

Ewan Moses

Loch Trool up Merrick

Writers' Walks



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Ewan Moses is an English teacher and smallholder. Currently enjoying writing short fiction and poems while wrestling with the direction of a longer non-fiction project. Tried living in places other than Galloway, but it didn't work.





Writers' Walks



Loch Trool up Merrick

It's only a four hour walk at a good pace, but the journey feels huge.

The sheltered beginning is bucolic and reaching Culsharg bothy feels like nothing short of time travel, but the forestry plantations around remind you that, regardless of how you might feel about it, this is a changed, but still working landscape and always has been.

Similarly, the sight of windfarms from the summit of Benyellary stir up passions to fever pitch among some. To me, from up there, they just look a bit pathetic – like most human endeavours when seen from above. From the top of the Merrick, on a clear day, you can see every country of the United Kingdom as well as Ireland. You can see yourself from the top as well, if you're okay with looking down.

Choosing the Merrick climb as my favourite walk might seem like a bit of a cop-out. It's not obscure, it's not my own little 'hidden gem' and it's certainly not underappreciated. It has its own car park. My friends and I once met a bus tour of German pensioners on their descent at ten in the morning as we began to meander up the Buchan Burn nursing serious hangovers.

But I like countryside that is enjoyed, the preciousness of having a place 'all to yourself' seems a little absurd to me, as even when you're alone on the land is never all to yourself.

It was my dad's idea to walk it as a family when I was still in primary school. We had never done anything like it before and never did since. A beef and sheep farmer, he was going to tackle it in wellies until my mother made him borrow a pair of walking boots, which he eventually agreed to but still did the whole thing in a pair of corduroys with a wax jacket in case it rained. He knew that men had worked this hill long before any notions of what breathable fabric might be.

Merrick

They say it's not a mountain
but I'd like to see them say it to its face,
watch it care nothing
for club memberships or baggers.

Watch it shrug its great shoulder
and turn back in
to the lay of land that will outlast all the names we give it.

At Culsharg bothy you make plans;
come back and stay a night. Maybe
add your name to the charcoal scratches on the granite, maybe join
the graffiti strangers who heard the same voice as you do now, maybe someday
you could all live with nothing
but bare floors and a fireplace.

Surrounding that daydream, military ranks of Sitka
drop dirty needles into the whisky water, then turn
soil foreign to them into a salient no mans land when their columns are felled.

The road that you must cross ahead seems
somehow
to go in two wrong directions.

You can't see the summit until you're practically on it,
a magic trick of impossible proportions,
hidden by Benyellary,
Hill of the Golden Eagle, Merrick's soaring gatekeeper.
Here I remember on my first time,
my father, sheltered by the cairn, lighting a Silk Cut, his ashes
whipped away in the wind
as quickly as he could draw,
gone now with his memory soaring over land suddenly below.

Across the Nieve of the Spit, where once
in summer, after school had finished
forever,
we ran teenage and breathless along the edge of the world,
the nervous exhilaration of a downhill after that first summit,
daring ourselves
against the sheer drops on either side,
imagining ourselves
eye to eye with the bird who flew flat against the curve of the hillside
who was suddenly launched into the clear blue.
We wanted to be sure we had nothing left
by the time we had to face the final climb
to the top.

I have a picture of the summit on the wall in front of me;
actually a picture of a painting.
It stopped me dead in a gallery miles away from here,
but I couldn't afford to buy it.

And now I am haunted by the thought
I may never find the painting
of the only place I can remember ever talking seriously about God.