

The Scottish Studies Foundation Celebrates its 40th Anniversary

Wednesday, May 13, 2026, marked the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the Scottish Studies Foundation, but its origins go back to 1965 with the launch of the new history department at the University of Guelph, when Professor Stanford Reid from McGill University was selected to be its first Chair. Reid was eager to find a field in which already established Canadian universities were not active and, because of his pride in his Scots ancestry, came up with the idea of Scottish Studies.

Reid realized the importance of community outreach, and by tapping into the expertise of faculty members, introduced bi-annual workshops on Scottish history and culture open to the public at large.

Prior to his retirement, Reid persuaded renowned historian Ted Cowan to come over from Scotland and in 1979 Ted took over from him. To Reid's delight and relief, Ted developed and expanded the program, added to the library's Scottish collection, and embraced and enhanced outreach activities.

In the 1980s, the Ontario Government was actively promoting multiculturalism and, in 1983, provided a grant of \$15,000 for Guelph's history department to showcase Scottish culture. The result was a 10-day event billed as The Scottish Heritage

Festival. This was a huge success and proved that there was a major constituency out there anxious to maintain the Scottish tradition in Canada.

At the same time, Ted raised concerns that the Scottish Studies Program at Guelph might fall victim to budget cuts and recommended that the best way to avert this would be to establish a Chair of Scottish Studies. This motivated a small team of dedicated individuals to band together to establish the Scottish Studies Foundation which was launched in 1986.

However, if serious financial support was to be obtained, it became clear that the Foundation's profile had to be raised significantly. With this in mind, the concept of a "Scot of the Year Award" was established—aimed at honouring individuals who had achieved distinction through their contributions to Canadian society or the international community at large. In keeping with the Foundation's mandate to avoid conflict with other established Scottish groups, it was agreed to tie the award ceremony to the relatively new Tartan Day date of April 6th, commemorating Scotland's historic declaration of independence in April, 1320. (See page 4.) This was slowly gaining in importance having been officially recognized by the Province of Ontario in 1991 after first being conceived by Jean Watson at a meeting of the Federation of Scottish Clans in Nova Scotia on March 9, 1986, the same year the Foundation received its charter.

The event was designed, not only to give people a chance to dress up for one of the most sophisticated events in the Scots-Canadian calendar, but to give business leaders a chance to network and nurture connections. In April 1993, the first recipient was Major-General Lewis MacKenzie who had just retired from the Canadian Forces following his successful command of UN



*Philip Lindsay McLeod, our Scot of the Year 2026
from a painting by his son Kagan McLeod*

ground troops during the Bosnian Civil War.

Under the leadership of Foundation president Bill Somerville, that year marked the start of a serious fundraising campaign that culminated in the Scottish Studies Chair being established in 2004 and in securing Guelph's reputation as the major centre for Scottish studies in North America.

Since then, 32 individuals have received the Award, including Philip Lindsay McLeod who was this year's recipient. Philip is the founder of Windsor's 35,000 sq. ft. multidisciplinary arts centre: SHÖ Art, Spirit & Performance.

Looking to the future, we will continue to support the Centre for Scottish Studies at the University of Guelph and provide financial assistance to Scottish Studies students. We will also continue to encourage and support members and other individuals involved in the study of Scottish history, literature, music, the arts, and similar endeavours.

In this anniversary year, on behalf of all of us on the Board of Directors, I extend our heartfelt gratitude to all our members and supporters for the generosity, expertise and encouragement we have received over the last four decades.

David Hunter, President



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I'm a big fan of the films of Scottish writer and director Bill Forsyth, among which are gems such as *That Sinking Feeling*, *Gregory's Girl*, and my favourite, *Local Hero*. The latter involves a young American executive, Mac, who is sent by his eccentric boss—a millionaire oil magnate—to a beautiful Scottish coastal village in order to wrangle a deal from the locals for the use of their land. During his stay, Mac is smitten by the place and its people. On his return to the US, where he will have to re-adapt to the furious pace of the business world, he still has one foot in Scotland in a spiritual sense. As the film comes to a close, we watch him returning to his high-rise apartment in Houston, pulling out mementoes of his trip: sea shells from the beach, photos of the friends he made. He steps onto the balcony, gazes out across the skyline with its mass of flashing lights, so very different from the Northern Lights he experienced in Scotland. As the chaotic noise of the city, with its blaring horns and wailing sirens, wells up from below, it's accompanied by the soulful music of Mark Knopfler's "Going Home," and we sense Mac's yearning to reconnect with the magic he's left behind. The film cuts to a public telephone box back at the Scottish village, the sound of a call ringing out...

It's a poignant, perfectly pitched ending, and I've been thinking about it a lot lately, as I visit the websites of Real Estate firms in Scotland, looking for a place where I might settle down for the so-called Third Act of life. It's not nostalgia that's driving me: as you probably know on the evidence of my previous columns, I don't own a pair of rose-tinted glasses. I think I'm just feeling a bit homesick.

I'm sure this feeling has something to do with age. This past May, I turned 62. At this stage, people tend to ask themselves questions such as: *How should I spend the time that's left—and where best to spend it?* I've no intention of leaving Canada altogether: my family is happy here and I think we'll always have a home in Nova Scotia. But I have a hunch (a premonition?) that I have unfinished business in *old Scotia*.

Last year, I visited the Highlands for a week and found myself in a state bordering on—gasp—happiness. I slipped the "gasp" in there because I'm not known for my *joie de vivre* (if you need proof, ask my wife). I was staying at Moniak Mhor, Scotland's foremost creative writing centre, which is based in Kiltarlity, west of Inverness. Every morning I'd rise early, make a cup of coffee and step outside to admire the landscape. And what a landscape. It was—no other

word will do—breathtaking. During the week, photos were snapped and videos recorded, the usual methods by which we memorialize special places. Looking at those images now, I remember what a great time I had, but it's not the same as *being there*. I feel like Mac on his balcony, with an overwhelming urge to make a call...



Walkerville welcomes Scot of the Year 2026

For the first time in its history, the Scottish Studies Society brought its Scot of the Year Award celebrations outside the Greater Toronto Area—and Windsor rose to the occasion. The 2026 honour came to the Walkerville area, with Philip Lindsay McLeod named as this year's recipient.

The celebration unfolded over two days, Friday, April 10, and Saturday, April 11, 2026, featuring music, dance, storytelling, and ceremony across two Walkerville landmarks, commemorating Scotland's enduring cultural legacy and the signing of the Declaration of Arbroath in April 1320.

Friday evening launched the festivities with a Scottish Cèilidh at SHŌ Art, Spirit & Performance, the 35,000 sq. ft. multidisciplinary arts centre founded by McLeod and partners Susan McLeod and Lorraine Steels. Two Celtic bands performed in two halls, and throughout SHO's walls hung Philip's own paintings alongside his designed and framed sporrans—a fitting introduction to the artist being honoured. The evening featured poetry, storytelling, a Scotch tasting, finger food, and a bar—and was completely sold out, with 130 tickets claimed against a planned 100, people still purchasing upon arrival.

On Saturday, the Award Ceremony began at the historic Willistead Manor—the jewel of Windsor—where we had the entire home for the celebration. Proceedings opened at 4:30 p.m. with a

Tartan Parade, a piper leading guests to the entrance before a Celtic harpist took over inside, her music setting a beautiful tone for the evening ahead.

Hors d'oeuvres followed—lamb lollipops, haggis tarts, and lobster rolls among the highlights—and conversation ranged warmly across theatre, music, and the visual arts. A short film by Phil's son, Sean McLeod, documenting a family visit to the ancestral McLeod home on the Isle of Skye, was quietly moving.

Bob Steele, well known to the community and a Scot himself, brought wit, warmth and a perfectly light touch to his role as MC, welcoming everyone and introducing Philip Lindsay McLeod and his guests. In a memorable standalone moment, Bob introduced Kagan McLeod—Philip's son—who presented his father with a striking portrait of Philip in full Highland dress. A Highland Dance performance was followed by tributes from colleagues and friends alike—spoken with such evident sincerity that there was scarcely a dry eye in the room.

Foundation President David Hunter gave a few remarks about the Foundation and the significance of the Scot of the Year Award. Kevin James, Director of the Centre for Scottish Studies at the University of Guelph, spoke about the Scottish Studies Program and thanked everyone for their support.

Jamie Lees, President of the Scottish Studies Society, then presented Philip with the award—an engraved Scottish quach. David Hunter returned to the podium to present a \$1,500 contribution from the Foundation to the Scottish Society of Windsor Pipe Band, supporting a youth's full Highland dress ahead of a competition in Scotland 2027.

Dessert—pecan-caramel brownies, crème brûlée, and fruit kabobs—brought a sweet close to a memorable evening.

Congratulations to Jamie Lees and her team. It was, by every measure, a triumph.

Report by Maggie McEwan



A video of the 2026 Scot of the Year Event is now available.
See: www.jank.ca/scottishstudies-scotoftheyear2026

Centenary Celebration of the Phototeria: a Scottish-Canadian's Invention

By Bruce McCowan

In keeping with our objective of showcasing items pertaining to historical activities of Scots in Canada, we are pleased to let you know that we are working with our new board member Bruce McCowan on a special project which will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the invention of the "Phototeria"—arguably the first viable portable photobooth from a commercial standpoint.

The inventor was David Alexander McCowan, born in 1898. He was the son of a Scarborough farming couple and had four Scottish grandparents. His father, Alexander McCowan, was prominent in the community, serving as a member of the Ontario Legislature for East York and Sheriff for the County of York. David married Helen G. Trebilcock and they had three daughters and two sons.

From an early age, David was afflicted with a speech disorder. He could not read aloud in school without stuttering, a difficulty said to have fostered his inward thinking and inventiveness. He withdrew within himself, and an early job as a wireless operator on the Upper Great Lakes during World War One allowed him to listen—and think. It was during this time that he conceived his first invention—a gum vending machine.

The story of McCowan's Phototeria is one

of overcoming obstacles, summarized here drawn from a lengthy 1928 Toronto Star feature:

"As a child, as a youth, as a young man, he stammered lamentably. He could not say "it" without stammering... By sheer grit he conquered this as he won through a multitude of mechanical and technical obstacles in making his phototeria. Today only an occasional hesitation, scarcely noticeable, in his sharp, incisive speech betrays the fact that he once stumbled for utterance. But this is the point: It was this stammering which was one of the main factors in his success... He could not get up in class to read. He could not take part with the bunch. He was isolated from ordinary contacts, from games, from parties—or, rather, he isolated himself. He withdrew within himself. He drew on his own strengths for amusement and development. He developed direction and self-reliance... He found everyone kind, everyone sympathetic, if, at times, embarrassed by his tongue-tied stumbling. In this self-imposed isolation, free from the ordinary distractions of youth, he began to think. He began to concentrate. His mind, with its mechanical bent, turned early to mechanical problems. His hands turned to tools. In his backyard, alone, he was always building model railroads and ships."



David A. McCowan and wife, Helen



*One of the last remaining McCowan Phototerias
(Now donated to Toronto Metropolitan University's Archives and Special Collections)*

McCowan's Phototeria was launched in Toronto in 1928. A Phototeria Centenary Celebration in 2028 is currently in the early stages of planning. Intended features of the celebration include:

- A Book Launch: *McCowan's Phototeria: The Man and His Machine* : Set in the Context of Scottish Photography Innovation.
- *An Inventor in Training*: A High School Drama Production with a sub-plot on the theme of bullying. (David A. McCowan struggled severely with stuttering in his youth.)
- Formal Donation at the Book Launch of the David Alexander McCowan Fonds to a public archive.
- Showcasing an original century-old Phototeria.

We invite members and other readers to be involved in this upcoming celebration: history teachers, drama teachers, and enthusiasts for photography, photobooths, and Scottish-Canadian history.

For further information please contact Emily Botelho (emily@autophoto.org) or Bruce McCowan (bmccowan@netrover.com).

The Legacy of Arbroath

By Ted Cowan (1944–2022)

Until his death, Ted was Emeritus Professor of Scottish History and Literature at the University of Glasgow and Director of that University's Crichton Campus, Dumfries. Prior to that, he was head of Scottish Studies at the University of Guelph.



The Ruins of Arbroath Abbey, where the famous "Declaration" was signed

A voice was conferred on the Scottish people due to the unprecedented concatenation of circumstances now known as the Scottish Wars of Independence. That cry was raised in defence of freedom. In order to foil the acquisitive, imperialistic ambitions of Edward I of England, the Scots argued, as early as 1301, "that the kingdom of Scotland... has always been completely free." The supreme articulation of the concept is enshrined in a letter, now known as the Declaration of Arbroath, written in Latin and sent to the pope in 1320:

For so long as a hundred of us remain alive, we will never on any conditions be subjected to the lordship of the English. For we fight not for glory nor riches nor honours, but for freedom alone, which no good person gives up except with life itself.

The document was sent by "barons, freeholders and the whole community of the realm of Scotland *Communitas Regni Scotie*. The letter relates that Robert Bruce, like another Joshua, had set his people free. He had become king through Divine Providence, right of succession and "the due consent and assent of us all," yet if ever he should seek to "make us or our kingdom subject to the king of England or the English, we would strive at

once to drive him out as a subverter of his own right and ours and make some other man who was able to defend us, our king." This remarkable statement is the first explicit articulation, with reference to a specific political situation as opposed to a theoretical abstract, of the contractual theory of monarchy in European history.

When Bruce seized the throne at Scone in 1306 he was, in the eyes of many, guilty of usurping the kingship of John Balliol. The new king had to manufacture a novel narrative to indicate the superiority of the Bruce claim to the kingship, while asserting that Balliol, with the connivance of Edward I, was the true usurper. In 1309, Bruce's PR department trumpeted that in advancing his claim, the faithful people of the realm would live and die with him, their true king, since he enjoyed the consent of the whole people, *consensus populi et plebis*, which seems more all-inclusive than the term *communitas regni* (community of the realm). It is difficult to ascertain in any historical period what exactly is meant by "the people" but Robert Bruce, for his own pressing reasons, seems to have been intent on making the term as widely inclusive as possible.

Historians have doubted whether the promise of Arbroath, the reciprocal rights between king and people, had much influence on posterity but in fact, as Professor Dauvit Broun of Glasgow University has recently shown, many manuscript copies of, and references to the document survive from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for example in Walter Bower's massive chronicle, *Scotichronicon*, in which it is possible to trace the development of notions of popular sovereignty. These, in combination with the inspirational legend of William Wallace as "man of the people" generated Scottish assumptions, or a mythos, about a kind of "democratic quotient" pervading politics, religion, education and many aspects of the national life and character. Wallace, although

the younger son of a knight, is always depicted as the man from nowhere, determined to stand forth in his country's hour of greatest need.

However, medieval people believed in the "Great Chain of Being," the idea that everything from God and the angels down through the different ranks and classes of humanity, to the animals, plants and the rocks beneath our feet, all had their legitimate place, but if one piece was taken out of the chain and placed elsewhere in the hierarchy, there was a danger of fragmentation, resulting in apocalyptic chaos. Wallace thus represented such a threat, since one of his rank had no right to be leading the Scottish army. The Scottish aristocracy feared and condemned Wallace with just as much passion as did Edward I of England.

Suffice it to say that the central ideas of Arbroath were not forgotten. John Mair, writing in 1525, argued that kings were instituted for the good of the people and not conversely. "It is from the people and most of all from the chief men and nobility who act for the common people, that kings have their institution." George Buchanan, Scotland's greatest expert on the Scottish constitution and the legality of resistance to tyrants, does not mention Arbroath, although he must have known about it. He was emphatic that there was indeed a mutual contract between monarch and people, but his authoritative writings served to obscure the Declaration and its message. Buchanan's writings damned Mary Queen of Scots, who was deposed from office for tyranny. Scottish political ideas were thus practical and demotic, as well as theoretical.

Buchanan's contemporary, John Knox, inspired a Reformation that was emphatically brought about, through popular revolt, in opposition to the wishes of the crown. Largely as a means of self-preservation, James VI revived medieval ideas of divine right kingship, developing theories that had earlier been vainly invoked to save his



Ted Cowan preparing a talk

mother. That is why Mary is so conspicuous in Scottish history. She was the first Scottish ruler to be martyred in the name of divine right, which argued that rulers were appointed by God and to resist them was to commit the worst heresy against God Himself. James wrote at length about the sanctity of kingship and narrowly avoided assassination. His son Charles the "Martyr" died on the scaffold. Charles II bolstered his position with many tracts favouring monarchy, in refutation of Covenanting claims such as the revolutionary assertion by Alexander Henderson, one of the drafters of the National Covenant (1638) that "the people make the magistrate (king), but the magistrate maketh not the people. The people may be without the magistrate but the magistrate cannot be without the people. The body of the magistrate is mortal but the people as a society is immortal." Scots certainly did not believe that there was a divinity which doth hedge a king.

As far as the covenanters were concerned, their political philosophies received manifest endorsement in the "Glorious Revolution" which appeared to sanction their resistance to tyrannical Stewart rule. The Declaration was printed with an English translation for the first time in 1689, the year of the so-called "Glorious Revolution," representing a kind of defining moment in the history of the Arbroath letter as it was absorbed into the Whig tradition. As far as the document is concerned, 1689 represents the crossroads of the centuries, looking back to the inspirational rhetoric of the early fourteenth century, and forward to the constitutional monarchy, and beyond, to the nationalism of later centuries.

The association with 1689 renders the Arbroath letter mythic, as it becomes part of a process which will eventually transform it into an oath, a manifesto, a sacred charter, and a declaration of independence attaining a status best described as "parahistorical." Thereafter it is frequently quoted in pamphlets, for example during the 1707

Union debates. It also appeared throughout the eighteenth century in publications concerned with the ongoing heated dialogue about whether the monarchy was hereditary or elective.

Reading the document, the novelist John Galt was moved to observe that whereas the English were a justice-loving people according to charter and statute, the Scots were a wrong-resenting race, according to right and feeling, and the character of liberty among them takes its aspect from that peculiarity. Interest in the document rather cooled in the nineteenth century, but two writers from Arbroath, in 1897 and 1904 respectively, dubbed the 1320 letter, "The Declaration of Scottish Independence" in homage to the American document of 1776. Thus, the voice of the people was heard once more, though academics paid little attention to Arbroath for a further fifty years only taking a truly serious interest as the 650th anniversary approached in 1970.

In the 1970s Mrs. Jean Watson of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, thought it would be good to add another Scottish Day to the calendar alongside January 25 and St Andrew's Day (November 30). She picked April 6 as the date of the Arbroath Declaration.

After a lengthy campaign, individual Canadian provinces and then the Federal Government adopted April 6 as "Tartan Day," celebrating Scottish values and achievements, particularly in education. All was well until the Americans became involved on March 29, 1998, when Senate Resolution 155 declared: "April 6 has a special significance for all Americans and especially those of Scottish descent, because the Declaration of Arbroath, the Scottish Declaration of Independence, was signed on April 6, 1320, and the American Declaration of Independence was modelled on that inspirational document."

In Scotland, the Press suspected an American right-wing conspiracy to commandeer a Scottish icon, inspired by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*. Soon there were Tartan Day celebrations right across America, including Washington, New York and Chicago, concerts, Scottish bands in pubs, a big parade ending in Central Park, Scottish celebrities and politicians everywhere. Thanks to the establishment of Tartan Day, the Declaration has become global, as Scottish values of freedom and constitutionalism are celebrated annually worldwide.

Ever since 1998, Americans—or some of them—have been looking for a direct connection between the two declarations. I can find no evidence

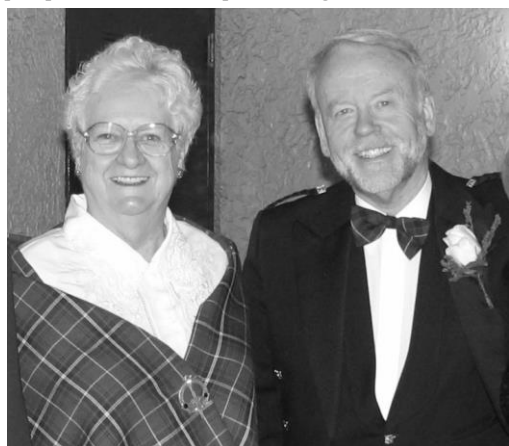


In the early days of the Foundation, Ted suggested that Tartan Day might be a good event for us as it was new at the time and not in conflict with the activities of other established Scottish groups.

that either Americans or Scots-Americans knew of the Scottish Declaration before their own Declaration was drawn up in 1776.

However, there is one intriguing link that might be suggested. I mentioned earlier that the Declaration was published with an English translation in 1689, the year of the "Glorious Revolution." When James VII and II fled to France to become the first of the exiled Jacobites, the English Declaration of Rights stated that he had abdicated, but according to the Scottish Claim of Right, James "hath forfeited the right to the crown and the throne is become vacant." The full text states that James, "by the advice of wicked and evil counsellors, did invade the fundamental constitution of this kingdom and altered it from a legal limited monarchy to an arbitrary despotic power and hath exercised the same to the subversion of the Protestant religion, and the violation of the laws and liberties of this kingdom, inverting all the ends of government whereby he hath forfeited the right to the crown..." The 1776 declaration drafted by Jefferson states that "George hath endeavoured to pervert the [kingly office] into a detestable and insupportable tyranny." For various specified acts of misrule he "has forfeited the kingly office and has rendered it necessary for the preservation of the people that he should be immediately deposed from the same and divested of all its privileges, powers and prerogatives." The echo here is surely of the Scottish Claim of Right rather than of the English Bill of Rights.

The Declaration of Arbroath should hold great significance for Scotland on its 700th anniversary, as it bequeaths values which are still inspirational. Small countries and their values can still make a difference in today's highly complex and increasingly bewildering world.



Jean Watson was our Scot of the Year in 2007 seen here at the Award event with David Hunter

The Skyline of Skye

By David Hunter

Having had a base in the Scottish Highlands since 2005, I have been fortunate to experience the dramatic landscape of this magnificent part of the country. This is an account of one of my many trips, usually on foot or by bicycle.

Immortalized in legend, music and song, the Isle of Skye is known throughout the world and rightly so. Anyone trying to describe the skyline of Skye on a good day will soon be running out of superlatives.

So with the forecast promising a spell of good weather, I cycled to Fort William from my base in Kinlochleven along the west shore of Loch Linnhe, leaving my bike at the train station before heading home by bus for the night.

I was up bright and early the next day to catch the first bus back up to the “Fort” and once there, made a quick dash from the bus stop to unlock the bike, buy a ticket and hop on the train. I made it just in the nick of time. Just over an hour later, I was in Mallaig.

Once out of the station, I made my way down to the pier to catch the ferry for the 30-minute journey over to Armadale on the Sleat peninsula of Skye. On arrival, I knew from experience that it was worthwhile to wait until the usual convoy of trucks, cars, motorbikes and caravans disgorged from the ferry to set out en masse, thus leaving the road ahead free for me to cycle without traffic. Not that the short wait was any great hardship, as the views east to Knoydart more than made up for it.

Once on the bike, a few minutes had me passing the Clan Donald Centre with its neo-Gothic castle and museum, its magnificent 200-year-old trees and stunning carpets of



View from Ord across Loch Eishort to Blaven, in Gaelic: Blà Bheinn (blue mountain)

bluebells, orchids and wildflowers reinforcing the affectionate “Garden of Skye” title of this part of the island.

A couple of miles later, I passed the entrance to *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, the Gaelic college founded in 1973 in modest old farm steadings. With a futuristic new building overlooking the Sound of Sleat, it has revitalized the Highlands by attracting students from Scotland and all over the world.

Continuing my journey, just east of Teague, white puffy clouds billowed over the ancient ruins of Knock Castle, a former stronghold of Clan MacLeod of Lewis and later of the MacDonalds. The Castle occupies a rocky headland that was originally the site of Dun Thoravail, an Iron Age fort. It stands out against the Sound of Sleat in the background, with the rugged landscape of Knoydart in the distance. It is claimed by Gaelic folklore that the castle is haunted by a Green Lady or *glaistig*—a ghost associated

with the fortunes of the family who occupied the castle: the ghost appears happy if good news is to come; if it's bad news she weeps. The castle is also said to be the haunt of a *gruagach*—a mischievous sprite-like creature which is said to have a particular concern with caring for livestock.

At just over five miles from the ferry, I arrived at the junction which would take me west over the hills to Loch Eishort but before doing so I figured I would have enough time to press on a further two and a half miles to Isle Ornsay, which I knew from past experience would give me a stunning view to Beinn Sgritheall on the mainland. I was not disappointed.

Retracing my way back to the Ord road, I headed west through woods of birch, oak, hazel and rowan, offering welcome respite from the afternoon sun as I climbed steadily up to Loch Meadal. There the road levelled out and the jagged peaks of the Cuillins appeared tantalizingly over the horizon. As they grazed on the grassy verge, I startled several sheep and lambs that quickly formed a herd in front of me, trotting ahead for several minutes before leaping off into the moorland one by one. Soon I was on the descent to sea level, the Cuillins intermittently revealing ever more, as if to tease me onward.

Once down at the beach at Ord I paused as the magnificence of the Cuillin range was finally revealed in its entirety and I couldn't help wondering why on earth I had not made the effort to visit before.

On the bike again, and heading south, I was immediately confronted with one of the steepest hills I have ever encountered. With a gradient of one-in-five, it has stalled many a car, and so it was with no shame that I got off and pushed my way up, stopping periodically to take in tantalizing views of Blaven across Loch Eishort until the road flattened out.



With my vintage Raleigh bike on the road above Tarskavaig



Looking east from Isle Ornsay to Beinn Sgritheall on the mainland

I was now way above the loch in high gear and the going was easy. The peaks of Hallival and Askival on the Island of Rum made a brief appearance before a steep descent had the wind whistling in my ears as I zoomed all the way down to the beach at Tokavaig. And what a beach it was! This was the place for lunch and in no time, I had my trusty camp stove fired up, a hot meal prepared and my map spread out, allowing me to pick out landmarks all the way from Beinn na Caillich in the north, to Blaven, Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr nan Eag in the west.

A short distance away I could see the remains of Dunscaith Castle which date back to the 12th century. The castle, perched on a rock above Loch Eishort, originated as a stronghold for the Vikings led by Gilbert MacAskill, grandson of the Norse explorer Ascall Mar Ragsnail.

Over the years it was claimed by both Clan MacLeod and Clan MacDonald but was abandoned in the early 17th century. In the ancient Irish legends and sagas known as the *Ulster Cycle*, it is said to be the home of *Scáthach*, a fierce warrior woman who trained the legendary Irish hero Cú Chulainn in arts of combat.

Moving on, I began the short climb up to Loch Ghabhsgabhaig, passing the first road leading to the hamlet of Tarskavaig and stopping at the next one just over half a mile later to admire the view. It was

brehtaking. To the south, the complete outline of Rum was backlit by a hazy summer sun and I had to remind myself that the view north over the crofting village of Tarskavaig to the Cuillins was for real, not one of the scenes made popular in recent years by Scottish artist John Lowrie Morrison, aka “Jolomo.”

Travelling south to Tarskavaig beach, the road turned to the east and I was now on the home stretch. I passed a flock of newly shorn sheep grazing contentedly in an open field near Achnacloich after which the road continued through lush moss-carpeted woodland, with the gurgling sound of the Gillean Burn close by. Soon the trees petered out and it was a mile of steady climbing up to Loch Dhughail where I stopped for a breather prior to tackling the final short but challenging one-in-seven gradient to the summit.

Once there, in the field opposite me, a young man was busy cutting blocks of peat using a traditional specialized L-shaped spade known in Gaelic as a *tairsgeir*. He came across to speak to me as he seemed very curious about my vintage Raleigh bike. We got chatting and I was quite surprised to learn that he used to live in Toronto. Small world indeed!

After that brief rest, and with the hard work now behind me, I paused for a final view of the Cuillins before cooling off on an exhilarating two-and-a-half mile freewheel ride down to Kilbeg on the main road. In a few minutes I was back at the pier in time for the boat and train south.

Back in Fort William, strolling along the High Street, I passed an accordionist and was immediately intrigued by the haunting familiarity of the tune he was playing—it was “The Skyline of Skye.”

From a song by Calum Kennedy

*The islands are calling me back home again
And I long for the skyline of Skye.
A lassie is waiting, sweet flow'r of the glen,
'Neath the beautiful skyline of Skye.*

*I left her one springtime;
oh, I loved her so!
The blue mountains whispered,
“You’re foolish to go.”
As I sailed with the tide,
something died here inside.
How I cried for the skyline of Skye!*

*In mem’ry I’m hearing the ghost of her tune
That keeps haunting my heart with a sigh.
It tells of her parting that sad afternoon.
It’s the song of the skyline of Skye.*

*The road to the islands
comes down to the sea
And that’s where my love
will be waiting for me,
And together we’ll stay
till we’re both old and grey
'Neath the beautiful skyline of Skye.*



The Cuillin Mountains

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