

BARDIE'S DREAM

BBC Scotland has reported that an unconscious man was found stretched out on a bench at Rannoch Station. He is believed to be the missing folklorist Hamish Henderson. Dr Henderson is understood to have been suffering from memory loss and confusion. The elderly man is being treated in Perth Royal Infirmary until his identity can be definitely established.

‘Mind the step, over the threshold. This is your room. For as long as you want to stay.’

‘Stiff as an old board.’

‘It looks out onto the hills, beyond the castle. I’ve left out some old books we got from the library sale. In case you want something to read.’

‘And a dram, as well, I see. Very good.’

‘Complete rest is what you need. We’ll bring you up a late breakfast in the morning. Beannachd leat.’

‘Aye. Beannachd leat, mo gràdh.’

A kiss on the cheek.

‘Sweet dreams, old friend, sweet dreams.’

She pulled the door shut gently behind her.

He looked round at a bed with pillows piled high, books with gold lettered spines ranged along the mantelpiece, a walnut dresser with brush and comb at the ready. He pulled the curtains back as far as they would go from the wide window. A glowing red sunset reflected on the hills above.

Cushy billet. This will be the sleep to make a new man of me. Tumble this lot out of the old kitbag. Reveille. I’ll wake to the pipes.

Humming the tune, with some decorative diddles, he raised the glass and downed his dram in one appreciative swallow.

‘To the Duke’s March! Slainte!’

Dawnlight over the hills. Clear light rising on the tops, flooding down the slopes onto this elongated body. To face the rising sun. Quo life, the world is mine. But mine’s this one fucking corpse clamped onto a bed frame.

Shift a foot. Then another.

Must piss. Slide sideways - no bend. Swing the legs and, yes sir, hope the rest follows. Whoa. Feet on the ground, then lever. Push, man, now. We're up, swaying on the deck, hold steady. Shuffle through and piss, glorious piss.

Waving with the flaccid member. Last tug and squeeze. Drip. Flush? Too low. Quo death the world is mine. Especially the backbone.

All spine till she loosens up. Back we go, must lie flat. Line up and tip. Down in a rigid one. Didn't feel a fucking thing. Is that good? Sideways onto the pillows, and breathe out, in, out. Better.

Where's that piper? Out of puff like me. The Duke has filled his pisspot without due ceremony. Democratic piss. Enlightenment piss even. Socialist piss really. John Maclean in the Calton Jail. Pisciare. Sardinian urine. Gramsci pisciaing in his cell, waiting to empty his own pail, like any convict

And me laid up in luxury, like a Duke of Atholl. Maybe I didn't try hard enough. Cushy billet on the Highland circuit. Where's that morning dram?

Grand tour, my arse. Covered every inch of it once. Bike and thumb, blagging a bed, or sleeping out in the wee tent. A bonnie callant in ma ain countrie. Reclaiming what I knew for my own, wanting the closeness I had lost. Carefree bragadaccio.

But it went further, deeper cut. Into the mountains - Blairgowrie, Rattray, Glenshee. Voices on the wind. The Sidh. The Fianna. Ben Gulben. My mother's songs on the ear. All dead.

For all gods die, but since

Their ghosts endure for the seeing soul

My heart took this in hand

Under the whaup's mountain

People of peace in the blessed glens.

Was it the Sidh who drew Grandpa back to the lost tongue of Eden. Gaidhlig. It began here in the hills of Atholl. I am come home. Sweet peace at last.

Shite, I've forgotten my class. Snoozed off again. This is becoming a habit. Never mind, what matters is thinking for yourself. Take the opportunities as they present themselves. No dead letter here, Calvin's iron pen, but layer on layer of living matter. Peel them back to reveal the organic growth, the root.

Look at this tower in the castle, not the picture postcards. We should ascend the winding stair, dear class, further and further, climbing round, into the core.

So, where do we start? Right here in the entrance hall, stacked high with weapons and hunting trophies. The Blair Atholl reception party, vain-glorious and threatening all in one tub-thumping overture. Those claymores were used in the charge at Culloden. That breastplate was holed at Killiecrankie, with Bonnie Dundee inside it. Bloody Clavers in deed, the fatal wound. Put your finger in where the bullet went, wee bit rusty. Never mind the stain.

Then these targes and helmets are clan trophies. 'Furth fortune and fill the fetters,' cried The Murray when he took his chance, seizing Macdonald of the Isles for a Stewart king. That was the making of the clan, the Atholl Lordship. Murrays making their luck by brutal violence. Welcome to Bonnie Scotland, land of the free, if you've got the right hardware.

Ascending the staircase, the rise of a dynasty. Portraits mark each step up, Stewarts and Murrays. First the Scottish Kingdom, then the British State. Working their way in at each successive Court - Knight, Earl, Marquis, Duke - an almost uninterrupted climb.....till, boom!

Look at that jagged hole, gaping masonry. Imagine we're all left shell shocked gazing onto the hillside. Lord George Murray, Marquis of Tullibardine leads the Jacobite Rising. His own father the Duke was put under house arrest here for opposing the Union of England and Scotland. But this was outright rebellion like the Earls and Chiefs of former times. Only it wasn't rebellion; it was a Rising in support of the rightful Stewart line. The Great Bardie took on the establishment and, even in retreat, laid siege to his own family castle.

There's an ancestor of whom you can be proud. A true soldier. If daft Bloody Charlie has listened to his own General George there would have been no Culloden. Scotland hanging on to fight another day. But he didn't, so Bardie died in exile. His picture's relegated from the staircase to its own room, keeking down on the bed where Charlie slept. Jacobites can worship at that shrine later. But there was justice in the end, because these succeeding Dukes come from Bardie's line, not his craven, time serving brother.

Still, revolt and revolution had to be erased, covered up. So they wrapped the old castle round with a Georgian mansion, and planted a million trees to order the landscape. Even Robert Burns took notice.

Look at these reception rooms leading off the staircase, if you will, please. Politesse, civility, conviviality. A world advancing, at peace with itself, if you were in the know and the money. And the Murrays were marrying into money, big English money. Selling the Isle of Man to swell the family coffers. And exporting their native ardour for imperial gain. Let our gallant Highlanders lead the charge; 'tis no great mischief if they fall. More where they came from in their Highland hovels. If people fail we can have forests, or sheep.

Enough jaw. On you go and look round. I can't do any more steps.

Then Grandpa blew it all up again. What was he up to, the old Duke? Taking the rugged heart of the castle, plastering it round with brand new layers of Scottish grandeur. Like living in a Walter Scott opera. Scottish glory in British guise - kilts with everything. But somehow the wildcat was let out of the bag.

And he wrote the history of family and nation, joining the royal Stewart name again to Murray, reviving Gaelic, the music, the dancing, the whisky filled quaichs. He's an enigma, the old Duke, and the source of everything that came next. Was it all self-importance? He was still a king in his own Atholl kingdom.

Then it went further, cut deeper. He made all his children learn Gaelic, and the youngest daughter the beautiful Evelyn goes among the people, giving her life to their culture - the language, the stories, the traditions. She would not conform to the Murray caste, so she had to be exiled. Trapped then in Europe through the Great War, till young Bardie, the new Duke, brought her home to rest. But she had harvested a treasure, the people's gift, and in time we saw what she had done.

That's her book on the mantelpiece. Do I take after Evelyn? Love what she did and what she was forbidden to do.

She became one more sorrow amidst a swelling lament. All the wealth and excess, the imperial might, the bombast ended in more brutal death. We could not evade the reckoning of empires. Brothers, sons, killed and wounded. The climbing stair ends with generations lost and scattered by the war to end all wars. The old Duke dies as the clansmen he had sent to war bled or choked in the slime. Everyone was left to count their losses, grasp at any comfort life still offered to them.

'Just take a seat in here, sir.'

And he ushered me into a private sitting room. Was that yesterday? Thank, Christ, I could lay out my legs. Fair enough, I was knackered, but why did he salute me? Looked like an old soldier. Did I look like a Duke?

Bardie succeeded his father, as the Somme dragged out. Mechanical slaughter. He showed me round the castle as a child, with my mother. She had worked in the wartime hospital there, singing to the wounded men. Healing love. He bent down and looked me in the eye. 'Hamish. *Seamus*.' Baptized by pipe smoke and cologne. Then he rose into a higher cloudy sphere. He gave me a Christian name, but palmed me off on another man. Paid for silence - the appearance of it. Yet everyone knew he had bedded the lassie from Blargowrie, falling from death's shadow into life's warm embrace. Quo life the world is mine. Supplanter Scott took the credit, or blame, for a thousand guineas. The mason's word still held good.

Unacknowledged bastard. Yet did Bardie reach out a hand to give me a chance in life? Left to work my own way, grab my opportunities. I tried to find out what he had done, but he commanded clan loyalty to the end. His soldiers were stood down but still in service. So I fought my war myself. It shouldn't matter now, but by Christ, it does. Why that fucking salute?

Do I owe the soldier I was to Bardie? His proudest moment was the Scottish Horse, raising men to fight the Boer, by keeping one step ahead of their mobility - mounted scouts in the veldt. And it was a dirty fight, like mine alongside Italian partisans, one step ahead of the German retreat - Sicily, Monte Cassino, till they held the Gustav Line, for a time. They were

my Highlanders. And we opened the second front against Hitler, D-Day dodgers to a man.
Pair bloody squaddies.

The piper is dozie, the piper is fey,

He willna be roun for his Vino today

The skies ower Messina are unco and grey

An all the bricht chaumers are eerie.

‘Farewell the Creeks’, a piper’s tune. All my music is in the pipes.

I did my bit, Bardie, I did my bloody bit, though truth be told, and things have reached that stage, it left me scarred in mind and soul, as well as knackered. What did it do to you?

I didn’t lead men to certain death - the men your father raised to the cause - from Atholl, Aberdeenshire, Argyll. Scottish Horse my rump - not a hoof to their name. But Johnny Turk was ready for them on Gallipoli’s beaches. Superior fire power. Killing sands. The ones the bullets missed were taken by disease. You built trench parapets on the beach with corpses.

What was the cost of that in lives, and dreams?

So he came back home, wounded in soul, while haloed in honour. And Nurse Henderson went to his bed, sensing his hurt but bathed in the charism. I am come home. The glory of war, the sorrow, the pity.

The great word of Glencoe’s son, that we

Should not disfigure ourselves with villainy of hatred.

One evening, breaking a jeep journey at Capuzzo, I noticed a soldier as he entered the cemetery and stood looking at the grave of a fallen enemy. Then I understood the meaning of the hard word ‘pietas’. His thought was like this - ‘here’s another Good Jerry. Poor mucker, just eighteen. Must be hard-up for manpower, or else he volunteered, silly bastard. That’s the fatal, the fatal mistake. Never volunteer for nothing. Wonder how he died? Just as well it was him, though, and not one of ours. The only Good Jerry, as they say, is your sort, chum. Cheerio, you poor bastard. Don’t be late on parade when the Lord calls “Close Order”. Keep waiting for the angels. Keep listening for Reveille.’

Once there were three brothers. Bardie the eldest son, and Geordie the far travelled soldier. And then there was wee Seamus, Hamish, who went to join his brothers in the Great War. Their father the Duke was too old to fight but he was determined that his sons would set an example for the people, so they would volunteer to fight as well. Geordie was in the front line when the enemy counter-attacked. There was no news of him for days, months even. Later, much later, Bardie found out where his brother had fallen and raised a memorial in his memory. Wee Seamus was wounded too in the battle but recovered. Going back to the front line he got lost and was taken prisoner. Which was fortunate, as that was him out of the war.

He survived to come home as the much loved youngest after whom by-blows might be named. Bardie had to fight on as the war stretched out unbearably, endlessly. The shadow of death lay on the land and all the people. The old Duke died and the whole burden fell on Bardie's shoulders. He stood between the living and the dead.

Did Grandpa sense a change as he died? Or was everyone a sacrifice in his Book of Life, a price paid? Yet he believed the music, the songs and the stories to be a gift, passed on freely to those who love the land and its children. 'Came ye by Atholl?'

But Atholl Mór had passed on. Was Bardie to escape the father's shadow? An uncrowned King of Scots with everything to prove. The brilliant soldier who had lost his command; huge estates from which wealth was draining away; a childless marriage. The Duchess was advancing her own career and name. But left to his own devices, Bardie had a dream, a vision of his nation.

Do I take after him? Though he watched my mother driven out by shame. Black hypocrite, you averted your gaze. Keeping the form, the appearance, sending her and her little boy away. Buying her silence by giving me an education. Yet everyone knew except perhaps the new Duchess, wrapped up in public service, her unacknowledged sacrifices. Childless.

My bonny mother with her hair tied up, and the sangs, always the sangs.

'What book is that song from, Mummy?'

'No aa the sangs are in books, Hamish. They're on the wind and the hills and along the burns an bonnie rivers.'

So we were exiled. And the castle was turned into a tourist show. A front, because the Duke could no longer afford to live there. Sham Bardie of a sham nation. Yet you took me round and bent down to look me straight in the eye. So that I would know, something. What sort of father is that? Never showing your bloody hand. Hiding behind some other man.

And her life drained away, the songs, the laughter. After I was sent off to school. There were holidays on the beach. I have the pictures. Snapshots. But I shut her out, with her life of menial service. I was glad to leave, didn't look back. She died and I never visited her grave. It's somewhere in Sussex.

She gave me life. Quo life the world is mine.

I was in the sickbay at Lendrick School with raging flu. Suddenly I felt something was wrong, terribly wrong. I dragged myself out of bed and onto the landing. All the Masters were in a huddle in the hall below with the Matron, Mary MacLaren, whispering together. I started down the stairs in my dressing gown, clutching at the banister. Then the hall door opened and in came the Headmaster carrying the body of a boy who had been knocked down by a bus. I went forward to take his cold hand. Then one of the teachers came forward, picked me up and was carrying me back upstairs.

Again and again, I have that dream. The boy killed by a bus? It was my mother that had died. Far from bonny Glenshee, pecked to death by the daurk hoodies. The nay sayers. The cancer. Even my dreams displace her.

Why did I deny her, not Bardie?

I lost them both, in different ways.

I had no father, or mother, in the end. Scotland became my parent, people and land. I turned to her and she has not failed me. She will not fail me even to my final breath. I am at home here. Laid out on this bed; it could be my wake. If I didn't keep falling asleep.

Bardie mused on the dead. For him they outnumbered the living. He sensed his people's need, his own need, not for glory but comfort. There were one hundred and fifty thousand fallen, lost, except that Bardie wanted all their names found and recorded, men and women. They would not be unremembered, the people's dead. He would build a shrine to their memory, each and every one. A War memorial would be his legacy, raised on Edinburgh's Castle Rock in full view of the nation, a poem in stone, expressing a people's grief, the pity of war. A nurse, a squaddie, a stretcher bearer, all depicted, lost but not forgotten. Their daily courage painted, moulded, sung. Flowers of the Forest, all wede awa.

'Remember also the humble beasts that served and died.' Even the animals - Bardie included his beloved horses, the dogs, the pack mules, the carrier pigeons.

When the age of the Fianna was ending, and Ossian met Patrick met, he asked the Saint if there was a place in heaven for his faithful hounds. 'You foolish old man,' scolded Patrick, 'what heathen ideas are these. There is no space for brute beats in the glorious realm of redeemed souls.'

'Ach,' replied Ossian, 'then that is not the kind of place in which I would wish to be dwelling.'

Fionn and his beloved Bran; Hamish and my faithful Sandy. The Fianna were the first Gaelic speaking inhabitants of Alba, our ancestors, guardians of the land and every form of life to which it gives birth. In some small way I am part of that tradition.

Bardie's poem was in stone, wood and glass. And the illuminated scrolls on which are inscribed the precious names. People came to trace them with a reverent finger. And they came in hundreds, thousands, silent queues wanting to touch some collective source of grief and consolation. In search of a well of healing, after the great destruction, the killing.

I salute your shrine, Bardie, though for my part I chose the carrying stream, the flow of music, poetry, song. Like putting a pail under the waterfall. People's voices unhushed by rank or privilege. The old carapaces were decayed, crumbling. Let the dead bury the dead. Yet we both imagined a people, a nation, and wanted to pass something down the generations. 'It was conceived in love, built in faith, finished in hope.'

Nae mair will the bonnie callants

Mairch tae war when oor braggarts crouselly craw,

Nor wee weans frae pit-heid and clachan

Mourn the ships sailin' doon the Broomielaw.

Broken families in lands we've herriet.

Will curse Scotland the Brave nae mair, nae mair.....

We were given twenty years for building and learning, twenty years that won't come back. And then what seemed just another dawn was the first morning of another war. What had we learned from all that remembrance?

Where's that bloody piper? Am I to lie here all day like a talking tombstone? Am I a tinker begging at the castle gate?

There was a king once who went off disguised as a wandering piper, a travelling man. Years and years he travelled without ever finding his way home. For, you see, he thought he had been rejected there, and his heart was full of bitterness and jealousy.

On and on he goes till one day he comes to a forest and in the midst of the forest there was a deep well pool, and he thought to himself, 'I must go in there and drink from the waters.'

But all round the pool lay wild animals sleeping - wolves, and tigers, deer, bears, and the king of the forest himself, the lion. And as he slept the lion had his paw resting on top of the golden bowl that you needed to dip into the well. How could the Traveller loose the bowl to drink the water?

But something welled up inside him and without hesitation he picked his way amongst the sleeping beasts, and he gently lifted and then set down the lion's paw on the ground. With the bowl he reached into the deep cool pool of water and then he drank. And the animals slumbered on.

He realised it was time to go home. So quietly he left the clearing and set off, arriving in rags at the castle gate, his feet bare and bruised. Taking his pipes from their tattered bag he began to play a tune that he and his young queen had once loved.

And she rose from the sickbed on which she had lain since he went away, for she recognised his music. 'That is my king,' she said. 'He has come home at last,' and she opened the gates wide to restore her love.

King of the Tinkers, my companion on the road, and so much more. They became my family. In the journey is the healing. He who makes the wound must also find the cure. Love that speaks its name, the one thing needful. Everything else can be foraged, living off the land, on the road.

They showed me into the drawing room yesterday, like a Marquis of Tullibardine. Time to head, old chum, before I am exposed. Keep myself Hamish, hidden source of my glamourie. No surrender now. The music's on the road.

I had your company on the way, old man, though the road was hard, and your feet were sore. And you nearly blind. Yet there was light enough going for us, and the whole thundering host of heaven about us. Saints and angels. In a corner of my brain that knows the universe ghostless and godless, I knew your vision, and my own heart. Near is, and hard to catch hold of, God. Keeping always on the move.

He pushed himself up, rising steadily to his feet. In a minute the kitbag was re-packed and he let himself quietly out of the room and down the stairs through a silent house. It was barely six o'clock, but already the open air was warm, and filled with birdsong. He began to put one foot in front of the other.