



Chapter One

Whispers of Ancients

Scotland has a profound, traumatic, and complicated history. The struggles and accomplishments of Scotland's people are stamped into the landscape, wrinkles on the palms of Old Lady History. Some experiences are deep ravines in the skin of the earth, others the soft lines of poetry skimming the surface like scree. Our history is all around us. It's in the wilderness and in the streets and buildings of our cities and towns. These remnants of our past hold secrets: the riddles of desolate Munro, shadowy river, and unplumbed loch veiled in ambiguous Gaelic names hint at something forgotten.

Names such as *Bod an Deambain* (the Devil's Penis (Point)), *Dùn dá Gaoithe* (the Fort of Two Winds), *Ath nam Marbh* (the Ford of the Dead), and *Bealach nam Fiann* (the Pass of the *Fianna* (Giants)) capture Scotland's own 'dreamtime' and evocative landscape tales.² These panoramic stories reflect the history of a

² Murray, J. (2014). *Reading the Gaelic Landscape*.

colonised people besieged by Anglo-Saxons, Norse, Romans, and others. The remnants of war and the impact of an elite Establishment pockmark the landscape from the Scottish Borders to Shetland. The human stories of our ancestors – how they lived, loved, and the beliefs they held – need to be nudged from the shadows of Munro and glen into the light of knowing.

A visit to Perth and Kinross took me and my spouse to one locale redolent in myth. We travelled through Glen Lyon – one of the remote places in Scotland, though it sits at its heart – a place where folk magic is kept alive. Travelling the expanse of Glen Lyon (perhaps named after the Celtic figure Lugh³), we followed the river to the start of our eight-mile walk to the *Gleann Cailliche* (the Valley of the Old Lady or the Valley of the Witch). At its other end lies the Tigh nam Bodach (the House of the Bodach or the House of the Old Man). It was this journey here that started my writing journey and led to this book.

We started at the Lubroch Dam in Glen Lyon.

The dam and the hydroelectric scheme revealed the presence of the shrine of the Tigh nam Bodach to the wider world. The community which lived here needed to stop the environmental destruction of a hydropower scheme. The plan proposed would have drowned Scotland's oldest animist shrine, and because of the need for protection, the shrine was revealed to the world.

Let's saunter together.

The track is simple but long. Perhaps, as we wander, we share stories to pass the time. We share dreams and wishes with each footfall. We talk about politics, ecology, and food while we

³ See www.philipcoppens.com/glenlyon.html.

share bad jokes. Together, keeping to the right, we follow the dirt road by the side of the loch. We pass by splendid waterfalls birthed from springs in the high crags where we can stop and refresh. The grandest of these is called *Eas Eoghannan* (Eoghannan's Waterfall or Waterfall Born of the Yew Tree) next to *Creag Dubh* (the Black Crag). The ravines formed from centuries of cascading water are home to birch and rowan – the greatest number of trees you'll see in the entire walk. The landscape is a monoculture consumed, daily, by sheep like those that displaced people during the Clearances. You'll spot a few other trees, but these are ghosts of the pines that were. Their white, skeletal stumps rise from the peat like bleached bones here and there. The trees were cut down long ago to make way for farming and homes, their roots left to rot.

We stop to breathe in the view, and it takes our breath away. Loch Lyon is magnificent in the rising sun. The grey waters reflect the tranquil orange haze of a warm morning. Today, we're lucky. There are no midges because of how exposed and dry it is. Perhaps they've been eaten by the beautiful *mòthán*,⁴ the butterworts lining the path periodically, though midges wouldn't be an issue if the ecosystem were in balance.

We follow the trail further, climbing over fence and stile. Five miles in, we come to a bend in the terrain. Taking this turn, we walk along a river away from the loch towards some imposing Munros. As we do, we think we hear the shouts of people warning us, their dogs barking. We frantically turn and startle at the sight of a group of low-flying geese honking as they gracefully land in the loch's water. Geese, especially in Fife stories, represent one of Scotland's oldest spirits: the Cailleach.

⁴ *Pinguicula vulgaris*, or the common butterwort – a carnivorous plant in the Scottish Highlands and with much folklore and magic about it.

We are mere steps away from her valley. After stopping to admire them and ponder this connection, we continue to follow the wee river towards *Gleann Cailliche*.

Here, we cross three forded streams.⁵ Over the final stream, we enter the glen itself. As soon as we do, the weather changes from cool, breezy, and dry to warm, tranquil, and humid. The glen is strangely quiet, with a warmer microclimate, or perhaps we feel the blessing of the Cailleach herself.

To our right is a pointed hill, *Sìth Trom'niaidh* (the Mound of Heavy Sadness), and cairns to the right of the *Sìtbean* (Fairy or *Sìth* Mound), which the *Allt Meurain* (Branching Burn) runs past. We speak of the *aos-sìthe*⁶ and the *creideamb anamach* (animist belief) found in the *creideamb-sìth* (fairy faith, also translated as 'fairy belief') and the folklore of the land with peaceful language in hushed tones. We ask ourselves if it's because of respect or fear. Finally, a mile or so further up the track by the side of the river *Allt Cailliche* (Cailleach's Burn), we finally find our destination: a small, one-meter-across structure, the Tìgh nam Bodach, Scotland's oldest animist shrine.

The Legend of Gleann Cailliche: The Keeper of the Wilds

This is not a *tìgh* (house) you need to knock on the door of in a conventional sense. The shrine, or 'the wee house' as some call it, resembles a miniature *bothan airigh* (shieling bothy) with low,

⁵ I say streams, but the last one is a river. 'Hell mend you' if you try to cross it after a lot of rain.

⁶ *Aos-sìthe* is a term used for inhabitants of the otherworld and means 'fairy community'.

stone walls and a turf roof. This small, unique structure is known as the Tigh nam Bodach (the House of the Old Man) by some and the Tigh na Cailleach (the House of the Old Woman) by others. The emphasis depends on the researcher's focus, but on our maps, it's named 'Tigh nam Bodach'.

If you're there between Bealltainn and Samhuinn (Scotland's summer season), you'll be greeted by a family of water-worn, arcane-looking stones. They live together in the Tigh nam Bodach and represent the Cailleach (the Old Woman or Grandmother), the Bodach (the Old Man or Grandfather), and through time, their *clann-nighean* (daughters) with some smaller statues said to represent other members of their mysterious family.

Bealltainn and Samhuinn mark the beginning and end of summer in our folk traditions. The significance to cow farmers is direct. Bealltainn marked the time when herds were moved out to pasture at the start of summer in an action called 'transhumance'. They were moved back at Samhuinn, the start of winter. The Cailleach and the Bodach provide blessings throughout the year to the things the people found invaluable: their land, cattle, families, community, and clan. The tale, recorded by well-known Celtic researcher Anne Ross,⁷ goes something like this:

The fragments ... which have survived orally tell of an event which happened 'many years ago' when, in an unusually fierce snowstorm, an unnaturally large man and woman

⁷ Thomas, A. C., & Ross, A. (1993). *Folklore of the Scottish Highlands*.

were seen coming down the mountainside of the upper glen. They asked the people who were still settled there for hospitality and shelter. These were willingly given to them. This pleased the supernatural pair well, and they took up residence in the glen when the inhabitants had built a thatched house large enough to accommodate them.

The woman was pregnant and in due course gave birth to a daughter. The weather was always favourable when they dwelt there. The stock flourished and the crops were always of the best. Then one day the time came when they must go. Before doing so, they promised that as long as they were remembered and their house kept in order, and everything done as they themselves had done it, they would bring it about that winters would be mild, the summers warm, and peace and prosperity would always be with the people who had been so generous to them. In memory of this event of long ago a small shrine in the form of a house was constructed and every Bealltainn the three stones representing the three deities would be taken out of the house and placed facing down the glen. There they remained until the house was rethatched and made warm and comfortable for the winter and they were returned to the miniature house on the eve of Samhuinn. When the upper glen was flooded, and the people moved away.

Folktales also tell of a *geas* (taboo or curse) on these stones perhaps older than those who settled here. The *geas* is simple. If anyone mishandles the stones or removes them from their house, 'bad things' will befall them. Ross once removed one of the stones for study and soon brought it back the next day – no easy task considering how long it takes to get there. Who knows

what moved a steadfast academic to do such a thing, but it does give weight to the taboo.

Other Bodach and Cailleach stones are found in similar locations outside of the Tigh nam Bodach, like on the Isle of Gigha. It's interesting that the size and shape of those found in Gigha are similar to the statues found in the Glen Lyon, and similar legends are ascribed to them. This is no coincidence.

Local author, traveller and traditional storyteller Jess Smith has said, 'Water stones mould rather than break up or go jaggy, so they can take on the form of a human or an animal, and there is power in them.' Jess spent her childhood on the road around Glen Lyon: 'We heard about the drovers throwing meal and bread to the stones, or their cattle would get sick. Places like this are very important. They live within the part of our psyche where we keep our respect for the ancients.'

We can only grasp for ideas about why these acts were performed, and many beautiful minds have tried to come up with an explanation. Perhaps it's a trace of Scottish communal culture, a time when people gave offerings and showed respect to the land to keep the peace between this world and the otherworld, an animistic expression of living in a community with a more-than-human world. Perhaps these offerings of consideration and respect were undertaken to guarantee the powerful forces of nature would look kindly upon those who lived in the glen in a polytheistic sense, these acts helping to safeguard herders and their families for future generations. Regardless of the reason, these haunting practices and stories anchor us to the land and connect us to something greater. However, over time, disinterest and cultural erosion have worn them away like the neglected landscape surrounding them, wrinkled by wind and rain.

This journey tale contains the essence of this book. We'll come back to the ideas presented here in different ways. The storied landscape, the history of displaced people, land use, and ways of life changed forever because of it. Yet roots of reconnection to a collective memory from before our cultural amnesia took hold still tether us to these ideas. Our collective history is bound up with the land, the air we breathe, and the water we swim in on this thumbprint of an island nation. If we grasp at these roots and embrace our heritage, we can rekindle ways of living that transcend the destructive, extractive patterns dominating our lives. These are ways we once knew, carried in the heart of our culture and captured by the Gaelic word *dùthchas*, a deep connection to the land and community that guided our ancestors and can guide us once again.

***Dùthchas*⁸: The Call of Ancestral Roots**

Dwelly's Gaelic to English dictionary gives multiple definitions of *dùthchas*: place of one's birth; hereditary right; of one's country; native, natural, indigenous; patriotic, fond of one's native land, and so on.

⁸ Please note the Gaelic throughout this book is based on different sources, writers and speakers. Some of the conventions of spelling will be different from modern-day Gaelic, and some in a dialect not often found or archaic. I have consulted with friends, who are modern-day native Gaelic speakers, on some tricky terms and words, but any mistakes are mine in the transcribing. I have tried my best to present the information I have authentically and as I have found it. Please see Ronald Black's comments on the Gaelic otherworld for more. *Is fheàrr Gàidhlig bhrìste na Gàidhlig sa chiste.*

Crofter and world-renowned knitwear designer Alice Starmore from Lewis described *dùthchas* as such:

A feeling of belonging, of where everything is linked, completely linked. Where you belong to the land, and the land belongs to you – there is no distinction. It’s like a hand in a glove. Everything fits in, and your culture is part of that as well, and everything you know that’s around you; every part of life that’s around you are all interlinked and interdependent, and it’s all about ancestry, knowing where you’ve come from and that you are a continuation of all that.⁹

In the definition in Dwelly’s dictionary, we find *dùthchas* as part of the family of words including *dùth*, meaning ‘natural and hereditary’ but also your proportion and equitable share; *dùthaich*,¹⁰ which relates to your country, native land or district and territory, as found in the phrase *An t-Seann-dùthaich*, the old country, meaning ‘Scotland’; *dualchas*, which can mean ‘tradition’ or ‘heritage’ along with the imitation of the ways of your ancestors; and *dùthchasach*, which means ‘native or indigenous’.¹¹

According to the Shieling Project,¹² throughout the Highland Clearances, Gaels felt their hereditary right of *dùthchas*

⁹ Starmore was interviewed for the Landed podcast from Farmerama Radio in 2023. You can listen to the full episode here: www.farmerama.co/episode/landed-part2/.

¹⁰ Not *duthaich*. Without the accent, it means ‘anus’.

¹¹ Found in *tùsanach*, meaning ‘indigenous’; *albanach*, meaning ‘belonging to Scotland’; and *sassenach*, meaning ‘belonging to England’. None of these are slurs; they are terms from Gaelic used for people belonging to a place.

¹² See www.theshielingproject.org/posts/dùthchas-what-are-we-actually-talking-about.

was being violated. Throughout the Land Wars of the 1880s, our people were acting in defence of this feeling, or customary law. This defence, stirred and empowered by the connection to the land and a way of life led, in 1886, to the formation of the Crofting Laws, which can be seen in many ways as both a treaty and an acknowledgement of a form of native title. These land laws eventually led to the creation of the Scottish National Party, a political party active in Scotland today, seeking independence but at a remove from these roots.

Dùthchas is a sense of place, a right to be in a space, a way of life about proportional use of land and community resources tied to our knowledge and the culture of working-class Gaels. The experience of these ideas is the backbone of this book in the spirit of our ancestors, *spiorad ar sinnsear*.

What fables do the glens, Munros, and lochs hold? What stories are in your local area? What tales do you hear of black dogs running at night and coaches rattling along corpse roads? The origins of these stories and the enrichment our local communities gain from these approaches are the questions we'll explore in this book.

Our memories can fail us, but our landscape will not. The tales of our culture and community might fade, but the landscape remains the book upon which our Scottish folk belief is written. It's crucial to remember how to read 'the book of the landscape'.

What follows in this book was inspired by this belief. As you explore the history and misfortune Scottish folk belief has had to manage in order to survive, remember this story is told in our landscape.

Let these ideas permeate gently.

In the following chapters, you'll find a guide for your own travels through place and connection, a compass to navigate the cycles of history and our folk calendar. With any luck, understanding your history will offer a rooted perspective which allows you to see the world we live in and our yearly festivals through an animated, thriving, and ecologically connected lens. Before we explore these concepts, however, a critical look at history is needed.

In the shadows of our past, we encounter tales of the *de'il*¹³ and the witchcraft panics that gripped our ancestors. These stories, steeped in fear and superstition, reveal a lot about the social and cultural currents of their time. The hysteria surrounding witchcraft wasn't just a historical footnote; it reflected deeper anxieties and a struggle for control over the unknown and an entire people. As we explore this dark chapter, we uncover the roots of these fears and the profound impact they had on our communities and folk belief. This exploration is not only about understanding the past; it's about recognising the echoes of those fears in our present and finding ways to overcome them.

¹³ *De'il* is a Scots word meaning 'devil'.