

Captain Number Two

The tale of a wandering Connel Park laddie

Written By
Bobby Rogerson



Adapted by Stephen Kennedy
On behalf of New Cumnock Now & Then
www.newcumnock.net

Reproduction kindly authorised by Bobby Rogerson

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	2
Acknowledgements.....	6
Foreword.....	9
Introduction.....	11
Chapter One – Connel Park	14
Chapter Two - Lochside.....	25
Chapter Three – Creoch Alliance	31
Chapter Four – Of Seasons, Fish and Folks Old and New	38
Chapter Five – Of Uncles and Others	51
Chapter Six – Soldiers	64
Chapter Seven – Of Hawkers and Tramps.....	78
Chapter Eight - McNivens	83
Chapter Nine - Schooldays Ending.....	88
Chapter Ten - The Start of an Era, the End of a War.....	92
Chapter Eleven - New Fields, New Friends.....	101
Chapter Twelve - Borderlands, Bikes and Balmorals.....	118
Chapter Thirteen - Where the Sun Never Shines.....	127
Chapter Fourteen - Here-awa‘-there-awa‘!.....	137
Chapter Fifteen - Throw Away The Tent-Pegs!	149
Chapter Sixteen- Black Lammastide	156
Chapter Seventeen – Corsencon - Where the Sun Rises.....	172
Epilogue	174
Appendix.....	176
A postscript from a Friend – Neil Currie	177
Evacuation – Town life versus country life	177



Aerial view of Connel Park shortly after the 'raws' were demolished



Taken at Connel Park

Back Row: Nellie Riddal, Mrs. Collie, Hannah Robertson, Cathie R. Lindsay, Liz McHallam, Helen McCurdie, Mrs. Peg Hose, Mrs. McCann, Mrs. Gilmore, Annie Ewan

Middle Row: (Two Small Girls) Jean Hose & Annie Houston.

Front Row: Hannah McGinn, Jint McCurdie, Nancy Lorimer, ? Whiteside, Jean Neish, Belle Neish, Unknown, Ina Whiteside, Alex Neish.

*Sic a nicht in winter shin wad mak' him cauld
His chin upon his buffy haund, shin he will grow auld
His brow, tis brent sae braid and I pray that Daddie care
Wad let the waen alane wi his castles in the air*



Author Bobby Rogerson now residing in Canada at time of writing 2008

Acknowledgements

Stephen Kennedy

I am a former resident of New Cumnock and I am responsible for the web site www.newcumnock.net which was formed after a meeting with local historian Donald McIver. I was introduced to Bobby Rogerson via the web site and was subsequently given 'Captain Number Two' to peruse and, suitably impressed, decided to completely rework the story and offer to the web sites many visitors as a free download. Months of late nights, research and painstaking effort, has produced the finished article, which is now available to all. I am also associated with the New Cumnock local History Club which has introduced numerous new friends to me.



I would like to offer special thanks to those listed below, for their tenacity and efforts 'to ensure the book was seen through to fruition. A culmination of Loveday's typing skills and John's insistence on ensuring the facts are correct, whilst checking the grammar, has produced the revised version of the wonderful 'Captain Number Two'.

Bobby Guthrie

Bobby Guthrie, a former New Cumnock resident who attended the 'Toon' School and is responsible for the remarkable web site http://members.tripod.com/bob_newcumnock/nchome/welcomex.html which contains unrivalled historic information on New Cumnock. His knowledge of the area is second to none. Bobby plays a large role in the local History Club and is often to be found at Loch Park supporting the Glens and needless to say, the man is also responsible for their web site and the match programme. A true credit to the village!

Donald McIver

It is true to say that without Donald's influence, neither www.newcumnock.net, Bobby Guthrie's historic site, Robert Hart's extraordinary New Cumnock CDs or even the local History Club would not exist today. Over the years, the man has collected books, photographs, documented local historic events in his books and even appeared in videos concerning the village. Donald was involved in the History Club for many years and is a major authority and influence on all things from times gone by.

Loveday McBlain

Loveday Pollock was born in Catrine. The sister of two elder brothers, she was brought up for the first eight years of her life in Castle Buildings, New Cumnock, after which the family moved to Milray Avenue, where she remained until her marriage. The marriage produced four sons and six grandsons, but parallel with bringing up her family, music has remained her abiding passion throughout the majority of her life. However, she also worked in a legal office for 20 years, thus sharpening her typing skills which were eventually to lead to her involvement in the production of this book.

Loveday first became acquainted with Bobby Rogerson in childhood, through their mutual friendship with the author's great friend Bob Turnbull, and it was directly because of her page on Stephen Kennedy's New Cumnock website that she and Bobby became re-acquainted some fifty odd years later. The typing of the raw material for the book followed, and she has declared Bobby's book to be one of her most interesting and informative reads ever.



Loveday McBlain (nee Pollock)

John Walker

John was born in 1929, the eldest of five children and lived at Stepends Road (The Washer Raw) until the age of six when he moved to The Castle. He attended the Toon School and on leaving served an apprenticeship as a joiner. Following National Service in the Royal Navy, during which he met his English wife-to-be, he moved to England in 1951. His memories of New Cumnock are therefore fixed firmly in the 1930s and 1940s which he considers was the best time to be young in the whole history of New Cumnock.

He also believes that the description in this book of the Knockshinoch disaster and rescue is the most graphic and lucid that he has read.



John Walker

The People of New Cumnock Past and Present

I would like to thank all those who have presented photographs, poems, stories and immeasurable information, and assistance with the cost of producing and maintaining the site as I endeavour to make the past available to all, young and old. Without you, the web site would cease to exist. Please continue to support the site in any way you can. My gratitude is endless.

Foreword

I have met many people since creating the New Cumnock Now And Then web site including such wonderful characters as the man who supplied the majority of the photographs Donald McIver, who in his own right is probably the best known local historian and has produced a couple of fantastic books.

The Dornans, Patrick and Mary who can best be described as two of the most wonderful people I have ever had the pleasure to meet and have supplied many pictures and information for the web site. Paddy and Mary's house has become my second home and they are true friends, almost family.

Bobby Guthrie a man on a mission to equip himself with knowledge of all things based on New Cumnock often dating back hundreds of years. Bobby has a superb web site, full of historical facts, which often complements my own. He is very passionate about many subjects such as the 'The Covenanters'. Bobby provides many answers for queries submitted to the site and has played a big part in driving me forward to taking on a project such as this.

Many people over the years have delighted not only me but a host of visitors to www.newcumnock.net by supplying photographs and stories to entertain the guests. Alex Jess and John Walker fall into this category and again go the extra mile to assist me where ever possible.

Then there is the man himself, who has told me many a story about New Cumnock, some of which he may be pulling my leg over but I like to believe they are all true. Bobby Rogerson is one of life's true characters. He has supplied much needed information to me in the past including this manuscript 'Captain Number Two' which, although it has been on the go for quite some time, isn't freely available to all due to it being mainly seen in a photocopied version.

With Bobby's permission, we have typed every word for all to peruse and made it available as a download from the site. I have complemented his wonderful stories by adding pictures and the occasional comment.

I have however edited the original, so that is easier to understand outside of New Cumnock as Bobby writes in true Ayrshire dialect and many of the words may be unknown to some.

I hope that you enjoy the content of this document as much as I have and that Bobby's wit and humour may put a smile on someone's face long after he is gone!

Stephen Kennedy

Even the most recent of the happenings described here are almost 50 years in the past at the time of publication. It is almost certain that many friends and workmates who had a prominent part in some of the events have not been mentioned and to all of you I offer my sincerest apologies. The absence of your names has nothing to do with any deliberate design on my part but simply through defect in this aging Connel Park Laddie's memory.

Bobby Rogerson

*I walk alone where two hawks fly
Where once was heard the bairnie's cry
Where water runs doon the rankled burn
An' the broken brig grows green among the fern*

Introduction

As the title suggests, this is the story of life through the eyes of a wee Connel Park boy from birth, through his childhood and teenage years. Characters and events from New Cumnock will be described as they had a direct impact on the life and the experience of the writer. What follows is by no means meant to be the history of New Cumnock, even if the descriptions of certain events do give cause for some fresh appraisal or the addition of some small increment of local knowledge. The history of New Cumnock has been dealt with before and I can recommend what I consider the best and admirably researched in his 'New Cumnock Far Away' by George Sanderson of the Leggate, New Cumnock. The fact that some of the events, names and situations found in this narrative seem to almost mirror several parts of Mr. Sanderson's writings is far from surprising and is a sign of respect for the man's work. There is no plagiarism involved as we both lived through many of the same experiences. I differ from George in the spelling of some local features such as 'Stayamrie' in his books would appear as 'Stayamra' in mine. It is possible that the former is correct but I follow my own past and I have always used the latter spelling. Neither do I use George's designation of the lochs as 'Creoch' as I believe that research fell short of finding the facts here – not that it is of any great importance but I can point to the old maps of Lochside where the loch is referred to as 'Loch of the Lowes'.

I wrote this rambling tale for my children, so that they might have a clearer understanding of how their dad grew up to be the kind of fella that helped to raise them. I wrote also for my brother, sisters and friends with whom I share these pages. I trust that I offend no one by my insistence of seeing the world through 'Bobby Rogerson's eyes; it is after all my story and it goes without saying that Lachie, Bet, Lily, Neil, Chrissie, Bill or any other friends of my youth who appear here would in all likelihood have some different perspectives. They may even differ with me on exact truths or chronology of certain events. All I can say to them – in the nicest possible way is – 'Tough! – Go write yer ain story'.

I have sought permission from Neil Currie, for the inclusion of a brief, but very informative description of his early life, with particular reference to his years at Creoch as an evacuee. Neil wrote this himself, at his daughter's request and I was amazed at just how much I didn't know about my boyhood friend.

Many years have passed by since the scenes described in the following pages became part of the past. Those who seek in the autumn of their days, to renew acquaintances with childhood haunts, may take a walk from wherever life has led them and stand once more on the auld Connel Burn brig to gaze westward along the roadway and up the summit of the Bank Brae; they will find no more than memories. The rail line still crosses the road but there are no gates, no Gatehouse and the auld summer seat has long since disappeared. Fitba Raw, Store Raw, Washer Raw, Honeymoon Raw and

the Boig Road are all gone – as though they had never been. The Boo-in Farm (South Boig) where in the long gone days, Connel Park families passed their pennies over the small metal counter in exchange for a daily milk supply, now stands naked and alone. The Caldells were the resident farmers in the days when wee Bobby, Lachie and Betty skelped around the back doors and closes with the other kids, surrounding the farm steading with the noise and bustle of a thriving mining community. I don't know who is in the Boo-in now but having several times taken that journey down the years, standing on the auld brig, I have gazed and wondered – do they hear on a quiet night, the voices of a thousand ghosts?



Burnfoot Row

Gone too are the auld Craighbank, Burnside and Burnfoot. At the western boundary of the sad, empty stretch of grassland that was once Connel Park, stands the 'Hawtrees', Bouchie Gray's dwelling of olden days, still defying the ravages of time and one of the few roadside buildings that survives from the days of my childhood, from the Leggate over Camlarg to Dalmellington.

It would be good to be able to refer in these introductory paragraphs to all the people who live through the following pages in the present tense but the onward march of time precludes that. So many of the lives touched upon in my story have come to their end – some in fact, many years ago. Of the people close to me – Mum died some twenty years back, Faither three years since and Uncle Jim, the last of the family to arrive in New Cumnock from Durisdeer in 1913, followed just over a year ago. Aunt Flora remains of Mum's family, living quietly in sheltered housing at Afton Bridgend and I trust that she have more peaceful years and the chance to read what has been written here. It would only serve to create sadness if I were to continue to mention all those who are no longer with us, even if some of that sadness is, for all we know, misplaced. None of us can see beyond the veil – Not Paisley, Pope or Prelate or any other seer who makes claims to the contrary. Like many another, I have my conviction that death cannot be the end of all things. I have tried to be a decent fella and to be on side with other good folk, whether they be underdog or millionaire. There are many who can be called "kirk gaun folk" and are sincere in the belief that they show respect to their maker in their way but I abhor the miserable creatures who try – often with scant success – to be good merely because some black-robed religious person tells them that hellfire and brimstone awaits if you don't

adhere to their particular concept of goodness and that the wages for being good will be the admission to some abysmal, dull sounding place called 'Heaven'. If my Heaven exists, in the unknown future, I want it to be no more or less than a return to the life of a wee laddie born in Connel Park, in the year of 1930. Maybe if there was a choice, I would request more of some things and less of others and yet I would wish to share my years with the same people – with my friends – and those few I would not like to count among my friends. After all there can be no knowledge of well being without first knowing pain or hardship; no awareness of good, without experiencing the result of which is bad and no true contentment without knowing love.

The final paragraph of this tale is woven around an encounter at the caves at Corsencon in the year of 1948. Yes, it is so – the moments described here are not followed in sequence; previous pages tell of events more than two years later. Perhaps those among you who have taken the time after an early walk, sat down and remembered the glory of the sunrise and that no fragment of the rest of the day can surpass that moment will understand. I met my lady at Corsencon – and there indeed the sun rose on a day that lasted for over forty years. Her name was Nellie. The first time I saw her, she had my thumb stick; she still has it as she took it with her when she left.

I have told my story mainly for the kids and to proceed further would mean starting a new chronicle and one that my children may wish to remain precious and unshared. Anyway – they already know it

Bobby Rogerson, Vancouver Island, Canada, 1996

Chapter One – Connel Park

My life began on the 26th of June, 1930 at 09:30. What day of the week it was, I don't know off hand but I don't think it is important.

In 1930 the great war of 1914-1918 was just twelve years past – 12 years of momentous development as far as the ordinary people of the British Isles were concerned. The advent of the female suffrage and the general strike of 1926 – broad based at first but ending with the British miners struggling alone and going down finally in defeat, having to accept conditions worse, if anything, than those that drove them to strike in the first place. The momentous years that followed in which we saw the rising influence of the Labour Party and of the nascent stirrings of the Nazis in a recovering Germany, paralleled by the growth of Mosley's fascists in Great Britain. Indeed the ingredients, by June 1930, for the mix which was to precipitate world war two were already in the political cauldron and ominously fermenting.

Little boys of very tender years are blessed however. Such events on the political scene may be described as “earth shaking” They certainly do not shake little boys; especially little boys who have loving, caring parents, who cocoon them in a ball of affection, which shuts out the whole troubled spectrum on national and world affairs. The most disturbing event in my infant years was one which, even my parents – especially not my parents – could alleviate its effects on a spoiled wee laddie's ego. A baby brother arrived! – Lachlan McNiven Rogerson, a squalling wee bauchle of around seven pounds weight burst upon an erstwhile idyllic scene and suddenly, metaphorically speaking, snatched the lion's share of the good things in life.

In rational hindsight, of course, the arrival of Lachie caused hardly a ripple on the sun kissed calm of the sea of childhood.

Mum and Dad were not well off in material terms. The little house into which I was born was, literally, a railway crossing gatehouse. Indeed, the postal address was Gate-House, Connel Park.

Connel Park; it conjures images of lush green trees, of pleasant expanses of green grass and open spaces. The reality was very different. The towering pit bings frowned darkly down on stone built miners cottages, each one like its neighbour – one room and a kitchen. Two built in or box beds graced the living room and the kitchen was endorsed with a stone sink and a single cold water tap. In the corner was a masonry shrouded cast-iron boiler, with an incorporated fire-bed beneath it. This was the laundry facility. At the rear of the house, at one side of a shared close, was – in the enlightened, modern days of my childhood – a flushing water closet and a brick built coal house completed the ensemble. Such were the dwellings of the coal miners. “Hovels”, some might say. The merest glance at the front of the houses would have you believe otherwise. Spotless white lace curtains, tastefully draped behind gleaming glass windows and the steps at the front door always freshly scrubbed or decorated in red cardinal or brilliant white stucco (stookie) design. And the mistake

of thinking these were hovels would be brought home even more if you were given the privilege of stepping over the portals of these cosy little rooms. In nearly every house, brasses winked and gleamed across the mantelpiece, burnished by loving hands. Lino covered floors were pristine and polished and partly covered by multicoloured rag rugs, all woven with patience and care in the long winter nights. And always the coal fire, with the kettle on the hob at its side and inevitable tea pot sat on the hearth. Little palaces they were, almost without exception.

NOTE: Not all the Rows had their own WCs and boilers. The Washer Row at least, had a communal block in which each house had its own coalshed but a WC was shared between two families and about eight shared the washhouse in which there were several boilers. Perhaps to compensate for this, these houses had two rooms and a scullery.

Mining villages tended to be close knit communities and Connel Park was no exception to this rule. The term 'minding your own business' was somewhat blurred in definition among the mining families. The term did have effect in most family affairs that deserved privacy (although in truth village gossip was a favoured pastime) but many aspects of life, which in a more diversified society, would be shrouded in secrecy or treated with public indifference, would be of common concern among the mining families. If Johnny Edwards's pet fox died, we all knew about it. If Sanny Sloper was 'fu' again on Saturday night, again it was common knowledge. If one of the boozing fraternities heard a new dirty story on one of his frequent visits to the pub doon the toon, then every receptive ear in CONNEL PARK had heard it within two days. And if someone was hurt, ill or in any trouble not of their own making, there was never a need to call for immediate assistance; it was given warmly, willingly without question by the kindly folks, who knew where the expression 'minding your own business' had its limits.

As is generally inevitable in such communities, CONNEL PARK had its share (perhaps more than its share) of memorable worthies. Nearly all at the time of writing, live on in memory only, as many years have passed since wee Bobby Rogerson has passed amongst them. I am sure all of them would be amazed to know how long they have actually lived in memory and how they affected and influenced the character of the community. They cannot all be named and even those who are mentioned in this transcript are touched upon fleetingly, which is a great pity for I could fill a book on each and every one of them, and with exclusively humorous anecdote at that! My father's immediate circle of cronies had one or two worthy of a mention.

Barney Crate, late of Fitba Raw..... a stout jolly gentleman, who with his round rosy cheeks and permanent smile, was the perfect model for Santa Claus.

'Mung' Baird was another of Faither's pals, again of Fitba Raw, liked nothing better than a Saturday night in the company of my father and the crowd. There they would enjoy a wee dram and sing a song or two in the Cross Keys, Mac's Bar or the Afton Hotel.

There was **‘Major’ Clapperton** formerly of Boig Road. He was a tall man, usually well turned out, who had a reputation for a dry and witty repartee and was another character of note. My father used to often tell the following story. The Major, Uncle Jim (more of him later) and father took a stroll up the Afton Road, which as its name suggests, follows the course of the river almost to its source. Back then you could find salmon in the Afton and as all were expert ‘guddlers’ it should come as no surprise that three men walked up the Afton and three men and a salmon subsequently walked back down. Now when Constable Morrison came into view in the middle distance, the salmon was swiftly slid down the major’s trouser leg. An amiable confrontation ensued.

“Aye boys – a grand day for a daunder” said Morrison

All agreed. The worthy policeman then addressed the Major. “The salmon are running then Major?”

“Aye they are that” he exclaimed trying to act innocent.

The constable continued “Some gey clever salmon in that Afton” glancing at the major’s distorted trouser leg. “Some of them can swim up the water and walk doon the road”.

Directly over the road from our home at the Gatehouse, lay the largest building in Connel Park. A two storied structure, it rejoiced in the high sounding name ‘Smithfield’. It is possible that it was constructed to house the high ranking colliery officials but this is merely a guess although it did have a more imposing appearance than any of the existing miners’ houses. By the time the thirties came around, I don’t think any of the families dwelling there would have enjoyed any superior status, in either wealth or station.

The tenancy included the Brown family, Mr. and Mrs., May, Greta, Matt, Sammy and a wee tottie smitch by the name of Henry. Also Tam Burgoyne, the Currie, Strachan and Gray families completed the Smithfield population and not forgetting Constable Morrison who lived on the first floor.

Big Wull Gray was in fact one of the ‘worthies’ who, both by virtue of his extrovert nature and his prowess on the football field made a lasting place in the memories of the people of CONNEL PARK. Another member of the same family lived at the extreme western end of the village in what was I believe, the only detached house in CONNEL PARK other than our own Gatehouse of course. Here lived ‘Bouchie’ Gray (pronounce the **ch** as in loch). He was a somewhat eccentric fellow and famed for his dry humour and a certain satirical and penetrating wit. The house was distinguished by having the name ‘Hawtrees’ and at the time of reproducing this story was the home of Alex and Mary Jess. As a wee laddie, I found wondrous fascination with both the house and its owner. One of the things that intrigued my young mind was the fact that it had a patch of green lawn to the rear of the house. At the bottom of the garden was a low structure – of what material I cannot guess, for it was almost entirely smothered in a copious growth of green ivy. Two faces carved in stone could be seen peering from the tangle of vines and leaves. I didn’t know it then, but peeking at me through the foliage were Tam O’Shanter and Souter Johnny.

Perhaps those stone caricatures may never have fixed themselves firmly in my memory had I not been introduced to the magic that they represented. No matter when I visited, Bouchie would lift me up and in the mouths of one of the said

characters, would be a treasure trove of pennies! Back then pennies were a considerable amount of money even to adults. I could buy quarter pound of chocolate caramels in Sam Bingham's shop for just one of those coins.

So many more of the CONNEL PARK folk deserve a mention but time, space and perhaps a certain lack of patience prevents me from discussing them at greater length. But before moving on, and travelling back down the Bank Brae from Bouchie's, I will name one or two of the residents.

On the crown of the hill lived Johnny Edwards. A man of many talents, Johnny was connected to the Scout movement and remained a prominent figure for many years. He was renowned for rescuing wild animals that were in distress and could and often did produce crocheted lace work that would be the envy of many a talented lady.

Further down the hill and across the road in one of the single ends, were the Morrison family; all fourteen of them at one stage! I recall the Daddy of them all, Dick, a tall gangly man and deservedly known as a bit of a wag, declare he lived in a semi-detached house in CONNEL PARK. "It is breaking away from the yin next door" he proclaimed.

I will leave the good folks of CONNEL PARK with a brief reference to Mrs. Allen and her wee Sweetie Shop in the Fitba Raw and just around the corner Mrs. Neish did a roaring trade with toffee apples on match days and all from her window overlooking the Glens fitba pitch.

CONNEL PARK people, faces and voices, now mere ghosts from the misty past but they lived and breathed and were part of the building of my life. Where are they now.... ?

Sam Hill, John Ferguson, Wullie Sweden, Dick McGinn, Sammy Broon, Jim Currie, Andy Robertson, Hugh McCurdie, Hawthorn Ferrans, Jim Black, Tommy Little, Forbes and Jim Morrison, Crighton Grant, Ginger MacAnespie, the 'Spud' twins and all other laddies who shared the same scenes? Some I know are still around. Others have gone beyond the horizon to god knows where and others beyond this life, to whatever lies beyond the veil for us all.

Ours wasn't a mining family; we were 'railway' people. My father was a railway surfaceman, which was probably as close to the bottom rung of the ladder as you could be. His wage at that time for his weeks toil was a princely sum of two pounds and ten shillings. My mother received a nominal fee for rushing to close the gate of the rail crossing to road traffic each time a warning whistle blast heralded the approach of a coal train.



The Gatehouse can be seen on the left just before the level crossing

The gates consisted of four heavy wooden gates which when closed barred the encroachment of motor vehicles onto the rail tracks. It was by no means an infrequent operation for a few hundred yards up line from the Gatehouse was the coal washery plant. It was a noisy, filthy mass of Victorian engineering, where passed the coal production of all local mines through its squealing innards. A constant cacophony of clanks, screeches and squeaks emanated from the massive grimy structure, ever accompanied by hissing clouds of steam from the mysterious processes within. It was a curious fact that when the racketing monster fell silent due to breakdown, holidays or whatever that hundreds of people who lived within the compass of the endless clatter, found themselves unable to sleep in the eerie silence!

Trainloads of coal were shunted from this washery down the track and into the marshalling yard known as the Bank Junction, where the laden wagons were filtered accordingly before being switched to the main London Midland and Scottish railway en route to their final destination.

So the demands of the crossing gates on my mother were frequent and heavy. Just to the west of the crossing gates was one of the CONNELL PARK institutions – the summer seat. This was little more than a long low weather ravaged board supported at several points with brick butts. It was well named ‘the summer seat’ for it was in a very exposed position and could by no means offer all weather comfort. However, on a good day Mum could rely on an abundance of volunteers, assisting in the operation of the line gates, for there was seldom a time when that old seat wasn’t being used by locals enjoying a smoke and a blether whilst absorbing the sunshine.

In times of less clement weather, volunteers were thin on the ground. Sometimes off shift miners or men on the ‘Buroo’ (the dole) used to congregate in the Clachan - a converted coal company housing unit, which served as a community meeting place where men could hang around discussing football, horse racing, pigeons or placing bets with the local ‘illegal’ bookmaker. It is fairly certain that the virtues, demerits, performance statistics, willingness or otherwise of selected parish ladies were also discussed on a regular basis.

To the east of the gates, just beyond Smithfield was a small cluster of shops. Unless the citizens of CONNEL PARK required a pair of shoes, factory knitted socks or a suit for instance, there was little reason for them to travel beyond this handy group of retailers. First was Peter Hendron's barbers shop followed by Bingham's Chippy. The chippy was indeed a popular place where a hungry lad could get a bulky bag of chips for a penny – and OLD PENNY at that! Across the road, over the Connel Burn Bridge and round the bend was Murray's grocery shop where one could purchase everything under the sun. Anything from porridge to wee paper flags for waving on the Rechabite trips.

NOTE: The Rechabites were an anti-alcohol association and if your dad enjoyed a whisky or a beer you were sent to join Junior Rechabites so you could attend the trips.

If you followed the road eastwards, CONNEL PARK was left behind and you entered the part of the parish known as the Leggate. A pleasant and friendly place but it had no relevance to the early days of my life. However the Leggate did feature strongly in my later life.

All of my grandparents were alive in those early days. My paternal grandparents owned a large country house, which stood in twenty-one acres of land. They also retained all the sporting rights to the loch which lay adjacent to it. On old county maps, this loch was titled 'Loch o' the Lowes' meaning lake of the flames. The house and its outbuildings were known collectively as Lochside, which was a thriving hamlet in those far off days. Over the years the name changed to Lochside Loch taken from the name of the house on its northern shores and that was the only name it ever bore in my time.

NOTE: On some Ordnance Survey Maps the loch is shown as Loch o' th' Lowes.

From CONNEL PARK, the house lay two miles due north along the rail track beyond the River Nith. Never did it enter my young mind that this cluster of stone buildings and people there were destined to play a colossal part in my life. It wasn't in fact, a favourite destination in my early days as I never felt truly at home with my paternal grandparents.

My maternal Grandfather was Lachlan McNiven. He was in his youth, a deep sea fisherman, sailing out of his native Islay. Later he took up the craft of so many of his highland and island compatriots and became a shepherd. Arriving on the Scottish mainland, he met and married a sweet lady called Eliza Morton and settled on the holdings of Floak Farm near the village of Eaglesham. One of his tasks during his employment was to take the daily milk production by horse and cart into the city of Glasgow (by such coincidence does the traditional Scottish ditty 'Drivin intae Glesca in ma soor milk cairt' have a fair degree of poignancy for me). Here on Floak Farm, my mother was born and spent her formative years. After a few years, the family moved to a new location near Cumnock. A shepherd's steading called Newfield. My parents met after my Grandpa and Granny McNiven moved to Dumfriesshire, to a cot house called Hillhead on the rise above Tynron village not far from Moniaive.

Like most people, memories from events occurring prior to my fifth birthday tend to be vague, but many Hillhead memories remain clear in my mind. It was there that I took for granted the existence of other members of the McNiven family. Aunt Flora was younger than my mother by a number of years. The salient memory of her at Hillhead is one of the frequent excursions to the hillside spring, where the cool clear water bubbled from the earth which was also the closest water supply for the household and it was in my memory, pure and sweet. A policeman came visiting too and was invariably accompanied by a dark haired lady. So I came to know them as Uncle Neil and Aunt Cathie. Uncle Neil was a tall well built fellow and was, I believe, a few years younger than my mother. He was a policeman in London. Aunt Cathie was a down to earth lady who said exactly what was in her mind. More than sixty years have passed since they visited at Hillhead but she is still down in London saying what she feels with a broad Ayshire accent from her native Failford. Other memories spring to mind; I scabbled along the turf one day, mimicking the busy doings of a mole, which had somehow found its way into my infant sphere of activity. And Davie Stitt, an old Galloway tramp a 'gaberlunzie' man, who was always given a brimming bowl of porridge and milk as reward for some minor chore. I insisted, always, if I happened to be there, on my bowl of porridge too. So Davie the tramp and I had many a confab squatting against the gable spooning our porridge oats and milk.

Aye – to a little fella of five years, Hillhead was heaven. Ah, time, cruel time! My fifth birthday was spent there and I never was to spend another. My last memory of Hillhead and Tynron is vivid in my mind – the Jubilee celebrations for King George V at Tynron village green, 1935.

The McNiven family moved to the Dunscore area, not many miles from Hillhead but to a wee laddie it might as well have been a thousand. The Beatties of Dalmakerran Farm moved to another called McChainston and Grandpa, being literally part of the Beattie farming operation, found it necessary to move with his employer. This was no chore – a great mutual respect existed between Grandpa and old John Beattie, and there was no one whom he would rather work for. Besides, Aunt Flora's bosom pal in those days was Janie, the Beattie's only daughter. The new residence was a stone built cot, similar in many respects to the old Hillhead home. It differed from Hillhead there was no man of the house, at least not during the time I knew the folks. Mind that it was situated in a much more sheltered position, being almost surrounded by tall beech trees and having plum trees in the garden to the rear. There were also neighbours close by. They were now one of the families in the hamlet of Edgerton. The closest family lived in a cothouse just above and to the west; the Clarks. Mrs Clark was a strange character; some would say, and with some justification, weird! Had she been around during Cromwell's period, she may well have found herself tied to a stake among a pile of faggots. And no person would be less deserving of that fate, for as I recall, she was a delightful and entertaining woman. She held very strong old country beliefs and would wash her face in the morning dew every first day of May, and uttered her first words 'white rabbits!' as she opened her eyes on the first Sunday of any month. She also made the most delicious pancakes and homemade toffee and was more than happy to feed them to a visiting CONNELL PARK rascal. She had one son who lived at Edgerton with her. His name was Jim. He must have been around fourteen when I first met him but it's difficult to give any accurate estimate; for he was not like others of his age. He was a very highly strung lad and appeared to be in

a constant state of great excitement. In hindsight, his interests were those you might expect of a boy several years his junior. Despite his erratic mental state and his unpredictable behaviour, Jim was a harmless soul. Nothing he ever did stemmed from any malevolent motive and he was always a welcome playmate.

In another cottage in the hamlet of Edgerton lived the Irvine family. My memory is vague where they are concerned and only one of the family members stands out and that was Jock. I can comment on Jock's character now because of his continued association and friendship for many years after Edgerton. He was a thoroughly decent fellow; shy and somewhat withdrawn. He could however be an enjoyable companion once he became part of the social scene, and down through the years was counted as a valued friend by both Father and Uncle Jim.

Not much more can be written about Edgerton; yes we had our adventures there, for instance being viciously stung by a wasp swarm springs to mind. Lachie and I were throwing stones at a tin can which was lodged in a hedge and managed to burst a wasp byke wide open. Another day saw the pair of us careering downhill on Johnny Beattie's bogie, and having failed to take the turn at the foot, taking lumps out of our scalps on the road metal. I recall marvelling at the old steam engine at McChainston Farm. It was still in use back then and one of its jobs was to power the thresher at harvest time. There were peacocks, plums and chestnuts, not to mention rabbits by the thousand. Yes it was quite a paradise for visiting CONNEL PARK kids.

Life in CONNEL PARK went on. The big event of this period was the commencement of my education at New Cumnock 'Higher Grade' School (forgive the quotes but I cannot for the life of me see how the youngsters at the Toon School were of higher grade than any others). My first teacher was Miss Dalgliesh. I still recall her as typifying exactly what one would expect in an aging, fussy, Victorian spinster, thin as a rake, tight-lipped, and pince-nez perched on her narrow nose end. I am unjust! In truth, I have NO bad memories of Miss Dalgliesh at all. She was a fine, kind lady. I turned up each morning with my school slate, slate pencil, small cloth and a bottle of water. All clerical functions were handily accomplished using these simple items. Is there a lesson here for those in the present day hierarchy who are prone to bemoan materials shortage? I settled in at school in an admirable fashion having made a circle of young friends, wrapped Miss Dalgleish round my little finger, and even burst the nose of the class bully. I was running like hell at the time, but he was about to catch me, so I stopped suddenly, turned round and bopped him a beauty. He called at our gatehouse, shirt all bloody, to complain to my Mum. She chased him and I got an extra helping of baked rice.

Then disaster struck! The school catchment areas were rearranged. I was sent to the BANK school. Horror of horrors! All the barefoot, hard fighting, harum-scarum ruffians of the Parish were at Bank school and me without a club, a gun or even a sling shot. How amazed I was when I found myself among a friendly, grinning bunch of kids. More, certainly, seemed to prefer their socks hanging around their boot tops than had been the norm at the 'Higher Grade', but if the truth be told, from a class of about twenty boys, only two turned out to be more harum-scarum than me and incidentally those two I could never get the better of with my fists. I beg pardon, but at Bank school one's prowess at 'battling' was the decisive factor in the matter of one's level of popularity and influence. I made firm friends of both of them and

others around me. Tommy Goudie, fair-haired, fast as sheet lightning, grew up to be a champion amateur boxer, and tragically died a young man of some ailment, the nature of which I never ascertained. Geordie 'Monty' Montgomery, a red haired not very big bundle of energy and cheek with an 'Ah'll fight oanybuddy attitude and a heart of gold to go with it. Geordie finally became almost civilised when a fair haired lass called Joan from the Leggate nailed him down at the altar.

Then came 1938 - at this time the turmoil in continental Europe began to compel the attention of everybody, even us school kids. The manoeuvrings of Herr Hitler were beginning to alarm all of his neighbours. He marched bloodlessly into Czechoslovakia and began making threatening overtures to Poland on the pretext of alleged ill treatment of German elements in the population of Danzig (Gdansk). I can plainly recall how we laddies had him all whipped and trussed in advance; who could possibly expect to beat the BRITISH???

One day, the coal washery fell suddenly silent. People came from their homes to stand ashen faced on the footpaths, watching the traffic. There was nothing to smile at, nothing to wave or cheer about. They stood to watch the passing ambulances. There had been a disaster in Bank Number Six, a name which was destined to loom large in my later life. Number six was a mine. This meant simply that the coal seams had been accessed by driving a sloping tunnel down through the strata, catching each coal seam at varying depths. A pit was by definition, an access to the seams via a vertical shaft. A mine gradient varied according to geological conditions. The incline of the coal bearing strata and the depth from the surface in number six had made a gradient of one in four (one foot down for every four forward) the choice there.

Access to the work area was gained by travelling in a train of wheeled tubs, four men in each suspended by a steel wire rope which wound on and off a rotating drum on the surface based steam engine.

The rope had broken. Twenty men were sent hurling back down into the blackness, having been close enough to the end of the rattling journey at the completion of their shifts to have seen the approach of the square of bright daylight. For five men, it was their last sight of daylight.

Only two names stuck in my eight year old mind; Bill Grosier, died in the baths building after being stretchered to the surface and Jim Walls, fourteen years of age, first day underground.

Grandma died, my Dad's Mum. From my point of view, she was there one day, gone the next. I have made mention earlier that I had no great emotional tie to my paternal Grandparents yet Grandma's passing proved to be a watershed in our lives.

We had to move. We had to move from Connel Park from our Gatehouse. By this time there were three kids in our family; me, brother Lachie, and four years younger than me, a girl – yes a GIRL! Who ever thought of inventing THEM!?!?

I suppose you could say that me and oor Betty didn't see eye to eye toooften!

Anyway due to Grandma's demise at Lochside, Grandfather Bob Rogerson was left on his own. So, we were moving in. It was with sorely mixed feelings that I left

Connel Park. To a young lad this was the equivalent to emigration. Connel Park and its people, its rows of miners' homes and its smoky chimneys were all I had ever known. Everything outside was alien. Here I was being asked to leave my friends, my beloved football, and to submit to being dumped miles from anywhere in the depths of the country and, incidentally, having to leave my friends at Bank school and start making a niche for myself at the "Higher Grade" again. But it had to be. The family possessions were meagre enough to start with, and the fact that we were moving into a fully furnished house rendered what small amount of stuff we did have almost redundant. So we travelled light. We transferred our home by means of the caboose or guard's van which was attached to each coal train moving between the coal washery and the mainline Bank junction. The buffer stops at Bank junction were a hundred yards from the front door of Lochside house.

Thus my world became different.

Nae castle then, nae castle now
The ferm hoose stands, commands the view;
Still the crescent moon hangs abune the door,
Ancient spirits slowly tread the kitchen floor.

Where Two Hawks Fly
Anon

Chapter Two - Lochside

From Connel Park, two miles to the north by the railway line, Lochside had always been 'the house'. A two storied traditional stone building, it dominated several square miles of the countryside around. Standing on a bare rise of green sward, the front aspect with its large Victorian porch faced northward towards the Dumfries to Kilmarnock highway a third of a mile away, and was in communication with this via a dirt road, which tended to be bumpy over much of its length. A hundred yards to the rear of the house, where the land dipped downwards from a copse of broom, the loch lapped on a gravel shore. Lochside Loch, an odd name indeed. I never was able to trace the origin of the old name, Loch o' the Lowes. Just northward, nestling cosily in a natural hollow close to the main rail line, were the cottages. A small bustling community of people, three families to be precise, all of them with their own special sphere of activity governing their lives, all of them different. The houses weren't named or numbered. Their origins lay in the history of Lochside. They were almost certainly used to house Buccleuch estate workers in the days when the place was owned by the duke. It is thought that the true origins were as a shooting lodge for the Marquis of Bute. In 1939, Will Cravens and his family lived in the cot. Wull was a railway signalman, and a proud gardener. With him were his wife, Mary, daughter Nancy and son Will. Nancy was a couple of years my senior, and the derogatory nickname 'fatty' was never far from my impudent lips when referring to the lassie. Shame on me! Nancy was a good lass. Will? He was almost of marrying age and did in fact disappear from my ken shortly after our arrival at Lochside. Yes - many a time I was left with the imprint of Will Craven's boot on my arse after an abortive sortie among his prize strawberries.

A few yards from Wull's cottage was the Dawsons front door. Come to think of it, the only door as none of the cots had a rear door. Jimmy, his wife and five members lived here. The eldest son, Jim, married a local lassie and left home just about the time we arrived on the scene. Johnny was a ploughman on a neighbouring farm. Of the three lassies, Jean was the eldest. A brightly extrovert, dark-eyed damsel, Jean loved life. As I recall, she was the first of the girls to leave home and marry and I believe lived in Saltcoats for the remainder of her life. Alice too was a good looking young woman and wasn't single for long. She moved with her husband down to Lincolnshire, where as far as I know she still lives happily. Chrissie ah Chrissie! Full of happy mischief, she used to smuggle sister Jean's love letters out of doors so that she and I could drool over them. Chrissie had cute legs and had a habit of wearing the shortest of little miniskirts. Without doubt the first love of my nine year life, this devastating little lady engendered some strange longing in my besotted soul. Ach! I was only nine years old after all!

Hitler started World War Two. So the Lochside fighting unit was formed. The battalion strength consisted of brother Lachie and me and the boys from the cot next door to the Dawsons; the Blackmores, Jim and Billy. Jim and Billy lived more or less permanently with their Grandparents, Mr and Mrs Park. Mrs Park operated a small catering business by the main road at the entrance to Lochside Avenue. Jim was older than me at ten, and Billy a snot nosed kid, a mere eight years old. There

ensued some heated argument as to who was captain of the unit. The final outcome was; Captain Number One, Jim Blackmore, senior in years and Captain Number Two, yours truly, Bobby Rogerson.

Salutary effect on Hitler's armies, should they ever arrive, would be debatable indeed but we were, we thought, game for anything. The L.D.V. (Local Defence Volunteers) who were the forerunners of the Home Guard got a regular roasting. It was their habit to use the countryside around Lochside as a battle training ground. It was our custom to show them how easily they could be ambushed by armed bandits. The said armed bandits, mind you, had neither the experience nor the nous to question the wisdom of setting up an ambush from the treetops. If you misfired with your first, imaginary grenade, there was no avenue of escape from a hundred 202 bullets, also thanks be imaginary, up your ass-hole. We did however become adept at keeping our Home Guard on their mettle. Some devilish weaponry evolved during this period of mock warfare. One device in particular stands out and it was deadly. Not the schoolboys' pretend kind of deadly but really and truly so.

The famed English longbow of the middle ages was constructed of the wood of the yew tree. It just so happens that yew branches are easily obtained at Lochside. So too were the straight, rigid, feather light withes of dried loch reeds. With a sharp steel nail bound securely in their hollow stem at one end, and feathered at the other, those reeds made Robin Hood's arrows look like telegraph poles. Fired from a yew bow, they made incredibly fast and lethal missiles. Without much effort, we could unleash those arrows straight upward beyond the range of eyesight. Thank goodness that even in our immature years, we recognised the dangerous potential of this device and not once did we aim an arrow at anyone.

So we were soldiers and we were boys. Time passes and of course boys – and girls – change very quickly.

To the west across rolling fields and swampland, bordering a neighbouring loch, was a group of farm buildings – a steading called 'Creoch'. Strictly speaking this was Little Creoch as Meikle Creoch (meaning Big Creoch) lay directly opposite Lochside beyond the far southern shore of the loch. The latter played a minimal part in my unfolding youth. Little Creoch - well there lies the scene of many ploys. Most of which were mischievous, some were downright wicked and would have been whole heartedly condemned by our Presbyterian minister.

Hah! – The Presbyterian ministers held no terrors for Captain Number One and Captain Number Two and their brave brigands.

Perhaps but for the war, nothing of note would have occurred at Creoch. Then Hitler's blitzkrieg arrived, raining destruction on our island cities. Glasgow did not escape the attentions of Goering's Luftwaffe, and so the tide of refugee children began to flood outward into our countryside and of course, our lives.

One day – a utility bus arrived!

The utility bus was a phenomenon of wartime. Every consumable that could be modified; buses, clothing, furniture and even food could be modified and WAS! The

idea was to minimise material consumption. Utility buses were indeed, the only means of public transportation. Private vehicles could be used for essential business purposes only. Trains were for the sole use of the military.

After this motorised marvel had ejected its designated portion of human cargo and its tinny rattle and phut-putting engine faded into the distance on its way back to the main highway, our family had suddenly been increased in number by three. Three dark haired, sloe eyed lads; Jackie, Ellie, and Abie who were thirteen, ten and seven years of age respectively. Ah! Yes! Jacob, Eli and Abraham – JEWS!

Life became abruptly hectic. These were Glasgow urchins from Adelphi Street, from the back alleys of the Gorbals. Native wariness gave way to curiosity, however, when it became clear that practising Jews, as indeed they were, didn't tend to be gangland ruffians. They were ultra-hygienic, meticulous in their ablutions and faithful to their religious creed. Jackie, we soon learned, was a decent kind of guy.



Children of the Gorbals

Abie was just school age and Ellie was a pain in the neck. His nose had to be punched to finally convince him that a country bumpkin **wasn't** fair game for a tough nut from the Glasgow Gorbals. Once the matter was settled, the lad was OK.

Dormitory arrangements were of prime importance. To the rear or south western aspect of the house, were the sitting and dining rooms. I later learned that this part of the building was an addition to the original. The sitting room had always been my Grandpa's bedroom and as such had to remain so. The dining room underwent some drastic changes. This was to be the kid's dormitory for Jews and Gentiles both but if memory serves me correctly then I believe the exception was Bet. The furniture which merited protection was stored in other parts of the house. Five beds were arranged around the large room. The windows received the classic wartime treatment; tough sticky tape was placed in a criss-crossed fashion over the glass panes. This was to protect us from, or at least limit, the scything shards of glass in the event of a bomb blast. The carpet was removed, leaving the bare boards. Like all new directions resulting from the war, this was a big adventure but like all similar measures soon became a bind and blood was often spilled in the dormitory. Ellie and I just couldn't get any form of camaraderie going at all. A somewhat grotesque ritual grew from this mutual aversion. More than once, I was rudely and painfully awakened by a slap on the ear and once, I swear, by a bite on the end of my nose. HMMMMM no sweat, the idea wasn't too bad really, for I tended to be an early bird in the morning and I was quite adept and enthusiastic about devising painful methods of introducing Ellie to his day. We didn't HATE each other because of this state of affairs. NO – it was kind of a game; a vicious one I grant you, but still a game.

And out and about among the farm implements and animals, I am afraid no power on earth could impress upon Ellie, the dangers and the need for discipline. He used hay forks for digging holes in the ground or chased the chickens, roused the milk cow and heifers; and he was forever throwing stones. To his credit he never, to my knowledge, deliberately aimed stones at the animals but the inevitable happened. It was a contest. That is to say I was throwing stones too. I reckoned that I could pitch a rock higher than him. So... there we were, firing one after the other straight up into the air.

Ellie was the unlucky one. One of his better shots soared high, with hardly an arc at the top of its flight. So perfect was its trajectory, that it plummeted straight and true onto the head of a white leghorn chicken. There was no squawk but instead it suddenly turned over, feet in the air. Just then Mother appeared and spotted the upturned hen.

"Who?" she asked.

Oh what glee! What devilish glee!

"Ellie" I chirruped pointing an accusing finger, a picture of rigid adherence to the righteous path. Ellie got whacked by Grandpa's walking stick. Poor Ellie....For all his devilment, he finally got punished for an accident. And to add insult to injury and no small degree of hilarity – the dead chicken unexpectedly came back to life, squawking raucously, it fluttered off to rejoin its feathered friends. It must have had a pretty sore head though.

All things considered, all of us got on pretty well in the end.

Kick the can, a variant of hide and seek. A strange name for a game I thought. One guy was 'it' or 'het' as we called it in our dialect. A ring was drawn in the playground and an upturned can was placed in the centre. This was protected desperately by the 'it' guy, for if one of the other participants managed to boot that

can out of the ring, thus releasing all those who had been caught or 'copped', it could well happen that the poor bloke could be het all day. Kick the can was a favourite for all of us, boys and lassies alike, and this being the case; it was foreseeable that some rather cosy situations were likely to develop.

There was a girdel in the byre (HmMMM, local dialect again). There was a large wooden chest in the cowshed in which it was customary to store grain feed for the cows. In the stampede in one particular mass escape from captivity, I came tear-arsein 'round the door of the byre and was treated to a fleeting view of Chrissie's pretty rear end, just disappearing into the girdel. Honest there was nowhere else for me to hide and of course it was warm in there, dark and so little room that being tangled up was unavoidable. Anyway, neither of us complained and were to the contrary beginning to look forward to a long period of incarceration when there was a sudden screech of hinges and a brutal blaze of daylight! I had the merest instant to glimpse Chrissie's startled face before a voice roared 'Come oot o' there ya young devil or I'll brek ma stick ower yer bloody back!!!'

Grandpa – an irate stick waving Grandpa at that. Come out I did and hellish smart too, making an ignominious and extremely ungallant scurry for the byre door. I left poor Chrissie to face whatever harangue the old fella intended to deliver. Grandpa must have remained tight-lipped, for not a word of chastisement ever came our way. I fully expected a much exaggerated picture of sin and debauchery would be described to Dad or Mum or indeed both! But as I say, there was not a whisper. Maybe he had a quiet chuckle over the episode; he was a horny old devil in his own right. Ah yes! Kick the can was a rare old game.

Our Jewish evacuees went home one weekend and just never returned. The lads were happy enough with our family but their mother seemed to miss them badly, so I think the family bond proved too strong to bear further separation. We never heard from them again.

There were other kids nearby.

Langsyne when life was bonnie
An 'a' the skies were blue
When ilka thocht took blossom
An 'hung its heid wi' dew
When winter wasna winter
Tho' snaws cam 'happin' doon
Langsyne when life was bonnie
Spring gaed a twalmonth roon

Alexander Anderson, Kirkconnel 1845 - 1909

Chapter Three – Creoch Alliance

An elderly couple farmed Little Creoch. A kindly pair they were, with no family of their own; none, that is, until the boys arrived. They came on the scene at the same time as our Jewish lads and from the same street jungle – the Gorbals of Glasgow. Like the Jewish boys, they too were evacuees; Neil, George and James Currie. Neil was ages with myself, George and James were younger by one year. None of us knew it at the time but lifelong friendships were being formed. Rivalry might well have been the order of the day but it didn't work out that way. Perhaps the attitudes were influenced by the confluence of the right of way with our Lochside Avenue. From the main Kilmarnock to Dumfries road, the avenue (we always referred to the access road as 'the avenue') led down to the cluster of buildings at Lochside. A path, which is a public right of way, continued onward across the open fields, over Loch Hill Burn and past the line of beech trees, which marked the boundary of our property, and thence to a hundred yard long plank bridge. The bridge spanned the swamp and the runner which connected Lochside and Creoch Lochs.

NOTE: The runner is a broad ditch, dug many years previously, which allows the free passage of water between Black Loch, the smallest and deepest of the three, Creoch Loch, Lochside and subsequently the River Nith. Black Loch is something of an enigma. Coinciding with the point that the L.M.S railway reaches its highest level, its waters drain out either end. To the west it flows to reach the River Ayr and to the east into Creoch Loch. It has been stated that only one Lake in the world is known to run out towards two separate destinations, which is said to be somewhere in Norway. Maybe the Black Loch is considered too insignificant to be added to the list; anyway, if curiosity drives, go and check the ditch, which flows from the west end of Black Loch. You will find that Black Loch waters run northwest to the Firth of Clyde AND south to the Solway Firth.

The far end of the bridge was Creoch land which also had its own community. The farm cottages housed two families and both homes had their share of kids. Geordie Weir was the stockman and the father to John and Ella. John was in my age group, whilst Ella was a couple of years younger. Next door were the Burns family (no relation to the mighty Bard as far as I know). There was mum and dad and a shaggy, bad tempered dog called Tweed. The father, Jimmy, did general farm work and took responsibility for the score or so of sheep, which grazed the surrounding fields. Son James was two years my junior. Of his two sisters, Jean was the eldest, thirteen years of age – practically an old maid! Margaret was a cute, curly haired damsel of similar age to me. She was of a happy disposition and always ready to take part in the group activities, unless some naughtiness was involved. Ah well, a tiny bit frustrating for a boisterous laddie, who was just beginning to appreciate the company of the lassies!

To the kid population of Creoch, Neil, George and James were added.

All of those kids used the right of way as part of their route to school. Consequently, there was a daily congregation at the avenue end, where we all hung around awaiting the arrival of the morning utility bus. That rattling old bus served us well in those years.

Those years when Neil and I formed a cast iron friendship that death alone could break. The years when Gran McNiven died and Sister Lily came into the warring world.

So much happened during those years and some events would merit a book of their own, and many, in fact, did become the subject of various literary works in post war years. Adolph Hitler ravaged Poland, Holland, Belgium and France. His Luftwaffe struck savagely at London, Sheffield, Coventry, Glasgow and Clydebank.

And! Neil and I found a BOMB!

Jock McCrone, a local fella, took it upon himself to form a New Cumnock Company of the Boys' Brigade. So Neil and I became B.B. boys. Why we chose the B.B. in preference to the established Scout troop in the village, I don't know. Possibly the glamour of being founder members had something to do with it. A B.B. company had to be affiliated to a church. We had the devil's luck (do I blaspheme?). Our chaplain was a Wee Free minister, the Reverend Andrew Lowrie. He is very easily described; tall, narrow of features and of body, thin lipped and pale. No – not pale, but deathly white! A more graphic description, and one that is closer to being accurate, would be to compare him to a ghoulish extra from some Stephen King horror film. He'd be a dead ringer (wonderful pun) without makeup. Our B.B. company was nevertheless a highly presentable example of a Scottish boy's organisation and indeed, my attachment to the Boys Brigade had a strong formative effect on my attitudes to life and living.

Under the B.B. umbrella, I gained my first honours in the learning and practice of first aid to the injured at the early age of eleven years. My interest and commitment to this humanitarian science never waned over the years but continued by association with the St. Andrew's Ambulance Service and latterly with the Red Cross. With the Boys' Brigade, I became a middle distance runner of some repute, as did Neil I hasten to add, and I was an Ayr County Champion ball pitcher.

I also discovered what bigotry and narrow-mindedness meant.

Our company decided to hold an annual party. The Girls' Guildry were invited to form the female element in the festivities. Ah!! Women!! If the Reverend Andrew possessed the psychic art of mind reading I am sure his imaginings included idyllic visions of decorous country dance, correct and courteous behaviour and Christian fellowship. OUR fiendish little minds were immediately full of short skirts, plump legs and pink silk knickers. Why pink? Dunno – sexy knickers were always silk and pink in our world. So, since the Reverend Lowrie would be in attendance, there was a disaster waiting for an opportunity to happen. And thus it transpired.

Our officers, non bigots all, had enough cautionary knowledge to keep 'Bee Baw Babbity' and 'Postman's Knock' off the programme.

To explain; Bee Baw Babbity is an ancient Scottish game/dance in which the lads form an outer circle and dance clockwise, while the lassies dance anti-clockwise in an inner ring. Each cycle is heralded and accompanied by a ritual chant.

Bee Baw Babbity, Babbity, Babbity
Bee Baw Babbity, kiss a bonnie wee lassie
Kneel down kiss the ground, kiss the ground, kiss the ground
Kneel down kiss the ground, a lassie or a wee laddie
Choose, choose wha ye'll tak, wha ye'll tak, wha ye'll tak
Choose, choose wha ye'll tak, a lassie or a wee laddie

At the conclusion, the rings break up and a melee ensues during which, each individual, this applies to both male and female, endeavours to grab someone of mutual preference. It is surprising how seldom it takes more than five seconds to sort the confusion out.

Postman's Knock: ah! There was a different kettle of fish or another ball game altogether you might say. It can't be claimed as an exclusively Scottish caper, although it may have been played in a way that was typical of red-blooded Scots. A boy or girl would be postman and would be consigned to a room or cupboard, the door of which they themselves could lock from the inside. There could be, and indeed were, many variations of the game from then on. The postman would request via a note, the company of a named member of the opposite sex. He or she would also quote a number, which denoted the quantity of stamps or the value of the note. This of course was intended to convey some idea of the intensity of the feeling the postman had for the lucky or not so lucky recipient, and by inference, what heights the celebration of those feelings might raise in the darkened room or cupboard. Oh what a terrific game this could be at times. A veil must be drawn on further description, lest the laws of propriety be breached.

Back to our tale – we were of course discussing the annual B.B social evening. The reverend Mr. Lowrie was there, austere in his Wee Free uniform, his manner approaching the benevolence of a warmed up corpse.

Brigade marching displays were carried out with great aplomb. Girls' Guildry gymnasts, while displaying their abilities, and their knickers, caused no trivial amount of twitching and heavy breathing among the assembled innocents in pillbox caps. All such reaction had to be surreptitious to the nth degree, since Mr. Lowrie was standing close by.

So everything was going smoothly and happily. I had already established a sly visual rapport with Jean, who had the prettiest face and the cutest legs in the hall that night. Perhaps what followed was our fault to some degree. It stemmed from the grand old Duke of York. Not the esteemed general but the dance connected to his name. I made sure that I partnered Jean in this particular dance set. Why? Hmmm – probably because she was fixed in my blinkered gaze when Lieutenant Alec Turnbull called 'Take you partners for...'; I took off like a rocket. Anyway, Jean and yours truly

were prancing around the floor to the music of the Grand old Duke of York. In this particular dance, when the lead couple end their set, they must form an arch with their hands and arms, under which all the following couples must pass.

Disaster loomed. A slightly naughty variation of the dance had evolved, which meant that the couple forming the arch prefixed their minds on a suitable pair and as they passed beneath, dropped their arms and trapped them. Before they were allowed to escape, the captured pair had to kiss. Ah, yes! You guessed well. Jean and I and oh yes, I kissed her! I didn't dare do less, for the eyes of my buddies were upon me, judging me. I didn't dare do more, remembering the brooding presence of the Reverend Lowrie. But what a satanic atrocity this innocent kiss must have seemed to the super pious agent of the Wee Free Church of Scotland. The man went berserk! In the short space of five minutes, we were all expelled from the church hall and out in to the cold darkness and the hall lights were extinguished. The party was well and truly over. The company was irate and the daggers of rage were flying in MY direction. Jean had managed to convince everyone that I had forced myself upon her. I took off smartly. Even my pal Neil was against me that evening but I have a notion that a wee twinge of envy may have had a part to play there.

Funny thing was, I never partnered Jean again, not in any capacity. We remained quite friendly though and perhaps there never really was a spark there.

The war went on and on.....

There was a Wednesday night in the year of nineteen forty-one, when a German warplane flew low and northward past Lochside, following the steel of the railway line. It was soon evident that it was no mere reconnaissance, for later that evening, the infamous Lord Haw-Haw proclaimed on a German news bulletin that a large rail junction in the southwest of Scotland had been destroyed by Luftwaffe bombing. In fact, our enemy visitor had dropped one bomb on Kirkconnel, eight miles down line from New Cumnock, and had wrecked the gable wall of the local Co-op building. Only one death recorded – a pet rabbit. Mind you, the pilot was a few scant yards wide of his target, which had been the railway.



The Afton Buildings which was destroyed by fire in 1963

Life went on as usual for the remainder of the week and on Sunday, Neil and I, in our Sabbath best, attended the B.B bible class as was expected of us. The weather was nice, which was just as well, for in spite of there being a bus service, we were on shanks' pony, having as usual, spent our bus fares on something or other. It wouldn't have been sweets, chocolate, oranges or ice cream, for they weren't available in those days. Anyway, the benediction from the Reverend Andrew still ringing in our ears, we made our way along the loch road and over the Nith Bridge. For the benefit of the new generation, back then there was loch and marshland on both sides of the highway between the smiddy and the Nith. Turning left after the Afton Buildings, we made our way along the farm road alongside the railway to Waterside Farm, where auld Fitzie plied his trade. Fitzie (Mr. Fitzsimmons) was a cantankerous old fella, who as far as I know never harmed a soul in his entire life. Not that his character has anything to do with this tale.

Continuing past the farm, the track veered right, emerging on the north side of the railway via an underpass, and then left again for a short distance, hugging the railways boundary fence. I noticed a Sunday gang at work on the railway track, where it passed by a piece of bog land, which was triangular in shape by virtue of the fact it was where the old colliery line veered away from the main line, heading right. I was aware that Ned Smith was the ganger (he was my St. Andrew first aid instructor too).

NOTE: The old colliery line went to Paddy Waddell's pit

I saw a small rectangular hole in the bog.

"Ah" I said, "There's where Fitzie's been burying the sheep!"

This is a common occurrence on sheep farms. The animals die for many reasons and small graves are dotted all over the sheep country. Commonplace or not, boys are curious creatures by nature, and that small hole exerted enough pull to have us eventually standing one either side of it. A germ of puzzlement now entered my mind. Something about the hole in the ground didn't quite match our first assessment. "Neil" I exclaimed, "that dirt hasnae been dug oot – it's been splashed oot!"

"Aye" came the response, "Maybe it's a bomb?"

Well we looked and peered down into the black, murky depths of the water, which had seeped in from the surrounding bog and filled the hole. There was nothing to be seen. Soooooo. – we went and fetched some boulders and yes – you guessed it, we proceeded to throw the said rocks into the hole to discover if indeed there was anything hard down there. We were only eleven though!

"What are you doing Bobby?" It was Ned the ganger sticking his head over the railway fence.

"We think there is a bomb in here" replied Neil brightly.

Ned's eyes fell for the first time on the mysterious hole; his eyes popped, his mouth fell open, his face went a deathly shade of pale and I swear his hair stood on end. His right hand gripped, knuckle white on top of the fence wire, his left was rigid and emphatically pointing in the general direction of Lochside "get tae hell oot o' there and bloody fast!" he roared. "Get yersel hame and tell yer faither and naebudy else" he continued.

Seeing Ned's agitation, we did get ourselves out of there and bloody fast as well.

Upon arriving home, I told Mum and Dad and not another soul. I am sure that Neil would have put Mr. Sloan the farmer at Creoch in the picture too. Boy did we feel

ever so important though. We knew a MILITARY SECRET!! Next day at School, I went among the other kids, full of self importance. I was entrusted with a state secret and my lips were sealed. Then came school dinner time. There was a strange array of motor vehicles lined up in the vicinity of the police station. Was it the Bomb Removal Squad? What a commotion this had caused in the town! Rumour upon rumour, speculation was rife and of course a certain two young lads felt that they were the most significant secret agents in the whole of the allied war effort against the Nazis.

In the afternoon we headed back to our classes. Some humdrum subject or other was interrupted suddenly by a knock on the door. A very authoritative knock it was too. Miss Lees, bless her, opened the door to reveal the stern and imposing figure of Sergeant Leslie, our local police supremo.

“Is Bobby Rogerson in this class?”

A concerted gasp of awe and surprise from the class and an extremely puzzled look from Miss Lees – “what have you been up to Rogerson?” All she got was a sheepish grin in response to the question. I recall vividly, my triumphal progress down the centre aisle of the classroom, across the floor in front of the blackboard to the door where the Sergeant laid his big hand upon my shoulder and escorted me beyond the ken of the wondering class. Neil was waiting in the corridor with a big cheesy grin across his face. Sergeant Leslie I am sure, knowingly and with secret enjoyment, fed our swollen egos like crazy. He practically had us believing we were war heroes.

We were informed by him of the following:-

There indeed was a bomb. It was of a type which if hadn't detonated within nine hours of impact; it was never going to explode – EVER! Moreover, since a continuous and copious flow of water impeded their recovery effort, the bomb squad decided to leave it in peace. So to this day, beneath a small a patch of green rushes and a willow bush, which grew to eradicate the small hole, there lurks a German WW2 bomb. Over fifty years have passed but I can still take any curious visitor to the spot and point to it with pinpoint accuracy.

A sound is in my ear today
And playful fancies with it throng
It follows me and all the way
It haunts me like a snatch of song

And it is this; an upland gleam
Of sunshine such as warms and thrills
The tinkle of a quiet stream
That broke the stillness of the hills

Alexander Anderson, Kirkconnel 1845-1909

Chapter Four – Of Seasons, Fish and Folks Old and New

The changing seasons predictably dictated corresponding cyclic variations in our habits and in our interests. In memory every winter season brought frost and snow. Perhaps it is wise to reiterate in memory! In reality, the winter season varied in its weather patterns over the years. The human mind, when engaged in retrospection, tends to recall the events and circumstances which gave pleasure in past experiences, and to exclude the mundane and even more so, the episodes of grief or pain. So it is that I appear to remember each winter as a season of sledging, snowballing, ice skating and curling on the frozen lochs. Much enjoyment ensued when the loch ice became thick enough to carry our weight. Skates were on occasion produced and more often than not, were bound in ramshackle and precarious manner to our booted feet. They weren't strictly necessary however, for in those days boots were tackety. That is to say that all the boots worn by the lads of this period had rows of steel studs or tacketts embedded in the leather soles. Additional wear resistance was provided by a toe plate and a heel shod of similar steel. Those boots were serviceable and being of all leather construction, durable and were worn for everyday activities. They served for school, for football or roaming the hills and for the ever popular kick the can. They were also excellent for sliding which often took place on a frosted pavement, school playground or the dark ice of the frozen lochs. Therefore skates weren't an essential piece of kit for our games on ice. Indeed on the 100 yard slides, which provided some of the high points of our enjoyment, skates would have been a hindrance. Tacketty boots were the ideal vehicle for speed and effortless performance of the various hunker sliders, spins etc. which were included in our repertoire. If a game of hockey was suggested, then skates ruled the roost.

Curling 'The Roarin Gemme' was played by Dads, Uncles and much older brothers. The venue was Creoch Loch. A curling match was an occasion of excitement and celebration, usually coinciding with Christmas or Ne'erday. I do not propose to go into a lengthy description of the game of curling as it is so often featured on TV these days that such an explanation would be superfluous. However, one thing can be said, the relative decorum displayed by the modern televised participants, bears little resemblance to the raucous, noisy, alcohol accentuated matches between the country dwellers, celebrating their festive seasons with great cries of "sweep, sweep" or more often "sweep ya bugger!", and all this to get their team mate to guide the granite stone on target.

Many a sore hip or indeed 'sair erse' was in evidence in the opening days of each succeeding year; the direct consequence of indulging in Johnny Walker, Long John or Cream of Barley, coupled with the inherent tendency of tackety boots to slip on the frozen ice.

Always there was a sneaking sadness in my heart when the thaw came; the ice became a sheet of grey water once more and winter resorted to its more normal succession of raw, windy days and dark scudding clouds, which carried cold, squally sleet, hail and rain showers. Days more suited for welly boots, warm raincoats and

woollen balaclavas. Mum's Scotch broth and tatties and stew were a welcome sight indeed when we toddled home from school on such darkening days.

Then one morning, a balmy feeling would come on the breeze, no clouds, and no frost and white snowdrops giving way to daffodils. We would all be aware that spring was upon us and King Winter toppled from his hoary throne. The month of March, although never warm, often brought a final vicious blast of arctic fury from the north Atlantic. The season would be changing, the birds pairing off to build their nests, the crows usually first. Mainly they would be found in social groups. They would prefer to build their nests in groves of tall trees, often using the same nests year after year and filling the air with their 'cawing' racket as they fluttered and fussed around the tree canopy. The old folks; and Dad was no exception, used to insist that crows started their nest building on the first Sunday in March. How on earth the crows knew it was Sunday and not Monday or indeed, any other day, I was never able to figure out. The blackbirds weren't far behind and the Lochside yew trees were a likely choice for them, since the evergreen thickets were there during all seasons. As March closed and April days began, the shrill, whooping cries of the peewit became part of the warming season. Their activity was first witnessed by the appearance in the fields of the small, saucer like scrapes, which were the tentative beginnings of their nesting. Back then, there were thousands of them. It was a poor day without a doubt, if an egg hunting person, failed to collect in double figures. It was common then for many of the villagers, to roam the countryside, gathering 'peesies' eggs to supplement the somewhat unappetising wartime rations.



Lapwing or Peewit or Peesie

Nowadays it would take many hours of searching to find a fry of Lapwing's eggs. They can still be found in reasonable numbers on the high moors but gone is the time when the black and olive mottled eggs were regularly enjoyed by the village gourmets. No one now, bar the illegal egg collector, interferes with the poor remnants of the once proliferate lapwing. It would be too easy to point the accusatory finger at those who roamed the fields in search of eggs. Many years have passed since those days of depredation ceased, so why have the swooping flocks failed to return to the ploughed fields and pastures? The farmer would no doubt resent being told that he is the culprit and perhaps, it is unfair to condemn him for methods and actions that have been forced upon him, through the ever present and increasing demand for cheap and plentiful food. It is certain that modern, competitive agriculture is the main factor in the decline of the bird population. The lapwing has suffered as has the lark, the curlew and the rest of the plover family along with many other feathered denizens of the rural landscape. The corncrake and its distinctive call vanished completely from the Scottish mainland more than a generation ago. Recently there have been reports of its return to the flat New Cumnock valley but such evidence is so far sparse. Sadly, until agriculture is once more carried out without the use of deadly pesticides, and farm stock foddered with the sweet sundried grass, there is scant hope for the return of the wild creatures that we once knew so well. And for our children and grand children, my heart is heavy.....

We collected eggs. The future was a closed book to us and we could not know of the holocaust hidden in its pages. We were not able to foresee the decimation of the raptors, sparrow hawk, kestrel, peregrine, marlin and the golden eagle. Even then, the golden eagle was a rare creature in the southern uplands. Glen Afton was home to one nesting pair, high on the rocky face of Steyamara. In and around the lochs, the waterfowl were plentiful and the coots especially produced a phenomenal number of eggs in their floating, miniature rafts, among the tall reeds. The water hen was also a common sight. It was normal to see a pair of swans raising a brood and the wild mallard ducks hid their nests of down and feathers, in the thick, lush growth of the marshes.

At Lochside, a pair of great crested grebes appeared but we never found their nest. The smaller species were abundant; the reed warbler, coaltop, snipe, meadow pipit or moss cheeper and many others. These were birds associated with lochs and marshland. In the fields, woods, hedgerows and outbuildings were many others; blackbird, mavis, sparrow, swallow, chaffinch, wren, robin, lark, hedge sparrow, yellowhammer, the list is endless.

The months of May and June were the time of bird nesting, times of interest and adventure. The loch was the venue for much of the activity. Over the months and years of familiarity with the water and its reed beds, deeps and shallows, we knew where the fish were, where to find the eggs of the coot, where to swim safely and where one more step meant sudden immersion in ten feet of murky water, with a bottom of shifting, muddy silt. The fact that there was a boat available to us helped enormously in our accumulation of topographical knowledge. We all had fishing tackle. The only item that came from the tackle shop was the hook and perhaps three or four feet of decent fishing line. Our rods were six foot bamboo canes of the type normally associated with garden plant supports. The greater length of line was ordinary string, with a few feet of genuine fishing gut attached and of course this held the hook. At a distance from the hook that was dependant on our judgement of the depth of the water, a cork float was attached.

NOTE: It was important to know at which depth the fish would feed.

Perch were our prey. We received ample encouragement from our folks, for the fish that we regularly caught, were a welcome addition to the wartime food ration. The flat bottomed loch boat was handy for chasing the shoals, although I think it would be fair to say that just as many fish could be landed from the shore. The favoured bait was a large garden worm. I still recall the thrill of watching a gently floating cork acquire a life of its own. A convulsive bob, a quick horizontal shift and then the spreading ring on the surface where the cork used to be, followed by a reactive tug on the six foot cane and the fish was well and truly hooked. More often than not, the captured fish was skinned, cleaned and in the frying pan within an hour. I used to love watching the white chunks of flesh twitch as they hit the hot fat. Perch didn't grow to a large size, so a fish of a pound in weight was considered a respectable catch. When the catch consisted of a dozen or so, then a good family supper was in store.

Pike and eels were also plentiful in the loch. I have heard it said that pike will take a worm but in all the years I fished Lochside, I never knew of a pike being caught directly on a worm-baited hook. I say directly – for more than once I unsportingly set my line overnight and hauled Mr. Pike ashore in the morning. The cause of his undoing was made evident when it came to detaching the hook, for there in his throat would be the half eaten tail of a perch. The original victim of the worm-baited hook was the perch which was subsequently grabbed by the predatory pike. Anyone who is familiar with the anatomy of the perch will understand why it is always the tail of the fish that is seen. Even voracious pike would not be able to swallow a perch taken tail first. Every detail of the outer structure of the fish is designed to cause injury to any predator attempting to take it from the rear. The gills are bony and razor sharp along the rear edges. The dorsal fin takes up a large proportion of the spinal area and consists of a series of strong bones, which are joined by a web of tissue, which fold harmlessly from the head to the tail, whilst creating a vicious saw toothed weapon when any friction is imposed in the other direction. The perch is thus a morsel which the pike or any other hungry predator must swallow head first. Unfortunately the hungry pike discovers too late that the perch it has just consumed is securely attached to a hook and line. The pike cannot regurgitate it for the same reason it cannot eat it tail first. So it was hard luck for the pike, not caught directly by the worm, even if the baited hook could be said to be its original undoing.

Pike are a different kettle of fish, (sorry for the pun!) as they are by far the largest predatory fish in the fresh water lochs and streams of Scotland. In the river environment they lurk in the slow running waters, and are particularly fond of rivers which have muddy bottoms. They will eat almost anything that moves; trout, perch, frogs, ducklings and even the odd water rat. The loch dwellers depend mainly on perch and each other for their diet.

On the day that the war with Japan ended in 1945, we found a dead pike on the gravel shore, a piece of flesh neatly bitten from its back, just behind the head. This was a sure sign of the work of a hungry otter. This fish was so spectacular in size that it justified measurement and so measure it we did. Father and I proceeded and recorded it as five foot four inches from snout to tail tip.

Davie Currie, an old CONNELL PARK crony, was with us that day and it was Davie who found the one that was even larger! It was haying time and Davie often appeared to lend a hand with the work that went into converting the mown hay into the commodity used for winter fodder. When the evening's toil became tiring or tedious, he would stop haying and desert us for his first love – fishing. Summer evenings were long in those days. This may be a strange comment to pass you may think, but there is good reasoning behind it. There was in being, during the war years, something called 'double British summertime'. This had the effect, due to the shifting of clocks forward by two hours, of delaying the hours of darkness till almost midnight. It was on one of those long, pleasant evenings that Davie followed his inclination once more and, leaving us to our sweaty labours, set up his fishing gear and took to the boat. It didn't seem long at all till he reappeared, hurrying breathlessly, hardly stopping to talk and obviously moving with some definite purpose in mind.

“Where are ye runnin’ tae?” asked Faither.

“Mair tackle, got tae get mair tackle! He replied breathlessly and was almost incoherent. “I broke ma tackle – as big as Long Jimmy – gawn fur mair tackle”. Off he sped, along the rail track towards the village.



A large pike

His great enthusiasm became even more apparent when he surprisingly returned after a short period of time, armed with a fresh kit of heavy spinners, wire traces and treble hooks. By this time, my curiosity was thoroughly aroused; not because of Davie’s concern over the one that got away, no, I was more interested in what kind of fish could be compared to ‘Long Jimmy’?

Perhaps I should explain that Long Jimmy was a hayfork! Normal hayforks are two pronged metal implements attached to a six foot wooden handle and were used in the field at the making of the hay. When it came to gathering however, and the high stacks had to be built, a tool of longer proportion was required. The hayfork used for this job had to be seven or eight feet long. A specimen of the latter category had somehow become part of our inventory in the field and was a tool to be avoided. No one wanted to wield Long Jimmy.

So, this time Davie had a companion. Me!

Approximately 100 yards from the house, where the broom crowned knoll dipped sharply to the loch shore, stood the boathouse. I scrambled into the boat with Davie and his refurbished rod and shared the act of launching out into the open water. There was an area in front of the boathouse which was clear of reeds and obstructions. Whether it was cleared by man or natural processes I never knew, nor did I try to find out if I am honest. It was here that Davie asked me to drop anchor, right in front of

the boathouse. Here the loch had a level bottom, carpeted by a kind of tough, short growing weed. It had proven to be ideal for swimming, for the water depth was a uniform four feet over a wide area. Davie was adamant that this was the spot where the action should proceed. He prepared his cast. It was rigged with thirty pound line and a treble hooked spoon on a wire trace. First cast, fairly short and to the edge of the reeds, drew no response. He flipped the rod tip and cast a second time. I don't think the lure made it to the water surface. The sudden disturbance of the water was caused, I would swear, by the upward lunge of what seemed like a pair of round mouthed spades, which snapped onto the flying lure like a bear trap. Davie reacted like the experienced fly fisherman he was. He flipped the rod tip back in the classic manner of sending the hook home. A blistering epithet burst from his lips as no responding resistance to his tug ensued.

"Missed the bastard again" he cursed and flipped the rod tip forward once more. This time there was no resulting strike, not even a splash. There was no lure at the end of the line to cause one. The trace had been parted cleanly as though by shearing snips. I had seen one or two fearsome pike in my young life, but by this time I was convinced that here, in the dark murky, depths of the loch, lay a monster!

After some frantic action on Davie's part, the rearmed line was sent snaking outwards once more, along the edge of the reeds, where predatory pike were likely to lurk. Despite being half expected, the almighty swirl of disturbed water was startling. This time the line held and the pike moved. That's all it did! Moved; no sudden arcing leap from the water, no darting dash for the reed thickets and freedom. It merely swam sedately it seemed, and not even in a direction that would have taken it clear of the boat. It actually came towards us! Davie's reel was spinning furiously, sending a tangential spray of droplets as he worked to take up the slack. Then....I saw it - gliding at walking pace, parallel to the boat. It was an enormous fish!! The immediate comparison that sprang to mind was a railway crosstie or sleeper in our dialect. The consequences of its passage sternward was the reversal of Davie's reel, tension took effect, placing a resistance to the progress of the pike through the water. The pike scarcely noticed the struggle for it did not alter its speed or direction. The line eventually ran out and the tip of the rod whipped back as the pike moved on its way. I am sure the six inch length of trace would prove to be some source of irritation until one way or another it became detached.

I will not dwell on Davie's highly emotional expressions of disappointment but suffice to say that the presence of the real big one in the waters of Lochside was the topic of many a fisherman's discussion. Of course it had a name; Long Jimmy. Hence the reason for the lack of trepidation when a five foot four inch specimen was discovered on the gravel shore, for we knew without a shadow of doubt, that something much bigger lurked in there.

I hope I can be forgiven if I take some liberty with the chronological order of events and tell of an astonishing occurrence, which is so strongly related to the saga of Long Jimmy, that it would make no sense to set it apart in a later chapter of events. It happened some years later; so many years in fact that the experience fell during a much appreciated break from shift work at the colliery. It was a back end evening, probably in September and I was enjoying one of my life long pleasures. I was lying in lazy contentment on the sloping grassy bank, immediately overlooking that same gravel shore, where we found the big fish on the last day of the war. I was keeping

half an eye on the immobile floating cork, which held a large garden worm, suspended at what was hopefully the right depth for passing perch. The cork was still for good reason. There was not a breath of wind to disturb the calm, smooth water of the surface. Sounds carried clearly over the loch and oyster catchers dipped and swerved, emitting their high pitched double piping over a mile away at Meikle Creoch. The melody of the busily grubbing coot in the various reed beds and the flutter and croak of the disturbed duck, could be plainly heard in the hushed evening air. The sun was setting in a glorious blaze of reds, greens and radiant purples over the Arran peaks. The far side of the loch was shadowed by the low green knolls of Little Creoch's pastures. There was no discord in my entire world as I lay on the grassy bank, steeping in the tranquil experience of the autumn night. And then, it happened.....

A sudden, violent commotion erupted among the reeds on the faraway, shadowed side of the loch. My eyes and ears were straight away drawn to the source. Some form of confrontation was taking place amongst the dark, green depths of the reeds. One of the protagonists was quickly identified by its raucous quacking and frantic fluttering. The unfortunate bird burst suddenly into my view, literally flying for its life. I say flying but for all its considerable forward thrust, the poor creature seemed unable to get clear of the water. Water sprayed from the surface with every beat of its wings. It was fifty yards clear and desperately striving for greater distance from the cause of its terror when it became apparent what its attacker was. The serenity of the soft dusk served to emphasise the sudden turmoil and sheer horror the bird was suffering. Like a torpedo its attacker burst from the reeds in an aggressive pursuit – like a surging missile making a determined and predatory dash after the fleeing duck. It was a futile chase as it transpired, for whatever the injury the duck had sustained before its panicked emergence from the reeds, had not been sufficient to cause serious disablement. The duck flew safely to the opposite shore, escaping the murderous attack of the pike, which returned to the deeper water. For a pike it had to be. The turbulence subsided and quiet calm returned once more to the mirror smoothness of the lochs surface.

I was strangely affected by the stark, sudden violence of those minutes and for me, serenity of soul could no longer match the seemingly idyllic evening calm. It was a sobering thought that in spite of the apparent reign of tranquility there, lurking just beyond the immediate sensibility, were all the brutal machinations of nature. I packed my gear and on my way along the shore and uphill to the house, I reflected on my own role in the peaceful panorama of the dying day. Was I in pursuit of my sport, any less impairment on the calm of the evening? Did it really matter, which life was threatened - that of a duck or fish? The roles of the pike and man could so easily have been changed. All it required was the substitution of a twelve bore for a fishing rod and Long Jimmy would have been left with nothing but perch for prey.

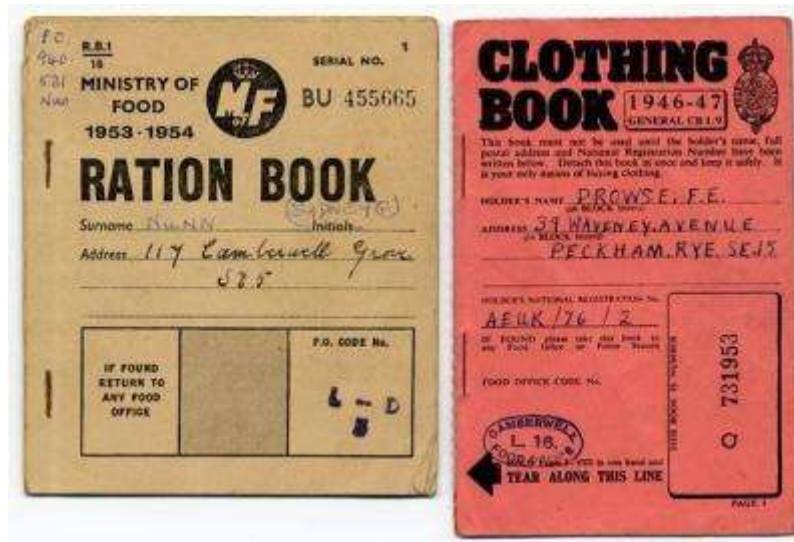
All of this was part of my adult years but more must be told of my journey through boyhood and the years of wartime.

The Grim Reaper and his inevitable passage caused us to lose the companionship of two friends. Mr. Park died. Mrs. Park being advanced in years and not very robust moved to the village to live in the home of her daughter, Margaret. Margaret was married to a local mobile grocer by the name of Charlie Shewan, a man worthy of a

mention and one of nature's gentlemen. This left one of our cottages without a tenant and friends Billy and Jim without a home. Billy went to live in the home of his mother and stepfather, some miles south on the Mansfield Road, beyond Southampton House. Jim, our cherished Captain Number One, went to the city of Glasgow. At the time of writing, I haven't seen or heard of Jim for over 50 years. The small catering business may have faded into history but the nephew of the Parks, a kenspeckle character rejoicing in the name of 'Pinkie' Stewart, took on the task of feeding the drivers of the varied commercial vehicles, the odd military wagon or bus staff etc. Pinkie did well. He had the best apple tarts I have ever tasted, before or since. He didn't take up residency at Lochside, preferring to continue his tenancy of a council house at Loch View, Pathhead. Thus the little cot remained empty.

It is extremely difficult to recollect the events in exact order of occurrence during the early part of our lives. I may well have certain episodes in incorrect time frame, perhaps even containing some small inaccuracies in their description. The following scenes however, I know to be as described. They came to pass in the height of summer 1941, when the Japanese Imperial Army was just starting its reign over the Malayan peninsula and the city of Singapore. Burma was also overrun during this period. I know it was high summer, for we ate strawberries and cream that afternoon in celebration of a special event. So as Burns said; 'Tae oor tale'.

It wasn't usual in the days of restricted travel and utility buses to find strangers, walking the avenue towards Lochside. There was the odd stroller, who usually turned out to be a native of New Cumnock, enjoying a spell of exercise or a rail worker using the road as convenient access to that certain length of track, which ran alongside our property. But this day was different. This day brought not a railwayman nor a local rambler but a strangely dressed lady and a small fair haired girl. The girl held the lady's hand tightly as if she feared she may come to harm at the hands of the bunch of ragamuffins, who confronted her and her mum as they approached the lone Scots pine tree halfway down the avenue. I say strangely dressed so perhaps I should explain. In those days of austerity, it wasn't only travel that was restricted, or the availability of exotic fruits such as oranges, bananas or pomegranates. In fact these fruits weren't restricted, they were actually non-existent. All food was rationed, even bread and milk and of course meats of all kinds. Clothing too was rationed. In order to purchase apparel, it was necessary to use a certain amount of one's coupon allocation.



Examples of Ration Books

The innovation supposedly assured equitable distribution of the meagre resources available. Not only was there a clothing quota but like our famous bus, it was a utility.

This lady wasn't wearing utility clothing. She was attired in a manner which spoke of affluence and plenty; of a time which only we older kids remembered. She appeared somewhat out of place walking down the avenue towards Lochside. We were soon to discover just how incredibly out of place they truly were.

"Does Liza McNiven live here?" she enquired. She had what we deemed to be a polite voice, which meant that she spoke English, albeit with a pronounced Scottish accent, similar to what we were taught at school. As far as we were concerned, this was considered a rather odd question for McNiven was my mother's maiden name. "That's my Mum" I responded as she immediately took on a different air. The change was subtle but it was as though she suddenly was at home with us. It was like a trust and friendship between all the individuals present was a natural, collective right. The shyness of the country youngster reasserted itself and not much was said till our front door was reached. Our new acquaintance was not allowed to stand on ceremony, for Lachie, Bet and I fell over each other trying to be first over the threshold to break the news.

"Maw! There's a wumman at the door". I think I got in first, I am not too sure. All I know is our Bet wasn't too pleased at my description of the lady as a 'wumman'. Jeeze! If she wisnae a wumman, whit the hell wis she? Mum went to the door to greet the yet unknown visitor.

"Peggy Twynholm!" she cried, joy in her voice.

"Liza" Both then were hugging cheerily and the pleasure was spontaneous and mutual.

Peggy Twynholm! There was a puzzle here. Not about the name, for I had heard it many times in conversation and I was aware that the lady was a close friend of my mother's from way back. Here I was, eleven years old, and meeting this person for the first time in my life. I knew too, that the reason for this, lay in the fact that she lived somewhere on the other side of the world. Yet; here she was, in the flesh. The

pause on the threshold was brief and the lady was shortly ensconced in the most favoured chair in the kitchen. Our family had the perverse habit of calling the living room 'the kitchen'. We were quickly given to understand that here before us was Aunt Peggy. I could not immediately assimilate this fact, for I knew that it could not be strictly so, even if Bet and Lachie were young enough to accept this statement unquestioningly. However, as stories and events unfolded, it became easy to accept her just as that – Aunt Peggy. What an exciting tale she had to tell. Actually it was the recount of a truly harrowing experience but to a wee laddie, it was a tale of excitement and romance. I cannot bring to these pages, word for word, the voice of Aunt Peggy, as she told of the trying period, through which, she and her family had passed in the weeks prior to her arrival. But with hindsight, I can tell the story of that part of her life, which will allow a clear understanding of events.

Peggy Twynholm, was in her youth, a lassie of a fairly extrovert nature. She was a member of the famous Glasgow Orpheus Choir. Peggy still held great pride in that part of her past at the time of our meeting in the early forties.

NOTE: In 1901, a seventeen year old Glaswegian called Hugh Robertson took up conductorship of the Toynbee House Choir. The mixed voice choir took its name from its meeting place at the Toynbee Men's Social Club, 25 Rottenrow, Glasgow. In the next few years the choir was discovered by the public and gained great popularity. In 1906, it broke its links with Toynbee to become an independent organisation and one of the true treasures of Scotland. Its new name was The Glasgow Orpheus Choir.

Her outgoing spirit led her to travel and in the process, her path converged with that of a brilliant engineer by the name of Alfie Menhennet. Alfie was of Welsh extraction I believe. The early years of their married life were spent in Penang, on the northeast coast of the Malayan peninsula, where daughter Jean was born. Uncle Alfie became part of our lives too. He was the manager of a tin mine in the area and from Aunt Peggy's conversations, subsequent to her arrival at Lochside, had become a much loved part of the world for her. Further to the south of the southernmost tip of Malaya, lay the island city of Singapore, one of the jewels of the British Empire. It was also, one of the world's busiest seaports and appropriate use of engineering and management skills was required to maintain the ports efficiency. I cannot go into detail of how it came to pass but Uncle Alfie was appointed harbourmaster of Singapore, which became the family home. Aunt Peggy had glowing tales to tell of this fair city and the people who lived there. She especially had a great respect and liking for the Chinese element of the population; indeed some who were employed in her household were gladly joined in true friendship. The happy situation wasn't to continue; the Japanese ambition intervened.

As Hirohito's imperial hordes came raging from the north, it became increasingly apparent that the defence of Singapore would be feeble and plans were announced to destroy all equipment that might be of use to the enemy. Uncle Alfie ensured that his beloved family were embarked on a ship bound for the British Isles.

So it was, that Aunt Peggy and little Jean were here sitting amongst us. It wasn't long at all till the inevitable celebratory meal was laid upon the table and the newly augmented family sat to dine. We remember now with such hilarity, how self-

conscious we were on that auspicious occasion. Mum didn't have to remind us about not slurping our tea, keeping the elbows off the table or any other irksome mores of etiquette with which decent hungry kids were plagued. In fact, we were so preoccupied in minding our manners, that our enjoyment of the meal was a little less than it might have been. Conversation was fairly muted, as I recall, and the most voluble contribution came from our visitor, who expressed genuine surprise at the quality of the meal being offered to her. She had been hearing so much about food shortages and rationing etc, yet here she was in this beleaguered island and she was being served such varied food and plenty of it too. It was pointed out to her that we owned twenty acres of land and it was being put to very good use. We had a surplus amount of potatoes, gallons of fresh milk from our own cows, home churned butter galore, so many eggs that we were selling the excess to the egg marketing board (not to mention the ones that found their way to friends without the board's knowledge), and how would she like to have strawberries and cream for dessert? A surreptitious sigh of relief whispered around the table as we were having nightmare visions of the lady declining, which would have been for us children, a sad state of affairs indeed. I couldn't see mum bothering to dish up such a succulent dessert to her group of urchins if her guest turned down the offer. There is no juncture at which the burdensome rules of Victorian table etiquette become more difficult to maintain than at the moment after you have savoured the last delicious strawberry and your spoon cannot even be partly filled again with the juice and cream coating, which clings so invitingly round your plate. Ah! – How we sat there and eyed that tempting prospect. The talk all at once ceased and a funny, awkward silence ensued. 'A pregnant silence' is that the term used when the reason for the sudden quiet is in fact known to all but are reluctant to admit it?

Anyway, I was struggling to restrain myself when our guest suddenly and quite loudly said "Well I don't know who else is going to lick their plate but I am for licking mine!"

In a split second, her nose was out of sight under the rim of her plate. Pretty soon, there wasn't a single nose visible anywhere, and the sound of slurping and lip smacking was a joy to hear.

Thus it was, in those few seconds, a lady from the far side of the world became Aunt Peggy in our hearts. Our visitor, it transpired, was to take up residence in the cottage vacated by the Parks. The house was once again shelter to a family, this time to some of our own kin. Happy tidings arrived regarding Uncle Alfie's situation. He had escaped from Singapore as the installations blazed and was in the port of Colombo, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and was taking on the duties of the harbourmaster there for the duration of the war.

But I saw in that moment the heather
That lay like a purple sheet
On the hills that watched over the hamlet
That sleeps like a child at its feet



Chapter Five – Of Uncles and Others

My Father had four sisters and four brothers. It would be well beyond the scope of these writings to delve into a detailed history of the Rogerson family as it existed in and around Durisdeer, through the early years of the twentieth century, but some limited disclosure along these lines will not be amiss, if only to provide some background to events. Most of the references will be brief but one or two carry enough interest or relevance to merit longer discussion.

As far back as I can ascertain my grandfather was a worker on the estates of the Duke of Buccleuch and it was whilst employed by the duke, that he and my grandmother (nee Twynholm) began their family in the late nineteenth century. I cannot be certain whether Aunt Nan or Uncle Pete was first on the scene. They must have come into the world during the 1890's and both immigrated prior to the start of the First World War. At any rate, on the female side were Aunts Nan, Liz, Marian and Bell. Following Uncle Peter were George, Alec, Walter (Faither) and James. Nothing much need be said about their childhood years. They were part of an earlier story than mine. Scraps of conversation via Grandpa or Dad conjured images of kids, who were instructed to carry their footwear to school in hail, rain or snow; donning their shoes only after arriving in the formal setting of the classroom. This was to prevent unnecessary wear and tear of the footwear; images of a harder time indeed. Uncle Pete and Aunt Nan both sailed for North America during their mid teens. At about the same time, the family said goodbye to Durisdeer and God's country as Faither used to say, and moved to New Cumnock, where Grandpa Rogerson took up employment as a railway surface man. The younger members of the kinfolks continued their education. Only anecdotal reference remains to shed any kind of light on their time at school in New Cumnock and mainly of a humorous nature, which has been kept alive through the many years by frequent repetition. Aunt Bell was the perpetrator of one such incident. She was asked to spell 'frog' and piped up in her native Dumfriesshire accent "F-R-O-G, Pladdick!"

NOTE: Pladdick is Dumfriesshire slang for puddock

Aunt Tot (Marian) managed to create her own verbal monument when, in remonstrating with a certain fella called Dawson, grabbed him by the ear and sternly enquired "Are'ee the boy that stole the tossel aff oor wee Jeamie's boanet??" all spoken in a broad Dumfriesshire twang.

Unusually it has fallen to the female element to provide steadfast memories of the Rogerson family schooldays, of that generation at least.

Of the sisters, Nan married a farmer, MacMillan by name and lived her life in New England, USA. Aunt Liz was the wife of Tam Cravens, a railway signalman at New Cumnock station. Tam incidentally was the brother of Will of Lochside cottages. Aunt Tot was domiciled in Liverpool, England, after marrying Billy Ingham, an auctioneer. Aunt Bell remained local at Whitehill Farm, near the hamlet of Dalleagles. Her husband was Willie Sloan, a member of the well known Ayshire and Nith Valley farming family. Of all of them, only Aunt Bell's life touched briefly on my own. More shall be said of the farm at Whitehill.

NOTE: It was common for children to miss school during the winter because they had no footwear. The problem well documented in various New Cumnock books, depicting on occasions, half the school failing to attend because of this issue. Harsh days indeed!

Uncle Pete took his bride Sarah, a native of Maybole, across the broad Atlantic to Canada, where during a long life; they became head of a fair tribe of Rogersons, so many in fact that there were more Rogersons in Canada than there were in Scotland!

It is usual, when members of a close family come to the parting of the ways that those left behind, feel the pain. Grandpa and Grandma Rogerson could not have foreseen the great sorrow that was to befall in a few short years. Uncle Pete wasn't long gone from his native shores, when he returned as a Canadian soldier. Kaiser Wilhelm had violated Belgian neutrality in defiance of the warnings of Britain and France, and the First World War began. Shortly thereafter, Uncle Pete was joined by his brother George, in the uniform of the Cameronian Scottish Rifles. Uncle Alec had just turned sixteen years of age and was an apprentice in the joinery trade at the Bank Colliery. He disappeared. He resurfaced at a military training camp somewhere in England, having lied about his age to be accepted into the regiment of the Black Watch. He was swiftly transported back to New Cumnock, but he didn't remain very long. For some reason, he took umbrage with his boss one day and laid him flat on his back with his fists. He was of course sacked for this adventure and landed in Liverpool under the wing of Grandpa's brother James, who was in the butchering trade. He may well have been in the process of being trained as a butcher, I am not sure. I do know he took up boxing and was gaining a fair reputation by the time he reached military age. The boxing career ended then. He was in France as soon as he completed his training with the 9th Black Watch. By 1916 he was on the Somme River, France. He met his end, not in the infamous battle on that bloody river but on another day. Wullie Logan explained to me how it happened. He was our local butcher in later years and was in the same regiment as Uncle Alec. He was present when he was hit! They had been on some form of raid and were haring back to the relative safety of the friendly trenches. Wullie's eyes misted as he continued "The bugger jist widnae drap that bloody Hun machine gun!"

Uncle Alec apparently had acquired a trophy and was determined to see it back to the trenches. This determination was his undoing as it slowed his progress across no man's land, allowing time for the German gunners to compose themselves as the pair were still exposed to the enemy.

Wullie said "He just disappeared; there was a shell burst and when ah crawled oot the glaur, I couldnae find heid not tail o' him"

Tommy Ponton who had been a workmate of Alec's at the Bank Colliery, told of seeing him some weeks earlier being carried up the line with a hole in his back you could have put your fist in. A wound which had it been just a bit more disabling, might have resulted in Alec Rogerson being back home with his folks in New Cumnock. It wasn't to be.....

The same Tom Ponton was one of Uncle Geordie's teenage friends. The war at first had set them many miles apart; with Tom in France and Cousin George in

Mesopotamia during the early part of his war service. Then one day, a few weeks after Alec's demise, Tom heard on the grapevine that Geordie's regiment has arrived in France and was somewhere close by. Soon he tracked the regiment down and set out to find his friend. Tom says "They aw went quiet" when I asked of Geordie. "I kent afore they telt me."

Uncle Geordie had been cut down by a sniper the previous day.

Tom Ponton came through the hell of the trenches and for the remainder of his working life he worked in the joiners shop at the Bank, still carrying the scar of a sniper's bullet, where it had passed through his face.

I find it difficult to describe the events of those far off times and tell the tale of the death of two of my uncles, who were mere lads of eighteen, younger than my own grandson at the time of writing. This was a horrid waste of young lives; and for what? It happened again!!!

So my father lost two of his brothers in such a short span of time. My grandparents saw three of their sons go gladly to fight for what they believed to be a just cause. They saw one son return but only fleetingly for Uncle Pete, a Canadian soldier, went home to Knowlton, Quebec to his beloved Sarah. A bizarre kind of record exists as far as Alec and George are concerned. Their names are carved on no less than four war memorials. Their sacrifice is recorded on the small memorial in the churchyard at Durisdeer. Their names can be seen again on the Carronbridge monument set by the wayside on the road from Carronbridge to the pass of Dalveen; once more on the stone in the cemetery at Glen Afton in the parish of New Cumnock and finally with all their comrades in arms, on the national monument in Edinburgh Castle.

It was a natural consequence of events that led Wattie (Faither) and Jim to develop an exceedingly close relationship. They were after all the only two Rogerson sons to remain in New Cumnock in the aftermath of World War 1. The family at that time dwelled at Southampton House, on the Mansfield Road, having moved there from their first New Cumnock residence, Gatehead Cottage.

NOTE: Southampton house was more recently The Clutch and before that it was the Masonic Lodge. Also do not confuse Gatehead Cottage with the Gatehouse at Connel Park as the former was on the Mansfield Road.

Father began his working life as a butcher's apprentice, and from the tales told in later life, he also involved himself in work at Castlemains Farm. I am fairly sure that it was through association with the farming community, the Beatties in particular, that he came to know Liza McNiven, our mother. As Uncle Jim reached his mid teen years and left schooldays behind him, the two brothers began to share much of their leisure time. Pursuit of the 'burn troot' was the sport of their lives. The picture still hovers in my memory of men in long hip waders, a wicker basket strapped to their back and a folded fly rod in their hand. It was normal to see them heading for weekend excursions to Scaur, Deuch, Nith, Afton, Ken, Cree, Euchar or Daer waters or maybe just returning from one of these venues with a full basket of brown trout. Many years later Dad bragged proudly to me about hikes over the Galloway Hills to 'Hoose o' the Hill' with Uncle Jim. There they would fish Scaur Water and Loch Enoch on the way.

“Loch Enoch” he said, that’s where the troot have nae fins on the bottom, cos they’ve been scrubbed off by the sand”

As far as he was concerned, this was the gospel truth. Sadly I said “Dad – there are nae troot in Loch Enoch”

“Ye’r talking bloody nonsense” he growled “Jim and me fished it for twenty years, man an boy! Ye can see the fish on the white sand fae thirty yards oot”

“Dad” I said “Loch Enoch is dead, acid rain”.

I saw the look on his face and wished I had left him with images of Galloway from his youth, along with the precious memories of his days in the hills, with his brother untarnished, by time and the results of careless human activity. They were two brothers who obviously loved their homeland in the Scottish Southern Uplands. There must have been some regret when marital commitments and distance imposed by the demands of their employment, began to restrict their ability to take off amongst the hills of Galloway. Both by this time were employees of the railway. Uncle Jim, met, courted and married Jenny, a lassie from the Craig family of Polquhaup, a small steading by the rail side a few miles west of New Cumnock. The Rogerson family were now established at Lochside, and Uncle Jim started his married life on the upper floor of the ‘big hoose’. By the time wee Bobby Rogerson had entered life at CONNELL PARK, and was fully aware of what was around him, Uncle Jim and his family were no longer at Lochside.

Uncle Jim lived in the town of Dumfries. He and Aunt Jenny were blessed with three daughters; Lily, Betty, and Mari. Lily was born at Lochside, prior to the move to Dumfries. It will be noted, during this account of the doings of Uncle Jim that not much mention is made of his immediate family. The prime reason for this lies with the character of Aunt Jenny. She was a sweet, quiet lady, introvert by nature, who because of her innate shyness wasn’t often involved in the family get-togethers at Lochside. She most certainly would never have been embroiled in any of the madcap escapades in which our more outgoing Uncle was frequently involved. Uncle Jim was the youngest of the family of my paternal Grandparents and by a long way, *the craziest*. Don’t let me mislead you; there was no lack of intelligence or of native wit. In fact it could be said that a gross over-endowment of the latter trait is what set him apart from the other family members and incidentally from ninety-nine percent of the human race. He is what’s commonly known among Scots as a ‘Bloody Heider’, a ‘Nutter’ or an ‘Eejit’. His fondness for crazy pranks was legendary. One daft episode involved Cousin George. George was a policeman in Liverpool, having followed that career rather than taking up farming at his home at Whitehill. Rail being the most convenient way of transport at the time, George often passed through Dumfries on his way home. With Uncle Jim working with the railway, it wasn’t uncommon for him to board a train at Dumfries station. On the day in question, he stepped aboard the train and there he saw Cousin George, who had boarded the train further south at Carlisle. They were delighted to share each other’s company as they travelled to New Cumnock. Jim at this time had a very large, nasty looking lump on his lower jaw, which Cousin George was showing concern for.

Uncle Jim fingered the disfigurement gingerly. “Doon the White Sands last nicht” he mumbled.

“Did you fall” George asked

“Fa’? – No I didnae fa’ – well no tae efter he hit me”

“You didn’t get into a fight did you?”

“Fight? Aye in the boxing booth” Uncle Jim informed him. Then the tale unfolded.

It was September and the time of the Rood Fair or Guid Nichburris Week (Good Neighbours Week). It was the Dumfries annual festival and as usual there was a fairground occupying the length of the White Sands, a broad area running along the Nith bank.

In order to justify his participation in the tragic comedy that he proceeded to describe, he had to be at least half pissed. The evening had started with a visit to his favourite tavern, the Waverly. The reason why this particular watering hole took precedence over other notable drinking places, such as the Hole in the Wa’ was probably because of its close vicinity to the railway station and its closeness to the Rogerson home at Stoup, on the Lochmaben Road. So to continue, he was well oiled when he emerged from the Vennel and mingled with the crowds among the fairground stalls. There was a boxing booth there and a challenge was being proclaimed. “Stand three rounds with our champion and win five pounds”. A fiver was real money back then.

George guessed the rest. Uncle Jim was still bemoaning his self-inflicted misfortune as the train pulled into New Cumnock station. Dad was waiting on the platform as the train pulled in. George’s Mother, Aunt Bell, was waiting by the gates in the car. With a final warning to Faither and Uncle Jim to stay out of the Afton Hotel, she and her policeman son headed off to Whitehill Farm.

“Whit the hell’s wrang wi’ yer jaw! Faither asked.

Uncle Jim went to the edge of the platform and ejected half a dozen prune pits from his mouth. “Ah’m bloody gled tae get rid o’ these!” he said grinning.

The pair of them adjourned to the Cross Keys for a visit to the Downies. They had after all promised not to visit the Linds at the Afton Hotel.

By this time Aunt Bell must have been having a canary after hearing from George about the mythical boxing match on the White Sands.

I might have made it through adulthood without falling victim to Uncle Jim and his loony humour, but I wasn’t that lucky. It was the school summer holidays and many important things were on my agenda. Such projects as building a fort at the avenue bend, beyond the railway bridge, as defence against the marauding attacks of the Pathhead gang. There was kick the can at Creoch Farm, marathon runs with pal Neil up past Lowes Farm and over the Cairnscadden summit to the Blaw-Wearie ruin and back to Lochside. Which may explain why I needed a haircut – there just wasn’t time for such trivialities. However, Mum had reached the end of her tether and made an emphatic approach to Faither, giving him the understanding that the shearing of my lengthy locks was of the greatest priority. Being one of the men in the family, Faither had a very busy schedule. It maybe wasn’t as important as Lachie’s and mine but nevertheless, it was time consuming. He did agree with Mother that there was indeed a great need for me to have a haircut. He finished whatever task he was doing and washed the grime off his hands before fetching the scissors and clippers. Just then, Uncle Jim came breezing through the door, all the way from Dumfries with his wicker basket slung over his back and fishing rod in his hand.

Father took a towel and started to dry his hands. “Where the hell are you aff tae?” he asked his brother, “Are you going on the loch?”

Ma of course had the kettle on straight away. The kettle started to boil. Uncle Jim called over his shoulder, "Naw – Ah'm goin' up Daer tae Kirkhope and I'm here to see if ye wid gang wi' us".

The expression on Father's face was enough to tell us that he fancied the idea very much. Mum said "Now Dad – whit about the boy's hair? Ye'll dae that afore ye go gallivantin'".

It was Saturday. I didn't fancy being subjected to the cold feel of the clippers and the itch of short hair clippings inside the neck of my shirt. Apart from that, here was the chance to do what I have always wanted – to go on a weekend fishing trip with Dad and Uncle Jim. So maybe the haircut could wait till another day and I could get ready quickly with Faither and sally forth into the Lowther Hills.

Ah! No escape. "You get yersel ready Wattie and Ah'll cut the boy's hair" Jim said. So I was sat unceremoniously in a chair, towel tucked around my neck as Uncle Jim unwrapped the horrid implements.

In answer to my plaintive query he said "Of course you can gang wi' us – noo sit still and lean forrit a wee ..."

I bent my head forward so that the clippers had access to the nape of my neck.

"Hoo dae ye like yer hair cut?" asked Uncle

Feeling smart I replied "I don't like it cut at a " but if ye don't hurt me wi' the shears it won't be too bad"

And the cold steel of the clippers began click-clicking up the back of my neck.

I had a wild country laddie's hatred of haircuts but I was resigned to my fate. When it was done it was done I thought. I had as much confidence in Uncle Jim's prowess with the tools as I would have with anyone else. He was well practised in the craft, being called upon to trim Dad's hair on a regular basis, not to mention many of his workmates. So when the clippers started going beyond where I thought they ought to, my over confidence in his abilities sapped my poor wits to the extent that, before I knew it, a swathe had been clipped right over the top of my head and down to my brow.

I heard Ma cry "My Goad Jim!"

He began a second pass. "Stoap worrin" wumman – it is the summertime!"

I remember thinking that I'd never be able to face the outside world again with all my hair gone. Mum put a brave face on things though and reassured me that nobody would take the least bit of notice of my hair. I couldn't be convinced but the lure of the trip to Daer overcame my fears. So when they set off for the main road and the utility bus, I was with them. We had to take the bus as far as Kirkconnel as the convenient train didn't stop at New Cumnock that day. Nobody on the bus appeared to take any notice of my new haircut, and I thought it may not be that bad after all! However, all my fears came crashing back when on Kirkconnel Main Street; I distinctly overheard a woman behind us say to her companion "Aw – wid ye look at that poor laddie's hair!"

Kirkconnel Station at last and the approaching train was a welcome sight. Arriving at Carronbridge Station didn't involve any embarrassment, for there wasn't even a porter to be seen, and the station buildings are the only places of human habitation for some distance. Jimmie Robertson, gamekeeper come shepherd, was there with his tractor and trailer to greet us. We passed the war memorial with the names of two Rogerson brothers upon it, up the pass of Dalveen by which time, I had forgotten about my skinhead.

On our jolting trailer we rode the rough track to Daerhead and Kirkhope. I was in countryside that I loved. High windblown moorland and rough hill pasture, with a mosaic of heather patches, which offered a riot of purple for the autumn. Whilst the hills had a certain brooding wildness, they were anything but silent. Nature's symphony echoed all around; in the whisper of the cool, sweet wind through the stirring tuffets and the plaintive piping warble of the whaups over the far hillside and the whirring wings and distinctive call of the swooping lapwings. The Daer Water gurgled and splashed down through the corries and over the rocks of the Lowthers as it had done for eons of time. I was so lost in the magic of the Scottish hill country that I forgot that I was there to take some part in a fishing exercise. Yes - wonderful memories indeed.

Kirkhope, nestled in the valley bottom, well up toward the source of the Daer stream. The river had by this stage become what the Scots called a 'burn', which can best be described as a stream, just narrow enough to leap across. Our arrival at Kirhope was followed very shortly by the opening of a whisky bottle and a comfortable period of fireside chat. Being a young lad, I partook in none of the former and very little part in the latter. I did though find this to be a pleasant interlude, for like Faither and Jim, I was finding the change from bouncing on a rattling trailer to being seated in a comfy high backed chair, soothing for the aching bones.

The day was wearing on and it wasn't long till the talk turned to fishing and the tackle was produced and assembled for action. I began to take a keen interest.

The stream bank was less than a hundred yards from the Kirkhope front door, so I was surprised to find that the smooth stretch of sward between the house and the stream wasn't crossed straight away. The chosen route took us downstream, back down the rough track which we had travelled earlier. Two or three miles must have been covered before at last, by a clump of saughs (willows) on the riverbank, the flies were chosen and tried.

The knowledge possessed by the skilled fly fisherman or woman is extensive and varied. The art of being hidden at all times must be learned. Awareness of fish habit and environment is essential. Weather is critical; a bright day is seldom a good day. A rainy day usually means that trout are after prey, which has been caught and swept downriver by spate water. Worms and grubs are plentiful in these conditions. A trout fisherman doesn't like the water to be clear. Faither used to say "If you can see the trout, they can see you!"

For the same reason, a breeze blowing upstream and ruffling the water surface is also helpful. I learned all of these things but my knowledge was applied only in the comparatively clumsy activity of worming. I never obtained the wonderful skills displayed by my Father and Uncle Jim on that weekend. Crouching, always moving, travelling upstream, and when the feathered fly hooks were not floating gently on the water's surface, the rod tips were flicking back and forth. The merest hint of a fish lurking brought the fly cast hovering silently over the exact spot, settling gently, to float with the current.

And woe betide the hapless trout that was deceived, even momentarily, by the colourful, feathered hook floating above. On the instant the bait was taken, a reflexive back flick of the rod tip, served to drive the hook home, leaving the fish

fighting for its life. A good sized fish was always 'played'. A hurried reaction could so easily result in the hook being dislodged, the line being broken or serious damage to the top piece of a cherished and expensive greenheart rod. Smaller specimens were treated with less ceremony, since their light weight was less likely to contribute towards damage to the rod and tackle or their own mouths. The smaller ones very invariably returned carefully to the stream, often with some ribald comment like "it is yer Faither Ah'mefer!"

As the afternoon wore on into the evening and the action moved upstream, we again arrived at Kirkhope. By this time, the Daer Water had reached the status of a burn. Further down, it had been swollen by a tributary, which meandered in the hills to the south. As the volume of the water was diminished, so too was the stream width and the conditions weren't suited for fly fishing. Wandering back upstream, I noticed half a dozen pan sized trout go into each basket and both men appeared content with their catch. Something though, was giving me cause for puzzlement. Three hours, twelve trout! Here they were folding their rods away for the night. I had a picture in my head of Faither arriving home from another such trip with a basket full of fish. How come?

I wondered how the rest of the daylight hours would be spent. I soon found out. The baskets removed from their shoulders, they peeled off their jackets and proceeded to roll up their shirt sleeves. They took their time about it and ensured that they were rolled up as securely as could be. Within seconds there were two Rogerson arses facing the sky and Jimmie Robertson's soon followed as the lawless trio plunged their hands down and under the stream overhang, feeling gently for the fish that might be lurking there. And fish there were! Within ten minutes, there were fifteen or twenty trout stowed in the baskets. Now I knew how there was always surplus to drop off at the CONNELL PARK Gatehouse for Sanny and Mary to distribute to the Browns and the Grays at Smithfield or to the old folk who needed some help to enhance the wartime rations.

We stayed at Kirkhope that night and the following day was spent on the downstream tributary. This meant travelling on foot across the moorland into a neighbouring valley, which was wilder than the Daerhead. It was remote and there was no human habitation. I was sorry to see the end of the trip as time appeared to fly. Soon evening arrived and we were back at Carronbridge and on the train back to Lochside.

A memorable jaunt it been for me and greatly enjoyed. However, I still had to face Neil, Chrissie and all the others to endure the laughter and hilarity as they took the piss out of my haircut.

I think before I pass on to other members of the family, I should tell of another hilarious incident created by my crazy uncle from Dumfries. On this particular day, he had been out on Lochside land with his shotgun and on his return, he handed Mother a nice plump mallard duck. She was only too pleased to have something different to add variety to the family food rations. Off she went to prepare the duck for the pot. After some time, and amid a pile of feathers and down, Mum called through to the kitchen "Jim – Ah cannae for the life o' me fin' where ye shot this bird!"

"That's no surprising". The pokerfaced reply came, "For Ah didnae shoot it!" Mum's head appeared round the door jamb. "Whit dae ye mean ye didnae shoot it?"

“Weel” says Uncle Jim, “Ah wis hunkered ahin the faur dyke yonder, waitin’ for the jeuks tae come in at the daurknin’, an did Ah no fa asleep! - Ah woke up wi’ a kinna stert, an here wis this jeuk perched on the en o’ ma gun barrel! – Ah goat sic” a fricht that the gun went aff – and the jeuk deid o’ hert failure!”

I went into hysterics immediately.

Aunt Peggy had two brothers in Glasgow. Dan was an ordinary kind of fellow and as far as I know, never caused enough of a ripple in society to merit notoriety or fame in any degree. He therefore prompts no more than a mention here. Sandy; now here we had something different. In fact, diverse from most members of human society; perhaps best described as the Uncle Jim of the Twynholm family. It was fortunate that Sandy and Jim never actually got close long enough to collaborate in any mischief, for the consequences could well have made the national headlines. Sandy was a sergeant in the police force and was based in Glasgow. He was one of the best liars I have ever known. He was so damn plausible that it was hard to determine where truth ended and falsehood began. He even had members of our Royal Family organising Nazi underground squads in central Scotland. I do not know to this day if any truth existed in that unusual tale. I got involved in one hilarious personal experience with the formidable Sandy. On one of his occasional visits to Lochside, I took on the task of rowing him around the loch. This held no excitement for me, for we more or less grew up with a boat in the family, and knew every inch of the loch intimately. Sandy and his family were from a large city however, and a spin on the loch was something to be enjoyed and remembered. Rowing never became a chore to us, in spite of its familiarity, so I was perfectly happy, to be messing around in the boat.

The pleasant trip was set to remain that – a pleasant trip. Then, Sandy got his mischievous eye on John Sloan’s turnip field. Little Creoch land rose steeply to the horizon from the landward side of the dark green reed mass, in which in later years, I was to witness the predatory dash of the big pike. During this year, the field had been planted with swede turnips. It should need no reminder to any Scots lad, just how sweet a stolen turnip tastes.

“A lang time since Ah had a turnip!” says he.

Well a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse, as the old saying goes, so with a grin on my face that would have taken a bang on the head to wipe off, I made a beeline for the reeds, shelving the oars and letting the impetus carry us through them to the rocky shore. Soon we were among the greenery, heads down and selecting a pair of nice, plump turnips. I grabbed my choice and uprooted it, cuffing off the loose dirt from the roots – but to my horror I found myself eye to eye with farmer John Sloan, who was less than a hundred yards away, on top of the rise. Beside him was a black dog and over the crook of his arm, a shotgun! There was one difference between Sandy and me as we fled to the boat and back out through the reeds – He still had his turnip. I dropped mine in fright.

We didn’t need to run for I am sure had we greeted John Sloan formally, he would have been happy to part with a couple of thousands of turnips, in order to foster the good neighbourliness that existed between our families. Of course it wouldn’t have been the same. To Sandy, yon turnip was a triumphant return to his youth. If we hadn’t bolted, the turnip wouldn’t have been quite as ‘stolen’ and as a result, would not have tasted quite as sweet. Our worthy Glesga polis chortled for hours.

Afterwards, I bet, so did John Sloan. There was only one boat in the loch and he knew fine who would be rowing it!
Ach!! Whit's a turnip between neebors?

In those days there were two colours of petrol. One was strictly for use in pursuit of business and livelihood. The other – a much smaller ration - could be used for social and recreational purposes. Geordie Johnston, Dumfries plumber, had the wrong colour petrol in his tank the day he got involved with the Rogersons; but that is significant somewhere in the middle of this next episode. I'll begin where we first became aware of something fishy (literally) being afoot.

It was early Saturday evening when the polis came to our door. Faither hadn't long arrived from Dumfries, where much of the weekend rail work was centred. Anyway, his cousin Robbie Rogerson, a Liverpool butcher and mayor of Bootle, was having a short visit to Aunt Jenny and Uncle Jim at 'the Stoup' on the Lockerbie road, and it was assumed, naturally, that Faither would spend a little time with them. Anyway, when Faither noticed the approach of our local constabulary, he met them at the door, enquiring as to the purpose of their visit.

"Is Jimmy Rogerson here?" asked one of the duo in a voice that left little doubt that this was surely in the line of duty.

"Naw – he's no here", replied Faither. "Whit dae ye want Jim for?"

Again the impersonal, business-like tones (we knew the polis very well, and in fact had many a blether with them) "Ah'm afraid he's been reported for poachin' sea trout – where d'ye think we could find him?"

"At hame, Ah wid think," replied Faither.

"Tried there", said the polis, "Where last did ye see him?"

Faither lifted his hookerdoon bunnet and scratched his head; "On Dumfries station platform, when Ah got on the train tae come hame" says he. That seemed to leave the law satisfied that there was nothing further they could learn at Lochside, and they disappeared soon over the railway bridge. As soon as it was certain that the polis interview was over, Mum initiated one of her own. A very firm request was put to Faither to start with the truth, keep to the truth, and end with the truth. The tale that followed was so damnably outlandish that it just had to be true; anyway, Uncle Jim was involved.

Since the weather was good, and Cousin Robbie hadn't seen much of Galloway for some years past, Geordie Johnston was persuaded to take the Rogerson trio for a 'wee rin in the moatir. This bargain was more than likely struck in the hallowed halls of the Waverly Hotel, where the fellow-feeling induced by a hauf or two no doubt made the idea all the more attractive. So the four of them piled into Geordie's plumber's van, and off they went. Boyhood haunts have a pull on the minds of men all through life, so it wasn't surprising that Geordie Johnston's van was shortly afterwards seen taking the right-hand turn off the Kilmarnock road at the village of Carronbridge. The banks of Carron Water were the scenes of childhood to Uncle Jim and Faither. Touring in a van wasn't exactly the best way of renewing contact with the woods, meadows and stream banks of their youth, and it wasn't too long till the van was parked by the roadside and four contented fellas were taking in the rural scene, wandering Carron banks. There is an old stone bridge over the Carron on the road to Durisdeer churchyard, which still bears on its weathered parapet the traces of the carved letters 'P.R. – M.R. 1911'. Letters painstakingly carved in stone by Uncle

Pete, at the request of Aunt Tot (Marion) two years before he left the shores of Scotland, to live his long life in Canada. The daudering foursome dallied on the old bridge. A fateful pause; there was a bonnie sea trout lying in glistening splendour in the clear pool just downstream of the bridge, and Uncle Jim saw it. Thus began the descent into lawlessness. Somehow, that fish had to be found a place in Geordie Johnston's van. After a quick reconnoitre and a hurried confab, it was decided that, since Geordie had some very handy fine wire in his van, the instrument of execution would be the girn.

Ah, and what the hell is a 'girn?' I hear folks ask. Perhaps a little 'aside' is in order at this point. The word 'girn' can refer to any one of three things – two in Scots, one in English. In the county of Cumberland, folks actually hold competitive meets at which the person who can contort his or her face into the most grotesque shape is declared the season's champion. This they refer to as 'girling'. In Scotland, however, the word is most often heard in use to describe a crotchety character who is always grumbling – or 'aye girnin'. The other Scots use of the word is the one with which we are presently concerned. The girn about to be put to use on Carron banks was a wire noose, very similar to the snare used for rabbits and other small game. The structure and strength of the girn depended upon the circumstances at the time. One of the favourite tricks was to make use of the burdock plant, the roots of which were long, strong and smooth, and which could be fashioned into a serviceable noose if a hungry fisherman didn't have higher technology to hand. The band of poachers on Carron that day had no need of the Burdock plant; they had an expertly fashioned, grade one wire girn with which to accomplish their nefarious purpose. It was a toss-up between Faither and Uncle Jim as to who would be the one to stalk the fish. Uncle won, and as he crawled forward and bellied down above the shimmering pool, a young local laddie poked his head over the bridge parapet and watched the proceedings with some interest. The girn was gently lowered into the water, just downstream and to the rear of the trout, which was suspended almost motionless in the stream, only intermittent flickers of its tail and the regular movement of its gills giving signal of vibrant life. With great care, the suspended noose was manoeuvred over the tail and up along the body. Just behind the gills, and timed to coincide with their outward flaring, Uncle Jim struck. A flurry on the water, the sudden silver streaking of a flying, writhing wet body as it arced in the air in the sunshine, and the fish lay quivering on the grass. Uncle Jim stood up, and as he hefted the big trout on the noose in judgement of his weight, it was noticed that the little local laddie's head had been replaced by the head of a much older native of the area. The head shouted down at them, "If you fellas ken whit's guid for ye, ye'll get tae hell's fire oot o' here quick; yon wee boy has phoned the polis!"

Thirty seconds later there were four wrongdoers and a fresh-caught nine pound sea trout careering down the lane towards the main Kilmarnock road in a plumber's van with the wrong colour of petrol in the tank. The escape route carried them past Coshogle where the 'leears gan for their denner', and down to the main road. Straight across the main road they went and down the drive to the Castle of Drumlanrig. Bypassing the castle, they carried on through the woodland byways and over the hill road to Keir and Penpont. Before they reached Dunscore village, they turned their vehicle towards the main road again at Auldgirith, where they crossed it once more, taking the little-used back road to Dalswinton and Heath-hall. There, they made south and west to Torthorwald village before venturing northward into Dumfries town, where Robbie and the trout were dropped off at the Stoup, Faither taken to the station,

and a much relieved Geordie could park his van in the station yard. The polis never had a chance! In those days carphones, or even boundless polis cars, still hadn't been heard of; and they were chasing will-o'-the-wisps who knew every by road, hill track and lay by in the county of Dumfries. That, then, was the end of Faither's account of the day's events. As it turned out, it was by no means the end of the story of the fish. When Robbie returned to Liverpool, the chief of police in that fair city was presented with a bonnie nine-pound Galloway sea trout, courtesy of the mayor of Bootle. We never did get to know why the police centred their attention on Jimmy Rogerson.

NOTE: This was a local saying about Coshogle, where, apparently, a motley crew used to gather for the mid-day and would try to out do one another in the telling of tall tales.

There came a day when Uncle Jim lay flat on his back in Dumfries infirmary and enquired, with all of his usual impudence, if the nurse attending him would mind paring his corns!

"Pare your corns, Mr. Rogerson?" asked an astonished lassie.

"Aye," says Uncle, "But ye'll hae tae gan ower tae the station for ma fit's ower there someplace!"

This was, indeed, fact; he'd just been unloaded from the ambulance, having had his left leg amputated between ankle and knee when he was struck from behind by a shunting train.

Many years after, when I myself lay in the same infirmary, the medical staff recognised him as soon as he came stumping into my ward on the first of his frequent visits. They knew him as the man who used to push the duty nurse's trolley around the ward every morning as she distributed medicines – and who, on the morning of his appendectomy went missing after he had been given his 'pre-med' injection, and was eventually discovered in a complete daze pushing the medicine trolley as usual! From that same operation he arose with an unhealed operational wound still stitched and against all advice and pleas from the surgeons walked out to attend his Father's funeral.

But this happened in a life beyond my boyhood years, and finds a place here only to further illustrate the character and strength of the man who was my Uncle. He deserves a biography of his own; perhaps one of his immediate family may see fit to tell the world of his long life and innumerable exploits. I must return to Lochside, and rejoin the kids thereabouts. There is still much to tell.

“Did they beat the drum slowly, did they play the fife lowly,
Did the rifles fire o’er you as they lowered you down?
Did the band play the ‘last post’ in chorus?
Did the pipes play the flowers o’ the forest?”

“No-man’s Land”; Eric Bogle



Unknown soldiers from New Cumnock

Chapter Six – Soldiers

In the village of Auchinleck, a couple of miles beyond Cumnock town, military uniforms were a common sight throughout most of the war years. They weren't British uniforms; nor were they worn by soldiers of one country. Some proclaimed the wearers to be Free French. The other large contingent was from Poland. And they did not get on together.

Dunkirk, in 1940, while not quite a glorious victory for the Nazis, couldn't be described as anything less than a debacle for the Allied armies. True, it was something of a minor miracle that so many thousands of British and French troops were saved from annihilation or imprisonment, and while no doubt this was in some part due to heroic rearguard action by Allied units, it is almost certain that the salvation of the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force owed as much to an uncharacteristic lull in the blitzkrieg tactics of the mighty Wehrmacht. Be that as it may, the end result was the billeting of thousands of French and Polish troops around Auchinleck.

Auchinleck is six miles or so north west of Lochside, and since our home was a little off the beaten track it wouldn't have been all that surprising if contact between ourselves and those men from foreign climes had been very infrequent. It turned out, however, that the Polish soldiers were intent on augmenting the army rations; and they were very fond of pike. Several of them became regular visitors to Lochside, and to the south west facing gravel shore in particular. They fished for pike as we'd never seen the art practised before. Over the years, we had watched many fishermen come and go, some leaving with fish in the teens of poundage, others with nothing worthwhile, and still others bemoaning the monster which had destroyed their tackle. Now the Poles were here, and they showed us how to keep a big fish once it was hooked. And it was all so simple and straightforward. No fishing rod, no proprietary line of designated breaking strain, and no slim wire trace was used. Soon, all the kids in the parish were copying their methods, and with some astounding success. All that was required was a length of clothesline, a rubber ball float, and a big treble hook attached to a foot or so of stout wire – fence wire being a common choice. Bait ranged from fish offal to hunks of raw bacon. The end of the line was anchored by means of a substantial boulder or a driven stake, and coiled carefully till just enough was left free to let the heavy tackle be whirled around and slung outward over the water. While it was true to say that this method attracted fewer bites, one thing was certain – once Mr. Pike was on that big treble, he was on for keeps, and no way was that tackle going to break!

To those who would criticise those Polish soldiers, and cry 'unsporting', I would point out that these fishermen weren't there for sport; they were there for food.

Only one of the Poles who made a regular visit to Lochside came as a sport fisherman. He was a friendly, jovial character, and informed us that his name was Joe. (We found later that there was an incredible number of Joes among them). Joe

always arrived with his rod and tackle, and clad in hip waders. He didn't land any big stuff but enjoyed every minute of his fishing. An amusing character, he used to snarl and spit at the mention of Stalin, who, at that time, was a hero to us lads. This gave cause for no end of hilarity, for his physical likeness to the mighty Josef Stalin was uncanny.

The mutual antagonism between Poles and Frenchmen in the district was giving rise to the threat of more than enough trouble; a further ingredient was added to the brew through the advent of the prisoner-of-war camps. I don't know to this day if Germans and Italians were contained all together in one area; what I do know is that there was a ready supply of labour on offer for the convenience of any farmer who felt that he could use an extra hand; Many of the local farmers were only too glad to take the chance of an expense-free employee, and as far as I know, there was no lack of willingness on the part of the prisoners to take part. For all I know they may, within the barbed-wire enclosure of the prison camp, have been told without option that they were required to work in the countryside. At any rate, when they found that a reasonably co-operative attitude to the work routine resulted in a welcome place around the dinner table, it was the odd one indeed who didn't return happily day after day. In some cases, the arrangement was found so mutually satisfactory that the farmer was able to come to an agreement whereby the prisoner in his employ, instead of being carted off night after night back to the camp, could instead 'live in' at the farm. An Italian by the name of Aldo Garrazzino was one such. Aldo had proved to be such a handy fella to Sanny Mair at the Auld Mill farm that Sanny decided to hang on to him for the duration. Aldo became such a fixture in and around New Cumnock that only the fact that he was compelled at all times to wear the prominent round contrasting patch on his clothing proclaimed the status 'prisoner of war'. Unfortunately, (and perhaps, who knows, with some reason), some of the free French troops did not like Italians. Aldo became an unlucky target, and received a severe beating one dark night. Some there were in New Cumnock who expressed scant sympathy for him; he was an enemy alien after all, and the French lads were our allies in the field. Like many another, however, who had come to know Aldo as a fella of some dignity, with no fear of hard work, and without trace of arrogance, I felt disgust towards those who had taken the cowardly course of attacking one man under cover of darkness – allies or not. Aldo, thankfully, quite quickly recovered.

There is an area in New Cumnock which rejoices in the high-sounding name of 'the Castle'. I believe that this title has more legitimacy than meets the eye, as there is historical evidence to support the story that a castle did indeed stand on the summit of the rise to the north of the highway. Anyway, here, in those times, was the commercial centre of the parish. If anybody in satellite communities such as Burnfoot, Burnside, Bank, Connel Park, Pathhead, Coupla, or parish farm steadings was heard to say that they were 'gaun tae the toon', it was more than likely that they were bound for the bustle and commerce of 'the Castle'. It was a minority who might be found travelling to some other destination – perhaps to the doctor's surgery, or to school, or maybe an overnight stay in the polis-station cells for a cooling off.

The traveller from New Cumnock rail station or points west, after crossing Nith bridge, first came to the Smiddy on the right; a busy establishment in those days. The co-op shop, again on the right, faced McKechnie's garage on the opposite side of the road. As the short uphill stretch beyond that was negotiated, mainly private dwellings

lined the route. A noticeable exception was, on the left, Mac's Bar, 'McKechnies pub' in local parlance or, more usually, just 'Kechie's'. At the top of this rise Gino Benedetti's fish and chip shop faced 'Roager Hood's shoe-repair shop. Gino was of Italian extraction, of course, but being born in Britain wasn't included in the roundup of enemy aliens at the beginning of hostilities. All the locals were quite taken aback, though, when Gino's popular employee, 'wee Jockie Pookie' was carted off to enforced confinement. Kids of my age couldn't recall a time when there was no Jockie and his ice-cream cart. He was led away weeping and tearfully promising "I come back! ... I come back!" And Jockie DID come back. Past Gino's shop, Hyslop's ironmongery and Bain's [later Paton's] butchers, there was a gap in the terracing of stone buildings, filled by a tall wooden bill-boarding. I think this came into existence through a fire sometime in the past. One of the largest buildings in the parish of New Cumnock rose beyond. The ground floor housed Davie Henderson's grocery and the post office. The next shops past Hendersons Buildings were Jack MacFarlane's butcher shop and Sturrock's drapery.



The Castle

In Henderson's Buildings, the two storeys above the bustling shops were occupied by families. Before leaving this area, I would be remiss if I neglected to direct attention to Hughie McNeish's 'Golden Stairs'. To gain access to this famed emporium, the shopper had to pass down through Henderson's close, thus arriving at the rear of the Castle buildings and the array of street-frontage shops. The stairway up to the first floor of the dilapidated building which used to stand there wasn't golden at all; it was built of wood. Hughie's stock came from goodness knows where; I would guess that fires and bankruptcy sales were probably part of the source. No matter, in that makeshift drapery establishment half the population of New Cumnock found a fair proportion of their clothing needs. Mr. Gillies the tailor further up the street had to depend on Kirk and wedding suits for his livelihood. Across the street from the

Castle buildings, and walking past Roager's shoe shop you would pass a vet's (later a ladies hairdresser's and then Shankland the plumber), McKechnie's paper shop (no – they didn't own the entire town!), a dwelling house, Julia Glendenning's home bakery and Rose Crawford's sweetie shop, the favourite destination of the kids. Hunter's grocery was next, and beyond that, the Bank of Scotland. Directly opposite from the post office was the glass frontage of the foyer of Biddall's picture house. Biddall's – the mecca of the younger set in the days before television, where unsophisticated youth gathered to meet Gene Autry, Deanna Durbin, Buster Keaton, the Three Stooges, Buck Jones, Tex Ritter, Jelly Bean, The Dead-end Kids, the Mystery Riders, Andy Clyde, Smiley Burnett, Shirley Temple and a thousand others. The Saturday matinee would be packed with kids from Connel Park, Bank and beyond. Thruppence pocket money; tuppence for the pictures, and a penny for a bag of caramels or maybe a handful of cinnamon bark from Rose Crawford's which you either nibbled throughout the film or if you felt like acting tough, you lit up and smoked.

When Biddall's closed down, New Cumnock changed forever.

Just past Biddall's stood the Castle Hotel, a favoured hostelry among the drinking fraternity. Then Sarah Logan's sweetie shop (later Mick Clark's shoe repairers), Willie Young, the solicitor and Sanny Gibson's.

Well – I began this description of the Castle and its surroundings as mere digression from the tale of Aldo Garrazino and his troubles. Reminiscence, however has led to the thought that mention must be made now of certain people and places, lest they be forgotten in the cavalcade of events. Sanny Gibson is one of those people. Sanny's stock-in-trade was mainly fruit and vegetables. The shopper who climbed the three or four stone steps and crossed the threshold of Sanny's shop entered a multi-coloured den which smelled delightfully of the earth and its produce. The walls apparently built of serried rows of canned fruit, bags of dried peas, rice and beans, cardboard trays displaying leeks, carrots, onions, apples, local strawberries, swede turnips, lemons, potatoes and every conceivable edible home-grown plant. It is hard to imagine just how this tiny shop would have coped with the range of exotic produce available in peacetime. Bananas, oranges or pomegranates were completely unavailable; in fact, there were children growing to school age who had never seen some of these fruits other than in picture-books. Even without the addition of imported fruits, if it hadn't been for the infectious good humour of the proprietor the effect of being closely surrounded and confined in a solid wall of fruit and veg would have been claustrophobic. With Sanny Gibson performing behind the counter, there was little fear of any such effect. Sanny had just about as much space on his side of the counter as there was available on the other side for his customers. It was almost the equivalent of a stage and auditorium and that's just how Sanny used it. He provided not so much a service as a performance. There were few who visited his little shop who didn't come out chuckling over something which had transpired during their transaction with the irrepressible Sanny. His comedic exploits weren't confined to the fruit shop and many were the tales told locally of some of his doings. Sanny was at one time a member of the local drama group. In spite of his cavorting within the familiar confines of his shop, when it came to being actively involved in a role in a staged play, Sanny always was on the verge of freezing in sheer stage fright. The story goes that he was cast as the villain in an eerie play called 'The Clutching Hand'. As usual, Sanny was a bundle of nerves as he awaited his entrance cue.

Knowing almost to the minute how much time he had till the fateful moment, Sanny smartly nipped out to the adjacent Crown Hotel and proceeded to swallow as much Dutch courage, in the form of Johnny Walker's golden liquid, as he could manage in the time available. He was able, it seems, to retain enough of his senses to find his way back to his offstage position exactly on cue. Sanny was to stalk to centre stage, and throwing his sinister black cloak over his shoulder, announce in eerie tones "This is a night for bloody deeds!!"

Right on cue, and with great aplomb, Sanny waltzed his way to centre-stage front, and with a happy grin and wide-flung arms, announced to the packed auditorium, "It's a bloody fine night indeed!!"

How the play progressed, or if it did at all, I never got to know.

My Father used to recall an incident (and I cannot vouch for the truth of this, but it was fairly typical), which is supposed to have occurred during the miners' strike of 1926. It seems that there were blacklegs keeping the collieries in the Kirkconnel area producing coal, and this was seen as being a threat to the effectiveness of the strike. A flying picket was arranged. In common with several of the other shop owners in the village, Sanny Gibson was in solidarity with the cause of the miners. He joined the flying picket. The expedition was ill-named, for far from 'flying' the ragged regiment had to hike their way to Kirkconnel. Sanny was with them all the way, full of enthusiasm and determination, a flat half-bottle of Johnny Walker Red stuffed in his hip pocket, just in case his stage fright came upon him again. As it was, the lads just hadn't a chance, for the authorities had taken the precaution of placing a company of soldiers athwart the road into Kirkconnel in anticipation of just such an event.

Anyway, the story goes that when confronted by the marching picket, the army lads were ordered to load and aim. Discretion being the better part of valour, the miners took to their heels just as the order to fire was given. The plan of course was to fire over the heads of the miners (or perhaps to fire blanks), but the now truly flying pickets couldn't afford to bet on it, so they retreated in some panic. Sanny had to negotiate a stone dyke almost immediately, and in his haste to gain the shelter of the lee side his Johnny Walker bottle came into violent contact with the dyke top, and the precious liquid was suddenly running down the back of his leg just as the rifle volley rang out. "Oh hell!" Sanny was heard to moan, "Ah hope that's bluid!!"

As I say, I can't guarantee the truth of the tale, but it was in essence vintage Sanny Gibson – a memorable character.

Beyond Sanny's shop, the last place of any note on that side of the road was the Manse, home of the Rev. Andrew Burnett. Not being an attendee at the Auld Kirk – other than for B.B. church parades – the Rev. Burnett wasn't really part of my scene. He was, I was led to believe, the intermediary between Grandpa Rogerson and God, but the only thing I knew for sure about him was that he had crates of Scotch whisky delivered to the manse – regularly.

On the opposite side of the road were the access doors to Hugh Turnbull's the barber, Jockie Lees' shoe shop, and lastly, Trotter's drapery.

That in those days completed the array of business places in the 'Old Castle'. And it so happened one night that I was standing in the shelter of the post office entry directly across from Biddall's, shoulders hunched and hands in pockets in the chill of the evening, awaiting the arrival of the utility bus, which would pull up at the bus stop at Sanny Gibson's. The post office doorway was handy for this purpose, for from

there a clear view could be had of the Auld Mill bus stop a third of a mile away, and when the bus arrived there, it gave plenty of time to venture out into the weather and cross to the stop at Sanny's. But something happened which took my mind completely off my transport home. I saw Aldo coming up past the manse gate. Aldo had just recovered from his unequal mini-war with the French. Normally, there would have been nothing very remarkable about Aldo having a stroll through the Castle at nine o'clock at night, but tonight, besides the fact that he hadn't been seen around since his beating, there was something that was remarkable. He carried in his right hand a two-and-a-half foot length of inch thick wire rope of the kind used in the slinging of cages in the pit shaft. And I didn't think that Aldo was about to sling any cages. His seemingly aimless stroll brought him past the portals of the Castle Hotel and into the evening shadow shed upon the concrete platform before the glass doors of Biddall's foyer. He stopped right there, and after a careful look up along the length of the interior to the auditorium entrance began to saunter back and forth, staying always on the concrete frontage. He was obviously waiting for something. Once, his step faltered and his attention became riveted to the auditorium double doors; they were swinging open. Two middle-aged women emerged and made their way to the foyer doors. As they adjusted their scarves and fussed with their gloves in preparation for the walk homeward in the cool evening air, Aldo took no further interest in them. The next time the auditorium doors opened, a French soldier appeared. Suddenly I knew what was afoot. Aldo's reaction was to register the presence of the Frenchman, and immediately pretend that he hadn't seen him at all. He turned his back to the glass doors and gazed straight across at me, holding the steel wire club – for that's what it was – dangling before his legs. I am certain that, even though his gaze was toward my side of the road, he was in these moments seeing nothing. It was a sure bet that all of his senses were concentrated on guessing what was happening behind him, inside Biddall's foyer. I could see happening what Aldo could only guess at; the French soldier saw Aldo before he had taken three steps beyond the auditorium doors. He stopped dead in his tracks, wheeled abruptly, and went back through the doors into the darkness. Moments later, the door reopened and this time three uniformed figures emerged and made their way down the foyer towards the glass doors, making it obvious by looks and gestures and a voluble three cornered conversation that some imminent tactical manoeuvre was being discussed. Aldo's deathly stillness as he stood, back to the foyer doors, might have alerted a more cautious foe to the fact that they were walking into more danger than they realised but these fellows were cocksure – they had beaten this Italian to the ground before, and they would take delight in doing it again. The first Frenchman reached the doors, and very quietly eased the right-hand panel open, just wide enough to allow his two companions to slip through. He then eased through himself, thus ensuring that the odds were three to one in their favour. But the last Frenchman through made the mistake that I'm pretty certain Aldo was banking on. He allowed the door to swing noisily shut on its own. Before that door was closed, all hell broke loose! The closest of the stalkers was pole-axed as Aldo spun round and thwacked him across the ribs, just under his upraised arm. It was hard to tell whether or not bones were broken by that blow, but the second swing of the murderous wire rope produced a very distinct crack as it came viciously down on the shoulder of the second man. He too went down for keeps. The third Frenchman landed a hefty kick somewhere on Aldo's thigh, and I thought for one moment that he was going down but the attacker didn't quite land on the vital area and he paid dearly when the whirling steel smashed into his upraised arm as he tried to protect his head. In spite of the undoubtedly painful nature of his injury -

blood was flowing freely from his sleeve - he was the lucky one of the three. He was able to take to his heels and run. Three blows were landed. Aldo Garrazzino looked down at the two cringing specimens who lay suffering on Biddall's forecourt, glanced along towards Hunter's shop where the clatter of running boots could still be heard, and walked off, down past Sanny Gibson's front steps and onward towards the Old Mill farm, still carrying his lethal wire rope.

The pair on the forecourt stood shakily on their feet by the time their fugitive companion crept back along to the scene of the debacle. The three of them would manage without an ambulance, but only just. For the fella who had taken the whack on the shoulder was supporting a forward-sagging shoulder in the classic manner of one who has just had his collarbone snapped.

At ten minutes after nine the bus arrived. I boarded it; the Frenchmen did not. Why they didn't was puzzling, somewhat; it was the ideal transport to their camp at Auchinleck. Not that it bothered me at all. I know one thing - Aldo Garrazzino was never again harassed by any of our French allies.

In spite of all measures taken in Auchinleck to try and keep Poles and Frenchmen at peace, things finally got so far out of hand that something had to be done. So it was that a very short time after we heard of machine-gun bullets ricocheting up and down Auchinleck High Street; we began to hear sounds of battle from the summit of Cairnscadden hill and beyond. Some brass-hat in his infinite wisdom had set Free French against Poles in battle-training manoeuvres! At the time, everyone thought it was the craziest of crazy decisions, for it was plain to all that both factions would be at each other's throats in deadly earnest. For three or four days an unholy racket echoed around the hills between New Cumnock and Muirkirk. Then it ceased as suddenly as it had begun. No reports ever reached the ears of the public as to what form these manoeuvres took or if there were casualties resulting. A scant ten days or so after the ceasefire, the laddies of Lochside and Creoch could have told some disturbing tales. Curiosity having overcome any respect we had for the warnings of our parents, we were soon up there on the moors, nosing around. One of the first discoveries we made was what appeared to us to be a full French soldier's kit - tin hat, boots, and tunic - stuffed in a narrow ditch. Shortly thereafter, following the traces of a tracked vehicle along the cart-track heading east from Lowesmuir Farm to a point where it had suddenly veered off to the left and smashed its way through a stone dyke. The obvious course was to follow on through and see what direction the tank (for this it must have been) had taken on the open moorland on the other side, and this we did - and came upon a perplexing scenario.

The tracks were there beyond the dyke but came to an abrupt end a short distance out on the moss. They stopped at the edge of a perfectly rectangular hole; a hole something like 15 - 20 feet by 10 feet, filled to the brim with dark, deep peat-water. It didn't need a boy's fertile imagination to picture what this circumstance implied. There were tracks going into the dark water, and none coming out. We bellied down and peered into the depths, trying to get some clue as to what might be in there. I even reached downward into the murky water, feeling for God knows what; there was nothing! Whatever lay down there was well beyond our reach. Finally, we gave up and turning southward, made our way past Blaw-wearie and the round wood on

Cairnscadden summit then from there downhill past Rottenyard burn springs and on to the two-mile slope to Lochside.

It was on this journey downhill that the gang decided on further investigation of this dark pool beyond the horizon. It surely was a measure of the intensity of our curiosity that we collected the punting pole from the boathouse and immediately set out on the long trek back to the high moor. The punting pole was over twelve feet in length, and was intended for use in the propulsion of our flat-bottomed loch boat in situations which precluded the use of oars – among the reeds, say, or progressing through thin ice. Glad we were of the rocky location of the ice cold Rottenyard springs on the return trek; the water tasted like nectar. We arrived presently by the gap in the dyke and passed through to view the square patch of black peat water once again. We all took a turn with the punting pole. Each one of us reported the same amazing result. There was nothing! No soft sludgy bottom, nor – in spite of our excited conjecture – any tell-tale solid object down there in the murk.

Perhaps there are those reading this who cannot quite believe. I don't blame them! Dad wouldn't give credit to our story either and steadfastly refused to take the hike over Cairnscadden just to "prove thae boys are talkin' bloody nonsense". Well, to those who are of similar mind after all the years, I would suggest that you might get quite a surprise if you take the time and energy one fine day and find the rocky outcrop which marks the source of the Rottenyard burn. Turn your face north-east and carry on up and over the summit. You won't find a dyke with a twenty foot gap in it for it has been mended these many years past, but if you walk beyond that dyke I am certain that you will be able to see, even after all this time, definite traces of that dark rectangular hole in the moss.

I won't be too surprised if there are few takers. It's a long stretch from human habitation. The closest man-made edifice is the Blaw-wearie ruin, and that had been a derelict shieling further back than even my Father's memory.

NOTE: Many years after the war's end, I came across a series of backnumbers of the 'Scots Magazine' in which a weeks-long discussion had been taking place on the letters pages regarding the location of a 'legendary' shepherd's cott called 'Blaw-wearie'. I was interested to find that only one correspondent came close to locating the ruin correctly; he had heard from a reliable source that it was on the moors between New Cumnock and Muirkirk. Close enough, I'd say but I could have taken them and showed them the Blaw-wearie midden, never mind the house. Nettles always grow in the abandoned middens.

More soldiers came. One day, when we all tumbled off the utility bus at the end of a school day, a most amazing sight greeted us. Lochside Avenue had been occupied from end to end. There were Coldstream Guards in wagons, bivouacs, bren carriers, in various groupings or on the move from one location to another, either on foot or speeding up and down on army motor bikes. There appeared to be a project of some urgency afoot. As we made our wondering way down past the pines, where most of the camouflaged vehicles were concentrated, we came upon what was undoubtedly the raison d'être for this company of troops. Along the rough on the golf course

fairway margin, and in the lee of the stone dyke bordering the avenue, a battery of anti-aircraft guns had been set up. Christmas morning never held such excitement! By the time we finally arrived within sight of the front door that day, Mum was beginning to think we were lost somewhere. As we crossed the railway bridge to where the pine by the roadside had, a long time back, been split by lightning, we came upon a Bren gun emplacement there among the fallen branches. Two Coldstreamers manned it – the only Scots, as far as we ever could find out, in the company! Down behind our rockery, inside the hairpin bend formed by the road as it swung back on itself to end at the cottages, was another group. I suppose you could say that they were the right wing of the detachment, for there was no more military activity beyond that point – not on our side of the loch, anyway. I found something very interesting about this particular group; one of them – he happened to be a Canadian – was the company bugler. I wouldn't rest till I could have a go at blowing that bugle! The Canadian must have noted the gleam in my eye for the next time I saw the bugle, the mouthpiece had been removed.

As days passed, we became familiar with the troops and their activities. It wasn't long till we knew as much, probably, as the officers knew about what was going on. The 'front line' faced south, towards New Cumnock and Connel Park, where they were confronted, two and a half miles away, by the 'enemy', the London Irish regiment. If a flight of Boston's appeared there was no panic - they were friendly aircraft. A flurry of frantic activity ensued, however, if the Spitfires hove into view. They were the enemy, and an agile and aggressive enemy at that. They swooped low and fast up the golf course weaving and strafing as they did. In those days there was no automatic aiming and firing of ack-ack guns. The crews leapt to their positions – one to a winder that controlled elevation, one to horizontal orientation, one to the sighting position, and an N.C.O. standing by to command. The air rang with the shouts of men; "Plane!" – "Engage!"- "On!" – "FIRE!!"

No plane ever came down of course, and no soldier was ever killed or wounded. One of the highlights of our young lives was when we were allowed to form our own team from 'the Lochside fighting unit' and man one of the guns. We got it right first time too, and claimed a Spitfire. No team had ever been keener to learn every move! (The feared nemesis – the Quartermaster Sar'nt Major- wasn't around at the time, of course!) Sister Betty had her moment of glory when the driver of a light tank sat her in the driving seat and allowed her to steer the vehicle by periscope. The driver had to grab the steering very smartly, though, for a course was being steered which was about to land the tank and its occupants in the marsh at the foot of a steep drop.

The soldiers were on a strict hard-tack food regime. This meant subsisting on a diet of canned corned beef, hard biscuits, rock-hard chocolate and other Spartan fare. Cooking was accomplished by using small hand-held individual dixies and settling them on a flame generated by igniting a white paste of mysterious composition contained in a small flattish tin. The stew cooking in their dixies usually consisted of corned beef mixed with pulverised hard-tack biscuits. Unknown to their NCOs, however, the stew was frequently augmented by the addition of potatoes and carrot sneaked in pocketfuls by the boys and lassies of the Lochside gang. The fellas behind the rockery just thirty yards from our front door had the best of things as they were within feet of the well and the hand pump which raised the sweetest water in the district. They were also, by their very proximity, the most likely recipients of clandestine titbits from Mum's table. They were a friendly bunch, and as days slipped

past it was natural to find a growing familiarity developing between the family in the house and the small group of squaddies on the extreme right flank of the Coldstreamers.

Perhaps it was hardly fair of Faither to invite the fellas for supper. To young guys on an enforced diet of hard-tack biscuits and bully beef the prospect of sitting down at a table to a feast of home-made lentil soup, tatties and mince and veg, with an oven-baked rice pudding and stewed rhubarb and cream for dessert must have been seen as an overwhelming temptation; and this it proved to be. Around our table on that balmy summer evening our meal was being shared by six young soldiers; all of the squad from behind the rockery to the last man – Canadian bugler and all. They had a special request in that the front door should be kept open. They reckoned that if the dreaded Quartermaster Sar’nt Major should go on the prowl, they’d immediately be aware of it from the sound of his motorbike as he revved up at the avenue-top. This being settled, they tucked in with great gusto. Watching big folk eating wasn’t one of my pet pastimes; I went a-wandering.

... And there was the bugle. It was laying there on top of a bundle of much less interesting gear, and glory be – the mouthpiece was in place! Here was an opportunity that might never again present itself; can a young laddie be blamed? A surreptitious glance towards the House assured me that no watchful eyes were in evidence. I picked up the bugle, and taking a deep, deep breath, set it to my lips. As hard as I could, I blew. The discordant blare that issued from that bugle was anything but melodious – but to me, it counted as a first-order success! I could swear that the sound re-echoed from the far loch shore and back over the valley to Cairnscadden. Then I heard a sound that wasn’t an echo; it was the sound of a motorbike engine starting and being revved to top speed up beyond the wood where the Quartermaster Sar’nt Major had his station. Shit! – Here was trouble – and coming at me from both sides too, for the sudden sound of a stampede from our front door heralded the panic-stricken exodus of six Coldstream Guardsmen from Mum’s kitchen. With the whirring clatter of the motorbike bearing down on one side, and the mad scramble of the British Army closing rapidly on the other, Bobby the bugler took to his heels across the road and under the yew trees, making a new hole in the field hedge in the passing. I didn’t stop till I had sprinted my way right round to the back door, and panted my way through to the kitchen, where Mum and Dad were scrambling to conceal the traces of six squaddies and the telltale signs of their recent meal. Faither glowered at me on the run; “Stupit bugger!” I couldn’t hear the motorbike engine. A peek out of the kitchen window revealed the reason for that. The dreaded NCO was out there being very nasty to the fellas by the rockery. The Canadian seemed to be bearing the brunt of it. He was standing ramrod straight, staring straight ahead, moving only his lips, and even that was dependent on the short moments between the irate officer’s epithets, as he stood, head thrust aggressively forward, obviously giving the unfortunate bugler one helluva dressing-down.

Faither went to the door, and shouted across the yard to the fuming Sar’nt Major, “Go steady wi’ the fella – it was this bloody boy that blew yer trumpet!” The officer looked round at Faither and me standing in the doorway. He turned once more to the group of squaddies, spoke a final couple of not too complimentary words, and began walking to our door. I scuttled into the kitchen. I wasn’t keen to take the place of the Canadian bugler and suffer the Quartermaster Sar’nt Major’s wrath. I

heard Faither loudly proclaiming the innocence of the soldiers in the matter, and explaining that this “stupit boy” of his had blown the bugle and bolted before anybody had a chance to stop him. (Faither always talked loudly to people who might have trouble with the Scots dialect – he had some odd idea that this would somehow help them to understand.) He was taking the gamble that the lads at the rockery had withheld the whole truth from their officer, and that he was still unaware of the clandestine dinner invitation. As it turned out, the squaddies had indeed told the same tale as Faither, and had been praying that the irate officer wasn’t learning the truth at our front door. Anyway, during the conversation between Faither and the Sar’nt Major it became plain that he was a ‘nasty’ to his junior ranks only, and was in fact a perfectly ordinary and reasonably pleasant chap who appeared to take all he was being told as Gospel. He remounted his bike anon, and revved his way back up over the railway bridge. I am sure, now, that he went with a knowing grin on his face for fellas who reach the rank of Quarter-master Sar’nt Major aren’t usually daft.

I was never again allowed within spitting distance of that bugle. Not that I had any further inclination anyway; once was enough!

It was with regret that we watched the soldiers after some days as they bundled the camouflage nets, stowed all their gear and set off in convoy for whatever destination the powers had pre-arranged for them. The avenue seemed desolate and deserted without them. We soon discovered, however, that they’d left more than mere traces behind. There were dark-green tins full of hard tack biscuits stacked by the rockery, up along the golf-course dyke, under the pine trees, in the Tank wood – in fact anywhere there had been a group of Coldstreamers there was a discarded stack of the hated ‘hard tack’. While we laddies had no more appetite for this army fare than the squaddies had – even the wartime rations were to be preferred by far – we certainly did find a use for the myriad square cans; we built a humdinger of a gang headquarters with them! There was even a fireplace and chimney incorporated, and a surprisingly effective oven. The biscuit filled cans made perfectly insulated building blocks – and we weren’t completely averse to nibbling parts of our headquarters walls now and again

Billy Blackmore was at Lochside on the day of the ambush. Billy and I were at the shop at the avenue end, probably trying to wheedle a free apple tart out of Pinkie. There was a company of soldiers across the highway in the Tank wood, and they seemed to be very busily engaged in some odd activity. They were erecting camouflage nets and using them to conceal low walls built of the ever-present hard-tack cans. This flurry of activity continued until there was a system of low barricades along the fence which bordered the wood, and another mini fort behind the hawthorn hedge just beyond Pinkie’s shop. Things had settled down a bit, and Bill and I were back to cadging a tart from Pinkie, when a motorbike came roaring from the direction of the Heather Rig and skidded to a stop immediately opposite the shop. There was a few seconds of hurried conversation between the dispatch rider and the officer in charge, a loudly barked command, and in a very short space of time there wasn’t a uniform to be seen. Something was about to happen there was no doubt. Bill and I dodged quickly into the shop and watched around the door-jamb as the drama unfolded. As the dispatch rider wheeled his bike a few yards down the Lochside Avenue and parked it against the golf course dyke, the first sounds of approaching traffic reached our ears. An army lorry crested the summit of the Heather Rig,

followed closely by another – and another. A convoy was approaching. There was a final sharp command from behind one of the barricades, then silence as the first dark-green-and-brown camouflaged wagon came rolling past the drinking-trough at the east end of the Tank wood and drew level with the avenue junction. Then, with a sudden yelled command, all hell broke loose. All at once there were shouting soldiers everywhere, and the bombs began to fly.

I should explain about the bombs. The training of military personnel is developed so as to place those being trained for the battlefield in conditions which conform as closely as possible to the looming reality. This reality in the thick of twentieth century battle almost always involves the use of grenades, the flash and crash of high explosive and volumes of smoke and dust. The vicious blast of bombs, shells and grenades cannot, of course, be duplicated in the training scenario, but the hellish noise, the flash and the dense clouds of acrid smoke certainly can, and in full measure. In the days and weeks prior to the invasion of Europe, this realism was attained through the use of a cylinder about nine inches long and one inch diameter. I cannot go into the composition of these devices, but as I recall they were activated by striking one end as one would strike a match on a rough surface such as a piece of emery or sandpaper. This initiated a controlled burning similar to that of a powder fuse, during which the grenadier had time to pick his target and launch his bomb. Those were the missiles which came sailing out of the Tank wood that day, trailing their streams of smoke in arching trajectory behind them.

Three things happened at once; the first smoke bomb went off with an almighty bang, the leading army lorry slewed violently sideways and Billy and yours truly took a dive belly down on Pinkie's rug, just inside the doorway. A hellish cacophony of shouts, flashes, deafening bangs and screeching tyres ensued in the following seconds. Two fascinated laddies gaped avidly upon the carnage from the vantage of Pinkie's doorstep; till the smoking cylinder came bouncing across the road and rolled forward on to the flagstones about two feet from our noses! You never know the speed of your reactions till an emergency arises and this was an emergency. Within a split second the front edge of Pinkie's rag rug was whipped upwards in front of my face. Almost simultaneously, I'd swear, there was one almighty crash, and the rag rug batted me solidly on the cranium. I heard Bill give a yelp as the pair of us did back-somersaults in our efforts to retreat to safer quarters. Poor Billy! The hair on the back of his head was singed and he didn't think it was funny at all! It was just about then, as the crashing explosions ceased, that we heard the screams. Since the danger seemed to be past, we arrived back out front once more. The source of the screams was immediately obvious; our brave lads had ambushed a convoy of vehicles driven by A.T.S. girls! The lead driver was out on the tarmac; she wasn't screaming so much as screeching and looked set fair for tearing the red hair out of a sergeant's head straight opposite the shop. Others were out on the road too, some shaking in their shoes, some joining with their lead driver in threatening to violently reduce the size of the British Army, and one or two poor lassies who were having a good weep. The squaddies were aghast at what they had done; it was plain from the contrite expressions of most of them that the last thing they expected to find in the driving seats was a contingent of A.T.S. girls. Some heartless blokes, of course, thought it was a hilarious turn of events. As the smoke cleared and tempers cooled, we could see the army lorries slewed in all directions on the road. One had landed in the ditch, on the north side, mercifully, for there was a sheer drop into the golf course on the

other. A couple had rear-ended the wagon in front. Fortunately, the injuries sustained were confined to ringing ears, streaming eyes, some seriously disturbed emotions and a fair degree of hurt pride. A lot of back-patting and commiseration followed as the soldiers tried to calm the rage of some, and console others who were more inclined to grief and sheer fright. In no time at all there were a couple of fires going in the wood, and tea-dixies set to boil. Pinkie ran out of tarts, so our chances of a freebie disappeared along with the smoke. Before long, reconciliation was more or less complete. One or two, in fact, paired off with unctuously attentive squaddies and went wandering up through the wood towards the water-tank. Perhaps they found consolation in looking at the brown trout which swam around in there. Yes... Perhaps!!

Sadly, the last episode of any that live on in memory regarding soldiers at Lochside involved tragedy. Pinkie Stewart was the only witness to any part of what occurred. He had been working at his oven, and looking out of the small window which faced southeast towards New Cumnock he saw a crawling figure on the roadside which appeared to be making very slow progress in a journey along from the Heather Rig direction. Pinkie went out front and looked along the roadway. He saw a young soldier. The soldier, seeing Pinkie, came to a halt and promptly collapsed on his face. The lad was lying prone about a hundred yards from Lochside road end, and when Pinkie reached him, he was met by a terrible sight. One of the soldier's legs was all but severed, and a trail of blood had been left along the edge of the tarmac where he had painfully dragged himself in an attempt to reach a human contact. He was further damned by fate that day in that road traffic was even more sparse than the wartime norm, otherwise he could have been found before having dragged himself over two hundred yards. As it was, Pinkie could do no more than run back to the shop and get a coat and a cushion for the poor fella; there was no telephone available. I never got to know the exact detail of what transpired after that. I know that Pinkie stayed with the young soldier, because he was able to tell of the boy's pleas that someone should go and help his friends. When the first vehicle came along and stopped, one passenger got out and stayed at the scene while the driver sped off towards New Cumnock. I believe it must have been about that time that Pinkie decided to back track the grisly trail. He found a bren carrier in the golf course where it had gone careering off the road and overturned at the Heather Rig summit. Pinkie never ever described what he found. He probably wanted the scene blotted for ever from his memory. There were five dead soldiers.

Our boyhood adventures with the soldiers came fairly abruptly to a close. They disappeared from our countryside. The Poles, Frenchmen, Coldstreamers, London Irish and all of the other regiments of khaki clad young men who had trained in the fields of Ayrshire. They went, some to die, but they all won a war for us, in the hills of Italy and on the plains of France, the Low Countries and in Nazi Germany itself.

I've seen the high Ben Lomond a-tow'rin' tae the moon
I've seen by Crieff and Callander an 'roon' by Bonnie Doon
I've seen Loch Ness's silver tides an' places ill tae ken,
An' up intil the snawy North by Urquhart's faerie glen.

'Tramps an' Hawkers'; Anon

Chapter Seven – Of Hawkers and Tramps

The interests of our circle of friends were not always confined to bird nesting, harassing the lads in khaki or indulging in the naughtier versions of kick-the-can. We did on occasion find some situation or incident which compelled our attention. Like the still, cold winter day when one of us spied the wisp of wood smoke rising from the heart of the Pit Wood, way up on the Cairnscadden slopes. The 'Pathhead gang' was the guess that would seem closest to the truth, and since the Pit Wood was our territory, we felt honour bound to reconnoitre. So it was that a short time later the Lochside unit was sneaking into the bottom end of the wood, gathering as we went our supply of the favoured ammunition – fir cones. For some quaint reason it was an unwritten rule that fir cones were the weapon of choice for battles in the woods. We took advantage of the ditch which ran centrally up the full length of the wood, and drew close to the source of the smoke, quiet as mice. We were amazed at what we discovered. There in the middle of the wood was a large boma, constructed of fir branches in such a way as to resemble in shape a ten-times-life-size igloo. The smoke was filtering through the top of this strange structure. It was straightaway decided that this was not the work of the Pathhead mob; we approached, cautiously. As we rounded the boma to its northern aspect, we came upon the entrance, and from there we could see inside. There was a white tent (a once-white tent would better describe it), a lively log fire, a pram – of all things - and two human beings squatting in the warm glow of the embers; two human beings who could be charitably described as being of distinctive appearance. No – to be honest, the pair of them were what Faither used to say about us laddies on our worst days – as “black as the Earl of Hell’s waistcoat”. They looked middle-aged, but it was difficult to tell, for the muck, the long unkempt hair and the awful rags of clothing could well have concealed a pair of thirty year-olds, for that matter. We could tell that there was a man and a woman, and that they had spied us. None of us was bold enough to approach and make any contact with them, and we decided that discretion was the better part of valour and moved off and out of the wood into the open field and the winter sunshine. Curiosity still burned, though, and it was agreed that we would make friends with the pair, if it proved possible, using the same dodge that brought success with the soldiers. Within the hour we were back, and bearing gifts. A half stone of Kerr’s Pink spuds had delighted the British Army; we couldn’t see this starved-looking couple being averse to an offer of the same. Lachie stuck his head in through the boma entrance; “D’yez like tatties?” he asked.

The woman scrambled to her feet. “Eh? – Oh aye son – we dae that – oh, whit braw wee tatties, Dick. They’re better than the yins ye get in Hunter’s, ye ken – they’re a’ rotten!” And there we were, squatting in a ring around the cosy fireside of Heilan” Mary and Dick, blethering away in great style. True, they did indeed come close to the colour of Clottie’s waistcoat, but we would travel a long way before finding a pair of worthies as interesting as Dick and his scrawny Heilan’ spouse. I believe our ‘s companionship was even more appreciated than the gift of potatoes, for Heilan’ Mary (as she introduced herself), hardly stopped talking for breath or bite all the time we were there. Dick, who suffered from constant tremor of his hands and limbs, reckoned that he was shell-shocked. He vehemently backed up Heilan’ Mary’s story

that she owned a 'big, big hoose' in Oban, but preferred the nomadic existence with Dick. I couldn't speak for my companions, but as I counted the empty bottles littering the ground around the tent there was more than just a seed of doubt in my mind!

Heilan' Mary and Dick were around for a long time, and were often to be seen wheeling their old pram in the streets of New Cumnock. If the pram was found parked, the front door of one of the local pubs was always close by. Eventually, their absence was remarked, and they were seen no more.

The smoke of another campfire was seen one fine day. In fact, not only the smoke could be seen, but the several figures around. Again, it was the Cairnscadden hillside which had been chosen as the favoured site. This time, whoever had the choosing of it seemed to have either a masochistic streak or an iron constitution, for the small group around the fire was camped on the exposed hillside about a half-mile above the highway with nothing at all between them and the westerly gales. True, there was no severe weather on the day, but that situation was prone to quite sudden change; the sun was shining that afternoon, but night could easily bring gales and rain. This time, we took the tatties on the first visit.

Gathered round the hot fire of beechwood and dead hawthorn roots we found a tinker family from Orkney. Their delight at the offer of a small bag of potatoes was obvious, and we were straight away invited to join them for dinner. There was only a single pot – albeit of generous proportions boiling on the fire, but we were mere laddies and always willing to engage in fresh experience; we accepted. Some of our potatoes were washed and placed, unpeeled, in another smaller pot and set to boil by the fire. There were three youngsters in the group, all very shy and reticent. I cannot recall one word being spoken by any of the three. The father, for such we assumed him to be, was an interesting fella, and liked to talk about himself, his work, and his family. He showed some of his handiwork in the form of small tin whistles, neat little metal boxes and other artefacts of metal and solder. His conversation was liberally punctuated by exclamations of "Ye know!" He gave us cause for hilarity after a while, when he apparently realised that we of the South Ayrshire breed didn't necessarily speak the English which came from learning it as a second language as he himself had to do, being a native Gaelic speaker. He suddenly interrupted the flow of his narrative with the half-apologetic remark, "Ah, yez will no understand ye know, but ye'll understand ye ken!"

This was greeted with some hilarity by us Lochside kids and along with the remarks of Heilan' Mary in reference to 'the braw wee tatties', it came up again and again down the years, never failing to give renewed cause for laughter. While we waited for the contents of the pots, I gave them some cause for laughter in return.

I told them that they had chosen to cook their meal on almost the exact site of an incident which befell pal Neil and myself not too long before. It was here that Neil and I met the Pathhead gang one sunny day. We had been bird nesting, and had cushats, crows, larks and several lapwings' eggs in our hands and in various pockets. The Pathhead bunch greeted us with an unusual good-humour, enquiring of our luck in the quest for eggs. Proudly, and with some relief at the unexpected geniality of our arch-enemies, we displayed our haul of eggs. In ten seconds flat those eggs were stuffed down our shirt collars, inside our pants, and we were slapped thoroughly all over. What could we do? – There were two of us and seven or eight of them! Neil

had a fit of the giggles; I had a screeching fit of (futile) temper. In a rare old sticky mess we were, that day.

Having had his cackle at our past predicament, our Orkney host lifted the tattie-pot off the fire and set it well back beside the larger pot, which we now knew contained turnip. Now I wonder where he came by that? We had a good idea, but who were we to complain – we were the best turnip stealers for miles around. The next move was puzzling; he took a short-handled spade (which I had noted and wondered about) and very deliberately scraped the burning embers of the fire to one side. When the charred patch of ground was exposed, he proceeded to prise a patch of turf about a foot square, which had obviously been cut earlier, out of the charred area. A mass of leaves and earth was revealed into which the tinker sank his spade, and lifted a steaming mass about the size of a large football and rolled it to the side. Before our wondering eyes he gently broke this ball of clay and leaves apart. And there, naked, steaming and done to perfection were two small rabbits! Ah! – Now we could see a worthwhile meal in prospect. We were each presented with a couple of the boiled potatoes and a dollop of turnip, and were asked which of the two carcasses we'd like to sample. I didn't think that it made much difference, and said so. "Ah, but Son –", the tinker picked up the smaller of the two. "This one is a hedgehog!"

It was indeed a hedgehog, and had been cooked in the ball of clay and wet leaves under the fire, its spines and skin being removed very simply by the fact that they came off with the clay as the improvised 'oven' was broken apart. So we tasted hedgehog, and very nice it is, too.

Our Orkney tinker and his three kids were off on the road long before dark on the same afternoon, packs carried on their backs and heading south towards Kirkconnel. We never saw them again.

“Oh, the broom – the bonnie, bonnie broom,
The broom o’ the Cowden Knowes;
Fain wad I be in the North Countrie,
Herdin’ my Faither’s yowes.”

“Broom o’ the Cowden Knowes”; Anon



Wonderful picture of the Old Mill Cottage and Farm

Chapter Eight - McNivens

Grandpa and Granny McNiven moved again. The Beatties took their farming operation to the Rigg farm, just a mile north of Kirkconnel. The shepherd's steading here was a cottage and outbuildings called the Racks, and stood roughly a half-mile off the main Dumfries-Kilmarnock road, almost on Nith bank. This latest move placed my grandparents a mere ten miles away by bus, and this made it easy for me to go visiting. Their time at Racks seemed uneventful for me. Perhaps this was because of my lessening involvement in the innocent fascinations of childhood; I was coming close to my teen years. Only a couple of things are fresh in memory. I played nursemaid to an old ewe which Grandpa had given up on. It lay inert and gasping in the yard behind the house, and appeared to be in its last days. I started to feed it with milk and water. Lo and behold in a few days it had graduated to solid cattle food, and a week later was tottering around the yard. There came the day when I stepped off the bus, and making my way down the track to Racks I saw a ewe leave the flock in the field on the north side and come charging down the slope towards me. And it followed me all the way to the front door. My woolly friend had completely recovered.

The only other event that stands out in memory at the Racks wasn't so pleasant. About two hundred yards in front of the house there was a stone dyke. There was a single hawthorn tree growing by the dyke, its trunk being almost integrated with the stones. I was climbing in the upper branches of that tree, when in a sudden explosion of sound a Hawker Hurricane fighter plane came roaring down the fold in the hills beyond the dyke, banking steeply to swing away south as it came. I still have the picture in my mind of the wings of that plane as it flashed past level with my perch on the hawthorn tree; one wing was a dark blue, the other green. I fell out of the tree in fright. If I had ended by landing on the green grass, perhaps even this memory would be faded from my mind; but I didn't land on grass. I landed astride the top of a very, very hard stone dyke! To the male readers of this I do not require to give any further explanation as to why it stands clear in memory.

The Beatties retired from farming, leaving a manager to run the Rigg. It wasn't long till Grandpa realised that he and the manager – a man called Hiddlestone – were not compatible, and he looked for pastures new. He found his niche at Mossbank, the shepherd's cot on the holdings of John and Willie French on the farm of Mosscastle, near the tiny village of Crawfordjohn, which lies high on the moorland south of Douglas in Lanarkshire. I loved Mossbank and its wild surrounding moorland, but one of my life's saddest events took place here. Granny McNiven died. In a lifetime, a man may be privileged to meet and know maybe a scant half-dozen women who could be ranked with the Saints. I would claim that for Granny McNiven. Not once in memory can I recall an unkind word pass her lips. She it was who taught to me, before I was five years old, the old Hebridean song "I left my Babe a-lying Here" on the day that I pleaded with her to leave Lachie wrapped in his shawl by a thicket of nettles so that I could climb Tintac Hill with her above the cot at Hillhead, by Tynron. Sixty years later, I still sing it as she taught it that day. She was a Christian in the

absolute meaning of the word, the embodiment of Faith, Love and Charity. She literally would not kill a housefly on a window pane. And now she was gone. Surprisingly, she must have made some request that she be interred by the place I had liked least of all her homes – The Racks, by Kirkconnel. Grandpa and Aunt Flora stayed on at Mossbank. The French family were good employers, and Grandpa was still a fit and competent shepherd. Aunt Flora had been hankering to be off and doing her part in the war effort through a place in the A.T.S., but the new circumstances put this from her mind, and she settled at domestic work at Mosscastle. She did have a social life though, and this led her, one night, to depart for a dance in the Crawfordjohn village hall.

It was quite a long, winding road between Mossbank and Crawfordjohn, and Grandpa was naturally concerned that his lassie had to walk home in the wee sma' hours. He might have decided to wait up for her safe return, but tiredness must have caught up, and he went to bed in his attic room. Sometime in the early hours, he was awakened by a loud crash, turned over thinking that Flora should be more careful with the door, and went to sleep once more. He awoke in daylight, and hearing Aunt Flora busying herself with breakfast downstairs, he arose, and joined her presently in the kitchen. His porridge bowl was set down, his spoon and a bowl of milk. Two eggs were on the hob being soft-boiled. As Grandpa went to sit, Aunt Flora chose the moment to say, "Dad – there's an awfy mess ben the room; the ceilin's fa'en doon!" When Lachie McNiven followed his daughter through into the front room and saw the heap of plaster and the bare ceiling laths, I'm sure there would be some well chosen words in the Gaelic. Then Grandpa, who at that moment happened to glance out of the window, gave an exclamation of surprise; "Whit in the name has happen't here?" he cried. Aunt Flora turned back from the doorway and directed her gaze in the direction her Dad was pointing. Something very strange had happened to the trees. The four tall beech trees that grew along the far wall of the kitchen garden which on the day before had their full summer foliage were now completely stripped of their leaves from a level about halfway up their height right up to the topmost twigs! This, naturally, was a phenomenon to be viewed at closer quarters, so as soon as their boots were on their feet, they made their way through the garden gate, down the path beyond the outhouse and were soon bellied up to the garden dyke and gazing in some amazement at the half denuded trees. The cause was then apparent too, for as they came forward to the beech trees, they were able to see down into the bog land beyond. There were three bomb-craters, forty feet wide and the same in depth. "Sma' wunner Lassie," says Grandpa, "that Ah thocht ye'd slamm't the door ower hard!"

The news was soon relayed to the French household at Mosscastle, and from there it was further spread, till soon there were a fair number of curious sightseers up around Mossbank. Most were locals, and were mystified as to why 'Gerry' should want to bomb the high, empty Lanarkshire moors. The most plausible theory was one which suggested a bomber being pursued and dropping his bomb load to gain maximum speed. When the site was examined it was found that not three bombs were dropped, but four. As was the case with the bomb which Neil and I discovered at Fitzie's farm, the fourth bomb was left embedded deep in the bog land. Many years later I visited Mossbank; a ruin by then, and found that the farmer now in tenancy had no idea that the three boggy ponds in the hollow were bomb craters. An expatriate Englishman, he was tickled pink to hear of this, and listened with great interest to the story of the night the McNivens' ceiling fell in.

The sojourn at Mossbank came to a close not long after this, an event which might well have been to our real regret, for we loved the woodlands and the high moors, and Faither was getting some regular fishing in the nearby Duneaton water. There was no regret, however, for the McNiven family were welcomed to the farm cottage at Creoch, a scant mile from us. Not only were we happy with this situation, but my bosom pal Neil took an immediate shine to Grandpa McNiven and brightened the old fella's days with his companionship. Aunt Flora went in to 'service' in the farmhouse, and very soon felt very much at home.

And my Schooldays were drawing to a close.



Back Row: 1. Harry Turnbull 2. Jim Blair 3. Billy Blackmore 4. Bob Turnbull
 5. Bobby Rogerson 6. Ian Stevenson 7. Jim Findlay
 Third Row: 1. ? Hunter 2. ? Halliday 3. ? Middleton 4. Alex McKechnie 5. Davie
 Goudie 6. Dave Park
 Second Row: 1. ? Laurie 2. Billy Forrester 3. Tom Lisset 4. John Burgoyne 5. Alex
 Gallagher 6. ? McGinn 7. Alex McDonald 8. John 'Buster' Armstrong
 Front Row: Sandy McKechnie 2. Ian McKechnie 3. Bobby "Biley" McKechnie
 4. Alex Muir 5. Alistair McKechnie 6. Joe Goudie

All the guys on the back row apart from Bobby are deceased at the time of publication of this picture.

Harry Turnbull & Bob Turnbull were from a family of plumbers.
 Jim Findlay died shortly after the picture was taken.

Mr. Halliday was a colliery manager's son, from Temple Brae

David and Joe Goudie are brothers.

Alex Gallagher immigrated to Australia.

Buster Armstrong moved to London.

Tom Lisset moved to Dreghorn

Alex Muir became a joiner and undertaker

Alex McKechnie owned McKechnie's Garage

“Tell me o’ love o’ Country
Content to see’t decay
An’ ony ither paradox
Ye think o’ by the way.
I doot it needs a Hegel
Sic opposites to fuse:
Ooreducation’s failin’
And canna gie’s the views
That were peculiar to us
Afore our vision narrowed
And gar’d us think it time
The claith was owre the parrot!”

Hugh MacDiarmid – 1892-1978

Chapter Nine - Schooldays Ending

My last three years at school were spent in ‘the Higher Grade’. This was in fact the first three years of a six-year academy course, and was the section which supposedly justified the high-sounding title ‘New Cumnock Higher Grade School’. Most of my classmates went forward to the ‘Advanced Division’, which was a secondary course which confined studies to practical skills and mathematics. The Higher Grade course was a prelude to further study at Cumnock Academy, with hoped-for advancement to university. I actually failed the maths test for entry to the academic course. I never could get enthusiastic about a farmer having twenty cows and leaving half to Willie and if the other two sons got this proportion or that proportion how many were left for beef – what the hell did I care!! I was destined for the ‘Advanced Division’ till it was announced that one more place had to be filled in the Higher Grade, and that three of the class were near enough to the borderline to be considered. I was one of the three. In order to decide who had to be elevated to the lofty level of the language courses, it was arranged that all pupils would take an intelligence test. I came top of the class; yes – I even trounced the first prize winner of the previous session. What a brain! – What a braggart!

So I became a higher Grade student, and was introduced to the joys of the French language and the utter boredom of Latin. Languages were, for me, an easy part of my studies. So easy in fact, that it’s likely that only my lackadaisical approach to my schooling prevented me reaching a much higher standard. Mr. Dow, our illustrious headmaster, (in spite of the seemingly demeaning nickname ‘Auld Cushie’, he commanded great respect) once asserted, in interview with my Mother, that “Bobby has the best brains in the school, but he’s too lazy to use them!”

I have never been sure if this was a compliment or a downright slur on my character. Anyhow, my promotion to the Higher Grade did nothing to help my maths; I still had trouble taking seriously the daft questions about cows and sheep and how many would you buy for eleven pence – yuk! This was an unfortunate block, for it meant that I was missing vital progress in algebraic functions just at the time when I should be receiving a good grounding. In the subject of Geometry, mind you, I made very good progress – the teachers couldn’t quite find a way to bring sheep and cows and pounds shillings and pence into the picture.

Alan Davidson, who was the poor fella who took on the seemingly impossible task of trying to bludgeon the rudiments of Algebra into my uncaring brain, was more than somewhat incredulous when, almost a score of years later, on a chance meeting, I told him – truthfully – that maths and physics were hobbies of mine!

I discovered that if I could drop Latin as a subject, I could take up practical woodworking in its stead. Latin? I detested the damn stuff; (Rex Graeciam duas pulchras filias habuit” – izzat so??) so I deliberately flunked a final exam. Ah – Donald Stalker wouldn’t be kidded; he knew exactly what I was up to. I had to get on

with it, whether I liked it or not. In hindsight, while I am not convinced that the teaching of Latin to pupils who do not intend to follow a career in law, or medicine, say, is in any way essential, I have found that knowledge of the ancient language does frequently give insight into literary meaning which might otherwise prove elusive.

At this stage of my schooling I was bored. Like so many young lads – both then and now – the relevance of what I was being made to do was lost on me. My education seemed to be pushing me in a direction I didn't want to travel. I think that I would do well to make the story of my final school years as brief as practicable, for if I myself found them boring, goodness knows what a second-hand description is doing to the reader of this! I was fairly average in my academic achievement, was runner-up to the school sports champion (Bill Copeland), and was elected school captain during my final year. The latter appointment apparently meant that if there was any kind of mass misdemeanour by the mob at large, I got whacked for it. I think the idea was that if the kids are misbehaving, then Bobby must be setting a bad example somehow.

I was determined to leave school for good at the end of my third academic term. As is usual in these cases, I was lectured and cajoled by school staff about the benefits of an extended education and about the doors that academic qualification could open, etc., etc.. It had no effect on my resolve.

The last months of my schooldays were marred by a sad incident. At the start of my final session a young lady joined our class; a comely wench indeed and I took an enormous shine to her. Her name was Mary Ford. Mary was sitting by me in class one day, neither of us paying one whit of attention to what the teacher was saying, when a messenger arrived at the classroom door. Mary was called out of the room, and I never saw her again. Her Dad, an under manager in Bank Number Six mine, had been killed in a firedamp explosion.

I went to the school Christmas party in December 1944; when the class re-assembled in early January 1945, Bobby Rogerson was missing, and never appeared again.

“To plough and sow, and reap and mow,
And be a farmer's boy ...”



Town School Teachers

Back Row: Unknown - Unknown - Miss Lees - Mr. J. McInnes - Mr. Purdie - Miss I. Baird - Unknown - Mr. D. McGuire

Second Row: M. Brian - Miss McHallum - Mr. Scobie - Unknown - Mr. J. Robson - Miss Cathy Muir - ? Menzies

Front Row: Mr. Donald Stalker - Miss Dalglish - Mr. Dow (Headmaster) - Miss Jean Weir - Alan Davidson

Chapter Ten - The Start of an Era, the End of a War

I left school without any definite idea of what I wanted to do. I knew that I wanted to be a mechanical engineer, but hadn't much notion of where to get a start. I had the urge to wander and was attracted consequently to a naval career. I wrote to a naval college in the South of England and received in reply a great bundle of printed matter detailing all rules and regulations, advising that I leave all gold watches and other valuables at home, etc. On graduation, you were a junior officer at Midshipman rank. I ended up scrapping that one; I didn't like the undertone of upper class bullshit that seemed to thread through the literature, and besides, at the end of it all I still wasn't an engineer.

Faither abhorred idleness not only in himself, but as a trait in others, too. I was anything but happy to be at a loose end myself. So it was, one fine day, I was told to pack myself off to Whitehill farm and make myself useful there. Faither reckoned, you see, that Uncle Willie and Cousin Harvey had been of such assistance to us at Lochside in past years that it wouldn't be amiss if he sent me up there to return the favours by working on the farm. I rebelled at first, but was finally persuaded by the promise that Faither would try to secure an engineering apprenticeship for me.

So there began a spell of work on the farm. There was nothing new to me; I'd done it all before on our own twenty one acres at Lochside. In fact it was far from being my first visit at Whitehill; I had spent time there in the past, during parts of my school breaks. Bluntly, I didn't like the place. Uncle Willie was OK – a bit grouchy, if things didn't go well, but a decent old guy all the same. Cousin Harvey could work but would he hell get out of bed in the morning. Every day began before six a.m. with Aunt Bell shouting upstairs "Harvey, get up!" What invariably happened was that I got up; leaving Harvey to lie there ignoring repeated calls from the stairwell. There was no breakfast waiting, and no time allowed for even a hot drink; straight out across the yard and down through the main byre and past the dung midden to where the forty or so milk cows – Ayrshires – waited by the field gate, their biological clocks having told them it was milking time. All I had to do was to open the gate and let them stream through, for the regular practice in the morning was to pile a bundle of sweet meadow hay in each stall. It took a scant ten minutes to chain each beast securely, as there were four pairs of hands at this task. Uncle Willie was there, supervising fussily; Geordie Allen, a stocky, permanently cheerful lad who hailed from Lugar busied himself, all the while tormenting Uncle Willie mercilessly by asking deliberately obtuse questions, making crude suggestions, and telling a stream of the filthiest stories imaginable. Besides me, the one remaining worker (Harvey wasn't due to appear yet!) was Bob Shinkfield. Bob was a deaf-mute. He most certainly wasn't lacking in intelligence, however and was an excellent worker. The milking was done by machine. Harvey usually managed to put in an appearance by the start of the milking. In spite of his tardiness in rising from his bed in the morning, once Harvey was moving around he could work alongside the best. During the milking period I usually was given the chore of opening the turnip-pit and filling a large bogie full of the roots, which were destined to be distributed to the cattle as the

milking period drew to a close. On a late January morning there was no sensation quite like the one you got when you grasped a perfectly ordinary-looking Swede turnip and found your fingers squelching wetly through a mess of ice-cold, rotten mush. If I had a break from filling fodder and carrying full milk pails to the dairy cooler, I was required to take a cloth and a pail full of cleansing fluid and wash each udder in advance of the fitting of the machine suction cups. In the late spring and summer months, as the milking drew to a close, the cows were unchained and allowed to make their own way back down through the gate to the pasture. As soon as the byre was clear, the dung-barrow was wheeled in and the shit shovelling had to start. When finally, after numerous barrow loads, the dung had been transferred to the midden, the whole building was hosed and scrubbed from end to end.

Then, and only then, was breakfast on offer. I trauchled into the farm kitchen at around 08:30 each morning, often feeling so nauseated that I could hardly face food. Why I was affected this way I don't know, but it happened regularly. And I'm almost convinced that Aunt Bell thought I was shamming. I had to make quite an effort to stay civil to Aunt Bell. She was a critic of everything – my manners, my appearance, the methods I used at work, even my morals. She was one gigantic pain in the arse, but by golly she made sure that you had enough to eat! I usually managed to eat breakfast without actually being sick, and with the others went out to begin whatever chores were set for the day.

Most of the tasks on a farm tend to have their season. High summer, in the first half of the century, was usually haying time. The autumn brought the harvest, the storage of hay in stacks or barn and the cutting and ripening of the corn. Late in the season, before the onset of winter – and hopefully during a dry spell – potatoes were harvested and stored either in pits or in cool, dry areas. A date was set for the hiring of 'the big mull', which back in those days was a threshing machine which travelled from farm to farm, hauled and driven by a steam engine. The turnips weren't so urgent, being cold-weather hardy, and could be dealt with quite late in the season before the first severe frost. Farmers who ran sheep on their land often left the neeps in the ground and opened the field to their animals. The early part of the year – and this was when I arrived at Whitehill – meant ploughing, draining and muck spreading. Before the end of January that year, I could have been found in Whitehill midden stripped to the waist and the snow falling on my back as I rived and tore at the packed dung in the effort to dislodge a forkful to heave aboard a slowly growing cartload. There were no J.C.B.s or hydraulic grabs available at Whitehill in those days; it had to be 'a'en frae the ribs' as the saying goes. Then it was up and away with Pinker the Clydesdale between the shafts, out to Sunnyside pastures or Greenhill to 'scale the dung'. As long as the cart was well loaded, I had no problems. But Pinker wasn't called Pinker for nothing, and as the load lightened, she always became progressively friskier. By the time the cart was empty and I had her head turned for home, it was a matter of hanging on in that bouncing cart and praying that we didn't hit a rock big enough to topple the rig. Horses and Bobby just didn't get along with each other, you see, and it would have made no difference if docile old Jimmy with the 'ringle e'e had been in the harness; he would have acted up for no-one else in this world – but he'd have made an exception of me! Still, even with the hair-raising homeward gallops and the bruised arse, the dung-scalin' was to be preferred over wading to the tops of your wellies in newly dug drain ditches filled with ice-cold glaur and doubled over fumbling in the muddy water trying to connect terracotta tiles in line.

There was a spare stall in the stable. The stalls were four in number and only three Clydesdale horses were kept. The spare stall was at the opposite side of the stable from the others, and it became the storage area for household coal. The stall directly opposite was occupied by Flora, who – for anybody other than yours truly – was a quiet and biddable beast. I was cleaning the stable. Having the horses removed from their stalls merely for the purpose of cleaning out was unheard of, and I had no great qualms about shovelling the horse shit into the barrow directly behind them. All three were contentedly munching on some feed which I had thrown into their hecks before starting the mucking job. As any country fella well knows, horse dung is very light, and so a barrow load can be built quite high without fear of overstraining yourself in the wheeling. I had my barrow built sky-high, and was engaged in sweeping the last clinging shreds of shit from the cobbled ditch behind the horses, when Flora, the docile, harmless quiet beast, decided to take a hand, or should I say, a hoof, in the matter. The hoof, in fact, went whistling past my nose-end, taking my stiff-bristled brush with it, and meeting the dung barrow side on with a splintering crash and sending wrecked barrow and a full load of horse dung right across the stable and all over the coal heap in the stall opposite! And, said Aunt Bell, it was my fault entirely! It didn't matter how I tried to convince her that I had done nothing to provoke nice gentle old Flora, it still had to be my fault. So I spent the remainder of that day separating coal from horse-shit. Lord, keep me away from the rear end of any horse – forever!

Bob Shinkfield headed off for pastures new, and Uncle Willie, anything but averse to having another unwaged farmhand working, applied for the services of a prisoner of war. In due course, a prisoner did arrive. He was an Italian; he gave his name as 'Miguel'. Uncle Willie, steeped for sixty years in the dialect of county Ayrshire, immediately simplified this to 'McGill'. Because of the language problem, the others weren't too keen to be involved with him at first, but boyish curiosity overcame any reticence on my part, so I ended up being the one who got to know Miguel on that first day. My first impression, which turned out to be just about on the mark, was that he was completely unfamiliar with farm work, and in fact had a stand offish attitude to work of ANY kind. The morning passed, and Uncle Willie yelled "Dinner-time!" from the byre end. I passed this info to Miguel, who, when he got the message, sat down on the midden wall and dug a paper package from inside his tunic which he unwrapped to reveal a 'doorstep' sandwich of two slices of white bread slapped on either side of what looked like a slab of raw ham. It struck me at the time that his sandwich had kept its shape well, in spite of being carried all morning by a bloke who was supposed to have been working hard in a farm midden. I could have entered Miguel right then in a 'what's my line' contest and defied any panel to associate him with any such occupation. One thing I knew for sure – he was definitely no Aldo Garrazino. Ah well, deserving or not, he was going to be offered far better fare than he had produced there on the midden dyke. "Hey, Miguel!" I called. "Come!" I beckoned him to follow.

He looked suspiciously at me, but followed nevertheless. So our Italian prisoner had the first of a series of the slap up meals which were produced routinely at the Whitehill table. He informed everybody that his 'Pater' was a farmer in Italia. I felt like saying "Aye, and mah Faither's an Eskimo frae Timbuktu!"

The days passed, and the more that Miguel became at ease with his surroundings, the less we felt at ease with him. An unfortunate combination of arrogance and overt fascism became evident. The fact that he seemed absolutely convinced of the correctness of his beliefs, and was cheerfully supercilious in expounding them to everyone within earshot made him all the more offensive. Hitler and Musso were wonderful people. Germany was fighting a righteous war. Everybody should like Germany. Two days after he first set foot on Whitehill, I was of the opinion that raw ham between two slices of bread was much too good for him. That he was an arrogant shit bag was bad enough; but he was worse – he was an arrogant, lazy shit bag. And Uncle Willie appeared to be blind to his faults. Mind you, I was just as cheerfully scathing about his faith in the Axis Dictators, and told him, in no uncertain terms that they were a pair of murdering beasts, and that in the circumstances there was no way I could like Germany.

Things came to a head in the hayshed one day. Uncle Willie had Miguel and me loading hay on the wheeled skip for foddering during the five o'clock milking. There was what had become the usual niggling between Miguel and me. The difference between us was that I was niggling and working; Miguel was niggling and leaning on his fork as usual. All at once I got a hard shove on my right shoulder, and ended up against the hay dass on my arse with the prong of a hay fork on either side of my neck, ramming me backwards against the hay. "You like-a Germany? - You like-a Germany?" A half snarl, half grin on his face, his teeth set together, he was growling the words.

I felt my eyes starting to pop, and I had the sensation of my face puffing and swelling. And I was in a tearing rage. There was no way I could rise and reach the bastard with my hands, but here again the good old tackety boots came into their own! I raised my left foot, placed the instep on the shaft of the hay fork, and rammed that boot up and forward just as viciously as I could. An effective manoeuvre indeed; the way my tackets took the knuckles of his forehead, there had to be some serious damage. He screeched and dropped the hayfork, grabbing his injured hand and nursed it to his belly, literally dancing in hysterics. I was on my feet in a split second, with the hayfork in my hands. Luckily, at that point, Uncle Willie came blustering through the byre door. He saw Miguel; he saw blood. He also saw straight away the rage that I was in, came to a conclusion that was at least half the truth, and angrily ordered me to the house. I tried half coherently to get my story across, but Uncle was in no mood to listen. I headed for the house, close to tears myself by this time. As I sat myself moodily down in the kitchen, Aunt Bell came through from the stairwell. "Noo, boy – whit hae ye been at the day?"

Typical Auntie – assuming the worst of me as usual. Something, however, must have given her pause; she stopped her progress towards the door, and came over to stoop by the window where I sat, and peered at my neck. "Whit hae ye done wi' yer neck?" She asked brusquely. I told her how I came by those angry red marks. And I heard Uncle Willie come raging along the passageway from the yard, ranting about "that bloody boy being on the next bloody Dalmellington bus and back tae Lochside, etc., etc" - and as far as I was concerned it really wasn't such a bad idea. He was soon made aware of the truth of the matter, however, and made further aware that Aunt Bell wasna' goin' tae gi'e a clean bandage for yon blasted Nazi, and that he could get his-sel' oan tae the lorry an' never come back! And that was what happened, almost exactly. I say 'almost' – Miguel got a bandage on his torn hand after all. Harvey

swore that he saw the white bones of Miguel's knuckles. He never came back to Whitehill. A German arrived in his place.

The war in Europe had moved north through Belgium and Holland, and the borders of Germany were being threatened by Allied armies, east and west. The lads who landed on the Anzio beach had taken the steam out of the German defence line in Italy and Berlin and other cities in the Fatherland were being smashed to rubble by endless bombing. This was the state of affairs on the morning that I looked up from my chores in the byre and saw Heinrich for the first time, walking glumly down the concrete walk with Uncle Willie. Uncle was shouting in Heinrich's left ear; like Faither, he was under the impression that if you shouted loudly enough in English (English??) any foreigner was bound to understand. Our new recruit was quite a short fella, and looked a deal too old to have been in the German air force; he was wearing the blue uniform of Goering's Luftwaffe.

Heinrich was a worker. Nobody needed to use any kind of coercion to get him moving, either; he just listened, understood, and got on with it. And he had some interesting things to say. According to his story, he never had been in the Luftwaffe, and was taken prisoner as a Wehrmacht soldier. He said that he had taken no part in the war at all till after the D-day landings. He told me that he was half Dutch, on his Father's side, and had lived in Holland for most of the war, a five-minute walk from the German border. His Mother, a German, owned property nearby, just over the border in Germany. His Father died, and Heinrich's Mother made the fateful decision to take up life on the German property. A bad move, indeed, for Heinrich; he was drafted almost immediately into the German Army. His explanation for the Luftwaffe uniform was that at this stage in the war, there was a shortage of Army uniforms, and a surplus of those worn by Goering's Luftwaffe; so there was no standing on ceremony – they supplied the late army conscripts with Luftwaffe blue. He was taken in an ambush by the French Maquis, this being accomplished by a Frenchman impersonating a German officer and directing Heinrich's column on a route which led to a prepared ambush. A very lucky fella indeed, I'd say; after some of the things the Nazis had done in France, the Maquis were not often inclined to take prisoners. Anyway, he was taken, and handed over to a Canadian unit. And in Heinrich's own words, he was glad to be clear of it. He was suffering, nevertheless, as all of this fellow prisoners must have been at that time, knowing of the terrible carnage going on in and around their country, and wondering and worrying over the fate of their loved ones at home.

Heinrich was well liked by all of us.

Then came the day when a British soldier walked into the kitchen at Whitehill. It was a day like any other in those final days of war. We had the chores of the forenoon behind us, and were seated at the big table in front of the window in Whitehill kitchen, just started on a bowl of thick, steaming broth – Harvey, Geordie, Heinrich, me, Aunt Bell and Geordie's sister Rebecca who had recently arrived as kitchen maid. I heard the footfall on the step at the kitchen door, looked up, and saw there a tall, thin young man in uniform. His face was vaguely familiar. He was in the middle of the kitchen floor and still hadn't uttered a word when Aunt Bell cried aloud and jumped from her chair. She took three quick strides and threw her arms around the newcomer. "Jackie! Jackie! When did ye come hame, son!" The young soldier

smiled, returning the hug, and spoke for the first time. "I walked into Marshallmark kitchen a hauf hoor syne", says he, "An' Mither went intae hysterics – they had tae tak' her oot!" Ignoring Uncle Wullie's offer of a chair, he continued, with a quick glance at Heinrich who was still at the end of the table, halfway through his bowl of broth, "They didnae ken I was comin" – and I wasnae able tae let them know for a while anyway. An' by the time I was in the country I thocht it wid be guid tae surprise them."

I knew now who the soldier was; he was Jack Brown of Marshallmark, posted as missing in Italy, and of whom his people hadn't heard for months – for so long, in fact that they were beginning to lose hope. Small wonder, indeed, that his sudden appearance before his parents there in the kitchen had sent his Mother into a fit! "Whit in the name o' Goad took ye no tae let yer folk ken ye were a' richt?" Uncle Wullie asked, "Could ye no hae sent some word?"

Jack shook his head. "There was nae chance," said he, "We were marchin' richt across Germany, an' we could hardly stop for a bite tae eat – no' that it mattered much - there was naething tae eat onyway!"

Jack went on to tell of that gruelling trek across Germany, herded and guarded every step of the way by German S.S. men. He was describing one particularly horrific episode in which two of his fellow prisoners were shot dead for daring to enter a stationary rail car that held a cargo of sugar, when I suddenly noticed a reaction from Heinrich. His spoon was going more and more slowly, almost like a clockwork toy running down. Finally, as Jack told of the murder of the prisoners, the spoon stopped altogether, and Heinrich, eyes downcast, started to rise from the table. Jack Brown's reaction was prompt and spontaneous. He stepped forward, and laying his hand on Heinrich's shoulder, he said gently, "Hey, Freen' – sit down; I worked on a farm in Germany, and I was treated just like you are being treated now!" Hesitantly, Heinrich sat down. Jack continued, "It wasna folk like you an' me that made this war whit it is." He laid his hand once more on Heinrich's shoulder, and returned to his mid-floor stance to continue the harrowing tale of his recent past. When he decided at last that maybe his Mother had had time to get used to the knowledge that her son had come home, he said his cheerios and before responding to Harvey's call that the caur was awaitin', the last person who received a handshake was Heinrich, the man who was an enemy no longer.

On a balmy summer evening, long after Heinrich had been collected by the army wagon and whisked off back to the Nissen hut or whatever form of camp accommodation the prisoners used, I sat with a congregation of relatives and fellow workers out at the rear of the farm dwelling house where there was a patch of lawn shaded by two monkey puzzle trees. The evening meal was past, and as we lounged there enjoying the calm of the dying day, George and sister Ruby were challenging all and sundry to a tourney on the croquet pitch which lay beyond the far garden hedge. The dining room window was open a few feet away, and we were enjoying a programme of music. Abruptly, the music was cut off, and a voice proclaimed an announcement by Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister. In the same ringing tones as he had used in his 'we'll fight on the beaches' speech, Winston Churchill told the world that the war with Nazi Germany was over. Tomorrow would be a day of official celebration. The reaction on the lawn at Whitehill was odd, to say the least. Or perhaps it wasn't odd at all; perhaps it was typical. There was no sudden outburst of joy, no cries of victorious triumph. Uncle Willie said, "Well, that's it!"

Then there was silence for almost a full minute. I can only know what was in my own mind at that time. I thought of Jackie Brown, who had already been home and had returned to his army unit. I thought of Willie Timpany, still to come home. I thought, too, of Heinrich and how he would be taking the news, and how we would soon be losing him. If the thoughts of the others there were known, would they have been much different? Probably not. As realisation grew, however, so did elation, and soon we were chattering ten to the dozen and plans and suggestions for the morning's celebration were flying around in all directions. Ah – but then, a spanner, in the form of Uncle Willie came flying into the works; “Haud oan!!” he roared, and proceeded to make the point that this was a farm he was running, and he couldn't just close the dampt thing doon at a minute's notice. True; not even the second coming of Christ could alter the fact that the kye would have to be fed, milked and mucked, or that the hens, the pigs, and the horses had to eat too. So we had to curb our exuberance, and accept the fact that we'd be joining the celebrations later in the day. That being settled, and as we prepared to retire indoors, we heard, for the first time in years, the distant tolling of the Auld Kirk bell. It was joined anon by an air-raid siren, sounding, for the last time, the high, constant tone, ‘All Clear’.

As the ‘toonies’ were awakening the next morning to sally forth to hours of frantic celebration, the scene in Whitehill byre was hardly distinguishable from the usual. A lot of shouting and banter back and forth between Harvey, (who'd been off somewhere the night before) and Geordie and me. It was just around the time when Heinrich usually appeared, though we had reason not to expect to see him on that morning. So I was surprised when I looked up and saw him come wandering down the byre. He didn't look particularly happy. In fact he looked as he had been looking for some weeks – a man weighed down with worry. “Hey, Henrich!” I yelled, “Make a smile!” Heinrich stopped, halfway down the byre walk; “Ja?” he said, a slightly puzzled look on his face.

A thought came suddenly to my mind, which I dismissed immediately as being so improbable that it just couldn't be. And yet, why was Heinrich no different from the morning before? When I dropped the cloth I had been using into the pail and walked towards him with my hand outstretched, his bewilderment was plain to see. I took his right hand. “Heinrich” I said, “Krieg, fini!” It was in this kind of Franco-Deutsch-English that we had come to communicate.

Heinrich looked askance at me, at Geordie who said “The war's feenished ya daft bugger – auld Wullie'll hae tae pey ye frae noo oan!” Heinrich's face suddenly changed; he said, again, “Ja?” and looked around as if to look for more confirmation. Seeing no-one, he took off up the byre with Geordie and me in full cry behind him. As he skidded the right hand turn through the meal house at the byre end I heard the revving engine of the army wagon as it began to move out of the Whitehill close and up towards the wood en-route to the main road. Uncle Willie was still standing in the middle of the close where he had been talking to the driver of the vehicle when Heinrich burst upon the scene, yelling at the pitch of his voice. As we followed through the door the lorry had just gained the level ground at the top of the close, and one or two of the prisoners were in the act of getting to their feet, as if not quite comprehending what was coming from Heinrich. As Heinrich's shouts continued, I saw first a rifle, then a Cameronian bonnet complete with toorie go flying out sideways into the farm pond. When the lorry reached the gate at the wood end, the driver had to stop; half of his passengers were in a squirming, shouting heap about thirty feet back in the middle of the road, the unfortunate Cameronian prisoner escort

being the one on the bottom, in contact with the hard ground. Uncle Willie grumbled “Whit the hell did ye tell him for?” We ignored that, and watched as the mass of humanity resolved itself at last into a group of happy individuals, and the Cameronian retrieved a wet bonnet and an even wetter rifle. I would never get to know whether or not the Cameronian was happy with the situation. My guess is that he was quite glad to be relieved of what must have been an instruction to withhold news of the German capitulation from the prisoners. Perhaps it had been thought – with probable justification – that knowledge of the final ceasefire would have put paid to any hope of getting the prisoners to work that day.

There was one man on the tail board of the lorry who did not join in the joyous reactions of his fellow Germans. He was a young man who stood stony faced on the end of the board, hanging on to the frame of the cowling. He was blonde and blue eyed; bitterness and rage were etched deeply in his features. There was always one to be found!

We dispersed that afternoon to our various destinations, and to whatever celebration was in progress. Funnily enough, I can recall almost nothing of any joyful activity in the days after the ceasefire; maybe the euphoria didn't last all that long. There were too many lads still missing, the most recent being Sam Nesbitt, brother of Annie, who was wed to Jock McGinn of Dalricket Mill cottages. And besides, the Fourteenth Army lads were still fighting the Japanese in the steaming jungles of Burma.

I went back to Whitehill, but briefly. I arose one morning, decided that my nerves could stand no more of the grinding routine, and set off without preamble towards Dalricket Mill where I followed the Nith down past the Dump, crossed the water at the Ha' Runnel and climbed over the grassy rise and descended to the Little Creoch steading. I could have stopped and checked with pal Neil, but I didn't; I trudged onward, crossing the stile at the Beech trees by Lochhill burn and setting foot at last on my home ground at Lochside. It was still fifteen minutes shy of 10:00. The walk home had taken about two hours.

Mum was horrified; not because I had deserted Whitehill, but at the idea that I had left without warning, and the worry my action would be causing to Aunt Bell and Uncle Willie. I told her not to worry on that score, for I had told Geordie, who'd seen me making off, and he said he'd let them know as soon as I had been gone long enough to be clear of the road at Dalricket Mill. Faither of course was at work when I arrived. I was sure of one thing - Whitehill would never see me again except in a social capacity, or by invitation for a period pre-arranged and a due payment negotiated. I didn't know what to expect from Faither when he arrived home, and in the event was pleased to find that he accepted – not without a grumble - that there would be no point in trying to change my mind.

Within a week, Faither came home and told me that I had an appointment to speak with Bob Currie, chief engineer of New Cumnock Collieries. And I had lost my pal Neil; his Mother had insisted on his return to Glasgow to ensure that any return from his talent and labour would accrue to the family up there.

‘The blunders of youth are preferable to the success of old age’

Disraeli



Bank Pit Re-union Around The Mid 1950's

Back Row: Bobby Rogerson, Jimmy Muirhead, Bobby Wight, Jim "Pud" Walker,
Andrew "Bunny" Rae

Second Row: Duncan Walker, Hamish Rae

Front Row: Bobby Woods.

Chapter Eleven - New Fields, New Friends

Walking up the narrow road towards Knockshinnoch farm was hardly a new experience for me but it had been a long time since it had been a part of my everyday surroundings. Not since before the Rogersons of the Gatehouse became the Rogersons of Lochside. That change was seven years behind me and the road to Knockshinnoch farm was a much more travelled route now. For as long as I could recall, it had been used for access to the coal screening plant. As a child, I had joined my friends up behind the farm at the Knockshinnoch mine mouth at the end of the miners' dayshift, and helped to swell the chorus of "Ony pit piece?" as we vied with each other in acquiring whatever morsel the men had left over in their piece boxes. If you landed a fried egg sandwich, you had a prize; the norm was quarter-inch thick slab of cheese between two thick slices of Co-op bread. Sometimes, if the pickings were sparse at Knockshinnoch, we'd run like hell down to the „Wee Pit“ across from the Catholic school in the Leggate and try our luck there.

The Knockshinnoch mine was no more. The coal seams were accessed now through the workings of Knockshinnoch Castle, a modern, vertical shaft which had been sunk some years earlier. The coal production from this pit by far exceeded the amount which had been extracted from the old mine. Because of the presence of the „Castle“ pit, Knockshinnoch road was a well used thoroughfare – and it was towards the pithead structures of the Castle that I now walked. I had to find a man called Bob Currie.

As I emerged from the trees at the top of the rise above the farm I came upon, on the left, a long single storey building with a series of large windows facing the road. The first person I saw I took to be a shepherd, and I found the sight of the man, his black dog, big clodhopper boots, stick and all to be a wee bit out of place in this pit head setting. Not that I had any experience or expectation of what to look for around a pit head, but a herd certainly was out of the category. As he came out from the far end of the building, however, he was the only human being in sight, so I asked him politely if he knew where I might be able to find a man called Bob Currie. He eyed me, not unpleasantly, from under the skip of his bunnet; "I'm Bob Currie!" says he. "Oh ...!" It took me a moment to get over the idea that this was what a chief engineer looked like; "Ah'm Bobby Rogerson!"

He raised his head and looked me over from top to toe. "Ah!" said he, "the laddie frae Lochside".

On my affirmative, he bade me follow. I went with him across a concrete gangway that spanned double rows of tub rails upon which rows of tubs were arrayed, some coal filled, some empty. There was no stopping there, though, for our destination was on the other side, across a wide yard and into a large building from which the hum and clatter of machinery could be heard. Through the door and to the left, I was introduced to Sanny Allardyce. Sanny was the foreman who was to have the task of trying to make a tradesman of me. The interview was short and to the point. It was a case of o.k., start on Monday – and if you turn out to be useless we'll boot yer arse

doon the road. I walked, smiling and whistling all the way down the rail line to Lochside; there was a life beginning.

I can't remember how it came about that Sam Mason and I became pals. I know that I was at „sixes and sevens“ after Neil went back to Glasgow. All the boyhood pursuits had lost their attractions since I had lost the companionship of my bosom Pal. The Boys“ Brigade connection petered out and was finally severed. I kind of wandered into a pally situation with Sam and another fella called Jim Glendinning. Both of the lads lived on Afton Road. I think it was Sam who got me in contact with the local Scout troop. Not that he or anyone else deliberately set me on a course; no – I think it transpired simply because Sam was in the Scouts, and I happened to tag along one night, when there was some kind of open air happening down on the Glebe. I almost immediately felt an affinity with the crowd there, and a great curiosity about what they were about. I was greeted smilingly by a Connel Park worthy – Johnny Edwards. Johnny had been with the Scouts since his youth, mainly in the role of Cub Master. That was the first of a series of visits to the Scouts. It was very soon apparent that some solid friendships were in the making. I met the Turnbull boys, Bob and Harry, both of whom struck me as being just the kind of fellas I wouldn't mind sticking with. It was good to find, too, that one of my old classmates, Jim Findlay – incidentally a cousin of the Turnbells – was an active member of the Senior Scout section. And Buster, John „Buster“ Armstrong. Like everyone else, I found that it wasn't quite a matter of meeting Buster – more a case of becoming entangled with him. He was a fella full of ideas, bursting with energy, and an irrepressible showman.

With new friends, new ideas and fresh interests, a bright future beckoned.

A sad day dawned. Coming home one evening – I can remember that Sam Mason was with me on the avenue that day – I was met by Sister Betty with the news that Grandpa McNiven had passed away while visiting his old employer, Willie French, on his farm near Douglas. Grandpa had been in poor health for some time, having fallen victim to a disease called dropsy which affected his heart. John Sloan, ever a kind gentleman, had insisted that no matter what, the cottage at Creoch was Grandpa's for as long as he required it. Sadly, it wasn't for long; Grandpa was gone, and we had lost some part of our own lives in his passing. Before he was laid to rest by Granny's side at Kirkconnel, his casket was set in the dining room at Lochside. I sat for a long, long time just gazing at that coffin and thinking, thinking ...

I liked my job in the engineering workshop at Knockshinnoch Castle. I would, more than likely, have been content to be employed there for all of my apprenticeship and more; the fact that events changed the course of my career did not constitute tragedy, however. We will come to that anon ...

Most of the lads in the workshop didn't use the colliery canteen (which, by the way, was the long, low building from which Bob Currie emerged on the day I first arrived). There was an array of low tool boxes and the like ranged along the wall under the windows in the electricians' end of the building, and it was the custom to use these for seats during the lunch breaks for the eating of the inevitable bread and cheese, a blether and a sup of tea from either a can or a tin tea-flask. I can still remember the guys who sat there with me; „Dainty“ Stewart, artisan of the threading machine,

Bobby Nairn, John McNulty and Dick Gibb, all blacksmiths. Andy and Billy Geddes, Bert Hunter, Jim „Pud“ Walker, Bill Downie, Toe Melvin, Hamish and Andy Rae, Roger Park, John Stobie and Adam MacNab, blacksmith“s hammer men. There were others who either used the canteen, or sat in other corners.

That Monday morning, as I made my way down past the winding engine house, my first sight of the Bank smiddy generated feelings that were confusing to say the least. I wasn't sure whether to foster the impression I was getting of a certain old world charm, or to give way to a feeling of dismay at the sight of this ancient brick built, single storey structure, roofed with slate and sprouting seven chimneys, one of which could almost be said to be still fairly close to the vertical. There was no concrete yard on the approaches to the front door. In fact the initial impression was that the place had been built on the original pit bing, and had sunk into it to some extent over the years. How, I thought, could engineering functions be ongoing in such a dilapidated place? I stepped in through the door.

A slightly built, pipe smoking fella stooped over an anvil at a forge to the right of the doorway; he gave me a cursory glance and kept up his rhythmic tapping on the glowing metal on the anvil. I noticed with some vague amusement the slavers dripping off the bowl of his pipe, and wondered if he knew about it. He was obviously used to new faces popping in at the door. There was another forge facing me straight opposite. A muscular individual of medium height stood there, having paused in his labours to look unsmilingly at me from under beetling brows. "What d'ye want, sir?" he growled. (The word "sir" in our local dialect did not necessarily convey respect – in fact very seldom did – and could very well be used in aggressive context – as in "Ye'll get a skite in the gob, sir!")

I wasn't being offered a great welcome, that I could see, but I didn't get the impression of resentment either. I said "Ah'm supposed tae start here this mornin", wi' Jock Murdoch. My name's Bobby Rogerson."

For the first time I saw a lopsided grin appear on the face of the fella facing me over the anvil. "Is that so?" he said, "Ah'm Bobby Wight." (He pronounced it "Wicht") He turned his face up towards a raised section of the work area, where I could see two old fellas pottering around, one at a bench by the window, and the other bent over what looked like a partly built rail points system. "Haw Jock!" he shouted, "Here's a new start for ye!"

The figure over the points system stood upright or as near upright as he seemed able to attain. I got the immediate impression of someone with chest trouble.

"Whae the fuck are you?" he growled, "Nae bugger tell't me there wis onybuddy startin'!"

I looked up at him. He was a big man, and must have been an even more imposing figure in years past. In his right hand he held a hammer, in his left, a chisel.

I called up "I'm tae start here this mornin'".

Bobby Wight followed with "He's a Rogerson frae Lochside!"

Three things happened at once; the big man gave a kind of lurch, a coughing splutter, and threw the hammer and the chisel in different directions. "Hell tae mah Christ!!" he roared "No anither yin!!"

I looked around at Bobby, and found him chortling fit to burst. The voice came rasping from the raised area again, "we had yer Uncle bloody Jimmy here an' a'", he growled, "An' if he wisnae oot lookin' tae see whit Brockloch wis da'in", he wis sleepin' in the fuckin' rafters!" The description of the attitudes of my crazy Uncle gave me cause for amusement, and I grinned cheerfully at the hulking figure up there amid the sleepers and rails. I turned to Bobby Wight. "D'ye ken this, Bobby? – Ah like „im!"

By this time another two men had joined Bobby at the forge. For some reason my final words on meeting with the formidable Jock Murdoch gave cause for high

amusement. The wee man at the forge by the door laid his hammer down, took his pipe from his mouth and looking over at me, said “By Goad!”

So I began that happy part of my apprenticeship which saw me working alongside a good bunch of lads; Bobby Wight, Willie Young (of the slavery pipe), Geordie Gibb, Billy Whiteford, Old John Stobie (father of John at Knockshinnoch), Jim Muirhead and Willie „Corruk“ Lindsay. And every one, to a man - no matter how they railed about being mistreated – had the greatest respect for the terrible Jock Murdoch; and so, too, had I.

The war with Japan had come to an end with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Terrible things had come to light in the aftermath of both theatres of conflict. Awful scenes were made public of the hell camps at Auschwitz, Dachau and Belsen. Soldiers were coming home from Burma, Singapore and even Japan itself with their tales of suffering and cruelty. I have already told of the return of Jackie Brown to Marshallmark. Others there were who came home – Willie Timpany, who spent almost all of the war in German prison camps; Willie Blackwood, ex-tail gunner, who, like Jackie Brown arrived in the middle of his parents’ living-room floor, having been missing for a long period. Johnny Burgoyne, Desert Rat and proud of it, came back from the slog and mud of Italy, bringing with him a wealth of anecdote and army song which was to become a lasting part of the lore and tradition of his local Scout troop. Bob and Harry, my recently found friends in the Senior Scouts, had become resigned to the knowledge that Brother Billy Turnbull wasn’t coming home. It was 1946, and my sixteenth birthday was approaching.

The scout troop was preparing for the summer camp. I cannot recall a year in which there was no scout camp. As soon as the school summer break came close, there was a rash of plans and preparations for the transport of a score or so of kids ranging in age from about nine to fourteen years to a pre-arranged destination. In the year of „46, a new venue was chosen; a place called Lochmaben. My pals Buster, Bob, Harry and Jim Findlay were all involved as scouts in the run up to the journey to the wooded grounds of Lochmaben Castle, the reputed birthplace of Robert the Bruce. As the day of departure drew near, I pitched in and helped where I could with their preparations, airing tents, carving and counting ground pegs, scouring dixies, and all of the necessary tasks which preceded a ten day camp. I enjoyed doing this, even if I secretly was feeling „left out“, not being a full member of the Scout movement, and therefore not entitled to attend camp. I was in for a pleasant surprise, however, for that doughty Connel Park veteran, Johnny Edwards, approached me one evening with a proposition. The Scouters had decided that the troop would need someone who could handle a boat. (This, at least, was the story; I suspected it was more of a ploy to have me at camp.) The camp ground, you see, was situated by the ruins of Bruce’s castle, which was remote from Lochmaben village and across a mile wide stretch of water, the Castle Loch. The boat was to carry grocery supplies, and the odd passenger. I needed no coaxing. The effort I was putting into the preparations was now fuelled by the knowledge that I was a part of it all. Johnny Edwards came to me again; “Wid ye like tae hae a kilt, Bobby?”

Would I? – I’d dye my hair for a kilt! Johnny told me of a young lady in Connel Park by the name of Mary McGowan who had bought herself a kilt, brought it home, and had discovered to her dismay that she had purchased a piece of Gordon Highlanders

ex-army surplus. I was home like a shot, wheedled ten pounds out of Mum, and at Mary McGowan's front door on the Bank brae within the hour. I returned home with a Gordon kilt that day in Nineteen forty six. As I write, its most recent outing was on Burns night, fifty years on, January Nineteen ninety six.

Aunt Peggy came up with a pair of kilt stockings, bought in Glasgow, and I found a brown leather sporran down in Ayr. As I stood, resplendent in my kilt and sporran in Lochside kitchen, Mum had tears in her eyes. "What a prood auld man he'd have been!" she said. Aye – Lachie McNiven would indeed have been proud to see his grandson in the tartan; he had lived all his life steeped in his highland traditions.

Harry Burgoyne was the Patriarch of the Burgoyne family, and, with Jim Kerr, could be said to be one of the pillars of the 46th Ayrshire Scout troop. It should be pointed out here that when I speak in print of "Mr Burgoyne", it is to the aforementioned gentleman that I refer. If I casually mention "Johnny", then I will be speaking of the son of the family. Anyway, Mr. Burgoyne came forward one evening while we were at some function or other in the Glebe, and presented to me a varnished hiking stick, a thumb stick, asking that I should use it well and look after it. I was delighted with this gift. Carved along its length were the words "46th Ayrshire scout troop" and it bore a crest carrying the legend "Rover Scout Moot, Monzie Castle, Scotland, 1939"

Like my kilt, this thumb stick lasted and served well for a lifetime; not my own lifetime, I am bound to say, but till the end of the lifetime of someone who became very dear to me. But that has its place in another time, and another story.

Harry and Bob Turnbull, Buster and I disdained as a group the comforts and convenience of travelling to Lochmaben by motorised transport. We did take the chance of loading our blankets etc., on to the wagon which was carrying the main group, but, that done, we mounted our bikes and set off, pedalling south to Dumfries. I can remember being overtaken by a mob of cheering youngsters in a lorry halfway between Closeburn and Auldgirth. The other memorable part of the journey was the long hard haul up the steep Torthorwald brae; it seemed to go on up and up for miles. After a short pedal along a plateau, the run down into Lochmaben was easy and pleasant, then a short rise, and we swung round past what looked like the town hall, finding ourselves facing a long wide street. We dismounted at the base of an imposing statue which turned out to be of the great Bruce himself. The closest shop was a bakery, on the south side of the street. I went there and enquired of a cheerful and pleasant proprietor what would be the best way to Bruce's Castle. Grinning and wiping doughy hands on his apron, he led me back out to the pavement. "Not only the best way, lad; Ah can tell ye the only way!"

He pointed directly down the street. "D'ye see the kirk yonder?"

I could see it plainly, and said so.

"Weel", he continued, "Gan" doon past it oan the left-han"side, an" cairry oan oot along the lochside an" tak" the first oan the left – it"s a guid mile."

Thanking him, off we went, and arrived anon at the cut off to the left. This narrow road ended after about a hundred yards or so through the trees. We could plainly see the tyre-marks through the gate on the left – and besides, the high, excited voices of the boys at the campsite were echoing through the wood. A few minutes later, we dipped down into the bed of the ancient moat and veered round the ruin to find the tents in place and the organisation of the campsite all but complete. And what could

we expect with fellas like Johnny Burgoyne, Geordie McMillan, Johnny Edwards and Alec Gallacher on the job?

Bob, Harry and Buster were collared straight away to organise the kitchen. Johnny B. says “Bobby you see tae the Vendace.”

At a loss, I asked, “The what?”

Johnny laughed; “The boat! – It’s the name o’ the boat!”

“Oh!” I said, “The boat – is it doon at the water?” As soon as the words came out I felt daft – for where else could a boat be? But while Johnny’s response didn’t appear to indicate that he thought that the question was daft, he grinned just the same as he replied, “Aye, it’s doon at the water a’ richt – awa’ ower yonder at the village!”

Ah! Now I understood his chuckling; I was obliged to get my boots on and start back for Lochmaben, only this time it was „shanks” pony”. Never mind – I set off in high spirits, and soon arrived at the approaches to the village, where I noticed the access road down alongside the bowling green to the only visible boat jetty. I found a boat tied up there, the name „Vendace” stencilled on the hull. I couldn’t see any sign of oars. As I was poking around the area, a head popped up above the bowling green hedge.

“Are ye yin o’ the scoots?”

On my affirmative, he asked “An’ can ye haun’le a boat?”

I grinned. “Aye, but no’ without oars!”

He emerged from a narrow gateway and dug a pair of oars from a nearby shed. The boat was hired for seven days. I was curious about the name „Vendace”, and he explained that here in this loch was the last known population of the fish of that name. He reckoned that they were on the verge of being an extinct species. My curiosity satisfied, I got under way and soon was well out on the water. The oars, as a matter of fact, I found awkward at first, as the rowlocks were of a different type from the Lochside boat but I soon became accustomed to them, and made a fast journey back to camp. Before that day ended I had one more journey to the village with an empty milk-churn. When I arrived back in the failing light, ready at any time to tumble into my army blankets, I was informed that first thing in the morning I had a full churn to pick up and fetch for the camp breakfast. To think, I mused as I lay snugly in my blanket, that I’d had the idea that „hiring” me to handle the boat had been a ploy to justify my being in camp with the scouts! I was going to have some work to do. I didn’t care – I had never been happier in my life; and I made up my mind that I was going to be a full member of the movement as a senior scout. I fell asleep.

The memories of that first Lochmaben camp are all happy ones. Even with the four days in a row of rain; we simply did without clothes and ran around in bathing trunks. As friend Harry used to take delight in reminding us – after all, your skin is waterproof! I can recall the events of visitors’ day, when I was asked to ferry a couple of visiting parents across a very choppy Castle Loch, since they had no personal transport. I wonder if Dan Park and Cathy Muir had even a tiny inkling of the heart in the mouth concern I was feeling as I bent my aching back to the oars of the old Vendace as we ploughed through the „chop” that windy day? We made it, even if we did take a few dollops of water over the stern, and wasn’t I just glad to be tying that boat to the jetty! That visitors’ day was made all the more memorable by the exploits of Johnny Edwards, firstly in winning the hundred yards sprint – at over forty years of age - and secondly by turning out a deep two foot square tray of the most delicious trifle; and that with no more culinary convenience than a campfire and a „Dutch

oven". This last was inspired by the fact that it happened to be Dorothy Arnott's birthday. Dorothy was a visiting cub mistress from Cumnock town.

We met the local lassies – of course! Lochmaben at that time was rather a unique community, in that the ratio of females to males was ten to one! There was no local employment for men, other than on the farms around the district. The women, on the other hand, found employment in a local glove factory, as nurses and auxiliaries in the nearby hospital, and in the various shops in the village. It followed quite naturally that when the Lochmaben folks began to trickle out in small groups to satisfy their curiosity about the wild bunch under canvas by the castle they were almost always of the female sex. So it was that our senior scout group became acquainted with new and very pretty friends. Harry, Bob, Buster and yours truly paired off with Anna Johnston, Fay and Sheila Robson and a bonnie wee lass by the name of Etta Anderson, who was the local polis sergeant's daughter. Smashin' lassies, every one, and we enjoyed their companionship over the week. There was the inevitable visit to the local picture hall; this deserving a mention because of the fact that it was a partly converted church building which still carried a tall stone cross on its gable. Nobody, it seems, would take the responsibility of removing it – for fear of divine retribution, no doubt! I have often wondered, as the years pass, if the old „Barras Cinema“ still sports its cross.

It wouldn't do to leave the description of the 1946 Lochmaben scout camp without naming another two worthies at least. One, the mischievous „Biley“ McKechnie, who, when left in charge of the cookhouse one day popped a snail into the mince and sat back laying bets with himself as to who was the lucky laddie with extra meat in his dinner. Luckily, Bob Turnbull had spotted Biley at his tricks, and while he had enough of the devil in him not to make the news completely public, he was kind enough to tell his senior scout pals to have corned beef with their spuds. The other guy of note was the formidable Geordie „Breekie“ McMillan. Geordie was well into his twenties and of Rover scout age. He had the weird quirk in his character that seemed to compel him to make himself appear to be always on the edge of an uncontrollable rage. I can't think of any other way to get Geordie's character across. He was forever roaring threats in all directions, and frequently accompanied those displays with short bull-like rushes towards the object of his ire. I've seen many frightened out of their wits by Geordie, but never once did I ever hear of any of his tantrums ending in actual violence. Truth to tell, Geordie was a wee bit of a fraud! The Lochmaben lassies weren't to know that, however, when they followed him along the loch road one day and shouted “billiard-table legs!” at him. When they saw the maniacal, roaring, kilted hulk come pounding along the tarmac towards them, they took off in a panic and didn't stop running till they were a helluva lot closer to their own front doors! Geordie, of course, had abandoned his mad rush as soon as the fleeing damsels were out of sight around the first bend but they weren't aware of that, and as can be imagined, the Lochmaben lassies gave Geordie a wide berth from then on.

The old Vendace back at her moorings and all the gear packed, we had to take our leave of Lochmaben and all our lady friends. I knew in my heart that we'd be back though. I went with Fay Robson's address tucked safely away, and a mutual promise to keep in touch.

Back with the grime in the smiddy at Bank, I soon resettled into the business of working and learning. The term "old routine" wasn't one that applied here. There was no routine, at least not in the day to day jobs in which I was involved. Much of my time was spent trying to please Auld Jock by producing the level of excellence he required on the construction of the rail systems. If I ever did attain the standard that he wanted, he certainly never told me so but, then, nobody ever managed that as far as I know. If the work piece which was handed to him for his appraisal wasn't thrown the length of the workshop, then you could assume that you'd done a helluva good job. His demanding standards could, in fact, be the source of some quite amusing episodes. Poor Willie Young – a first rate blacksmith – was many a time the butt of Auld Jock's wrath, even though it was, in a sense, of the remote variety. Jock made use of my youth and long legs when he wanted any tools or materials fetched from the far end of the smiddy. One of his more frequent requests was for a freshly tempered chisel from Willie's fire. I used to look forward to this one!

If I fetched the chisel and it was checked and accepted, I was a disappointed fella, for there would be no entertaining fireworks on these occasions. But, as often happened, when Jock looked at the chisel with his mouth in a certain twist, and sometimes even went as far as to wet the edge and apply it just once on the work piece, then with a snarl and a roar turned from the bench and sent the offending tool spinning through the air, I knew we were in for high jinks. "Take that bastard thing back through there an' skelp 'im on the broo wi' it!" would be a typical instruction.

I would retrieve the chisel, and, even though I never once was able to find a damn thing wrong with any of them, I'd always look at it carefully, just to see if I could find the defect. I don't recall ever finding as much as a chipped or dented edge. I'd take the tool back to Willie, who would go through the same spluttering fit of pique every time, the slavers flying in all directions from the end of his pipe. In every case, however, he'd finally hand me a fresh chisel and say something like "There – tak' that through there an' hit 'im ower the heid wi' it!"

The integrity of the second chisel wasn't necessarily guaranteed, either; many a time I had a second or even a third run. I was a bad lad – I'm afraid these little mini-wars used to brighten my days no end.

It should be said right here and now that Jock Murdoch's skill with a chisel was legendary. I tried to emulate him, but never could. He could go chipping along the length of a metal bar, and then let you look at your reflection in the result; and I never ever saw a machine, other than a polisher, that could do that. The man was a true master with hand tools and I am willing to stick my neck out and say that if Jock Murdoch said there was a flaw in Willie Young's chisels, then there damn-well was.

Piece-time was one of the highlights of the working day. It was an understood thing that we could spend five minutes (or more!) in the preparation of our meal. You may wonder why I bother to go into any detail over such a mundane operation. Ah, well, y'see, times have changed, and ways of doing things likewise. Go into most places today where working fellas are to be found, be it garage, engineer shop, foundry or whatever, and I'm sure you will find – if there's no modern canteen available - at least one electric kettle, perhaps a toaster, or even a coffee maker and a microwave that some housewife has discarded in favour of a newer model. There was nothing like that in the Auld Bank Smiddy or in any other old smiddy. You arrived at your place of work in the morning with your piece bag slung over your shoulder, carrying the

day's provender. There would be a metal box shaped in section to suit as nearly as possible the contours of a slice of „store bread“ and inside that box there would be packed, wrapped in paper, anything up to six slices of bread – some with cheese, some jam and often in my case a fried egg. Also to be found in this bag would be a small tin container about two to three inches long and of oval cross-section. Inspection of this box in its empty state would reveal that it was in effect two boxes, for there was a metal bulkhead divider half way along, and there was a removable lid at both ends. One section was for tea, the other, sugar. When it came time to prepare our daily feast, two of the smiddy forges were stoked up with the appropriate quality of coal and brought to a white hot glare by directing the air from the fan through its centre. Into each of those fires a bar of metal was thrust and allowed to arrive at a white heat. From whichever odd corner of the workshop had been favoured, each man laid hold of his tea-can – almost certainly a one-time container for Tate & Lyle's Golden Syrup with a wire handle attached, and filling the blackened can with water, would set it carefully on the most smoke free part of the fire he could find. On the flat top surface of the anvils, meanwhile, an assortment of sandwiches had been laid out. One of the guys would then carefully (very carefully – you weren't dealing only with your own grub!) take a white-hot metal bar from the fire, and hold it rock-steady above each piece of bread in turn, until all were a nice golden brown. Cheese was given the same treatment. The result was a supply of delicious “welsh rarebit” (Bobby Neish used to say “a virgin frae Cardiff”!) and the aroma never failed to whet the appetite. No fancy restaurant ever dished up more sumptuous fare. O.K - so maybe there was the odd flake of burnt rust to blow off the toast and cheese, and so what if there was a layer of soot on the outside of the tea-drum; we weren't likely to be entertaining finicky visitors. The inside of our do-it-yourself tea drums shone as new, and the tea was sheer nectar. I did, once, have a visit from a London cousin, Uncle Neil's laddie, and he flatly refused to try even one sip from my tea-can!. Our favoured area for seating was up on the raised area where I had first clapped eyes on the terrible Murdoch. There was a spacious fireplace there, and as many tool boxes etc., as were needed for our comfort. A frequent source of entertainment during these breaks took the form of a battle of wits between Corruk Lindsay and the smiddy mice. The mice became so used to our looming presence that they quite boldly came scampering out from behind cupboards and tool boxes to dart around our feet gleaning the odd crumb, or, quite often, a deliberately dropped cheese titbit. The fun used to begin as soon as Corruk had laid his empty piece-box aside and had his cigarette lit. He'd set his sights on one unfortunate rodent, and after allowing the poor wee beastie to get within nibbling distance of a morsel of cheese, would suddenly, without as much as moving his head, spurt a jet of baccy juice (he used to chew the end of his cig), straight and true, right on the unlucky mouse's head! The reaction to this, of course, was a hasty retreat to the safety of the nether regions behind the tool boxes. Incredibly, it was never very long till they all popped out again – and the one with the wet head was invariably with them! I wonder what Rabbie Burns would have had to say about Corruk's inconsiderate treatment of the „timorous beasties“?

There were others around at Bank who were characters worthy of mention. Bobby „Dally“ Duncan was one such. He had a standing procedure with every new start around the smiddy and the coal screening plant. He would introduce himself by approaching the new laddie, holding his hand over his face and groaning “Son – can ye hae a look at my eye?”

Now, some young fellas are a wee bittie averse to examining eyes for grit, insects and such, but those approached by the bold Dally nearly always made the effort to suppress any such aversion, and said O.K. he'd have a look. Next second he'd find himself having a glass eye pressed into his palm with the words "Here, then – hae a look at this yin!"

This stunt was all the more atrocious when it became apparent that the glass eye really WAS from the head of Dally Duncan. Behind all of the coarse humour there was a genuinely decent wee chap. Dally did have another trait which irritated some, amused others. He loved to brag of his past, and of the vast experience he had gained during his long working life in varied occupations. He began just such a dissertation one day while sharing the fireside with all of the smiddy lads at dinner break. I listened to his opening remarks, and decided that here was a wee chance to poke fun; I slipped my tattered notebook from my boiler suit pocket, and began taking surreptitious notes. Dally rambled on for about ten minutes, and at last reached the era of his employment in the pits around New Cumnock. I laid down my notebook.

"Haud oan, Dally!" I said.

He looked at me "Eh?" I winked an eye at Bobby Wight on the other side of the fire and said, "Dally, accordin' tae the figures for a' the places ye've wrought, ye're a hunner an' five-year-auld, an' ye startit workin' the day ye were born!"

Which, by simple addition was as close to the gospel according to Dally that my notes could indicate. Dally tried to make some belated amendments to his tale, but the damage was done; everybody was too busy cackling to listen.

The civil war in Spain had caused thousands of refugees to seek sanctuary in the British Isles. Three at least of such displaced persons had found their way into the employ of New Cumnock collieries and were to be found around the pithead at Bank. There was a coal-face stripper too by the name of „Packy“ – probably Paco originally – but I believe he was from a family who had Welsh connections, and perhaps had no connection with the war. The three surface workers were Juan (Whang) Moreno, a young guy by the name of Pedro, and a well-known popular slip of a fella called „Jimmy the Spaniard“. For all anyone appeared to know, wee Jimmy could have been reared without a surname; I certainly never heard it spoken. Jimmy was one of humanity's natural comics. There was a day in the far end of the smiddy – where the Auld Jock designed crossings were laid out and built – when I was having a particularly hard time trying to please the auld Yin. He'd lost a couple of days' work through a vicious bout of asthma, and was spending his morning at the bench, his time divided between short spells of hand-tool work and longer intervals of wheezing, swearing and spitting. Not that his crotchety mood was troubling me; I was used to the auld fella by this time. He was in the throes of one of his gasping bouts, standing with his hips against the bench, a folded three foot ruler gripped tightly in his hand, coughing and spluttering. Wee Jimmy the Spaniard walked in, bright as a button, and ready as usual to spout some impudence in any direction he fancied. Seeing Auld Jock back there at his bench after being missing for some days, he came forward till he was within two feet of Jock's boot toes where he had his feet planted in order to support his weight against the bench. Sticking his scrawny neck out and peering upwards into Jock's face, he said "Zis aul' bastar' no deid yet?" Two seconds later wee Jimmy was regretting his impudence, for Jock's right hand darted out, whipped Jimmy's bunnet off, leaving his little bald head gleaming in the overhead lighting. With surprising speed, the three-foot ruler was bounced emphatically off the wee man's bald pate and rebounded upwards among the rafters. As Jimmy bolted from

the scene yelling blue murder about cutting the auld ---,s throat, I collapsed in helpless mirth among the rails and crossties on the floor. The next thing I knew I was dodging files, chisels and anything else that could be thrown. “Whit the f---in“ hell are ye laughin“ at?” Jock was roaring. I followed Jimmy the Spaniard at the gallop. I was soon back however, and the Auld Yin sent me to his home in the afternoon for some of his special cigarettes; he knew that his daughter would see to it that I was well supplied with home-made candy.

Jock Murdoch had some entertaining interaction with quite a few of the worthies at Bank colliery. His dealings with Jimmy the Spaniard were among the best. I never did get around to supplying Jimmy with a „kikirikee“ for Christmas. This had been one of Jimmy“s oft-repeated requests after he discovered that we reared poultry at Lochside.

At Lochside, the second floor rooms were always let, as they became empty, to any family who were in need of accommodation at the time. Uncle Jim and his family had moved from there to Dumfries just before we first arrived. When we settled in on the ground floor, the tenant upstairs was Jack McFarlane, the local butcher, his wife and daughter Tina. His Scotty dog, Dougald, used to make the mistake of mixing it with my little wire haired terrier Jackie and would invariably find himself fighting two furies – for Beezer our black cat, was there like a flash in defence of his pal! (Beezer was the only cat I ever knew which actually went into the water and swam after ducks; it came home regularly with one small dry patch on top of its head – but never a duck, mind you.) After Jack left, John Young, the eldest son of Lochhill Farm (or East Lowes”, if you prefer), came to take tenancy with his new bride. Their daughter, Senga, was born there.

By the time I had started my employment in the mining industry, the upstairs tenants at Lochside were Jim Sinclair, a schoolteacher, his wife Agnes and infant son Grant. Jim Waddell, the brother of Mrs. Sinclair, also roomed with them. Jim Waddell had an abiding taste for big-band music, and I believe my contact with him at that time had a fair degree of influence on my tastes in modern music. But it wasn“t Jim Waddell who had the greater influence on my life at that time – it was the head of the household, Jim Sinclair. If Jim had a sense of humour, I never was able to detect it. Don“t misunderstand me – he was not an unpleasant man; he was the epitome of earnestness. Every word he spoke, every action or any project in which he took part had to be considered seriously in all of its aspects and carried through with constant earnestness during all of his involvement. And Jim produced plays with the local drama group, the New Cumnock Players. How it was that I arrived there among them one night I cannot remember; but I did, and fell by default into another fresh experience. The rehearsals for the pending production, a Joe Corrie one-act titled „The Salmon Poachers“, were being conducted weekly in one of the classrooms of my old Higher Grade school. On this, my first revisit to the old halls of learning, I found myself among some ex-classmates and friends. I became a friend to Agnes Morrison, a warm-hearted, laughing lassie who was later to become the wife of my Scouting buddy, Johnny Burgoyne. I sat myself down that first evening and contented myself in listening to the delivery of the script. The rehearsals hadn“t advanced to the level of staging at that point. I became so absorbed in the action on that occasion that I had just about made up my mind to join the group as a stage hand, make-up or lighting

assistant. Needless to say, I was back again the following week, sitting in the background at a desk, listening and watching. The play was a comedy which told the story of a poached salmon which finished up being hidden beneath a baby in a cradle, having got there through the native cunning of a guy who can only be described as the village idiot. This part was being taken by a fella by the name of Rab McKee. That night, Rab dropped a bombshell; he was moving away out of the district. The following rehearsal, he was missing. This was set to bring the rehearsal to naught, unless some way could be devised to „cue“ the rest of the cast. The play was now past the reading stage, and the cast were rehearsing movement and expression on a temporary set. I was persuaded to read Rab’s part. I consented to do this on the condition that I didn’t have to be up there on the floor, for I was quite certain that I would freeze, or faint or something. Jim had them going over the particular scene in the action which had daft Johnny sitting rocking the cradle (with baby and salmon inside), and pitting his half-wits against those of the gamekeeper who must have come into the quarter-wit category somewhere. The gamekeeper said something about the daft lad knowing the whereabouts of the missing fish, and I, in the guise of daft Johnny, read from the script the word “A-ha!!” – and the whole bloody lot of them fell about laughing. Well, except for Jim and me that is. I was utterly bewildered; Jim was like some bespectacled entomologist who had just discovered a brand new bug. Grabbing me by the collar, he hauled me like one of his wayward pupils out to the front and among the cast. “Bobby”, he said, “you will learn these lines!”

And I did; and I went on to do something that I never in my wildest dreams thought I’d be able to do. I appeared onstage, before the public. The local press critics were fulsome in their praise of my performance, too, and I was more than a wee bittie chuffed with myself. And I didn’t have to do a „Sanny Gibson“ and slide off for the dutch courage at the Crown Hotel.

Only one thing – I got some ribbing from the lads in the Bank smiddy over Mrs. Bob Currie’s remark as she sat in the front of the auditorium – “Look at him up there Bob; it comes natural tae him, doesn’t it?” It wouldn’t have done me much good to tell them I was only acting the village idiot. And since it could only have been Bob Currie who carried the tale to the Bank smiddy, I can have a clear conscience when I tell of how our illustrious chief engineer ordered a ton of eleven-inch by five-eighth bolts – and a ton of nuts to fit them!! I can swear to the truth of this, for I helped to offload them from the rail-wagon at the smiddy door. With the supply of five-eighth nut ammunition we had for ever after that, we should have been able to bag every rabbit on the old pit bing across the rail line; we never managed to hit a bloody one of them.

The squad at the Bank smiddy increased in number. The first to arrive was a ginger haired weed of a laddie who brought with him the nickname „Mouse“ – or, in our own dialect, „Moose“. He was christened John Brown, but his proper name passed our lips but seldom. Jock Murdoch put him to learning forge work, and Moose thrived at it. Then John Nairn arrived; son of Bobby Nairn, blacksmith at Knockshinnoch. Jock was a bright young fella, and was into everything that was going in the workshop. In fact he was into everything whether he’d been directed to it or not. He was a natural worker, and showed aptitude for acting independently and making a success of what he tried. Like me, the lads had their trials to go through in the settling-in process. Besides having to get used to Jock Murdoch, they were obliged to hear, with all the

patience they could muster, the earnest pleas of Geordie Gibb that they should give up the wicked ways of the world, live by the scriptures, and let Geordie guide them on the true path by following him to the Plymouth Brethren prayer meetings. I had already been through it all, having been forewarned by Billy Whiteford. Like me, neither Moose nor Jock Nairn were “born again”. I hope I do not give the impression that Geordie was a pain in the arse; he wasn’t – in fact he was a well-liked and much respected fella, and when he wasn’t trying to convert everybody, was a pleasant workmate. Bobby Wight assured us that before Geordie’s own conversion to his faith, he had been one of the roughest guys around.

Geordie Gibb didn’t manage to put his mark on either Moose or Jock Nairn, but one of the pair wasn’t so lucky where I was concerned. Young Jock, being busy-busy as usual, was seen poking and stoking at the fireplace in the top end, preparing the comforts in advance of piece- time, no doubt. Bobby Wight must have been needful of his services for some reason, for he roared up at Jock in his usual polite fashion “Haw Jock! Whit the fuck are ye daein”? Ye’ve aye got yer bloody heid up that fuckin’ lum!!”

Not being able to resist a dig of my own, I added, “Aye – they’ll be ca’in ye Jock the Lum next!”

Fifty years later, and most of the citizens of New Cumnock parish can identify „Jock the Lum“, and direct you to his residence if necessary. (Sorry, Jock!!!)

Another phase of my training was about to commence; I was to be added to Jock Blackwood’s team of underground engineers. Just about then, incidentally, the British mines were being nationalised. The first general election after the war had returned a Labour government, and radical changes were being made in our land. There was a marked increase in the number of new homes being built, especially around the Bridgend and Coupla areas, and folks from Burnfoot, Bank and Connel Park were beginning to drift down that way to live in homes of a standard that they had never dreamed of. At Bank Glen, a group of special housing units were erected, and were earmarked for tenancy by upper rank colliery officials – managers, under managers, etc. The application of a popular name for the street was inevitable. It was known for many years as “Nazi Avenue”.

“Ah“ll sell my rod, Ah“ll sell my reel,
Ah“ll sell my Granny“s spinnin“ wheel;
Ah“ll sell the lot, tho“ doon has“s a“,
An“ gang oot ow“r the hills tae Gallowa“.

O“ the Gallowa“ hills are covered wi“ broom
Wi“ heather bells in bonnie bloom;
Heather bells an“ rivers braw,
An“ we“ll gang oot ow“r the hills tae Gallowa“”

Southampton House, a former dwelling of the Rogerson family (1914 – early 1920s)



Chapter Twelve - Borderlands, Bikes and Balmorals

The group of lads who had come together as friends in the Senior Scouts were sticking with each other, and were diversifying the social activity more than somewhat. Local dances began to be part of our scene – and local lassies too, in consequence. Some run-of-the-mill folks might have marked us as an odd bunch. We seldom dated the lassies; we just kind of ran into them, since they happened to be a bunch of the opposite sex who had a deal of the same interests as ourselves. I don't think the lads will mind if I pass on their salutes to the memory of old times with Liz „Cosy“ Osborne, Chrissie Shearer, Lottie Goodwin, Minnie Hendry, Sarah „Sal“ Reid and all the other great girls from New Cumnock who shared some good times with the mad-caps of the local Senior Scouts. No one reading this should pass on to other things with the idea that we were angels or that I would try to confer such a state of grace on either myself or the lively lads with whom I shared the plots of youth. We did date the lassies but for some reason, not usually New Cumnock lassies. Sunday night at Biddall's cinema was a favourite haunt, and on more than just a few occasions would result in a liaison with some damsel from farther afield than the parish of New Cumnock. Biddall's on a Sunday was standard custom. The Baptist Kirk folk, of course, saw attendance at this den of iniquity as an awful affront to their own particular deity, and it was far from unusual to be standing in Biddall's queue on a Sunday evening awaiting admission to find yourself being harangued by a group of Baptist youth, newly returned from a ramble somewhere up in the wooded Glen of Afton, and being told just what a terrible sin we were committing by congregating with the purpose of watching the harlots of Hollywood and their escorts. This situation was the norm for quite some time, but it was brought to an end as the result of a hilarious altercation on one summer Sunday evening. The queue at Biddall's was being slowly reduced and we were shuffling forward to a raucous chant from the “unco guid” across the road by the post office doorway. The pious caterwauling never gave our crowd much offence, for we just let them get on with it. In fact, one or two of the would-be preachers were quite well liked in the contacts made with them in normal circumstances during the week and besides, there were some braw lassies among them! Mattie Murray was in the queue that night, however, and Mattie was scunner't listening to them. In a voice that had been known in the past to make grown men tremble, Mattie yelled, “Hey, youse crowd – does yer Maw ken whaur“ yez are?” There was an abrupt silence. Then a young lady – who shall remain nameless, though I assure you that I could identify her – answered from the group across the road “Whit has that got tae dae wi“ it?”

Mattie stepped out of the queue and stood squarely on the edge of the sidewalk. “Whit's it got tae dae wi“ it?” she trumpeted; “Ah“ll tell yez why – „cos mah Maw kens whaur“ Ah am!” We never were lectured by our Baptist friends again and the young lady who was the leading protagonist with Mattie was obliged to have a rather hurried wedding not long afterwards. There's a moral somewhere in this; perhaps one reference could be made to the one “who casts the first stone” or again “Judge not lest ye be judged” or simply this, in view of the Baptist lassie's ultimate (and not, to my knowledge, unpleasant) fate – “tae step aside is human”.

I met a young lady from the Royal Burgh of Sanquhar who informed me that her name was Molly. She made no secret of the fact that she liked me, and I in turn was harbouring some beastly imaginings where she was concerned, so, since she was from

remote climes as far as our ideas dictated, I dated her. Since I had made her acquaintance in Biddall's picture-house queue, the same romantic location was chosen as our rendezvous. We kept our tryst. It lasted about five minutes. I hadn't bothered to ask her what her family name was. She told me as a matter of course. It was Twynholm. She was my second cousin. Ach well, you may say "so what?" Well, if you bear in mind the tacit taboo against dating local lassies, perhaps you will understand better my reasons for dropping this one like a hot potato. After all, she was practically a member of our family! Molly was far from broken hearted. She rather fancied Harry anyway, so I was off the hook with the minimum of rancour on both sides. The outcome, by the way, was far from negative. Molly was my friend from then on, and the friend too, of others near and dear to me. The closest encounter I had with Molly in later years was in a hospital in Hexham, Northumberland, she had fractured her pelvis when she rolled off the top of the Elizabethan walls in Berwick. She rolled off with her boyfriend!!!

We had a Scout rally at Cumnock, in the Woodroad Park. All the district scout troops were there, and the Woodroad was a busy area that weekend. It was on the Saturday of that week that I was in a public swimming pool for the first time in my life. I took cramp and sank like a stone. A fella hauled me out, thank God, and I was never in another public swimming pool again for many years. Perhaps it was through association of unpleasant memory, but I had a persistent aversion to chlorinated water from that day forward.

An incident which occurred at that camp stands out in my memory. I can't recall the troop to which this fella belonged, but he was one of the Scouters nominally in charge. I say nominally, for the chap was obviously not in possession of all his faculties. Some discreet conversation revealed that he'd had a serious accident and the head injuries he had sustained had left some slight impediment. He was, nevertheless, a pleasant and sociable chap. He had other qualities too, and those were demonstrated when the camp was two days old.

The second night under canvas brought a rainstorm of unusual fury. The poor lads who hadn't bothered with the old wisdom of pitching their tent on a rise, and slicing the turf around for good measure ended up floating on their groundsheets – those who had groundsheets, that is; some had none, and were in a sorry state. The morning brought sunshine, however, and all the wet gear was soon laid out steaming in the warm air. We were sitting in a circle around the breakfast fire when an idiot with a German Shepherd dog arrived on the scene. He was taking what was more than likely his usual morning stroll with his dog, and he hadn't bothered to put a leash on it. The dog, it must be said, did not seem to be particularly ill-tempered, and was moving among the boys without showing too much concern. Like many another animal, however, it suddenly showed an unaccountable aversion to one particular individual. In this case, it happened to be a youngster of around eleven years old, a boy who was doing not a thing to offend man or beast, but who for some obscure reason became the object of the hatred of this large dog. It came stiff-legged and bristling towards the youngster, and might have done serious damage had we failed to notice what was happening. Our friend with the scarred face and less than normal faculties leapt at the owner; "Get that beast on a lead!" he roared.

If the man had shown some remorse, he might have gained some little sympathy from those around, but he gave instead a display of arrogance which served to alienate all

of us. He did put his dog on a lead, though, albeit with bad grace. Our angry friend stood squarely in front of the dog and its master, feet astride and forefinger wagging in emphasis. "If that dog ever goes for that wee fella again, Ah'll kill it – Ah'm warnin' ye!" he growled.

He got a curled lip in response, and without deigning to reply, the fellow wheeled and walked off. The next morning, he came back, and idiot that he was, he had his dog running free. Apparently, he had supreme confidence in his own ability to control the animal with his voice and force of personality, for as the dog came close to where the same youngster was in company with his friends, he was heard to warn the beast to stay at heel. It ignored him. Teeth bared and back bristling, it made straight for the unfortunate kid. Then, from a tent flysheet nearby, a figure burst on the scene. It was our friend of the day before, kilt flying and hobnailed boots pounding the turf. The animal wasn't going to stop on any command this time, and when the big lad came between it and the young boy, it simply went for the first human form in its way. It was dead in a matter of seconds. The big scouter had its forelegs quickly in each of his hands, and in a quick and vicious movement wrenched its legs outwards to an unnatural width. There was one dying yelp, and the dog lay quivering on the turf. The big fella turned to us "Burst its heart!" he growled.

He turned once to look at the horrified owner, but spoke not a word to him, and crawled back into the tent from which he had emerged less than thirty seconds before. The arrogance was gone now; "He kill't mah dog!" was the tearful cry. "Naw!" someone said, "You did!" And we all turned our backs on him.

We had a campfire singsong that night and I had the pleasure of escorting Ella Hume, a bonnie local lassie, back to her home beyond Lugar. Well, it was a pleasure at least till Ella slapped my ears as we stood by her garden gate for being a bad lad. I didn't tell pal Bob Turnbull about that though, for we had been vying with each other for Ella's favour and I couldn't stand the thought of Bob chortling at me.

It was during the camp at Woodroad that the idea of combining the New Cumnock and Lugar scouts in a Lochmaben camp was put forward. It was close to the Glasgow fair holiday; we were looking forward to seeing the Lochmaben lassies again.

Just eighteen days past my seventeenth birthday I was in Lochmaben again, and the kids were running up and down the main street yelling "The Scoots are back!" They were indeed, and in force. Not only had we combined forces with the Lugar troop but we had one or two added to our Senior Scout group. One of the notables among them was Ian „Jeuk“ Stevenson. Ian was a likeable chap, always happy to be carried along with the crowd (unless things got too rough) and had at least half a brain hidden deep somewhere in his head. Ian was always smartly turned out, and wasn't a bad looking fella; if only his attempts at humour had been more successful, and he had refrained from guffawing noisily at anything that he thought was even meant to be funny. Jeuk was a product of Bank School. How the hell he ever survived among the likes of Geordie Montgomery, Tucker, Bahoo, Finoad, Thicky and the rest I can't understand. Maybe the Bank boys were like us and kept him as a kind of mascot. Ian reached a new high point in his life during his camp at Lochmaben for he met a girlfriend. If Ian had ever had any previous involvement with the fair sex, I hadn't heard of it. Her name was Kathie Lindsay, and she was, indeed a very bonnie lass. Ian being what he was however, it could hardly be expected that his chosen girlfriend would conform to the accepted notion of normality (which, come to think of it, put his

chosen male companions in a doubtful category!). And Kathie did have an aberration from what you'd expect to find in the pretty sixteen-year-old lassie's character. Kathie could punch with the venom, speed and accuracy of a lightweight boxing champ. My own impudence made me painfully aware of this. I made some cheeky remark, meant to be at Kathy's expense. The tables were turned with a vengeance. A flashing right fist came darting under my lower ribs, and I was all of a sudden on my knees thinking "Holy shit!" but without the available breath to say it. From then on, as long as she was within punching distance, Kathy was treated with the greatest of respect by this fella!

A friend of younger days at Lochside was with us this time, too; Bill Blackmore, who had been included in the roll as a „boat handler“, just as I had been the year before. It was good to have Bill along. It seemed to connect, in a way, what I perceived at that time to be the old world of Lochside and this new era of Scouting and the teen years.

Maybe it was because of the presence of the Lugar troop that this camp proved to be more of a hectic happening than the camp of '46. I'm sure that a certain Lochmaben postman would agree. He had bruises to bolster his opinion! His entanglement with the ploys of the Lugar/New Cumnock scout campers came about one fine morning as he attempted to deliver a batch of mail to the tents in the shadow of Bruce's castle. His route lay across the site of the original castle moat, which, even after the passage of six hundred years, still meant negotiating a fairly abrupt dip and rise close to the ruined wall before swinging round to the right to where the tents were grouped. To a youngster on foot, no problem existed but to anyone on a bike, skill and caution had to be employed. The postman was on a bike. And there was something lurking in the old moat bed just around the bushes and out of sight of the unwary traveller approaching from the highway - something which hadn't ever been seen there before. It had a long, undulating body, black and scaly, a small reptilian head raised in a threatening manner on the end of a long arched neck, its eyes were protruding, white and bulbous, with small, black, staring pupils.

The Lochmaben postie, pedalling briskly and cheerfully around the bend and down into the moat, came face to face with this bloodcurdling apparition and did a vicious sideways skid and what he reckoned to be two somersaults before landing in a defenceless heap under the hovering jaws. Beyond the bruises from his tumble – and the dents to his dignity, the postman was in no kind of peril, of course, for the monster was a creation of the fertile imagination and mischievous enterprise of the scallywags in neckerchiefs and woggles. There was hilarity all round at this incident. It was fairly certain that our postman too, had some fun in the telling of it around the village. I still hear references to the "monster at Bruce's Castle" almost fifty years later.

Other than the gruelling day the Scouters had during a day's excursion with the boys to Dumfries, (where the lax security of Woolworths led some of the naughtier imps into an attempt to acquire fireworks free of charge), I think all would agree that the most memorable evening of this camp – perhaps, even, of any camp – was the evening of the Lochmaben Ghost. It was the day prior to the customary public „campfire“ evening, when it was usual to have friends, parents, and any interested local folks join the boys and the Scouters around a blazing campfire to join in feasting and the singing of songs old and new. A dead-calm, quiet evening, and the sounds of faraway traffic and the cries of farm animals and even human voices were carrying clearly across the mirror surface of the Castle loch. For some reason which I can't

recall – and it matters naught, anyway, it fell to me that evening to carry the empty milk churn in the old Vendace across to the arranged pick up point by the roadside at the south end of the village. Bill Blackmore was the official „boatman“ in ‘47, but it may be that Bill wanted to be part of the campfire rehearsal which was scheduled to take place. I had no objections; a more pleasant way of spending an hour could hardly be imagined. Halfway on my outward journey, the boys started singing. As I beached the Vendace, shipped the oars and manhandled the milk can ashore, I saw an assembled group of villagers ranged along the fence on the roadway above, entranced by the sound of the young voices wafting sweetly over the loch from the far, wooded shore a mile away. I deposited the can by the wayside, and joined the local folks for some minutes, enjoying with them the haunting strains of “Cum ba-ya” being brought from the distant castle on the quiet air. I soon had to bestir myself, though, for I had the return journey over the water in prospect and dusk was already making dark silhouettes of the tall trees on the far shore as the sun slowly sank over the Solway beyond. I launched the old Vendace and set out on a leisurely row back across the Castle loch. I had been cruising along for sometime and glanced over my shoulder towards the shore, from whence the sound of campfire song still came. I saw another boat coming from the direction of the Castle landing. I was able to make out the stocky frame of Buster Armstrong at the oars. Jock must have taken a notion and sallied out to row the last quarter mile with me. I grinned to myself; campfire rehearsals didn’t allow scope for the kind of madcap capers for which the bold Buster was famed. I rowed on and the distance between us diminished. I took a final glance over my shoulder. Buster had shipped oars and was drifting, awaiting my arrival alongside his boat. It was well into gloaming by then, and I could see plainly the glow of the campfire up on the rise amid the trees. The boys were still singing, and the strains of “With the scent of woodsmoke” to the tune of the old wartime favourite “Lili Marlene” combined with the darkening calm of the summer gloaming to generate an entertainment that I couldn’t imagine being bettered anytime, anywhere. Then, something happened. In the middle of the song and in the middle of a word, there was a sudden, deathly silence. No longer rowing, I coasted through the water, listening, wondering, and hearing nothing. It was as though every living thing except the two oarsmen on the Castle loch that night had been spirited away, beyond existence. Puzzlement gave way to some degree of concern and both of us dipped oars, and plied for the Castle landing.

While Buster and I made our way up the grassy rise to the campground, I saw the first of the boys appear at the gap in the ruined wall and stumble down the short ramp to the level of the tents. Others followed, quietly, wan faced. That something unusual had happened there was no doubt. No normal occurrence would have this effect on them. There was a sudden shout, “There he is!”

One or two of the laddies were pointing in our direction. “It wis you!” one of them cried.

I held up a hand, palm forward “Na, na – wait a meenit – I was in the boat”
“No you - him!”

It was Buster who was being accused. Buster began straightaway to protest his innocence in whatever had taken place, but I knew that there was no way that he would be believed without my intervention. Knowing Buster’s propensity for practical jokes, I know that I wouldn’t have believed him, had I been in their shoes. I spoke up. “When you stopped singin”, Buster wis oot on the water wi’ me!” I said.

They had all filed out and had gone quietly to their various tents and Buster and I collared Johnny Edwards, who had been conducting the signing.

“There wis something up there!” Johnny said.

“Up there” according to Johnny’s pointing finger, was atop a tall, precarious column of masonry which towered upwards for about forty feet, crowned incongruously by a tuft of grass and a stunted bush. This particular feature I had noted earlier because of its dangerous looking state. I thought at the time that it should be demolished for reasons of safety. I looked back at Johnny.

“What was up there?” I asked.

“A man wavin’ a branch ower his head!” said Johnny.

There was no way in the world that any man could reach the level of that small tuft of grass and small bush. But Johnny insisted. He it was who had been facing in that direction as he conducted the boys in their singing, and it was his reaction to his sighting of this alleged apparition that caused the boys to cut their song in mid-note. No matter how Buster and I phoo-phooed the notion, Johnny was adamant, and by the time Jock and I crawled into our tent, we had as many goose-pimples as the rest of the company.

Having lain down on my two grey army blankets, turned the bottom up over my feet and rolled over three times, I lay with my head pillowed on my folded kilt and listened wide awake to what seemed to be the mournful howling of every hound in the district. Then, there was a footfall, a heavy footfall, fairly close and to the rear of our tent.

“What the hell’s that?” Harry’s voice.

“I dunno.” I replied.

There was further sound, as of something large, moving with stealth.

“Some so-an’-so’s playin’ funny”, says Harry, quietly slipping out of his bedding.”

You go round yin wey, an’ I’ll go the ither”, says he.

“O.K”

Outside the tent I turned and took the leftward route, slipping silently along the side of the tent, carefully avoiding the guy ropes. As I came close to the end of the canvas, I slowed to a creep, crouched cautiously. I peeked around the end of the fly sheet.

What confronted me made me freeze for the merest instant. An enormous pale white shape; not a dead thing – this, whatever it was, was very big, and very much alive! I spun and was flying for dear life in a flash and by some miracle didn’t fall foul of a single guy rope before skidding sharp right towards the tent flap and blessed human companionship. There I met Harry, flying in the opposite direction. I met him hard too, with an almighty crash and a tangle of threshing limbs as we both scrambled to be first into the tent among our pals. Harry made it through the flaps first and as I scrambled behind him, I became aware of the sound of laughter. Johnny Burgoyne’s laughter it was – uproarious and unrestrained. I stuck my head back through the tent flaps. Johnny was on the ground at the front of his bivvy, literally rocking with mirth. The sight of my head sticking out through the flaps seemed to give reason for even greater hilarity. He could only point, speechless, at something beyond our tent, in the trees down towards the loch. I scrambled out and crawled on hands and knees to where I could look down past the tent and across the old moat bed to where the grass and bracken were fading into the darkness among the gnarled beech trunks. There was a big white horse making off at a fast canter, down to the water’s edge, making distance, no doubt, between itself and the strange beings who scurried around like frightened beetles in the dark. I clasped my hands behind my head, laid my forehead

in the dust, and squatted there in humiliation until at last Johnny's continuing merriment got to me and I joined him in guffawing to the night air. Half the camp was roused by this time, wondering what the kerfuffle was about. Harry was out there alongside by this time, and his chagrin at the patently ridiculous episode was enough to set me off on another round of cackling. Finally, sides aching, I rolled into my blankets again and prepared to settle. Within five minutes, there was a "psst" at the tent flap. "Hey Buster Bobby!"

It was Johnny again. Buster made answer. He must have been awake through all the previous on goings. You and Bobby were supposed to close up the mess tent, weren't ye?" Johnny hissed.

I groaned "Oh aye!" I grunted, and grumbled my way out of my blankets yet again. As Jock and I made our way across to the mess tent, Johnny disappeared into his bivvy. A promise was a promise. Buster and I had taken on the job of closing the tent for the night, and none of the scouters was about to let us off the hook.

The mess tent was ex U.S. army, dark olive and black camouflage and held gloom in its interior even in the middle of the day. By this time we were seeing only by virtue of the fact that our eyes were accustomed to the near darkness and the cavernous depths past the rolled up flaps of the big mess tent were dungeon dark. Buster went to the left hand flap, I took the right. On tiptoe, I began loosening the tapes which held the flaps in the rolled up position so that they would drop to where they could be secured in the closed position. In the dark depths in front of me, somebody – something – moaned eerily. I froze. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck bristle. I'm sure, if I hadn't emptied my bladder a few minutes before, it would have relinquished its load in that instant! Petrified and staring into the stygian gloom, I saw a pale face, seemingly hovering in the air about four or five feet above the ground. It moved! It moved to one side, and moved back again. A second long, anguished moan came floating from the darkness, and in the last vestige of light a long, shiny, green arm rose slowly up by the horrid visage, as though a ghostly finger was being pointed in my direction. The fact that Buster was in exactly the same predicament at the left flap never entered my mind; as far as I was concerned there was just me, and – It. I don't know what prompted me in what happened next. Maybe I had some crazy notion about getting it before it got me. Some wee voice in the back of my mind said – go for it. And I went, head down and legs pumping like crazy, straight for whatever it was, there, in the blackness. And I hit something, too, with an almighty crash. There was a welter of wooden trestles, table, some cold, plastic material – and another human being, who gave a yelp of pain and surprise as I hit him like a cartload of bricks. It was Johnny Edwards. As he and I extricated ourselves from the pile of debris, I could hear that Burgoyne laugh start up again. I couldn't be angry; and I couldn't laugh either, not right then, anyway. I was too damn busy being relieved that I hadn't been tangling with some supernatural ghoul after all! Oh aye! – It had been that convincing! A scout hiking stick stuck in the ground with a white „hi-li“ bat swivelling on top with a ghoulish face painted on, and a highly inventive Johnny Edwards moaning and manipulating, with his left arm in a green camouflaged army „gas cape“ for the final macabre touch.

I'm not sure whether I went to sleep at last that night, or if I simply lost consciousness through nervous exhaustion.

Our friends the Robson family were no longer part of the Lochmaben scene. They had moved far away into Berwickshire and the village of Greenlaw. When the tents were struck around Bruce's castle in 1947 it was for the last time as far as 46th Ayrshire and Lugar scouts were concerned. The camp for '48 was planned to take place at Galashiels. Our group of „seniors“ would not be there; we had our sights on Greenlaw. But a year is a long time, and a lot could happen.

Crawlin' aboot like a snail in the mud,
Covered in clammy blae;
ME made efter the image o' God?
Jings! But it's laughable, tae!

Howkin' awa' neath a mountain o' stane,
Gaspin' for want o' air,
The sweat makin' streams doon my bare back bane,
My knees a' haukit an' sair!

("The Image o' God"; Joe Corrie, 1894-1968)

Chapter Thirteen - Where the Sun Never Shines

I don't think anybody ever forgets their first day underground. It is an introduction to an environment never known or experienced by 90% of the human race, and only by being part of that experience can the contrast between toiling "doon a-b"low" and working in the sweet air and daylight "on the hill" be appreciated.

It was in the year of 1947 that Alec „Sauce“ Jess was given the chore of introducing Bobby Rogerson to the joys, frustrations, fears and fellowship that were part and parcel of the miner's lot. I can imagine some saying "Hold – wasn't he an engineering apprentice?"

That is so but Map Park was a coal stripper, Joker Houston was a cutter machineman, Davie Jess was a minedriver, Snap Capstick was a pit bottomer, John Goudie was a shotfirer, Toolie Houston was a fireman. All identified themselves as miners. So too did I, in time, and proudly too.

I remember the smell - powder smoke, fungus and sweat. Other things linger in memory of that first day of new impressions. I had never before travelled down a shaft in a rattling cage. This, as days passed to months, was to become of no greater excitement than the pre-shift bus journey. I was struck, as I stepped for the first time off the cage, by an almost total lack of colour. The pit bottom area, being a marshalling point for loaded coal tubs arriving from the production areas, was illuminated by flameproof lighting units. Even so, the predominant colour was a drab, dirty grey which merged to deep blackness in the shaded corners. The timber and steel supports were of a hardly varying shade of the same colour.

The smell – if I were to be transported in a state of unconsciousness into a working colliery now, fifty years on, and allowed to awake in the velvet dark, I would immediately know, I would know where I was with my first waking breath. I would know the smell. Of all the new impressions I experienced on the first day underground, the smell of the working colliery is the one which will stay with me all of my life.

The first man to greet me as I stooped to walk off the landed cage that morning was the inimitable, crotchety „Snap“ Capstick. I cannot recall ever having known Snap's real name. Snap, of course, wasn't the name given at his christening (if such ever took place), but no ordinary name would have sounded right; Snap it was and it fitted perfectly. If old Snap ever spoke civilly to anyone, then I must have missed the occasion! Perhaps that was in part due to the fact that this impudent apprentice took evil glee in stirring the old fella up at every opportunity. Funny, though - few there were who could get an „early tow“ up to the surface near the end of their shift. I was one of that exclusive little clique.

The seam being worked in Bank number one pit in those days was the Mussel coal. The access haulageway took its name from the seam – the Mussel Dook. The fresh air stream took this route to the workings. This, unfortunately, meant that if your place of work lay somewhere down there in the Mussel coal, you had perforce to

travel most of your journey both to and from your job in the „back dook“ or main return airway. Many a time, in subsequent years, I compared in my mind the undoubted dangers of walking on the haulageway in the cool fresh air, knowing the risk in dodging the moving tubs or the off chance of a runaway, with the awful prospect of toiling breathlessly in the back return airway, breathing used air and powder smoke and suffering the wafting, nameless odours – the origins of some of these being easily guessed at. As often as not, the fresh air route was chosen. An unlawful procedure and of immediate danger but who could say what long term damage was done by regular exposure to the fume and filth of the „back dook“?

That first day however, Sauce made sure that I travelled the return airway and impressed upon me the dangers and the illegality of using the main haulageway.

The downward trek in the foul air ended with a ninety degree turn to the left where I found myself confronted by a brick wall - in the centre of which was set a massive wooden door. Sauce led the way through and in passing through at his back I noticed that the door was counterbalanced in such a way as to close automatically behind us. We faced another, identical wall. “This”, said Sauce, “is an air lock, you are between the trapdoors. Noo, watch what happens when I open this yin ...” He opened it and we stepped through – into cool, sweet fresh air. Not, admittedly, the meadow scented zephyr that wafted over our upland hills – the smell of the pit was there, but in comparison to the foul atmospheric soup of the back dook, it was sweeter than wine and delightfully cool. I immediately heard the sound of tubs moving on rails ahead and could see the glow of lighting. Moving ahead, we came on the scene of much activity. Here was the main landing, where the empty hutches were untied from the hauler-rope to gravitate down and round the leftward sweep across the points to be manhandled along a short level to where, running free of the rails and onto flat, smooth skidplates, they were deftly spun and manoeuvred to drop neatly on to the rails under the jib of a belt conveyor. As the hutch was pushed forward it came under the offloading cascade of coal which flowed continuously on the moving belt from the working coal-face.

It was here that Alec „Sauce“ Jess introduced me to „Scoonie“ Park, „Cure“ Nesbitt, „Litch“ Littlejohn, „Dexter“ Currie and „Bonsha“ Bain. They all were possessed of Christian names, but nobody ever used them. Cure, Scoonie, and Dexter seemed to have a common label for each other and everyone around in any case. They cheerfully and without a trace of malice dubbed their entire Mussel landing mates “Ya bastard”. Christian names just had no chance!

Cure appeared to be the one who most regularly did the „tyin“ oan“. This was deftly accomplished by slipping the „gabby“ or hook on one chain end into the drawbar link of the full hutch as it came rolling out onto the main roadway and under the moving rope. The other chain end was then quickly spun three turns around the hauler rope and secured by latching the hook back on to the chain as the strain came on, the chain locked securely on to the rope, and another full coal hutch was on its way to the surface screening plant. Dexter, when he wasn“t fully occupied in throwing verbal insult at someone or trying to convince some passing workmate that his wife was sleeping with someone else, was just as deft as Cure at tying-on and took the job over for some periods over the shift. Bonsha – a good friend of mine in later years – was

usually content to handle the hutches, empties in, full ones out, and was wont to entertain himself – and others – by exercising a considerable talent for drumming on the rims of the tubs in his spare moments, using for „sticks” two pieces of stone.

The belt conveyor, Sauce informed me as we passed in by towards the coalface, was a Sutcliffe Goliath. The name registered but didn't mean a great lot to me at the time. One thing I did note – it was kicking up some dust. As we reached the end of the belt level, I could see that the return end of the conveyor was set well under the roof of the three-foot coal seam. After having the function of the coal face pans briefly described and having heard from the duty fireman, Mr. „Dey” Belford, a description of the daily cycle of events – the nightshift coal-cutting, dayshift hewing (stripping) the afternoon shift advancing of the belt level by one girder and the shifting forward of the face conveyor – Sauce bade me follow back out to the conveyor discharge and the main haulage landing. He wanted to complete my first day underground with a visit to the limit of the workings of Bank number one at that time – the Mussel dook face. The dook face was the name given to the solid wall of rock strata that confronted the underground traveller who hiked to the limits of the workings. As I stumbled behind Sauce down past a small single drum rope hauler on the right hand side of the main dook and was passing under the massive, slowly-revolving hauler rope return wheel, I heard the raucous voice of Dexter back up on the landing behind us. I was being admitted to the „club”.

“Hey, Sauce! Tell that big bastard tae hing oan tae his troosers or Davie Jess”ll get him doon there!”

Sauce gave a short grunt of amusement. I grinned to myself; so this was where Davie spent his working days. I knew Davie well.

As we approached the dook face and the immediate surrounds became discernable in the glow of our headlamps and those of the three busy miners employed there, I was able to deduce for myself most of the method used in the advancing of the Mussel dook. But Sauce filled in with a detailed explanation anyway. In the Mussel seam, no attempt was made to diverge into any other coal bearing strata, and so it was convenient, and sensible, to drive the dook on the gradient of the coal seam. There were three men busily engaged in hand-shovelling coal from a pile under the rock roof, where an „arcwall Maver and Coulson” machine had undercut the coal to a depth of seven feet before it was blown down for filling. When the arc of undercut coal had been stripped, the next operation would be the drilling of the rock strata above in order to let the shotfirer do his job, which consisted of firing another charge of gelignite which would bring the rock down in a broken heap. When this was filled, the dook could be girdered another few feet forward in readiness for a repetition of the cycle.

NOTE: This method of mine or dook driving was common at the time and was typical of operations which aimed at taking the most profitable seams, often at the expense of the ruination of conditions for extraction of neighbouring seams above or below. After nationalisation of the mines and a subsequent change to more forward planning, a method called ‘horizon mining’ became more commonly used. This involved the sinking of the pitshaft to a depth at which a level mine could be driven to bisect several inclined seams.

I recognised the three dust begrimed fellas who wielded the shovels under the overhang, Hughie Robertson, Davie Jess and Andy Robertson. (Hughie and Andy, in spite of sharing the same surname, weren't closely related, as far as I know.) The appearance of a visiting rookie was considered enough of an occasion for the suspension of filling operations and besides, there was more than a mere trace of devilment in Davie. He reckoned that I was due to undergo an initiation rite. Nothing that had any basis in past custom, mind you - just something that David conjured up in his own daft imagining. So I found myself wrestling around among the layer of „goaf“ which the coalcutter had thrown out, doing my best to preserve the virginity of my left ear. Three spectators, Sauce, Hughie and Andy stood around grinning and leaning on shovels. Being seventeen years old, six feet in my socks and fit as a flea, I came out of it with my eardrum intact – but only just! Perhaps the fact that I gave a fair account of myself was what allowed me to join in the humour of the moment. I'm glad I did; a later contemplation of any trace of anger or petulance would have been a cause for private shame. Compared to the „towsings“ that some of the new lads got, mine was mild indeed! I wasn't deterred from having a vicious dig or two at Davie's ribs in later days in the baths building. I must confess, though, Davie always was thumping my ribs in return – and I was ever the first to surrender.

And so ended the first of many hundreds of days spent in the dark galleries of Bank number one pit, Number six mine, Model and Brockloch mines and the long closed Afton number one pit. During my early years as apprentice and tradesman the main source of coal production was from the Auld Pit – Bank number one. Number six mine at this time harboured the main pumping stations which were essential to the „dewatering“ of the workings in both Bank and Knockshinnoch Castle collieries. Access to these pumps was by riding the man hauler – the same one which sent several men to their deaths in 1938 when the rope broke. Model and Brockloch mines were both gradients to shallow seams. In the latter, in fact, a roof fall quite often brought loose shale, turf and daylight! Model was the more productive of the two small mines and as such merited the employment of an engineman on each shift. One of the two employed was a very old friend by the name of Harry Smith. A devout champion of the Presbyterian religion, Harry had long been associated with the Orange Order. Some there may be who give immediate voice to mistaken prejudice upon learning this but they would be wrong in their assumptions. My friend Harry was no bigot. He was in the Orange Order, not through unreasoning hatred of other religions and creeds but in assertion of his freedom to worship as he himself chose. This, in essence is the sentiment from which the Order arose. Harry was steeped in the history of his native land, from the days of Oliver Cromwell up to the present. Like many another Scot, he was never blind to the fallacy which has been brought into being by romanticists regarding the cause of the Jacobites and of the Stewart Kings in particular. He recognised the cruel hoax which was perpetrated on the Highland peoples in 1745. Charles Edward Stewart had no interest whatsoever in the freedom of Scotland – he was intent upon the throne of England, recently become the British throne, and determined to impose upon parliament and people the despotic „divine right of kings“. Harry revered the memory of the Covenanters and expressed in poetry the heroic struggles and the martyrdom of many of these people in their effort to hold to their own form of worship.

“Frae the far hillside the whaup’s cryings;
High in the sky the laverock sings,
Scotland’s heritage frae Stewart Kings
... the graves amang the heather!”

A heartfelt cry of protest from the pen of my friend, Harry Smith, miners’ poet.

I should not, having given Harry mention, ignore his worthy fellow engineman of the opposite shift – Mr. „Sodjer“ Jackson. Sodjer had an artificial leg and though it may be that his militaristic nickname stemmed from this fact, I believe that the limb was lost due to the after effects of a footballing accident in his youth. Like Harry, he was fond of a „blether“ and more than one urgent repair job had to wait while Bobby Rogerson the engineer had a wee confab with one or other of his friends in front of the glowing stove in the Model engine-house.

One other thing about the Model I find worthy of mention. The echo. “How so?” I can imagine the reader asking.

Perhaps there is a generally held misconception about the quality of sound in the galleries underground. I know that in the fake caverns created by the film industry there is invariably a hollow reverberation to each noise heard in whatever high drama is being acted out. In fact, in the roadways and caverns of the coal mines, such acoustics are very rare. On the contrary, sound nearly always has a flat, dead quality, and has less reverberation than will be found in, say, the normal dwelling house. The Model was the exception. The only one I ever experienced in all my years in the pits, in fact. Halfway down the gradient on the way to the level of the coal seam, there was a spring of pure, clear, drinkable water, which was itself an exception to the norm in the coal mines. And right there, where the surrounding stratum was composed of hard granite (whin) rock and the roof had been vaulted higher than normal; there was an echo to every sound. As I say, a very rare phenomenon underground.

Afton number one pit – „Burnfoot Pit“ in our everyday conversation - had ceased producing coal some years before I arrived on the scene at Bank. Mining operations were still going on, but the product was something called “Cannel” coal, which wasn’t a true coal at all, but a material which I believe – while it did have some carbonaceous content – was essentially sedimentary shale. Its value lay in the fact that it was oil bearing. It certainly burned and gave off a substantial heat and volatile flame but while it burned it splintered and cracked and sent off showers of minute flying sparks. Its exclusive destination was the neighbouring oil plant, which had been built close by to take advantage of the handy supply of oil bearing strata. The Cannel seam was about midway down the shaft. Burnfoot Pit was one of the key dewatering stations for the New Cumnock collieries, so it carried a small staff of pump attendants, winder enginemen and firemen. Engineering maintenance was the responsibility of Blackie and his Bank based squad. I was involved at one stage in a project being carried out on nightshift in and around the units which were in Blackie’s sphere of responsibility.

It consisted of the checking of the mechanical and electrical condition of every motor in use at the time. This job had fallen to an engineer from Knockshinnoch Castle by the name of Bill Paton. Bill, incidentally, was well known to our family, since he had a half dozen sheep grazing on our land at Lochside. A strange hobby for a pit

engineer! I was loaned to Bill as his assistant in the operation, and in due course we progressed to the motors in Burnfoot pit. There weren't very many motors to be concerned with in Burnfoot but they were scattered over a wide area and access to them meant travelling some wild roadways. The underground galleries of Afton number one were well down the list when it came to repair and maintenance; after all, they were used on a regular basis by a mere handful of personnel. The most far flung of the pumping units was the „five-foot pump“ (a reference to its location at the five-foot coal seam level). There were two ways to reach this pump. One - the usual route taken - meant travelling on a man hauler down „Ladysmith“ mine to the staging pump room at the bottom, and proceeding from there through a long, rough tunnel to where the pump was located. The alternative route went via a very steep dip – the Black Band dook – which was, indeed, the shorter of the two journeys but which wasn't too often travelled in view of the fact that the business of engineering maintenance nearly always concerned the pump room at the foot of the Ladysmith mine. When the five-foot pump motor came up on the list for inspection, I convinced Bill Paton that our best route was down the steep black band. I had a particular reason for my preference for the black band route. Not only was it the shorter of the two routes, and with the freshest of the air but I would get a chance to scoof once more. I was introduced to the thrills of „scoofing“ by Caldwell Dick, one of the firemen on shift at Burnfoot, on my very first visit there. I wasn't aware of whether or not this was a practice which was common in other collieries or whether it was practised but under another name. No matter; the description of my introduction to this unique mode of travel underground will serve to give a clear idea of what is entailed. There was a planned visit to the five-foot pump – for what purpose I cannot recall – and Cawdie Dick reckoned the Black band dook was the way to go. Having arrived at the pit bottom – in a cage ride, incidentally, which was much smoother than the daily drop in the coal producing pit at Bank – we were led in by the top end of the dook. I looked out over the steep incline and immediately felt disinclined to say the least, to go any farther. I had no option in the matter, of course. I envisioned the squad of us clambering downwards into the depths and clinging to the arch girders to prevent ourselves from a precipitous slide and tumble all the way to the bottom. I was handed one of an odd looking bundle of accoutrements which were hung handily on one of the girders. It consisted of a rectangular piece of conveyor belt of around nine or ten inches length and three or four inches width. Through a small hole at one end was threaded a length of strong twine. I watched Cawdie as he tied the twine securely to his belt buckle, so that the rubber strip hung down over his crotch. I followed suit, wondering what the next move might be. I knew the answer to that a mere second or two later, when Cawdie set his feet astride the tub rail and squatted on his hunkers so that the rubber strip lay flat on the top of the rail beneath his hips. I copied his every move and began also to see ahead to what was in store. Squatting there on the summit of the steep incline, Cawdie adjusted his balance, raised his boots clear of the pavement and shot off like a rocket down the rail! Ah! ... This was when skill was found wanting! I raised my feet, and I too shot off downwards at a fast pace – for about five yards. I simply tipped over sideways and ended up scoofing on the rough slope on my left hip and shoulder. Painful contact with sleepers, rocks and girders brought me quite quickly to a halt, cursing and spluttering among the dust cloud that my undignified tumble had stirred up. The dust wasn't long a problem, for fresh air was flowing and it soon cleared. I sat determinedly on the rail once more. This time, I started with the knowledge that Cawdie's skill was born of experience, and I couldn't hope to emulate him at first try. I raised my feet once more, and set off

downward, this time making sure that each time my balance shifted I had a foot in position to tip my body in the opposite direction. Soon, I was fairly flying and enjoying myself immensely. That was the first of several occasions on which I had the opportunity to scoof down the black band dook. Now that I was here again, with Bill Paton, I was looking forward to another trip down the rail. Having persuaded Bill to give it a go, we set off to the beginning of the steep dip and donned the scoofing gear. Bill was the novice on this trip and went through the same series of tumbles as I had done on my first trip but like me, was well into the way of it by the time he reached the end of the rails.

It wasn't too far from the foot of the black band slope to the pump at the five-foot location, and a very few minutes accomplished all that needed to be done. We set off through the rough, winding airway to the pump room at the foot of Ladysmith dook. On the way through, we ran into a duo of repair men who were just then packing up their tools and were making for the Ladysmith man-hauler too. We arrived at the comparative comfort of the Ladysmith pump room in due course (whitewashed brick walls, concrete floor, good lighting, a padded bench and piles of books and magazines) and settled to await the advent of the manhauler train. This took more than just a few minutes, for the fella who controlled the engine was based on the surface, and had to prepare himself and be transported down the shaft to where he set off on foot to where the hauler engine was situated. As on previous occasions, I settled down contentedly and read for a while. The rattle of the approaching „rake“ was finally heard, and we made ready to go out to the boarding area. „Slick“ Lithgow (the member of the repair duo who was known to me) and his partner were first out, and consequently had the choice of berths on the manriding train. This, on almost any other man-hauler, was no big deal; one berth was as comfortable and safe as any other. But Ladysmith was different. Several factors combined to make it so. Because of its great age in terms of the life of Afton number one pit, the roof had settled and squeezed the packs at the roadsides till the height was such that it became necessary to use flat bogeys upon which men had to lie on their stomach so as to be sure of being clear of the roof while travelling. Another of the joys of Ladysmith travel was the stinkdamp. This was the name given to a particularly noxious and horrid smelling gas which seeped from the old workings about halfway up the slope. I believe the chemical formula is H_2S or hydrogen sulphide – a highly poisonous gas, which in fairly dilute concentration had a vile stink; lethal concentrations are known to destroy the sense of smell at an early stage - an insidious, dangerous gas indeed. The gas in Ladysmith stank to high heaven – so in theory we were reasonably safe in passing through it. Another unfortunate quirk in the character of Ladysmith dook was the fact that it „bellied“. In other words, it started steeply at the top and gradually levelled out towards the pump room terminus. This, particularly during that part of the journey which took in the lower half, had an alarming effect on the run of the man rake. The rope had a nasty habit of starting to whip up and down between the roof and the pavement, and this had a hair-raising affect on the speed of the suspended tubs. They would come to a sudden halt, as though the engine had stopped, and then with gut wrenching suddenness would accelerate to an alarming speed. Over a fair part of the journey this cycle would be repeated over and over again; a thrilling experience, indeed...

I followed Slick and his mate, and clambered aboard the second bogie. Lying belly-down on the left side of the low, flat chassis, curling my fingers over the leading edge,

it fleetingly crossed my mind that I'd never before been on this journey with more than two men on the train, both being on the front bogie. Second bogie on the left side, I thought, was a tight situation if anything were to go wrong.

Bill Paton, being the last to board, had the job of signalling the engine-room. In those days in Burnfoot, no pushbuttons or spring-loaded pull-switches were involved. There was a pair of wires which ran the length of the dook, set apart by insulators and powered by a bank of batteries in the engine room. It was advisable, when riding the man-hauler, to carry a hacksaw blade in your ruler pocket. This was the instrument used to short the wires and activate the bell. At the terminus, there was a blade tied to the lower wire. Bill took this in his right hand, and holding the wires in his left, drew it twice, firmly, across. Without waiting for the result (there was no immediate way of knowing of the success of the operation) he climbed aboard the second chassis by my side. The signal was good. The train rumbled forward and up, beginning the long haul towards the pit bottom. I turned half onto my left side, and looking down past the toes of my boots, watched as the lights of the Ladysmith pump room receded further and further in the distance. There was a sudden lurch and the upward motion abruptly stopped. My stomach up somewhere near the back of my throat, my mind registered the fact that it was an unusual stage for the rope to start „whipping“ – when suddenly I realised that we were rattling downhill – fast – and faster yet ... I heard rather than saw Slick and his mate go tumbling off the front bogie, and all at once found myself all alone on the second. Bill was lucky; being the last man to board, he was on the clear side, meaning simply that there was room on that side to get off. On my side there was no way of exiting. I had to follow Bill over the right-hand edge. By the time I had a clear access to the edge of the chassis, the pump room lights were rushing up toward me at a fearsome speed and the bogie wheels were roaring in a rising crescendo on the rails. I remember thinking that the mine walls had become as smooth as the bore of a rifle; there was an almighty crashing jolt, and I was under water. In hindsight, I still find surprise in the fact that I was so amazingly calm and rational in my actions. It was even more of a wonder that I was completely unhurt. The water was shallow and I pushed myself to my knees and stood up, dripping. I had gone careering past the pump room lights, and I could see the silhouette of a dirt filled tub above me. There was a two foot gap between the tub and the roof. I had been catapulted through that gap and I'd touched nothing till I hit the water! I heard shouting and realised that Bill Paton was scrambling precipitately down the slope, calling my name. It dawned on me that he had no way of telling that I was on my feet, for my hat, with the lamp attached, was under two feet of water down by my boots. I quickly retrieved it, and waved my light in a circle to set Bill's mind at rest. He arrived, a much relieved fella, as I was clambering over the full tub to where the three man-hauler bogies were piled in a jumbled heap. Having quizzed me incredulously in order to make sure that my claims to be in perfect condition were not born of hysterics, he reckoned that we should aim for God's fresh air. We'd had enough of the pit for this night. Contact with an extremely worried Hughie Orr (the winderman – incidentally, an uncle of our friend Tam McFarlane), revealed that the cause of the calamity had been, not a broken rope, but because a dog-clutch had become disengaged while Hughie had let his attention stray by having a pee outside the engineroom! Had he been at his controls, the simple manoeuvre of applying the brake would have kept me from a severe soaking, and a bewildering crashdive down Ladysmith dook.

We'd have been forgiven for refusing to board that train for a second time that night; but we didn't refuse. A fast, rumbling run up that steep gradient through the nauseating fume of stinkdamp might carry the possibility of another unwanted thrill – but it was still preferable to a slow, lung punishing hike over the same ground.

The air of the early morn when we stepped off the cage on the surface had never smelled sweeter. The dawn was spreading brightening colour across the north-eastern horizon and south to Corsencon and Knipes, promising fine weather. I left Bill to blether with the fellas in the office about the night's events, and set my face south east, down the railway past Burnfoot and Burnside rows. I wanted to be washed and home; it was Friday, and I had a tent and some grub to pack. The Rover Scouts would be roving again, somewhere, over the weekend.

“In autumn weather they sleep on heather,
They sail my seas, and they swim my streams;
My Scottish boys here ha’e a’ these joys here,
An’ seek adventure even in their dreams...”

Scottish Rover Scout song.

Chapter Fourteen - Here-awa'-there-awa'!

The kilt-and-Balmoral bunch had no intention of neglecting Lochmaben but we felt bound to pay a visit to the county of Berwickshire and the village of Greenlaw where our friends the Robson lassies, Fay and Sheila, now lived. In our teenage summers, sleeping under a roof from Friday till Sunday was strictly for kids, women and drunk men. It was of no great concern to my folks when, during the dark days of winter, I sallied forth on a Friday evening with my hair slicked back and my tie Windsor knotted, resplendent in my brown suit, probably making for one of the favoured dance venues – the town hall, Cumnock, Dalmellington or even as far as Maybole. They could be reasonably certain that I'd turn up back home to tumble into bed before the next day dawned. It was around the first week in May each year that they noted a worrying change. The advent of Friday evening brought, as often as not, Bobby Rogerson striding out in kilt, tackety boots, shapeless khaki shirt and a „thoomstick“ in hand. Mum would follow me to the door and the exchange of words was nearly always in similar vein.

Mum “Whar“ are ye gaun, son?”

Me “Dunno Mither” (and, indeed, I very seldom, if ever, knew where I might be going). Mum “You see an“ be back for yer work on Monday!” Her concerns were legitimate; I didn“t make it back once ortwice.

I bought a bike; the first one I had ever possessed. Faither“s response to repeated pleas as we grew up was “Ye can ha“e a bike when ye can buy it yersel!” This attitude wasn“t entirely born of a reluctance to spend cash; I“m pretty sure it was his way of keeping his family off the highway until they were old enough to understand the dangers involved. Now I was old enough, and had the funds, so I had my bike. It wasn“t long till a trip to Berwickshire was proposed. Buster, Harry and Bob and a pal called Jim Blair were my companions on this expedition. We set off one Friday night with the usual words from Mum ringing in my ears about being back for work on Monday. 23:00 (double British summer time) saw us brewing tea and eating bread and cheese in a lay-by at the east end of Douglas Water. The decision was made there to cycle on through the night. We had a mere two days in hand, after all, and a long way ahead. Just beyond Douglas Water, on top of a steep rise, we came upon a road off to the right. Just at that point I took a helluva cramp in one of my legs and the following minute or two was used by the other lads in peering at a map, from which they gained the information that this right bearing road was a handy shortcut to Biggar. We took this route, and found ourselves fairly flying down a long, steep hill. While pedalling along the broad Biggar high street, I came off my bike again with another agonising cramp. I called to the other lads to carry on and I“d put some speed on and catch up. I found this to be easier said than done and by the time I was back within calling distance of the group again, the dawn was well advanced in the north-eastern sky. On a level stretch alongside a wood and a mere hundred yards behind the lads and gaining, my left leg locked in yet another vicious spasm. I tumbled, yelping, into the ditch. A minute or so later, still standing by the roadside kneading at the hard, painful knot behind my thigh, I watched the distant figures of my fellow bikers as they disappeared over the top of a long slow rise about two miles away. Shit wi“ this, thought I, and heaving my bike across the fence into the wood, I climbed over and unwrapped my blanket. I thought about my pal“s pedal pounding onwards

towards Peebles and had a wee smile to myself. I had been assigned to carry the food in my panniers. As I lay down and rolled over in my blanket, I munched hungrily on the corned beef ration. Having gulped more than my fair share, I put my head down and closed my eyes. Perhaps I dozed off, I'm not sure, but I was startled wide awake by a rustle in the bush just about ten feet or so from my head. I craned my neck, got a glimpse of a brown beastie, round-backed and grubbing around in the brush. My mind registering „rabbit“, I laid my head down again and resolved to have a nap. Just a minute! – Rabbits don't have wee short ears, pointy noses and long tails! I was rolled over and up on my knees in a second. A rat! And a rat that could be mistaken for a rabbit was a memorable specimen indeed. Two minutes later and I was out on the road pedalling again, all thought of having a snooze in the wood banished from my mind. I never have liked rats but I had never been afraid of rats either. But this was a rat that I took for a rabbit! – No thanks! Cramp or no cramp, I was back on the bike.

At ten past six in the morning by the town clock in the town of Peebles, a young polis stepped out from the parapet of the bridge upon which he had been resting and waved me to a halt. “Are you wi' a bunch o' lads wi' kilts?” he asked.

On my affirmative, he told me that they had blethered to him for a short time, expecting me to turn up, but had finally moved on just ten minutes previously. I pedalled on, through Innerleithen, Clovenfords, and into Galashiels, where the locals who were out and about at eight in the morning were dumfounded by the sight of a big kiltie going hell-for-leather up the main street and taking the road for Earlston, Gordon and Greenlaw.

At some time between ten and eleven o'clock on that bright Saturday morning, I freewheeled down the final gradient into the village of Greenlaw and set my feet gratefully on the pavement by the shop doorway which matched Sheila's description of her workplace. I was still behind the others – by about five seconds.

We were made to feel very welcome by the Robson lassies and their friends. We all took a shine to Fay and Anne Lillico, who seemed to be the closest friends of Sheila and Fay. Fay Lillico, we were soon to find out, was an accomplished accordionist. Friend Bob Turnbull, who was in process of taking accordion lessons at home in New Cumnock, naturally found common interest with her. Mr and Mrs Robson – to whom we had never been formally introduced in spite of our vacation in Lochmaben - made us feel at ease in their home. One circumstance which made the Robson home a happy place for us was the fact that there was an unlimited supply of musical instruments. An Aunt – on Mrs Robson's side, I think - had died recently, leaving a fully stocked music shop to the Robson family. Fay and Sheila's folks had no inclination to take up a business venture, so, having allowed the girls to take their choice of whatever instruments they fancied, they sold it off. A wonderful time was had by all that weekend, particularly in and around the stackyard of the farm where our tent was pitched. We had a determined try at playing every instrument we could lay our hands on. It was unfortunate that the farmyard in question happened to be more or less in the centre of Greenlaw village, and the racket we kicked up, while at times it seemed like sweet music to our ears, certainly caused consternation among many of the peace loving villagers. Mr Robson had a quiet talk which took the form of a plea on behalf of his own reputation in the village. The polis, it seems, had seen fit to ask for his co-operation in getting the wild lads from Ayrshire to cool it more

than somewhat! Ah, well – we were planning to attend church that Sunday morning, since we were wearing scout uniform; surely the village folk would realise we weren't such a wild bunch after all. Well – not a dangerous wild bunch, at any rate! We had arranged our church parade the previous evening, at the fairground of all places.

Protocol demanded that we approach the minister of the local church for permission to attend his service on Sunday morning as Scouts. With this in mind, on Saturday evening we enquired as to where the manse was located. Having found this, we were shortly thereafter at the door, respectfully requesting interview with the minister. The young lady who answered our knock I judged to be the maidservant of the household. She smiled in friendly fashion and suggested that we look around the fairground. It so happened that the itinerant showmen had set up their merry-go-rounds and side-stalls in Greenlaw for the weekend. An unlikely place to find a minister, we thought, but off we went up to the fairground. It had been our intention to be there anyway and the lassies had preceded us and were already wandering around amid the flashing lights of the moon-rocket, waltzer and all the roll-penny, coconut-shy and shooting stalls. We soon found them among the milling throng.

“Ye want the meenister? He's ower yonder!” Fay said, pointing at the nearest shooting stall. Sure enough, there was a tall, bespectacled chap standing there, looking just as you'd expect a meenister in mufti to look. He was taking a keen interest in the doings of a wee fella in a bright sporty outfit who was trying to splat some wee tin birds with an air rifle. We assumed our best behaviour mien, and approached.

“Excuse me Reverend”, Buster said, “We are a Scout group in camp for the weekend and we'd like to attend your church in the morning.”

He looked us over, quite amicably, and said, “It's no' me that ye want, laddies – ye'll hae tae talk tae the meenister.” And he indicated one of the most unlikely candidates for the Protestant clergy that I have ever seen. It was the wee fella with the air rifle and the natty sports jacket. When he abandoned his assault on the tin birds and engaged in conversation with us, we were pleased to find him to be a very pleasant chap; kind of ordinary, I thought – as if ministers had no right to be that way (they aren't, usually, are they?).

So it was that we made our way to the little church on Sunday morning, and found to our surprise that it was „standing room only“. Obviously, our sporty friend was a very popular minister. The customary cheerios and handshakes at the main door after the sermon were in progress as we filed out among the crowd. The minister asked if we'd wait around for a short while, till the ceremonies were done with. This we did, and were treated to a lecture tour of the church and its environs“ and very interesting it was, too. He showed us the dungeons. Taking us up a narrow spiral staircase to the top of the church tower, he drew my attention to the narrow firing slits in the ancient stone walls and, with a sly grin and a wink over his shoulder, to the “Braw pair o' nylons in front here!” The said nylons were adorning Fay's legs as she toiled up the stone steps ahead of us and they were, indeed, a “braw pair o' nylons”. Aye, our first impression had been right; here was an unusual Presbyterian meenister!

The Greenlaw weekend had to come to an end. Our lives had to be lived in the west and with the “haste ye back”“ ringing in our ears we began the long toil back across country. The girls had suggested that we might find a stop on the way home to be quite rewarding. Between Gala and Peebles, there was an imposing gateway, almost

regal in appearance, having two tall pillars surmounted by stone lions. The driveway beyond led to the portals of a tree-surrounded mansion. In this impressive building, said the girls, lived a man by the unlikely name of „Spiganovitch“. He was, they said, an eccentric, but was constantly involved with young people and showed concern for their lives and wellbeing. They thought that he“d be pleased to see us. Not having committed ourselves by any promises, we duly noted the existence of the mansion and stopped for a brief moment to look it over, but then set off once more towards the Clyde valley, Douglasdale and the pastoral lands of Ayrshire. Some years later, the teen years behind me, I sat one evening watching a programme called „This is Your Life“ on my first television set. The subject of that programme was a gentleman by the name of Spiganovitch. And he was exactly as the Robson lassies had described him. His claim to fame was an unswerving dedication to the needs of youngsters. I wished then that we“d gone to his door that long time ago.

On the New Cumnock scene, the drama group had taken to rehearsing in the scout hut. I mention this merely as a matter of course, and also because it was here that I can remember the courtship of two couples of my dearest friends of later years. Johnny Burgoyne, the erstwhile „desert rat“ had his sights set on our most talented actress, a sweet lass from Pathhead called Agnes Morrison. And I“m sure that Nan Rae won“t mind if I quote her most memorable line, in my memory as “My auld Auntie used tae say – there“s naething like fish soup for puttin“ brains intae ye!” Nan was being enthusiastically courted at that time by a mine-engineer-ex-sailor-Rover scout by the name of Duncan Walker. Duncan hailed, like Agnes, from Pathhead. Nan“s home was in Bank (Craigbank to quote the full title). Her father was „Big Don“ the owner and operator of the famous Bank pub. The Bank pub“s main claim to fame – other than the occasional need for the attentions of a hastily convened polis riot squad on a Saturday night – was the fact that the whole pub building leaned at an incredible angle to one side. Nobody who hailed from Craigbank could ever have been awed by the supposed marvel of the leaning tower at Pisa. I should mention in passing that Nan was the sister of Hamish and Andy, two of my fellow pit engineers.

The New Cumnock Players didn“t exist solely for the furtherance of Romance, however, and the production and staging of plays proceeded quite as satisfactorily as the blossoming partnerships.

Brother Lachie had become a member of the group somewhere along the way, and gave some creditable onstage performances. I can remember in particular his hilarious role as suitor to one of the daughters in „Let Go the Painter“.

Our group tried gamely each succeeding year to come out „top dog“ at Troon Drama Festival. We never did reach that dizzy height, but we enjoyed trying and had many a merry time at Troon and at other venues. One unforgettable incident came about during our journey to Troon Festival on a dark winter night. Somehow, our driver (I can“t recall who), took the wrong turning in the approaches to the town of Ayr. None of us were aware of this at the time of course. Bob Shankland it was who wondered aloud, “Should we no“ be comin“ near Troon by noo?” Nobody spoke in answer, but we all peered out through the windows, trying to make some sense of vague shapes passing in the darkness. I think we all saw it at the same

time but Bob it was again who cried out “Stop! There’s no a brig on the roadtae Troon!”

We had, indeed, just passed directly under a large overhead structure. We stopped. When we stepped out on to the hard surface, our sense of disorientation increased tenfold. We seemed to be on a road, alright, but it was inordinately broad and there were no houses anywhere close by. We walked back towards the bridge. Our „bridge“ turned out to be an aeroplane! We had passed right under one of the wings! We had, by some strange means, driven on to Monkton Aerodrome! (Later to be developed into Prestwick International Airport). Our eventual arrival at Troon didn’t produce any subsequent triumph on the stage but none of our rivals could boast of such a memorable jaunt to the scene of the contest.

A three-act play, „Five, Brick Lane“, was staged in Thornhill, Dumfriesshire. I had no part in this one, other than as a stage hand. The performance was received with great enthusiasm by the audience and as ever at such times, the mood of the cast and helpers was one of elation and high spirits. A peculiarity of this venue was the fact that there was only one very large dressing room which had to be shared by all members of the cast, male and female. This caused us not the slightest concern, for such circumstance had befallen so often in the past that we would all carry on with our dressing, undressing or whatever without turning a hair – or paying any attention whatsoever to the state of dress or undress of our companions. This night became just a little different. We were all feeling in a kind of celebratory mood because of the terrific audience reaction and even the normally reserved members of our group were showing elation. Take Bella Jackson, for instance. Bella snatched Stewart Leslie’s trousers while his back was turned and hid them behind a bench among the female contingent. Stewart very quickly realised that his pants were missing. Now Stewart was the kind of lad who wasn’t easily embarrassed in any circumstances (he was the son of Sergeant Leslie, New Cumnock police) and he straightaway began a noisy search for his missing garment, delving unashamedly in the midst of the lassies in his flapping shirt-tail, all the while shouting some loud and somewhat lewd threats as to the punishment of the culprit. We all witnessed the finding of his trousers and roared with laughter as he turned triumphantly with his pants held on high, and then he froze! - A look of horror on his face. The laughter died as we turned and followed his stare. How much of the „pantomime“ had been witnessed by the two people standing in the doorway, none of us could guess. I recognised one of them immediately. He was a gentleman farmer from the holdings at Dalgig, at New Cumnock. He was a reputed millionaire. I couldn’t put a name to the other man but I most certainly could recognise his mode of dress. He was, unmistakably, the Thornhill Presbyterian minister! Our discomfiture was quickly soothed, however. The reverend gentleman was laughing just as heartily at our escapade as was Mr Bernthal, the millionaire farmer. The minister had arrived to congratulate us on a very good performance. Mr Bernthal was on a very different mission. He was there with a proposal to take the whole group on tour with „Five, Brick Lane“ A wonderful offer indeed, which, on the face of it should have engendered delight among us. We were all aware, though, that tempting though this offer was, it just could not be followed up. Every member of the cast and all of the support, had work and family commitments which could not be set aside. We could always dream of what might have been.

The „core“ group of Bob, Harry, Buster and yours truly didn’t always socialise in this limited number. It could be said that this was the „Camping“ group, the one which

most frequently formed the nucleus of varied expeditions hither and yon across the south of Scotland. We also went dancing and on these occasions, our group of friends grew dramatically. There were the home regulars – those who were part of nearly all of our ploys which did not involve tenting. John „Biscuit“ MacDonald was a constant companion, almost every night of the week. Biscuit was a gifted footballer, and was part of the Glenafton Athletic squad. He should have attended training sessions on occasion but did this seldom or not at all – he was with our bunch, every night of the week. Willie McKnight, who was a dapper little fella, was a year or so older than most of us and not to mention a talented dance band drummer and another regular. Willie liked nothing better than to tag along with the lads when he had no gigs to attend. Bill Clegg, built like a Sumo wrestler, possessed of an impressive strength and fortunately, as quiet and amiable as a lamb. I think Bill’s main motivation for attaching himself to our bunch was through sheer amusement at our outlandish capers. Andy „Pimpy“ Stewart – not the famed White Heather Club comedian, but possessed of similar comedic talent, though unconscious and unpaid – hailed from Burnside. Pimpy liked our company for similar reason to Bill. The only difference being his impish desire to be involved in any crazy ploy that might be afoot. There were others – Geordie Keegans, Ian „Jeuk“ Stevenson, Jim Blair and more. Our favoured dance venue for many Saturday nights was the Merrick Hall in Dalmellington. We were attracted by the musical talents of Tommy Hodgeson’s band – and the comeliness of the Maybole lassies, who found the Merrick dance much to their liking too. If no other transport was available, we made use of the bus service which ran hourly between New Cumnock railway station and Dalmellington. Usually however, we were driven by friend Bob Turnbull in „Auld C.S.“. Bob was an occasional taxi driver for Tweedie’s garage, and „Auld C.S.“ was our affectionate name for the veteran car in which we invariably rode. We always travelled to Dalmellington in a group. The Dalmellington lads liked a good fist-fight you see, and most of our bunch preferred to avoid this pastime and being in a strong group usually kept you out of trouble.

One Saturday night Bob decided that „C.S.“ was going back over Camlarg earlier than usual. We were all O.K. with this decision, with one exception. Friend Pimpy was adamant that he was staying till the death, and declared his intention of catching the late bus. We reminded him that he would be on his own and could very well be targeted by the Dalmellington „boxers“. Try as we might, we couldn’t sway the reckless Andy, so we left without him. Monday morning arrived, and as I stripped off my civvies in preparation for donning the overalls, I looked along to Andy’s berth (he used the same locker row as me) and spied him there, hauling off his socks. “Get hame a” richt Saturday nicht Andy?” I called.

“Aye!” he growled, turning towards me. He had the bonniest black eye I’ve ever seen.

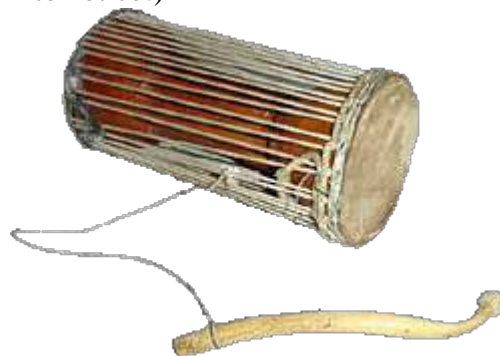
“We bloody warned ye!” I said, “Where did ye get that yin?”

His face cracked in a sheepish grin; “Up the Carsphairn road”.

Andy hadn’t learned any lessons from this experience. He never got into any more battles, but that wasn’t through dodging them; it was sheer luck. Andy was afraid of nothing and nobody.

It would be a serious omission if I passed over this stage of my teen years without making mention of the „Wagon Wheel Committee’. An odd concept, most might say; ah, well, they’d be right. This famous congregation of crazies came into being

through the latent desire among the Rover Crew for some rather more outlandish entertainment than was commonly found locally. We were all fans of Bobby Pollock and his Nighthawks who were the „in“ dance band in the district at this time. Somebody decided that what New Cumnock needed was a dose of our kind of culture. To say that our planning approach was organised and meticulous would be to tell the biggest lie since Peter heard the cock crow. We threw the idea open and invited suggestions. What made the end product unique was the fact that no matter how outlandish some of the ideas were we took them all on! I believe that it was Shankland's plumber shop which designed and built the trestle decorated with cymbals, starting pistol, hooters and whistles (forgive me, Turnbull's shop, if I err in this!). Duncan Walker, who could manage a few tunes, produced an old piano-accordion with a third of the keys missing. Pals Bob Turnbull and Johnny Burgoyne owned their own instruments and were well capable of turning out some old time tunes. From somewhere, a bass drum and a snare were dredged up. Mr. Burgoyne supplied an authentic kalengo drum from the Gold Coast or some other exotic location. It could produce varied tones because of its construction, which consisted of a hollow wooden tube, narrowed at the waist, with the skins attached by a series of strings from end to end around its circumference. When these strings were squeezed under the armpit, the tension in the skins was automatically varied. I had wanted all my life to have a go on the drums, so I was duly ensconced centre stage with the „Spike Jones“ contraption and the bass drum in front, and the snare on its pedestal at the side. Harry didn't claim to be a musician, but a place was found for him standing at the rear with a stringless guitar hung around his neck. (Amazingly, no one ever queried this – those who were in the know kept their mouths tight closed, and those who weren't didn't seem to notice!)



The Kalengo Drum

We advertised. In fact, we sent open invitations to all and sundry. All of the local band leaders and bandsmen were targeted. Amazingly, most of them turned up! The scout hut on the Castle green was never so crowded. The „Wagon Wheel Committee“ had quite a few social evenings and it tickled us no end to find that the local professionals were always first in the queue for admission. There were dances, the like of which had never before been seen in New Cumnock. In fact there were set dances invented for the pleasure of our clientele which the White Heather Club would have found completely beyond their knowledge. One in particular did derive its name from beyond the Ken. It was tagged with the name „The Deuch Polka“. I think it was Johnny Burgoyne who came up with that one. In performing the Deuch Polka the dancers had to be restrained somewhat and the floor vibrated and bounced to an alarming degree. The season being winter and the nights cold, we had a small pipe stove burning in front of the stage (the stage about six feet by eight and packed tight

with the merry bandsmen). During one Deuch Polka melee Willie Blackwood was having a bit of a struggle rigging a clothes line from wall to wall and decorating it with long johns, knickers, holey socks and other strange items of apparel, when the floor took a slightly greater bounce than usual, and the stove fell over on its side. During the ensuing fire-fighting operations, Willie took the stage and regaled the assembled public with his favourite poems. They were old standards, but the way Willie Blackwood performed them rendered them priceless. His true party piece was that old piece of doggerel from the New York Bronx:-

*The Spring is sprung the grass is ris
and all around the flowers is
de boid is on de wing -
but dat's absoid
I always hoid
the wing is on de boid*

This was delivered with much gesticulation and palm-punching and invariably ended with Willie collapsing in a cackling heap on the stage. No matter how often we witnessed this performance (and we saw it a thousand times over the years) we always held our sides laughing. These merry evenings are a long time past, and the old scout hut has been gone for many years. With those folks who are still around, I share happy memories.

I cannot recall how it came to be that one weekend, Bill Blackmore and I were apart from the rest of the crew. Such a situation arose seldom, particularly during the months of summer, but for some reason we found ourselves the only two representatives of the roving bunch, and with an unplanned Saturday and Sunday ahead of us; we put the push-bikes on the road and headed south.

When we set off, we had no fixed notion as to where we might end up; not too far away, surely, as we had no food, tent or sleeping gear. It was a glorious Saturday morning, however and we were wheeling southward past Sanquhar Castle after what seemed like a short, easy run. Our confidence sky high, and our reserves of stamina hardly dented, we decided to head for Lochmaben. Ach! – no tent, no grub, and not even dressed for rough living but what was a mere fifty miles to a pair of intrepid, healthy and more than a little daft cyclists like us?

Perhaps the thunderstorm was the work of Providence. As we pedalled merrily past the Mennock Road junction and began the long, easy freewheel down into the Nith valley bottom, the sun became veiled by a leaden cloud and forked lightning darted from the darkening sky, bringing the deep rumble of thunder and the first heavy drops of rain to pepper the dry roadway with dark wet spots. Long before we came to the slow rightward sweep where the road levelled once more, the wet spots had merged and the tarmac was a swilling veil of water punctuated by four-inch high spouts where myriad raindrops pelted down from a lowering sky. And Bill and I were well and truly soaked. The two intrepid cyclists, who mere moments before had been full of the joys of summer, were transformed in short order into something resembling a pair of half-drowned rats. It was painfully obvious that the Lochmaben destination was just not on. In fact it was even more obvious that it had been a harebrained notion right from the start – though neither of us was prepared to come out and admit that.

We stopped at the massive grey, man-made cliff of the „retaining Walls“. Bill wanted a drink of water for pete“s sake! If he“d opened his mouth a minute earlier and looked up at the sky he“d have drowned in the bloody stuff! Perhaps it was a signal to the Almighty, after all – the sun appeared as if by magic and as we remounted our bikes the steam began to rise from rapidly drying roads, trees and cyclists. We wanted to be dry for the return slog to New Cumnock (startling it is how a sudden soaking can change a leisured bike ride into a “slog”!). As the hamlet of Enterkinfoot loomed ahead, I suggested that we“d perhaps be as well drying off on the route north rather than south.

“Ah“m gaun tae the gemmekeeper“s!” was Bill“s shouted reply, as he ploughed doggedly onward, head down. I gave a kind of mental shrug and resigned myself to follow. I was aware of the fact that Bill had lived and worked in this area for some years. He evidently had some plan in mind. At the branch road off to the right which led to Drumlanrig Castle, we stopped and had a short confab. Bill had friends – a gamekeeper and his wife – who lived in a cot just beyond the Castle. He proposed that we go there and have a visit while we dried off. I agreed wholeheartedly, still sticky-wet, and developing a sore spot in my groin from the chafing of the saddle. The sooner I could be off that bike and dried off the happier I“d be.

Ten minutes found us pedalling past the high iron gates which guarded the entrance to the front of Drumlanrig Castle. Besides the imposing grandeur of the old building, there were a couple of items of note. One was the fact that the royal standard was atop the flagpole. This could mean but one thing; royalty was in residence. The other was an odd item indeed. Standing motionless and alone, with the grand backdrop of the double stone stairway and the great wooden doors of the castle entrance was a little old Ford motor car, square, box-like, with running boards, semi-detached headlamps and spokes on the wheels.

“Whit the hell“s that jalopy daein“ there?” I queried.

Bill“s reply was a shake of the head and a nonplussed look. We cycled on, passing the Castle and its walls on the west side. Bill, a few yards ahead, suddenly lurched rightward behind a roadside thicket of deciduous trees (most of the woodland was conifer in the area). I followed, and found myself coming to a halt amid a scattering of dilapidated farm implements which littered the front yard of a whitewashed cottage.



Drumlanrig Castle

We had arrived at the gamekeeper's residence. We were welcomed indoors by a slightly-built lady of middle years who apologised for being „up tae the oxters in flooer“. It was obvious that she was in the process of baking – probably the old country favourite, soda scones.

The cheery glow from the ingle-neuk was a welcome sight indeed, and the steam was soon rising from our wet clothing. A constant flow of conversation was being carried on between Bill and our hostess. A loud conversation! The lady was somewhere in the nether regions of the cottage busying herself with her baking, and Bill was huddled alongside me by the glow of the fireplace. Some reminiscence of Bill's visits to the area was being passed between the two when there came a knock on the front door. I looked up and saw with some surprise the front end of the little Ford car which had been parked at Drumlanrig.

“Bill – wad ye answer the door? I'm flooer tae the elbows!”

Bill called “O.K.” and as he stood up, I saw a tall fella emerge from the driving seat of the car and move around to the rear passenger side. I moved out into the passageway behind Bill as he opened the door. The person on the door step I couldn't quite see, but activity around the little Ford car was well in the line of my vision. The tall fella standing holding the rear passenger door open seemed somehow familiar, but I didn't quite place him just then. It wasn't till a diminutive slip of a lassie came popping out of the rear seat and made her way around to the front passenger side that my mind began to focus. I saw the two black limousines lined up behind the Ford. I saw in them the dark-hatted figures, eyes watchful under the brims, registering every movement around. I looked back at the girl climbing into the Ford car; it was Princess Margaret Rose. And the big fella was the son of the Duke of Buccleuch. It suddenly dawned on me who it was who was engaging Bill in such earnest conversation; it could be none other than the heir to the throne, Princess Liz herself. It was small wonder that I hadn't been able to see who was there on the step – to be frank, and making use of a couthy Scots saying, she wasn't the height of a tippenny

scrubber. I heard her thanking friend Bill for something or other, and watched her retire to the rear seat of the car. Buccleuch Jnr. closed the door, and we nipped smartly indoors calling for the lady of the house to come and watch the royal departure. (She displayed not the slightest interest, as I recall, and continued with her baking). As the little car chugged off uphill, followed by no less than five limousines, each packed with hard-looking characters, I asked "Where the hell are they goin'?" Bill took one last look as the cavalcade disappeared from view; "They'll be turnin' right at the tap o' the brae", said he, "they're gonnae open a floer show at Droodle". I had heard some reference to "Droodle" during the conversation at the door; there was a wee niggle of curiosity, but I let the subject drop. There was some brief discussion with our hostess regarding a talked of romance between Princess Elizabeth and a bloke called Philip, but that subject, too, petered out.



Young Princess Elizabeth, heir to the throne

NOTE: The name 'Droodle' refers to Druid Hall but with typical Dumfries country custom, it was locally called Droodle. It is set in an isolated grove of trees about halfway up the Scaur water between Drumlanrig and the back of the Knipes.

The return journey to New Cumnock must have been unremarkable, for I can recall no detail of it. No more thunderstorms, anyway, thank goodness, and home to a warm bed at night. If we hadn't been thoroughly soaked on the way to Thornhill, there's no

saying where we might have ended up, maybe fish and chips from the Lochmaben Tallie's and the sky for a roof, more than likely.

Many years later, in my own car, and with my own Lady by my side, I took the right fork to Drumlanrig and followed the route that Bill and I had taken „way back down the years. I pointed out the white cot in which we had dried out after the storm and talked about the „brush“ with royalty. Not far beyond, at the top of a rise, I saw a signpost which indicated „Scar Water“. Ah! – One of Faither's favourite trout burns. I turned right and followed the narrow road up Scar. After a few miles, the landscape changed as it typically does as one follows those hill streams toward their source. Farm steadings and wooded areas became scarcer, and soon the Scar stream was winding towards the Nith through expanses of coarse hill grass, rock and peatbog. We had been traversing just such country for some time when an isolated grove of tall beeches loomed ahead. As I drove past at a leisurely pace, I noted that it sheltered a fairly large farm steading which stood back beyond a high stone wall. A nameplate mounted on a board above the wall took my eye. It made me suddenly recall events of some years previously; I resolved to stop on the way back.

The road follows Scar Water to within a mile or so from its source on Corse Hill – a mere mile or two from the source of the Afton, where that famous stream begins its journey to New Cumnock and Nith. Like all such hill roads, however, the surface deteriorates as it nears the limit of its extent, and on that day we turned around while we still were on a reasonable surface, and made our way back down. When I came to the grove of beeches, I pulled up. What, my Lady enquired, was the purpose of this impromptu halt? I asked for her forbearance, and left her wondering in the car as I walked over to the stone wall and craned my neck over at the point at which I had seen an elderly chap busying himself in a flowerbed. “Excuse me” I called, “Can I hae a word?”

He looked up from his labours, smiled widely at my head sticking up above the wall, and walked over. “Aye, a grand day!” came one of the familiar greetings exchanged by strangers as they meet in the hills and byways of Galloway.

“It is an a”, I said, “Sorry tae tak ye frae yer gairden, but how d’ye say whit’s oan yon wooden notice up yonder?”

He glanced in the direction of my pointing finger; “Oh” – says he, “Droodle!” I thanked him, and returned to the car.

“What was all that about?” my Lady wanted to know.

“Read what’s on that notice” I said.

“Druid Hall!” she replied.

“Thanks!” I grinned, and explained how I had at last found the explanation of something that had been a mystery to me for some years.

“The old ways are changin“, you cannot deny,
The way o’ the traveller is over,
There’s nowhere to go an’ there’s nowhere to bide –
So goodbye to the life of a Rover!”

Ewan MacColl

Chapter Fifteen - Throw Away The Tent-Pegs!

Lochmaben was still a favourite weekend destination during the months of spring and summer and with each visit, memorable and mostly hilarious incidents followed one upon the other. There was the night for instance, that Andy Turnbull came tearing down the track and around the castle ruins into the camp on Faither Hugh Turnbull's old Rover car. The rest of us had been out „on the town“ at some ploy or other – I can't recall just what or where, maybe at the Barass cinema with some of the lassies – and we weren't too surprised to find that Andy hadn't made it back before we did. He had a date with a farmer's lassie from High Tae or thereabouts and when a fella took farmers' lassies home from a date there could well be a dalliance in stackyard or hayshed and such dalliance is liable to take up some time. This particular evening, however, Andy arrived in some haste. In fact, had conditions been right, he'd literally have skidded to a stop in a cloud of dust. Since his skid marks were made on grass, there was no dust, but there was something decidedly unusual; he was trailing four fence posts and about twenty yards of barbed wire behind him! As he stepped out of the car it became plain to us that he'd had an adventure. He was grinning from ear to ear. Now when Andy's face split like that, it was certain that he had a story worth the telling. And you could never be sure that he was actually going to tell it. On this occasion the experience was shared.

This wasn't Andy's first date with the maid in question. It was the last (as it turned out) of several trysts. The young lady had shown some concern on about the third or fourth liaison, telling Andy that her dad had got wind of their meetings and he was anything but pleased. In fact she was continuing the relationship under threat of dire consequence. This fazed the bold Andy not at all. In reality it probably added spice to the situation as far as he was concerned, and he happily continued to „court“ the lass and to take her home safely each night. He managed to avoid confrontation with the farmer on these occasions by doing a loop around the farm stackyard in the car so that the one and only stop required was in allowing the lassie to alight through the passenger door. As soon as she was clear, Andy would be off like a shot, completing the loop and accelerating into the distance towards camp. Till this night, it had worked a treat. Coming around the stackyard as usual, he cut lights and engine so as to roll to a halt without alerting the house. His lady friend had her hand on the door handle, when she gave a horrified whimper. “There's dad oot the front!” Andy had given hasty and somewhat ungentle assistance to the lass in her exit from the car, fired the engine, cut the darkness with his main beam lights and slammed down the throttle. The old Rover behaved perfectly and ideally Andy would have been free and away; well, he did get away, but not quite scot free. There, looming up ahead in the beam of his lights was a brand new barbed wire fence! Well, Andy couldn't be sure of whether it was a backfire or a gunshot he heard – he swore he heard one or the other – but he wasn't about to take any chances. He took the new fence with him, all the way into camp.

There were no more dates with the farmer's daughter!

It isn't always easy when thinking back to those days, to get events in the order in which they actually happened. I know that Andy Turnbull wasn't always with the group who descended on Lochmaben every other weekend in the year of '48 but since there was at least one other incident in which he was a ringleader I know he must have been there on two occasions.

We were anything but a rich bunch. In truth, on most weekend camping excursions, after paying for the essentials like food and petrol, we could be said to be pretty impecunious. A date and a visit to the picture hall would be about our limit most weekends. We were never in danger of being in alcohol-induced trouble. We hadn't the cash to buy the stuff! We liked attending the local dances, though.

Lockerbie was a scant three miles from Lochmaben and on a Saturday night in Lockerbie town hall there was music and dancing. One summer evening our hard-up group dallied on the sidewalk listening to the sounds of music and merriment coming from the front entrance. It would have taken a pooling of funds and a roll of the dice to get even one of us paid admission. We weren't about to give up however, and the mischievous minds got into gear. Only one harebrained idea (and there were several) seemed to have the tiniest vestige of merit. The plan was put into effect. Andy had perched on his head an ANZAC army hat, an uncommon piece of headgear, to say the least. I think it was Jock Burgoyne who had the camera. A camera, it must be said, which did have the look of something a couple of grades above the usual wee square Brownie. Its usefulness didn't surpass the more humble types however, as it had no film in it. A piece of white card about two inches by four was produced from somewhere, and in half-inch high letters, in black ink, the word „PRESS“ was carefully printed. This was tucked into the hatband on Andy's ANZAC headgear, in a prominent position just in front of the upturned brim (for the record, the brim of an ANZAC hat was turned vertically upward on the left.) We were now ready to tell our little lie. Moving in through the door with what we hoped was a confident and business-like air; we approached the pay-kiosk. This was of a makeshift style, being simply a small table set beside the door upon which a cash box and a roll of tickets were being attended by a couple of local fellas. Since the table was on the right of the door, Andy had to do a little twist of the head as he confronted the ticket-seller. "Press!" he said, giving a quick flick of his finger towards the card-bedecked hat and flashing the Andy Turnbull smile. The rest of us shuffled and mumbled at each other trying to look as authentic as we knew how. The lad looked slightly askance at the four out-of-town faces, took in the camera, and said "Aye – jist gan in boys!" We went in, and spent most of the following half-hour pointing out imaginary points of interest to each other and exhorting Johnny to take photos of this and that with his empty camera. We finally decided that whoever happened to be running the dance wouldn't find it strange if this group of „newsmen“, having done their job, laid aside the tools of their trade and took part in the social activities for the remainder of the evening. An enjoyable night was had by all – due in no small part to the knowledge that we'd sneaked in free.

Later in the season Andy „Pimpy“ Stewart and I took the road to Lochmaben and subsequently to the same Lockerbie dance. As I paid for my ticket at the small table and turned to pass into the bright hall lights, it crossed my mind that the lad with the cash box might well have recognised me. I was two steps beyond when his voice came following. "Whaur's the rest o' the press gang the night Pal?"

I turned, open-mouthed – though with no idea what I was going to say in reply. He grinned at me, eyes twinkling. I relaxed, stuck my thumb up, winked and went to the dance.

In the year of 1948 the east coast of the border country was hit by the worst rain storm in living memory. The flooding which accompanied and followed in the aftermath of this storm caused widespread havoc. Greenlaw, though a long way from the coast, was hard hit. There had been a cloudburst some miles above the village, in the Lammermuir hills where arose the Black Adder stream. We were into the month of September, and preparing for the last camping trip of the season. Greenlaw was the venue and we duly arrived to witness a scene of devastation. The village was particularly vulnerable because of its position on the Blackadder water. The stream tumbled down the glen flowing beneath the highway where it entered the village at the south end. It flowed in a wide meander out over flat meadowland, taking a long, slow curve till it re-crossed the highway and the rail track at the northern end. Just a week prior to our arrival that September weekend, the Blackadder had changed in the space of minutes from a tumbling hill stream to a raging torrent; a wall of brown water which came roaring down the glen to the bridge on the village highway. The bridge itself, though written off as a fit crossing for motorised traffic, we found still passable by bike. It was obvious that it might as well have collapsed completely; it would need to be demolished and rebuilt. The house adjacent (I seem to recall a baker's shop) was open to the elements. The gable wall was gone. We four – as far as I can remember, Bob, Harry, Buster and I – having said our hellos to the girls and their folks, took a tour around on foot. Some of the sights we saw were hardly credible. What had been flat meadowland contained within the wide sweep of the Blackadder ramble was now a hill; a hill built of gravel and sediment which had been transported by the roaring surge of the previous week. The flood had obviously been formed into a gigantic swirl as the brown water hit the valley bottom and was forced to the left by the lie of the land and had deposited hundreds of tons of whatever solid material had been carried from the hills above the village. At the other end of the village, the rails and sleepers of the rail track hung incongruously in mid-air, from pier to pier. All of the solid timber and masonry of the bridge was gone, carried away in the flood. Nearby where the road bridge had suffered a similar fate, the army had come to the rescue and installed a very good „temporary“ Bailey bridge (I use quotes advisedly – the „temporary“ bridge served the community of Greenlaw for some years after.)

We got a pleasant surprise that weekend. This took the form of a dinner invitation to the home of two of our girl friends, Fay and Anne Lillico. The element of surprise arose from the fact that, up till then, our rover band from the Wild West had been personae non gratae as far as Mr. Lillico the butcher was concerned. At least, so it had seemed, for his reaction to friend Bob's association with his pretty elderdaughter approached the realms of paranoia. He'd even been spied following the two of them on the street! Hence the surprise; the pleasure lay mainly in the fact that Fay and Anne's father was the Greenlaw butcher – and in those days of post war austerity meat was still strictly rationed. So it can well be imagined how, after examining with amazement and awe the flood high-water level mark on the living room wall five feet above floor level, we sat down to a feast the likes of which none of us had experienced since we were primary school kids.

There was a dose of culture to be enjoyed (endured?) that weekend too. Some of the lassies were involved in an amateur production of that famous tale of a Hielan“ village which supposedly comes and goes into existence and back to the nether regions again, time after time and none of the douce hielan“ folk getting a day older with the passing centuries. I“m referring, of course, to „Brigadoon“. The name is evocative of a real location in auld Ayrshire, but as is well known, Hollywood and/or the indulgence in a surfeit of whisky can make things appear or disappear in the oddest places and at the oddest times. At this time, Brigadoon was about to appear in Greenlaw. It would have been boorish in the extreme if we“d elected not to attend and we duly arrived and were seated before the stage. It was a great pity that we did not make a pact with each other to behave with some decorum, for our demeanour fell far short of that as the evening progressed. Perhaps any resolve on decorous behaviour would have collapsed in any case; we shall never know – but, in friend Bob“s words, we literally “cracked up“. The upshot of this was that the girls were grievously offended and adamantly refused to even acknowledge our existence from then on. Ah, well – there was no turning back and doing a rerun on good behaviour. We had „shit in the nest“ and no mistake. As we made our way up the hill to the tent that night, some of the hilarity had a kind of false ring to it.

The tent was pitched on an unusual site that weekend, for our usual campsite in the farmyard had been submerged by the deluge and was still waterlogged. Our way was up past the town hall (a surprisingly imposing edifice for such a small village) and through the wood beyond to a high grassy bank above the Black Adder. It was a beautiful late evening, calm and warm. I was glad of this for good reason; „Feetoro“ was barred from the tent until such times as the rest of the squad were safely in their sleeping bags and had their heads well muffled under. Bobby „Feetoro“ Rogerson had notoriously sweaty extremities, you see, and this often led to well justified cries of horror from the lads in the confines of a small tent. I took off my kilt socks and paraded around for some minutes on the dew-wet grass. It was near dark by then, and not a good time to try clambering down the gully to the water. Leaving my stockings to mellow in the night air, I crawled into the tent and rolled into my old army blankets. We had to be on the road in the morning.

The dawn was grey and didn“t seem to promise clement weather. As we scrambled from the tent however, there was no rain and it was as yet a calm morning. The remains of the „creesh“ which we had wheedled out of Mrs. McMillan at her wee chippie at the foot of the Coupla brae was employed in the fry-up for breakfast. We were profligate in the use of our remaining resources on that morning, for we were fairly sure that the camping season was ending right then. In fact, as we dismantled the tent, we discarded the pegs. We would make a fresh batch for next spring.

As we trekked down toward the highway with our bikes, the wind started to blow. And if Rab Burns had been with us on the forty-eight hours following, “O“ a“ the airts the win“ can blow” would surely have been less fulsome in its praise o“ the West! That damned wind was howling all the way o“er Aird“s Moss, Muirkirk, Biggar, Peebles and right into our teeth.

Long before we struggled at a snail“s pace into Galashiels we had begun to have regrets about throwing away the tent pegs. It was obvious by this late afternoon that there was a night in the open in prospect. Pedalling on a level surface was a head-

down, straining slog, and even the slightest uphill grade found us hiking alongside our bikes. Some miles west of Gala, we called it a day. The road here ran parallel to the railway, which lay above and to the right. Where the bank levelled out on top and a few feet from the steel rails, the tent was spread on the grass. We could have taken some time and improvised pegs, but none of us felt like engaging in any labour that could be avoided. We lay in our blankets between the canvas sheeting of the tent, our kilts for pillows, and slept like logs till we awoke to broad daylight and the roar of a passing train. The wind had died down. I poked my head out of the swaddling folds of kilt, tent canvas and blanket; there was rime on the grass. Down on the highway, as four dishevelled and wild-looking figures clambered to their feet on the bank-top, an excursion bus had pulled up. Perhaps the driver had acquiesced to a request by some old ladies or beer soaked fellas for a pee-break. We never would find out, for I think the appearance of the apparitions – tousle-haired, bare-legged, unwashed and kiltless – on top of the railway embankment prompted them to move ahead to where they could feel themselves to be in a safer and more civilised environment. This episode lightened our gloom for as long as it took to share some bread and cheese, pack the gear on the bikes and take the highroad into the teeth of that hellish wind once more.

The day was fading to gloomy, gusting dusk as we four weary wanderers trauchled our way into Douglas Water, knowing that there was yet another night under the stars ahead. We were trudging over the rise to where a long, slow downward gradient began which would take us an easy mile or so closer to the village of Douglas, which was the next place on our route, when I made the dismaying discovery that I had somewhere along the long way lost my groundsheet. The prospect of lying on the wet ground appealed to me not at all. And the traversing of a further mile, easy or not, would make certain that our final stop for the night would take place in full darkness; not a pleasing prospect. Buster had been musing along the way from Biggar that it might be feasible for us to reach Muirkirk, where he happened to know the local polis. He reckoned that we would be welcomed to stay there overnight. As it turned out, Buster had been somewhat optimistic – about fifteen miles optimistic in fact. The word „polis“ pulled a wee trigger in somebody’s brain, however, and taking the first right downhill off the main road, we made for the police station; we were about to ask to be locked in the cells for a night!

We explained our sorry predicament to the polis, who seemed to find the situation quite funny. Well, I suppose anybody standing at their own front door with a cosy living room behind them would find the sight of four chattering characters who had a tent but no pegs and a groundsheet short to be quite comical. Whilst standing there looking at that grinning polis, the thought crossed my mind that if this was the Lord’s judgement on us for laughing at the lassies and „Brigadoon“, then he was going just a wee bit over the score.

“Naw!” says he, “Ah cannae put yez in the cells, but c’moan wi’ me.” And he led us to the door of a large timber hut. “Ah’ll put ye in the office for the night!”

He opened the door and we trooped gratefully in. Definitely not a palace – but to us, the master bedroom of the finest hotel in Glesca couldn’t have been better.

I was awakened in the morning when a pair of feet encased in ladies’ slippers shuffled past my nose. It was the policeman’s wife and she had a tray heaped with fresh

morning rolls and fried eggs. It was one of the most delicious breakfasts I could remember.

We did not depart without very sincerely thanking the Douglas Water polis and his good lady. We couldn't do more than that at the time, for I don't think there was the price of a fish supper among the four of us.

As we traversed the moor road and approached the town of Muirkirk in the mid afternoon, the weather began at last to improve. We stopped at the police house in the town. As Buster had said, he was well known to the folks there, and we were treated to another good meal and a welcome pot of tea. The dramatic improvement in the weather had us raring to go, however, and we didn't stay long in Muirkirk. We cycled (yes actually cycled!) the rest of the way, cutting left at Logan Toll and taking the back road to Meadow cottages which took us clear of the Cumnock streets and traffic. From there, it was a mere three-mile run to Lochside and the telling of the tale to a relieved family.

A few days later, a box of chocolates and a pair of nylon stockings were delivered to the polis station at Douglas Water.

Such was the last camp of the season in nineteen forty-eight. Our relationship with our bonnie Greenlaw lassies receded to pleasant memory, and occasional friendly communication. It was to be over forty years ere I set foot in the village of Greenlaw again.

Back at Bank number one Pit, old „Baker“ Walker joined Blackie and me in the workshop one day. He was in tears; „Snap“, our crotchety old pit-bottomer, had been caught and dragged up the shaft by the moving cage. He was dead. A terrible accident but things even more horrifying were in the future for the miners of New Cumnock.

“Sae weel I mind yon Lammas eve
That left sae mony cause tae grieve;
Mud, deadly, slid; and thirteen men
Forever sleep in Afton Glen.”

“Coal and Afton Glen” B. Rogerson circa 1969

Below – An overhead view of
Knockshinnoch



Chapter Sixteen- Black Lammastide

On Wednesday September the sixth, nineteen fifty, Toe Melvin arrived in the workshop at Knockshinnoch Castle Colliery some hours before he was due to do so. Geordie Paton, being the man who was responsible for seeing that the underground machinery was at all times covered by qualified engineers, wasn't too pleased to see him.

"What the hell are you daein' up the pit?" he barked.

Toe walked past Geordie to where he could seat himself on a toolbox.

"Ah'll no' be gaun' back doon, either!" Toe declared; "Somethin's gonnae happen doon there!"

Geordie, nonplussed just then, said "Ye'll hae to go back anyway – for yer graith bag."

"The fuckin' graith bag can stey there!" Toe replied. "Ah'll never be back doon that pit again!"

Having heard this adamant pronouncement, Geordie demanded to know what all the fuss was about. Toe had been in number five heading. This heading was a project which was planned to make the ventilation of Knockshinnoch Castle more efficient. It was rising steeply towards the surface and progress was fairly rapid. In accord with accepted practice, the advancing girdered roadway had been reduced in dimension. This was a measure adopted when the conditions ahead were not known with 100% certainty. Toe had been called to this heading on some repair or other; possibly a problem with a drilling machine or a conveyor tail end or some other of the irksome defects which regularly plagued mine-drivers. He had been halfway up the heading, sweating and swearing under the load of his tool bag, when he was all at once met by a gush of water which tumbled down the heading and around his feet, bringing with it a load of silt and shards of broken timber. Toe dropped his tool bag, turned, and got the hell out of it straight away and he kept going till the second he parked his arse on that toolbox in the workshop. Geordie had gone as far as warning Toe that his job was at stake before two-thirty p.m. lousin' time arrived that Wednesday afternoon of September sixth. Thursday the seventh dawned, and Toe's tool bag still lay in number five heading. It lay for a long, long time.

Toe Melvin never set foot in Knockshinnoch Castle again for the rest of his life.

The light of a wet and blustery Thursday faded to the twilight of an even wetter evening. I don't remember what film was showing at the Barn picture hall. It must have been something I really wanted to see, for at eight o'clock I stepped off the Burnfoot bus at Knockshinnoch road-end and ran across the road into the shelter of the bright foyer as the twilight dulled to an early darkness. The rain kept up a constant drumming on the corrugated roof all through the film. When I came out just before ten, it had eased somewhat, and for this I was thankful, for my handiest bus home had to be caught down at the Old Mill toll at ten after ten. I „ran a pole and walked a pole“ and was there for the bus from Dumfries when it arrived.

It had been just another ordinary wet September day but as the lowering clouds spread darker from the east and before I had boarded the Burnfoot bus en route for the bus stop at Knockshinnoch road-end and an evening at the pictures, men were dying in

Castle's number five heading. Before I sat down to watch the film, a George Medal had been earned and as I lay down in warm contentment for my night's sleep, high ranking Coal Board officials were gathered at Knockshinnoch pit head, dreading the approaching time when the people of New Cumnock would have to be told that one hundred and twenty-nine of their men were trapped in the apparently impregnable catacombs of Castle Colliery.

I arose on the morning of the eighth, broke my fast, slung my piece-bag over my shoulder and caught my bus as always. Incredibly, it wasn't until I was stepping off the bus platform at Bank pit road-end that I had the first inkling of something being badly wrong. I overheard Dan Jess wondering aloud about the situation of a hundred men who had been trapped in Knockshinnoch. On the instant, every last vestige of lingering sleepiness was dashed from my mind. I set my face towards the baths building and my working gear.

The afternoon shift of Thursday, seventh of September hadn't been long at work in Knockshinnoch when Dan Strachan, deputy, reported another „burst“ of water at the working face of number five heading. Another colliery official, Andy Cunningham, felt enough concern about this situation to decide that a trip to the surface to inspect conditions there would be a wise move. It was, but through no fault of any man at Knockshinnoch Castle that night, tragically late. One of the shift blacksmiths, I believe it was Bobby Nairn, had already been witness to the bizarre spectacle of a full-grown tree disappearing downwards into a rapidly sinking morass of black, porridge-like silt. A rain-soaked Andy Cunningham ran to the shaft gates and demanded immediate despatch back down into the pit. The implications of what he had seen were horrifying, and Andy knew that lives could well depend on how quickly he could warn of the danger. I don't know exactly what faced this brave man in the shaft-bottom. There are stories that he actually had to swing hand over hand on the girders at one stage, in order to reach a point in the main roadway which would guarantee access to the areas of the pit in which most of the miners were working. That he could have assessed the situation on the surface and decided to make certain of his own safety, there is no doubt. He did assess the situation, came to a correct conclusion, and went selflessly to what could have been his doom. A brave man indeed!

„Chook“ Simpson, one of my friends who was in the Castle pit that night, was attending as driver of a small auxiliary hauler by the side of the main level. Chook reckoned he heard some bangin“ an“ crunchin“ from in bye and thought that his cousin Davie, who was the underground diesel „pug“ driver, must be having some bother with derailments. This illusion wasn't long held. He saw the headlamp of a frantically running man come bobbing out of the darkness of the mine. His cousin Davie never faltered in his headlong flight when Chook yelled at him, “Run, for Goad's sake run!” He shouted at Chook, “Ye should see whit's comin“ oot here!” Chook ran.

They were in the last cage which raised men from the seething hell that was Knockshinnoch Castle that night and they had to argue vehemently with the pit bottom signaller before the guy was convinced of the deadly danger. Shortly thereafter, there was a solid sea of mud which, before it finally stabilised many feet up the pit shaft, had taken steel rails and tubs in its path and crumpled them like paper.

And buried there with all the mangled steel was a puny, half-inch diameter phone cable, still intact!

Every possible escape route from the pit was closed. There was no way out. One mercy lay in the fact that communication by phone with the trapped men was possible. It very quickly became evident that here was a disaster of major proportions and as the night wore on, more and more of the off shift colliery officials and miners congregated on Knockshinnoch pithead. And the more the dreaded facts became clear, the more despair deepened. Then, sometime during the long night, the second near miracle occurred.

Johnny Clapperton, an oversman in our Bank number one pit, was one of the large group of officials who were in constant contact with each other, trying desperately to come up with some course of action which might help. It came to Johnny that, in his days as a fireman in #6 Mine, he had worked in a heading known as „Waterhead“ which, he seemed to recall, must have been fairly close to Knockshinnoch workings, and had been, in fact, in the same coal-seam. There was an immediate search for the old survey maps and thanks to the regulations which demanded their preservation, they were handily traced. The information found there sent hopes soaring sky-high, and straightaway shifted the centre of operations to Bank number six mine. If the old survey maps were accurate – and this wasn't 100% sure – there might be a still passable roadway to within forty feet of the Castle workings and the area in which the miners were trapped.

It was sheer bedlam that Friday morning, no matter where you looked around Bank mine head yard and buildings. There were those who knew exactly where they were going and why. This was just as well, for they at least knew what their purpose was. They knew the mine; they knew who could direct them; they knew with some certainty what they had to face, and they would know how to do the job when they got to it. But there were many hundreds of others – shopkeepers, bakers, joiners, clergymen, drivers, clerks and every type and trade under the sun who were there to help and didn't know how. Many of them would be put to good use as the hours passed, but right then they had no purpose bar the sharing of our hope, and the willingness to stand by and be there if they were needed. I saw men there who were unmistakably, miners and whom I had never seen before. They would be from Cumnock, Auchinleck, Dalmellington, Kirkconnel – all there and willing to try whatever was required to get their fellow miners out of the dark galleries of Knockshinnoch and into the sweet light of day. These men were among the most welcome and would be in the front line of the fight.

At seven-thirty I had overalls, boots and seib-gorman hat and I was digging in the depths of my baths building locker for my belt. If I had no belt, there was no way I could carry my pit-lamp. My belt was gone. I felt no anger – for it was certain that it had been commandeered by somebody who was about to use a pit-lamp and was therefore being well used. I raised my head and called out into the milling crowd “I need a belt!”

Belts arrived from every direction!

There was a surprising amount of room in the engineer shop as I was checking my tools. The immediate approaches were seething with activity. Men were hurrying

constantly back and forth past the door, carrying rolls of canvas air-duct, coils of cable, batches of flat two by four timber and other items which were going to be essential in the attempted rescue underground. I had seen, as I swung around the corner of our workshop, the row of wan faces ranged along the wall above the man-riding hauler rails at the mine mouth. They were mothers, daughters, sons, sweethearts – nearly all with a desperate hope in their hearts for somebody down there, entombed in Knockshinnoch's West mine. Anna McLatchie was there and as I saw her look of recognition, I raised my hand to her. Her dad was down there, somewhere in the stygian dark.

Blackie had his squad organised and on the move within minutes. The ultimate object of our particular part of the operations was clear. We had to see to the installation of two axial flow „Torpedo“ fans as close to the area of the attempted breakthrough as was possible. This was a monumental task. For a start, the old Waterhead roadway hadn't seen the light of a headlamp or resounded to the tramp of a boot for some years past. We could only guess at what stage of deterioration the girders and roof supports would be found; and there would be black damp and fire damp. Even the man-haulage roadway of the main number six mine posed problems as far as the passage of two one-ton fans was concerned. We had the will, the engineering know-how, all the willing labour in the world, and above all, the motivation; so we went at it, hard.

The need for this undertaking had been anticipated just as soon as it was realised that the one hope of rescue lay in the long abandoned workings of number six. Inspection of the old maps showed the limits of Waterhead workings – the closest area to Knockshinnoch's West mine and the trapped men - to be well beyond the farthest point in number six mine, which had received any kind of maintenance in recent years, either in the matter of roadway support or of ventilation. Beyond the two-foot seam, which was one of the seams closest to the surface, the only reason for access to the old number six workings was for the operation and maintenance of the pumping stations. Access to the main station was via a short tunnel off to the right from the main mine and just beyond the limit of the man-hauler. This was the better part of a mile from the surface. Down beyond this point, the mine took a suddenly steeper dip, ending in a ninety degree right turn, and along a level for about a hundred yards to where the four-foot level pumps were situated. The Camlarg dook, a one-time endless haulage-way, dipped down to the right from there, in completely the reverse direction from the main mine from the surface. Down in the dip, at the limits of Camlarg, was the outermost pumping station. This was at the lowest drainage point for all of the coal seams being worked at this time, in either Knockshinnoch or Bank. From this station, a steep mine roadway connected back up to the main pump room, just off the main number six. This roadway, „Haeburn's“ mine by name, served as the return airway for the system which ventilated all roadways used for access to the pump rooms. A wilder mine roadway than Haeburn's couldn't be imagined; in travelling it, you found yourself clambering as often as not along the tops of the original arched-girder supports. Beyond the dip pump and up the leftward rise into Waterhead workings, there was no maintenance and no ventilation. Since the abandonment of the coal seams in that area, there had been no perceived need for concern in either direction.

On Friday September eighth 1950, a fresh-air base was established with all speed at the bottom of Haeburn's mine, just in by from the dip pumping station and in the wild abandoned roadways beyond, there was now a desperate need for ventilation. Members of the Mines Rescue Brigade had already traversed the old roadways right to the solid wall of coal behind which it was reckoned – and hoped – that oversman Andy Houston and the trapped Knockshinnoch miners would be gathered. To thousands of those to whom this information was passed, this had to be the triumphant beginning of a speedy rescue; men who were familiar with these dark galleries knew the different reality. No miner who values his own safety or that of his comrades would ever move into an underground area unless it had been checked for safe access by specially trained men. Not even a working coal face or roadway which was in constant use was exempt. As can be imagined, the long abandoned workings of Waterhead got special attention - especially so when it was realised that an unknown number of completely inexperienced people would be in the area. During those checks and in the initial tentative exploration of the old workings, it was found that the rising roadways into Waterhead workings had stood the test of time and pressure to an almost miraculous degree. To a healthy adult, a walk into Waterhead and back to the fresh-air base would, on the face of it, be an easy matter. There was one enormous obstacle, however. Beyond the established fresh-air base, in the long unused galleries, there was little or no movement of the air. What little there was occurred because of a phenomenon familiar to every living thing on the earth's surface – the weather!



The crater with the Graveyard beyond

When the first Mine Rescue team made their way up into the workings, they had with them equipment to cover any foreseeable eventuality – Davy „Glennie“ lamps, individual breathing apparatus, nylon safety lines, etc. No appreciable excess of CO₂ (black damp) was found at the lower levels at the foot of the Waterhead heading, where it might have been expected. As the squad made progress to the higher levels, however, there came a point at which the flame in the lamp carried by the lead man increased in length till it filled the internal gauze cage and blew itself out. This could

only mean that there was 6% plus fire damp (methane) in the air; well into the range of explosibility – as demonstrated by the lamp flame and moreover, at a level which rendered the air non-life-sustaining due to the consequent lowering of the oxygen percentage. This situation became evident when there was still nine hundred feet of travel to go before reaching the coal face and the area where digging must take place. Perhaps at this point a discussion of the situation, with consideration of the possible consequences of each factor should be entered into. It will then be better understood just what faced those who were concerned in this effort on the day – and how the lives of one hundred and sixteen men depended upon the whims of fickle Fate.

No one could foretell exactly what effect the installation of our torpedo fans would have on the wall of fire damp in the heading. One thing was certain – a lot depended upon the weather on the surface. A mine, or section of a mine, which has only one means of access and egress is in effect like the closed tube of a barometer in which the mercury rises and falls according to the air pressure. High pressure brings clear weather and the mercury is forced along the tube away from the open end. A simple substitution of mine roadway for a glass tube and lethal fire damp for mercury will make the picture clear. Falling barometric pressure on the surface not only allowed the mercury in the tube to flow back to the open end – it also had parallel effect in the underground roadways, where pressurised gases in the strata were released into and along the roadways. It was clear, therefore, that continuation of the stormy weather on the surface boded ill for the men who had to face the poisoned atmosphere in Waterhead.

On the surface it had stopped raining and the barometric pressure was rising.

With only a puny phone cable, still giving faint communication, old survey maps showing the seemingly close proximity of the two separate mining operations and a rising barometer tending to push deadly gas back – was this fate? Was it divine intervention? We couldn't tell, but we prayed for more. At the scene of the origin of the disaster at this time, men were struggling frantically to stem any further flow of peat silt into the fifty-foot deep crater which had appeared in the field south of the colliery. The area of the rim was roughly that of a football field. Like some devilish funnel, the crater was swallowing up all that was poured into it. The Knockshinnoch farmer willingly gave all of his hay stock to be poured down into the awful chasm. Brother Lachie was there, driving a dump-truck, and coming as close to the precarious edge as he dared, time after time, to pour all the dry debris, timber or anything else seen as suitable down into the depths. A belt conveyor had appeared overnight as if by magic and pit bing material was being continuously offloaded over the rim. The volume of peat displaced from this treacherous basin was truly colossal, and as time passed and the only possible point of rescue – that in Bank number six – became evident, the attempts to stabilise the crater by this method were stopped.

Where we could use mechanical power, we used it. Where there was naught but the strength and will of men, this was applied. In a surprisingly short time the fans were in Waterhead and as close to the volatile mass of methane as could be attained. Men were hauling armoured cable, heaving massive flameproof switchgear, carrying roll after roll of screen cloth and canvas air-duct. A supply cable was laid from the dip pump room and up into the heading to be connected to the gear, which would control the torpedo fans. Blackie, Ian, Sauce and I set to with a will and no power extension

or double fan installation in the history of New Cumnock Collieries ever took less time. Three times during the connection of one gate-end switch, the cry came down the heading, "Out – out! – the gas is on the move!"

It was a case of dropping everything and moving smartly down-heading to the fresh-air base by Haeburn's until another call came from the brigade lads up there in their breathing apparatus. Heroic efforts were being made all around us. Here at last, all of the shopkeepers, joiners, plumbers, schoolteachers and men of all trades and occupations who were in the depths of the earth for the first time in their lives were realising that their willing services were much required and appreciated. They worked in relays to get the materials to where they were needed. They worked under the supervision of experienced mining men in the erection of a divider screen up the length of the heading, so as to create a return airway. They toiled alongside the miners hanging the canvas air-duct on the upstream side of the fans. And they ran with the rest of us when the cry "Gas on the move!" came down the line.

Once, we were asked to see that the roadway remained clear till further notice. Within a few minutes, the reason for this was apparent. A stretcher party came hurrying down grade and past us on the long trek to the surface with one of their fellow brigade members. Up there, in an atmosphere that was probably more methane than anything else, his nose clip had slipped, and before he could get it refitted, he collapsed. To those who had harboured any doubt or complacency as to the potentially lethal nature of the elements they were battling against, this was surely a salutary experience.

I heard one of the Bank miners asking Blackie why he didn't test the cables as normal before connecting them. Blackie looked up from where he was sweating over a joint box. "Just wan wee turn o' the Megger doon here son", he said, "An' there'd be airms, legs an' heids fleein' up this fuckin' mine!"

Few people seemed to realise it, but there must have been times when the methane-air mixture was at a volatile level. One stray spark could have triggered the worst mine explosion in history. And all hope for the men in Knockshinnoch west mine would have blinked out with the same spark.

When, later, it was all over, many a mineworker who had toiled in the darkness on those days shuddered at the thought of what could so easily have happened.

Blackie wanted something-or-other from the surface. I cannot recall exactly what, but I do know that the hiking fell to yours truly. I was the youngster among them, after all. I can remember that when I came back down I wasn't carrying anything, so it must have been a matter of passing or receiving information. I trudged up Camlarg, and round on to the main mine roadway. I was pleased to find that the man-hauler was handily available, and was soon up there in the fresh clear air of the afternoon. As I climbed out of the tub, a uniformed Salvationist stepped forward and without preamble stuck a Capstan cigarette between my lips. Dishevelled, and black as a crow, I stood there and enjoyed the first drag. A female member of the Sally army took me firmly by the arm and said "'m'on son! Hae a drap o' tea!"

Well, now - I did have the means for the making of my own tea, but it would have taken more time than conscience would allow, so I followed the lassie into the baths building where I discovered that a fully stocked and equipped food-centre had been organised. Tea and sandwiches were swallowed in short order, and it was time for back down the mine. As I came within sight once more of the man-riding tubs, I saw

that this particular run was all but full up with men and materials. I decided to wait for the fifteen minutes or so that would pass till it arrived back again. Most of the engine-men would have taken ten minutes longer, but I knew that Bobby Meekie was at the controls and when Bobby was on that throttle handle, you'd just better put your head down low and hang on for dear life! There was an argument of some sort going on around the leading tub. Willie Hamilton was trying to impress on a news reporter that it was much more important to get the tub loaded than it was to get a photo of the operation. The guy had his big fancy camera trained exactly where he wanted it, and he tacitly ignored Willie's remonstrations. Willie, normally a placid and devout Brethren fella, stepped forward, wrested the camera from the reporter's hands and smashed it down the haulageway in a million pieces. Up along the high wall there was a cheer of approval. I looked up; Anna was still there. I waved a hand at her, turned into the workshop and lit another Capstan.

Fifteen minutes later, as I stepped into the man-riding tub once more, the same Salvationist stepped forward and pushed an ounce of chewing tobacco into my overall pocket.

When I clambered out of the tub and began the walk down towards Camlarg, the notion took me to call in at the main pump room, so I turned right and went in along the short level to the whitewashed walls and bright lights of the pumping station. A screen had been erected here too, I noticed, which I could see was serving to deflect the return air travelling up Haeburn's out clear of the pump room and directly out to the main mine. One of the Bank firemen, Rab Martin, was stationed there, taking his ease on a bench by the pump room entrance. I had a brief word with Rab, but decided to move on back to the fresh-air base. It occurred to me that Haeburn's mine offered a much shorter, if less smooth, route back to my destination. I decided to travel the mine, took my leave of Rab, and, finding a flap in the screen cloth barrier, set off on my shortcut. Haeburn's held no terrors for me, for I had travelled this way several times in trips made to and from the dip pump in the course of my routine maintenance work. I was approaching the end of my rough journey, and, coming towards another freshly erected screen, was quite startled when a hand holding a Glennie lamp was thrust through from the other side. The flame extended alarmingly. As I came within a few yards of the screen, a headlamp poked through; "Whit the hell are ye daein' there?" an irate voice demanded. "D'ye ken there's fower per cent fire damp travellin' in the air here?"

I said no, I didn't, and that I was returning from a trip to the surface. As I passed through the screen, I recognised him as a mines inspector, Young by name, who had taken charge of the ventilation and safety arrangements at the fresh-air base and beyond. He demanded to know how I had dodged past the deputy who had been posted to prevent any access to Haeburn's. I told him that I had deliberately dodged no one, and had, in fact, had conversation with the said deputy before entering the mine, and had not been given to understand that Haeburn's was out of bounds. He seemed to accept my story; after all, the truth of what I was saying could be easily checked. If it was, and Rab got hell for his lapse, I never found out.

In the heading beyond the fresh-air base, there was little change. Messages were still intermittently coming down line warning of gas movement. The torpedo fans were making a difference, but mainly through their creation of fresh air circulation up past the end of the screen cloth barriers; the body of methane was still responsive mainly

to barometric pressure. It was becoming very obvious that even a breakthrough into Knockshinnoch west mine would not signal the rescue of the trapped miners. Any unprotected men who ventured into that lethal gas concentration would most surely die. The obvious solution appeared to be to supply every man with breathing apparatus. It wasn't as simple as that. The fellas who were digging their way forward on the number six side of the barrier all wore breathing gear; but they were rescue brigade personnel, who had undergone rigorous training in the use of breathing apparatus. Many a one had experienced a moment of sheer panic in the earlier stages of his training as he tried taking a deep breath inside that clinging rubber mask. What would happen to exhausted men who, having been freed from what had seemed a death sentence, now knew that a final three-hundred-yard stumble would put that death behind them? Would they be able to adjust to the seemingly stifling rubber masks? The picture was still in our minds of the brigade man being carried out on a stretcher; a highly trained brigade man. As Friday 8th September wore on, minds were being urgently applied to this looming problem.

In the west mine, Andy Houston had the men working in rotation, digging their way towards their only hope of release. Thanks to the incredibly surviving telephone cable, co-operative effort could be, and was, arranged. There was one part of the instruction relayed from the surface that must have been disquieting, to say the least, to Andy and his deputies. They were under strict orders to monitor very carefully the direction of any movement of air at the moment of breakthrough. If the air movement was from number six mine into Knockshinnoch, there was only one course of action to take. The newly created hole must be immediately resealed in order to stop the transfer of methane gas laden atmosphere into the midst of the trapped men.

Late Friday afternoon one of the brigade men came down the heading and broke the news to us that they had „holed through“ and spoken to the men in Knockshinnoch. He waited till the cheer died and said, “We had tae seal it up again ...” There was a long silence. There was no alternative, however, but to pick up and get on with it. Dr. Fyffe wanted to be in a position to meet the men as they came out just as soon as possible after they were clear of the methane body. A new base had to be established further up the heading. There was work to be done. And there were developments on the surface.

The high-ranking officials of the Coal Board weren't the only people applying their brainpower in the attempt to find a way around the hellish obstacles being encountered in the foul dark of Bank number six mine. Concern for the entombed men of Knockshinnoch wasn't confined to the coal towns of Scotland, or even of the U.K. The world knew of the disaster and news of concern and offers of assistance were arriving from many thousands of miles around. Many well-meaning suggestions were considered and rejected as being impractical but one was seized upon. A suggestion that a smaller, more compact type of breathing apparatus might be available in sufficient quantity was followed up and as a result the „Salvos“ apparatus was on the way to Bank. Like so much of the action of the previous twenty-four hours, a calculated risk was about to be taken. A risk, but the alternative could not be contemplated.

When I arrived at the surface on my next errand, I was startled to find that darkness had fallen. The Salvation Army was still there, and the willing hands of strangers still

fetched and carried, poured tea, cooked food, made sandwiches and performed a myriad of essential tasks. I wonder if they ever realised in the aftermath just how much they had done for the men on both sides of that barrier in number six?

Blackie's squad had done all they could as engineers but other tasks were in need of being done, and we took them on with a will. Demarcation lines were observed when commonsense and safety dictated, beyond that, they were completely ignored. The dark hours of Friday-Saturday morning were taken up as far as I was concerned by a series of journeys down to the fresh-air base, with a short break between each on the surface for a mug of tea or a sandwich and the inevitable cigarette. The man-riding train, which had itself been the focus of disaster some twenty-two years past, was now having a salient part to play in the saving of scores of lives. It was instrumental in staving off exhaustion for many of those who carried materials down into the mine – myself included. The Salvos apparatus arrived and became the priority above all else for transport to the fresh-air base. The last time I was able to use the man-rake until my final journey to the surface I took a load of blankets and other supplies for Dr. Fyffe's emergency aid station. It was quickly realised that with the amount of manpower available, the most efficient method of getting the breathing apparatus to where it would be needed was to strap a set on each man's back and set him off to walk from the surface down to the distant base. By this method, all the required units were in transit almost at the same time, and the man-rider was free to be used for other essential loads.

In the early hours of Saturday morning I arrived in the workshop to find Blackie in conversation with two American reporters. They had been on the scene since before noon on Friday. He broke off his talk long enough to turn to me and say, "Time ye were away hame, Rab."

I raised a hand to acknowledge his words, but shook my head. In an adrenalin induced state of high energy, I felt that I could carry on for a long time yet. I wasn't alone in this as there were men there who had arrived for their nightshift on Thursday night, thirty hours before. I walked out of the shop, and went to the baths building where I picked up a wad of towels, some chocolate bars and a load of prepared sandwiches. I caught the next rake back down into the mine. Like many of the other fellas who had toiled through a day and a night, I had the desire to see, before stepping back, the first of the Knockshinnoch men come down Waterhead to life and freedom.

In common with all who were on the outside of that wall of coal and gas, I can only guess at the condition, thoughts and feelings of the miners who were huddled in Knockshinnoch west mine. They would be cold, tired, and hungry, that's for sure and they would be afraid. Davie Jess was one of them. The same Davie who had so boisterously welcomed me to the joys of mine work some years before. I can well imagine Davie's complimentary language when the Brigade men broke through and almost immediately stated their intention of sealing him and his mates back into their dark, foul-smelling prison. It happened again, this time the hole was actually enlarged enough to allow the passage of Brigade workers to go through and be among the trapped men. What a terrific moment that must have been! The euphoria was very short-lived; the gas began to move again – the wrong way. Brigade men, with their breathing apparatus, could withdraw back into Waterhead in number six. The trapped men, some, I would guess, now despairing, would have to stay in their prison, and let

themselves be sealed in once more. This time, however, something happened that lifted the trapped men from the depths of despair and misery. One man watched his Brigade companions clamber one by one back through the forty-foot tunnel to Waterhead. As the last man prepared to leave, he stripped off his breathing gear, handed it to his companion, and said, "On ye go – I'm stayin'!"

And he was sealed into the Knockshinnoch trap with his fellow miners. This was Dave Park, and his action earned the second George medal in the thirty dramatic hours since seven o'clock on Thursday September the eighth. Dave had risen above his fellow miners in New Cumnock, and had come from his high Coal Board office in Edinburgh to help his old workmates. By his action he proved that he had risen not only above the men in the pits – he had gone head and shoulders above 99% of humanity.

Saturday morning wore on, and we were well into the hours of daylight. Nearly all of the materials and back-up were in place in Waterhead, and men were being strung out at intervals up along the heading to form a human chain which would give both physical and moral support to the exhausted Knockshinnoch men. The time was approaching for the big commitment. All would depend now upon the reaction of untrained, exhausted men to their enforced dependence on the Salvos breathing apparatus. Dr. Andrew Fyffe, who could, in his lighter moments, be quite a funny fella, was ready for all eventualities at his station at the fresh-air base. He once told Faither, "Never drink whisky without water – an' by the same token, ye shouldnae drink water without a drap o' whisky in it!"

Such frivolity was far from his mind right then; there was a young man behind the wall in Knockshinnoch who was in even greater need than his friends. Gibb McAughtrie was asthmatic, and was in a bad way. The rescue brigade was preparing to bring him out first.

I think it was about eleven in the morning when I arrived in the workshop, beginning to feel the strain of almost thirty hours of constant hiking and hauling. Rab Timpany, mine manager, was in the shop in conversation with Blackie. Jock looked at me.

"Rab, Ah want you tae get yersel' hame!"

I was rummaging around looking for a cigarette. "Ah'll go in a wee while, Jock" I said.

Rab Timpany spoke up "Listen, lad – we'll need cover for Sunday mornin'. Get yersel' awa' doon the bloody road!"

I gave no answer to that, but said to Blackie "Gi'es wan o' yer fags, Jock – Ah've lost mine!"

Blackie smoked Capstan too, but with a wee bit of difference. He smoked „full strength“. More than that, he had the habit of boosting their effect by subjecting them to a toasting, either by storing his supply in the heat of the baths building or like right then, by laying them out loose on top of the steel plate above the shop fireplace. He handed me one of his fags. I turned around, lit a paper spill and applying it to the end of the cigarette, took a long grateful drag – and toppled backwards like a felled tree. I have little or no recollection of events after that. I can't recall even my arrival at Lochside, or of going to bed. I awoke sometime in the early Saturday evening, the light beginning to fade outside my window. I arose and went through to the kitchen, where Mum set me some dinner on the table. The radio was on. "Some of the men are out" she said.

In some strange way, in spite of the surge of joy at this news, I felt a twinge of resentment – as if I had been cheated of an experience in which I deserved a share. “I cannae go back tae the pit – Rab Timpany wid chase me!” I said. “I should think sae an a’!” Mum said emphatically, “Ye’re no’ gaun wi’ a neck like that!” Puzzled, I said, “My neck?” I rose and stood by the mirror. My neck was swollen up as though I had mumps. “Ye should ha’ seen it when ye arrived hame!” Mum said. Resigned to hearing the news as it broke over the radio, I got on with my meal.

Incredible as it may seem, it was about twenty years later that I discovered through a chance remark from my Mother that on Saturday the ninth of September 1950, at noon, I had been carried home in an ambulance.

In the climactic hours of the Knockshinnoch rescue I was at home, glued to the radio and catching every brief update. I knew, finally, that the last of those left alive came down Waterhead heading just before Sunday dawned, and took the long walk up to the early morning darkness to await the most welcome sunrise of their lives. There had been moments of tension and uncertainty during those last hours, but lighter moments too. Dick Morrison, one of those who had been entrusted with the task of escorting Knockshinnoch men down-heading to Dr. Fyffe’s base, picked one fella up as he cleared the gas body and removed his mask. Just then, the story goes, a call came from the Rescue Brigade that the gas was on the move. Dick gently suggested that it might be a good idea to move a little faster. It had been Dick’s lot to be appointed guide to a devout churchman – either Baptist or Brethren, it was never made clear – and the response Dick got to his exhortations was “Ah, Dick! – Don’t worry! Ah’m prepared tae meet my Maker!”

Dick very abruptly dropped the mask of polite propriety; “Aye! Said he, “That could weel be true – but Ah’m no’ bloody ready yet!!”

I heard news of one of the saddest episodes of this black Lammas tide. Three of our Salvation Army workers, part of the wonderful contingent who had showed so much kindness and compassion for the men, rescued and rescuers alike, had been tragically killed in a car crash as they sped through Cumnock on an errand connected with their work at Bank.

It had been known for some time that thirteen of the men were not accounted for. There were still some brave attempts being made to trace them, particularly via the bottom of the crater in the field behind the colliery. On Sunday, after it became apparent that further incursion into Knockshinnoch’s number five heading through the bottom of the crater was of no avail, and was inviting more calamity, the Coal Board made the sad announcement. No hope should be entertained that any of the thirteen would be found alive.

Sunday morning saw me back in the workshop at the mine-mouth. There was some clearing up to do.

I didn’t know all of the lost miners personally. Of the thirteen I knew Dan Strachan, the deputy on duty in the fated number five heading. I knew Will McFarlane – the same Will who had come storming down from the roof a long time back, demanding to know who had punched Tam on the nose. I knew Sam Rowan, whose brother John

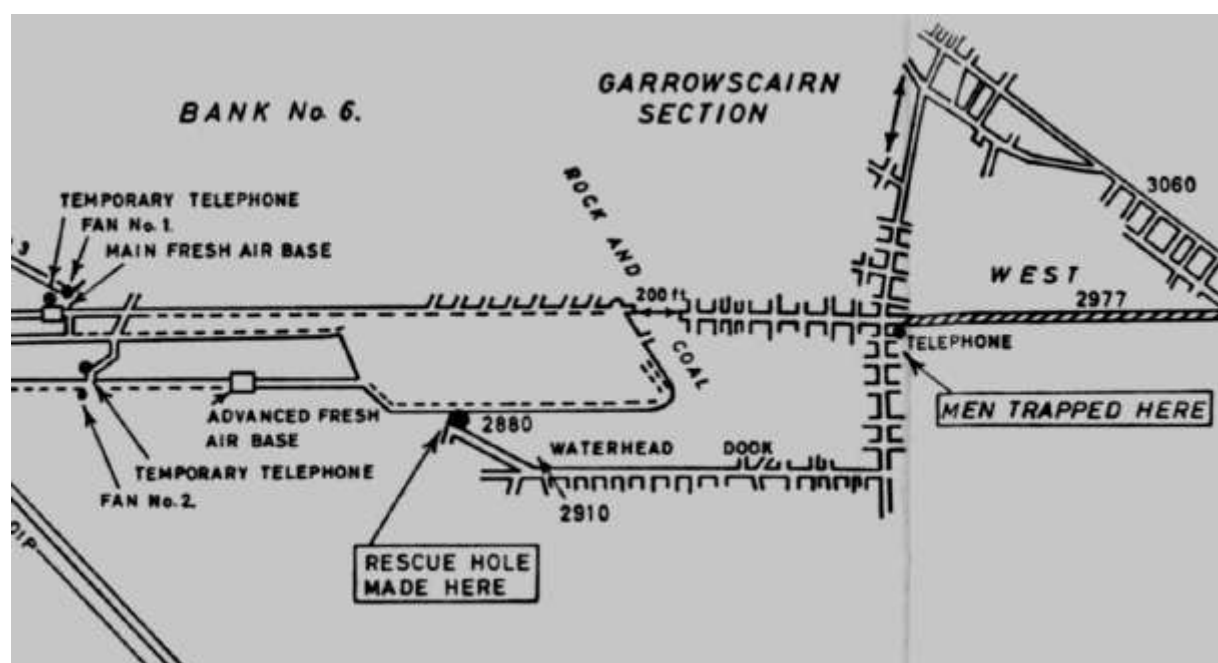
was a Bank surface worker. John left the pits some years later, only to lose his life as a member of the fire service. And I knew „J.“ McLatchie. Anna, as she waited for her Dad by the wall at number six mine, had waited in vain. Of the thirteen, two were eventually found clear of the deluge of mud. They were Willie Howat and John Dalziel. I believe John was a Salvationist, thus making a toll of four for the Salvation Army that terrible weekend. Those who recovered their bodies, some months later, described them as lying on their backs, hands behind their heads in an attitude of peaceful sleep. A nearby tally of passing days scratched on a flat surface showed that they had been alive for over a week following the disaster. It was to be almost a year before the body of the last victim was brought to the surface.

As a result of the inquiry that followed, no human agency was seen to carry any guilt in the matter. The all-too-familiar suggestion was put forward – all of the death and suffering was due to „an Act of God“.

The picture came rushing to my mind of a fourteen by eight H-beam halfway down number six mine. A rusted, bowed steel support running the full width of the roof, dripping with water and growing patches of dank smelling fungus. The words, scrawled along its length in ten-inch high chalk letters by some evangelic miner of past years read “God is Love”.

The arbiters who came up with their verdict never had the opportunity to see that girder but every man-jack who toiled their way down that mine in September 1950 did see it, and knew that no matter who buried the men in Knockshinnoch, it most surely wasn“t their God. And they had a good notion as to who inspired the rescue ...

... Blasphemy takes many forms ...



Courtesy of Bobby Guthrie's historical site

http://members.tripod.com/bob_newcumnock/knockhome/welcomex.html

The New Cumnock Now and Then web site would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to those who lost their lives on that fateful day in September 1950.



**John Dalziel
James Houston
Thomas Houston
William Howat
William Lee
James Love
John Murray
William McFarlane
John McLatchie
Samuel Rowan
John Smith
Daniel Strachan
John White**

**TO THE MEMORY OF NEW CUMNOCK MINE WORKERS WHO LOST THEIR
LIVES IN THE COURSE OF DUTY**

**'Out of Darkness
Into Light'**

Courtesy of Bobby Guthrie's historical site
http://members.tripod.com/bob_newcumnock/knockhome/welcomex.html

NOTE: Many people have asked how the two trapped Knockshinnoch men could have recorded time in complete darkness. Here is Bobby's recollection.

The time the two miners were known to have survived entrapped in Knockshinnoch, and who knows how much longer they actually were alive was communicated by the custom of marking the days off using four vertical strokes crossed by a diagonal line for the fifth day. It was not uncommon for miners to carry a watch. Their pit headlamps would last some days, especially since it is likely that they economised on battery power by using one lamp at a time. Also, my vague memory tells me that Mr Dalziel was a shotfirer, and as such he would be obliged to carry a 'glennie' or Davey lamp and a watch.

Corsencon with its hat on



Chapter Seventeen – Corsencon - Where the Sun Rises

It was 1948 and a summer morning. The Rover scouts had a job to do that day and boots, kilt, khaki shirt and balmoral were the order of dress. In Lochside back kitchen, a shaft of brilliant light came streaming in through the window. I took my tea-mug in my hand, went out into the clear air and turned to see the sunrise of a glorious morning over Greave Hill and the high summit of Corsencon. A pleasing sight, indeed as Corsencon was our destination for the day.

Harry Burgoyne's girlfriend of that time was a young lady by the name of Jean Telfer, of Cumnock town. Jean was one of the organisers of the local youth club and had come up with the idea that a guided tour around the site of the Corsencon caves would make a dandy club outing. Harry Burgoyne had offered the services of the Scout troop. It is more than likely that the Cumnock youth club had little idea that the scouts involved would be of the kilted, hairy-legged eighteen-year-old variety.

I finished my tea, and having set my mug on the Welsh dresser, had my face set for the avenue end when I remembered my thumb stick. It was a fair hike out to the caves, and we wouldn't necessarily be using the Mansfield Road route. I arrived anon at the Burgoyne residence in Glebe Street, where it had been arranged that the Cumnock folks would rendezvous with the scout volunteers. It must have been over an hour later that Bob, Harry, Buster and I succumbed to our fidgeting impatience, left Harry Burgoyne and Sister Meg to steer the visitors in the right direction, and set off for Corsencon with cooking gear. An hour later, there was a lively wood fire burning in the lee of the cliff face by the cave entrance; a two gallon dixie was already on the boil. Buster, having returned to the fire pit about ten times in ten minutes from impetuous excursions in as many different directions, decided that his next enterprise would be a trip into the caves. I dare say he'd have been crazy enough to have gone ahead on his own, but I thought I'd better be with him. Not that I viewed a clamber around in the bowels of the earth as something to look forward to; the Coal Board was obliged to pay me for doing just that, every working day. Leaving Harry attending the fire, I groped my way in Buster's wake into the dark maw of the nearest tunnel. There was nothing to suggest that this was about to be anything other than a typical excursion with the Lads; nothing to tell me that, as I came back from the darkness, there would be a second Corsencon sunrise for me that day, and that the world would be forever different.

As we fumbled our way deeper into the cave, the daylight rapidly faded. It struck me then that we were fine scouts indeed. In fact the words "Be prepared" might at least have prompted the packing of something as obvious as a torch for a cave excursion. We had no torch, however, and were blundering around in the dark. I was opening my mouth to call "retreat" to Buster, when there was a sudden splash from his general direction and an outburst of some very un-scout-like language. I wasn't too worried, for by the direction, tone and length of his tirade he'd suffered nothing more life threatening than wet feet. Then, just ahead, I saw the reflection of daylight on the wet cave floor. So, I thought, we might as well go forward. The light was coming from directly overhead.

The small irregular polygon of brightness was about thirty feet above and the rocks leading up to it, reflecting some of the light, revealed an almost chimney like shaft, which had in its sides many cracks and irregularities. The sensible thing to do of course was to retrace our steps and go out the way we came in. Sensible actions are for sensible people! We climbed the chimney. There was barely room to wriggle up and out of the shaft at the surface, but we made it finally, finding ourselves some distance from the site of the cave entrance and in the midst of a stretch of coarse grass and heather. One benefit accrued from our cave excursion; we had inadvertently exposed the lurking danger which that hole in the moorland represented. Being all but completely concealed by overhung vegetation, it was a potential death trap.

We heard voices. Cumnock youth club had arrived at the caves. The route back to the camp fire, because of our unorthodox exit from the cave, had to be by way of a long detour either to right or left in order to skirt past either end of the sheer rock cliff in which the cave entrances were situated. We two, being short in patience and long in curiosity, decided that we could assess this fresh development and be aware of just how many and who had turned up without having to make the longish trek to the campfire. We went to the cliff edge, lay down on our bellies (sensible for once), and looked down. There was a lassie lying by the fire, talking to Harry.

Somewhere off to the side I heard Buster's voice droning on. I think he was doing a head count and naming names. I vaguely remember the notion that he hadn't mentioned the first one first. All of my attention was fixed upon the lassie that had picked up my thumb stick and was holding it as she carried on a lively conversation with Harry.

"Jean Telfer, Morag Stevenson, Ralph Douglas, Dot Arnott - Ah see Meg Burgoyne's here; hey! - whae's that?"

I was startled from my brown study by a prod in the ribs

"D'ye see her? - Whae's that?" Had I seen her? I hadn't seen anyone else!!

As I came down across the east shoulder of Greave hill, where that morning I had watched the rising of the sun from Lochside, I walked in the sunshine of the most glorious summer day of my eighteen years. Her eyes were smiling blue and she was holding my thumb stick. Her name was Nellie.

Epilogue

As has been said, I have written this in part for friends of the years of childhood and youth. Mainly, however, it is for our children; perhaps they may, in the reading of it, gain some idea of what moulded the character and outlook of their Dad. The remainder of my story will not be written here; it has a copyright which is shared by Walter, and Lynne, and by Nellie, who has my thumb stick still.

Suffice it to say that in the year of 1953, my Nellie and I were wed. After a short interlude in our first home in Leggate, I took my Lady to Connel Park.

Bobby Rogerson had come home.

The Store Corner Connel Park



Appendix

- Nobody should expect, after all, to find the slightest trace of the deep dark pool on the moor beyond Blaw-wearie. A recent hike (January 1997) up past the Rottenyard springs brought to me the sight of mile upon square mile of sterile Sitka spruce monoculture which had obliterated for all time any trace of the events of fifty-five years ago – and obliterated too is a corresponding area of the remaining viable habitat of the Whaup, Lapwing and Skylark; somebody making a bundle on their tax returns.
- The generations born after the 50s may be unfamiliar with the name “Heather Rig”. This feature no longer exists, having been obliterated by the rerouting of the highway. The section is now distinguished, not by a “rig” (ridge), but instead by a cutting through the high ground which renders the road surface level.
- It was in the dip at the foot of Camlarg dook that Mary Ford lost her Dad in a firedamp explosion in 1944. He was under manager of the mine. The manager, Charlie Hines, was killed at the same spot. There were several fatalities that day.

A postscript from a Friend – Neil Currie

With thanks to Neil for this poignant reminder of some of the effects that World War Two had on families many miles from the front line. Live on, live well, Old Friend – it has been my privilege to know as a friend a boy from Glasgow's Gorbals.

Evacuation – Town life versus country life

A Glasgow Evacuee
Written by Neil Currie

My life began on the 18th of August 1930 in a two-roomed tenement flat overlooking the Gorbals Cross in Glasgow. Born to ordinary working class parents, by the age of five I had an older sister and two younger brothers (a younger sister had died of diphtheria).

The significance of my father's funeral when I was five years old escaped me. Dying of what today would have been an easily cured illness; all I can recall is my weeping mother and a feeling of bewilderment. Shortly after this my older sister was crossing the road where we lived (a very busy road with tramcars and lorries whizzing by) when she was knocked down and killed. Fate had dealt my mother a very cruel blow yet again.

Life after this was very hard for the family such as when starting school I was kitted out in a „Parish Suit“ – I remember the itchy, flannel shirts and heavy tweed suit to this day. Everyone made fun of you knowing you were poor. I wore this for one day only and battled with my mother not to wear it again.

The streets being so very busy, all our usual games of peevers, kick the can and hide and seek were played in the „back court“.

By the age of seven, I became quite enterprising in earning money to take my two younger brothers and myself to the Saturday matinee. At seven o'clock on a Saturday morning I took a five minute walk over to the backstreets of Argyle Street with homemade wheelbarrow that I had made out of an old pram. There I collected old wooden boxes, took them home to the back court, split them into kindlers (fire sticks) and sold them round the doors for a penny a basinful. One good customer gave me up to a dozen beer bottles, which I took to the shop and retrieved the money which I was then allowed to keep.

In the 1930s there were many Jewish people living in the Gorbals and yet another way I earned money was by cleaning out their fireplaces on a Saturday morning (the Jewish Sabbath) for a sixpence and a shilling respectively.

For a couple of years this was my life including Christmases when we were thrilled to receive a torch and an orange in our Christmas stockings. Sunday school and Band of Hope meetings were a must every week.

In the summer of 1939, my friend and I were playing over on the Glasgow Green when we saw a lot of activity there. Men were building air-raid shelters surrounded by sandbags and there were whisperings of a war being imminent. At nine years old we didn't fully understand what this was all about.

My next vivid memory was on the third of September 1939. My two brothers and I were standing in a queue waiting to go on the School bus. Around our necks were gas masks and name tags. We waved goodbye to my Granny and my mother, got on the school bus and were driven, along with all the other boys and girls to St. Enoch's Station. At this moment in time I thought we were just going on a „Fresh Air Fortnight“ with the Glasgow Corporation. I had been before and had quite enjoyed it.

We arrived in New Cumnock at lunch time and were marched to the School there and were all put into one classroom. Soon adults arrived and began selecting a child or a family until only myself and my two brothers aged five years and seven years were left. At this stage I knew it wasn't a „Fresh Air Fortnight“ but felt bewildered as to what was happening. We were sitting in a corner at the back of the room and I told my brothers to hide under the desks and perhaps we would be forgotten and could eventually be sent home.

Then a middle-aged man entered the room, apparently to pick up three girls. He was surprised to see only three boys left but took us home anyway. It was only at this point that I realised that we were to be taken to live in a new home.

A billeting officer and Mr. Sloan took us in his Rover car (our very first ride in a car) to his home, a large picturesque dairy farm with a nearby loch. Going through the farm gates, children from the farm cottages began waving and cheering at us. Mrs. Sloan met us at the door and took us into the farmhouse. That evening, sitting in the drawing room with my arms around my two brothers, I began crying bitterly. I wanted to go home to my mother. Soon Mrs. Sloan had three howling boys to contend with.

From the day we set foot in their home, Mr. and Mrs. Sloan, who had no family of their own, showered us with love and kindness (although strict), treating us like the sons they'd never had.

Life changed dramatically for us after this. We were taken by Mr. and Mrs. Sloan and kitted out with the best of clothes, attended New Cumnock School and joined the Boys' Brigade. To begin with I often had to protect my brothers when we were taunted and called „Glasgow Keelies“ in the playground. Soon though, we were accepted and made a lot of friends, some of whom we keep in touch with to this day.

Farm life couldn't have been more different to life in the city. I learned to milk cows by hand, helped with the harvest and other farm chores. We could be found skating on the loch in winter, fishing in summer, sliding down the hay, learning about country

life and all the fields and forest to play in. It was a wonderful time in my life. Christmases were a wonderland, lots of lovely toys and oh, what a wonderful atmosphere – beyond our wildest dreams. There always seemed to be snow around, a large Christmas tree and carol singing and lots of laughter.

Soon we didn't miss Glasgow at all and were only reminded of it when our Granny came to visit. She had played a big part in my life when I lived in Glasgow. This was a very exciting time. Meanwhile my mother had re-married and had another family, my half brothers and sisters. This made it difficult for her to visit. When I was fourteen years old the evacuation system was still in force but because fourteen was the school leaving age in those days, my mother wanted me back in Glasgow. The day I was to leave the farm was one of the saddest in my life. My brothers were crying. Mr. and Mrs. Sloan were tearful but I had to promise them to write regularly and visit at every opportunity. This I gladly did. My two brothers never did go back to Glasgow to live. When Mr. and Mrs. Sloan retired to Ayr they went with them. To the day they died we always regarded them like a mother and father.

I feel my evacuation years shaped my life and when I look back on my childhood it's the New Cumnock years that I fondly remember. Although my family in Glasgow were basically good living, I learned so much more in a completely different environment and values.

At the time of writing, I live in Ayr and at 63 years of age, I have a wife and three children, who have done well in life and with four grandsons, we're a close living family. Looking back on my life I count my blessings at the way my life turned out, knowing New Cumnock played a big part in this.