

CLAN MACNACHTAN LANDS

By James Macnaughton

A Timeless Landscape deep in the Perthshire Hills of Highland Scotland.

Forget for a while the mechanised, computerised world of the 21st century and allow yourself to be totally immersed in the sights, sounds, scents, sensations and flavours of a beautiful slice of Scottish Highland countryside which, unlike much of the modern world, has not changed in thousands of years.



Fig. 1: Remony House, Acharn.

Start your journey at Remony farmhouse in Acharn, on the banks of Loch Tay and head up the old peat road on the Western bank of the Remony Burn. It is early on a bright, sunny August morning. To your left, between the dirt track and the burn rumbling down in its deep gorge, are green-leaved beds of wild blue-berries – called blae berries in these parts – and your first taste sensation is of their juicy semi-sweetness, a juice which soon stains your hands purple. The blueberries nestle under the elegant silvery trunks of birch trees with here and there some alder bushes and rowan trees with their bright orange berries – our own Clan tree – enlivening the colours of the scene.

On your right the grassy slopes, stippled with glowing yellow buttercups and white clover, are dotted with sturdy black-faced sheep, looking lean after their fleeces had been shorn earlier in the summer, and plump unshorn lambs, still gambolling and jousting as their seething hormones

surprise them. A peewit (lapwing) swoops across, making you duck your head as it loudly screams at you to go away from its nestlings, hiding in the grass.

Fig. 2: Lap Wing or Peewit.



Further up the steep track, you are glad to stop to catch your breath and to admire the hermitage, where solitary monks used to sit on a boulder and contemplate the high waterfall on the Remony Burn, pearling down into the gorge, its waters swollen and golden with peat after a big thunderstorm the previous night had brought it down in a majestic spate. The heavy rain had cleared the dust from the atmosphere, leaving the sky a deeper blue than ever. You sit, meditating in silence, feeding your soul with the unspoiled beauties of the nature around you.

Above the gorge, you follow the path along the bank of the burn, now flowing through heathery slopes in a shallow rocky bed, its limpid waters gurgling and bubbling. Stop for a moment to scoop a handful of this crystal-clear water and to taste its sweet purity, just as people from the Pictish population over 2,000 years would have done. Some of the best things in life never change. You relax for a while, taking off your boots and socks and steeping your hot feet in the water, scuffling them through the fine sand and pebbles on the bottom. What is that suddenly gleaming on the bottom? Could it be gold flakes? Quite possibly, because gold has been found in the Remony Burn over the centuries, but it could also be fool's gold – iron pyrites. As you sit by the deep pool, you are entranced by the sight of a little dark brown and white bird quite tame, which bobs on a boulder by the pool, and then, to your amazement, calmly walks under the water and searches for caddis fly larvae among the pebbles on the bottom of the pool. This is a dipper or water ouzel, which miraculously, can keep itself from floating up to the surface.

High overhead, as you look up to scout out your route further up the hill, you spot a golden eagle effortlessly soaring on a thermal, its flight feathers, on the ends of its majestic two metre wing span, spread apart like fingers, and its keen eyes scanning the moorland below in the hope of spotting a mountain hare or a grouse hiding. You clamber up through the heather, coming to a



marshy patch with a few tussocky reeds, some clumps of damp sphagnum moss, and on a drier bare bit some staghorn moss, looking like miniature deer's antlers.

Fig. 3: Ben Lawers as seen from Loch Tay with Crannog in foreground.

Lie back in the heather for a breather and on closing your eyes become totally immersed in the sensation of comfort from the soft heather fronds. A gentle breeze wafts

the honeyed fragrance of the heather blossom across your nose; busy bees hum among the blooms extracting the precious nectar; this is heaven on earth, you think! After a snooze sit up and open your eyes, drink in the primeval longer view to the horizon; to the far West, the peaks of Ben More and Stobinian, to the North west, the majestic summit of Ben Lawers, rising 3,984 feet above the invisible Loch Tay, and, with its 16 foot cairn on top, achieving the magical 4,000 foot height above sea level, making it one of Scotland's highest peaks after Ben Nevis and the four big Cairngorm summits. Due North is Carn Marg, one of the rounded summits above Glenlyon, and to the east of it the magical fairy mountain Schiehallion, unmistakable with its pointed triangular peak. Finally, North east, above Aberfeldy, is Farragon – “the pimple” in Gaelic. Again, a panorama unchanged for thousands of years.

Fig. 4: Red Grouse.

After a bite of lunch and a drink of some more of the delicious pure water from the burn, you carry on up the hill, rousing a covey of red grouse – ma, pa and a dozen wains – which clatter off, the cock bird with its bright red eye wattle shouting loudly – “Go back, go back, go back!” Next of nature's wonderful sights and sounds is a curlew, rising from the reeds where its young ones are hiding and uttering that inimitably sad “Curlee, Curlee” and the ensuing bubbling trill as it sinks back to earth at a safe distance.



As you cross another grassy damp patch, your eye is drawn to some little plants nestling among the grass and pebbles. They provide striking proof of the fact that, although the natural world may appear to be very beautiful and attractive at first sight, there are, even among the most harmless looking plants, some which demonstrate that in nature you eat things weaker than you or you are eaten by something stronger. One of these flesh-eating plants is called sundew, and it has reddish green round leaves which have many tendrils around their circumference, each with a blob of sticky substance on them. An innocent fly, beetle or ant which lands on or scuttles across them becomes immediately stuck to the glue-like globules. The leaf then slowly curls up, enclosing the unfortunate insect and takes its time to digest the creature. The other flesh eater is called butterwort, and it has long, narrow leaves flat on the ground around its centre and these again are very sticky and curl up over any insect which lands on them. Enough to send shivers down one's spine!



Fig. 5: Osprey nest.

As you ramble on, you spy a pair of long ears above the heather blooms and when you draw nearer, a lanky mountain hare bursts out of its form and gallops swiftly away to another hideaway. You are now nearing the pass at the top of the Remony Hill before the lands drops down

into Glen Quaich. Perched on a rocky eminence the sinister hulking black form of a raven surveys the scene and emits a threatening “Caw!” as it lazily floats off to find some carrion for lunch. At the top of the pass, nestling in a hollow is the Lochan, a small lake with a little islet in its middle. On the islet grows a solitary Scots pine and on the top of its branches is a big untidy mass of twigs, built up over years and forming a regular nesting site for a pair of ospreys which migrate there from Africa every spring to raise their brood.

In August two young birds have hatched and are constantly opening their wide red beaks in the hope that their parents will arrive with some tasty fish for them. You sit quietly and very still on the grassy shore of the lochan and wait patiently for some action. After a while your eye is caught by a ripple on the surface of the water and you see the low outline of a swimming bird with an almost snake-like head and neck held out in front of it and you realise that you are lucky enough to see one of Scotland’s rarer birds a red throated diver. It is an excellent swimmer and catcher of fish but being relatively heavy for the meagre expanse of its short wings, needs a long take-off distance on water to get into the air. It disappears under the water and then re-emerges by the shore of the islet where it waddles clumsily up the beach to its nest of reeds to bring some fish for the two little ones impatiently awaiting their meal. When they are a little bigger they will spend all their time on the water, sometimes taking a ride on their mother’s or father’s back.

Time is meaningless on the hill and your patience is rewarded, when suddenly there is a swoosh of powerful wings and the male osprey dives down onto the surface of the lochan and after much splashing emerges clutching a trout firmly in its talons. This feast it takes up to the young ones in the nest, and they each gobble down a portion of the fish.

Fig. 6: Osprey about to dive.



Completely sated with all these amazing sights, sounds, scents and sensations, you set off jauntily back down the hill towards Remony, with a host of anecdotes with which to entertain your family, and a feeling deep inside you that your very soul has been refreshed by your experiences.

“My heart’s in the Highlands!”