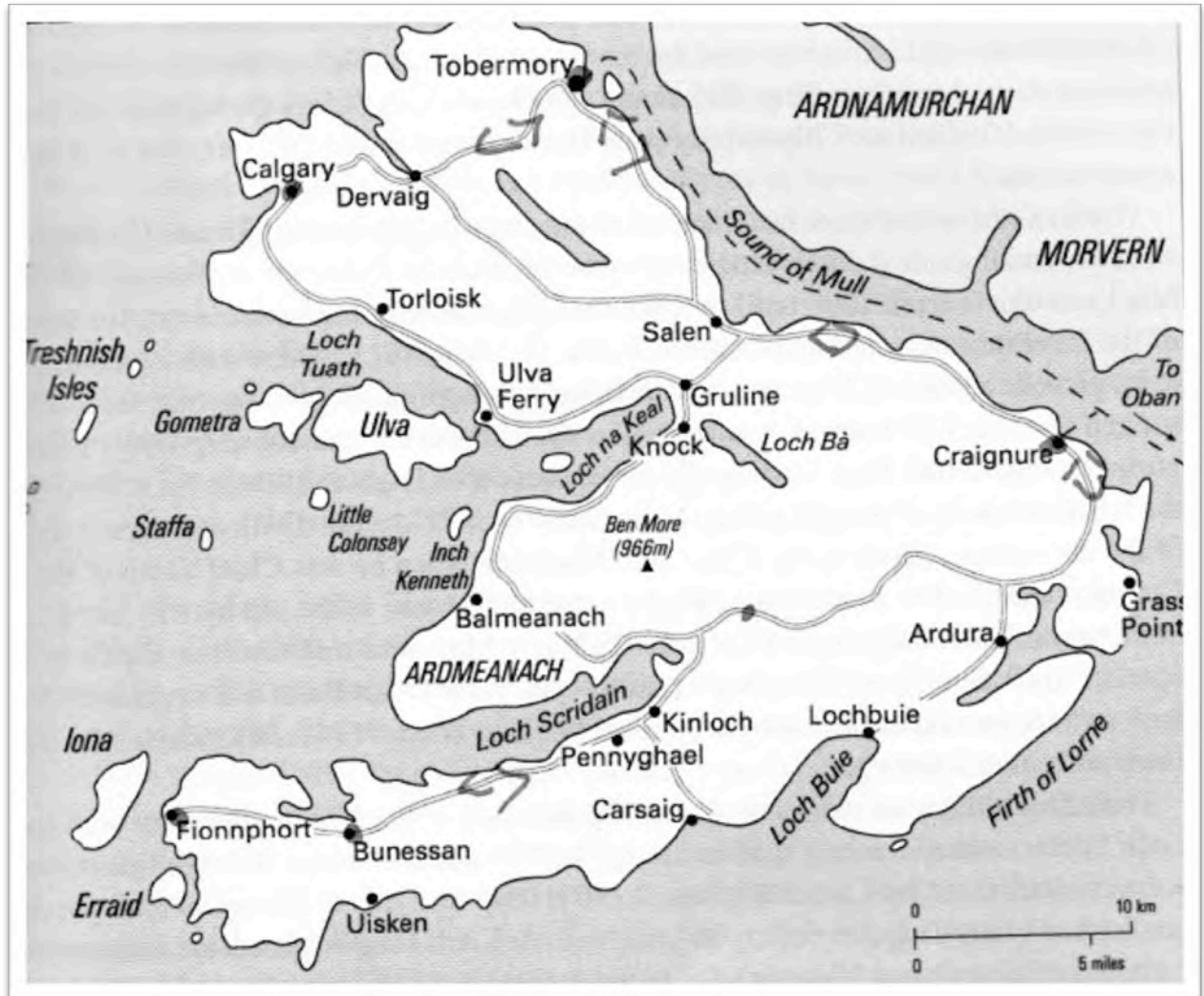


The Isle of Mull, Scotland

August, 2013

Once again we've taken the opportunity of our annual visit to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe to explore one of the Scottish Western Isles enroute. Two years ago we visited Arran, then Harris and this year we chose Mull.



On the overnight sleeper to Glasgow which leaves London an hour before midnight we got into the mood in the bar with a couple of wee samplers of single malt. The next morning we walked through the city centre, still unwakeful under cloudy skies, to Queen Street station and caught the train to Oban. The skies brightened and we sat outside for the hour's crossing of the Sound of Mull to Craignure. We were pleased to see that the bus to Bunessan was there at the dock. Last year the Skye bus didn't wait for the ferry, and a taxi to our destination cost £70. Still, the bus journey was a bit steep: £9 a head to get us to Bunessan in the southwest corner of the island, which is called the Ross of Mull.

Mull is a substantial island, the second-largest in the Inner Hebrides (after Skye.) A single lane road with frequent passing places led over rolling hills through woodland and alongside sea lochs and down a long open valley. Bunessan is a scattering of houses by the head of a small bay. There's a Spar, another Spar, and a former non-Spar general store for rent, a tea room tripling as a fish-and-chippie, and,

when the chef is in, a pizzeria. The local chain of charity shops on the island is called 'Castaways'. In the Argyll Arms public house we had reserved Room 5, which has the best views but, we discovered, the worst internet connection.



Views from room 5 in the Argyll Arms, Buinessan

The local history centre displayed some photos about the traditional life of the island: centuries of hardship, then the clearances, then more hardship. We picked up a booklet of local walks, and the shop assistant, Emily, who is also the National Trust of



Scotland ranger, offered us a lift the next morning out to a weaving centre on a remote croft, where a butterfly and moth hunt would take place. The sun was still out and there was plenty of the long Scottish afternoon left, so we set off for a stroll on a quiet lane around the shore of the blunt peninsula of Ardtun.

Dwellings were simple and widely scattered. All commanded sweeping views, but only a few bothered with gardens, mostly roses, fuchsia and crocosmia. There were run-down caravans, too, perched in magnificent positions, a poor man's patch of paradise. We passed a remote bungalow offering bed-and-breakfast. This was where we had originally planned to stay until we discovered the landlady would require us to clear out between the hours of 10am and 4pm. We hadn't fancied spending our holiday hovering in a bus shelter in the Scottish drizzle, so opted for the pub instead. And now that we were actually doing it, we realised that to walk a mile to the pub for dinner, and another back, would have been a serious inconvenience. Tourism in the Western Islands is aimed at car-owners and package groups with transport. The view of the Ardmeanach peninsula across the loch grew increasingly impressive,



so we sat and sketched it. When we circled back to the pub for tea we had completed a seven kilometer circuit. A mizzle of rain set in at dinnertime while we feasted on smoked salmon, local pan-fried scallops, and helpings of haggis and black pudding served with caramelised apples. We discovered two excellent bottled local beers, both with stories attached. Golden Galleon is named for a Spanish ship which exploded in Tobermory harbour where it had sought shelter after the disaster of the Armada. The wreck of the vessel and its suspected cargo of treasure has been long sought but never found. The Terror of Tobermory is a strong dark beer named after a notorious Royal Navy martinet who ran an anti-submarine training station there during the Second World War.



The breakfast menu which confronted us the next morning was formidable. We never essayed the Full Scottish Breakfast, but the minor slacker's version included fried eggs, toast, several thick rashers of bacon, beans, mushrooms, fried tomato, potato pancakes and a slab of alarming pink spam described as Lorne sausage. Much of this we folded into napkins for lunch.

Emily drove us to Arðalanish where a croft has been developed as an organic sheep-farming enterprise. The owners have reverted to traditional breeds and raise fewer animals compared to the landowners who moved in after the clearances, whose herds were too numerous for the land to support. They have renovated and installed ancient looms, but the process is not entirely self-sufficient. The wool must be sent to the mainland to be washed, then is returned to be spun and woven. It's shipped back again to the mainland for carding and finishing, before returning once more for the final production and sale of tweed cloth and garments.

About thirty people turned up for the butterfly hunt, both local residents and tourists, and including several knowledgeable amateur lepidopterists. A light sea fret enveloped us as we trudged through the fields, so the butterflies kept to their beds and there were more hunters than specimens. However, we learned a bit about plants. Yellow rattle is a parasite but encourages wild flowers in meadows because it weakens the thuggish grass. Ragwort is poisonous to cattle and horses, but is important for many species of insect populations. The caterpillars of the cinnabar moth can live on nothing else, because it contains alkaloids which are ingested by the caterpillar and are distasteful to predators, a fact which is advertised by the caterpillar's yellow and black markings, which turn to red and black when it becomes a day-flying moth. So, if you're keen on moths, you contrive to keep a patch of ragwort growing where animals don't graze, but pull it up before it seeds and spreads.

We inspected the contents of the light trap which had been set overnight. Most of the moths were, to our eyes, indistinguishable little brown jobs, but these were not without interest to the experts. Clearly the smaller and more unobtrusive the moths, the more likely that you may discover new sightings or even species. And many were subtly beautiful, marked in chiaroscuro or iridescent colours, such as the 'garden tiger' and the 'magpie'. The experts used a standard reference book of 'pug moths', in which we were delighted to find the authors had appealed to our entomologist friend, Mark, formerly of the National Museum of Scotland to resolve a conjecture: could the predilections of parasitic wasps in choosing hosts for their offspring offer a guide to identifying moth species? No way, is the resounding answer, which Mark confirmed to us when we had lunch with him at his home in Edinburgh the following week.

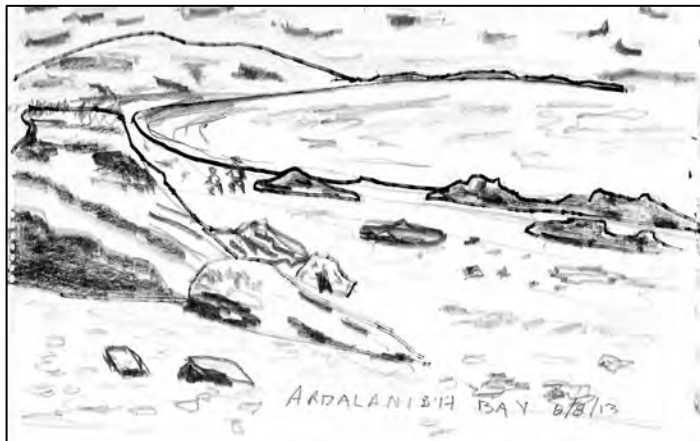
Afterwards we tramped down to the wild, grey beach to munch our breakfast remains under cloudy skies. It began to rain lightly so we pulled on our full wet weather gear and thought about returning home. But the shower soon passed over, and as the weather began to clear, we sat on the rocks and sketched.



Ardalanish Bay.



Afterwards, we walked on the beach, herding clusters of tiny waders before us. They had pale breasts, fawn backs and black heads, with a black neck ring - the lot scurrying about on pink legs. Ringed plovers. We ascended through fields of flowers stirring with now wakeful butterflies, past sheep and abandoned and lived-in crofts and reached the road serving Uisken, the next cove eastwards.



We walked seven kilometres back to the Argyll Arms as the clouds darkened once more, and by the time we sat down to a fish supper it was raining again. We consulted the bus schedule. The next morning the 8:50 bus would take us the few miles to the port of Fionnphort (pronounced finnafort) for a visit to the mystic island of Iona. We would have to return by taxi and so booked one with a man called Dave.



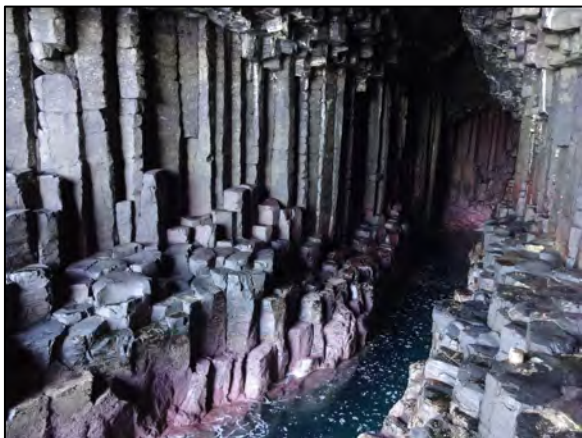
The morning dawned bright and clear, promising a perfect day for the voyage to the even more magical islet of Staffa, so we changed our plans and booked a seat on the excursion boat from Fionnphort, which would embark at 10am. By 9:20 the 8:50 bus had still not arrived. With great good fortune we were able to beg a lift from the only other couple staying at the hotel; they were bound for Staffa, too.

Jura can be seen in the distance (sometimes).

Staffa is an upthrust rock lying seven miles out in the bay. Its six-sided black basalt columns resemble the ruins of a vast pipe organ, and it houses the surreal sea cavern called Fingal's Cave.



It was unknown to the outside world until it was visited by the English naturalist Joseph Banks in 1773. It was acclaimed as a natural wonder. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert made the journey and it attracted a procession of Victorian artists, writers and composers: Turner, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Jules Verne, Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott, Wagner and, memorably, Mendelssohn, whom the moan of the relentless undertow in the cave inspired to compose his Hebrides Overture.



Fingal's Cave.



Basalt structure offshore.

We disembarked and spent an hour wandering up the giant steps to the cave and soaking up the limitless views from the grassy meadows atop the rock. Through binoculars we caught a glimpse of the last puffin skimming over the waves towards the mid-Atlantic, and squadrons of Manx shearwaters, gannets, cormorants and black guillemots wheeled shrieking through the bright blue sky.



The excursion boat dropped us off in Iona. Although only a mile of sea separates it from Mull, the geology is entirely different. The bedrock here is hundreds of millions of years older, so old that it contains no fossils. There is an attractive village of cosy houses with small windows. Some have gardens that drop down to meet the waves. Our first stop was the seafront restaurant for a huge heap of steaming mussels. We then visited the ruined 13th century nunnery, converted into a charming garden, before exploring the abbey, one of the most important religious centres in Western Europe.



In 563, St Columba came here from Ireland with twelve companions, and founded a monastery which spread Christianity among the Picts and Scots. Kings were crowned, and also buried, on Iona. The famous illuminated manuscript, the Book of Kells, is believed to have been produced here.



David and Goliath, purportedly.



A modern capital decoration.

In 806 Vikings massacred 68 monks in what was henceforth called Martyrs' Bay, and the survivors disbanded, fleeing to establish monasteries on the Continent. The abbey still harbours a religious community and has been much restored.

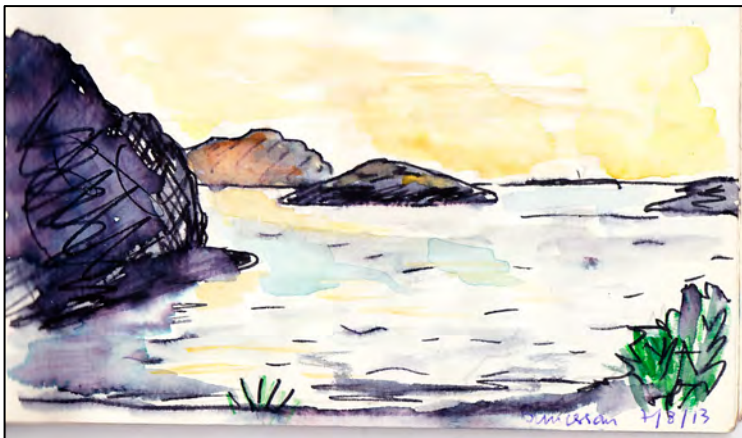


Alternative views from the Iona beach. A passing toddler much preferred Chuck's (r.)

We were relieved to find Dave, the Sassenach taxi driver, waiting for us as the ferry docked in Fionnphort. He claims that from April to mid-June the weather is almost always clement. We heard this before, on Harris, and wonder if it can be true. In winter Dave conveys wealthy Italian shooting parties to and from Glasgow and Edinburgh airports. When Chuck complained about the bus service Dave tactfully opined that the 8:50 bus may run only on Mondays, a fact we later confirmed by a closer inspection of the small print on the bus schedule.

During dinner we fretted about the prospects for the morrow's weather, but when

Dave walked into the pub we seized the opportunity to engage him to take us to the start of a local walk the next morning. We listened to the Proms on Radio 3 while Judith sketched the setting sun from the window of our room.



Just outside Fionnfort lies the islet of Erraid, where David Balfour languished, starving, in heavy weather for three days before realising he could cross over to Mull at low tide, so Chuck

was inspired to reopen the pages of 'Kidnapped' on his Kindle, enjoying this cracking yarn while savouring his first Tobermory ten-year-old single malt. No peat, but excellent .

At breakfast we worked out that the best provisioning strategy was to order an egg plus a bacon roll, and stow the latter in our pockets for lunch. The weather was cool and overcast. Dave drove us up a poorly surfaced road (in Mull termed a 'weak road') and dropped us near the ruined Kilvikeon chapel. We set off for the deserted

village of Shiaba, passing Scoor House, grand by island standards, with views of the sea to both south and north. We saw no sea eagles nor deer and only patches of blue sky.

Shiaba is a widely scattered collection of ruined foundations on a knoll with spectacular views of the dramatic Carsaig cliffs to the east on Mull and the paps of Jura, with Colonsay and Islay behind it to the south. In the first half of the nineteenth century the Ross of Mull suffered a potato famine, the collapse of the kelp industry and the forcible removal of villagers in the Highland clearances. One house still has standing walls and the remains of a metal fireback; this may have been the home of the last resident, who persisted until the 1930s. It must have been a hard and lonely place to eke out your days.



We returned to the ruined chapel and its ancient cemetery which is still used, or at least has been within the last 10 years. In this harsh environment it seems people mostly died very young or lived to late old age. The sun deserted us again as we set off along a track down to Kilvickeon beach, a fine stretch of sand and rocks. The map suggested we could regain the road by following a burn through a short valley up from Port Bhethain, one of several small coves separated by fingers of jagged rocks. The pervading mist began to condense into raindrops as we set off up to the col between the seaward and landward hills, struggling through pathless bog and bracken to reach the promontory overlooking Port Bhethain. It is not a port at all, but a small rocky beach, and is also known as the Bay of Thumbs, so called because when the MacPhees from Colonsay sent a raiding party to steal Mull cattle in the early 17th Century, the MacLeans ambushed them here. The MacPhees fled to their boats, and dragged them into the surf, while the MacLeans chopped off their thumbs as they tried to ship the oars. It was said the MacLeans gathered up 'nine times nine balerfuls (bucketfuls) of fingers and toes'.

The descent to the beach was steep and trackless. We decided not to risk it and took advantage of a break in the rain to sit in the heather to rest, enjoy the view and devour our bacon rolls. We could see a track starting at the top of the small valley, so we turned inland, floundering through bog and bracken, leapt across a small burn and squeezed through a gap in a high wire fence. It was an arduous but effective shortcut, and after circuiting Loch Assapol we gained the minor road Dave had brought us up on that morning. We had walked 16 kilometres before arriving back at the Argyll Arms to deal with the usual calorific dinner, the Terror of Tobermory, and taking a dram of single malt up to our room to savour while falling asleep to Nige Kennedy's late night Prom broadcast.



The next day we embarked on the journey to Tobermory in the north of the island. The weather was dreich, a Scottish word which means exactly what it sounds like. We were surprised when two different buses, from different companies, arrived at the same time. Why this lavish provision, when the bus service in general is so limited? We travelled back along the single lane road to the port of Craignure, where we transferred to another bus which met the Oban ferry and transported us, and a load of day-trippers from the mainland, up through more settled surroundings, often on a dual lane road. The hills gushed with waterfalls; presumably there had been more rain in the central highlands than we had experienced on the coast.

Tobermory is a picturesque fishing port which has not wholly relinquished its traditional character to the tourist trade. We stayed in in the Tobermory Hotel, one of the row of colourful terraced houses overlooking the harbour. The friendly receptionist immediately dealt with our most pressing problem: how to escape from Tobermory in two days' time. Maddeningly, on Sundays there is no bus service which reaches Craignure early enough to connect with the only ferry allowing one to arrive in Glasgow or Edinburgh before nightfall. The efficient lady immediately rang her friend Alan and booked a taxi for us.



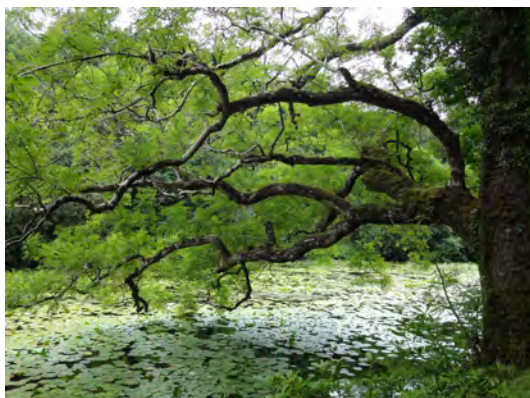
The second important task was to visit the Tobermory distillery, which sits right at the end of the shorefront. We furnished ourselves with a bottle of the Tobermory ten-year-old which Chuck had been sampling and the more peaty Ledaig (pronounced letchik). The third task was to walk up the hill to stock up on smoked trout and salmon. Our housekeeping finished, we set out on a short walk on a muddy path threading northward through woods lined with raspberry and blackberry brambles between a stony cliff and the sea. It led to a lighthouse where we sat and sketched.



We returned by climbing a path up to the clifftop which wandered around a golf course, occasionally disappearing entirely and stranding us on a fairway. The evening meal at the Tobermory Hotel was brilliant. We shared an imaginative starter salad: shreds of venison and sausage, fetta cheese and fruit arranged on green leaves. We ordered langoustine to follow, expecting perhaps three or four to arrive. Each plate was laden with eight large langoustine, fresh from the sea. When we returned to London our local fishmonger told us these were probably what is termed in the trade 'under-eights' (inches?) or 'under-twenties' (centimetres?) and would cost him £60 or £70 for that quantity. Our meal cost £24 for three courses. Pudding was a scrumptious whisky-flavoured pannacotta garnished with raspberry ice cream and shortbread.

We grabbed the last two stools in the Mishnish bar for a rock music gig advertised as beginning at 9-ish and which commenced sometime much later-ish. A Friday night crowd packed the joint. We sipped Tobermory single malts and eventually deciphered the slurred speech of a tattooed Scotsman who was attempting to inform some visiting Italians that Alex Salmond is 'nae bloody goud'.

After traditional breakfasts - porridge and Loch Fyne kippers - we set off southwards along a path bordered with lush, almost tropical-looking greenery.





Segregated streams of white and brown foam poured down from a waterfall. Chaffinches abounded. The sun emerged and we paused twice to sketch, including the familiar view of Tobermory port with its terrace of brightly coloured houses. These were originally painted for a movie; the locals liked it and have maintained this Mediterranean contrast to the usual grey and dour Scottish houses.

We did not wish to attempt to reprise the memory of last night's marvelous meal, so dined instead at MacGochan's, a large pub on the waterfront convenient to the distillery. Judith ate a combination plate of battered haggis and black pudding. Scallops are so plentiful that they are also offered in batter, like fish and chips. This sounds like an insult to a noble seafood, but they were marvelous – huge, flavourful and moist morsels. They are battered in beer because, we were told, the gas keeps the batter light

Alan arrived in plenty of time to convey us to the ferry at Craignure in a shared taxi, which kept the price reasonable. It was sunny, so we sat outside again for the journey across the Sound of Mull to the increasingly grey skies over the mainland were gloomy. Next stop Edinburgh and the frantic bustle of the Festival Fringe.



We agreed that while Judith's sketch from the clifftop overlooking the Sound of Mull (l) was more accomplished, Chuck's perspective (r) was more correct!