19

The Flyer to Cape Wrath

My Blue Guide's description of the north-west coast of Scotland suggested a setting that was straight out of *Dracula* or *The Mountains of Madness*. 'The road crosses a strange and forbidding mountain wilderness,' it began, 'of sombre rock-strewn glens, perched glacial boulders, and black lochs.' And then, 'after 8 m. of lonely moor and dark bog . . . the road from the ferry's w. end to Cape Wrath crosses a bleak moor called *The Parph*, once notorious for its wolves,' and at last, 'the road rises across a desolate moor . . .'

It made me want to set off at once. It seemed the perfect antidote to the presbyterian monotony of Dingwall. If the guide-book's description were accurate it would be like travelling to the end of the world – in any case, the British world. Cape Wrath was not merely remote – the ultimate coastline – it was also such a neglected place and reputedly so empty that the method for getting there had not changed for eighty years or more. Baedeker's *Great Britain* for 1906 said, 'From Lairg, mail-cart routes diverge in various directions, by means of which the highly picturesque country to the W. and N.W. . . . may be conveniently explored . . .'

At Dingwall Station I asked the best way to Cape Wrath.

'Get the post bus at Lairg,' Mr MacNichols said.

In other words, the mail cart. There was no train, there was no bus, there was hardly a road – it was paved the width of a wagon for fifty-six miles. There were people who still called the post bus 'the flyer', as they called tenant farms 'crofts' and porridge 'crowdie'.

The train to Lairg left Dingwall and passed along the edge of Cromarty Firth, which at this state of the tide was shallow water seeping into the mudflats. Not long before, the railway line was

to have been shut down; but it had been reprieved. It passed through the bleakest boggiest part of Caithness, where the roads were often bad, and in winter it was an essential service. But Mr MacNichols had confided to me that in the off-season there were sometimes only three or four people on board.

To save money on the line some of the stations had been closed. The ruined, boarded-up station building at Alness resembled many I had seen in Ulster. A large aluminium smelter had just closed at Invergordon – 900 more people out of work and another building left to rot. Decrepitude was decrepitude – the fury of terrorists was indistinguishable from the wilfulness of budget-cutters and accountants.

Beyond the village of Fearn there were farms and fields of a classic kind – long vistas over the low hills, quiet houses and smooth fields of fat sheep. There were steeples under the soft grey sky at Tain – the Tolbooth, with a conical spire and turrets, and a church spire like a pepper-mill. Pink and purple lupins shook on the station platform.

People used this train for shopping, travelling to a place like Tain from miles up the line. Two ladies were sitting next to me. They were Mrs Allchin and Mrs MacFee. They were discussing the butcher.

'Duncan is very obliging,' Mrs Allchin said. 'We often give him a lift on stormy days.'

'I think it's an ideal place, Tain,' Mrs MacFee said.

Mrs MacFee had two large bags of groceries, and she had also managed to find a packet of 'toe-spacers' at the chemist's shop. It eased her mind to know that she had these for pedicures and nail varnishing. Kenneth had mentioned a dinner-dance at the Lodge and she did not want to fuss at the last minute.

Mrs Allchin had been very lucky in Tain. Ian's lad, wee Colum, was having a birthday, and she had found a box of something called 'indoor fireworks'. Apparently, you just cleared a space on the table and set them off. Apparently, they were perfectly safe. Chinese.

'What won't they think of next?' Mrs MacFee said.

But Mrs Allchin's mind was elsewhere. The indoor fireworks reminded her that she was chain-smoking again. She often chain-smoked in trains. It worried her, like nail-biting.

'I dinna drink, at any rate,' Mrs Allchin said.

We travelled inland, towards the hills at Culrain, which had a ruined look. And the roof was off the station at Invershin. Some other stations had clearly been sold off to be turned into common bungalows or holiday homes. There were cabbages growing where the platform had been.

We went through Acharry Glen – the River Shin on the left. I had settled down to watch the mountains passing, but soon we came to Lairg and I had to get out.

There was something very disconcerting about leaving a train in the middle of nowhere. It was all activity and warm upholstery and then the clang of a carriage door and the train pulled out and left me in a sort of pine-scented silence. Lairg Station was two miles from Lairg, but even Lairg was nowhere.

I saw a man throwing mailbags and bundles of newspapers into the back of an old-fashioned vehicle. It was a cut-down version of a bus, about the size of a hearse. Still the man went on loading it with the bags and bundles the train had left.

I cleared my throat. He looked up. I said I was going to Durness on the post bus.

'This is the post bus,' he said. 'We can leave as soon as I get these bags loaded.'

His name was Michael Mathers. He pronounced it 'Maithers'. His accent was not Scottish. It was fairly Gaelic and very Scandinavian, a soft Norse whirr in every syllable. Later, I discovered that everyone in his part of Sutherland had the same accent, a legacy of the Vikings. This accent was all that remained of their language, Norn.

We set off for Lairg and picked up more mail and an old couple on their way to Scourie. Michael said that this was a Bedford bus, only ten years old. It had gone 400,000 miles.

'When I took over,' he said, 'we had an Albion. Made in Glasgow. That one went 650,000 miles in fifteen years.'

He had been driving for twenty-one years. He was forty-four and had the solemn kindly face of a fisherman. He had once tried working on a fishing boat. He said, 'You need a strong stomach for that.' It was cold, it was hard, there wasn't much money. At midnight on a pitching boat, struggling with nets, he would look into the distance and see the lights of Durness: the lucky people indoors. So he had chucked it.

We headed out of Lairg and were almost immediately in a bog. It was a wide dark landscape, with rocks and grass and heather close by, and mountains ahead.

There was no better glimpse into the life of remote Sutherland than through the smeared windows of this eight-seater. The post bus was a life-line and Mr Mathers much more than a driver. He not only picked up mail and dropped it off, and ran with it to houses in the rain, and carried scribbled messages from house to house, he also drove along a single track road for the whole of the way north, which meant he had to stop when a car approached from the opposite direction – eighty or ninety times in a single trip, because the road was only wide enough for one car. He carried milk. He carried newspapers. He carried shapeless bundles labelled 'For Graham'.

He stopped the bus at 'The Reeks', in the middle of a peat field, and with the mist flying sideways he hurried to the door with a pint of milk, the *TV Times*, today's *Scotsman* and a birthday card for Mrs Campbell. Farther down the road at 'Fernside' it was two pints and a *Mirror*, and then a five-minute trot up a muddy path to deliver a junk-mail Sunglasses Special Offer from the Automobile Association (though Mr Innes was expecting a long overdue letter from his daughter in Australia), and then a copy of the *Sun* to 'Hope Cottage' and another favour – fifteen pounds of wet fish in a plastic shopping bag for a householder who had asked for it over at Kinloch. And more newspapers. Such effort and expense to bring people copies of the gutter press! But that was Mr Mathers' job. And he was never abrupt. Whenever he handed something over he exchanged a greeting. 'How's your mother feeling?' and 'The sheep are looking well' and 'It feels like rain'.

We came to an unearthly, gigantic landscape along Loch More in the Reay Forest. The fields looked bitter and brown, and the loch very cold, and the mountains were vast shrouds of rock. One of these silver mountains was the most beautiful I had so far seen in Britain – a great bulge glittering with cataracts of scree. It looked as if it had just frozen in that carbuncular shape the day before.

'That's Arkle,' Mrs MacGusty said. She wasn't local. Her accent was amused and tentative, like someone nibbling shortbread, the tones of Morningside – the genteel landlady accent of Edinburgh. 'It's Icelandic, you see.'

What did that mean?

'It's all turned over. These high mountains' – she seemed to be describing babies, her voice was so affectionately savouring the words – 'Ben Stack and Arkle – what should be on the bottom is on the top, they reckon, the geologists. You look at them and you think, "They all look duffrent!"'

Mr MacGusty said, 'They're also very beg.'

This was Achfary – 'the Duke of Westminster's estate,' Mrs MacGusty said.

'Does he farm here?' I asked.

'Oh, no. It's an estate. He keeps it for the shooting and the fishing. Prince Charles comes here in a helicopter sometimes, for the shooting. Och! I expect you're a republican!'

We were sitting by the roadside in the post bus as the rain came down. Mr Mathers was bringing a copy of yesterday's *Express* to a cottage behind a high wall.

I said, 'So it's all gamekeepers here?'

'Aye,' Mr MacGusty said. 'The Duke owns a good butt of Sutherland.' He thought a moment. 'It's the old way of life.' He thought again. 'It's very unfair, in a way.'

It was more a shrug than a protest. But he was resigned. After all, we were talking about feudalism.

The past was accessible here as a present fact. Not only in ducal estates and private game reserves, but also in ancient names. The MacGustys got off the bus at Laxford Bridge. It was a Norse name – *lax* meant salmon (and of course the Yiddish *lox* for smoked salmon was a cognate). Then Mr Mathers told me how his parents had both been fluent Gaelic speakers and that he spoke it fairly well. And peat-cutting was part of the past, too. The peat was free, but cutting it was back-breaking work. They were cut and left to dry in stacks, so everything depended on good weather. Even present-day crime sounded somewhat outdated – sheep rustlers, and squatters and poachers.

We drove up the narrow track to Rhiconich. This was actually the coast, a muddled maze of islands and lochs. We went to

Kinlochbervie, which was a busy fishing port on a sea loch, dealing in white fish and lobsters.

We stopped twenty more times. Mr Mathers did this twice a day on this small windy corner of Scotland. When he stopped and parked, the wind shook the bus and rattled the cottage gates and moaned against the telegraph wires. A pint of milk, a *Scotsman* and a printed postcard saying, *This is to acknowledge your communication of the 13th inst.* to Mrs Massey at 'Drumbeg'.

'Cape Wrath doesn't mean "angry",' Mr Mathers said. 'It's from a Norse word that means "turning-point". This is where the ships turned south. Sutherland is another Norse name – it was south for them.'

Then he smiled. 'Don't be disillusioned,' he said. 'The weather can be hellish here. In 1952, when I was still at school, we had a January storm. The winds were a hundred and twenty miles an hour – roofs were torn off houses. The Irish ferry was lost that night. It's often bad weather – horrible weather. I pity the lads in those wee fishing boats.'

We came to Durness. He said, 'This is it. There aren't more than three hundred people here. It's the work problem, you see. There's no employment.'

The village was empty, but the wind was a presence – wild gusts flew in from the direction of the Faroes.

I walked back through the sandy cliffs, among the rabbit holes, to Keoldale and the Cape Wrath Hotel, and had my first good meal for days. There were a number of English anglers at the hotel. They blustered when the national news came on. They were all Tories. They called the Prime Minister 'Maggie'. Her nonsense suited their nonsense. One said he wanted to shoot the man being interviewed, who claimed he had known all along that the Falklands were going to be invaded. 'Too many bloody people giving advice!' Another said that half the Labour Party should be shot for treason. One thing about anglers, though. They went to bed early.

The next day I crossed the Kyle of Durness and walked seven miles to Kearvaig, which was like the end of the earth. But this was Cape Wrath proper and had peaty soil – it was crumbling cliffs and sand at Durness.

I saw a seal take a salmon. People told me that seals did not

really eat them – that they just took bites of the fish's shoulders and threw the rest away. But this seal lay on his back with the eight pound salmon in his mouth, and he tossed his head and snapped his jaws and ate the whole thing.

Then on my way back I saw a flock of sheep crossing a sandbar in the Kyle of Durness. The tide was coming in. The sheep started moving. Soon they were swimming, the big horned sheep in front, the lambs behind with their noses out of the water. They were North Highland Cheviots. They moved very slowly, for the tide was still rising and they were still far from the bank. Fifteen minutes later the Kyle was filled, there were fewer sheep visible; and then there were none. They had all drowned, about nine of them, under the grey torn sky.

Some fantasies prepare us for reality. The sharp steep Cuillins were like mountains from a story-book – they had a dramatic, fairy-tale strangeness. But Cape Wrath was unimaginable. It was one of those places where, I guessed, every traveller felt like a discoverer who was seeing it for the first time. There are not many such places in the world. I felt I had penetrated a fastness of mountains and moors, after two months of searching; and I had found something new. So even this old, over-scrutinized kingdom had a secret patch of coast! I was very happy at Cape Wrath. I even liked its ambiguous name. I did not want to leave.

There were other people in the area: a hard-pressed settlement of sheep farmers and fishermen, and a community of drop-outs making pots and jewellery and quilts at the edge of Balnakiel. There were anglers and campers, too, and every so often a brown plane flew overhead and dropped bombs on one of the Cape Wrath beaches, where the army had a firing range. But the size of the place easily absorbed these people. They were lost in it, and as with all people in a special place they were secretive and a little suspicious of strangers.

Only the real natives were friendly. They were the toughest highlanders and did not match any Scottish stereotype I knew. They did not even have a recognizably Scottish accent. They were like white crows. They were courteous, hospitable, hard-working, and funny. They epitomized what was best in Scotland, the strong cultural pride that was separate from political national-

ism. That took confidence. They were independent, too – 'thrawn' was the Lowlands word for their stubborn character. I admired their sense of equality, their disregard for class, and the gentle way they treated their children and animals. They were tolerant and reliable, and none of this was related to the flummery of bagpipes and tartans and tribalistic blood-and-thunder that Sir Walter Scott had turned into the Highland cult. What I liked most about them was that they were self-sufficient. They were the only people I had seen on the whole coast who were looking after themselves.

It was a shire full of mountains, with spaces between – some valleys and some moors – and each mountain was separate. To describe the landscape it was necessary to describe each mountain, because each one was unique. But the soil was not very good, the sheep were small, the grass thin, and I never walked very far without finding a corpse – loose wool blowing around bones, and the bared teeth of a skull.

'Look,' a shepherd named Stephen said to me on one of these hillsides.

A buzzard-sized bird was circling.

'It's a hooded crow,' Stephen said. 'They're desperate creatures. In a place like this – no shelter, no one around for miles – they find a lamb and peck its eyes out. It's lost, it can't get to its mother, it gets weak. Then the hooded crows – so patient up there – dive down and peck it to pieces. They're a terrible bird.'

He said that it was the predatory crows, not the weather, that killed the lambs. It was a cold place, but not excessively so. In winter there was little snow, though the winds were strong and the easterlies were usually freezing gales. There were always birds in the wind – crows and hawks, and comic squawking oyster-catchers with long orange bills, and singing larks and long-necked shags and stuttering stonechats.

It could be an eerie landscape, especially on a wet day, with all the scattered bones gleaming against the dun-coloured cliffs and the wind scraping against the heather. It surprised me that I was happy in a place where there were so few trees – there were none at all here. It was not picturesque and it was practically unphotographable. It was stunningly empty. It looked like a corner of another planet, and at times it seemed diabolical. But I liked it

for all these reasons. And more important than these, my chief reason for being happy was that I felt safe here. The landscape was like a fierce-looking monster that offered me protection; being in Cape Wrath was like having a pet dragon.

On one of my walks I met a veterinarian, Doctor Pike, who was making the rounds of the Cape Wrath farms trying to persuade the farmers to dip their sheep. An ailment called 'sheep scab' had been brought over from Ireland and had endangered some of the flocks.

Doctor Pike was a fluent Gaelic speaker. He was self-assured and well-read, and though he did not boast he did imply a moral superiority in the highlander – and in the Scots in general – and he suggested that there was something lamentable and decadent in the English.

'Take the colonies,' he said. 'The Scots who went out were very hard-working and idealistic. But for a lot of the English families the colonies were the last resort. They sent the black sheep of the family – the rubbish, the drunkards, the layabouts.'

We were walking around Balnakiel Bay – he was heading for a farmhouse. We passed a shepherd driving a flock of sheep to be shorn.

Doctor Pike said, 'You might take that shepherd to be a fool or a rustic. But most of these shepherds are sensible men. I mean, they read. I go to many of these shepherds' wee cottages and – do you know? – I find lots of books in some of them. They take books with them out on the hillsides.'

We had a good view of the sea – the mouth of the bay was wide. There were no boats out there. I seldom saw boats, at any rate. It was one of the roughest areas on the British coast, and the scarcity of boats added to the feeling of emptiness I felt on shore. It was like the world after a catastrophic bomb.

Doctor Pike was still talking about shepherds. He said, 'There was a man here from Edinburgh. He saw a shepherd in the hills and said how wonderful it was to get so much fresh air and exercise. "But how does it feel to be so far from the centre of things?"

'The shepherd stared at him and smiled. "That depends what you mean by the centre of things." You see, he felt that it was just a matter of perspective. Who was this city man to say that the shepherd was not at the centre of things?'

I told Doctor Pike that I had seen nine sheep drown in the incoming tide at the Kyle of Durness. He said it was a pity but it sometimes happened. Although sheep could swim, the horns of a ram made it hard for the creature to keep its head up, and the lambs were too frail to swim very far. But he said that he loved sheep – he loved working with them.

'They have very keen instincts. They have a wonderful sense for forecasting the weather – they know when a gale is coming. They begin to leave the hills many days before it begins to snow.'

The next day I went with Doctor Pike to Loch Eriboll. It was a sea loch piercing ten miles of Sutherland, and it was deep enough to take the largest ships. In the storms for which this part of Scotland was notorious, ships found a quiet anchorage here.

'I want you to see something,' Doctor Pike said.

We rounded a bend, turning south towards Laid, along the shore of the huge loch.

'Look at this hillside,' he said.

It was a rough, steep slope, covered with small white boulders. Patches of the slope had been ploughed, but most of it was covered with glacial rubble and humps, and the grass was blackish and sparse. Some sheep stood on it and looked at us with their characteristic expression of indifference and curiosity. This grazing land was very bad.

'Now look over there, across the loch,' he said.

It was like a different country, a different climate. It was not bouldery – it was soft and green. There were grassy meadows and gentle slopes over there. It was sheltered by the mountains behind it, and pleasant streams ran through it. There were trees over there! There were no houses, there were no sheep.

But this windswept side of the loch – the western shore on which we stood – was lined with tiny whitewashed cottages. They were surrounded by broken walls and fences and some bushes. There were gnarled trees, none higher than the cottage eaves. The roofs fitted the cottages in an irregular way like lopsided caps and made the cottages pathetic.

'These people once lived over there, on the good side of the loch. They were cleared off that land and moved here. They were crofters then – they're crofters still. They were given the worst land.'

He was talking about the Clearances, the evictions by the chiefs and landlords who wanted to cash in on the land. It had taken years, but the Highlands were eventually emptied – the fertile parts, that is. Enormous sheep farms replaced some crofts, and others were turned into playgrounds, grouse moors and baronial estates. This was a major reason for the tremendous number of Scottish emigrants, dispersed across the world between 1780 and 1860. So what had seemed to me no more than an early chapter in a history of Scotland, or a melodramatic painting by Landseer, was a lingering injustice. The cruelty of the Clearances was still remembered, because many people who had been made poor still remained where they had been dumped.

'Is it any wonder that some of them are poachers?' Doctor Pike said.

He was fairly passionate on the subject. He said the land ought to be nationalized and divided into smaller units. The land could be made productive – people would have jobs.

I said he was the first left-wing veterinarian I had ever met. He denied that he was left-wing. He said most radicals were devils. Then he said, 'Want to meet one of the victims of the Clearances?'

We stopped at a small white cottage near the edge of the loch and were greeted by an old man. This was Davey McKenzie. He wore a tweed hat and a threadbare jacket and loose trousers. His shoes were cracked and broken. He had a healthy face, good colour, and he was sinewy. He was about seventy or a bit more. He raised some sheep and he grew vegetables and he was always followed by a black terrier with a pleading face which lay down and snored whenever Mr McKenzie sat down.

'We can't stay,' Doctor Pike said.

'You'll have a cup of tea,' Mr McKenzie replied. He had the same Norse whirr in his accent that I had been hearing for days.

We entered the cottage and were introduced to Jessie Stewart, Mr McKenzie's sister. She was perhaps a year or two younger than he, but she was pale and rather feeble. Doctor Pike whispered

to me that she had recently had an operation and he added, 'She's far from well.'

'Sit down in front of the fire,' she said. 'I'll put the tea on.'

It was the end of June – a few days from July – and yet a fire burned in the cottage hearth, and the wind made the rose bushes scratch at the window.

Doctor Pike said, 'Don't trouble yourself, Mrs Stewart.'

'It's no trouble,' she said. 'And don't call me Mrs Stewart. No one calls me that. I'm Jessie.'

The cottage was comfortable but austere – a few potted plants, pictures of children and grandchildren, a calendar from Thurso and some Scottish souvenirs, a glass paperweight showing Arthur's Seat, and a little doll in a tartan kilt.

Doctor Pike said his piece about sheep scab and then turned to me. 'You know you're in the Highlands when people make you welcome like this. No one is sent away. If you come to the door of a Highlander he lets you in.'

'That's very true,' Davey McKenzie said softly.

'I know a rune about that in Gaelic,' Doctor Pike said. 'Translated, it goes like this –

> 'I saw a stranger yest'reen.
> I put food in the eating place,
> Drink in the drinking place,
> Music in the listening place –
> And the lark in its song sang!
>
> Often, often, often, often,
> Comes the Christ in the stranger's guise.'

'That's very beautiful,' Davey said.

'Some people come,' Jessie said. 'But these days there are vandals about. We never locked our doors before, but now we lock them. People come – they look so strange, some of these hikers and campers, and the women are worse than the men.'

She went for the tea. Doctor Pike said, 'I was telling Paul about the crofters here, how they were moved from the other side – from that good land.'

He did not say that it was over a century ago.

'It was unfair, aye,' Davey said. He blinked at me. He had wet

red-rimmed eyes. 'There's so much good land lying idle. Aye, it's hard land where we are.'

He was a quiet man. He said no more. It seemed to me terrible that he had spent his whole life trying to feed his family by digging this stony ground, and always in sight of the green fields under Ben Arnaboll across the loch.

But the bad land had turned many people into emigrants or wanderers. Jessie Stewart's life was proof of that.

'So you come from America,' she said to me. 'I've been to America myself. I spent eighteen years there.'

I asked her where exactly.

She said, 'In Long Island and Virginia. New York City. Bar Harbor, Maine.'

'The best places.'

'I was in service,' she said. 'The people were wealthy you see.'

Her employers had moved from house to house, according to the season, and she had moved with them. Perhaps she had been a cook. Her scones were wonderful – she had brought out a whole tray of scones and shortbread and sandwiches with the tea.

Why had she left America?

'I got very ill. For a while I couldn't work, and then I started getting doctors' bills. You know how expensive hospitals are in the United States. There's no National Health Service –'

And she had no insurance; and the family she worked for wouldn't pay; and she needed major surgery.

'I could never have afforded it there,' she said. 'It would have taken all my savings. I came back home here and had my operation on the National Health. I'm feeling a wee bit better now.'

So she had left the poverty trap in the Highlands and emigrated to the United States, and become a servant, and fallen into the American poverty trap. And now she was dying on the croft where she had been born. Most of the crofters here were old people whose children had moved away.

I continued to Caithness alone. The farther east I went the greener it was, the more fertile the land. There were high mountains near the sea. The sheep were fat. They winced from the ditches where they crouched to get out of the wind. I went on to Coldbackie, Bettyhill and Swordly. They were small cold places. I went to Brawl and Bighouse. The grass was better here.

Caithness was a milder, more sheltered place, with sweet-smelling grass. But I liked it much less than Sutherland – its mountains streaming with pale scree, its black valleys of peat, its miles of moorland and bog, its narrow roads and surfy coast and its caves. It was like a world apart, an unknown place in this the best-known country in the world. No sooner had I left it than I wanted to go back.

20

The 14.40 to Aberdeen

From Thurso I walked ten miles to Dunnet Head ('the most northerly point of mainland Britain'). On this sunny day its cliffs were a rich bronze-orange and the foam on the violent currents of the Pentland Firth was being whipped into peaks by the wind. The rest of the countryside was as flat and tame as the flagstones it had once produced. Only the place-names were exciting – not just Buldoo and John O'Groats, but Hunspow and Ham, and Thrumster, Scrabster, Shebster and Lybster. And who or what were the Hacklemakers of Buckies?

People had babies in Thurso and round about. That was unusual. It was a noticeable fact that in most places on the coast there were few small children being towed by parents – not even on the sands. I saw big idle youths and middle-aged people and the very old. The very old, especially. They lived in the poorer, sorrier places. But Thurso had become prosperous from the offshore oil, and in the three or four towns on the British coast where there were jobs there were also young families.

After a day and a night in Thurso I took the branch line down to Helmsdale on the east coast. The summer brightness of the Scottish evenings made the flat brown moorland shimmer, and even the fissured bogs and sandpits did not seem so bad. We went along, stopping at ruined stations. *This is the Age of the Train*, the British Rail posters said, showing a celebrity who was noted for his work on behalf of handicapped people and incurables. He had been hired to promote British Rail. This branch line was certainly on its last legs. It was slow and dirty. But I liked it for being derelict and still stubbornly running across the moors. This was a little like being in Turkey.

The heather was in bloom at Helmsdale, and among the low

twisted trees there were thorn bushes and yellow flowers on the gorse. Large boulders stood on the strand here, where the North Sea lapped the coast, filling the rock pools. The sea was overlooked by small isolated farms and hills coifed with thick ferns. Sheep nosed around old gun emplacements and crumbling pillboxes.

I had High Tea – kippers, a poached egg and scones with fresh cream – and took a later train south. It was sandy beaches to Brora and beyond. At Brora I saw a sheep-shearer. He was kneeling against a fat sheep and clipping her with hand shears, just beside the railway line. He did not look up. There were smears of sheep grease on his arms. He was clipping the creature gently, and the sheep was not struggling much. It was as if the shearer was giving his big child a haircut.

It was a long zigzag through Easter Ross to Inverness, where I was planning to head for Aberdeen. I walked through this slow branch-line train. In the guard's van there was a crate with a label saying, *Pathological Specimens – Do Not Freeze*, and in the next coach a girl was writing a letter that began, 'Dearest Budgie'. There were campers returning from the Orkneys, and cyclists winding up their coastal tour. A Polish couple (the Zmudskys) were gnawing bread rolls, and their laps were spangled with crust crumbs. A man with unforgiving eyes named Wockerfuss, and his middle-aged-looking child, a boy of ten, sat sharing a book titled *Schottland*.

Mr Zmudsky smiled at a group of six men.

'Pgitty tgees,' Mr Zmudsky said, nodding at the trees out of the window.

'Yews,' one of the men said, and realizing that Mr Zmudsky was a foreigner, he raised his voice, crying, 'Yews!'

At this Mr Wockerfuss stiffened, seeming to understand but refusing to look.

The group of men were railway buffs. They were always a sure sign that a branch line was doomed. The railway buffs were attracted to the clapped-out trains, like flies to the carcass of an old nag. They had stop-watches and time-tables and maps. They sat by the windows, ticking off the stations as we went by. Ardgay (*tick!*), Tain (*tick!*), Invergordon (*tick!*), Alness (*tick!*), Muir of Ord (*tick!*), and then a bewildered little ticker named Neville

twitched his big lips crossly and complained, 'Hey, what happened to Dingwall?'

In a bed-and-breakfast place ('Balfour Lodge') in Inverness I pondered the question as to whether Inverness could be regarded as on my coastal route. It was a matter of perspective. The map was not much help. Everything seemed to depend on how one described the Moray Firth. Was that part of the North Sea?

And then I was too bored to do anything but set off immediately for Aberdeen. Balfour Lodge was operated by a quarrelsome couple named Alec and June Catchpenny. It was a cold house. The bathmat was damp. The Catchpennys sulked. Their dog looked diseased and I wanted to tell them it ought to be put down. I hated Alec's bowling trophies. Nor did either Catchpenny speak to me. 'Six pounds,' were the only words spoken to me in my twenty hours at Balfour Lodge. But what they bellowed at each other made me suspect that if I were to go fossicking in their bedroom drawers I would find what the dirty shops called 'marital aids'.

I went, via Elgin and Insch, to Aberdeen on the 14.40. A new railway strike was threatened and most of the passengers were talking angrily about the strikers.

'They won't have jobs to come back to,' said one man. This was Ivor Perry-Pratt who described himself as being in an oil-related industry. He supplied the off-shore rigs with non-slip rubber treads for ladders and walkways. It seemed they wore out very quickly or else perished in the wet and cold conditions. Business was good, but Ivor Perry-Pratt always wondered, *Will it last?* He sympathized somewhat with the railwaymen.

His friend Eric Husker said, 'They ought to sack the whole lot of them.'

Husker was in earth-moving equipment. Aberdeen was the fastest-growing city in Britain.

'That's too drastic,' Mr Perry-Pratt said.

'Rubbish. It's not drastic at all,' Mr Husker said. 'And it will come – you'll see! This will either be a fully-automated railway or else it won't exist at all. Ivor, be reasonable. A few years ago there were twenty-five farm labourers on every farm. Now, how many are there?'

Mr Perry-Pratt pleaded, 'But look at unemployment!'

Mr Husker was implacable. He said, 'We'll have to have a lot more unemployment before this country begins to run properly.'

Of course, he had a job.

We reached the coast. Offshore, a four-legged oil-rig looked like a mechanical sea monster defecating in shallow water. It was like a symbol of this part of Scotland. Aberdeen was the most prosperous city on the British coast. It had the healthiest finances, the brightest future, the cleanest buildings, the briskest traders. But that was not the whole of it. I came to hate Aberdeen more than any other place I saw. Yes, yes, the streets were clean; but it was an awful city.

Perhaps it had been made awful and was not naturally that way. It had certainly been affected by the influx of money and foreigners. I guessed that in the face of such an onslaught the Aberdonians had found protection and solace by retreating into the most unbearable Scottish stereotypes. It was only in Aberdeen that I saw kilts and eightsome reels and the sort of tartan tight-fistedness that made me think of the average Aberdonian as a person who would gladly pick a halfpenny out of a dunghill with his teeth.

Most British cities were plagued by unemployed people. Aberdeen was plagued by workers. It made me think that work created more stress in a city than unemployment. At any rate, this sort of work. The oil industry had the peculiar social disadvantage of being almost entirely manned by young single men with no hobbies. The city was swamped with them. They were lonely. They prowled twilit streets in groups, miserably looking for something to do. They were far away from home. They were like soldiers in a strange place. There was nothing for them to do in Aberdeen but drink. I had the impression that the Aberdonians hated and feared them.

These men had seen worse places. Was there in the whole world an oil-producing country that was easy-going and economical? 'You should see Kuwait,' a welder told me, 'you should see Qatar.' For such a man Aberdeen was civilization. It was better than suffering on an oil-rig a hundred miles offshore. And anyone who had been in the Persian Gulf had presumably learned to do without a red-light district. Apart from drinking and dancing

Scottish reels there was not a single healthy vice available in Aberdeen.

It had all the extortionate high prices of a boom town but none of the compensating vulgarity. It was a cold, stony-faced city. It did not even look prosperous. That was some measure of the city's mean spirit – its wealth remained hidden. It looked over-cautious, unwelcoming and smug, and a bit overweight like a rich uncle in dull sensible clothes, smelling of mildew and ledgers, who keeps his wealth in an iron chest in the basement. The windows and doors of Aberdeen were especially solid and unyielding; it was a city of barred windows and burglar alarms, of hasps and padlocks and Scottish nightmares.

The boom town soon discovers that it is possible to make money out of nothing. It was true of the Klondike where, because women were scarce, hags came to regard themselves as great beauties and demanded gold dust for their grunting favours; in Saudi Arabia today a gallon of water costs more than a gallon of motor oil. In Aberdeen it was hotel rooms. The Station Hotel, a dreary place on the dockside road across from the railway station, charged £48 a night for a single room, which was more than its equivalent would have cost at The Plaza in New York City. Most of the other hotels charged between £25 and £35 a night, and the rooms did not have toilets. I went from place to place with a sense of mounting incredulity, for the amazing thing was not the high prices or their sleazy condition but rather the fact that there were no spare rooms.

For £25 I found a hotel room that was like a jail cell, narrow and dark, with a dim light fifteen feet high on the ceiling. There was no bathroom. The bed was the size of a camp cot. Perhaps if I had just spent three months on an oil-rig I would not have noticed how dismal it was. But I had been in other parts of Scotland, where they did things differently, and I knew I was being fleeced.

To cheer myself up I decided to go out on the town. I found a joint called 'Happy Valley' – loud music and screams. I thought: Just the ticket.

But the doorman blocked my path and said, 'Sorry, you can't go in.'

Behind him were jumping people and the occasional splash of breaking glass.

'You've not got a jacket and tie,' he said.

I could not believe this. I looked past him, into the pandemonium.

'There's a man in there with no shirt,' I said.

'You'll have to go, mate.'

I suspected that it was my oily hiker's shoes that he really objected to, and I hated him for it.

I said, 'At least I'm wearing a shirt.'

He made a monkey noise and shortened his neck. 'I'm telling you for the last time.'

'Okay, I'm going. I just want to say one thing,' I said. 'You're wearing one of the ugliest neckties I've ever seen in my life.'

Up the street another joint was advertising 'Country and Western Night'. I hurried up the stairs, towards the fiddling.

'Ye canna go in,' the doorman said. 'It's too full.'

'I see people going in,' I said. They were drifting past me.

'And we're closing in a wee munnit.'

I said, 'I don't mind.'

'And you're wearing blue jeans,' he said.

'And you're wearing a wrinkled jacket,' I said. 'And what's that, a gravy stain?'

'Ye canna wear blue jeans here. Regulations.'

'Are you serious? I can't wear blue jeans to an evening of country and western music?'

'Ye canna.'

I said, 'How do you know I'm not Willie Nelson?'

He jabbed me hard with his stubby finger and said, 'You're nae Wullie Nullson, now piss off!'

And so I began to think that Aberdeen was not my kind of place. But was it anyone's kind of place? It was fully-employed and tidy and virtuous, but it was just as bad as any of the poverty-stricken places I had seen – worse, really, because it had no excuses. The food was disgusting, the hotels over-priced and indifferent, the spit-and-sawdust pubs were full of drunken and bad-tempered men – well, who wouldn't be bad-tempered? And it was not merely that it was expensive and dull; much worse

was its selfishness. Again it was the boom town ego. Nothing else mattered but its municipal affairs. The newspapers ignored the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the United Nations' initiative on the Falklands and the new Space Shuttle. Instead, their headlines concentrated on the local money-making stuff – the new industries, the North Sea Pipeline about to be laid, the latest oil-rigs. The world hardly existed, but financial news, used cars and property took up seven pages of the daily paper.

The *Aberdeen American*, a fortnightly paper, had the self-conscious gusto of a church newsletter. It was a hotchpotch of news about barbecues, schools, American primary elections and features with an Anglo-American connection. It was a reminder that the American community in Aberdeen was large. The American School had three premises. I heard American voices on the buses. And I was certain that it was the Americans who patronized the new health clubs – weight-loss emporiums and gymnasiums with wall-to-wall carpets. A lovely granite church had been gutted and turned into 'The Nautilus Total Fitness Centre'.

On a quiet street in the western part of the city was the American Foodstore. I went there out of curiosity, wondering what sort of food Americans viewed as essential to their well-being on this savage shore. My findings were: Crisco, Thousand Island Dressing, Skippy Peanut Butter, Cheerios, Pepperidge Farm Frozen Blueberry Muffins, Bama Brand Grape Jelly, Mama's Frozen Pizza, Swanson's Frozen Turkey TV Dinner, Chef Boyardee Spaghetti Sauce, El Paso Taco Sauce and Vermont Pancake Syrup. I also noted stacks of Charmin Toilet Paper, Budweiser Beer and twenty-five-pound bags of Purina Dog Chow.

None of it was good food, and it was all vastly inferior to the food obtainable locally, which cost less than half as much. But my experience of Aberdeen had shown me that foreigners were treated with suspicion, and it was quite understandable that there was a sense of solidarity to be had from being brand-loyal. Crisco and Skippy were part of being an American – and, in the end, so was Charmin Toilet Paper. I imagined that, to an American in Aberdeen, imported frozen pizza was more than cultural necessity – it was also a form of revenge.

'Isn't there *anything* you like about Aberdeen?' Mr Muir asked imploringly, as we waited on the platform at Guild Street Station for the train to Dundee. I had spent ten minutes enumerating my objections, and I had finished by saying that I never wanted to see another boom town again. What about the Cathedral, the University, the Museum – hadn't I thought the world of them?

'No,' I said.

He looked appalled.

I said, 'But I liked the bakeries. The fresh fish. The cheese.'

'The bakeries,' Mr Muir said sadly.

I did not go on. He thought there was something wrong with me. But what I liked in Aberdeen was what I liked generally in Britain: the bread, the fish, the cheese, the flower gardens, the apples, the clouds, the newspapers, the beer, the woollen cloth, the radio programmes, the parks, the Indian restaurants and amateur dramatics, the postal service, the fresh vegetables, the trains, and the modesty and truthfulness of people. And I liked the way Aberdeen's streets were frequently full of seagulls.