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Written by Lt-Col. The Hon. Arthur Murray C.M.G., D.S.O. Published by Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh 1950

The WHIRLPOOL OF CORRIEVRECKAN

Written in 1924 by my sister-n-law, Hilda, Lady Murray of Elibank, when staying at Armaddy Castle, near Oban

Let me feel the breezes blowing
Fresh along the mountainside!
Let me see the purple heather,
Let me hear the thundering tide,
Be it hoarse as Corrievreckan
Spouting when the storm is high-
Give me but one hour of Scotland,
Let me see it ere I die.

Long ago as a child the name was familiar to me from Aytoun's "Lay of Charles Edward at Versailles", but it is only in the last three years that Corrievreckan and its traditions have become realities. It is the channel, two miles long and one mile wide, running east and west between the islands of Jura and Scarba. Near the west and open sea end is the whirlpool, marked on all maps and charts as such, thereby earning for this sea passage the reputation of being the most dangerous in all this wild west coast. The flood tide, running west, attains to a speed of nine knots, and ahs a great overfall and race, owing to the sudden narrow strait into which the wide sweep of the Atlantic is forced between the islands on the one hand and the mainland on the other. Though the soundings are deep, ranging from 50 to 150 fathoms, there is at one place, about 300 yards of Bagh Ban (White Bay), on Scarba, a blunted pyramidal rock that shoots up to within 15 fathoms of the surface. This is the cause of the breaking sea, which, except at the turn of the tide, is never absent from this spot; when it is flood spring tide the currents are tremendous, and cause a sea of troughs and high, turbulent waves in which no boat can live, the suction being so great. There are, besides, powerful eddies on each side of the whirlpool, making the navigation of Corrievreckan no child's play.

Many legends are told of it. The Gaelic spelling of the word Coirebhreacain is translated by some as the cauldron of the speckled seas. Locally it is spoken of as the Cailleach (the Hag). The old Celtic tales of the witch or hag are many, too long to tell here, but her haunts are all over Gaeldom, by land and sea. Cailleach Bheur's (pronounced Veir) herds of deer pasture on the wild waves near the Torran rocks and the lonely lighthouse of Dubh Artach, off Mull; and Corrievreckan is the tub in which she tramps her blankets. Before the washing the roar of a coming storm is heard by people on the coast for 20 miles, and for three days before the Cauldron boils; when the washing is over the plaid of Scotland is virgin white.

There is, too, a more personal note in the name. In the seventh century Adamnan, biographer of St. Columba, speaks of the Charybdis Breani. Dr. Gillies, in his entrancing book on Nether Lorn, in the chapter on Corrievreckan quotes the ancient

topographical work – the Dinnseanchus: “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 and disgorging its draughts, so that its roaring is like distant thunder. And it was into this that Breacan [son of Lochlin, King of Norway] was drawn, and was drowned, with his 50 boats, when he fled out of Erin from his father.”

Another old tale, according to Dr. Gillies, is that Breacan, to prove his devotion to his love, agreed to pass three days and nights in his galley at anchor in Coire. On the advice of the wise men of Lochlin he had three ropes made – one of wool, another of hemp, and the third of the hair of women of spotless fame. With these he anchored in the terrible sea. During the first night the woollen rope broke, during the second the hempen rope parted, and, alas for Breacan, the third also gave, and the true lover and his ship were engulfed in the sea which has ever since borne his name. His body was afterwards dragged ashore by his faithful black dog, and was buried in Uamh Bhreacain (the cave of Breacan), on the shores of Jura.

It had long been a dream to see this alluring place, so full of legend, so enticing in its dangerous beauty. Several times we had gone in the motor-boat to look at the entrance at the south-east end of Luing, but either tides or winds were contrary, and the boldest seaman will not venture in unless all conditions are right, preferably at slack neap tides and with a following wind.

At last the day and the hour came. We had gone for a few hours’ snipe shooting to the Isle of Luing, on a lovely calm day with a gentle north-east breeze. It was four o’clock, and instead of returning home direct we decided to return by Corrievreckan. The skipper of the motorboat, Duncan McQueen, a master mariner who know every rock and reef, every tide and current in all this Argyll coast, was keen for us to do it, saying it was a perfect chance, as tide and wind suited well. So off we set, we two women, the two keepers, a dog, and our boatman. The motor launch, built by its owner and pilot, 26 feet long, with a beam of 7 feet 3 inches, and a 12 h.p. engine, in which we had often faced rough seas, gave us complete confidence.

So calm was the sea that we all thought the gulf would be dully quiet, and in my heart I expected to be disappointed, and to find my suspicions confirmed that the whirlpool and eddies were greatly exaggerated.

We kept close in to the shores of Scarba; it was flood tide, and we were going due west with the slight north-east wind behind us. Very soon we realised that though the water was smooth there were very fast currents, and we were soon slipping along at 15 knots. The Scarba coast on the south and west and north sides is very high and fine, with rocks black, grey and yellow, sheer into the sea. Here and there we saw deer – the reddest any of us had ever seen; but no sign of the wild goats. Then, a bit ahead, we saw a white line of breakers, and soon on our left, not 200 yards from us, there began a wild tumbling sea, deep blue troughs and curling waves 10 to 20 feet high, all foam-topped, and this turmoil extended half a mile away from us and fully a mile alongside. The sea behind was quite calm; the Atlantic ahead lay asleep in the warm August sun; nothing to the eye to account for all this tumult so close at hand. The two keepers in the bow had glasses fixed on Scarba and the deer, but we, one on each side of the steersman, who stood to his tiller all the time, were fascinated by the white deer of the Cailleach, and could watch nothing else. No disappointment anyhow in Corrievreckan’s ways; every now and then

an eddy would catch us and swing the boat at right angles, but always towards the shore and away from the maelstrom.

“What would happen if we got carried into that?” one of us asked the pilot.

“It would be certain death,” he replied emphatically; “no boat could live five minutes in it.” Then he added: “I never thought to see it so wild on a fine calm day, and a north wind.”

It happened to be half flood tide, also the day of the highest spring tide of new moon; and the unwritten law is that you shall only go through Corrievreckan in slack tide, avoiding spring tides” so we were seeing what is seldom vouchsafed to any from a small craft. The sense of being so close to that wild surge and borne along its outer currents at racing speed was thrilling and exhilarating beyond words.

Luckily engine and steering gear were in perfect order; there was no danger, only one realised there was no room for “buts” and “ifs”; also, one silently resolved never to dare it except with a seaman who knew his boat and his job.

At a certain point, when the waves of the whirlpool lay well behind us, Duncan sat down and said with a broad smile, “Now my anxious time is over”, and we shook hands warmly, for he had indeed given us our heart’s desire of the sea and, thanks to his adventurous spirit and his splendid sea lore, we had come through Corrievreckan in perfect safety in conditions one may never see again.

Corrievreckan has that same quality of allurement that surrounds the Lorelei rock and the isles where the sirens sang: to go once means only a greater longing to go again. Some day we will choose a time of high spring tides and a strong west wind, when it will be easy to slip round the south-east end of Luing, land on Scarba in a little sheltered bay on the south side, and by walking a mile westward one will watch what the Cailleach can do when she really tramps her blankets and when she allows no human boat to approach her tub. One would also like to go through at slack ebb tide from the westerly direction and watch from that angle that place of tortured turmoil.

The last part of our voyage was through familiar seaways past Lunga and the Black Isle, where we chased seals and cormorants, on by Fladda Lighthouse and through Cuan Sound, whose swift currents and tides will never seem anything again after our experience in Corrievreckan; and so home into the spacious quiet at Ardmaddy Bay; to the old grey castle to tell of our deeds to its chatelaine and fire her still more with the intent to come through our Charybdis Brecani.

Note by Lt.-Col. The Hon. Arthur Murray in 1949

On a day in August 1936, my wife and I started from An Cala at 3 p.m. for Eileach a’ Naoimh in Duncan McQueen’s motor-boat. Ever since settling down on the Isle of Seil five years previously we had had a keen desire to “do” Corrievreckan by small craft, and, as we were crossing the five-mile stretch of sea between Seil and the *Holy Isles* that August afternoon, I said to McQueen, “Duncan, d’you think we could do Corrievreckan to-day?” A momentary hesitation, and a look round the sky, and then, “I think we could, Colonel,” came the reply. “I’ve not seen a better day for it for many a year. The ebb will be slack about 6 o’clock, and if no wind gets up meantime, we could do it.” “Then we *will* do it, Duncan,” said my wife, “*that’s settled!*” So we had our

picnic tea in one of the lovely verdant dells on the southern slopes of Eileach a' Naoimh, and were across by 6 o'clock to the westerly spit of Scarba; and then on through the Sound, keeping close in to the great, towering, cruel-looking Scarba cliffs on our left, with Corrieveckan - truly a horrible and awesome-looking mass of rumbling, tumbling, swirling water – about a couple of hundred yards away on our right. Up to a point about a mile and a half down the Sound there was no possible landing spot on Scarba had the engine or tiller of our boat gone wrong, and there were certainly - and perhaps excusably (!) – sighs of relief from the three of us when such a spot was finally reached. And so round the easterly end of Scarba; inside Shuna; past Torsay; and back through Cuan Sound, arriving at An Cala at 9 p.m. greatly satisfied with our day's adventure!