. Its comforting shape stayed with me for the rest of the walk, just like the song said it would.

Throughout the trip Scotland took care of me. Sometimes it was the mountains, sometimes the people. Often the rain seemed perfectly timed to



"It took some prodding, but he sang a Gaelic song for me, in a beautiful and clear voice that belied his age."

TOP: THE GUIDING MIGHT OF SULLVEN. BELOW: COLDBACKIE SANDS. OPPOSITE PAGE: "THE KING OF CAMPSITES", BRAE TONGUE.



start falling only once I was safely inside my tent. I met people who actually understood and appreciated what I was doing when I explained my walk and how it came to be. I would sing for them and then ask them to sing for me - and they would! I met the man who wrote the song that started it all for me, corresponded with the author of the book that inspired the song, met organizers Issie and Meg who seem to know everyone in Sutherland, and yes, Calum, I met Essie Stewart. They have plans to reprise the *Summer in the Straths* walk again next summer and Essie asked me if I would return and join them. To all of you who helped make this walk a joy I answer "Yes!" It's clear to me that this was only my first trip to Sutherland.

David Kessler is a Travel Writer, Stage Manager, Calligrapher, Singer and a Program Coordinator at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Find more of his writings on Scotland, sailing, and other adventures at www.ouphrontis.com

"With the caravan in tow, we set out across the barren moorlands into the heart of Sutherland. We went on and that evening we camped in a small quarry high above the brae above the sands of the Kyle of Tongue. It was late, it was drizzling, but the clouds were lifting and the light was still just enough there on the waters below us for us to see 'the pale sands yonder'. And the tensions began to slip away. The shallow tidal waters of the Kyle can make the Caribbean look very much second-best, and next morning was perfect.

I rose from my tent and walked over the brow of the hill to look south across one of the great landscapes of Scotland: Ben Hope and Ben Loyal silhouetted above the small, illuminated fields of the croft-lands. Suddenly my heart went cold - there, just below me, was a half circle of tents with chimneys smoking - bow tents - the domed, grey galleys of the Stewarts of Remarstaig . . . Those whom I was soon to know, as the 'Summer Walkers'. I might have been in Mongolia. I might have stood there any summer during the last eight thousand years and seen a similar sight. I know no more beautiful landscape in the world, no grander campsite under the stars. The Stewarts call Brae Tongue The King of Campsites."

The words of folklorist Hamish Henderson - extract from the book *The Summer Walkers* by Timothy Neat. Canongate Books. Reproduced by kind permission.