The Dick Balharry Memorial Talk 2023

Land Reform, Access, and the Renewal of Relationship

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Parts 1 and 2 set the scene for rambling and some key characters of Rambling Scotland. Parts 3 and 4 address land reform and access. Part 5 looks at rambling and life's meaning. The PDF version has Rennie McOwan's 1994 paper appended.

I had presumed, ladies and gentlemen, that when Brendan Paddy, our chair tonight, invited me to give this Ramblers Scotland annual talk, that it would be a *genteel* affair!

I had good reason. I don't think I ever met the great conservationist, Dick Balharry, whose name we remember tonight. But recently my French wife Vérène and I had the pleasure of hosting his son, David, in our living room.

Both father and son are, of course, intimately associated with the John Muir Trust. Dick succeeded Andrew Thin, who now chairs the Scottish Land Commission, in becoming the Trust's chair in 2003.

And David, as its current CEO, departed our house in Govan with a costly can of venison stew from the Cévennes National Park in France; an example of the kind of cottage industry that can be supported by community-organised deer culling of the kind that his father had advocated.

But the hint of poaching from the larder-shelves of the city's G51 postal district was not what excited my genteel presumptions of tonight's event. O no! It was *sex,* that as Steppenwolf had it, got my "motor runnin'", to "head out on the highway / looking for adventure /... and explode into space."

Genteel, for “rambling” carries such a mellow tone, that I thought I’d better check its etymology, find out the underlying meaning of the word.

And remembering that I’ve come from Glasgow through to Edinburgh. And so had every reason to expect ... due decorum ... you can imagine my *horror* to discover that “to ramble” probably derives from the Middle Dutch, *rammelen,* meaning “to copulate”, or to roam around “on heat”. As the *Online Etymology Dictionary* says: a term “used of the night wanderings of the amorous cat”.

As if that’s not bad enough to get Ramblers Scotland put onto some sort of an official Register - oh yes, *we see you* as William Allingham of Ballyshannon had it, “Up the airy mountain, / Down the rushy glen ... / Wee folk, good folk, / Trooping all together....” – if that’s not quite sufficiently bad enough, worse for me, still worse as a writer from whom you might have expected lucidity tonight: by the 1630s, the verb “to ramble” had developed further meaning in the English language: "to talk or write *incoherently*".

Caught between a herd of cats and rabid incoherence, I would by now be at a loss for words for what to say on this occasion, had not I woken from my slumbers a week last Saturday’s morning with the apparition of a childhood book called *Rambles by the Riverside* dropped into my mind. I leapt out of bed and onto Google (the way one does when half asleep), and was instantly entranced by the descriptions of antiquarian booksellers.

“Wonderfully bright blue cloth boards with crisp title lettering and bordering to the front board,” said one.

A “... charming wildlife book ... in the form of observant nature loving children on a ramble,” said another.

I snapped mine up on E-bay for just five pounds thirteen pence. I kid you not, I hold before you here that very copy, dated by a previous owner, 31-7-31. And from the very first paragraph it drew me back to childhood rambles, if I might abridge the opening page:

> I was sitting day in early spring on a large boulder that jutted from the side of a high and grassy hill. The hill was fairly steep, and as I had been to the top of it and round about, and back almost to the foot, I was feeling rather tired. [And] I knew a great deal about the creatures in the yard ... and something of the birds and small animals whose homes were in the meadows and woods beyond the farm. I called them all my friends ... they told me all about themselves, their homes, their parents, their brothers and sisters, and their little ones. They told me of their joys and sorrows, too, *until I almost felt myself one of them*. (my emphasis)

I mean, eat your heart out, the "deep ecology" of Arne Naess of Norway, or of the Mamas & the Papas of California, dreamin'!

This anonymously written little gem of a book with four colour plates was published, undated, by William Collins of Glasgow.

And while still digging around in Google that Saturday morning, I perchanced to hit upon the *Book of Airdrie* published in 1954, subtitled, *Being a Composite Picture of the Life of a Scottish Burgh by its Inhabitants*, of which page 138 tells how: "*Rambles by the Riverside* and others of the kind never failed to inspire plans for the glorious Saturday ahead."

So there, good friends of Ramblers Scotland. My rambling introduction is not without its purpose. It has set a stage of "rambling" etymology. It has hinted what the practice meant to common burghers in an unpretentious Scottish town like Airdrie. And I'd like to point your attention, especially to those words to which I'll come back later: "They told me of their joys and sorrows, too, until I almost felt myself one of them."

For what is such a book through its ruse of talking animals, teaching? What is the alure of rambling on a glorious Saturday ahead, demonstrating? But, how to be *community*. Community with nature, with one another, and with the all-important flows of inner life that set our "joys and sorrows", indeed, the joys and sorrows of this Earth, into life's deepest realms of meaning.

2. From Riverside to Mountain Top

Growing up in the island that is Lewis in the north where we lived, and Harris in the south, there was nothing that I loved more than rambling in the hills, prospecting for rocks and minerals.

In April 1974, when we were eighteen, my schoolfriend “Cabbage” or “Cabbie” for short (as we called one Roderick Nicolson, I think his surname was), went on a five-day camping trip, and climbed *Roineabhal,* the highest mountain in the southern tip of Harris.

We spent hours slicing plates of white Muscovite mica from the old anorthosite feldspar quarry on its eastern flanks, and with my ex-army Geiger counter, chipping out flecks of shiny-black pitchblende, one of the ores of uranium, that speckle some of the island’s pegmatites.

Therefore, if you think there’s anything odd about your speaker tonight, you’ll now know why: for the mountain left its mark on me in many ways.

The biggest was to explode some twenty years later when I came back from Voluntary Service Overseas in Papua New Guinea where I’d been teaching and setting up village hydro electricity, to learn that the local landowner had sold the mineral rights to a multinational corporation. Redland of England, later taken over by the French, Lafarge, wanted to turn our mountain into the biggest roadstone quarry in the world: the Harris “superquarry”.

Enter, Dave Morris, who is still active on access and environmental issues in his retirement, but who many of you will remember as the passionately energetic and astutely informed director of Ramblers Scotland, from 1989 to 2014.

Here is not the place to go into all the ins and outs of the thirteen-year campaign against corporate power that followed. The details are well documented in Michael Scott’s and Dr Sarah Johnson’s report from Scottish Environment LINK, available online.

Suffice to say that it was the result of a magnificent collaborative effort between a range of NGOs including Ramblers Scotland, Friends of the Earth Scotland, WWF, the RSPB, Plantlife and the Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland.

For my part and in this context, suffice also to say that I first got to know Dave in a crazy car ride up the A9 together with Simon Pepper of the WWF at the wheel, and Kevin Dunion who then directed Friends of the Earth Scotland, beating a path from Edinburgh to Culduthel House which was then the headquarters of Scottish Natural Heritage's North-West Region in Inverness.

Our mission was to try and get the superquarry scheme "called in"; that is to say, made the subject of a government public inquiry that would put it under proper scrutiny.

So it was, that we were shown in to the offices of its chairman, the 8th baronet ... of somewhere ... Sir John Lister-Kaye.

But I ask you: "Lister"! A common enough Yorkshire name and no relation to Sir John; but for me, a magical set of associations with fishing boats and rural electrification. After all,

he had the kind of double-barrelled name
that from my childhood Lewis days
and then outstations in remote New Guinea
evoked those dark green diesel engines
twin-cylinders of some branch Lister's clan
that pounded on unto the generations after generation
like Hebrew prophets of a native Hebridean church

And such a thrill
to hand-crank up speed
and flick with deft precision
(to dodge the knock of kickback)
both decompression levers
Cylinder one; Cylinder two
Old Testament; New Testament
that roared the preacher into life
and thundered down the valley
"Let there be light!"

We had expected to get precisely nowhere with Sir John Lister-Kaye. He had, after all, originally been appointed to the government's conservation body for Scotland by Mrs Thatcher, a proponent of "the great car economy", and therefore, by implication, a lover of superquarries.

But it was to him we went because his board held the power to demand of the Colonial Office ... I beg your pardon, the *Scottish Office* ... to call in the planning application.

We tiptoed gingerly into his office, daunted, burdened on our four shoulders ... with a mountain.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said, with a disarmingly welcoming smile. "I was wondering when you were going to turn up."

"You see, we can only respond to pressure from the public. You have brought that to me. Now, *how are we going to stop this superquarry?*"

We'd flicked the decompression levers on not two, but all four cylinders in perfect synchronisation. And what we hadn't know, is that the engine was already primed to take off with a power that none of us had anticipated.

When I contacted him yesterday to check he'd not be offended by my poetic antics with his name, he told me that the Scottish Office were furious at the cost.

It became the longest running public inquiry in Scottish planning history. Indirectly, it ended his political career; but, he said, "Heigh-ho!"

I describe the superquarry saga from a largely personal viewpoint in my book, *Soil and Soul*. Some of you might remember the good guys cast.

The Native American war chief called Stone Eagle, who as the press delighted in putting it, "flew in to stop the superquarry".

And of some political resonance today, the professor of the Free Church of Scotland who asked if God mandated such a scar upon Creation.

And the French banking executive who, after I'd heaved him up to the summit, got out his phone and made appointments for me to meet key Lafarge figures in Paris.

And "the elder" – both of the church and in other ways – actually, the Harris boat-builder, who climbed the mountain to dislodge its summit rock, and place it into symbolic sanctuary with Chief Stone Eagle.

To cut a massive story short, in 2004 Lafarge laid down the project. The campaign stands as a testimony to combined local and international NGO cooperation, the public inquiry process, a ministerial decision to refuse planning approval, and sustained pressure on the developers: first Redland, until the quarry's stalling helped to knock a hole in their share price, and then their predator, Lafarge, which starting with the leadership of the industrialist Bertrand Collomb, was becoming increasingly sensitised through the 1990s to reputational management, license to operate and the wider call to corporate social responsibility.

But the relevance of this, tonight, is to let you know that Dave Morris, on behalf of you assembled here, some of the ordinary members of Ramblers Scotland, played a pivotal part. He did so not just in technical debates at the public inquiry, but also in activating the voices and letters of ramblers from all over Britain.

Afterwards, in 1996, he and Kevin Dunion went to the World Conservation Congress in Montreal and secured a Congress recommendation for greater protection against superquarry development in Europe.

But notice my trajectory in tonight's talk.

What started off so, innocently, as mere *rambling,* has raised us up from riverside to mountain top; and from there, into the heart of political, corporate and landed power, and the burning environmental issues of our era.

Notice too, how what enabled this capacity for people to engage with one another as communities of interest defending a community of place, was the right of *access*; known otherwise as the "right to roam".

3. Land Reform and Right to Roam

De facto rights of access have dwindled for our neighbours south of the border, where most folks have long been divorced from the land, and where so-called "trespass" is a civil offence in law.

The etymology of "trespass" derives from "trans" and "passer", meaning literally to pass over. Its use meaning to "enter unlawfully" was first attested in forest laws of the Scottish Parliament around 1455; and that, we should remember, was before popular democracy.

I find it interesting that in English churches, the Lord's prayer would have us be forgiven, and to forgive, "our *trespasses*". The Scottish version, following the King James Bible of 1611, says "debts": a word that comes closer to the original Greek, *opheiléma* ("of-i'-lay-mah"), as it suggests a moral or economic binding bond of obligation placed by one upon another, and therefore, and I think that this point is very important, a limitation on the grace of *freedom* in human relationships.

Access is freedom, responsibly exercised; and while I was exercising with family in the Lake District last year, we came to a little bridge over a river on a public right of way. This, comprising just a dozen or so railway sleepers to grant vehicular access to somebody's cottage, was loudly signposted: "Private Bridge: No Public Right of Way".

Another sign by the same hand pointed to the long way round, looping back onto the public footpath some fifty yards up ahead.

It shocked me to see how walkers in those parts were so conditioned by the hypnotic spell of land ownership, that they obediently did as they were told, and not what was otherwise so obvious to do.

I was having none of it! I stepped-we-gaily across the sleepers, secretly harbouring an intoxicating vision of my impending extradition from Scotland only to appear in an English court in kilt with flowing plaid – a latter-day Albert *MacHaddock* before a Mr Justice Swallow of the 1960s sitcom, *Misleading Cases.*

Whether my little protest dance that day was because I am a rebellious Scot ... I'd let Alastair Sim decide. But it could be, simply, that like Sir John Lister-Kaye, I happen to have been born ... in Yorkshire.

A bridge is not the only way to cross a mountain stream. I chuckled when Dave Morris told me of his extensive part in negotiating the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, achieving parliamentary approval in 2005.

Magnus Magnusson was chairing the National Access Forum at the time. One day, after Dave had scored a goal too many, Magnus fixed him in the eyes and said: "Dave, the Ramblers have not yet learnt to walk on water...."

To which he retrospectively quipped: "I was encouraged by the words, *not yet*"!

The 2003 Land Reform (Scotland) Act that we celebrate this year and in tonight's talk, has three elements.

In reverse order, Part Three is specific to crofting communities' right to buy, if need be without a willing seller.

Part Two enshrines other communities' right of pre-emptive purchase at a government economic valuation, when land is put on the market. I consider this to have been hugely important, more so symbolically in setting a tenor than in its directly applied practical terms.

According to Community Land Scotland, we now have over 400 land trusts covering getting on for 3% of the land surface. I see four main drivers of the movement:

- Access to land at cost for social and affordable housing;
- Renewable energy revenue and supply that can be chosen by, managed by and for the direct benefit of local communities;
- Business start-up opportunities, with local residents in control;
- The sheer can-do *empowerment* that flows when folks can manage their own affairs for their own and for the common good.

But tonight, it is Part One of the Act that most concerns us; the part that legally encodes our right of *access*.

In this matter, and in its wider political framing such as I've nodded towards with the Harris superquarry, the Ramblers have led for 90 years in campaigning for rights of public access and securing footpath networks.

A leading proponent of access was Rennie McOwan, born in 1933 at the foot of the Ochil Hills, and from a line of deer stalkers.

As a child, he demanded of an obstructive landowner - "Why can't we go this way?" – and in 1994, he wrote a paper, "Outdoor Access in Scotland", that fed into the rising politics of modern Scottish land reform, and that, as a driver both of Devolution and of its flagship legislation in the newly restored Scottish Parliament.

Rennie expresses his disappointment in some past and present members of the then Countryside Commission for Scotland and Scottish Natural Heritage (now the less weightily named NatureScot); also, his disappointment in the limited and limiting vision of what he calls "some modern Celtic scholars".

My sense of the so-called "Celtosceptic" scholars, is that they were either embarrassed by spirituality, being academics of a certain rigid era; or afraid of it or offended, having religious roots set in a rigid age. Some, have very understandably been turned off by the excesses of disembedded New Age appropriation. One way or another, an unholy alliance? And one that Rennie seems to have run up against.

He therefore undertook his own review of some of the indigenous sources. Drawing deeply on the abundant wealth of timeless Gaelic song and poetry, of Alexander Carmichael's six-volume *Carmina Gadelica* ethnographic collection, and on to the contemporary poets and writers, he demonstrated that "freedom to roam was as natural as breathing."

He cites the late Professor Derick Thomson, the poet-scholar of Bayble in the Isle of Lewis, as recording: "There can be no doubt that the Gaels regarded the countryside as their natural heritage, belonging to the people generally and never to an individual, whether a native chief or an incoming landlord."

He could equally have cited Iain Crichton Smith, from the same village, in his essay, “Between Sea and Moor”:

> Here they have no time for the fine graces
> Of poetry, unless it freely grows
> In deep compulsion, like water in the well,
> woven into the texture of the soil ...

“This land is your land”, as the American folksinger Woody Guthrie had put it, as he pictured a sign that on one side “said *No Trespassing*”; but the other side, was nature wild and free, “made for you and me”.

That’s the spirit and the practice of “the glorious Saturday ahead” of those working-class Airdrie folks. For as Guthrie’s lyrics continue, reconnecting town and country in a piquant social criticism:

> In the squares of the city, in the shadow of the steeple,
> By the relief office I seen my people;
> As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
> Is this land made for you and me?

Rennie deplored attempts by bureaucrats (perhaps grateful for their bit of grace and favour shooting, or a day on the laird’s river), to weaken Scotland’s historical “tacit” or “implied consent” to traverse freely across land by such means as foot, bike, horseback or canoe.

“We are talking,” he concluded: “about strolling, courting, ‘rambling’ ... [with] an intimate love of nature ... and expressing their love of landscape which could not be done without *‘access’*.”

And what a joy in 2003, the year that the Land Reform Act was passed in Scotland’s parliament, when my good friend Cameron McNeish stepped down as President of Ramblers Scotland to make way for Rennie: this gesture, to honour his contribution to the campaign that safeguarded our ancient freedom to roam, and that, now made explicit as a statutory right.

As I checked my facts during the preparation of this talk, I dropped a line to Cameron. Here's what he replied. "No-one did more for Scottish access than Rennie McOwan, and I was thrilled that he was Ramblers Scotland's president when the legislation was launched."

4. Land Access Rights Today

What is the cutting edge of access rights today? I put that question to my guru in the matter, the Venerable Dave Morris.

He replied by sharing his advice to the recently established Right to Roam campaign in England, a group set up to influence hoped-for legislation in the event that a future UK Labour government should be elected. Here is what he said:

> It took fifteen years to persuade outdoor recreation interests, government officials and politicians to secure our access rights. The outcome was Scotland's 2003 Act, followed by parliamentary approval of the Scottish Outdoor Access Code in 2005.
>
> Now, twenty years later, there is virtually no pressure to change any of the Act or the Code. It has stood the test of time, working successfully from the edge of our cities to the wildest and most remote locations of land and water.
>
> Similar legislation in England would massively increase public confidence to step off the path and exercise access rights across fields, woods, rivers, moors and mountains. At the same time landowners would come to accept that such access to nature was an essential component of a modern democracy.

Nearer to home, a number of issues need a finger on the pulse, and perhaps a single finger in the air, to show what's not acceptable.

Brexit (for its many sins) gives an opportunity to review land use in farming, forestry, horticulture and the subsidies regime that shape these. Payment should

be made conditional on compliance with access and other environmental measures. This should include the right to walk along the margins of fields, even where they are cultivated.

Quality of access is also impacted by land-based wind farms. Developers have paid little heed to landscape and amenity value. Today's talk of the steamie is of "repowering" older farms, which means replacing an earlier generation of turbines with ones perhaps of twice the height.

From Skye alone this year, I've had three emails within a month from folks worried about turbines that will stand 200 metres high, reaching 365 metres above sea level; that's to say, more than a third of the height of the Cullin mountains that so much of the economy revolves around.

Nobody disputes the need for renewable energy, but given the technology that's now available, should these not be located out to sea?

We must take care, lest a spirit of utility drives out the beauty that drives our capacity to connect with and so to care about nature. Especially, when that utility feeds too much the opulence of the well-to-do, and leaves, neglected, the fuel poverty of the oppressed.

Paradoxically, another fierce debate has flared up around so-called "rewilding".

Ecological restoration is a wonderful sight to behold where it is led by and serves local communities. Many of us have been involved in exemplary organisations such as Reforesting Scotland and Trees for Life; and my wife and I delighted at New Year to take a stroll amongst the trees of the Carrifran Wildwood in the Southern Uplands. People that we spoke to in surrounding communities felt that they both owned and wholly supported it.

But the sale of so-called carbon credits, and perhaps, in the pipeline, biodiversity credits, is now pumping up land prices, and putting community buyouts further out of reach. This, because capital value gets bumped up by steady revenue flows.

Some neighbourhoods find themselves at odds with the carbon capitalists, who are hard to criticise because they present as "green lairds", but who can be

oblivious to Scottish land history and to the simple fact that people, with profound cultural connections to their place and places, actually live here.

For Scotland is not *terra nullius*, an empty land without a master, there to be written on by anyone who wants to turn a buck by "offsetting" (as they pitch it) the carbon emissions of the profligate.

Most communities, even most academics in the field, are struggling to find out what this fresh form of commodification of Scotland's land might mean for them – the cheviot, the stag, the black, black oil; and what now, including for recreational access to what might be insensitively fenced and newly ploughed plantations?

The Scottish Government hopes to move a new land reform bill by the end of this year. From what's on their website, it looks mainly like a tidying up job around existing long-standing questions of public interest, hidden sales that can thwart community buy-outs, and the imperative of transparent land registration.

In addition, more radical and reform might involve tests of ownership fitness and, I would suggest, a land value tax on all that's not held by public interest bodies; with the proceeds being used to fund and power up further community buyouts.

I hear it said by some that there's not a public appetite for land reform. Well, there is in Great Bernera off the Isle of Lewis. Or Tayvallich in Argyll; but no way could they raise £10 million - the same as the entire Scottish Land Fund for a year – which is why they're currently negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding with Jeremy Leggett's "Highlands Rewilding", should his bid to raise private capital succeed, the deadline being *today*.

Personally, I would be more impressed by investors that gave their wealth for social justice, and left the ecological regeneration to real-life human communities. We see that happening in such as Eigg or North Harris. A Scotland where the glens ring with *freedom* shouldn't have to have it done to them by boards whose power is held by shareholders "from away".

"Nothing about us without us is for us."

But I'm going to rest the politics of land and wealth and power redistribution at this point, because I want to close this evening's talk by looping back to *Rambles by the Riverside*; back to that spry observation its anonymous writer, of nature personified in wildlife playing into in his or her imagination, such as "they told me of their joys and sorrows, too, until I almost felt myself one of them."

5. The Final Grace – Renewal of Relationship

My book, *Poacher's Pilgrimage*, just out this month in a new edition with a new cover, subtitle and Foreword, deepens the spiritual journey that I opened up in *Soil and Soul* fifteen years earlier. It threads a range of burning issues of our time through a twelve day meandering ramble, just sixty miles as the crow flies, from the most southern tip of the Isle of Harris to the northern Butt of the Isle of Lewis.

I'd like to read you a passage. It introduces a chapter reflecting on conversations late at night in the officers mess of military staff colleges, mainly the UK Defence Academy where, for over twenty years, I've guest lectured on alternatives to war.

In this section of the text, I'm reflecting on the stalkers' path that zig-zags up the mountain pass that borders Harris into Lewis.

> Here and there, every hundred yards or so, I pass the mossy pitted faces of tiny quarries. These were gouged out more than a century ago, for building up the foundations of much more ancient footpaths. I picture them being grafted at by men with picks and spades, and muscles knotted like Scots pine. Crofter men, in homespun tweeds and jerseys, an oilskin for the rain, who carted grit in baskets or on barrows while bantering in the Gaelic. The whereabouts of cattle, sheep or deer. The price per cran of herring landed on the Tarbert pier last week. The latest scrape of the Scalpay boys drift netting off the Shiants. The strength or weakness of the new minister's sermons. The who's who of shooting parties due up to the Castle next month. The furtive sharing of who got tipped by whom, fishing which loch, on what flies, and with what weight of catch. And from newspapers and letters read out by the literate, or from word of mouth from ships and those

returning home: what's fresh from the shipyards of the Clyde. Or the whalers of the Arctic. Or the sheep ranches of the Falklands and Patagonia. Or the prairies of Canada. Or India and the Cape. Or whatever other fighting fronts were open in the name of God and Empire with the Cameron or the Seaforth Highlanders, who'd be recruiting, respectively, in Tarbert and in Stornoway.

There'd be the studied contemplation, too, as they'd sit and pare at liquorice slabs of plug tobacco, tapping ash from out the bowls of briar pipes, tamping down the aromatic flakes. The never-ending ritual of lighting up, expiry in the damp, asking round to see who's got another light, dispelling clouds of midges with the satisfying puffs, and smelling like the tar and tallow-seasoned toilers of the soil that they were.

You see, this is what it means to connect with place: not just horizontally, in the geographical sense, but vertically through history.

In *The Women of Coigeach*, her fine poetry collection in both Gaelic an English, Lisa MacDonald pictures a woman, Nathalie, who came for a summer not to buy a bit of the view, and luxuriate and speculate, but to learn the ways and language of the people. Hers is ramble into the meaning of community, where:

I have learned the names of the birds on the shore
And the moorland flowers –
Extravagantly resilient,
Alive with purpose,
A keen, sharp beauty
And independent grace.
I see a richness about me,
The width of the sky,
The people who hold up my life
When I ask who
Anchor my roots.

As the late African American poet, Audre Lorde, said in her essay collection, *Sister Outsider*:

> Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams towards survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action ... carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

We can glimpse there how light, how rock, how hopes, how language and dreams, how survival and existence itself are inseparably interlaced, like the Vine of Life of John 15 in Celtic knotwork.

In the field of ecopsychology (or ecological psychology), there's a 1995 paper that had a big impact on me. It's by Martin Ringer and Lee Gillis and it's called "Managing Psychological Depth in Adventure Programming".

It's been years since I read it, but the memory that lingers is that outdoors experience can open up progressive layers of psychological and, indeed, spiritual depth of inner experience.

It's like, you can go for a ramble by the riverside, and just chitter chatter with your fellow ramblers, and have a nice day out. Or you might experience it a little deeper, and perhaps have a "meaningful" conversation with a fellow rambler.

And then, perhaps, you sit apart, or drop back from the group, and as one of the men from the GalGael Trust in Govan told me after one of our "pilgrimage" weekends to Iona: "I sat on a rock when we got to St Columba's Bay, and looked out to sea, and I felt a peace that I'd never felt in my life before; and it's come back on me again a few times since."

But as Ringer and Gillis wisely describe it, the adventure leader needs to hold in mind the implied contract of psychological depth within the group; because these

things can, if not managed, go deeper than the organisational container might be suitable for holding.

But let's, for now, let's close by throwing caution to the wind.

And if you want it deeper; or, meaning much the same and as one of Leonard Cohen's finest lyrics puts it: if "you want it darker" ...

And "if you're the healer / it means I'm broken and lame" ...

For "I struggled with some demons / they were middle class and tame" ...

"Vilified, crucified / in the human frame" ...

"Magnified, sanctified / be thy holy name".

And let me take this cross-cultural. Utterly surreal. For the surreal is that which goes beyond our ordinary perceptions of life's framing. It can reveal the greater holding of our lives' deepest calling, unfolding.

If you're willing to let me go there; there's a chapter that's often dropped from abridged versions of *The Wind in the Willows* by the Edinburgh-born writer, raised in Argyll and later in Berkshire, Kenneth Grahame.

It was probably too pagan for the Christians in 1908, and too Christian for the pagans; but it later gave its name to a 1967 Pink Floyd album; and the chapter's called, "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn".

On a ramble by the riverside, young Otter has gone missing, and Rat and Mole set off in a boat to try and find him.

As they set out after dark, and as the moon begins to lift, then as Kenneth Grahame puts it: “Their old haunts greeted them again in other raiment ... and somehow with a different look.”

Suddenly Rat starts up, and “listened with a passionate intentness” ... but then the sound is gone ... “so beautiful and strange and new! Since it was to end so soon, I almost wish I had never heard it. For it has roused a longing in me that is pain...”

... and “if you’re the healer / it means I’m broken and lame” ...

And “... the Mole stopped rowing as the liquid run of that glad piping broke on him like a wave, caught him up, and possessed him utterly. He saw the tears on his comrade’s cheeks, and bowed his head and understood.”

“’This is the place of my song-dream, the place the music played to me,’ whispered the Rat.... Here, in this holy place, here if anywhere, surely we shall find Him.”

The “Him” would seemingly refer to young Otter. But the “H” is capitalised; referring also to a deeper ground of being: whether Pan? whether Christ? for like I said: too pagan for the Christians, too Christian for the pagans.

And I think of me and Cabbage in our surreal ridiculousness – the innocence of our ramble up the sides of Roineabhal - and then the long rambling rumble of the superquarry saga - and how I’d meet with corporate executives in Paris – and they’d ask me why the mountain mattered - and I’d tell them about that “glorious Saturday” (or whatever day it was) – and how we found three ha’penny pieces and a Canadian cent on the trig-point at the summit - and how Stone Eagle flew in from First Nations territory in Canada....

And I’d see these top executives – as they’d tune in with their own childhood sense of wonder – and I’d ask about their grandchildren – and what stories they would tell them seated on their knees - “What did you do in the ecowars, Daddy?” as a 1990s song from the English motorway protests had it.

For poetry is not a luxury. You can't eat poetry, for sure. But as some penniless peasant once told a corporate executive when spending forty days and forty nights out in the wilderness: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth ... of the Great Cosmic Poet."

"I believe," wrote Nan Shepherd in *The Living Mountain*:

> ... that I now understand in some small measure why the Buddhist goes on pilgrimage to a mountain.... It is a journey into Being; for as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life, I penetrate also into my own.... To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain.

[silence]

[takes hipflask from the pocket, pours a couple of drams, passes one to the Chair]

Ladies and gentlemen of Ramblers Scotland.

I have delivered you of the 2023 Lecture.

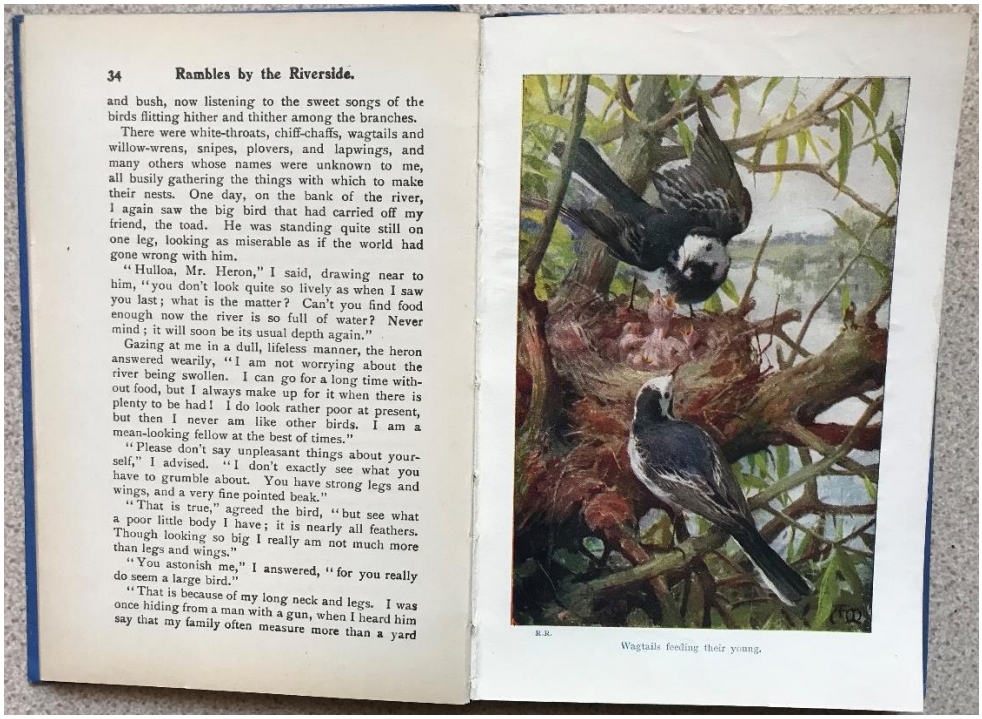
Let us raise a toast, and please, if you please, repeat after me:

To Dick Balharry ...

A rambler on Eternity Road ...

We honour your memory ...

Wooh!



34 **Rambles by the Riverside.**

and bush, now listening to the sweet songs of the birds flitting hither and thither among the branches.

There were white-throats, chiff-chaffs, wagtails and willow-wrens, snipes, plovers, and lapwings, and many others whose names were unknown to me, all busily gathering the things with which to make their nests. One day, on the bank of the river, I again saw the big bird that had carried off my friend, the toad. He was standing quite still on one leg, looking as miserable as if the world had gone wrong with him.

"Hulloa, Mr. Heron," I said, drawing near to him, "you don't look quite so lively as when I saw you last; what is the matter? Can't you find food enough now the river is so full of water? Never mind; it will soon be its usual depth again."

Gazing at me in a dull, lifeless manner, the heron answered wearily, "I am not worrying about the river being swollen. I can go for a long time without food, but I always make up for it when there is plenty to be had! I do look rather poor at present, but then I never am like other birds. I am a mean-looking fellow at the best of times."

"Please don't say unpleasant things about yourself," I advised. "I don't exactly see what you have to grumble about. You have strong legs and wings, and a very fine pointed beak."

"That is true," agreed the bird, "but see what a poor little body I have; it is nearly all feathers. Though looking so big I really am not much more than legs and wings."

"You astonish me," I answered, "for you really do seem a large bird."

"That is because of my long neck and legs. I was once hiding from a man with a gun, when I heard him say that my family often measure more than a yard

R.R.

Wagtails feeding their young.

Rambles by the Riverside (anon., Collins, c. 1930); me with Cabbage (left) at the summit of Roineabhal, April 1974; Private Bridge, Lake District, 2022

This may be useful for file - Rennie.

Rennie McOwan Celtic 1

Outdoor Access in Scotland (June, 1994).

Some outline notes on the Celtic tradition:

"The soul of the Gael is on the summit of the mountain" -
Gaelic proverb.

There is a strong sense of resentment among some modern Celtic scholars over being asked to provide written evidence of 'freedom to roam' in the period before the pre-19th century sporting estate legislation came into being and which restricted walking access.

This resentment is currently present because of two factors: (1) they feel it is surplus to requirements and (2) there is real anger that a de facto and cherished freedom is under threat in modern times.

A major misunderstanding is present in some outdoor circles over this issue.

No one is suggesting that historical research will show an ancient set of Celtic laws whereby a chief or leader says in a codified, legal fashion 'You have freedom to walk these hills, moors, glens and straths.'

What is being said is that there is overwhelming evidence, some precise, some circumstantial, that 'freedom to roam' was as natural as breathing or going for a swim and is, therefore, a proven part of Scottish traditions and heritage. People regarded it as a right.

There is not space here to outline the changing character of Highland land possession in past times, but at best there was a very real sense of communal possession of land, where leadership was seen as the duty of 'trustees' holding land on behalf of all and accountable to all and which was eventually replaced for a time by a pattern of owner-and-tenant, aristo-and near-peasant. Even in feudal periods there was sometimes a two-way sense of duty.

Too many people in formal outdoor circles in Scotland are scandalously poorly read in Highland land history written from native and Gaelic sources and this manifests itself in some out-of-focus statements, including some made by past and present members of the old Countryside Commission for Scotland and the present Scottish Natural Heritage. Little or no attempt is made to understand or analyse Gaelic and Celtic documentation and traditions.

It is important to stress that in examining this issue of access, we are not talking about the sheiling pattern, drove-route grazing rights, deer drives, the passage of goods or pack ponies or anything which might be nowadays called "commercial", except in as much as they are linked to known and often historic passes or to a sense of community possession. These areas of activity were,

from time to time governed by local or national laws, control and 'regulations'. The accounts of Martin Martin (d. 1719), traveller, writer and factor, telling of fire-ash markers and stones marking village boundaries were a matter of grazing rights and not 'access',

Nor are we talking about control being exercised in times of military or political tension when wanderers would be understandably questioned or when it would be unwise to stroll in a hostile glen.

We are talking about strolling, courting, 'rambling', appreciating and relishing landscape, wandering, travelling to see friends, roaming, the heroic chase in earlier times, an intimate love of nature. Many of these elements are still part of a modern desire for access.

In the 19th century, Alexander Carmichael (1832-1912) an Excise man, travelled the Highlands and Islands collecting the prayers, blessings, incantations, poems, chants, invocations, of the Gaelic people. They ran to six volumes (and can now be bought in one, published by Floris).

There is not space here to go into some of the literary controversies over this mammoth piece of folk research, "Carmina Gadelica", but in terms of the access issue there is no way such a sensitive, intricate, complex, rich and deeply moving cultural pattern could have evolved, but by a people who loved their landscape and moved among it in a free, normal and near-automatic fashion.

Within these researches, there are specific prayers for travellers, as well as praise of hills and glens.

Here are a couple of examples:

"God be with thee in every pass,
Jesus be with thee on every hill,
Spirit be with thee on every stream,
Headland and ridge and lawn."

"Each sea and land, each moor and meadow,
Each lying down, each rising up,
In the trough of the waves, on the crest of the billows,
Each step of the journey thou goest".

"...I am travelling the groves and the corries and the woods...
from the base of the mountains to the crest of the hills..."

"...I am watching the passes and traversing the hollows,
To see if I behold my lover who was gracious and kind,
I see not thee, my love, I see not glimpse of thee,
On the tops of the mountains nor at the edge of the sea".

The modern access pioneer, campaigner for social justice and UK ambassador

/to

to the United States, Viscount James Bryce, M.P., referred to the Celtic tradition of access. Protesting about the new deer sporting estates and their access restrictions, he said the scenery of Scotland had been filched from the people.

A study of Gaelic poetry and songs shows overwhelming evidence of people roaming and expressing their love of landscape and which could not be done without 'access'.

For example, on reading one book about Gaelic poetry, I covered several pages with notes relating to freedom to roam ("An Introduction to Gaelic Poetry", Derick Thomson).

"The Pleasures of Gaelic Poetry", edited by Sean Mac Reamoinn (Allen Lane), also gives similar background, but nearly all the mainstream Gaelic poets can also be read in English and with profit on this issue although you won't find such data in the booklets currently produced by SNH. Lists are available.

When I asked a prominent Gaelic singer for a list of songs extolling a love of landscape and roaming, she laughed and said: "Hundreds!"

Professor Thomson states: "There can be no doubt that the Gaels regarded the countryside as their natural heritage, belonging to the people generally and never to an individual, whether a native chief or an incoming landlord."

Gaelic 19th century poetry contains angry references to new 'restrictions' and adverse changes.

Professor Thomson adds: "There is, of course, a long tradition of intimate, loving description of the natural landscape...and this can be seen throughout Gaelic literature, especially in poetry and continued to the present. All this was encouraged by the necessity to walk or row and use paths and passes where there were few or no roads".

Such sentiments were more urgently expressed in the 19th century, with the Clearances and other restrictive events.

Other poets and writers worth examining on these issues include Duncan Ban MacIntyre, Mary Macpherson, Rob Donn, Evan MacColl, Alasdair MacMaighestir, William Livingston and John Smith.

Broadcaster, writer and historian Ian Grimble in his book "The World of Rob Donn" (The Edina Press) outlines the outrage Sutherland people felt when in the late 1700s the landowner in a bid to halt deer poaching tried to stop all walking on 'his' ground. Rob Donn said people trying to impose such a ban were the enemies of his society.

The angry local people felt a fundamental right was being removed. Rob Donn (1714-78) wrote: "Even if there weren't a bannock in the land, there would not be a step between the Grey Hill and the waterfall in Dougall's Corrie that I would not be at liberty to follow".

The poet Evan McColl, from Kenmore, Loch Fyne, wrote last century: "The Gael

/is

is driven off like the mist from your mountains and all that is left you is lairds, sheep and deer".

Note the precise wording. Evan McColl does not say 'the mountains', but your mountains.

The wanderings of the Celtic saints and the 18th and 19th century evangelists also throw some light on this issue: they used the obvious line of the passes, but were certainly not asking permission. The Watt papers show Highland girls selling dried fish who walked the passes and deviated to see friends and were astounded and angry to suddenly find one year that the new sporting estates had barred their traditional access. Seasonal workers covered long distances.

My own grandfather and great-grandfather, as head stalkers, often muscled people off their deer estate on the orders of the proprietor, but they had great pangs of conscience about it because they felt people had a moral right to be there provided stalking was not being harmed.

The above notes are only an outline, but in my view anyone who tries to argue that free access is not part of the Scottish heritage, temporarily lost and largely regained de facto in our own time, should blush and do some reading and consulting. There are differences in Lowland and Borders traditions, but there, too, the walking pedigree is deeply rooted. When Sir Walter Scott built Abbotsford he refused to have man-traps (!) in his grounds and other than a Lady's Walk and a private area around the house, he made most of the grounds open to all within reason because he sensed a feeling of 'right' and yet he was unquestionably a member of the landed classes of his day.

The aged bard's wish was to see again the Highland landscape (and he certainly wasn't seeking 'tacit consent', that bureaucratic and out-of-touch phrase so beloved of some of our current outdoor establishment figures):

"I see the ridge of hinds, the steep of the
sloping glen,
The wood of cuckoos at its foot,
The blue height of a thousand pines..."

~~If none of this paper appears tart then I have good reason!~~

— Rennie McOwan