



Achateny beach looking
to Rum and Eigg

A Wild Winter In Ardnamurchan

This season has a stark beauty in the lonely north west

by POLLY PULLAR

I SUPPOSE you might think I am a fraud. When asked where I come from, I say Ardnamurchan, but strictly speaking this is not true, and I do not really know where my real roots lie. They are certainly Celtic.

The truth is Ardnamurchan has always been my spiritual home, the place where I spent the most formative part of my childhood. It has instilled in me the passion and respect for the natural world that propels my soul. It is the place

I cherish and know best on earth. Returning there always feels like going home.

It's remote and at times inhospitable. When my grandfather first tackled the 50-something miles of single track road down the peninsula, he asked my parents what on earth made them wish to live in such a God-forsaken spot, much of it like moonscape. He was unlucky. In foul weather often you can see no further than your hand. »

If you want to move to such a remote place – almost an island, a great exposed chunk of land stuck out into the Atlantic – you must first experience a winter. If you can tolerate that then you can try living here.

Locals say that holidaymakers charmed by a week of fabulous weather have no conception of how miserable it can be when rain goes on for months on end, and gales lay waste to almost everything. Then there are the midges... ah, but in winter they're gone!

When my parents bought the Kilchoan Hotel in the mid-1960s they can have had little idea either of how their lives would be dominated by the elements, but to me it merely confirms that you are at the mercy of nature. That is something I relish. I giggle to myself when remembering how my mother's newly positioned greenhouse took off in a squall, last seen heading to sea en route towards the Island of Coll.

As in the Hebrides, caravans and sheds have to be battened down if they are to withstand the erratic temperament of the gusts rampaging in off the Atlantic.

Ardnamurchan, Britain's most westerly mainland peninsula, frequently experiences winds of hurricane strength accompanied by gigantic waves that lash the 36m (118ft) tall lighthouse perched precariously on the bastion of rock at the famous Point. Standing sentinel

since 1849, it is a fine example of Alan Stevenson's design skills. When there is a particularly violent storm, this is the place to watch in awe as the Atlantic boils and fumes like a mighty, malevolent maelstrom.

Every Hogmanay when I was a child we ventured there to join the resident lighthouse keepers and their families, together with locals, as a huge ceilidh continued far into the next day.

The New Year was ushered in over the radio as Gaelic songs were sung and stories told, and we joined forces remotely with lighthouse keepers in even lonelier outposts. It was a ritual, an extraordinary part of the area's social history before this lighthouse was finally automated in 1988. If the night was tempestuous, these parties seemed all the more exciting.

Winters then were long but there was a camaraderie that is seldom found today. My father found it depressing and eventually moved away, but I have always revelled in the extraordinary savagery that is an Ardnamurchan winter. It brings me closer to nature.

Ockle on the north coast, right at the end of the road and then a hill track, becomes my temporary home. I am at the mercy of the elements even more.

Days are short, evenings filled with books and peace. In the morning I hear ravens, hoodies, and the

“Burning the heather, Dougie Ockle stands against a backdrop of islands in a navy blue sea”

mewing of buzzards lured by the carcass of an old ewe that has succumbed. At night scrabbling above my bed indicates a pine marten is investigating the roof space.

From Ockle the views to Muck, Rum, Eigg and Skye are truly spectacular, and from Ben Hiant – Ardnamurchan's highest hill at only 528m (1732ft) – on the clearest days the world unfolds, views sweeping over Loch Sunart, the Sound of Mull, to Mull, Treshnish, Tiree, Coll, Canna, Eriskay, Barra, and the Uists, frequently with rainbows and curtains of low cloud as a sunburst of stage lights alter the colours every second.

While it sometimes seems as if it rains eternally, when it clears the clarity of winter's light is unequalled; crystal shards of brilliance on the finest cut glass, sharp as a knife, sea of topaz, sky of azure and hillsides dressed in a glorious tweed patchwork. The deer are down low; there are stags on the shore eating seaweed or running elegantly across the open hill with hooves that seem to barely scuff the hard-bitten turf. Some are lazing on a patch of snow higher on the Ben.

I like to be here alone. When the rain stops and the gale ceases to tease the cottage slates, the collies and I take to the shore. Fringed in emerald and bronze >>



Drift wood at
Camus Nan Geall



*“The sunset over Mull
was too much for the
soul to bear”*

Molly and Pip in
muddy wellies



weed, wet rocks shine darkly. We stop on the cliff top and listen to the melancholy calls of great northern divers. Once I saw more than a dozen off Ockle Point, backlit in a golden halo of low February sun.

I lie amid tawny grasses watching two otters playing in a sea of writhing kelp. They vanish, then one reappears, holding a wriggling butterfly. Silence fills the afternoon, but a tiny breeze sighs in a stunted birch tree at Achateny beach. The dogs cock their heads and watch too.

The oak trees of the Atlantic seaboard are wind-sculpted. Stripped of their dress, only a few brave brown wizened leaves cling on. Now bare, their forms become magical, more defined, twisted into sylvan creations that transport me on a journey of the imagination. Vestiges of ferns cling on too, crisped by salt spray. Lichen festoons every branch, some so iridescent they make up for the dearth of wild flowers, such is their flamboyant palette.

A pungent aroma of fox mingles with the sweeter one of pine marten and there is otter spraint on uncovered roots at the burn's edge. A robin sings its thin melancholy opus. Night falls with stars. Sometimes a gale begins to rage again. Oddly it brings peace.

Dougie Cameron, more usually known as Dougie Ockle, is burning heather with his brother John-Alex. He stands on the headland, beater in hand, ever accompanied by his collies, while behind him a backdrop of islands in a navy blue sea comes and goes through a slinking grey haze of smoke, like a wolf in the shadows. I have known him since I was very young. He is one of the few true locals left, a kindred soul, a man who has weathered many storms on his farm at Ockle. He knows this place like the back of his gnarled hands.

A sea eagle passes, darkening the pinkly curling trails of smoke. Yesterday I watched a pair of golden eagles at Camus Nan Geall. The sea is benign tonight and last afternoon the sunset over Mull was too much for the soul to bear. Snow is a rarity here and when it does fall, it never lingers. It is rain that holds sway, but how brilliant the colours of the bogs, even in the depths of winter. ◻

A stunted oak fires
the imagination

