

# BOTHY PROJECT

## Andrew Kerr – Modern Institute: Last nights tea not quite as contentious

Everyday on Eigg I went for a walk. In the mornings I was at the desk drawing or writing.

On the train up I sat opposite Swinburne and his companion. In Mallaig the sun was shining on the crowds catching ferries. I noticed cyclists leaving for Skye. The ferry crossing was smooth, affording sharp views of the Cuillin and Rum. Dark clouds hung above Eigg, strangely.

Eddie met me off the boat and, in the drizzle, we drove to Cleadale. A welcoming cup of tea at the house then Lucy introduced me to the bothy. An evening of unpacking and good-feeling.

The Sunday morning was ruled by indecision. The sun was heating up the back step as I paraded. The dark Cleadale cliffs were enticing. In the afternoon I made my way up through the tangle of bracken, heather and thorny scrub to the base of the cliffs in the hope of finding a gentle gully leading to the top. There were a few aborted climbs until making the ascent easily somewhere above Corrairigh. Once on the Beinn Bhuidhe plateau there was very little of Eigg I couldn't see, like standing on a roof. I was encouraged and followed the cliff top north. You could see the tide was out, I ambled downwards at Leit an Aonaich toward Camas Sgiotag, from there I clambered over to Bay of Laig. Perhaps it isn't surprising I knew nothing of the geological riches to be found on Eigg but it doesn't take long to encounter a startling rock and there was one after another on this stretch of coast: the bedrock has been sliced and carved effortlessly, large pools of lurid seaweed are peppered with prune-like boulders, heavy sandstone bulbs pretend to be sponge cake and so on. Return to the bothy elated, realising what the island contains. Finished off Elmore Leonard by red light.

Monday morning and I dither over whether or not to light the stove, decide against it. At the desk with sketchbook extending lines, plus a visit to the conspicuous sentry box out back. It's around two p.m. and the sun is blazing. I present 'Italia' cap. Down the track to Bay of Laig. I'd almost say it was busy: people tramping over from the singing sands, people and cows on the beach. I take a photo, so does everyone else. Baking heat, I target south west in order to scale the slopes beneath Sliabh Beinn Tighe. The bracken and heather don't help but there are sheep tracks criss-crossing the hillside. Ever since spotting the grand cliffs at the far end of the bay I had, for some reason, felt it necessary to go to them. To this end, after gaining some height, I traverse west and approach the clifftop. It is difficult to gauge the drop, the swell in the Sound of Rum offers no indication but affects my balance. I feel unsteady and am content to remain at a short distance from the step-off. I turn and glimpse Beinn Tighe, a great stump of a summit. The ascent is improvised; bounding over the carpet of thick heather, occasionally ducking through furrows filled with crouching trees. The wind arrives. The thrilling view is of expansive open water, Oigh-Sgeir is a dribble of Morse code out in the Minch. Beinn Tighe's balding crown is cobbled. There is no one about. Small birds, that I have no facility to identify, share the walk. As there is plenty of daylight I continue to An Sgurr. I keep high round Loch Beinn Tighe. A refreshing rain comes on. It's peaceful while wending my way passed the lochans and knolls between the two peaks. When I make it to An Sgurr ridge I'm frustrated not to see Canna but Grulin Uachdrach opens under me like a drawer. The rain and wind keep me from settling on The Nose. Quickly, I take in as much as I can: Tiree, Coll, Muck, Mull, Ardnamurchan, Arisaig, Mallaig, Knoydart, Skye, Rum and the mirage that is Barra. Sheltering by the bulging damp hull of An Sgurr I plot my return directly across the moorland. I hold a steady pace wading through the heather. A pale bird is patrolling up ahead. As I approach, it doesn't alter its circuits. I swear it's an owl and either chaperoning me away or anticipating I'll scatter voles and mice from the undergrowth. I hit the back of the forestry plantation, there's a track running along the perimeter. I choose this over whatever's under the bracken canopy. The track soon becomes overgrown and I let gravity suggest a way through. I am brought to the cliffs above Laig. I'm weary and think there is no better place to end a long walk than a beach. It's a shock to see a couple fellow walkers pass by, they provide a lead down to the farm. I disturb geese in the final field. The tide is low. Sand hoppers wrestle over shreds of seaweed.

Tuesday is a day spent in the new home with books open on the desk. I draw small sketches using pencils and pens. Abstract compositions precede fictional bodies. There is a notebook to write thoughts and phrases that enter my mind while making pictures. To alleviate the internal focus, every few hours I do observational drawing. I start to draw clouds. In the late afternoon I take the road to Galmisdale where I shop. The dried fruit torments the digestive order. I watch the window all evening, bracken shivers in the breeze.

Wednesday and there is a plan: Talm then the entire east coast. In the mid-morning I take the road to Howlin then cross the fields to the saddle at Guala Mhor. Once over this divide I immediately sense a change. There are no signs of people here. The path is faint and dwindles. The first obstacle is a vast, ancient rock fall; the remains of an unthinkable collapse. Scale is confusing. Sgorr Sgaileach lies beyond the crumpled cliff. When I reach it, brawling gulls and terns are unafraid to challenge me; they swoop aiming for my head. Seals on their backs lounge on the warm rocks surrounding Eilean Thuilm, they are dismissive of my attempts to whistle a tune. Cloud rests on the Beinn Bhuidhe plateau like crust on a pie but it's the only cloud in the area. A jumble of chunky rocks constitute the coast line and I scramble along in the glare. Although I'd intended to stick by the sea I can't keep my eyes off the giant basalt wall to my right: precarious ramparts, wayward seams and threatening ruts. The map shows only one ruin in the shadow of the eastern cliffs, Struidh, and I am curious. There I find an impressive amount of much-dated brick work. I take a photo. Instead of dropping to sea level I join the sheep track. They have made a fine highway and it's still in use; it is only correct that I detour round, at regular intervals, travelling groups of sheep. Over the next few miles the mighty cliff diminishes and becomes less fierce; it's structure is revealed: tightly packed narrow columns bent wavy by diabolical forces. At one last bay the cliff is nothing at all. I rest a while in this bay and struggle to write one postcard. I wander across the pasture beneath Kildonan then up to the church, I don't linger as I have the unnecessary idea to catch the shop. I more or less sprint along Druim an Aoinidh and the soft grass before the main road. The shop is receiving the evening sun and folk, seated at outside tables, are feeling its warmth. I buy a bottle of beer and pack of biscuits. I'm reluctant to stay, join the company and after a dispiriting visit to massacre cave, mainly due to my lack of courage, it's quits and time for Cleadale. At the bothy, enchanted, I witness the clouds and setting sun play out an unpredictable handling of Rum.

Thursday, the last full day. I had chosen not to walk, to take the day indoors. Devote the time to sketchbooks and draw without interruption. There were periods of drawing from the head and periods of drawing from life. I listened out for words and attempted to note them down too. At night, as I lay facing the rafters it felt very good to have been on Eigg.