

James Kirkley
Literature
22-MAY-99

Skye Walking

Knowing this would be my last writing assignment for the year I wanted to make this story one of the best I've ever written. I was influenced by some of my classmates and originally choose to write a Science Fiction story but the longer I sat in my chair and tried to force clever imaginative stories into my head I knew SciFi wasn't the topic for my perfect paper. Then my Mom played "Banba" a CD by the Scottish group *Clannad* and I knew what I had to write about.

In August of 1998 we took our family holiday for 3 ½ weeks in Scotland. The reason we decided on Scotland was Dad and I wanted to research our roots and the trip was to be a hiking/climbing vacation or as the Scots call it a "Hill Walking or Munro Bagging." Climbing is a sport we have enjoyed as a family ever since I can remember. When I was really little my Mom or Dad would pack me along and as I got older they began to take me on little interesting walks until at age eight I was already hiking six or seven miles with a small pack. Now as a family we pursue long and difficult climbs stopping short of technical climbing. I can't explain why I love the sport so much maybe it's the fabulous scenery, the excitement of a difficult climb, or the quiet. I did think writing about just one of my experiences would finally put onto paper my feelings for this sport and my family.

Plus the topic would enable me to write the kind of paper I wanted to produce for my final paper of the year.

We woke up to a very cold and rainy morning. Let me say this again, it was really cold and the rain was traveling sideways. It was really nasty! We had been in Scotland for three days and hadn't been able to climb due to the weather. We were currently on the Isle of Skye staying at the Bed and Breakfast of a Mrs. Doubtfire clone. We were beginning to get discouraged about our climbing opportunities. We were moaning about the weather and complaining about how it was effecting our climbing to our innkeeper, when she crossed her arms over her ample bosom and asked what we expected, we were in Scotland. She told us to stop complaining about it and just go do it. If we were waiting for the weather to improve we'd never get anywhere. We decided there was a lot of wisdom in what she said so we threw fate to the wind and went climbing.

We decided on a ten-mile walk to the remote and deserted villages of Boreraig and Suisnish. We found the trailhead located right across the road from an old Kirk (Scottish Church) and graveyard and began our walk. We noticed several cars and a van all parked along the road. We didn't see any people but then we were getting a later than usual start, so we were confident this was the right place. Fortunately it had stopped raining, it was still cold but as long as we might stay dry we would be happy.

Dad had the map and informed us that we needed to be looking for the “kissing gate” on the north side, which would take us past an old graveyard located up in the moors, and then look for an old stone building. Mom and I thought these instructions were a bit odd because we could see for miles and we didn’t see anything but Heather and Bracken (native Scottish plants.) After about a mile Dad started to get a bit wiggly because we hadn’t stumbled upon any of the trail identifications. We stopped to have a drink of water and I had a look at the map, this is when I pointed out he was looking at directions to a 13 mile hike along Loch Fada near Ullapool, which wasn’t any place near our present location. It was at this point that he relinquished the trail map to me stating that he was still probably jet lagged.

The hike was a giant square: 2.5 miles along the moorland to the to the abandoned village of Boreraig, a second 2.5 miles along the high cliffs which drop away to Loch Eishort, a third 2.5 miles up the coast through Suisnish and Glen Boreraig, and then the final 2.5 miles back to the car through a forest and over Beinn Bhuidhe.

As we entered into our second mile the mud continued to get worse. We couldn’t get over how there was simply no place dry enough to walk. Even if you climbed onto higher ground and used the Bracken as a foothold, every where you stepped you’d sink into wet, oozing, black, slogging mud. It was nasty and exhausting! We thought many times of turning back but we also kept thinking this couldn’t go on forever, it had to get better. We finally spied Loch Eishort and

the stone shells of Boreraig. By this time we were near the top of one of the Black Cullins and the trail had improved and dried out, but we were pretty tired from the experience of walking two miles in mud that tried to suck the boots off your feet with every step you took. We were also wet and covered with mud up to our kneecaps. We looked down upon the beautiful green pastures covered with the remains of the old crofting community. This village was occupied for centuries but ultimately became victim to the 'clearance' from the mid 19th century onwards, when families were removed from the land to make way for sheep. Sheep still graze the hillside, but the only sign that humans used to live there are roofless piles of stones scattered about the rocky Loch shore. It was beautiful to see but it also made you feel sad for the people who once lived there.

All during this time the hiking was also tricky because we couldn't find a trail. We just determined where we had to walk and then went in that general direction. It made us a bit nervous because we didn't want to get lost and get caught in the rain. It also looked like it was going to rain at any minute so we kept watching the sky, for all the good this would do.

When we arrived at the shore of Loch Eishort we had decided we would eat lunch in one of the many old roofless houses and get some relief from the wind by using one of the stone walls as a windbreak. Rounding a wall we ran right into a very large group of people hiking the same trail. They must have been sitting there having lunch for a pretty long time because we never saw them

ahead of us as we were coming down the mountain into the village. You could see for well over a mile, maybe even two. Dad started having a conversation with the lady leading the group. She was an official walking tour guide and was leading this group of experienced climbers on this hike. It was her van we saw when we began our hike. She not only led the climb but she also explained the whole history of the village's demise and the history and geography of the area. She was also nice enough to share some of her knowledge with us, which we enjoyed a great deal. She then asked Dad if we were going to go back the same way we came. Dad said no we were continuing on along the base of the cliffs and up through Suisnich. The lady commented that maybe we wanted to rethink this decision because it was a very long way. We thanked her for the advice, she packed up her group and left while we continued to eat our lunch and enjoy the scenery.

Dad fell rather silent, which he is often prone to do, so Mom and I continued eating and enjoying a little sliver of sun that had poked it's way between the clouds. When Dad jumped up and announced that we needed to get going, "now...right now!" We, of course, wanted to know why the sudden hurry? "Well, didn't we hear her, he exclaimed, "it was a challenge! She thinks we can't hike eight miles." He went on to say we were not only going to continue on our original course but we were going to crank it up a notch and we were going to pass them and beat them back to where our cars were parked. As he began packing up the remains of our lunch he kept muttering, "who did she think

she was,” and that it was now a contest between the American Scots (Us) and the Scottish Scots (them).

By the time we got back on the trail there was about thirty minutes between us and the SS (no, not Secret Police – the Scottish Scots). We were hiking fast, really fast. Fortunately we still had time to enjoy the beauty of the cliffs and the rocky Loch Eishort, which is really just an inlet of the Atlantic Ocean. The trail was still impossible to see, it was covered with a dense layer of ferns and sheep. The sheep would scatter out of your way, but the ferns remained. As we hacked our way through the ferns with sticks we found, we spotted a glimpse of the trail and made our way towards it. The trail wound its way around the cliff side and wasn't more than two feet wide, but we were determined to catch up to the SS. Making way around the cliff side at the quicker than usual pace we couldn't help but notice the beautiful scenery. The clouds blocked out the sunlight over the Loch and the cool wind caused waves to crash onto the rocky coastline. On the cliff side small waterfalls trickled down the cliff splashing and bathing Bracken and heather on its way to the ocean below. We just didn't have enough wind to exchange comments about what we were seeing. We were kind of jogging. After about a half-hour we spotted them, this only helped us get a second wind and increase our speed. The most difficult aspect of the hike was still ahead of us, we would be cutting back inland within about a half mile and when we did this we would be scaling the cliff face and climbing Beinn Bhuidhe. The thought of climbing a mountain at jogging speed wasn't very appealing, besides, we were still tired from the mud bogs earlier that day. We,

however, persevered and started climbing, making it to the top in lightening speed. We took a couple of proof pictures (see we're at the top of another mountain) and continued our sprint, hot on the heels of the SS. It took us another half mile but we finally passed them. I can honestly say that they didn't seem too happy about being out paced. Dad was right, she had dissed us. I was now fully on board, a full member of Team Kirkley. No one was going to insult us and get away with it.

This was only the beginning of a really ridiculous afternoon. We had approximately four miles back to our car or the "finish line," depending on how you want to look at it. Suisnich and Glenn Boreraig flew by in a blur. We had passed them but they were now hot on our heels and soon they passed us. Some perfunctory comments were exchanged and a few giggles were over heard but the exchange was quieter than the first. We sped up and soon over took them again. This time, both parties came upon some fenced areas. Neither climbing party assisted the other or shared short cuts, it was every man for themselves. We over took them on the trail near Torrinn right before the woods, this time nothing was said by either party. Things were getting ugly!

We could always count on Dad for providing a bit of comic relief. Every time we passed them Dad would hum the theme from Rocky and do the little Rocky dance. You know arms over head and jumping up and down, I've never seen Rocky, but my parents tell me this is the way it's done. Even Mom, who

isn't Scottish and was failing to see the humor in any of this, had to laugh. She also helped us to realize a victory song and dance wasn't valid until we were back at the car.

We were in the woods now and it was impossible to see them coming up from behind us. Our strategy was just keep cranking, we assumed they weren't far behind us, waiting to sprint to the finish and beat us. We had come so far, we couldn't let that happen. Finally we exited from the woods and we could now see behind us, no one there, we had a mile to go and felt we were home free. We slowed down finally taking a much needed and well-deserved rest. We took one last look back, ready to enjoy the rest of our hike. We arrived at our car a short time later, exhausted! Dad found the keys and unlocked the car so we could stow our packs. When we turned around to put our stuff in the trunk, we glanced up and there they were. They must have run the final mile and were only a hundred yards behind us. We had failed to look behind us during that final mile; we had no idea they were so close. But did I mention they were about one hundred yards BEHIND us? We had won the unspoken challenge.

While we changed out of our wet filthy boots the Scottish Climbing Party filed by us. If looks could kill we would have reeled from the pain. Not a word was spoken. The opposition uttered not a kudo, high-five or congratulations on a game well played. Team Kirkley didn't need the praise we won.

Later that day tucked into a cozy booth at the local pub we relived the day and laughed, still giddy with triumph. I sat back and looked at my parents and thought how much fun we had and how beautiful the scenery was during our hike. I knew these were the reasons I liked climbing so much. When a thought crossed my mind and clouded my happy thoughts. Was climbing a competitive racing sport in Scotland? Nnnnaaaahhhh!

Again, I love this story James.
You create such vivid images
of Scotland and the climbing
"race"! Great work!
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