

Varieties of luck

It was not a mountain, just a small hill, easily climbed, and flat at the top, where we lay on the grass to bask in the sun. It was my brother who named it Ben Chuern when he took a photograph of our three heads peering over the edge, looking down at him. The name was nonsense. My brother explained that it came from a dream in which he had seen us lying side-by-side exactly as he posed us for the photograph. Photography was one of his hobbies, which he took very seriously, like everything else he did. On this holiday, he also spent a lot of time fishing, casting his line into the loch when the incoming tide brought shoals of mackerel with it. Being younger and not sharing his interests, we usually left him alone to get on with it, but occasionally we went along to watch the mackerel, and once my mother and aunty came too, being curious to see where the fish they were having to cook were coming from. My aunty had a go at catching some herself, but somehow ended up with the fishing line wound all around her like a trussed-up goose. She had to make her way slowly and carefully back to the cottage for my father and uncle to disentangle her.

The cottage was a few hundred yards from the loch, with a gently sloping stretch of grass giving way to a pebbly beach. In the morning we would go down to the beach to throw stones in the water and collect driftwood to burn in the living-room fire. There was an open-sided wood store at the back of the cottage, already filled with logs by the owner, but to get them we had to brave swarms of midges. Another of our childish pastimes was to try drowning the midges by throwing saucepans of water over them, but we gave this up as it clearly didn't work, and my mother and aunty had to swab us with calamine lotion to soothe the bites.

From the beach, we could see a headland jutting out from the opposite shore of the loch with an abandoned house at the end of it, standing completely alone with nothing else nearby, not even a tree. We never saw any people there, and no road led to it. It was a mystery we were eager to explore, and after much pestering from us, my father hired a small rowing boat so we could cross the loch to have a look.

In those days no one gave much thought to safety, yet tragic accidents never seemed to result. You never heard of anyone going for a walk and falling over a cliff or freezing to death in a sudden blizzard, nor drowning after going out in a boat without life-jackets. Looking back, it seems miraculous that we survived, but at the time it never crossed our minds that we could be in any danger, especially not with my brother and father there to look after us. They sat in the middle doing the rowing, with my sister and cousin at the stern, and me at the bow.

The outward journey was uneventful, and it was no more than ten minutes before we were clambering up the rocky shore towards the house, but even as we approached it we sensed an eeriness that prompted my sister, who was the youngest, to say "I don't like this." The house was a ruined shell without roof or windows or any sign of anyone having lived there: no remnants of furniture, not even a scrap of paper or a broken bottle. The ground around seemed to be some kind of black stone, with just weeds growing in it. We walked along the headland for a bit, but nothing changed. Eventually, my father pronounced "Nothing to see here," and shepherded us back to the boat.

Within minutes of setting off, we realised the return journey was going to be difficult. By now the tide was coming in, fast and strong, and we were trying to row straight across it. We were soon being tossed about like a cork. Despite that, my brother repeatedly had to stand up and rush to pull in the fishing line that he had left trailing over the stern, as the mackerel were biting every few minutes. How he managed to keep his balance in the wildly rocking boat I will never know. If he had fallen, the boat would surely have overturned. Why did no

one tell him to pull in the line and not throw it out again? I suppose in our innocence, or ignorance, we still assumed that all would be well, and it was. It took about half an hour and a lot of effort from my brother and father, but we reached our side of the loch unharmed apart from being wetter than expected. Maybe that means we were never in such peril as I retrospectively imagined, but I still think we were lucky.

I was not the only one to think so, though for different reasons. At dinner that night, when the mackerel was put on the table, my father said: "We were lucky to be out there when the tide was coming in. Otherwise we wouldn't have caught all this fish." Where I saw danger, my father and brother saw opportunity.

The next day when were lying on top of Ben Chuern, I asked my sister and cousin if they had been scared in the boat too. It turned out we all had been. My cousin was an only child, and our families spent so much time together that we had become more like her brothers and sister than her cousins. Because we were almost the same age, strangers often thought she and I were twins.

"It's lucky none of us said anything about it," my cousin observed. "My parents would be furious with your Dad if they knew."

"So would our Mum," said my sister, adding "and poor Dad probably wouldn't understand why."

We agreed we had to keep it quiet.

I wanted to do some rowing myself, so when my father took the boat back to its owner, a Mr. McKay, I went with him, and discovered we had been lucky in yet another way.

"We rowed across to that abandoned house. Do you know anything about it, like who lived there?" I asked.

"Did you see any ghosts?" asked Mr. McKay.

"No."

"Then you were lucky. I don't how much is true and how much is legend, but the story is that the man who built the house was a Jacobite and he was killed at Culloden, leaving his wife and children to be driven out by the English and die in the snow. It's said that their ghosts still haunt the place."

"So no one has lived there for hundreds of years?"

"No, but someone did once plan to: a young chap came here on holiday, hiking and fishing, and decided to stay. It was before my time, but some of the older people remember him talking about rebuilding the house. He didn't have a chance to get started, though, because he was called away to the First World War and never returned. The twist is that he was a foreigner, so he went to fight for the other side."

Suddenly foreseeing what the answer must be, I asked, "Do you know what his name was?"

"Chuern."