

## HILL DAYS: Song by Richard Hardaker

I was inspired to write this in 1992, to the waltz tune, “Loch Sunart” by Mike France, then bass player with the Ellen Valley Band; his inspiration came from a holiday near Strontian in the western highlands. At the time I was about half way through the Munros. I had climbed my first in 1975, but it was 1988 before I decided to make a determined effort to do them all. That year I started the pattern of a week's holiday in May (“Days growing longer, etc”) for the best chance of fine weather, plenty of daylight, and before the midges! “Steep craggy ridges” takes me back to the ascent of Ben Starav from Glen Etive in 1988.

“Snow dappled peaks” recall the south Glen Shiel ridge seen in 1992 from the north side of the glen.. “New friends” are hills climbed for the first time, “Old friends” are previously climbed hills, viewed from afar. I have never subscribed to that combative concept of “conquering” mountains. They are indeed, respected friends, which permit you to disport yourself on their slopes and peaks. I believe Wainwright expressed similar sentiments. If any “conquering” is done it is by the mountains themselves, judging by the mountain rescue statistics. Fine weather could never be guaranteed; I was “Seeking a cairn in the fast falling snow” on the Cairngorm plateau in May 1990.

“Alone but not lonely”- of necessity, pursuing a personal goal single mindedly meant many forays into the mountains were solo. Sally accompanied me in the days before children and I would sometimes team up with other walkers met in bunkhouse or pub. Venturing into wild country alone is a matter of judgement based on one's physical fitness, navigational skills, taking into account the type of terrain and weather conditions. More than once, discretion prevailed and I turned back.

“A sweet healing spirit” expresses the solace and peace those days in the hills gave me, or it might be the malt whisky with which I celebrated the completion of the Munros. “This sad empty land” recalls the Highland clearances, which followed on the “Sorrow and war”. In Scotland one is constantly reminded of its violent past. Wandering

through the hills, you often find yourself crossing the path of the fugitive Prince Charles Stuart following the defeat of the Jacobite army at Culloden in 1746.

In 1991, “The long weary miles” led me to “a refuge and a resting place” at Fersit, an isolated community adjacent to the West Highland railway between Corroun and Tulloch. There, Nancy Smith, a well known character in the outdoor scene ran a an eccentric and very laid-back hostel.

I met Nancy a second time when she turned up at Newcastleton Traditional music festival two months later, and she was in the audience when I won the Men's traditional song competition. Nancy died of cancer later that year, so I dedicated “Hill Days” to her memory, and with it, I picked up first prize in the original song competition at Newcastleton the following year.

In 2001, having completed the Munros on Ben More Assynt, and well fortified with malt whisky at the Inchnadamph hotel, I stood by the lochside, Loch Assynt in the sunset's glow; “The peaks standing stark” were Quinag and its outliers which I would ascend the following day. This was the start of the next chapter, or rather its continuation I already had 23 Corbetts (Hills between 2500ft and 3000ft) to my credit, picked up opportunely among Munros; the next challenge was to climb the remaining 199. In this I was not alone, for a change, for I teamed up with my friend, Harry Blenkinsop in pusuit of the same goal. For several years we had annual trips to the Highlands, camping, bothying, hostelling, sometimes biking to the hills. In 2009, age and infirmity caught up with Harry and I was back to solitary wandering in the hills. I completed the Corbetts in 2017, unfinished business on the Welsh hills then called me and I have not been to the Scottish highlands since.

Old age has started to touch “limbs that have carried me so far”. My knees in particular have started to complain about steep and rough descents. However, my hill days are not over yet. I'm quite happy to

potter about on smaller, sub 2000ft hills of which there are plenty to choose from, and it's all new ground. Onward and upward!

Harry died in February 2024 and I was honoured to be asked to sing “Hill Days” at his funeral, an occasion commemorating his achievements as a fell runner and mountaineer but also celebrating the joy and companionship so many of his friends have experienced on the hills.

11th March 2024

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