

NETHERLORN (PP. 93-106)

CHAPTER VII SCARBA; GULF OF COIREBHREACAIN

“Or where the northern ocean, in vast whirls,
Boils round the naked melancholy isles
Of farthest Thule, and the Atlantic surge
Pours in among the stormy Hebrides.”

- THOMSON, *Seasons*

On a fine day, when the atmosphere is clear and a gentle wind from the west deepens the blue of the sea, the prospect from Dun-Bhrenain is enchanting beyond description. On all sides stretch the broad waters of the Firth of Lorn, while, with the exception of the space between Mull and Colonsay on the west, the circle of the horizon is occupied by islands and highlands of varied hue and form. On the north and east, softened by distance to a remarkable uniformity in height, peak after peak of the Grampians and their spurs, relics of the old central plateau riven and scarred by a thousand glens and corries, rear their purple heads over a veneer of the grassy hills of Netherlorn; while on the south, many miles away, the smooth, undulating form of Islay appears in the leaden-coloured haze of distance, tempering the transition from the light-blue of the firmament to the deeper azure of the ocean.

Amidst a galaxy of natural beauties the massive form of Scarba appears conspicuously, its glittering cone attaining a height of 1,490 feet. On the north and west the steep slopes exposed to the fury of the spray-laden blasts of the tempest are devoid of vegetation, the bare quartzite gleaming like burnished silver. Skirting the base of the precipices, and about 150 feet above sea-level, there is a broad belt of raised beach, densely carpeted with rich grass, but towards the autumn concealed by a forest of bracken, which grows to enormous proportions in the hollows, attaining a height of 7 feet or more.

Six beehive cells, of a nature similar to those found in Eilach a' Naoimh, but in a more ruinous condition, are clustered together on a sheltered depression leading down from the terrace to the bay called Iurach, the only landing-place on this side of the island. It may be that these cells formed the hermitage of ~muirbulmar; no such name has been preserved to us in the place-names of the district; but the probable derivation of the words (*Muir*, the sea; *bolg*, surging or soft; *mor*, great: the great surging sea) would indicate proximity to such a wild ocean as may be seen so frequently from this spot, caused by the rush of the tidal waters of Coirebhreacain...

...The [following] extract is taken from a letter [from an enthusiastic Highland schoolmaster] to a friend in the south, which was published in the *Greenock Advertiser* in 1845. The periphrasis is occasionally ludicrous, and some of the words were constructed by the dominie himself: -

“I am now to endeavour to give you a representation of the islands you entrusted me with; but I am sorry to confess that you cannot expect it in any way mellifluous, given you from such an imperfect describer. But I shall take it for granted that you will be content for the will in place of the deed.

“Scarba is of a triangular form. One angle bears east, another bears south, and the third bears west; and since I did not circumnavigate it altogether, if you had the advantage of seeing its map, you shall have the goodness of forgiving me if I am mistaken. It rises, from the east and south-east, gradually into hills and valleys towards the top of it, of which hills and valleys some of them very gramineous and are computed very good for nourishing lanigerous cattle, of which the inhabitants have a great flock. The top of the mountain is very rugged, and is rendered almost useless, owing to the number of water ponds, of which there are no less than twelve, and also to its producing no grass, owing to the congelaciousness of the air in general; for although the califaciousness of the sun would cause people to produce sudor almost towards the shore, you would find water congelated upon its top. From the east point of it round towards the west, and from that to the south point, it is generally inaccessible with rocks and precipices, insurmountable by wild goats in general, excepting birds of prey, of which there are a great many that dwell among the stupendous cliffs, which are very dangerous to the quadrupeds called lambs, owing to their carnivorous nature (I mean eagles). There was one lately killed by a lad that had fired at it in its nest in time of incubation, that measured from the point of one wing to the other no less than 7 feet; of which there was found in its nest seven heads of the lamb race.

“Upon the north side of it (Scarba) lies that area of the ocean nomenclated *Beallach a choin Ghlais*, whose stream goes with incredible rapidity, and between Scarba and Jura there is a conglomeration of tremendous billows connubriated by the power of those elements called wind and water, and are rendered so terrific where conquabated by the strength of said elements as to become an object of terror to those of a seafaring line when they would approach it. And as for the west and south-west sides of it, it is out of my power to describe it, for it would almost at times dishearten a hero, owing to its being shelterless in any part of it; tides and eddy-tides circumvolving it on all sides so as to render it dangerous almost at all seasons, if not aware of it. But of all the objects of dread (of which there are many) the only one of note is the whirlpool of *Cailleach*, whose fame is spread over Europe, owing to its being so dangerous in itself and its being the cause of many dangers forby. The cause of its (*i.e.* *Cailleach*'s) effervescence (if I may call it) is as yet unknown; but we must believe that there is a miraculous sub-maritime vortex that causes a constipation of billows so as to cause them to reverberate in the calmest of weather.”

The author, Archibald Sinclair of Maighstir Sgoil Crubach (the lame schoolmaster), was parochial schoolmaster in the neighbouring parish of Kilbrandon. He called his school the “Netherlorn “Academy,” and prided himself upon being the first dominie in the Highlands to introduce a course of physical exercises into a school curriculum, or “curricuculum,” as he called it. The meagreness of the schoolmaster’s salary and his own improvidence forced him to end his days in the poorhouse.

The channel between the north of Scarba and the island of Lunga is known as *Bealach a Choin Ghlais* (the Strait of the Grey Dog), or the Little Gulf; while that betwixt Jura and Scarba is called the Great Gulf, or the Gulf of *Coirebhreacain*. The former is about 1 cable broad, and the stream of water during the greater part of ebb and flood rushes along the narrow pass with much violence. So great is the overfall on the current, that even during moderate tides it is impossible to force a boat through.

The Great Gulf is 6 cables broad at the narrowest part, and, unlike the Sound of Luing which is long and sinuous, it is a short, straight, rim-like exit. This fact, and the enormous disproportion betwixt the capacity of the outlet and the volume of the seas which are forced up against it during the rise of the tide, combine to make the passage of the waters the most turbulent and dangerous on our coasts. In the long, narrow channels of the sounds of Luing and Clachan the obstruction to the tidal current is sustained for a considerable distance, and a measure of equilibrium is maintained so that the speed of the efferent stream seldom exceeds 6 knots, the average being 4 1/2. In the Gulf, however, which is the main outlet for the huge tidal wave from the Irish Channel banked up in the wedge-shaped basin formed by the convergence of the chain of islands, Islay, Jura, Scarba and Luing, on the one side, with Kintyre, Knapdale, and Craignish on the other, the passage is sudden, so that there is a great overfall and race on the flood, the current attaining a maximum speed of 9 knots. In some parts the soundings are 150, 90, and 50 fathoms, but at one place about 300 yards of *Bagh Ban* (White Bay), on the shore of Scarba, a blunted, pyramidal rock shoots up to within 15 fathoms of the surface. The presence of this sudden obstruction causes the breaking sea which, except at the turn of the tide, is never absent from the spot; and when the stream is at its greatest velocity a huge broad spout of green water appears to shoot up from the depths, breaking in a cataract of foaming, surging sea as it descends on the further side of the obstruction, and appears to bore its way down to the bottom of the ocean. The presence of powerful eddies on each side, but especially one on the Scarba shore, known as the *Saobhshruth Mor* (Great Eddy), causes innumerable whirls, but these are not very large or dangerous in themselves, apart from the risk that they might carry small craft into the raging cauldron above the sunken reef. With strong contrary winds the agitation of the water is very much increased, and the impression of stupendous, remorseless power, together with the loud, hoarse, angry roar of the seething maelstrom, makes the scene awe-inspiring and sublime.

This natural phenomenon is known as *Coirebhreacain* - a word which has been translated as the Cauldron of the Speckled Seas. The natives speak of it as the *Cailleach* (the Hag).

“Of Corryvreckin’s whirlpool rude,
When dons the Hag her whiten’d hood –
‘Tis thus our isles-men’s fancy frames,
For scenes so stern, fantastic names.”

But even as long ago as the seventh century, the name *Brecan* appears to have been a personal one. *Adamnan* speaks of the *Charybidis Brecani*. The ancient topographical work – the *Dinnseanchas* – says: “It is

the confluence of many seas, each pouring itself into the place of the other, until they are swallowed down to the bottom, and until it is like an open cauldron, sucking in and disgorging its draughts; so that its roaring is like the distant thunder. And it was into this that Breacan, the son of Partholan, was drawn, and was drowned, with his fifty boats, when he fled out of Erin from his father.” In Cormac’s Glossary it is said: “The seas whirl round like revolving compasses, each taking the place of the other, like the paddles of a millwheel, until they are sucked into the depths, so that the *Coire* remains with its mouth wide open; and it would suck even the whole of Erin into his yawning gullet. Breacan, son of Maine, son of Nial Naoighiallach, had fifty currachs trading between Erin and Alban. They fell afterwards on that *coire*, and it swallowed them altogether, and not even news of their destruction escaped from it.”

Although from the text of these writings the name might be said to apply to the passage between Islay and Ireland, later writers – Fordun, Monro, and others – applied the name to the present situation. According to popular tradition, the gulf owes its name to Breacan, a son of the King of Lochlin (Norway). This prince, to prove his devotion to his love, agreed to pass three days and nights in his galley at anchor in the Coire. Acting upon the advice of the wise men of Lochlin, he had three ropes made, one of wool, another of hemp, and a third of the hair of women of spotless fame. With the aid of these he anchored in the terrible sea. During the first night the woollen rope broke, during the second night the hempen rope parted, and – alas for Breacan and his hopes! – his fearful vigil was almost completed when the hair of some frail one proved unequal to the strain, the remaining strands gave way, and the true lover and his ship were engulfed in the sea which has ever since borne his name. The body of the prince was afterwards dragged ashore by his faithful black dog which had accompanied him, and was buried in Uamh Bhreacain (the cave of Breacan) on the shores of Jura.

Many fearsome stories are told of the dangers of the gulf. How ships in full sail, deserted by their crews, have gone down and been cast up unharmed on the shore of Bagh na Muc in Jura; how boats have been saved from the treacherous whirlpool by the simple expedient of casting a cap or a piece of cork into the vortex, the gaping vortex immediately collapsing and allowing the frail craft to pass through in safety; of mariners closing the hatches and remaining below until the ship was whirled to the bottom and vomited out again. These stories remind one of Poe’s description of the *Descent into the Maelstrom*, but are equally fanciful; for except as regards small vessels and open boats there is no danger; and with these, ordinary prudence and the observation of the old injunction to “tak’ a lang spune to sup wi’ the deil” have made tragedies in the gulf unknown.

The north part of Jura (*Ceann Uachdarach*, the upper end) is wild and rugged, indented with skerry-covered bays, and fringed by a selvaige of terraces formed by sills of basaltic rock. Until a few years ago it formed one extensive sheep farm: now it is a deer forest. On the shore of Glengarrisdale Bay, a few miles down to the west side, is a cave in which there is preserved – or was a few years ago – the skull of some unknown warrior. Two deep sword-cuts on the frontal part of the bone showed that he had died with his face to the foe: one stroke had cut a dise of bone cleanly off; while the fatal blow had penetrated deeply into the brain above the temple.

On the whole, this part of the coast is uninteresting. One well-known traveller says: “Intimate as I am with Jura, I have little to say of it, and much less to say in its favour. The distant view of its mountains, remarkable no less for their conical forms than their solitary reign, leads to expectations that are not realised.” Even our old friend the Maighstir Sgoil Crubach, in talking of Jura, displays none of that magniloquence which characterises his description of Scarba. I quote the remainder of his *Letter to a Friend in the South*, in which he also refers to the island of Eileach a’ Naoimh, lying to the north-west. “Jura is twenty-four miles in length and about or between seven or eight miles in breadth, and the west side of it is uninhabited owing to its infertility. Opposite to *Cailleach* (the north side of it) there are a great many caves and rocks, very stupendous. There is one cave of note, appellated *Uamh Bhreacain*, and in the cave there is a dog’s shoulder bone, supposed to be that of the *cu dubh* (black dog) that brought Breacan ashore when he was drowned, which caused that proverb in our vernacular tongue gendered to us, *Tha latha choin duibh gun tighinn fathast*.

“The inhabitants of Jura are generally of a robust constitution, and are inured to hardships. The produce of the island is almost worthy of no notice, excepting cattle, of which they have a great many, especially sheep; and they also keep a good many goats, owing to the ruggedness of the island in general, and they cannot but be very lucrative owing to their disposition by way of scrambling rocks and other inaccessible places. Deer are there, too, and the laird pays a good deal of attention to them. “Eileacha Naomh bears quite north from Jura, and it is reckoned an excellent pasturage for cattle. But, above all, it is worthy of note for its ancient relics of catacombs and monasteries; and also for the coats of arms that are still

to be seen there, which prove that the founder of them was a most excellent Dedalian, and undoubtedly that he was an admirer of the rites of the Church of Rome, because of the handcuffs that are to be seen there, and were used when the people made their auricular confession, when their hands would have been pressed with a stone wedge with severity, so that it would have been impossible for them to have concealed any of their past failures.

“Dear sir, you shall have the goodness of accepting of this incongruous description, and of forgiving my inability in construing this description, and had I it in my power I would de-decorate it with apothegms and consociate it with irradiance. If you are thinking of using it I beg of you to revise it, and to supplement what is desiderated so as to make it intelligible. Let me know whether you are pleased or not, and I bid you adieu, wishing you a continuity of beatitude and opulence. – Dear Sir, Yours, A.S.”

“KILBRANDON, 30th July 1845.”