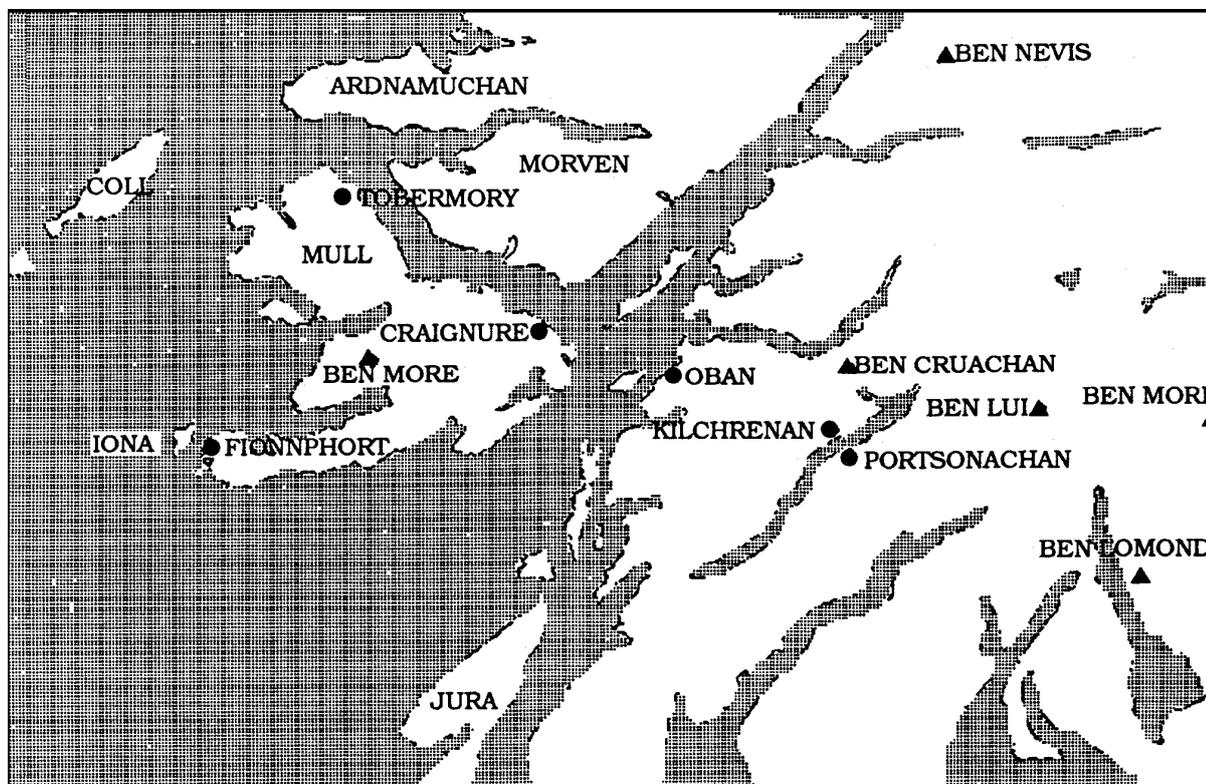


# 1991 Journey to Iona

Laurence Crossan PHC Journal 1991



I have made a few journeys on foot to Iona. The last was some years ago; I started that one from Rowardennan. This time, thanks to John Courtney and Archie Boyd, I was starting from Buchan's farm on the Falloch. This was going to shorten my Journey, and it was a very convenient place to begin heading West.

The start was made at a gate opposite the farm, with a steep rise connecting to the Hydro track that runs, parallel to, and above Alit nan Corainn. This was followed to the high moorland South of Ben Lui and Belnn a Chleibh. Then by upper Glen Fyne and the Shira track, I reached the dam at the West end of Loch Shira.

My Intention was to spend the night In the Portsonachan area on Loch Awe. In the morning I was confident that I could persuade one of the fishing ghillies, based there, to take me across the loch to North Port. Then, from nearby Kilchrennan It would be possible to reach Oban almost entirely by cross country.

The last time I had gone from the dam to Portsonachan I had become snarled up In, unmapped, newly planted forest. I did not want to repeat that awkward Journey. This time I was taking a different and unfamiliar way; It looked good on my map. From the North of the dam, four miles on high but descending ground, would put me on the road North of Cladich; then three miles on that road and I would be in Sonachan.

It had started to rain but I made fair progress on this way, until I met another unmapped forest: This would be about a mile from the Cladich road.

These places are dosed with fertilizers for the trees but the coarse grasses and heathers also thrive and hide the nasties; the hummocks, boulders and drainage ditches. There are some people who

can run a mile in four minutes, but It took me over an hour of ankle twisting, knee creaking, stumbling to clear that stretch of forest and reach the road.

My passage through the forest had left me in a foul mood, and as I shuffled down the road in heavy rain I thought of the changes that we are finding on the hillsides.

### **These privately funded forests are abominations!**

It is a sinister sight to come, unexpectedly, across one of those high wire link fences enclosing millions of small, cloned, Sitkas; - aliens on a Scottish hillside.

A concentration camp for wee trees; the addition of watchtowers and guard dogs would not look out of place on their perimeter. The ground is pulverised before planting to encourage growth and drainage and, once the trees are there, to make a passage across it one has to dig deep into one's reserves of British grit. The use of coarse and foul language can also help here. So many, crude, growth agents are dumped on the ground that if you drank the water from the streams you would start sprouting wee branches and have resin oozing out of the ears.

These places were not funded for the benefit of humankind. They were funded so that the rich could increase their loot by wringing money out of our Exchequer. If a path, no matter how old its history, is in the way the reaction is "Exterminate. Exterminate."

I told you I was in a bad mood, but the girning will soon stop - for a time anyway.

At Portsonachan Hotel I met a film crew that had been filming at the loch-side. They had a very smart power boat and I was taken, in style, across the loch to North Port.

It was 7.30 pm when I landed on the other side. The rain had stopped and although the midges were biting, I felt chirpy on the stroll up to Kilchrennan. [There were two more stretches of water ahead of me now on this journey. The Firth of Lorne [Oban to Craignure],

and Iona Sound [Fionnphort to Iona]. Cal Mac ferries would take care of these two crossings.]

Surprisingly, Kilchrennan Inn was not busy and I was able to spread out damp clothing; empty the rainwater and forest debris from the boots and put on a dry pair of socks. I had food and some drink and it was very cosy. Later on the place began to fill up and become stuffy; but I hung on. There were massed squadrons of Loch Awe midges flying around outside searching for me, and the longer I waited in the pub the more exhausted they would become. When I did leave the rain was off, there was a wind and no midges.

The next morning the midges were back and I could not see to cook a breakfast.

Just North of Kilchrennan a Scottish Rights of Way signpost points across the moor; its message is "Public footpath to Kilmore. 11 miles". [Kilmore is about four miles South of Oban and most of that can be covered by a forest road.]

I used the footpath for a mile or so, then it vanished into a bog. Then followed a struggle up through a forest on an invisible Right of Way. It was raining and I seemed to take a long time to reach Loch Nant. At the loch-side the rain had stopped and the sun was out. The Right of Way is visible here as the Hydro has made it into a service track.

At a burn the stove was lit and a pot put on for tea. The boots were cleaned out; socks were washed and wounds on the feet cleaned and plastered. It was smashing, lazing in the sunlit woodland, by the side of the bonnie loch. A pair of dry socks on; a stick of liquorice, [it puts colour in your cheeks] and I was on my way.

It had turned into a perfect day, and looking back there were splendid views of Cruachan over the loch. The way leaves the loch and goes along a shoulder of moorland on a long rise with broken patches of Loch Stor below and to the left. Beyond the high point there was a wee bit of up and down and then a steep drop into Glen Feochan. The Right of Way is now a narrow road servicing scattered farms in the glen. Kilmore is at the end of the glen. A bit North from here to Loch Nell,

then into Glencruitten to pick up the forest road. This met the Oban road near the golf course. Twenty minutes down the road and I was in the town. It was just after 5pm.

I had thought of staying overnight in Oban, but this was an Oban at the height of the holiday season; its streets were jammed with traffic and its pavements with people. There was a ferry for Mull at 6pm; I decided to make for that, but first there was shopping to do. A supermarket was used for food, then I forced my way into shops to buy another pair of socks, a tube of Germolene and a packet of Elastoplasts. Foot and mouth shopping!

I had 15 minutes to wait for the boat and this was spent sitting in the sunshine on the quayside. I dug into Low's food bag and with a carton of milk, ate a macaroni pie and a sticky bun. On board the ship I stayed on deck and watched the continuing melee of traffic and shoppers on Oban's front. Oban in August becomes "Andorra by the Sea"; and I was glad when it was left astern.

I went below for a rest. The "Isle of Mull" is a very comfortable ship. I took one of the big reclining chairs, removed my boots and was stretching out when a scruffy looking youth passed by. As he passed he said, "Hello faither; are ye tired?" I called him back, gave him a £1 coin and said, "Look son, away along to the cafeteria and get me a cup of tea. Milk no sugar."

He must have gone to the top of the queue for he was back in a minute with a pot of steaming tea and my change. I lay back, put my bootless feet up on the footrest and sipped the tea. I was really living it up.

I waited until the ship bumped in to berth at Craignure before I put on the boots. The youth had reappeared, says he, "D'ye think ye can manage to get aff; Wull ye need a haun?" "No thank you", says I in a suitable M. Thatcher manner.

Two service buses await the ferry at Craignure. One goes South then West along the Ross of Mull to the terminus at Fionnphort; about a third of the way on this journey the road goes over a spine of high ground. The other bus goes North along the East coast of Mull to its terminus at Tobermory. I took this bus, used it for 6 miles, and got off at Forsa. Tomsleibhe bothy is on the lower slope of Ben Talaidh in Glen Forsa. As you enter the glen, Talaidh is dead ahead. To find the bothy its just a case of following the track in the direction of Talaidh. An estimated hour and a half would reach there. I was moving briskly when I started off, but soon wearied and when on the rise up to the bothy my plates and hubcaps were protesting. sending messages to the brain that they had done enough.

There is a superb wee bathing pool in the burn beside the bothy, but the midges were there in force and I was only able to dip hands and feet before I had to flee.

Tomsleibhe is a comfortable place, [they have laid a new floor in the sleeping room] but sadly, only one armchair remains. After a meal, and before I turned in, I went out for a moment to look down the glen and beyond, over Morven and Ardnamurchan, the scene in the darkening evening was beautiful

The next morning the first aim in my day's journey was to get into Coire Mor. To reach there, I had to go through the forest in Liath Dhoire to Glen Cannel then along that glen to the ruins of an old settlement at Gortenbuie; the Coire rises South of that. The walking had been testing, but I had been over that way before with Ewan and I knew what to expect. The home of the Great Witch of Mull, the Cailleach Bheur, is in Clachaig, a glen to the North and just round the corner from Gortenbuie. To meet the Cailleach you have to enter the glen alone and in the early morning. I have tried this a couple of times in Clachaig and had no luck. However, the Cailleach has also been encountered in Coire Mor and that's why, this time, I was giving it a shot.

It was not yet mid-morning and I was alone. As I toiled upwards I searched around but there was no sign of her. With much show I started on the day's stick of liquorice hoping that would entice

her, but even that was unsuccessful and I had to make my solitary and unwanted way up, and out of the Coire. She must be avoiding me!

At the bealach I reviewed my route for the rest of the day. I intended to spend the night in the Nun's Cave on the South coast and that meant I had to get to Carsaig. The Craignure - Fionnphort road was below me and a walk West on that would take me to the Carsaig road end.

It was a thumping drop from the bealach to the road. I had been only minutes on the walk West when the Fionnphort bus appeared. I held up my hand and the walk down that busy single track road was changed into a seated journey, looking through a window at the Ross of Mull rolling past. Although the man would not accept my bus pass, the transformation was magic and I am sure that the Calileach had a hand in it.

I left the bus before Carsaig Junction, at the new tearoom. It has a splendid wash room, and with hot water and scented soap I had a much needed clean; and no midges. Outside, I lingered over a pot of tea and a plate of shortbread and I felt like a million dollars.

It was a cracking afternoon for the walk over Glen Leidle to Carsaig with glorious views behind of Ben More and the Chioch over the head of Loch Scridain.

From Carsaig my way was West along the beach toward the cave. Shoreline walking is a slow business. The raised beach is littered with huge debris from the high basalt cliffs that lie just inland; it's a case of up and down or round about. There is a limestone layer under the basalt and the beach is fertile. I was a few weeks late to see the full bloom of wild flowers but there was still plenty of colour on the beach.

The view seawards is fascinating, and it is one of the attractions of this walk. Colonsay, superimposed on South Jura, then continuing North, Scarba, Lunga and the Gravellachs. The sea looked placid, but there can be rough water out there. The sound between Jura and Scarba has the notorious Corryvreckan and between Scarba and Lunga is the smaller but more vicious whirlpool - The Grey Dogs. The Grey Dogs is where the Cailleach washes her blankets. I was really sorry that I did not meet her that morning in Colre Mor, for, she has the power to bring youth to the aged.

So much was I taken with things seaward that I missed the cave and had to retrace to find it. The entry appears to have grown more grotty but inside it still offered the same, spacious accommodation. The religious carvings on the soft limestone walls, a legacy from the nun's occupancy, remain visible. The fine curtain of water that I remembered falling from the cliff above over the cave's entrance now comes down in erratic dollops and it is advisable to wear a waterproof jacket with the hood up to go to collect water.

The midges were bad and a fire was essential. Twenty minutes combing on the beach brought in enough driftwood to keep a fire going and with my fire lit, the midges vanished, and cooking was possible.

Before bedtime I went out to watch night coming to the islands. [I must come here more often.]

I wakened in the night with the sound of high tide outside my front door. That, combined with the aromatic reek from the smouldering timber on the fire has left a delightful memory.

The next morning began the last day of my journey. I climbed up on to the moorland, using the steep Nun's Pass beside the cave. It was surprisingly misty on the high ground; it was awkward going and I was unable to see forward to choose routes. Near Scridain it started to clear and I was able to see my way to the road.

A few miles were left to Fionnphort, and, because of the holiday traffic, I was not looking forward to them. However, I was almost immediately offered a lift by a driver and I was on Iona by noon.

I walked up through the crowds on Iona to the machair above the North beaches; my favourite spot. I stretched the gear out for a couple of hours lazing. My water bottle had been filled in Fionnphort and I used this to start a brew going on the stove. I wrote some cards. It was a clear,

sunny day and Iona's familiar outlook, with its scatter of islands, dominated. Mull on the right; ahead, Staffa. Then the Treshnish with the tops of Rum behind. Coil and Tiree, and beyond them, smudges on the far North West that could be the Uists.

My first visit was made to this Island a long time ago. I had been walking on the West coast and diverted across Mull to take a look at Iona. It was during a spell of perfect weather at the beginning of May. There were few people on Iona then and the place had an air of absolute calm. The remaining works of the old builders made me aware that I was on the great Columba's Island and that the graves of early kings were there. The machair was then the furthest North that I had been and I pitched my tent with its door facing North to take the most from that surprising, and satisfying, seascape.

I had spent four years in the Far East; an experience of exotic riches and exotic horrors, and some of the places had been miserable.

I must have needed the tranquillity of this island, and the sight of the native, spring, colours of the Northern sea and its islands, for I loitered around contentedly, for the few remaining days that I had left.

Iona has changed and I have changed, but I find on my returns that I am able to recapture some of the sensation of that first visit.



*The Cathedral and Monastery  
Iona.*