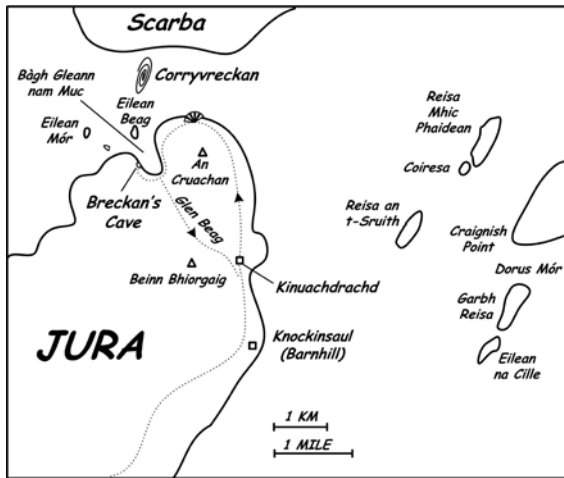


5: TO BREACAN'S CAVE: JURA



Map Reference: Ordnance Survey Landranger 61

IT WAS the second time on a trip to the islands I thought I might get shot. The first had been on Tiree, where I'd walked by snipe hunters in the twilight of a wet autumn evening (see companion volume, Chapter 8). During that encounter the guns had been pointed to the sky. But here they would be aimed a bit more in the horizontal plane; aimed at the heads of living targets that stand about six feet off the ground.

I was on the shore of the Bay of Pigs. No, not the infamous one in Cuba, it was Jura's Bàgh Gleann nam Muc, which faces the sometimes-

swirling waters of the Corryvreckan whirlpool. I had a choice to make. Should I do the right thing, and return the eight miles to my car by backtracking around the northern tip of Jura? Or should I do the wrong thing, and go up Glen Beag, which cuts directly across the island? That direct route would save my exhausted legs two hard miles. But there was one problem with this oh-so tempting shortcut. I could walk into a firing zone.

It was late September. If you want to hike the hills that time of year you're advised to check with the various estates before setting out. This is to insure you don't interfere with any deer stalking that might be going on. But if you're planning to stay near the coast, and not venturing onto the hills, there's usually no conflict, and you can wander to your heart's content.

And that had been my plan. I would hike north along the coast to Kinuachdrachd, then circle around the northern tip of Jura for a view of the Corryvreckan whirlpool. After that I'd look for Breacan's Cave, where Breacan, the whirlpool's namesake, was supposedly buried. I would then return the way I'd come, for a total round trip distance of sixteen miles. Because I'd be near the coast all the way I had not bothered to check if stalking would be happening on the Ardlussa estate at the north of the island.

From Craighouse, where my wife and I were staying at the Isle of Jura Hotel (its only hotel), I drove north along Jura's single-track road (its only road). After an hour I came to a chain slung across the road, and a sign proclaiming: *End of Public Road*. From there on I would be on foot.

The first four miles of walking followed a level unpaved track, an easy start to what would be a long hike. After an hour I passed Knockinsaul (Barnhill) where in the late 1940s a deathly ill George Orwell wrote *1984*. It was another mile to the last house, *Kinuachdrachd* (the headland above the ebb tide), where I came to an overgrown parking



The end of the public road

area and yet another road end sign, a remnant from the days when they let the public drive this far.

Beyond Kinuachdrachd I came upon a tall deer fence. My favourite way of solving problems (ignore them until they go away) worked for once, as I soon came across a tall ladder-stile. It was a surprise to find the stile. So many times when you come upon an endless length of fence you want to do the right thing, and cross without causing damage. But that can be a challenge, for stiles and gates can be few and far between. The country code is to leave gates as you find them, open or closed. But even when you find one, they're often tied shut with a ragged piece of fraying nylon rope. Don't even bother trying to untie it, for the favourite knot seems to be the double-triple soaked-in-super-glue half-hitch, also known as the welded-shut knot. They only method to untie these involves a sharp knife; something I've not done, but I've been sorely tempted on several occasions.

Even open gates can present a dilemma. Anyone familiar with Hebridean hiking knows the challenges of crossing soggy bogs. But due to years of livestock crossing back and forth, the swamiest patches of ground always seem to be around gates. One usually associates stepping-stones with ways to cross streams of crystal clear water in scenic hillside settings. But the most appreciated stones are the ones you may find lying in the black water, thick with mud and dung, which always seems to flood the ground around a gate. But if there are no stepping-stones you have to straddle the fence, using its lower boards as footholds, and sidestep in towards the end-post. Balanced above the muddy abyss you swing one leg around to the other side in search of a toehold. Finding one, you swing the other leg around. A mental sigh of relief goes through your mind, and you lower your guard. Your boot slips off the slick board you've pinned your destiny on, and you plunge into the poopy soup. A prayer flashes through your mind, 'Please, let it not be deeper than my boots.' Then you feel a cold rush spread from your ankles to your toes. Your prayer has been ignored. Now it's time to put on those spare socks you've learned the hard way to always carry.

Worst of all are those wicked fences that tell you to stay away, not verbally, but visually. And, if you are not careful, they'll punish you if you dare cross them. Your warning is a small sign with black, jagged lightning bolts, drawn around bold black text: *Danger—Electric Fence*. These beasts present their own unique challenges. Rubber gloves are not on the 'Ten Essentials' list for hikers (at least not any hikers I'd care to run in to). So you have to use something thick, like your cap, and while gently holding down the top wire, you do a double kick-step, hoping not to feel that tingle in your hands (or any other sensitive location) of electrons flowing through flesh.

I crossed the ladder-stile and traversed the hillside to the north. Below the summit of An Cruachan I came to Carraig Mhòr, the northern tip of Jura, and a cliff-top overlook to the island of Scarba

and the whirlpool. To the east there was a view over the small islands that guard the seaway of the *Dorus Mòr*, the great door. These are the Reisas, the isles of the tidal race between Crinan and Jura. They consist of: *Garbh Reisa*, the rough isle of the race; *Reisa an t-Sruith*, the race of the tidal stream; *Reisa Mhic Phaidean*, MacFadden's isle of the race; and little *Coiresa*, the cauldron of the race.

To the west, near the Scarba shore, a bit of unsettled tide seethed, but there was no sign, or sound, of the immense whirlpool I'd expected or, as Sir Walter Scott described it in *The Lord of the Isles*:

*Scarba's Isle, whose tortured shore,
Still rings to Corrieveken's roar.*

Like a washing machine set to low agitation, a mile of sea seethed. It had the feel of an earthquake zone, stresses slowly building under the surface. It wanted to let loose, but was being held back, waiting for more pressure to build. Here and there standing waves erupted in the disturbed water, but the tidal conditions, and the wind, were not ideal to see the whirlpool at its best. I'd have to come back someday. And it was apparent that a better viewpoint would be from Scarba's tortured shore, as over there the main tidal upheaval would be only a quarter mile away.

It was then time to find Breckan's Cave, so I worked my way around to the western side of An Cruachan. From there the sheltered waters of Bàgh Gleann nam Muc could be seen opening out towards Corryveckan. Nestled at the mouth of the bay lay the island of Eilean Beag, where George Orwell had been stranded for a while when his boat ran into trouble in the whirlpool. On the far side of the bay lay Breacan's Cave, a large dark spot in the cliff face.

It started to rain as I dropped down to the shore, where a hard walk over a stone strewn beach led to the head of the bay. The cave lay a quarter mile away, but there appeared to be no easy way to it along the rocky shore. So I headed inland, worked around to the north, and then



A quiet Corryveckan seen from Jura

cut back to the cliff edge above the shore. There I found a narrow slot in the cliff and, sliding down it, reached the shore.

The remnants of lichen-dotted stone walls guarded the approach to the cave, and as a last line of defence a fortification wall spanned the dark opening. The cave extended 200 feet into the rock, and its mouth, pointed at one end, blunt at the other, was twelve feet high, and forty across. The final protective wall retained three feet of its height, and at its centre a narrow gap allowed entrance to the interior of the cave.

Traditionally, Corryveckan, or more properly Coire Bhreacain, is named after Breacan, a fifth century prince said to have drowned when his fleet of galleys came to grief in the whirlpool. Martin Martin wrote this of Corryveckan and the cave, 'This gulf hath its name from Brekan, said to be son to the King of Denmark, who was drowned here, cast ashore in the north of Jura, and buried in a cave, as appears from the stone, tomb, and altar there.'