

Letter from Scotland



The John Muir Way,
Scotland's latest long-
distance trail

Last week I was out in the wilderness but this week I was in the heart of Scotland. It seemed a big jump from the top of An Teallach, on the north-west coast, to the John Muir Way through the old rust belt of Central Scotland, but they are just two sides of the same country. Scotland is both a highland and a lowland.

John Muir might not have classed his new 134 mile coast-to-coast trail as "wilderness" but it is an introduction to wilderness. And it is an adventure, because at each corner the "Way" changes so much. A friend and I cycled it in three gloriously sunny days, starting in Helensburgh. The trail then weaves over to Loch Lomond, past the Campsie Hills to the canal at Kirkintilloch, sometimes on tarmac, the next moment on gravel or grass, sometimes through trees, at other times out in open fields.

The "Way" gets steadily busier and more industrial as you come to the Falkirk Wheel, Linlithgow and Bo'ness. Then it becomes a coastal trail as you follow the Firth of Forth to South Queensferry, through Edinburgh to Musselburgh and Prestonpans. Finally it changes to golfing country, old fishing villages and barely fields as you head for North Berwick and Dunbar. It was from here, of course, that the young John Muir walked, behind his fundamentalist father, on this very trail to board his ship for America in 1849. The rest is history ...or at least the history of the environmental movement.

I wonder what John Muir would make of his old country today. Yes, we have two national parks and 42 designated "wild land"

areas but we have only just started on cutting our carbon footprint, returning to walking and cycling as modes of transport, beginning to re-cycle our waste and greening our energy.

The first newspaper I picked up after our trip had a banner headline speaking of a “green power surge.” The energy regulator Ofgem has approved SSE’s plans for a sub-sea cable in the Moray Firth to bring renewable energy from the North Sea and Northern Isles to the markets in the south. Ofgem has also promised to end the crazy tariff system which has seen renewable energy producers in the north charged more to use the transmission lines than carbon-belching power stations in the south of England.

✘ I notice too that some councils – Edinburgh, Fife and Aberdeen among them – are planning to issue us with smaller dustbins to encourage us to re-cycle more of our domestic waste. Only 40 per cent of our household waste is currently re-cycled in Scotland, behind England and way behind other nations in Europe like Germany on 62 per cent and 63 per cent in Austria.

While I was away in the wilderness there was, apparently, a national strike. Have the working classes finally revolted as in 1926 I wondered? Civil servants and local government workers have indeed much to complain about. Their earnings have fallen by 20 per cent since the bankers’ recession began and thousands of jobs have been lost as a result of the government’s austerity programme. It’s astonishing there hasn’t been a revolution and no one’s head has been cut off. But it turned out that this “national strike” was a bit of flop, especially in Scotland where we are already into the holiday season.

We are also into the marching season and today, the 12th of July, I guess several hundred Scottish Orangemen will have gone over to Northern Ireland to take part in the Orange

Parades over there. They normally do.

Last weekend, there was a 4,000 strong march through Glasgow. Unfortunately these traditional marches have political echoes in this referendum year. The Orange Order has registered with the Electoral Commission as a “No” organisation and it’s proposing to hold a “Better Together” rally in Edinburgh just five days before the vote on 18th September. The official Better Together campaign is not so sure this is a good idea and it’s tried to distance itself from the Orangemen in recent days . Too much drumming can be a bad thing.

Not at Balado it can’t. Scotland’s answer to Glastonbury is under way as I write with 85,000 fans standing in a field in Kinross listening to the likes of the Arctic Monkeys, Biffy Clyro, Calvin Harris and Ellie Goulding. I’m not sure this is what John Muir had in mind when he urged us all to get out into the great outdoors.

Photo courtesy of City of Edinburgh Council