

HARDY

TRAVELLING

BRITAIN

WEEK 7

(SCOTLAND)

LINDA

CHRISTMAS

CHOPPING DOWN THE CHERRY TREES

have to climb the stairs once more in order to get a ticket I asked a young woman if she would keep an eye on the luggage while I raced to the kiosk. Helen was the Manageress of Richards shops in Dundee. Actually she works in Aberdeen, but her shop there was being refitted, so she'd been moved to Dundee for a while and was living at the Angus. 'It's been rather boring. I don't feel safe out at night on my own, so I just go back to the hotel each evening and as I hate eating on my own I have something sent up to my room.'

The previous evening had been different. She invited her assistant Manageress to join her for dinner. 'All evening we were being eyed by two Arabs at the next table. I told my assistant to enjoy it, after all she's not very happy with her husband at the moment. In the end the Arabs came over and asked us to settle a bet. They thought my assistant was Italian . . . well she's South African and of course after that opening they invited us to join them for a drink.' Helen drank vodka and orange with her Arab until 1.30. He was here to buy property. He wanted an estate. I envied her the meeting. I'd have enjoyed talking to an Arab who wanted to buy a Scottish estate.

We'd been so busy with our chat that I hadn't noticed the station fill up with police. Once I did notice, I wanted to know why. A young officer said, 'There's a train coming in from Montrose, and there's a lot of trouble from football supporters, so you stand right back away from the track and be careful.'

The train came in. There was no trouble; a score or more of chastened youths got off. I looked out of the carriage window to ensure I missed nothing and both Helen and the young policeman waved to me as the train pulled out.

Chapter 4

Glasgow's Miles Better

Glasgow shares a problem with Dundee; it too is derided and has a dubious image; it too provokes a dismissive wrinkling of the nose from those who have never set foot in the place. Such people see the city as synonymous with drunken football fans, impenetrable accents, a foul-mouthed comedian called Billy Connolly and poverty in a place called the Gorbals. Arriving at the station my expectations were a little on the low side, but then, to be fair, they invariably are when heading into a strange, large city. Large cities present obstacles; they can be difficult to prise open. Beyond the tedious round of tourist monuments and the visual exploration of the delights and dilemmas of buildings, buildings and more buildings, they can seem as closed as any Masonic lodge. It's not that people are unwelcoming; it is easy enough to arrange formal interviews, but rarely is one invited into homes, and never, never is one invited to hitchhike towards a lobster! However, within days I'd fallen in like with Glasgow; a Glasgow that was anxious to explain itself; a Glasgow that was anxious that I should understand that it desired to change its image. It no longer wants to be the feared thug, the bullyboy, the ignorant, the victim. It wants to be well-dressed and charming and cultured, the victor.

How did Glasgow get such a dubious image? If one goes far enough back, to the early part of the eighteenth century, there are some attractive descriptions to be found; descriptions of handsome streets, of kitchen- and flower-gardens, of orchards and cornfields. Daniel Defoe passing through in 1727 described Glasgow glowingly; 'Tis one of the cleanliest, most beautiful and best built cities in Great Britain.' Nearby there was a pretty country village called Gorbals.

The slide came with prosperity and prosperity came with the Union with England in 1707, when Scotland was allowed to trade with Virginia and did so with relish, outwitting both London and Bristol to

become the centre of the tobacco trade. The tobacco era did not diminish Glasgow. The wealthy merchants added buildings of beauty. It was the ending of tobacco (with the American War of Independence) and the coming of steam, iron and coal, of cotton, engineering and shipbuilding, that turned Glasgow into an industrial city, bringing in its wake too many people too quickly. By 1842 Glasgow was labelled the filthiest and the unhealthiest of British cities. The mud was flung and it stuck.

Now, many cities suffered from the impact of the Industrial Revolution; many cities found themselves throwing up homes to house the industrial slaves that rushed from the countryside in search of wages. In Glasgow they rushed from the north and west of Scotland and from Ireland to escape rural desolation and famine. A three-storey tenement, offering a room and a kitchen or just a room, was a pitiable existence, but arguably better than rural starvation. The central point is that while other cities got their slums – and Dickens and Mayhew graphically described those in London – Glasgow seems to have got more than its share, and the image of the Gorbals stays in the mind, refusing to budge. Why? The answer is painfully simple. Glasgow has been ill-served by its writers. Glasgow writers painted over and over again a vision of nastiness that was so vivid it became indelible. Writers on the whole do not like to dabble in moderation; it is easier to grab attention if balance is ignored and extremes are explored. Think of Dallas. Dallas is synonymous with wealth and oil barons, with the ruthless rich and the square-shouldered, well-groomed women who cling to them. It is seen as a city of stylish dirty tricks; full of Ewing family clones and of millionaires, more per head than any city in the world. How many people know or care that Dallas houses thousands of blacks and Hispanics living in festering slums? That's what writers have done to Dallas. They've done the opposite with Glasgow.

On the train I'd dipped once more into Edwin Muir's *Scottish Journey*, written in the 1930s. He devoted sixty pages to Glasgow, most of them describing his appalling experiences in 1901 when he was dragged, aged fourteen, by his parents from an idyllic but poor Orkney into the slums of Glasgow. The experience turned Muir into a committed socialist. He has nothing good to say of 'industrialism', nor of capitalism, which to him was sanctioned greed such as the world had never seen before; a process which took no regard of human life unless compelled to do so; a process that devastated whole tracts of countryside. The Orcadian longed to be rid of this madness.

Muir's writing may have affected me, but he cannot be blamed for

Glasgow's image – his work was not sufficiently widely read. There is, however, one book and two men who are responsible for doing Glasgow down. The book is *No Mean City* and the authors, A. McArthur and H. Kingsley Long, are now widely resented. Their book is a portrait of the Gorbals in the 1930s, of poverty and unemployment and crowded living conditions and the effects that all three have on human beings, unleashing violence in men and passivity in women. Energy was channelled not into fighting the bosses for better conditions, but in fighting each other with razors. The Razor Kings ruled their patch and when things got too much they went out and slashed the faces and beat the hell out of other men whose fight for survival was just as grim. The only difference was that one gang comprised Catholics and the other Protestants; and then not even this imagined difference was there all the time. The women, submerged by slave mentality, revered those brutal Razor Kings, longed to have them as lovers, and took their beating along with the rest and justified their devotion by arguing that the fights and the Kings were the Gorbals way of making the rest remember that they existed.

The portrait is horrific: the writers knew what they were doing and, just in case anyone was tempted to dismiss the book as 'fiction', they included at the end a collection of newspaper references:

It is not uncommon for eight, ten or twelve persons to be herded together in a single room. There are [in Glasgow] 175,000 'houses' without baths and 105,000 'houses' without internal sanitation.

News of the World, 29 April 1934

John R—, 22, leader of the Billy Boys Gang, and known as the Razor King, was sent to prison for eighteen months at the High Court in Glasgow yesterday for having assaulted William R—, and seriously injured him.

Glasgow Daily Record, 17 December 1930

No Mean City put a shiny gloss on the statistics that had coated Glasgow's reputation for a hundred years. The book was published in the 1950s and many a writer since then has clung happily to its ragged trousers. *The Dear Green Place* by Archie Hind, which cut out much of the violence but kept the poverty, was published in the mid-sixties and won three awards. *Growing up in the Gorbals* by Ralph Glasser once again dwelling on rickets and resentment followed in the mid-eighties. Publishers, it seems, could not resist this one brand of paint, this single gloss. We must not forget Jimmy Boyle, 'the most violent man in Scotland'. Even those who do not read books know about

Jimmy Boyle; the man who drank and fought and stole his way from the Gorbals to Borstal and from Borstal to jail, accused of murder. The man whom many a television documentary has portrayed as a 'searing indictment of society . . . an outstanding testament to one man's ability to survive'. To survive and become a legend who writes and paints and sculpts and gets an Open University degree. Boyle's story is a nice little case history for prison reformers, but it made me pause to think of the unlauded bloke who improves his lot without notoriety and public adulation and a prison 'special unit' costing more per year than the fees at Eton. Thirty years of this sort of writing has scarred the face of Glasgow; no wonder outsiders wince.

Cliff Hanley wrote about Glasgow too and he wrote about poverty. His *Dancing in the Streets* was published soon after *No Mean City*. It does not glorify violence. It glorifies a sense of humour. Cliff Hanley shows what so many other Glasgow books fail to see – the wit and the warmth that helps most people get through the worst of times without the help of razor fights. I wanted to meet Cliff Hanley; I wanted to see his Glasgow.

He came to pick me up; a tiny man in his sixties, a sprightly man with a small red car and two accents: the one he used in conversation with me and another he used in conversation with his Glaswegian friends. He is as warm and witty as his writing. He began by showing me tourist Glasgow, by driving down Great Western Road into the centre, all the while keeping up a stream of comment that demonstrated an immense love for a place that remains a Victorian statement of supreme confidence; a monument to a time when wealth and industrial leadership stepped out of line and headed north.

'Look at all this space and grace. Look at these Victorian houses, very handsome, aren't they? And look at the parks! There's a lot of American influence, you must look out for it because it took me a long time to become aware of it. It seems so obvious now. We even had a Wurlitzer in our house because my father had been there. There's been this empathy ever since we started trading in tobacco, and even now there are a number of American businesses here. As we come into the city I want you to look closely at the buildings. We've had an extensive clean-up. The faces of the buildings are clean, but the sides are still grimy. I like to say that they have forgotten to clean behind their ears! The architects say it is better this way. That we mustn't clean the entire building, it wouldn't look good: we'd lose the contrasts.' The difference was obvious and amusing; two shades, squeaky clean and grimy, forming a mosaic.

'Here's the cathedral, St Mungo's. It's 850 years old this year, and

today we've had the Queen to a celebration service.' The awnings and endless ropes were proof, but we managed to park the car and wander in. Inside we parted within minutes. There were still a host of people in fancy dress, hats and floating dresses. The Queen had left some time before and these were the remaining guests, reluctant to leave the party. One of them stopped Cliff and asked, looking at his unfancy dress, whether he had been at the celebrations. He said no, and it wasn't clear to me whether or not he'd been invited or whether he just hadn't wanted to go. I wandered around while he chatted, not realizing that the pattern was set for much of the afternoon. Cliff Hanley knows the people of Glasgow and they know him. He turned what I considered to be a large city into a village of 'Hallo Cliff's' and 'Hallo Tommy's'. It turned our attempts at conversation into snippets.

'Would you show me where you were born?' I asked, being a poor tourist and wanting to be shown sides of Glasgow that I wouldn't otherwise see.

'Yes, yes, I'd like to show you that.' We got into the car. 'Now I don't want you to think that all tenements were bad. Some were bad; tiny one- and two-room holes with tiny beds like a cupboard – cavity beds we call them – and a toilet on the landing. Others were quite spacious and well built and the community spirit was great. And here we are at 628 Gallowgate.'

There was nothing there; green grass, trees and railings.

'It's been pulled down. It had to be, it was too far gone. I don't mind. It wasn't an act of vandalism. Some sandstone villas were pulled down to make way for a three-lane highway. Labour did that to show the bourgeoisie who was boss. They destroyed things out of envy because other people had it too good for too long. That kind of thing drove me out of politics. I get angry when I talk about the left, so I'd better stop. In my youth there was a cinema on every corner and you couldn't count the number of dance halls. How we danced! I used to be good.' And he twirled in the street before we climbed back in the car. We drove past the Saracen's Head, where Dr Johnson once stayed, and I insisted on going inside. The pub was seedy and the barman was huge; his name was Angus.

'You're here to learn about Glasgow, Cliff tells me. Well, you take note of the tobacco. It started everything, but it was ruined by the Civil War. That's the trouble with Glasgow, we always put our eggs in one basket: tobacco, cotton, ships.'

At the mention of ships, an Irishman weaved his way across to us. 'Cliff, I want to buy you a drink for all you've done for Glasgow. A large whisky, Cliff, will that be it? Now, all we want is a new ship, Cliff, a new ship on the Clyde. Can you get that for us, Cliff?'

The Irishman also wanted to buy me a drink, but I hadn't taken more than a sip of the first one and was about to decline. Cliff stepped in to save me from a social gaffe.

'She'd love another, wouldn't you, Linda? Writing a book is thirsty work.' To have refused a drink would have been an insult, he whispered hastily. The Irishman, having bought the drinks, stayed to chat and behave like a stage Irishman with his stories of adventures around the world. He gave me a rundown on his wanderings and then concluded: 'I've been in seventeen countries and this is the best place in the world. Now, you promise to say nice things about Glasgow. We're sick of the bad things. Everyone rubbishes Glasgow and don't you do it.'

It was mid-afternoon and the pub was by no means full; there were six or seven groups of men dotted around, small men, all of them, with bad teeth. And there was one table of women drinking together. One had very bad skin, yellow and covered with pimples, and her hair was long and grey and held back from her face with an Alice band. She'd had more than enough to drink and got up and left with her white mac flying as she plodded down the street, clinging on to the arm of an unsteady man. Cliff watched me watching them.

'You'll see a lot of that around here. We drink in Glasgow, but most of it is pretty controlled. You don't see many uncontrolled drunks. The controlled drunks are easy to spot: they seem OK, but their ears are shut off. You talk to them, but they can't hear.'

He decided it was time to show me the Gorbals. He'd had at least three doubles and in London I wouldn't have got into the car, but here it didn't seem to frighten me and the little red car sped off as though it knew its way through the streets. I wasn't prepared for the Gorbals. It wasn't there. In its place were high-rise blocks, soulless barracks looking both weary and tatty; yet they were only twenty-five years old.

'Sir Basil Spence is responsible for this lot - or some of them, anyway. He often said that people should live in the buildings they design, but he never lived in one of these. They design these places and they go off and live in a converted mill in the country.' I counted the storeys to twenty-four.

'Nonsense, isn't it? These places are totally dehumanizing. People meet horizontally, not vertically . . .' He paused for me to appreciate this joke. 'In the old days people walked past each other in the street and stopped for a chat, in these they shoot past each other in the lift. This lot were doomed from the moment they went up. The local authority didn't want to act as landlords for pubs, so they didn't build any, and in the beginning getting a drink meant a bus ride and once you've made that effort, you're going to have more than one drink - you're going to stay until you're drunk.'

Bleak is the word for the Gorbals. To the planners of the fifties and the builders of the sixties they must have seemed a dream. A chance to move people from overcrowded, insanitary cupboards into homes with separate rooms for eating and sleeping; homes with their own bathrooms and lavatories. But who on earth thought that twenty-four storeys was the answer? This is a bad example of American influence. This was the first time on this journey that I had stood staring at post-war housing development; it was by no means to be the last. Renovation of existing buildings was not seen as an option. The fashion then was to tear down and build anew, mostly on the outskirts of cities. This both blighted inner cities and blighted the lives of those who were lured by the luxury of lavatories from the hub to the fringe. What progress! From eighteenth-century rural famine to nineteenth-century urban squalor to twentieth-century bleakness. And with each massive shift, vast numbers improved their lot. Post-war tower blocks, ugly and inadequate, are much derided. They were a mistake. A lesson has been learned. What more is there to say? Designs for new council houses around the country are delightful. And attempts are being made to improve the lot of those who remain on bleak estates. In the late seventies Glasgow realized that the way to humanize such places was to give tenants a greater say in housing matters. Tenant cooperatives were set up to encourage residents to improve their homes and manage their estates. Some estates were sold to the Cooperatives. Glasgow didn't need Mrs Thatcher to show the way. Indeed it could be argued the other way: Mrs Thatcher saw a good idea in Glasgow and bought it. Her plans for municipal housing are far-reaching and little-understood mainly because people have focused on the way in which they undermine local authorities and undermine the Labour party by allowing tenants to buy their houses at favourable prices. The policy of selling council houses was a stroke of genius; a great social leveller. Two thirds of us now own the houses in which we live. That is pretty much saturation point. But what of those who couldn't or wouldn't buy? Mrs Thatcher doesn't wish local authorities to be the sole provider of low-rent housing. To this end she has cut their cash for housing and raised rents on existing houses by limiting rent subsidies. The result has been an increase in the number of homeless people (particularly in London) who live at huge cost to the taxpayer in squalid bed-and-breakfast accommodation. In place of a local authority monopoly the government would like to see more cooperatives; it would like to see housing associations grow as alternative providers; it would like building societies to enter the field. It wants low-rent tenants to have a choice, because choice involves competition and

competition brings improvements and higher standards. To this end rent control on new lettings has been lifted in the hope that new landlords will come forward. To this end the government has offered tenants the ultimate weapon, a vote to determine whether they should remain council controlled or whether they'd prefer to be taken over by another landlord, one more keen to please and just as socially responsible. In theory this sounds fine; in practice tenants see it as an open invitation for the wicked private landlords to move in and make their lives a bigger misery: they fear the arrival of profiteers would seek out the best estates, buy them and then ease the poor tenants out in favour of yuppies. And of course no one would want the worst estates and the local authorities would be left with miserable blocks full of anti-social misfits. (In fact, the government's answer to that is to take over the worst areas itself via Housing Actions Trusts and, having put them on their feet, hand them over to the most deserving creature, whether private or public.) It's the government's fault that it has received more brickbats than bouquets for this radical reform. Their case was sound: why should local authorities be monopoly providers? It might well be better to have a choice. But whenever it tried to 'sell' its proposals, the media settled on the complex reforms' one daft mistake - messing about with the voting procedures for such takeovers. Legislation said that those who didn't bother to vote would be counted among those who favoured change. Every piece of electoral research shows that the opposite is the case; those who don't bother to vote generally favour the status quo. I have much sympathy with the view that stick-in-the-muds should not be allowed to halt progress, but I think it would have been much better to have made the vote compulsory. With something so fundamentally important as who owns and runs your home, you'd have thought people would have been only too keen to vote, but if they feel like ducking the issue, the way to make them into active and responsible citizens is to say that they must vote. There would have been cries of anguish from civil libertarians, who would argue that compulsory voting is un-British, but it's fairer than letting the complacent carry forward radical changes by default. Some councils, and not all of them Conservative controlled, have jumped at this opportunity of ridding themselves of all or part of a financially draining commitment and a never-ending round of rent arrears and complaints about maintenance. The whole affair is a classic example of what is good about the reforms being smothered by what is bad, so that the general public is left with the impression that low-rent housing isn't safe in Tory hands. Only time will tell and, cheered by Saracen's scotch, Cliff and I agreed that there was just a chance that out

of the jumble good would come. After all, it couldn't be worse than the ghastly blocks before our eyes. And in need of something visually pleasing, we went to look at the Clyde.

The Clyde is muddy coloured; they say it is clean; they say salmon have been sighted. When Defoe passed by it was flush with herring. It is often said that the Clyde made Glasgow and Glasgow made the Clyde. A huge crane catches the eye. It doesn't move. It is a monument, a listed building, a symbol of the past. Glasgow's future does not belong to the Clyde. Like tobacco and cotton, ship-building has had its day; it can no longer support Glasgow. But that dead crane is no longer a sign of despair. Glasgow has seen the worst and decided to tell it to shove off. It hit rock bottom in the mid-seventies, and had plenty of time to get sick of the sight of boarded-up shops, general decay, meanness of spirit and the pathetic attitude of sitting around waiting for something to happen. Glasgow decided to fight back; to stop being a victim and become a victor. Such a change of attitude is impossible to pin to a specific date, but I believe that it can be traced to an Act of God. In 1968 a bad storm, with winds up to 140 miles an hour, caused much damage and since there was no possibility of pulling the buildings down, experts decided they would start a refurbishment programme provided they could get thirty years of life out of a building. Years later, as honey-coloured sandstone began to emerge where once there had been grime, the city fathers began to realize that they had a beautiful city; they liked what they saw and refurbishment and cleaning buildings became, if not a fetish, a symbol that Glasgow was going to pick itself up and brush itself down and start all over again. Glasgow embarked on one of the most ambitious programmes of urban renewal undertaken by a British city since the war. It changed the look of the city and the attitude of its citizens. And once it looked good, it started shedding that old mean image: it had to in order to attract new investment, new industry, new jobs.

It was to be a slow slog. Cleaning up the city was easy; cleaning up the image was hard. Michael Kelly accepted the challenge. He realized that every time a London-based newspaper wanted to write about poverty, crime, street violence, it headed to Glasgow. His answer was to steal an idea from New York. That city had similar problems and it fought back with the highly successful 'I Love New York' campaign. Michael Kelly's answer was a campaign called 'Glasgow's Miles Better'. It was only a slogan, an empty PR slogan, but it took root and grew into a statement of fact. He was expressing what every Glaswegian felt in his heart and wanted to believe. On the bus to meet Kelly, the driver-conductor said: 'You don't come from round here with an accent like that. Where are you from?' I told him I was from London.

'Glasgow's a grand place now. Have a good look round, won't you? It's a great city.'

Michael Kelly had been an economist at Strathclyde University and a member of the city council for fourteen years. By the end of his four-year term as Lord Provost, he had travelled widely, tirelessly promoting Glasgow at home and abroad; persuading people to visit, to use the city as a conference venue, to contemplate investment, and bring their businesses to Glasgow. It worked and he loved it. After this spell in the limelight, he couldn't think of returning to academic life, and now has his own PR company. Of course Kelly did not achieve all this on his own. He was backed by the council. I was told many times that Glasgow was lucky. It had a good council, a sensible council, a council that knew how to get various sectors in the city working together. That council is Labour controlled, forever Labour, stable and solid.

At one point, as long ago as 1979, Michael Kelly thought of twinning Glasgow with Liverpool since they both had a similar history and similar problems and could pool ideas and share expertise. One of Liverpool's Liberal councillors said that he considered the idea a suicide pact. 'They saw their problems as insoluble and we didn't. We said we are going to make things happen.'

Michael Kelly missed no opportunity to invite southern journalists to Glasgow in an attempt to balance those dogeared, out-of-date images contained in newspaper files. In 1983 came the opening of the Burrell Collection, a perfect chance for writers to concentrate on pearl boxes rather than pearl-handled razors. Sir William Burrell and his family made money out of shipping and spent that money on many an *objet d'art*, from pearl boxes, furniture, brass, medieval tapestries, ivories, sculpture, stained glass, bronzes, silver, rugs, to paintings, paintings and paintings. Burrell, as well as being an amazing businessman, was an amazing shopper.

His business secret was to sell his fleet in boom times, invest his money and wait until 'things were absolutely in the gutter', then order a dozen steamers in a week and get them built at rock-bottom prices. By the time they were ready, the economy had invariably picked up and, because he had built his ships so cheaply, he could afford to carry goods for less than anyone else. As I understand it, that sort of thinking marks a good businessman. The shopping secret was to haggle over prices. Burrell left the proceeds of his shopping expeditions to Glasgow, plus £500,000 (and that was in 1940) to build a roof over their heads. He died in 1958 aged ninety-six, without seeing the results of his generous gesture. A gesture which means that Glasgow can

boast the best art collection outside London. The Burrell Collection is now a top tourist attraction. Glasgow also is home to the Scottish National Opera, the Scottish National Ballet and the Scottish National Orchestra. In 1990 Glasgow will flaunt the title 'European City of Culture'. That should kill *No Mean City*. Hard luck, Edinburgh. That city, forty-five minutes away, at one time had everything Glasgow coveted. It had the title 'capital' of Scotland; it had a constant stream of visitors who went away sighing over its natural beauty; a comfortable middle-class ambience (the professions congregate there); and an annual Festival of the Arts which provided an international profile. In other words, it had a good image. But it was complacent. It has let its advantages slip away as Glasgow noisily said: 'Look at me!' and set about attracting one of the highest levels of investment outside London. Glasgow now employs more workers in the financial-services sector than Edinburgh. At one time Michael Kelly considered offering his skills to Edinburgh.

By the time I'd talked to Michael Kelly, the head of the tourist office, the leader of the council and the Scottish Development Agency, I felt bloated by the city's aspirations. I floated on middle-class success stories, and had been taken thoroughly by surprise at the image and mood of Glasgow. The city glowed with confidence and energy and swank: its zest was deliciously American – but then America has a dark underside. Over dinner in the sumptuous surroundings of a new and exclusive hotel which resembles a country house in mid-town and is known simply as One Devonshire Gardens, I confessed to a former colleague from the *Guardian* who now works for the *Glasgow Herald* that I felt my glimpse of Glasgow might be unbalanced. Glasgow was clearly on the move and it hadn't needed Mrs Margaret Thatcher to show the way. Labour Glasgow had tackled many problems, but it had not erased them all, so where were the less fortunate? I'd glimpsed them in the Saracen's Head, but where could I meet those who had yet to benefit from this city's self-generated success?

'Leave that to me,' Ray replied. 'I'll find you someone who knows the other side. I've got an idea that could work brilliantly, but then again it could be a disaster. Whichever it turns out to be, you'll have an unusual evening.'

The unusual evening began at the Hilton Hotel, where I was to meet Bill. That is not his name, but I agreed that he could remain anonymous. Bill, I was told, avoids the limelight. He was easy to recognize: he was fat and small, a mere five feet two inches.

'May I offer you a drink?' I asked as we shook hands.

'No, you may not. You are *my* guest in *my* city,' and with that he

signalled the waitress and ordered drinks. She came with the drinks and the bill.

'Put it on the tab,' he said, and she stood looking at him, waiting for a name.

'Everyone around here knows me. Put it on the bill.' This show of immodesty did not square with his desire for anonymity, but I let that pass.

'Ray says you are interested in Glasgow. Let me give you some background,' and in a jovial, totally uninhibited way he launched into his story. His father was a sailor and not married to his mother when she became pregnant. She, having to work, 'put him out' to another family where, it seems, they had so many children that one more made no difference. They were poor too; they lived in one room and were ill-fed, which he says accounts for his lack of height. The decent bits of china were seen only when the priest came to call. They were Catholics. Bill is a Catholic. His father and mother married when he was five and took him into their home which marginally improved his lot. His Aunt Maggie had the only 'palace' in the family and the only decent food. He used to love visiting her, and he thought that later in the evening I might like to visit her. She was in her eighties and living in a council flat in Govan. He went on without a pause through another drink, talking about poverty and how he'd once lived and worked in one room, dealing in electrical goods, determined to make something of his life and not be like his contemporaries. All they thought about was having another child so they could collect more benefit.

'You ready? I've arranged for you to meet a few people who work for me.' Ah good, I thought, time for visiting a few rough pubs, which is all I expected from the evening.

We drove off in his car, which had gold spokes and a telephone, and pulled up outside The Bell, in one of those bleak areas where much had been pulled down to make way for concrete slabs that would not look out of place in Eastern Europe. A group of children came towards us and started to talk to Bill. Their accents were thick, but from what I could understand they were raising money for sports facilities at their school by asking people to pay 50 pence and choose a number. Some numbers on the board offered a small prize; others did not. Bill gave them a £10 note. They looked from the note to him, and from him to the note.

'Who . . . are . . . you?' The words struggled for release through a mouthful of amazement.

'I was brought up around here, so I know what it is like not to have money,' Bill replied. The eyes of the boys continued to go backwards and forwards from note to giver, from giver to note. I felt uncomfort-

able. The gesture seemed flashy and I was glad when a man in his mid-fifties interrupted. It was Joe, Bill's chauffeur/gardener.

'The lounge is closed and the public bar is hardly fit for her,' he told Bill.

'Of course it is,' I said, with a laugh that hinted irritation, and marched into the public bar. Inside Joe's wife Jean was waiting, dressed in a pretty blue frock, her hair newly washed. It was rare to have a night out with 'the boss', she later confided, so she'd dressed up for the occasion. Bill plonked a wad of notes on the table and sent Joe off for drinks. Jean also worked for Bill. She had started as his housekeeper and now ran his office, a twenty-four-hour commitment, she assured me. She then talked about life in Pollockshields, one of the developments that replaced the slums. She talked well of the improved housing, of the space, but lamented the destruction of the community that existed in the slums.

'There's plenty of unemployment in Pollockshields, but it doesn't bother many people, I promise you. They all seem to make extra money easily enough. They know they are being snooped on, but they also know that the Security have to catch them in the act and that's not easy. Most do all right. They can make £20 in an afternoon just walking around the golf course looking for balls and then selling them in the city. There's quite a trade in that.' The message was clear enough. The poverty of her youth, of Bill's youth, had gone; you only had to be a bit sharp to get by. And of course if you were lucky you could get rich like Bill and fly down to London for lunch at Le Gavroche. Bill made his money in the 1970s out of local government contracts to do with drains. That's all I managed to discover.

'I could wake up of a Monday morning and know that by Friday night I could make £10,000. There was a lot of money sloshing around in local government in the seventies.' No wonder Mrs Thatcher was keen to get control of local government spending! Jean opened her handbag and took out a battered red linen-covered schoolbook. 'I found this at home and thought you might like it. It must be years old.' I was moved by her thoughtfulness. The little book, *Glasgow and the Tobacco Lords*, last belonged to 'Norman - 1968'.

After a while Bill asked Joe to get his telephone from the car so that he could ring Aunt Maggie and tell her we were on our way with a 'load of carry-out'. Joe was then dispatched to the bar for bottles of whisky and beer and a paper cup or two full of ice.

'She won't mind us turning up. I always give her £100 when I see her.' Aunt Maggie seemed bemused. She had two friends with her, a mother and her daughter. The daughter was retarded and wore a

headscarf. Aunt Maggie's room was too tiny to hold us all in comfort, but we squeezed into every available space and I found myself hedged into a corner next to a glass-fronted cabinet containing ornaments and gifts from many a seaside resort. Everyone was concerned about Jim. Jim should have met us at The Bell but had gone to the wrong pub. He lived off sick-pay laced with whisky. He turned up eventually and Bill asked him to sing for us. Jim liked singing; he stood up and delivered *Begin the Beguine* like a Fifties crooner, with a sob in his voice and violent arm movements.

Aunt Maggie said very little. 'What's all this about?' she kept muttering. No one answered, so I said, 'Bill wanted me to meet his family.' She looked even more bemused. At 10 o'clock Bill declared he was hungry, so abandoning Aunt Maggie and friends, Jim the crooner, and Joe and Jean (who I'm sure expected to be invited), we went off to the Peking Inn. It was crowded and we had not reserved a table, but that sort of thing doesn't bother Bill. They'd find him a table while we had a drink at the bar. Bill spotted, seated at a table across the restaurant, an Italian family whose wedding he had attended the day before. He sent them over a bottle of Bollinger. Such a gesture could not go unanswered. The Italians sent him a bottle of Bollinger in return. Bill told me about his mother. As soon as he had started to make money, he put her on the payroll and each week would send her 'a wage' in a brown envelope. When she died, it fell to him to clear the house. In a wardrobe he found a pile of unopened brown envelopes, containing thousands of pounds. 'She thought my luck would not last and that one day I'd be on my uppers and then she'd be able to give it back to me.'

Ray had said it would be an unusual evening. It turned out to be a bizarre and unforgettable evening. It showed how some of those who start life with a foot not even near the bottom rung of the ladder succeed in a struggle to the top – if wealth enough to lunch at Le Gavroche can be seen as a measure of success. It showed how those who have scraped out of poverty view those who have been left behind. It showed that the nature of poverty has changed from growth-denying lack of food and a bed in a cupboard, to life in a block of flats and afternoons searching for lost golf balls or other flirtations with the black economy. In all it showed how we make progress slowly, gaining much and losing something with every step. I treasure the little schoolbook on the tobacco trade: a symbol of the spirit of Glasgow, warm and thoughtful, proud and eager to display its best profile. This southerner was delighted to discover a Glasgow miles better than I ever expected.

Chapter 5

Northern Ireland: Bugger Strongbow!

I made a pig's ear of getting to Northern Ireland. The obvious route was to take the bus down the coast to Ayr where I could change buses for Stranraer and hop on the ferry to Larne. But I'd heard talk of Ulster yachtsmen sailing over to Arran and to Campbeltown for the weekend and from this I'd hatched the idea of hitching a ride back with one of them. There was some logic behind this whim. In my mind this was how the first settlers arrived in Ireland – from Scotland by boat some 8,000 years ago. If you glance at the map, there's a leg of Scotland at the Mull of Kintyre which is stretched out towards an arm of Ireland at Fair Head in County Antrim; the distance between the two is a mere thirteen miles. I wanted to travel to Ireland by the oldest, shortest route. My efforts to achieve this were considerable; I enlisted the help of several friends and acquaintances and one even broadcast an appeal on Radio Clyde. All to no avail. Finally, I got on the bus to Ayr, changed for Stranraer and got on the ferry with an ungracious sigh of resignation and the smug thought that the weather was poor and the forecast so bad that few if any yachtsmen would be tempted across the North Channel for some days.

My hands warmed by a polystyrene cup of coffee, I got out my diary. It was empty. I knew no one in Northern Ireland. I had no plans, and only one appointment – with the Tourist Board for a lesson in religious geography. This may seem a cavalier way to approach a place where a murderous little war had been going on since 1968, but it was deliberate. In the coming weeks I was simply going to let things happen. I wanted Northern Ireland to reveal itself in the way it chose. Millions of words have been written by those who arrived with preconceived notions and laden address books. What could I add to the struggle whose seeds had been sown some 800 years before, when an adventurous Norman baron called Strongbow had sailed across

Chapter I

Shetland and the Gift of Oil

That day no fish flew over the lighthouse. It was too calm. As I stood happily marooned on a rock at the northernmost tip of Britain, staring at the seals as they sunbathed and squinting at the sea a hundred feet below, revealing, as it slapped against the rocks, an underskirt of turquoise frilled with white lace, I longed to swap this beguiling midsummer idyll for the wildness of winter; for a fish flying over the lighthouse.

They say that there are times when the sea has no trouble scaling these rocks and that such is the height and impact of the waves that fish have been hurled over the roof and on to the courtyard. Such a visual memento would have been more appropriate than this mendacious impression, this soothing sight of sleeping seals. Lighthouses were not born of picnicking puffins, nor of fulmars fancying themselves in the sun, nor of almost nightless summers with print still legible at midnight. They were born of elemental fury to guide ships through swirling seas on stormy nights when rearing cliffs and broken rocks and hidden reefs threaten sailors.

The sea swells all around this kingdom; nowhere is far from its shore. The sea, citizens are told from earliest schooldays, is of the greatest importance; it dominates our history, providing a natural defence, a source of wealth and fortune and adding imagination and the spirit of adventure to our characters. The catalogue of its blessings is seemingly endless. All of which would be true if we limited our thinking to *recent* history. For something like 1,500 years the most the sea offered was a source of food. Other than that it allowed us to be constantly conquered; it provided a pathway for the Romans, the Danes, the Saxons and the Normans to sail in and settle. The sea did not make Britain great; she became great only when she decided to conquer the sea. She got a taste of success with the defeat of the Spanish Armada that gale-ridden summer some 400 years ago, and she built upon the success until Britannia Ruled the Waves. And here I was sitting among the sea pinks in a pose that would have pleased Millais,

and wanting another gale-ridden summer so that fish could fly over the lighthouse.

These thoughts dissolved into a shiver as a voice called to me from the lighthouse. At least it was chilly. The July day might yield only a few hours of darkness, but the temperature up here on a rock called Muckle Flugga, one mile north of the island of Unst, itself the most northerly of the Shetland Islands, was not concerned to match such fluctuations. It couldn't be bothered to go below zero or rise above 15°. That day, just past midsummer, it hovered around 13°.

'Come and see the most northerly geraniums,' called Walter Gam-mach, principal lighthouse keeper. I glanced up at him from a spot halfway between the courtyard and the sea. He looked the part dressed in a black roll-neck sweater and dark trousers, with a greying beard, balding head and missing teeth making him seem older than his fifty years. We'd met that morning a mile from Muckle Flugga, across the sea, at the shore station. Drizzle drained the colour from the landscape but Walter's spirits were in fine form either because he had just had a month on shore, or because he was about to go off-shore for a month. While we waited for the helicopter to effect the shift change, he chattered away to me and to everything else in sight.

'Fire extinguisher . . . I must put you out for the chopper. Marge, away you go to the fridge, and you too, bread.' All the time he fretted over the arrival of the helicopter and kept phoning for an update on its progress. 'Haloo, any update on the chopper? Ay, get me Dave. Dave, any update? Aha, aha. Refuelling is it, aha. Tip me off when it leaves, will you? Ay, it's been hectic these past weeks. My brother died a week past yesterday, and I've been running to Aberdeen. Ay, much obliged, bye for noo.'

In fact, his four years at Muckle Flugga had been marred by family problems which he rattled off complete with dates that were etched on his memory. 'I came here on 8 November 1982. On 11 December my mother died. Then on 27 December my father died. Eighteen months later my sister died and this past week my brother. I just managed to see him. I'm on the lightkeepers' committee now. I was voted in. It is part of the TGWU and I have to go to Aberdeen for meetings from time to time. Fortunate that. I knew my brother was ill and thought it was cancer, but didn't want to rush down and alarm him. The committee meeting gave me a good opportunity. I was just in time. No, this has not been a lucky station.'

And professionally it's been a quiet rock. A light bulb blowing is the limit of excitement. Anyway, he's not the sort to make much of disasters. He told me of one, some years back in Orkney. 'I was trying

to put over the weather report and I couldn't get through on the phone. So I thought I'd have a wash down instead. There were no facilities there, only a basin for water. I'd just started and only had a towel around my waist when I saw a flash. I thought it was the weather people ringing me but it turned out to be the coastguard at Kirkwall. A Greek ship had run aground while on autopilot, and it wasn't at all sure where it was. We asked it to light flares from which we could work out its position. The ship turned over in the end and five died.'

The phone rang and Dave gave us the news that the chopper was on its way. Walter clambered into his orange-coloured safety suit and we assembled outside to watch the bright red modern miracle whirl into view and land on a sixpence. 'Close your eyes as it comes into land . . . it blows dust and grit everywhere.' Everything began to happen at double speed. The pilot warned me of the bumps as we headed down the firth. There were no bumps and the journey was much too short; it was over in four minutes. A few more minutes and the couple going on duty had off-loaded the stores, the two going off duty had jumped aboard and the helicopter disappeared, away for its fortnightly visit to the next lighthouse.

Leaving the men to unpack and settle in, I took advantage of the momentary appearance of the sun and strolled to sea-level to tease the seals, who slid off the rock at the very sight of me, swam a few strokes into the sea and then turned their cheeky faces towards me to get a better look at the intruder who had dared disturb their siesta. And I'd gone down to count the steps, 243 new steps. The old ones, hewn out of rocks when the lighthouse was built in 1854, were wonky and abandoned. Something else was new too.

The home of the most northerly geranium, Walter's room, was in a block built in 1969, alongside the lighthouse in a space saved by electrification. Walter's room was the size of the average hotel's single room: more spacious than I'd imagined. There were two other similar rooms - it takes three to man a lighthouse around the clock - a large kitchen-dining room and a lounge with a television, much watched even though the reception was poor. The lounge was tidy, basically furnished with a few decidedly male frills, including the statutory picture of a topless girl which stood alongside a pertinent message:

He who works and does his best
Gets the shit like all the rest.

Someone had written 'censored' through the word 'shit'. A previous keeper had provided, as evidence of his hobby, paintings of daffodils

and of poppies, and a cartoon featuring a Russian submarine. 'There are plenty of those around here,' said Walter, walking towards the door, eager to whisk me away from all this space and show me the lighthouse and the way things used to be: circular, cosy and cramped; tiny spaces, piled on top of each other with vertical steps as links. Machinery dominated the ground level, above that a cell in which to eat, above that a crow's-nest in which to sleep and, at the very top, the light itself, its importance underscored by the gleaming brass rails adorning the vertical stairs.

'We don't touch those because we've got to polish them, but it's OK . . . go on, you cling to them.' I hauled myself up to admire the ancient device that had been such an essential navigational aid to sailors down the centuries – a light bulb around which revolved a prism of glass. Walter put the light on just for a minute to show me how it worked. It seemed such a simple invention, but it was a huge engineering leap from the days when mariners were lucky to catch a glow, provided accidentally from the shore, when men made salt and had to keep coal fires burning around the clock. Trinity House, the organization that provides lighthouses for England and Wales, came into being in 1565, but Scotland did not acquire its Northern Lighthouse Board until 1786. Now there are 140 lighthouses. One by one they are being automated. This reflects perfectly our changing world. With modern sophisticated technology, merchant ships from oil tankers to container vessels no longer need lighthouses to warn them off the rocks. Smaller boats still need the winking light bulb but they do not need it to be guarded around the clock by three men. What could be more labour intensive and out of keeping with the spirit of New Britain? The lighthouse, picturesque and shrouded in romantic imagery, may remain, but the lighthouse-keeper's job has a limited future.

Walter did not seem bothered. He described how in his twenty-eight years on the job he had moved around the Board's lighthouses, spending four years each in Orkney, the Hebrides, Shetland and so on. Each cameo ended with the same lines: 'That's automatic now and the lightkeeper's home is a chalet let to holiday-makers.' He said it with a broad Aberdeen accent, without a trace of sentiment, nor a Luddite whine about the passing of a way of life. He gave me the impression he'd drifted into the service and would drift out again.

'I sometimes think I joined for the uniform. I'd been in the RAF and when I came out at twenty-two I hadn't much in mind and thought I'd give it a try. Now we don't wear the uniform more than once a year, when we get all brushed up and bonny for the annual

inspection. Sometimes I think about coming out. I'd be quite happy driving a taxi in Lerwick.

'Come on, let's go and do the weather report and then we'll have lunch.' Making the weather report every three hours seemed a complicated business to me. I remember the wind speed was around 14 knots and that the sea state was 4. 'Small waves, becoming larger, fairly frequent white horses.' The rating goes to 12 which denotes a wind speed over 56 knots and chaotic sea conditions.

At lunch I would meet Tom. I'd already met Jim Leask at the shore station. He'd been a baker once, then a lighthouse keeper for seventeen years. He talked well of the life and claimed that no basic qualifications were needed apart from an interest in ships and the sea and a handyman's ability to be a plumber, painter, joiner and electrician. Any major problems – a malfunctioning engine for example – and they'd phone Edinburgh. By evening an engineer would arrive by helicopter. 'Oh yes, and a very strict medical. They look at everything, including your teeth. They don't want you to get on the rock on Monday and ask to come off on Tuesday with a toothache!

'The only time it's hard is when things go wrong at home and your wife is left with the kiddies to sort things out. My wife copes well. Her dad was in the Air Ministry and was sent to different airfields as a wireless operator, so she got used to men being away. My father was a whaler and spent half the year in the South Atlantic. We are well used to men on the move. It beats being in a factory. You even have more time for your kids in the end. When you are on shore you can give them all your attention.

'The secret is to pace yourself during the twenty-eight days on the rock, and to switch off from worries on the other side. In this job you must be self-reliant and a contented sort. If you need to go out a lot then you are in the wrong job. Even on shore we live quietly. The job's not well paid, but you get a free house, no bills, no rates and 60 per cent of the furniture provided. My wife doesn't know the price of a duvet cover, she gets them through the Board.' And on retirement? 'Those who haven't got a house of their own put their names down for a council property. There's no problem.'

Walter had told me about Tom. 'I said you were coming and that he had to get cleaned up. Tom isn't happy with soap and water. He's a bachelor, a crofter, born on Unst.'

Tom, a large silent man, had trousers that were a touch grubby, but his shirt and sweater suggested that he had received Walter's message. He was the cook. At 1 p.m. he presented us with soup and mince and tatties. It's always the same on change-over day. We chatted about

hobbies; lighthouse men are famous for their hobbies. Jim's is fly-tying, making the neat little feathery things that go on the end of lines to attract fish. The library sends boxes of books and since Walter's son works in the library they have no trouble with special requests. No trouble with anything. Fresh water was the only item they had to treat with care. It has to be brought from the shore station by boat, twelve barrels at a time, and then winched up from sea-level, three barrels at a time. When the weather is bad it can be weeks, maybe seven weeks, before the boat can make the journey.

I munched my mince and listened to these steady, reliable men making light of their isolation, alternately being good companions and working as a team and then slipping away each to his own room, and wondered what it was really like to be a threesome, holed up, parted from the rest of the world for twenty-eight days at a time. I'll never know. I requested permission to stay on the lighthouse, but the Northern Lighthouse Board had said no. Accommodation was the problem. The three men said it was no such thing; no one slept in the bunks in the lighthouse and I could have had the lot to myself. But arrangements had been made for Ali the boatman to sail the mile across the sea and take me off. I hoped the weather would detain him, but of course it didn't.

Tom stayed at the top in the courtyard and waved. Jim and Walter followed me down the steps again to help anchor the little boat to the vertical steps. As the boat slipped away it afforded a splendid view of the white tower on the rock with its biscuit-coloured bricks framing the slit windows, designed as it happens by David and Thomas Stevenson. Their father Robert was one of Britain's greatest lighthouse builders. One year in 1814 he asked his schoolfriend Walter Scott to accompany him on his annual six-week tour of inspection. This enabled Scott to write a dull little book called *Northern Lights* and, more importantly, to acquire the knowledge he wove into *The Pirate*. Thomas Stevenson's son went even further to link lighthouses and literature. His name was Robert Louis Stevenson.

It was raining again and Ali presented me with oilskins, which I snuggled into as I sank back and watched for the last time the puffins flirting, flying and fitting across the water, their bills providing a dash of orange to match my oilskins; a splash of colour in a scene that had otherwise been painted from the same grey shade-card. I was chilled but exhilarated by my half-hour journey back to the shore station.

The little boat dumped me on the shore by the lighthouse base. It had taken me three days, one tube train, two aeroplanes, three ferries, four buses, one taxi and one helicopter to reach Muckle Flugga. And

now I had another problem: how to bridge the six-mile gap to my hotel. Ali's wife is the local driver, but she was away on another mission. It was raining, which ruled out walking. And then, while shedding my oilskins, I saw a car a few yards away attempting a three-point turn. 'He's a stranger, that's for sure,' said Ali. 'Ask him where he is going.' I did and he gave me a lift. The stranger was a first-time visitor from Aberdeen, an asbestos expert who'd been called to the RAF station to provide an estimate for the removal of the stuff, once of great value, but now considered to be a health hazard. 'It'll cost them plenty. This place is so remote. There's nothing here. Where are the shops?' He had driven past the only store without recognizing it.

'The charms of Unst are not immediately apparent, are they?' I was about to disagree when I realized that my mind was full of coastal beauty, grand cliffs and sheer precipices; of voes and firths, of fulmars, puffins and seals. He had seen none of this and, as I looked around the flat land offering nothing but peat and boulders and sheep, I found myself agreeing. There are no trees. Oh what a glorious thing is a tree, but here they have all been chopped down centuries ago, and now they won't grow. If a shoot escapes the mouths of passing sheep, it soon suffers at the hands of the wind and the salt-ridden air.

I returned to Hagdale Lodge with my mind a great deal easier than it had been when I first arrived. It is not as grand as its name suggests; indeed, it is a former construction camp tarted up to resemble a one-storey motel. But the decision to stay there had been simple enough; there are only two hotels on Unst and they are both owned by the same person. One phone call reserves a room in either. My phone call from London was greeted by a moment's silence and then the message that they were full up, permanently full up with oilies (oil-rig workers), and no longer took casual guests. I asked the receptionist for the phone numbers of other places I might try. 'It won't be easy. Most of the bed and breakfasts are full up with oilies too. Look, call back in a day or two and I'll see what I can find.'

I called back; a room had been found, but it came with a warning: 'You realize that it is all *men* up here, don't you, and that you are going to be here over a weekend and it can be rowdy?' After I'd flown to Lerwick I had to stay overnight before catching the clutch of ferries and buses that would enable me to reach Unst. I stayed at an isolated pub on the Island of Bressay, four minutes by ferry from Lerwick. I was the only guest and the owner, who had recently moved from Unst, told me that he didn't think it a good idea for me to stay at Hagdale, for much the same reasons as the receptionist.

It is a sad fact that nowadays a woman travelling alone cannot afford

to ignore such warnings. So I didn't ignore them, I mulled them over, faltered and found myself inside the Tourist Office asking for alternative accommodation. I left with two phone numbers written on a piece of paper, and as I shoved this in my coat pocket I felt ashamed by what appeared to be a loss of nerve *and* a new inclination to lean on the opinions of others. My confidence returned as I recalled other occasions in my life when timid, unadventurous souls had described my plans as 'unwise'. Some are wise and some are otherwise. The manager of Hagdale Lodge met me. With great charm he told me that he had given me a room as far away from the bar as possible and advised me against using the showers. 'There are three in a row and the chances are that two men will be using the others. There's a bathroom next door.'

The oilies turned out to be helicopter pilots. There was only a handful of construction workers around; *they* are responsible for the oilies' poor image. The helicopter pilots were the best of company. They wore blue sweaters with 'Treasure Finder' stripped across the shoulder. That's the name of an accommodation rig, moored in the ocean alongside the oilfield. The pilots had loved living on the rig and didn't much care for Hagdale or the local b. & bs. But now that oil prices were sinking they'd had to move as part of a cost-cutting exercise. Another pound-trimming scheme had been to centre them on Unst; they used to fly from Sumburgh, near Lerwick, but the charges had increased and forced them northwards.

The Saturday night noise was minimal; a number of the pilots had been invited to a local dance given by the sailing club to celebrate the day's regatta. The noisiest moment was provided by a chap who felt a blow on the bagpipes would liven up the munching of deep-fried haddock. I felt as though I were in a foreign country. I was. Up here 'going south' meant going to Edinburgh and Edinburgh was in a foreign country called Scotland. The Shetland Isles may just admit that they are part of Britain, but they are not, they argue, part of Scotland. This was stated to me time and again and puzzled me at first, since I'd always considered the islands to be part of Scotland. But it isn't as simple as that. The Picts, part of a loose federation of related tribes, were the original settlers. They managed to avoid invasion by the Scots, only to be swamped by the Vikings in the eighth century. The Vikings stayed until 1468, when a marriage settlement muddled things. The daughter of King Christian of Denmark and Norway wanted to marry James III of Scotland. King Christian promised a handsome dowry, but when the time came he found himself strapped for cash and instead pledged the lands of Orkney and Shetland. He intended to

redeem the pledge once his fortunes improved, but they never did. Neither group of islands liked being handed to Scotland on a plate, and worse was to come. Scottish landowners bought up tracts of lands. Some of the owners proved to be bad landlords. They gave crofters a hard time and in the end cleared them off the best land. The Clearances have left the deepest scars on the islanders.

They still don't trust the Scots, and it's one of the reasons why in 1979 they voted against the devolution of power from London to a Scottish Assembly. They feared that they would be ignored in favour of Strathclyde, the most populous region of Scotland. Faced with the choice of being ignored by Edinburgh or ignored by Westminster, they chose Westminster.

The next day I left early to catch the bus for my journey southward. The morning was mournful. It must have been contemplating either the loss of June which had been, as indeed it is supposed to be, flaming, or the fact that it knew what I had yet to discover: that the next two months were going to be miserable: so chilly that I came to bless the invention of the thermal vest; so chilly that at times I lay in the bath at night until I felt warm enough to go to bed. And wet. My memory depicts me either carrying or huddled inside a voluminous hooded black raincoat, attempting a poor imitation of the French Lieutenant's Woman. The British have a reputation for going on about the weather. They have no reason for doing so since it is mostly predictable, rarely startling or surprising. We exaggerate its importance; it is not unusual enough to warrant the attention we give it. What do we really know about heat or cold? We've had the odd drought, and the odd hurricane, and we manage a bit of flooding now and again; and here and there a few gale-force winds and heavy rain (and where would romantic fiction be without them?). Yet we consider the weather to be a valid topic of conversation. It isn't; it is merely a socially acceptable conversational comma – or barrier. We use it as a filler behind which we hide either from those with whom we do not wish to communicate, or from those with whom we do, but for the moment need to pause while we reorganize our thoughts and think of something more interesting to say.

To a writer, however, the weather has another function. It is a paintbrush that changes the appearance and the mood of the picture before us. And on Unst that July morning the sky was sullen and the landscape melancholic, which is easy enough to achieve in a landscape without trees and with only a sparse and occasional covering of heather. The paintbrush had daubed subtle, sad shades on the scene, making bright splashes grab the eye and seem incongruous. Time and

again my eyes caught blue plastic sacks by the roadside. I asked the elderly woman in front of me what they were.

'Peat,' she answered. 'Peat waiting to be transported from the moors to home.' And then she told me how she'd been visiting relatives and had been out many a time cutting the peats. She said it with pride and no doubt at home they would be hearing about it too. The coming of oil has not made peat a thing of the past. Indeed, it is now considered a fashionable way of getting exercise: it's damned hard work, but worth it for the feeling of well-being and for the endless supply of free fuel. The elderly woman described how it is done. First the heather or moss has to be removed from the surface and laid to one side; then slabs of peat, longer and thinner than a brick, are sliced away and laid upon the ground to dry. For a more thorough airing, they are then lifted up and stacked like rifles to form a pyramid. Finally the heather or moss is laid back on the lower surface. The process scars the landscape a little. It is not obvious from the bus, but when walking it becomes clear that the moors are criss-crossed with ditches of varying depths.

Peat cutting is no more a thing of the past than is knitting, although when oil first came knitting and many other things were put on one side while women went off to do the chores of construction workers. Sixteen-year-old girls could be seen leaving school at 4 p.m. and stepping into waiting buses to spend a few hours at the terminal making beds for money that was way beyond their teenage dreams. Others abandoned school altogether because, for once, work was plentiful. Such a traumatic dislocation of traditional patterns has given rise to its own local literature.

When I moved from the bus to the ferry, I found a corner away from the cacophony of portable transistors and raced through a volume called *Thin Wealth*, by Robert Alan Jamieson, which takes a vicious and vivid stab at the illusion of progress provided by oil and the negative influence of 'soothmothers' (incomers) in search of a fast buck. The author worked at the terminal, so he clearly saw much of the downside: the rise in illegitimacy; of drunkenness, of fecklessness, of loss of neighbourliness, of family tensions born of higher expectations, of wives nagging husbands to give up the sea and settle for a steady job at Sullom Voe. Jamieson does not balance this with the improvements to the standard of living, the new roads, school, the leisure centre, the homes that now have bathrooms and are well insulated against the cold. The elderly have benefited much. There are many of them, some 14 per cent of the 24,000 population. The islands now boast the best sheltered housing in the UK, and each household with an elderly or disabled person gets a £200 bonus at Christmas; the

disabled have Volvo cars with hand controls instead of invalid cars which are no good in high winds and which have no room for families to take outings together. Village halls have been revamped, churches have received attention. The list is long.

Shetlanders argue, however, that they were not in bad shape when the oil came: fishing was going particularly well. The population may have dwindled to 17,000 but that meant that the faint hearts had left for softer beds and the ambitious had followed job opportunities, leaving behind people content with their lot. Their rugged life made them self-reliant and interdependent; they needed each other and they looked out for one another. The picture that is painted of the pre-oil years gives meaning to those hollow phrases: 'quality of life' and 'standard of living'; their standard of living was poor, but the quality of life was exceptional. It was once remarked that the islands had few pubs, and the answer came back: who needs pubs when you can walk through anyone's door and have a drink?

Oil put Goliath among the Davids, but the Davids were sensible enough to know that oil needed Shetland more than Shetland needed oil. This started as a mere slogan, but it is now deeply entrenched into the communities' thinking. They knew that the oil companies did not have the technical ability to bring oil to the mainland of Scotland at an economic price. The oil had to come ashore in Shetland, and that put the Islands Council in the strongest of positions. They made the most of it.

They were lucky to have had Ian Clarke around at the time. As treasurer he came to Shetland from Scotland in 1968 at the age of twenty-nine. By 1974 he was chief executive and under his guidance the Council made the rules for the coming of oil; they were bold rules, good rules and much applauded. The key was participation. Clarke and the Council wanted to have an on-going say in the development and a direct influence over it. To this end they bought the land where the terminal was to be sited, thus remaining the landlord; they insisted that the oil companies get together and use one terminal; that the SIC was to be the Port Authority, in order to monitor the oil companies. And in return for leasing the land, building the port and the camp for construction workers, the oil companies had to pay a 'disturbance allowance', based on the tonnage of oil passing through the port, which would be invested in local industries so that they would be able to sustain the island's prosperity once the oil had gone. The investment has been impressive. Through grants or loans, the islands have new fishing boats, new fish-processing plants, harbours have been improved, a farm-salmon-fishing industry started and a fisheries training

centre. Farmers have been able to buy lime and fertilizers to enrich the soil and they have been encouraged to increase their stock of beef cattle to improve the balance between sheep and beef. There have been new hotels built to encourage tourism and the knitters have had training and a joint marketing company set up.

But there are problems, not all is golden. The SIC claim that the oil companies over-estimated the throughput of oil and that they have never received the amounts they expected; they now want compensation for lost millions. And that, alas, is not the only serious argument: there's another about the cost of jetties; another about water charges; and another about the size of rent payable. All these are in the hands of lawyers and are destined for the courts. It seems such a pity: such a pity that agreements lauded by so many are later found to contain loopholes that people cannot sit down and resolve without the aid of the courts and of expensive lawyers.

Ian Clarke thinks it's a pity too. He's in Glasgow now, a chief executive of Clyde Cable Vision, and I sought him out one evening, eager to discover what he felt about the squabbles.

Clarke is not a man given to false modesty: 'I have no doubt that what was achieved in Shetland was one of the major successes of the century. If I had to do it over again, I'd change nothing of fundamental importance. No one could have foreseen all the problems that would arise. All I can say now is that the SIC must be happy to abdicate the decision-making to lawyers.'

He thinks well of the oil companies. Indeed, he must, for he went to work for BNOG when he first left Shetland. 'The oil companies are always being criticized for not looking after the community, but the community has to look after its own interests. The oil companies should of course behave like good citizens, but they are there to act in the best interests of shareholders. In dealing with that industry one must be wide awake; they can afford the best minds in the world. By and large they are open and honest and you'll never hear me criticize them for being underhanded.'

If there are quarrels now at least they do not spill over into one area of negotiations. Everyone praises the way in which the environment was considered. The mechanics of bringing oil ashore do not interest me, and my visit to Sullom Voe was to discover how the environment had been safeguarded rather than sacrificed.

I saw it before the ferry docked; it peeped over the brow of the hills: a solitary flame, the symbol of modern Shetland. Sullom Voe had been a sea-plane base during the war, after which it was deserted, leaving behind a few dilapidated jetties and the odd ruin of a building. The

terminal had been created from scratch, its architects given the luxury of a blank sheet of paper; the result is not unpleasant. The flame might be visible for miles, but nothing else is allowed to dominate the skyline. Everything is single storey, except the power station which is painted green like the storage tanks, so they can blend into the background.

Oil is an environmental headache. It is messy stuff and the thought of a tanker running aground on a wild night and threatening the coastline with its contents hardly bears contemplation. The tankers are not allowed to sail within ten miles of the coast unless they are about to enter the harbour. They can, however, still have accidents inside the harbour. They had a mighty accident inside the harbour at 11.30 p.m. on 30 December 1978, when a ship collided with the jetty and 1,200 tons of oil spewed into the sea. It seems that a tug towing the tanker caught fire and had to let go of the tow rope. Something like that. Captain Flett told me about it in the most amusing way. He's an honest man and willingly admitted that this accident was a blessing, a catalyst for the introduction of some of the stiffest rules going. It is all to do with the ballast, or rather, the disposal of ballast. Empty tankers have partly to fill their cargo holds with water to give them enough weight to remain below the water, and inevitably the water becomes oil-smeared. On coming into port they need to get rid of this before taking oil on board. They do this by dumping it in ballast holds, a costly and time consuming business. The port charges £100 per 1,000 tons and a tanker might have to discharge 10,000 tons; this could take up to twelve hours. Naughty tanker masters have been known to save time and money by getting rid of the stuff as they sail along. Captain Flett knows. He was once a tanker master. The poacher's ways of cutting corners are handy ammunition to the gamekeeper. The port thus has tight regulations and spot checks, and stiff penalties for those who break the rules. The checks are carried out by small aircraft that twice a day go spotting for tell-tale oil slicks.

I asked if I might fly with the anti-pollution squad; a phone call speedily settled it, but Captain Bray and his spotter Bobby Sandison were less than pleased to see me. 'You another passenger? Want a nice view of the islands do you? Happens all the time when the sun comes out. There are another two somewhere. I wonder whose friends they are.' He was most ungracious; I felt like turning away. The captain managed to answer a few questions before tuning in the radio to the cricket. He'd found only one slick but he firmly believed in the deterrent value of the flights and he sneered at the boats who thought the oil companies were paying for the flights; they are in fact paid for

from harbour charges. 'We don't advertise that much, ships might get uppity if they knew!' Spotting a slick is an easy business from the air – the rainbow effect is unmissable. We headed north-west out to sea before turning southwards, flying low over a Greek tanker to make sure he had seen us.

After some minutes, Bobby Sandison noticed a blot on the seascape; it clearly was not oil, but it looked interesting enough for the plane to dip for closer inspection. Sandison saw birds pecking away and jumped to the conclusion it must be a fish. But anyone could see it was too big for a fish. Binoculars revealed the answer. 'It's a dead sheep. How the hell did it get there? Must have fallen off a cliff and been swept out to sea.' That mystery solved, we went on in search of oil. The only spot we found was trailing behind a pleasure boat and it didn't bother Captain Bray and so we returned to base.

I took a taxi from the airstrip to the ferry where I knew there would be a bus to Lerwick. The driver had once been a roofing contractor in New York, but his wife got so homesick for Shetland that he brought her home and now they lead simple, self-sufficient lives, rearing sheep, planting and reaping. We were so busy talking, I missed the bus. It pulled in and out of its allotted place without either of us noticing. That's because it did not look like a bus; it was an unmarked mini-van. 'You weren't to know that, but I should have done,' said the taxi driver. 'Look, I've got a friend who runs the garage down the road, and he usually knocks off about five and heads for Lerwick. I'm sure he will give you a lift.'

'I'd never leave a woman stranded,' said the garage man, 'but the last chap I gave a lift to was sick all over the place. Get in.' We didn't bother with introductions. I sat in the back while he and a colleague chatted in dialect as the car sped towards Lerwick. This had once been a single track with passing places, but oil had provided a race track. As we neared Lerwick the two apologized for talking in dialect and returned to the subject of drink and drunken passengers. 'There's a good little pub by the ferry. They are open from 8 a.m. until 11 p.m. You'll see some sights in there.'

Alcohol abuse is a problem for these islands. A survey in 1979 revealed that one in ten men had problems with drink which showed up in their health, their work or their family relationships. Oil money has been used to fund programmes to tell the community of the perils of drink, through schools, through helping employers identify the problems. There are even special day centres where people can meet to talk without being tempted to drink. No one can blame the coming of oil; it has always been a badge of manhood around here to be seen with a bottle bulging out of a back pocket.

While waiting for the ferry to take me back to my pub, the Maryfield on the Isle of Bressay, I met Jonathan Wills, who lives on the island. He asked me home to tea, which is the kind of spontaneous gesture that delights this Londoner and I accepted with relish, even though I'd had a long day and felt travel-weary and talked out. Jonathan Wills is well known in Shetland. He's been a boatman, a crofter, a warden of a sanctuary island, Labour candidate, writer of children's books, manager of the local radio station and editor of the *Shetland Times*. He tried leaving the islands to seek fame and fortune, but soon headed back. He said that at the end of the eighteen-hour journey by boat from Aberdeen, grown men have been known to cry at the sight of the Bressay lighthouse and Lerwick harbour. He knows and loves the islands well, but he can be very critical. That night he was in the mood to kick the oil companies out, tell them to go to hell and come back only when they had sorted out all the squabbles. He has an inclination to see the oil companies as wicked giants taking advantage of little islanders. He can also be hard on the islanders. Some of the new industries, started on oil money, try to hire non-union labour at low wages, with one lavatory between a workforce of forty. There was, I felt, a tendency to exaggerate; to find one bad egg and then be suspicious of the whole box. After a while he conceded that Shetland had gained substantially from oil. The future looked bright: talented residents no longer had to leave in search of work, everyone had a wider outlook brought about by the infusion of outsiders and yet the very same infusion has also made them more aware of being Shetlanders and had given rise to a new interest in their own culture, their music and their language.

We went peat cutting at 10.30 p.m. It was completely light as we parked the car by the television mast and walked across the moors. My pathetic attempts to try my hand were made easier by the description provided by the elderly woman on the bus that morning. 'It's a lovely way to end an evening,' said Jonathan, as we humped three sacks to the car, stopping to ease our backs and to allow ourselves to be thoroughly sentimental about the view of the harbour, where two Polish ships were anchored. Jonathan said they did a nice time in contraband, swapping watches and cameras for mail-order catalogues to take home to their wives, who could then copy the fashions. When we'd finished being sentimental about the view, we became sentimental about the sunset, forcing ourselves to ignore the arctic edge on the July breeze. We came across a host of yellow iris and by falling to our knees we could line them up with the horizon and allow the red rays to peep through. It was a photographer's dream.

Walking back across the moors we had our final discussion on oil

and oil revenues. Whatever the hiccups and whatever the social problems, at least the islanders can see where the money has been spent and that some of it has been invested in the future – for the day when the oil runs out. Looking at Britain as a whole, this cannot be said.

Tony Benn was minister of energy in the mid-1970s when the oil began to come ashore, but by the time the money began to roll into the Exchequer he was no longer in office and now claims that his successors have misused the funds – ‘The greatest act of treachery to the national interest in the twentieth century.’ Well, have they, or is this left-wing hyperbole, or what? The answer is not simple; economists disagree. Some argue that the Thatcher government has blown the money funding the dole queues and on an orgy of consumer-spending on imported goods; others say that the money has been used to erode trade-union power, which has helped to make industry leaner and fitter and to build up assets abroad, both of which will pave the way for years of steady economic growth.

Taxation of oil companies alone has yielded billions of pounds for the Chancellor to play with. The Labour party argue that they would have put this money in a fund for investment in industry – just like Shetland – to help manufacturing get on its feet, so that it would be able to pay the country’s bills when the oil money runs out. The Conservative government chose not to have such an earmarked fund, and instead put the billions into the general budget. They don’t seem unduly worried that manufacturing now accounts for a mere 20 per cent of our economic base, compared to 30 per cent in Germany and Japan, and they don’t seem unduly worried as they watch our bill for manufactured imports growing. They argue that we ought to be glad to see the back of old-fashioned, overmanned, uncompetitive industry and that new industries are taking the place of manufacturing; service industries such as banking, insurance and tourism. This is true and has accounted for a hefty rise in ‘invisible earnings’ to help offset our trade balance. None the less the Labour party has a point: we should be putting more money into research and development to discover new products, new things for Britain to sell in the world market. Industry’s record is pathetic; research suggests that only 1,000 of Britain’s 80,000 manufacturing companies invests in research and development. It’s hard to get the true picture: such figures are not published in annual reports.

Let me repeat a story, a story that I read somewhere which well illustrates the problems of our age. It is the tale of two cameras. Once upon a time in 1952, the Brownie 127 was born and sold in millions over the next twelve years. During that time there was one model

change. In 1979 the Japanese company Canon brought out a market leader and by 1987 there had been five changes of model. The company, during this time, had spent 10 per cent of its turnover on R. & D. to make sure it maintained its leading position. The moral is that change is more rapid and that you can’t have a winner and then sit back. A winner this year is obsolete next year.

All these arguments about poor investment in research and development are nothing new. It’s well established that the British are no slouches when it comes to pure scientific research, but leave much to be desired when it comes to applying the knowledge to producing marketable products. But it doesn’t have to be like this. I have every sympathy with those who say that at least some of the oil money should have been earmarked to boost this kind of development rather than let it swirl around the economy and hope that the private sector will become rich enough to allow itself to think long term rather than short term. The next century will see the worth of Tony Benn’s remarks. Either that or Mrs Thatcher will confound her critics once more.

Chapter 3

The Highlands and Dundee: Heavenly Beauty and Nationalist Fervour

A glimpse of beauty that evening at Scarfskerry, of lobster pots and craggy rocks, made me greedy for more. I wanted to find the real Highlands. The Highlands of my imagination were soaked in a sentimental haze supplied by Walter Scott's bestseller prose, and I already sensed that I would find little of this biscuit-tin culture, of bagpipes, kilts and swirling mists, but I might well find remnants of the isolated, hard Highland life, and descendants of that intriguing clan system with its weird hierarchical array of chiefs, tacksmen, tenants and sub-tenants, tough men given to fighting rather than farming.

Until a couple of hundred years ago, the English regarded this part of the country of little value and best ignored. And then in 1745 the Highlanders (or rather some of them) decided upon a final fling against the House of Hanover. After the skirmish, London decided to tame the Highlands, to attempt integration and the destruction of the separateness of the Highland way of life. Even so, for several decades few, apart from government officials, attempted the journey northwards.

It came as a surprise to discover that when Dr Johnson published his account of travels through the Highlands in 1775, the place was considered as exotic as the North Pole. Cobbett came much later, in 1832, and only briefly reached the foothills, but that didn't stop him pontificating in his *Tour of Scotland*. One glimpse and he felt able to sum up, though this may have been easier because he was interested only in two things – food and the land as potential for growing food. Starving in the army had made him a food bore. He saw oats and cattle and sheep and was well pleased. 'All that we have heard about the barrenness of the Highlands of Scotland has been a most monstrous exaggeration,' said he, with an equal amount of exaggeration. The Highlands can be barren. There is much granite and hard sandstone;

there are mountains running to the sea's edge where small communities cling within the entrance to a sea loch, offering a natural harbour for fishing and crofting. I was heading for such a community, Kinlochbervie, on the north-west coast.

From this point my journey took shape. I decided that in the interests of a comprehensive inquiry I would ricochet from coast to coast, from east to west and from west to east. Every time I arrived on one coast I would plan a route that returned me to the other, and in so doing would zigzag my way through Britain. In Thurso I was close to the east coast and thus I would head westwards. I'd heard much about the beauty of this coast. And I'd read an account of the westward road by Edwin Muir who, in the 1930s, had been commissioned to do for Scotland what J. B. Priestley had done for England. Most of the time during this section of his Scottish journey, he seemed obsessed with his car, which was always going wrong, but in between he did convey to me an impression of strangeness and, to use his words, a heavenly beauty.

Without a car I was in difficulty. I didn't believe it at first. There was a road, therefore there had to be a bus, a mail bus even; I was in no hurry and could wait a day or two. But the bus went as far as Bettyhill, leaving a gap far too wide to bridge by taxi. I quizzed the hotel receptionist; I went to the bus station and to the tourist office, but the answer was *no*. I even telephoned Thurso companies with connections to the fishing community at Kinlochbervie, and indeed found one that would have helped with a lift had it not been the holiday season. 'Sorry, pet, we just can't help this week.'

So I gave up, or rather gave in and abandoned the coast road and planned to reach KLB (as it is known locally) via a deep V, taking the train which runs down the east coast before moving inland to Lairg, at the point of the V, and from there I'd move northwards by bus. The train left at 6 a.m., and since it clearly scorns a close relationship with the bus, it leaves the traveller with a four-hour hiatus at Lairg, lengthening the journey to eleven hours. But in the end it was not necessary. The Barr family, strangers, mere voices on the telephone, suggested they meet me at Lairg. I protested. I felt inadequate. I had long since given up doing the two-hour round trip to meet folk at Heathrow (which seemed the nearest equivalent). It wasn't that I minded the driving, it was that I minded the airport. But then Lairg railway station was hardly in the same league. I accepted and once again felt cossetted.

The railway journey, apart from going in the wrong direction, was pleasant enough; the train was slow and full. I shared a compartment

with two young Scots, unapproachable since they had blocked off contact by clamping on ear-phones, through which pop music seeped, and three French teenagers, one reading Katherine Mansfield, another reading Evelyn Waugh and the third eating crisps and biscuits. I accepted his offer of a biscuit just to be friendly and we chatted about where we were heading in that clipped Pinteresque dialogue which inevitably afflicts two people who are not at home in each other's language.

We hit the coast at Helmsdale and the sight was lovely, with sweeping apricot-coloured beaches, the sun winking at the water and not a soul in sight. I moved to the corridor for a better view and immediately found myself in conversation with an Australian Catholic primary-school teacher who was whizzing around Britain on an eight-day rail pass costing a mere £74. He was using it to the fullest extent, which meant that he hardly stopped for breath in each place, but none the less seemed happy with the view from the railway tracks and human contact supplied by fellow passengers.

I tried to get my thoughts together on KLB, which took no time at all since I knew little about the place, except the importance of fishing and the fact that Brian Friel, the Northern Irish playwright, had set part of his most unusual play, *The Faith Healer*, there. The station at Lairg was predictably tiny. Three people left the train. The other two, an elderly couple, were met by a lady in a large car.

'Are you all right?' she called to me. 'Can I give you a lift into the village?'

I explained that I was being met, but having misread the timetable I was a little earlier than I'd said and was happy enough to wait. Imagine that happening at Heathrow.

Sara, the Barrs' twenty-one-year-old daughter, arrived and we set off to find the Highlands. She drove very fast, which made me nervous for a while, until I realized just how well she knew these roads, every bend, every passing place on the single track. Then I relaxed and allowed myself to be swamped by the landscape, which was stunning. There were green fields, and darker green wooded hills, and in the distance mountains shading from blue to grey, and there was clear water and stone cottages. But merely to list them is like listing the ingredients of a recipe with no understanding of the final mouthwatering dish. The views were so lovely that I kept asking if we could stop for a moment so that I could imprint the scene on my memory. I felt I was being tiresome, but Sara assured me that it was flattering when a visitor responds to your native country, a place which you have long since taken for granted. Sara's parents, Robin and Jennifer Barr, own

22,000 acres of Sutherland, from KLB to Cape Wrath. Jennifer's father, Robert Neilson, bought the land after the war. He'd been a stockbroker but had no desire to return to that life. Sutherland then was a depressed place, the kind of place which gets featured in television films because it seems poor but at the same time has values and a style of living that makes a mockery of that four-letter word.

Colonel Neilson, when he arrived, pondered what he might do to improve the lot of Kinlochbervie, and of the crofters on his estate. The weather provided the answer. One day fishermen from the east coast were forced to find shelter in the loch and Neilson asked them what it would take to persuade them to land their catch in KLB on a regular basis. Ice and transport came the answer. Ice and transport ought to be possible, he thought, and enlisted the help of the forerunner to the Highlands and Islands Development Board and of his neighbour, the Duke of Westminster. If it hadn't been for Colonel Neilson, the story goes, there would be no fishing industry at KLB, but there is and it is thriving and ever expanding.

A new harbour was being built: a grand scheme costing £4 million, grant aided, including a chunk from the European regional fund, the money to be spent on a new fish market, a major dredging exercise to enable the harbour to accommodate up to eighty boats, perhaps a fish-processing plant and a repair yard. Fishing provides the crofters with a much-needed source of income; the two go well together. After all, it was what the better landlords had in mind when they cleared the Highlands for sheep. Before sheep there was poverty; moving families to the coast to make way for sheep meant they had a better chance, through fishing, of improving their lot. But that kind of thinking is rarely acknowledged; to most people there was nothing good about the idea of the Clearances. Today, however, men readily acknowledge that having a piece of land with, say, forty ewes and a few cattle, cannot provide a living, but fishing means they can stay close to the land they love and on which their families have lived for as long as anyone cares to remember. In the past the crofters would have to travel, going away for a season to fish; now they go to sea for less than a week at a time. There are some moans: the dual life keeps many busy and prevents them from devoting as many hours to the all-important business of being neighbourly, a pastime that acts like glue, attaching people to each other in an undissoluble way.

KLB is imbued with the best aspects of Coronation Street, the EastEnders, Ambridge or even Peyton Place. Everyone knows everyone; everyone gossips about everyone. Sometimes this sounds malicious, but it is a shallow kind of malice, the kind that makes men fight of

a night outside the pub and embrace the next day. Such closeness can of course be claustrophobic, but I wasn't around long enough to feel that. I was around long enough to be entranced and much amused. Much of this was the Barr influence. I had intended to stay at a local hotel, but was invited to stay at their home, and anyway by the time the car turned the final hill for the descent into KLB, I already knew many a character by name and I already knew that the bothy vied with the local hotel as the centre of village life.

Sara had been at the bothy the night before until the wee small hours. It's at the bottom of her garden, so to speak: a wooden hut with space at one end for bunk beds, a sitting area in the middle and kitchen quarters just inside the door. The salmon fishermen live there in the season (from mid-May until mid-August) and when they are on land the door is always open. The bothy was my first port of call, and there I met Pete and Andy, who own the boat, and Willie and TC, who are helpers. The group have had a licence from the Westminster estate to fish in the same waters for ten years, and they wouldn't reveal how much it costs. They were cagey too on how much money they made, but said it supported the group for the season, after which they split up and go on the dole or to Thurso in search of work. Pete and Andy were most forthcoming on the subject of farmed salmon, which is all the rage; a new industry, heavily backed by the Highlands and Islands Development Board since it brings employment. There are around 200 farms producing around 20,000 tonnes of salmon, which could well rise to 50,000 tonnes by the early 1990s. Big business, and all too many under the umbrella of multinational companies like Unilever. Such farms are not universally popular, facing claims that they blight lochs and damage the tourist trade. For the salmon fishermen in the bothy at KLB there are other problems. Farmed salmon hardly bears comparison with wild salmon, but the market, which is mainly in the south, is too ignorant to know the difference; mostly they do not even know whether they are buying wild or farmed versions. The bothy boys know; they can tell at a glance; farmed salmon lack the blue-grey sheen on their skins; their fins are wimpish (they can after all only swim in a limited circle) and their meat is greyish because they have been fed on fish pellets rather than the prawns and shrimps that give wild salmon its distinctive colour. Farm salmon they claim is artificially coloured. They invited me to go out with them the following morning in the hope that we would net a stray farmed creature, one that had got away, and I could then see the difference myself.

Meanwhile we all arranged to meet in the pub later that evening for, being Friday, it would give me a chance to see the community at play.

This did not mean a cosy chat or two in a comfortable chair; it meant standing at the bar for some considerable time failing to keep pace with the quantities of beer and scotch being consumed. Sara warned me not to spend too much time talking to any one man; it would worry the women. 'The Black Widow' already had a reputation for being a snake after the men. I began with Willie. At the bothy he'd said very little; kept his nose in the newspaper and looked up only once: 'How many Ts in Rotterdam?' he ventured, needing help with his crossword. He was chatty in the pub. He told me how he had been living in Thurso with Angie, and together they had a son who died of leukaemia. 'We'd split up before it was diagnosed, but once we knew how serious it was we got back together for his sake. He used to play on the beach at Dounreay, but you can't prove it was that which caused his illness.'

'Look,' said Maureen, who runs the shop and who lives in a caravan with Ben. 'Look, there's the Black Widow. Can I introduce you?' The Black Widow earned her name from the colour of her hair rather than the colour of her skin; her dress tended to be black and as elegant and as time-consuming as her make up. We got on well. She'd worked in the wardrobe of the Scottish Opera before going to Canada, but she had become bored with city life and felt that KLB might be a good place to bring up her son. She thought she might stay: I thought she might not. 'Did you notice how she kept putting her hand on TC's shoulder? She's possessive,' Maureen whispered. 'He walked her home the other night after a party, but as he left the bothy he yelled to us that he'd be back within half an hour, just to make the point that he didn't intend to linger.'

'Yes,' said TC. 'I kissed her good night and then kicked the fuck out of the cat when I got home.'

I met Muriel. She has a daughter of fourteen who had just returned from her first visit south, where she had strawberries and cream. Muriel's brother had been banned from the pub for his behaviour. I met Sally, who had a mysterious background, aristocratic in some way, drug-related in another, who now ran a craft shop on the harbour side. Sara's mother sometimes knitted jumpers to sell in the shop. Sara, Gordonstoun-educated and with a degree, was hoping for a career in the film industry. One day, since she is an only child, she will be the landowner, but despite the difference in background, her ability to merge with the locals was matchless. It was either that or being lonely. By the end of a long evening, submerged in local gossip, I felt I had the makings of a soap opera to rival *Brookside*, one that would certainly overturn the legacy of *Dr Finlay's Casebook*.

The next morning, Saturday, the weather was poor, windy and wet, but the salmon boat had no option but to brave the swell. There's a rule that the leader net must be lifted from noon on Saturday until 6 a.m. on Monday, in order to give the fish a free weekend. If the weather precludes the net being lifted then the estate manager has to be notified, otherwise the fishermen risk being fined. We thought it worth trying to get the nets up, so donned oilskins and boots and clambered aboard the fibreglass all-purpose boat. It wasn't designed for salmon fishing, and once we started slamming against the waves, it seemed rather small and inadequate. TC sang at the top of his voice. My eyes closed against the rain and the spray which was annoying since I had wanted to enjoy the view from the loch, but whichever way I twisted and turned so that my back could take the pounding, leaving my eyes open, I still found my vision blurred. I decided it was best to keep my eyes shut until the boat stopped behaving like a roller-coaster and paused by the nets. The hauling up of nets is work for fit men, who place their toes under a piece of wood in order to anchor their feet in the hope of not tripping overboard. The first net yielded one salmon. The second net saw thirty-four plump, streamlined beauties plummet to the deck, showering us with scales, with tiny silver flakes like confetti. There they squirmed and lashed about in a futile attempt to regain their freedom.

'Mind the eyes,' yelled Andy as TC went for the kill. There's a knack to clubbing salmon so that there is no trace of the death blow; bruises and damaged eyes cause instant devaluation. I didn't think it worth trying my hand.

'Here we go - a perfect farm job,' Andy called to me with contempt in his voice. And he was right. Seeing the two side by side, the differences are marked: the dullish, brownish colour cannot compete with the heavy blue-grey of the wild creature, the shape was less streamlined and the fins were indeed feeble through lack of use. The sky grew darker and the wind increased, which prompted a brief debate about turning back, but we decided to go for one more net and a final attempt to reach the leader. The waves seemed to get bigger and the boat smaller, but it never occurred to me that we were in any way at risk. Afterwards Andy revealed that he had been apprehensive and that his decision to go for another net had not been wise. We didn't reach the leader. Instead we belted for the shore, cold and uncomfortable and clinging to the rail for fear of being tipped into the sea.

A morning of salmon fishing was followed by an afternoon witnessing an important local social event: the opening of new buildings at the Seamen's Mission by Anne, Duchess of Westminster. The weather

spoiled her appearance; she wore the statutory big hat and pearls, but her dress was protected by a blue windcheater, which is not an elegant garment. The Seamen's Mission provides a home from home for fishermen from the east coast; while the catch is being unloaded and auctioned, they can have a shower, a meal and a game of snooker. The duchess thought it was all 'charming'. 'Isn't that *charming*. I really am most impressed,' she said in the gravelly voice of a heavy smoker. The fish market where the catch is auctioned had been turned into a fair, with stalls selling lobster and cakes and Christmas cards. Some boats were offering rides around the loch, others invited the nosy to crawl all over them. I crawled all over one which was old, cramped, uncomfortable and grubby. I then bought lots of cakes and went to the bothy to see if the salmon boys had thawed out.

During the next couple of days I turned my attention to white fish and learned about the growth in pair trawling and the difference in nets and of plans for the future and stories from the past; of the days when the Barr family first arrived, when the road from Lairg was mere gravel and there was no electricity and no running water. In those days the family owned and ran the local hotel and had three sheep. Now they've sold the hotel and have 300 sheep. Jennifer Barr loves the sheep. She'd had to bottle feed four of them. One morning I offered to help and found myself in a wrestling match with a sturdy, greedy little creature, quite determined to knock me over in an attempt to gobble more than his share. While he walked on my feet and butted me, I took mild pleasure in knowing something he had yet to learn. This was to be his last bottle; within twenty-four hours he'd be crying and bleating and longing for his bottle, angry that he'd been apparently forgotten, not realizing that he'd been kicked out into the world to fend for himself. The noise was pathetic, but sheep are surprisingly quick on the up-take; after two days he and his three chums got the message.

I left KLB one evening at 8.30, along with thirty tonnes of haddock and whiting in a lorry that was fifty-two feet long. I'd cadged a ride with Edwin, who was going through to Inverness (where I wanted to be), *en route* for Aviemore, where another driver would be taking the catch to Edinburgh. He seemed delighted to have a passenger. 'It's good to have company and I'm happy to be a taxi driver. You've got to be around here, the transport is so bad. I'm always giving rides. One day recently the boss rang me and asked me to take *three* people . . . turned out to be a wedding party, bride, groom and best man. They drank all the way and I had to pour them out of the lorry. They invited me to the wedding, but I couldn't turn up in a boiler-suit could I?'

Edwin had been driving this route for three years. He was born on

the west coast and now lived in Lairg. For ten years, between 1959 and 1969, he was a policeman in Dundee.

'Nine or ten of us left at the same time. We were all disillusioned. It was the poorest-paid job in Britain then. I got £17 a week to take home. It's the kind of job that makes you cynical, and Dundee is not much of a place, but it is full of contrast, lots of unemployment and a big university. I was glad to get out.'

At first he worked in a garage changing clutches and brakes, and then he began to drive.

'It was the oil. There was a lot of money to be made driving for the oil people when all the construction was going on. I'd work fourteen hours a day, seven days a week for two years.' And with the money he bought his own lorry and began doing the beef run to London, driving illegally long hours until the day he fell asleep at the wheel and woke up in hospital with a ruptured spleen.

'Look, a deer,' I said, which was an obvious remark, but it was the first I'd seen.

'Yes, we're on Westminster land now. One man owns all this. It isn't right in my view. There's no farming done, it is one great park for shooting and fishing. He comes up here once a year for a month and that's all. There's money for you.'

'But it does create employment, doesn't it?'

'Not much.'

'But it must bring money to the area?'

'Not much.'

They say Queen Victoria is to blame. She read Walter Scott, fell in love with the area and bought Balmoral. This encouraged the rich to use the area as a playground. The Arabs own estates now, and so do the Dutch. The Arabs use their lands infrequently, flying up in their helicopters, leaving the place in the hands of agents much of the time. It doesn't promote good relations between the landowners and the rest, but then absentee landlords never do.

The village of Achferry is pretty. The Westminsters have decreed that all houses shall be whitewashed and have black-painted window-frames and doors. Everything is black and white, even the telephone box.

Edwin was bothered by the road. 'Look out of your window. You've got about three inches to spare on your side and I've got about the same on my side. We could do with a better road.' If the road was unsuitable for such huge lorries, it was also one of the most beautiful routes. We passed only one other vehicle, another fish lorry, and paused for a chat. I think Dr Johnson might have recognized it. He

complained that the roads of Scotland 'afford little diversion to the traveller, who seldom sees himself either encountered or overtaken'. If it bothered him, it delighted me. The feeling of space and of emptiness was a bonus and a revelation. When you think of the size of the British mainland and of the size of the population, it seems inconceivable that there would be any empty space.

'They are still putting in a lot of trees around here,' said Edwin. 'Tax dodge, and it must be a good one with all those pop stars putting money in.'

They are indeed putting in a lot of trees, mainly in eastern Sutherland and Caithness. And it has caused much controversy. The rationale goes way back to the First World War, when Britain needed to replace depleted timber reserves. The Forestry Commission could be said to be the first nationalized industry, and many are surprised that it was not one of the first to be privatized. Rich sportsmen as well as pop stars have attracted much publicity for taking advantage of tax concessions for afforestation programmes. These have now ceased, but other grants have been introduced. And rows over what is planted and where continue. We need trees, of that there is no doubt, not to ensure an adequate supply of props for the trenches, but to reduce our import bill for timber heading for the pulp mills. This area is planted not with indigenous Scots pine, but with imported spruce, which is upsetting the wildlife and causing consternation among conservationists. This message has finally reached the right ears and in future the planting of broad-leaved deciduous trees is to be promoted on grasslands and arable lands. The greenshank and the golden plover will be pleased to see fewer foreign pines.

It was dark by the time we reached Inverness, three hours later. My first view was of thousands of street lights. How odd they looked. I hadn't seen such a sight in weeks; there had been a handful lighting K.L.B. but this array signalled a city - albeit a small city of 40,000. I'd happily forgotten about cities.

Edwin pulled into an industrial estate on the edge of Inverness where he was to deliver his first load of fish. From Highland Haulage he phoned for a taxi to take me to my boarding house. It was 11.45 and I was anxious. I'd phoned to say that I would be late, but the owner had sounded none too pleased. 'We'd better wait up for you,' he said. 'We don't want you ringing the bell and waking the rest.' He was waiting to receive my apologies. The sheets on my bed were made of nylon and a sign said that baths could only be taken between 6 p.m. and 10 p.m.

Inverness, at the mouth of the Ness, is called the capital of the

Highlands. It is *the* service centre, the trading centre and the headquarters of the summer tourist traffic. There are no shortages of bed-and-breakfast houses; people make their money in the summer and have a quiet winter. The city has doubled its population in the last twenty years. The coming of oil caused that, and now, with oil on the retreat, there is unemployment; but in the summer it is well concealed by the tourist. The Labour party tried hard in the 1960s to direct industry to the area. The result was an aluminium smelter at Invergordon and a pulp mill at Fort William. Both have now closed. To have had the two for ten years was better than not having the two at all, but thinking on regional policy has changed. It's no longer considered wise to bring in industry, garlanded with all manner of grants and tax incentives, for once all the incentives run out, such industries flounder. Much better to encourage smaller industries to grow from local needs so they have a better chance of taking root; much better for the locals to find their own solutions, than have vote-catching temporary expedients placed on their doorsteps. For all that, the busiest place in town was the tourist office, followed by Marks and Spencer. That's a landmark. M. and S. dithered about putting a store in Inverness, and have been amazed, so I was told, by its success. The unit sale, the amount each person spends on a visit, is said to be extraordinarily high. From miles around folk travel once a month to Inverness for all their needs. I wasn't interested in tourist Inverness, and vowed to ignore Loch Ness and its monster: it's more biscuit-tin culture. But then I heard the legend of the loch and liked it; it explains how the loch came into being.

Once upon a time in that neighbourhood there lived a holy man who somehow managed to have access to clear spring water and, being a generous man, he offered the water free to others, stipulating that they must place a wooden lid on the top of the well after drawing water. A mother came with her baby and while she was filling her jug she saw an adder creeping towards her child. She grabbed her offspring and ran, forgetting to put the lid back. The water rose and trickled out of the well and did not stop until the loch was formed.

My purpose in stopping in Inverness was of course to glimpse the Highland capital, but also to glimpse the descendants of the clan chiefs whose names are woven consistently throughout the tapestry of Scottish history. Commander Mackintosh is now the Mackintosh of Mackintosh. He lives a handful of miles outside Inverness, at Moy, in an elegant but modest house on a modest estate. He is a modest man, delightful company, and with a line in self-deprecation that is decidedly un-Scottish. He went to Dartmouth at the age of thirteen and, follow-

ing in the footsteps of his father, became a naval officer. His father unexpectedly inherited the estate in 1938 and left it in the hands of a lawyer while he got on with the business of fighting Hitler. It was a vast estate then, but much land was sold; it now consists of 11,000 acres, the majority of which is moorland.

Commander Mackintosh debunked the mystery of the clan-system over tea in his paper-crowded study.

'There is nothing mysterious about tribes or the tribal system. The key to the Highlands is communication. Before 1720 there were no roads, so it was difficult if not impossible to get in and out. Farming was at subsistence level, so people starved or stole from the next person. Land in those days meant only one thing - food. We fought over food. And of course as soon as the roads came the clan system began to crumble.' Being a Scottish landowner took more than a few sips of tea to explain. 'I find it difficult to justify. If you want to take the view that land ownership is unfair, I find that statement hard to refute. When I was in the navy, it was so much easier. The navy was very much respected and I felt the approval of my fellow men. When I became a landowner, I immediately felt the difference. I became public enemy number one. When I first decided to stand for the local council my friends all told me not to bother. You'll never get in, they said; they won't vote for a landowner. Well, I stood and I won and since 1974 I've been unopposed. Even so there are only two landowners on a council of fifty-two.'

He sounded very defensive, more defensive than I'd have expected. 'I am defensive. Landowners in the Highlands have a very bad reputation and the Clearances are a big part of it. I've argued with historians about the Clearances. The Highlands before the Clearances had a greater population than it could accommodate and it was to the advantage of many to be moved or to be given a passage to the colonies. It was either that or penury. It was to the advantage of many. One day a Rolls-Royce full of Americans drew up outside here. They'd all come to trace their ancestors and I told them they were lucky. They'd done well by leaving.'

I mentioned that I was much surprised at the number of times the subject of the Clearances had come up in conversation since the day I set foot in the Shetland Islands, and that all landowners seemed to take much the same defensive view. And I also told him about my most recent encounter with the opposite view. I had been wandering around a churchyard near Cape Wrath looking at the graves when an elderly man in a cloth cap and raincoat began to talk to me. He didn't look at me; he kept his gaze fixed in the middle distance while he talked in a

soft voice about the 'wicked factors' and how they waited until the most able men were away at war and then began to clear the land. He never mentioned the landowner, but used the phrase 'wicked factor' over and again. He came from the Isle of Lewis. The Clearances, it seems, refuse to become 'history'; they remain a raw living memory.

'In my youth we never talked of these things, but maybe that is because we were taught very little Scottish history. Nowadays all children learn about those times and talk about them. There's still a lot of resentment in the Highlands. The Clearances may be in the past, but on another level we don't think we get our share. There are primary schools with outside loos. We seem too far away; no one is interested - except those who are looking for a playground. "Incomer" is a nasty word and "White Settler" is even worse, but those of us who work the land resent them. We resent them out of fear; we feel vulnerable. We had to tear down the Victorian mansion because it was just too much to keep up. We put up this house in its place in the 1950s. I'm not particularly chauvinistic, because I've lived in the south, but when we struggle, we do resent those who use the land as a plaything.'

He made the life sound so hard that I shocked him by suggesting that he might sell. 'It's inconceivable. My family have been here for 600 years. Owning land in the Highlands is a luxury; it's a struggle, but we get by. And it's so different from being a landowner in, say, Wiltshire. There is a much greater spirit of egalitarianism in the Highlands, which is why English Tories always say that Scottish Tories are so much farther to the left. We have a different attitude to class. We all know each other. We mix with each other because we are interdependent.

'Once a year the Mackintosh of Mackintosh plays host to the clan. It's a world gathering to which several hundred come at a time. They are mostly Americans looking for the land they left behind. It sounds a touch ludicrous, I know, but it is harmless enough. To please them I have placed a collection of treasures, of clan memorabilia, in a hut in the garden. There's a bed in which Bonnie Prince Charlie slept. Come and have a look.' I went and looked at the wall hangings, the newspaper clippings, the swords and the bed. And then we walked back over a beautiful lawn, pausing to admire the view.

They speak ill of Dundee; 'they' being anyone of any note who has passed through and then felt obliged to comment upon the fact. Dr Johnson came and went and found nothing to remember; Queen Victoria declared: 'The situation of the town is very fine, but the town itself is not so.' James Cameron shared the same view, but expressed it

more eloquently. He ribbed the place for being blessed with a site which should have encouraged a city of grandeur but instead gave rise to an absence of grace so complete that it was almost a thing of wonder. Dundee, climbing the hillside above the River Tay, had the makings of a kind of Naples, but instead 'had the air of a place that from the beginning of time had reconciled itself to an intrinsic ugliness'. Cameron lived there in the late 1920s, filling up glue pots on a magazine, improbably titled *Red Star Weekly*, for working girls who liked gory stories. The magazine was owned by D. C. Thomson, who was more famous for *Beano* and *Dandy*. Cameron was amused that what he insisted was one of the most alcoholic towns in the nation persisted in returning the only prohibitionist Member of Parliament. 'Endlessly voted for by the distracted wives in a hapless effort to keep the dole money from the pubs.' That prohibitionist, a Mr Scrymgeour, also had the distinction of unseating Winston Churchill, who as a Liberal represented Dundee from 1908 to 1922. When he deserted the Liberals he was dumped.

And it was another MP that was taking me once more eastward - Gordon Wilson, the Member for Dundee East, was one of only two Scottish Nationalists in the House of Commons (the other represented the Western Isles), and a chat with such a rare specimen was a powerful magnet. At the station in Inverness I had a choice; I could travel via Aberdeen or via Aviemore and Perth. I chose the latter because it sounded prettier. Dundee is a place with a past. It was once the centre of the jute and flax industry; 30,000 tons of the stuff once came into the port from India in a fleet solely devoted to the trade, and many factories in Bengal were owned by Dundee merchants. The industry employed 50,000 people producing rough sacking, carpets and linen. The city was also famed for jams, for marmalade and of course for comics.

In those days, towards the end of the nineteenth century, critics might argue the place was so engrossed in getting rich that it didn't bother about how it looked. The jute barons, and they included the Grimond family, achieved much, but the city was full of slums and poverty and violence - Saturday-night brawling was commonplace. Now, of course, Dundee is neither so busy nor so rich. Unemployment had reached 17 per cent among a population of 180,000 which is one of the reasons why the sensitive Liberal party chose to have its conference there in 1985. I attended as a sketch writer for *The Times*. The town was brimful and delighted to be on the lucrative conference circuit. At the best hotel, the Angus, they were singing to the sound of the tills ringing.

'I'm sorry, lovely,' said the barmaid, 'but the manager has said that all drinks served have to be doubles while the conference is on.' On my last day I decided to make a dash for the plane from Edinburgh to London, and asked a taxi driver if he fancied the run. He looked as though he had won the pools. 'Oh, I'd be happy to be out of Dundee for the afternoon. Let's go.' He told me in that hour his entire life story, a story of poverty in Glasgow and unemployment in Dundee. He also told me how he bridged the gap between his income and his needs with a life of petty crime. He picked up deals in pubs and always wore boots several sizes too large in case he left footprints behind. 'Why should I gaze in shop windows at things I can't afford to buy? There are always ways of getting them. Wouldn't you do the same?' I wondered if I might find him again on this, my second visit.

Outside Dundee station, I turned left and found a bed and breakfast hotel called The Bruce. At £9.50 a night it's the kind of stop that long-distance coach drivers use and sure enough it took me less than half an hour to find myself discussing the run to London. One driver said that it had become so boring he bit his fingernails for something to do; another discussed the cowboys who drive for twenty hours at a stretch and give the rest a bad name. As well as coach drivers, the hotel was seething with RAF cadets on a course. Since no meals were served they'd been out to collect fish and chips. I decided I needed a walk.

It was only 7.30, but the centre of the town was already alive with loudmouthed youths yelling at girls in their weekend best. I watched them and began to count the number of times the girls eased their blouses back over their shoulders, an action that was not done out of modesty, to cover an inch of cleavage. It was done for comfort: their garments were badly cut and slipped and slithered instead of staying put. Their shoes were similarly cheap; I checked by looking in shop windows, which had abandoned window-dressing skills for unimaginative racks. Several of the shops were empty and plastered with stickers claiming that the royal family were parasites: 'What have they got that we haven't got?' they asked, and invited me to a public meeting to discuss the answer. Excellent, I thought, I'll go - only to discover that the anti-royalist heat had been dissipated the previous evening. Disappointed, I wandered instead to look at the new leisure centre; if a place is poor and struggling, it will have a large leisure centre built with guilt-appeasing grants. I thought about going in and then headed instead for a pizza parlour with mock Tiffany lamps, and more young girls adjusting their blouses. It was quiet and welcoming and neatly segregated into booths for smokers and non-smokers.

On the way back to The Bruce I stopped at the Job Centre and looked at the vacancies in the window: 'Housekeeper required, 23 plus, accommodation available, must be good cook, honest, reliable and of excellent appearance.' 'Door-to-door salesman required for bread rolls and dairy products.' 'Kitchen designer, commission only.' None of the ads mentioned money.

Gordon Wilson's office was uglier and scruffier than anything else I had seen in Dundee. The staircase leading from the street was dust covered; the ladies' room was locked; 'Oh, don't worry about that use the Gents.' I did, and it was stomach turning. Wilson's waiting room displayed dirty ashtrays and I was offered coffee in a cup so cracked I didn't dare drink out of it. I sat under a poster saying, 'England is too much trouble', and opposite a poster saying, 'Gordon Wilson works and cares', and another saying, 'It's time for self-government.'

Wilson is an unprepossessing, dull man with what seemed to me to be a total lack of political fire. Maybe a morning surgery listening to the complaints of his constituents had doused the fire and left him longing to get home to a round of golf or whatever it is MPs do with their spare time. He gave me a brief sketch of Dundee problems from nineteenth-century prosperity based on the sea to the coming of American companies like Timex and National Cash Register, both in the doldrums, having been overtaken by technological advance. The worst, however, was over, I was assured. 'In 1980 the use of the buses in towns dropped 20 per cent as factories closed, but things are picking up now. There are signs of recovery.' The most visible sign being the Wellgate Shopping Centre, a three-storey complex housing British Home Stores and Tesco, and undoubtedly responsible for some of the empty shops I'd seen the previous day in another part of town. We then turned to Scottish nationalism. He was interesting on the build-up of enthusiasm for the party during the early 1970s, which sprang inevitably from dissatisfaction with other parties and other policies; a build-up that offered the SNP 30 per cent of the vote in the election of October 1974, but which had evaporated by the time the referendum on devolution and the setting up of a Scottish Assembly came before the electorate in 1979. On that occasion 64 per cent turned out to vote and of that percentage 33 said yes and 31 said no. The bill demanded that at least 40 per cent had to be in favour; the mission failed and after that the SNP support crumbled further. The bill, said Gordon Wilson, had been a mess, and so complicated that all too few understood what it entailed and all too many found clauses over which to squabble, and reasons not to bother to vote.

That 64 per cent is a sad figure; it means that 36 per cent couldn't be

bothered to vote on something as important as who makes the rules that govern them. On the whole, however, it is safe to assume that abstainers are in favour of the status quo, in other words that they were saying no to devolution. The closeness of the other figures is just as interesting: it reveals that those who bothered to vote were equally divided. A fine example of the Scottish personality – both realistic and romantic. The realists were saying no and the romantics were saying yes. Before the referendum most of us in the south thought that Scotland would vote for devolution; they kept saying they would. Allan Massie, a Scottish writer, tried to explain in an essay published in the *Spectator*. 'We may all be Jacobites and nationalists in our hearts, but a lot of Scots reserve sentimentality for whisky sessions and, when sober, don't like to let bread fall jam-side to the floor.' I accept Massie's theory, but Gordon Wilson believes that if there were another vote tomorrow it would be *for* devolution. The reason for the change is Mrs Thatcher. 'We feel that Scotland has been taken to the cleaners over oil, and we know that Mrs Thatcher is anti-Scotland. She treats us with contempt and has no sympathy for the fact that our best people are still having to leave Scotland in search of opportunities. This has been the pattern for centuries and it cannot go on much longer. If Scotland ran its own affairs such men would stay.'

I did not feel comfortable in Gordon Wilson's presence. Try as I did I could not establish a rapport with him. I felt unwelcome. He answered my questions briefly and quietly and did not seem to relish discussion. We bored each other. Looking back I can see that the tone for our meeting was set within the first few minutes and that it had been impossible to change it. During those early minutes his secretary had knocked on the door and said that a constituent was outside waiting to see him.

'Let him wait. He's late.'

I said that I didn't mind giving way to the constituent as our conversation might take some time.

'Let him wait. He's late.'

Gordon Wilson lost his seat to Labour in the election of 11 June 1987. He is now president of the SNP. The SNP won an important by-election at Govan in 1988; the result represented a 33 per cent swing against Labour. Most people, and especially the Labour party, like to see this as a mighty vote against the Thatcher government: a mighty roar of protest by a left-wing country against right-wing rule from London. The poll tax or community charge was the biggest single issue. This is the Conservative party's new alternative to rates. Instead of a charge on *property* to raise money for local services, *individuals* will

have to pay, via flat-rate levy. The poll tax appears to have few admirers: many more people will have to pay it than pay rates. In fact, everyone over the age of eighteen will pay something, even those on social security will have to find 20 per cent of the bill. All this is part of Mrs Thatcher's attack on high-spending local authorities and also part of her campaign for citizens to feel involved and concerned about what is happening around them. More people paying the tax will mean more people who care about the quality of the local services, and more voices to complain if payment for those services is considered too high. The tax is said to be more costly to collect than rates (people move around, buildings don't), and those eligible for charges will be taken from the electoral roll. It is argued that to avoid paying people will not register to vote. The new system will cover England and Wales from 1990, but in Scotland the change came a year earlier. The able SNP candidate, Jim Sillars, latched on to the unpopularity of all this and used it as a focus for Scottish frustration in general. It helped to win the by-election. This victory may goad many to reconsider the virtues of devolution: I don't think it means that Scots want independence. The SNP argues otherwise. They have discovered the EEC. They were against the EEC at the time of the 1979 devolution debate. Now the EEC looks attractive.

If Scotland could get from Europe the kind of financial support it gets from London, it might well tempt the Scots to thumb their noses at London. I find the SNP change of heart over the EEC both cynical and opportunistic, but I also feel that the English have been far too superior in their dealings with Scotland and Wales. On these travels I came to value the Celtic fringe; to value the countryside for its beauty; to value the people for the contribution they make to the nation's life; to value the colour and sparkle that they add to the words Great Britain. England alone would be a dull lump. Our loss would be Europe's gain and it would serve us right.

I had intended to ask Wilson to show me his Dundee, the place in which he lived and worked. I'd discussed this idea with his secretary and she had said that he'd probably be delighted. In the end I didn't bother to ask him. I didn't think he'd say yes, and if he had, I feared the hours would be arid. I went instead to the Angus Hotel for a cup of tea and to ponder what to do next. I thought about the taxi driver I'd met on my previous visit and how I'd left in a hurry. In an instant, I decided to do the same again and within the hour I was back at the railway station waiting for the train to Glasgow.

There are too many stairs at Dundee Station and as I struggled with my luggage I failed to see the ticket office. When I discovered that I'd

have to climb the stairs once more in order to get a ticket I asked a young woman if she would keep an eye on the luggage while I raced to the kiosk. Helen was the Manageress of Richards shops in Dundee. Actually she works in Aberdeen, but her shop there was being refitted, so she'd been moved to Dundee for a while and was living at the Angus. 'It's been rather boring. I don't feel safe out at night on my own, so I just go back to the hotel each evening and as I hate eating on my own I have something sent up to my room.'

The previous evening had been different. She invited her assistant Manageress to join her for dinner. 'All evening we were being eyed by two Arabs at the next table. I told my assistant to enjoy it, after all she's not very happy with her husband at the moment. In the end the Arabs came over and asked us to settle a bet. They thought my assistant was Italian . . . well she's South African and of course after that opening they invited us to join them for a drink.' Helen drank vodka and orange with her Arab until 1.30. He was here to buy property. He wanted an estate. I envied her the meeting. I'd have enjoyed talking to an Arab who wanted to buy a Scottish estate.

We'd been so busy with our chat that I hadn't noticed the station fill up with police. Once I did notice, I wanted to know why. A young officer said, 'There's a train coming in from Montrose, and there's a lot of trouble from football supporters, so you stand right back away from the track and be careful.'

The train came in. There was no trouble; a score or more of chastened youths got off. I looked out of the carriage window to ensure I missed nothing and both Helen and the young policeman waved to me as the train pulled out.

Chapter 4

Glasgow's Miles Better

Glasgow shares a problem with Dundee; it too is derided and has a dubious image; it too provokes a dismissive wrinkling of the nose from those who have never set foot in the place. Such people see the city as synonymous with drunken football fans, impenetrable accents, a foul-mouthed comedian called Billy Connolly and poverty in a place called the Gorbals. Arriving at the station my expectations were a little on the low side, but then, to be fair, they invariably are when heading into a strange, large city. Large cities present obstacles; they can be difficult to prise open. Beyond the tedious round of tourist monuments and the visual exploration of the delights and dilemmas of buildings, buildings and more buildings, they can seem as closed as any Masonic lodge. It's not that people are unwelcoming; it is easy enough to arrange formal interviews, but rarely is one invited into homes, and never, never is one invited to hitchhike towards a lobster! However, within days I'd fallen in like with Glasgow; a Glasgow that was anxious to explain itself; a Glasgow that was anxious that I should understand that it desired to change its image. It no longer wants to be the feared thug, the bullyboy, the ignorant, the victim. It wants to be well-dressed and charming and cultured, the victor.

How did Glasgow get such a dubious image? If one goes far enough back, to the early part of the eighteenth century, there are some attractive descriptions to be found; descriptions of handsome streets, of kitchen- and flower-gardens, of orchards and cornfields. Daniel Defoe passing through in 1727 described Glasgow glowingly; 'Tis one of the cleanliest, most beautiful and best built cities in Great Britain.' Nearby there was a pretty country village called Gorbals.

The slide came with prosperity and prosperity came with the Union with England in 1707, when Scotland was allowed to trade with Virginia and did so with relish, outwitting both London and Bristol to