

Chapter & Verse

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June 2015

Writing Retreat at Barnhill, Isle of Jura

Jura is the emptiest large island off the Scottish coast. Badly affected by the Clearances of the early 19th century, it has become an island of *ghosts with no children*, in the words of one writer. There are the remains of villages, some of ancient origin, all over this island. Barnhill lies beyond where all roads cease.

With patience and skilful driving, Sue somehow manages to negotiate the rocky track which leads to the stark house which sits in total isolation a few hundred yards above the sea. In the stony field below the house, brown cattle graze, their brown flanks moving ghost-like through the Hebridean drizzle and mist in the stillness of evening, disturbed only by the persistent calling of a cuckoo from a patch of surprisingly lush woodland above the house. It's as if the cuckoo is trying to tell me something in words in a language I can't yet comprehend. However, as we draw up beside the house, the skirl of bagpipes echoing from inside, drowns the voice of the cuckoo as Cameron plays one of my favourite tunes, *Leaving Port Askaig* in recognition of my unavoidably late arrival.

Barnhill is still owned by the same family as in George Orwell's time in the 1940's: the Fletchers. Damaris Fletcher who I had been in contact with for months beforehand is very careful about who she lets stay in Barnhill, hoping that they will

share something her protective love for it rather like a damaged child. She is aware of the house's many imperfections: its damp walls; its shabby, down at heel furniture; its rugs and carpets on which no Hoover would dare to tread; its bath stained brown by decades of peaty water. But despite its many shortcomings, it's a house full of history and atmosphere. Like the landscape of Jura, its absences are filled with mysterious presences. I feel drawn to the dingy rooms and the murky light where shadows are allowed to roam at will. I detest the harsh lights of many modern houses in which I feel as if I'm being interrogated about a crime I can't recall committing.

The bedroom in which I'm shown to is the one in which Orwell so frantically wrote *1984*. His rusty typewriter was placed on a rickety desk right on front of the window which looks out on the ever shifting lights of the sea. From a dark framed photograph, the face of Orwell stares accusingly at me as I lie in bed.

The rain taps and taps against the loose window frame. As a previous resident of Barnhill wrote:

this old house is marked, like Orwell's wrinkled face, with the deep grooves of those who have sojourned there . . . pilgrims of the roaring silence, embracing the rugged hermitage of solitude, perched above the seal draped bay on an island far away.

The next morning, I see an eagle glide above the bay. As I don't have binoculars, I can't be certain if it is a golden eagle or a sea eagle but its majestic flight is unmistakably that of an eagle.

In the afternoon, I go for a walk with the others, with the exception of Janni who is recovering from getting stuck in a peat bog the previous day, to the sheltered bay where some forty seals congregate to languidly discuss the events of each day. Almost everywhere



you look on the bare hills are elegant red deer leaping over bracken and heather or standing motionless as if listening to sounds beyond all human hearing. In the copses of gnarled and lichen trees, bluebells still form scented waves. It's wonderful to see my favourite wild flower for a second time this spring. Bluebells play a significant role in *1984*. It's in a copse of bluebells where Winston and Julia rediscover their lost humanity. Bluebells release the remembered scents of love and home.

Winston picked his way up the lane through dappled light and shade, stepping out into pools of gold wherever the boughs parted. Under the trees to the left of him the ground was misty with bluebells. The air seemed to kiss one's skin . . . The bluebells were so thick underfoot that it was impossible not to tread on them . . . He went on picking bluebells. It was the best thing to do.

When we reach 'seal bay', Cameron gets out his bagpipes and stands on a rock and plays tunes to the seals in the soft Hebridean rain. It's widely believed that these beautiful and inquisitive creatures are responsive to music but with their wide, sad eyes which hint of lost loves and unrealized dreams, I suspect that the instrument they love best is the cello with its yearning timbre. One day, I shall play a recording of the adagio of Dvorák's cello concerto to them and watch them swoon.

I was surprised to find another house above the bay and to learn that it is permanently occupied by a couple, even through the storms and long darkness of winter. Coming

across such an isolated dwelling reminded me of a passage by my favourite writer of Highland and Island landscape, Margaret Leigh who describes her emotions when she come across a remote cottage in the hills:

I watched the white cottage and the tiny figures moving, a pang of envy seized me. To live in peace year in, year out, in some remote and beautiful place, with work to hand, a loving mate to share it with - what more could man desire or woman either?

Sue, Cameron and I set off over the hills in order to look down on the famous sea whirlpool, the Corryvreckan which has a starring role in the Powell and Pressburger 1945 romantic film, *I Know Where I'm Going* but the mist descends so thickly that we have no choice but to return to Barnhill for dinner, wine, whisky and candlelight.

The next day, we return to the seals who splash in the bay as if pleased to see us. We were relieved to leave behind us the appalling odour of burnt soles as Kay had left her wet boots to dry on top of the hot stove. She later tried to erase the smell by the curious method of placing segments of lemon on top of the stove but this only succeeded in blending burnt lemon with burnt resin. In the words of Jane, this brought new meaning to the words lemon sole.

A common criticism of writing retreats is that not nearly as much writing gets done as expected and in that respect, this retreat was no different. However, this unique place has to be absorbed slowly and poetry is the voice of memory. In such a remote location with a generator to be mastered - ably looked after by Mark; a calor gas fridge to be kept alight; the wood burner to be lit and meals to be made and so on, one can't expect to

be bent all day over a desk. In this extraordinary location, it would be such a waste not to explore the surrounding environment. This is precisely what Orwell did in his early months at Barnhill. He wandered the hills; he dug out a vegetable garden; he fished for brown trout in the numerous lochs; he sailed around the coast, almost drowning in the Corryvreckan. Only when he had fully settled into the house and the island he grew to love did he begin to furiously write the novel which had so slowly germinated in his mind. So it will be with those who have come on this retreat, the words for future poems will ferment in their minds in the coming months and years.

On the morning after I left Jura and my beloved Islay, I found myself sitting half-asleep amid the crowds and noise and squalor of Victoria coach station waiting on a bus to Norwich. It came to me that what the Barnhill cuckoo was really trying to tell me, over and over again, was *come back, come back, come back. (and bring Ann)* I know that one day I shall obey that persistent command.

