

Letter from Scotland



“I to the hills will lift mine eyes.”

Every so often it is good to get out of town and away from the cosy life of central Scotland. So a friend and I met up in Aviemore last Friday and climbed Bynack More, an old granite hill at the north end of the Cairngorms. The rocks looked their age (400 million years old) well-worn, sleepy and wise. The strong wind kept most of the wildlife indoors but we saw a couple of ptarmigan, a black grouse, some wheatears and a mountain hare.

Dark clouds came hurtling over the ridges, some still etched with snow. But it stayed dry and clear for most of the day and the sun occasionally lit up the glens and plains far below us. It was a moment to view the world from above, to be reminded how small we are compared to the landscape and how insignificant we are in the history of the planet.

Take Brexit for instance, or the Royal Wedding, or the Football Cup finals. Will any of them register in the story of the world in, say, a hundred years' time? Leaving the EU

might indeed be a seismic event – if it ever happens. But my suspicion is that Theresa May will engineer a “partnership agreement” which will look much the same as we have now, and all the fuss and bother of the last two years will be quickly forgotten.

All that being said, we do live for the moment and as I came down from the mountain I found myself wondering what news I’d missed and how I’d ever survive the excitement of the royal wedding and the Celtic v Motherwell cup final.

I even became quite angry about the EU Withdrawal Bill. How could the Tories think of clawing back those 24 powers as they return from Brussels ? Don’t we have the right, under the devolution settlement, to decide whether we have GM crops growing in Scotland ? Or the right to label our food as we wish ? Or to make support payments to our farmers ? Or decide our own fishing quotas ? Apparently not. The UK Parliament remains “sovereign” even in an age of “partnership”. So on Tuesday the Scottish Parliament duly voted against the EU Withdrawal Bill and we are on course for one of those constitutional crises.

Another crisis hit the railways this week with news that the main east coast service between London and Scotland is to be re-nationalised. The private operators, Stagecoach and Virgin, have given up the franchise, having made a £200m loss. So from 24th June, the trains will be run by a state-owned company under the charmingly old fashioned name of the London and North Eastern Railway LNER. Whether Mrs May’s government will have the nerve to privatise it for a third time remains to be seen.

It was with some alarm that we woke on Monday morning to be told that Scotland has 164 known crime gangs, mainly related to the drugs trade. Apparently that is fewer than last time the National Crime Agency counted them but their 3,000 members are more heavily armed than they were before and more

ruthless, with feuding gangsters gunning each other down in the street. Only last week a man was jailed for shooting a "friend" sitting in a car at traffic lights in the Tradeston area of Glasgow.

"Peace be with you," is not part of these gentlemen's creed but it is the theme of this year's General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, which begins in Edinburgh this weekend. The main debates will be on climate change, the war in Syria and the future of the ministry. It comes as the Kirk celebrates the 50th anniversary of the ordination of the first woman minister. Thesedays around a quarter of ministers are women, including Rev Susan Brown, the minister of Dornoch Cathedral who, appropriately, is this year's Moderator.

Finally, can I return to the natural world ? We learnt this week that Scotland's rabbit population is in rapid decline. The British Trust for Ornithology reports that the number of rabbits in Scotland has fallen by 80 per cent since 1995. We could be down to our last 10 million. This may seem a good thing to farmers and gardeners. But foxes, stoats, birds of prey and fans of Beatrix Potter will take a different view. Scientists are worried about the balance of nature and say climate change, a loss of habitat and disease are all having an effect, the results of which we just cannot guess.

I wonder what a middle aged man standing on Bynack More 100 years from now will be thinking. Will he be shaking his head at the loss the rabbit, or how the climate has changed, or how the war in Syria was allowed to happen or whether we would have been better off staying in the EU ? Or will he just enjoy the everlasting view and sit on the rocks that never change.