

Way out West

A true story by

K.W.McRAE

On a chilly evening in March 1951, I alighted from the steam train at Kyle of Lochalsh station, and was met by a man from the Forestry Commission, the driver of the "pick-up" van that was to take me to my new location at Ratagan Forest near Glenelg, North West Highland Region of Scotland.

I was approached by a slight built man of about twenty-five. "New start?" he asked. This was very obvious, as I was the only stranger to alight and looking lost, and he had easily picked me out from the small group who had also alighted from the train in the gathering dusk at its terminus on the North West coast line.

I confirmed I was the 'new start,' and we introduced ourselves. His name was Jack McDonald from Moyle, the area adjacent to Ratagan Forest, Glenelg. The Forestry Commission area I was going to work in. We made for the station exit. He wheeled my rusty, but trusty bicycle. I carried my home-made wooden suitcase that contained all my worldly possessions. Outside the station, we headed towards a standard P.U. (pick-up) Forestry Commission ex-army small van, the rear steel floor area covered by a metal frame and tied down canvas canopy.

When we reached the van Jack said, "I've to pick someone up in town before we head back, so you'll have to go in the back under the tarpaulin."

"Right," I replied, thinking, as I heaved my case and bike under the canopy and scrambled over the tail-gate of the vehicle, we would not have far to go to my destination. In town we picked up a young woman, who sat in the front passenger seat of the van with Jack the driver.

We set off and left a dimly lit Kyle of Lochalsh and headed into the now dark and cold evening. I wrapped myself up as best I could in my waterproofs and huddled down against the cabin as I tried to avoid the cold draughts that found their way under the tarpaulin canopy. It was a very cold, frosty night and I hoped my destination was not too far distant.

How wrong I was

About an hour into the journey, one of the wheels of the van had a puncture. Grateful for the halt, I clambered over the rear of the van to give Jack some assistance to change the wheel. At the same time it allowed me to stretch my cramped and cold limbs. I flapped my arms as I tried to induce the warm blood to flow through my nearly frozen body.

I did not know where the Hell I was, and by the time we fumbled by the beam of a small torch to change the wheel, I felt as if my fingers were solid blocks of ice. It was pitch dark and the night air was very cold. By the time we fitted the wheel on by the light of the torch, I was wishing I had never come to this awful place.

With assurance from Jack we had not far to go, I had no option but to reluctantly clamber back into the rear of the van, and continued heading towards the small village of Sheil Bridge on the shores of Loch Duich

At last, possibly a half an hour from the wheel change, we arrived at Sheil Bridge. I was now in the ancestral home of my clan, the McRae's.

A weak moon cast a pale beam onto the still waters of the loch; lights shone from houses unseen in the darkness, except for the glow that shone brightly from their windows. All was still, except the noise from the engine of the stationary Forestry Commission vehicle.

The front seat passenger, a young girl, alighted and informed me I could have her vacated seat. Gratefully I scrambled over the tail-gate, thanked her and sat into the empty seat of the warm front interior of the van, which smelled faintly of the last occupant's perfume.

The journey for me was not over. We continued on for a short distance, and I was just beginning to thaw out in the warmth of the vehicle, when we stopped at a stone lodge building. We went in and I was introduced to the head forester, a short, balding, overweight individual of about forty-five. By the expression on his face, someone or something had upset him. Could it be because of the wheel change, we were behind time in arriving, and had made him late for his dinner?

I introduced myself and gave details where I had come from. No handshake, or how are you, you've arrived O.K. from him.

To Jack the driver he said, "Take him over to the bothy". As if "him" was a fugitive from justice and was being returned to the prison camp. We exited his office without a goodnight from him, which was to be expected. During our short time inside the office, it had started to snow.

Jack and I clambered into the still warm, slightly perfumed vehicle, me wondering what was 'over the hill'. Neither Jack or his 'Lordship' had said anything and I thought it best to 'wait and see'. We proceeded into the darkness, broken only by the flickering lights of the van dancing on the tarred track ahead. Soon the road surface and incline changed from a smooth one to a fairly rough road heading steeply upwards.

We climbed slowly in 2nd and 3rd gear. The snow thickened as we ascended higher and the incline seemed to get steeper, and steeper. I looked out the window on the passenger side. Bloody hell! There's nothing out there, just a big black hole; into which large white snowflakes were being swallowed up into a black void maw of darkness.

What was I doing here? Where was I going? What possessed me to leave the soft rolling hills of the Borders, where at times it was tough, doing forestry work out on the hills and here was I, who had not even begun to work in the area, scared, starving, crawling up a mountain trail in a clapped out small ex-army van with a complete stranger, who had given me no information as to where we were, or where we would eventually end up. I hoped not over the side of the road that fell away to Hell.

Outside, in the darkness, the large flakes of snow had almost obliterated the road ahead. I was again half-frozen, either from fright, cold or both; going to God, and the driver only knew where.

Jack, the driver, seemed confident enough as he gripped the steering wheel tightly, I could see the white of his knuckles in the dim darkness of the van and he pressed the steering wheel against his chest and leaned forward, his nose almost touching the wind screen, as he attempted to see the road ahead, as the headlights endeavored to pierce the blackness and the blanket of snow that was now falling thickly.

"Not long now," Jack said confidently, in the soft Highland brogue of the region. How he knew where he was I did not question, he was a local man after all. I took his word for it.

With a nervous "good" I tried to let him see I was confident in his ability to arrive at our destination in one piece. I averted my eyes from the chasm alarmingly close on my side of the road and tried to concentrate on the road ahead.

Shortly after Jack exclaimed, "We're at the top, doon hill all the way from here." He slammed into top gear. Like a bat out of Hell, that van hurtled down the other side of the mountain, skidded round corners, wheels spun on the snow covered track. Loose stones thumped under the floor of the vehicle from the road. I expected any moment to go over the edge and go flying into space. I wanted to scream at the madman to slow down. "It's an old van yer drivin, ye mad bugger." But he had the confidence of a racing driver who knew every twist and turn of the race track ahead as we skidded round corners, wheels spinning.

Thankfully the nightmare journey ended when we reached the bottom of the hill. During the nightmare journey, at times my back-side was seldom on the seat

Approximately two or three minutes from the foot of the incline, we turned sharp left and onto the road (I use that term loosely) that would take us to our ultimate destination, the forestry worker's bothy at Moyle, Ratagan Forest.

The road we traveled had been bad enough, but we now drove along what was nothing more than a farm track; deeply pot-holed and very rough, it was like driving over corrugated iron, even the heavy covering of snow was not sufficient to cushion the wheels of the van from the bumps.

After about half mile, sore ribs and backside later, we halted outside the usual Forestry Commission bothy--an x-army wood Nissen hut-- where subdued light filtered through the dirty windows. "This is it" said Jack.

Thankfully I alighted from the vehicle and retrieved my possessions from under the canopy of the vehicle

I thanked Jack (and the Lord) that I had arrived in one piece

I leaned my bike against the hut. The van about turned. I gazed after it as it rattled and bumped away on its return journey along that terrible track. Soon it was swallowed up in the inky darkness; the rear red lights winked

at me. Maybe I should have taken these red lights as a danger signal as to what was in front of me in the days to come. There was no going back, even if I wanted to. Here I was and here I would have to remain.

With some apprehension, I picked up my case and climbed the steps and opened the door into a warm kitchen. In front of me as I entered, was a large cast-iron range on which sat a steaming kettle and two or three bubbling cooking pots, over which a small wizened man stirred something in one of the not very clean pots. He looked like a wizard stirring some magic potion. To complete the scene, I thought, he should have had a Raven on his shoulder and a black cat at his feet.

He turned his head towards me as I entered. I said. "Hi, I'm the new start." He nodded in answer. Like Jack the driver, a man of few words.

On the right-hand side of the kitchen sat three men on wooden benches at an ex-army wooden table, two at one side, one on the other. No words of greeting was forth coming from them either. They were all dressed in normal forestry attire, ex-army shirts and khaki trousers and tackety boots on their feet.

The men at the table were about the same age as the pot stirrer, 50 to 60 years of age,- to me they looked that age anyway-. I detected the strong smell of pine rosin emitting from their clothes and mingling with the cooking smells that drifted round the warm kitchen

"Want a plate of soup?" asked the gnome, as he continued to stir the contents of the pot.

"Oh aye!" I answered, "I'm starvin. No' had anything, since I left Hawick this mornin, except a jammie piece sandwich on the train."

He pointed at the wooden table. "Sit yersel down there. Here's a spun"

Before he handed me the "spun," he gave it a wipe with his off-white greasy apron.. I shook off my waterproofs and gratefully sat down at the table in anticipation of a lovely bowl of home made soup. What he set before me in a soup plate was liquid green, laced with battle-ship gray, that no artist could possibly have created.

On the surface of this "masterpiece," grease had started to congeal. It reminded me of years previously having seen bilge water from an old

rust bucket of a trawler being tipped overboard; the difference being the bilge water then was more appetising than the soup in front of me now.

I was very hungry. My belly rumbled for the want of food. I had no alternative but to dip the "spun" into this awful goo, and reluctantly open my mouth and pour it down my throat. Gawd! It was disgusting and not even hot. How I ever supped the remainder of that Hellish soup, and it remained in my stomach, I shall never know. It put me off pea soup for life, and I did love pea soup. I cannot remember what followed the 'soup' but I certainly did not have seconds of the gnome's pea soup.

After "dinner" I was shown my accommodation. A room of my own, at least this was different from the set up in the Borders bothy, where one Nissen hut was shared by fourteen men. This hut also had a dining/kitchen area at one end, at the other end was the toilets/washroom and luxury, a shower, the hot water provided by a wood fired boiler within the toilet area. A corridor ran down the centre between these two areas. There were three single rooms each side of the corridor, one for each worker. Each room consisted of the usual ex-army bed and mattress, two blankets and one pillow, bare wooden floor, and one fold up chair. It was more private than what I had been used too, and it lifted my spirits some-what after the nightmare soup.

I was extremely tired after such a lengthy journey and all it had entailed. I looked out my work clothes for the following day. Made up the bed. Had a quick wash in cold water. Went through to the kitchen and said goodnight to my new workmates, a nod from a couple of them. I undressed and crawled under the coarse blankets. As I drifted off to sleep I wondered what possessed me to come to this out of the way part of the country. Stuck away in the back of beyond among total strangers who, at times, spoke a foreign language; -that's when they spoke. Any sentence of words of more than five syllables was to them, a speech.

Next morning at 7am. I was wakened by a knock on the room door. I switched on the electric light--a bonus. In the bothy in the Borders the light was provided by Tilley paraffin lamps. I dressed in the very cold room. Went into the wash place and washed my face and hands in icy cold water. This was no hardship for me as I had used the same means at my two previous bothies.

Dressed for work, I entered the welcome warmth of the kitchen and was properly introduced to my work mates before sitting down to "knotty" porridge and a mug of tea.

My fellow inmates were all "teuchters." Most were from that part of the country. There was Murdo, the wizened cook/bothy cleaner. Two others I cannot remember their names and old John, a more amicable man from the Isle of Skye. He was a retired merchant seaman as I later found out. He had traveled the world and would tell us tales of his escapades in far-off lands, and the convoys he had taken part in during the war. This was in the days when it was thought that the world was a large place. Times before air travel reduced the size of the modern world.

There was no radio due to the bad reception because of the surrounding mountains so John was our source of entertainment. A great character with a wonderful sense of humour. He believed in black magic/ the supernatural and some of his stories were fantastic and scary.

After breakfast, we all went out into the cold and snow; to the stable meeting place not far from the bothy. The rest of the forestry staff had assembled there in the cold light of dawn. Apart from the bothy contingent, the other workers consisted of local people from the nearby crofts, who were employed by the Forestry Commission for work in Ratagan Forest because there was not enough work on the croft to sustain all the family and the surplus sons, and daughters worked in forestry to make extra money, to maintain the family as the crofting life was very hard at that time.

The entire forestry squad amounted to twelve persons, four bothy men, six local crofter men and two local girls, sisters, from the adjacent croft. Mary, about sixteen, the other Dot about twenty, and even wearing their working, clothes not bad looking.

Every body were dressed the same including the girls; dungarees, old tweed jacket, scarves, woolen mittens and heavy boots. The men wore balaclavas or caps, the girls had a bandana tied round their heads, like a turban, the working woman's fashion in those days.

There was one exception to the crofters, a Newfoundlander, who with his wife and young son were tenants of the single Forestry Commission house adjacent to the bothy. He was a comical figure in his overalls that covered his short legs and a Canadian lumber jacket that shrouded his

roly-poly body, on his head he wore a flapped fur hat. He wore loose fitting steel rimmed spectacles that slid down his nose continuously and he had to constantly push them back up the bridge of his nose. Apart from the normal duties the rest of the squad carried out, he, when necessary, with a horse, extracted the first tree crop thinnings to the "ride lines-that the squad had felled. It was also his responsibility to feed and water the horse at the end of each day.

Introductions over. Everyone was given a brashing saw. This is a short curved saw blade about a foot and a half long, attached to a three to four foot long wooden handle.

We made our way in the snow, to the woods a short distance away and began to remove the small spruce branches from ground level to over six feet high. The purpose of this work was to enable the head forester access into the wood to count, and mark the trees to be thinned out and it also allowed the squad to move around without being impeded by branches tugging at your clothes, and easy access for the Newfy and his horse too.

I had never worked with a brashing saw before but it was a simple operation and I soon got into the "swing" of it. The act of brashing involved push/pull the curved saw over the small branches close to the stem of the tree to the specified height. The cut branches were left where they fell. For the first two or three days my arms and shoulders, not used to this sort of work, were extremely sore but after the first week I could brash all day with no discomfort.

Even though the weather was cold, in the wood it was dry underfoot as the rain or snow could not penetrate the canopy of the close growing trees, and deep inside the forest the winds could not penetrate the closely planted trees and we would sweat with the exertion of the work and soon discarded our outer garments and worked in shirt sleeves, but at break time, put on our jackets because of the chill air even in the woods.

The trees we were working on were Sitka spruce and Larch. They were about twenty to thirty years old and ready for "first thinning". After several days brashing we exchanged our brashing saws for thirty inch "bow" hand saws and sharp axes. Another essential requirement, not supplied by the Commission, was a set of strong arms and shoulders. After the tree had been sawn through at ground level, it remained in an upright position, hemmed in by the adjacent trees. The procedure now

was to clasp the "butt" at shoulder height and bodily pull the tree down to ground level, where it would be "sned" (removal of the lateral branches) with the axe, and top cut off at two inch diameter

At some locations, it was impossible for the "Newfy" to enter with his horse and extract the "poles"; they then had to be manually removed by the squad to the "ride lines" (access roads) for ultimate removal by lorry to Corpach processing plant near Fort William, for use as chip board or coal mine pit props.

After a few weeks I began to enjoy the work. In the wood during the spring and summer months, the flies and midges were a bit of a pest but there was nothing we could do about it, repellants were non existent at that time.

During my free time I would assist in the adjacent croft with the haymaking. The locals all spoke the Gaelic and I'm sure some remarks made were at my expense, but I took no offence at the ribaldry, maybe because I fancied Dot, who it turned out, was the occupant in the front seat of the van the day of my arrival. We had fun during this time but all we did was make hay, it was a case of keep your hands on the pitchfork, not on the lassies. Mum and Dad and the rest of the family were watching.

I would often go walking alone into the surrounding hills and watch the wild beasts and birds in this wilderness. One day on one of my jaunts I saw a magnificent Golden Eagle perched on a high crag. It is said that the Red Deer is the monarch of the glen, but if you could see a Golden Eagle in silent flight over the high mountains, ever alert as he surveys his domain, you would agree that here is the true king of the glens.

On another walk I spotted a Buzzard's nest situated in an almost inaccessible ledge. I managed to climb above the site and could look down on the fledglings. I visited the nest regularly until the young had flown. The adults were not happy at my visitations and would make loud cries at my approach but did not attack me. Thank goodness.

A stream of clear water flowed close by the bothy and regularly I would follow it to its mountain source and many strange and wonderful natural sights I would see. One phenomenon sticks clearly in my mind as regards the burn itself. As the water cascaded down the rocks, it fell into pools of clear water. Over centuries, the water with the action of pebbles had

hollowed out in the solid rock, perfect bowls holding clear, crystal, ice cold water. In the pools swam beautiful rainbow trout; some of the pools were small and shallow and it would have been quite easy for me to "guddle" some for a meal in the bothy, but I preferred to leave them in their natural environment.

One day, before I set off on one of my walks, Jack (the driver) gave me his 410 shotgun and suggested that maybe I could bag a roe deer that were rife in the area. They were classed as vermin and it was permissible to shoot them and it would also provide meat for the bothy too augment our rations, as we were still on wartime rations. The roe deer cause some damage to the trees when their antlers are growing; they strip the bark from trunk and branches, when they try to get rid of the velvet covering on their new antlers.

During my walk that day, I did see a roe deer browsing in the heather. I was down wind and he did not smell, hear or see me. I managed to keep out of sight and stealthily moved closer to within 50 yards from the animal. I could not have missed at that distance. I raised the gun to my shoulder Sighted along the barrel. Closed one eye. I couldn't miss. It was too easy. With my heart pounding, my finger curled on the trigger. I hesitated. Released my finger from the trigger and shouted. The roe deer, startled, looked in my direction and bounded away. Why did I let it go unharmed? It had done me no personal harm, so why should I take the life of such a beautiful animal.

I returned the gun to Jack but did not mention the Roe deer incident. I have never handled a gun since that time, not even at a fairground shooting at targets.

A bulldozer driver with his machine, was employed to construct a rough road through the forest to be used by timber lorries to uplift the cut "poles" piled at the side of the "ride lines," dragged there either by the horse or dragged by the forestry workers manually. The driver had his own accommodation, an old caravan that he towed to the various sites as he moved through the forest. He also had a motor-cycle that conveyed him to the village of Glenelg where he would occasionally go for a beer. On his way back to his caravan one evening, he collided with, and killed a roe deer. He handed the carcass into the bothy for our use. but before it could be cooked it had to be prepared; hung, bled, gutted, skinned and butchered into suitable sizes for the cooking pot. Old John and I

volunteered to take on this task, and nasty and messy as it was, but the thought of some fresh meat, especially venison, spurred us on

I was far from happy with the meals being cooked and served by Murdo, but I tolerated the situation until the venison episode. The next day after work, I was looking forward to a nice plate of choice venison, instead of the usual rubbish food we were subjected to. I sat down at the table and anticipated a big plate of mouth-watering slices of venison with our usual boiled tatties.

A plate of small pieces of meat was set before me.

I looked at the meal in front of me, then at Murdo. "What's this?" I asked.

"Venison" he answered. "What's the matter?" I looked at my companions plates. They had nice cuts of venison.

I stood up and faced Murdo. "I helped John, hang, bleed, gut, skin, cut up that deer and you give me this rubbish, a' the wee bits. The scraps."

In anger he replied. "You're always complaining, somebody has to get the odd bits."

I was so enraged, I picked up my plate of scraps and said. "Well! you can have them." and threw them at him and stormed out the kitchen.

Previous to this incident I was getting fed up with Murdo's attitude to his other duties, Apart from cooking, his other responsibilities was to keep the bothy clean and tidy, light the fire under the boiler for showers but this was seldom done, especially the boiler, it was never lit.

During the summer it was hot and sweaty work in the wood and a shower would have been welcome after work. When someone else lit the boiler it would be late in the evening before the water was hot enough for a shower, even then, there would only be enough water for two people to have a shower, as the hot water system was very primitive.

Shortly after the venison incident and thoroughly fed up with Murdo's attitude, I managed to get "digs" in the Newfoundlander's house, which

was, as mentioned earlier, adjacent to the bothy. I thought at the time I had made a move for the better but as it turned out, it was a case of out of the frying pan into the fire.

The first evening I sat down at the table for dinner, which was certainly better served and cooked than the bothy grub, but before we could tuck in, his wife, son and I had to wait for “him” and sit down at the table. By the time he had bedded, watered and fed the horse; which was his responsibility, washed himself and sat down, the meal was cold. I did not say anything for a couple of days, to see if the situation would change. It didn’t and I complained.

His answer was, he was head of the house and no one would begin their meal until he sat at the table. I agreed that the meals were better but it was cold before we could eat it, and this I would not put up with. I do not know why his wife tolerated the situation, waiting until he came into the house before she and their son could have their meal; possibly because he had instructed her it had to be on the table when he came through the door. I did not have to accept this nonsense. I tolerated the situation for a week to see if the situation would change. It didn’t and I reluctantly moved back into the bothy.

During my short stay in that house, there was an episode that amused and makes me laugh even to this day. As mentioned earlier, they had a son of about four or five years old. Whenever he went to the lavatory to answer the call of nature, and when he completed the necessary, he would yell “Hey mum, I’m feenished” and his mother would rush away and wipe his bum. I thought, surely at that age he should be able to wipe his own arse.

Shortly after I returned to the bothy, Murdo left for pastures new and a young lad took over the job of cook/cleaner. He was an improvement on Murdo and I was prepared to give him a chance. I suppose I could have been taken on the job, due to my experience as a cook in the army, (In spite of what is said about army cooks, I was a good cook and still am.) they did not know this of course or I might have ended up with the job. I had enough of working in hot bakeries and kitchens. As a four years apprentice baker and two years in army kitchens. I enjoyed being out in the fresh air, and the outdoor work was what I wanted. Forestry was the occupation I had chosen, and even though it was sometimes hard work and the flies, and midges were a pest, I was happy.

There was not much social life in the evenings. I was totally T.T. at that time. Even to-day, I only drink socially and if I attend a function and have to use my car I do not drink at all. I also do not smoke, never had the urge to try it and I couldn't afford to buy either from my Forestry Commission wages, which were basic. During my time with the Commission, neither myself or the people I worked with, ever worked piece-time, or overtime.

I would sometimes cycle to Glenelg, the nearest village for some essentials. Soap, sweets or just to explore the village area. On the way there I would visit and watch an old man making walking sticks and shepherds crooks. There was an abundance of hazel trees in the vicinity for him to obtain the shafts. He made some beautiful handles from discarded sheep horns and deer antlers, even the hazel roots were turned into intricate shapes by the old man into fine "heads".

The old gentleman lived in an old house built on General Wade's road and its situation apparently, (I do not know if it was true or not) absolved him from rent and rates. His water he obtained from a spring that trickled by the side of his house. Lighting was by paraffin lamp, heating and cooking were provided by an old iron range. His toilet facilities I never found out about, I could only guess, but he seemed content. His pension was no doubt augmented by the sale of his sticks to a traveler for sale in shops in Edinburgh and Glasgow. I purchased a stick from him and I still have it to this day.

Old John, the ex-seaman and I became pals and he would tell me of his exploits during his time in the Merchant Navy before, and during the war when he had been in the convoys to Russia. John, like most seamen was very superstitious and one of his stories I remember clearly. It concerned a cook aboard one of the ships he served on. John was in the galley when the cook put a whole chicken into a pot of boiling water to cook. Two or three minutes later the chicken pushed up the lid of the pot, stood on the rim, cock-a-doodle-dooed and fell back into the soup pot. I laughed at that story but I could tell from John's face he was deadly serious, or was he just kidding me on?

In spite of my apprehension when I had arrived at Moyle, it was with regret that I decided to leave before the Winter arrived. I had worked with and met some wonderful people in the crofting fraternity and even though I was not one of "them" I was made welcome. Maybe being a McRae had something to do with it, I would like to think that was the

reason. It had been my intention to visit the ancestral home, Eilean Donan Castle, of the McRae clan but lack of time and motor transport deprived me of this privilege.

During that glorious Summer there was always something to occupy my time away from work. I kept the skin from the roe deer, cleaned it, stretched it on a wooden frame, cured it and used the pelt as a rug for my sparsely furnished room. On the days when I could not go for a wander because of rain, I made rag rugs. A piece of hessian stretched taut on a wooden frame. I made a cleek fashioned from a large six inch nail, a hook filed in the stem allowed the rags to be pushed and pulled back and forth through the sacking. Old wool clothes were the best material, cut into two inch strips. All the loops had to be of equal lengths to make the rug "even" on the top side. Before I began a rug, a rough pattern was sketched on the canvas with chalk as a guide.

During my stay at Moyle I made three of the rugs and when I left I parceled them up and gave them to my mother when I arrived home in Edinburgh, for which she was grateful, as carpets and rugs were virtually unobtainable and very expensive to buy in 1950/51.

I left Moyle and Ratagan Forest and also quit working for the Forestry Commission. The work had entailed a hard and tough life for a small wage, living and eating under some awful conditions. There had been times when I had nearly given up, but kept going because I loved what I was doing, and have no regrets at taking up this profession. I had worked with some great characters, most of the people I encountered during the Forestry Commission years were nice and friendly and they more than made up for the bad ones, which were few..

I have seen some of the finest sights presented by nature, scenery, animals, fish, and birds, in different parts of Scotland in all the seasons of the year.

I was then and even now quite happy in my own company, not that I shun other people, especially since I retired and my wife Ethel died in September 2000. I have found being around people makes life more interesting and entertaining.

Most of all I did not take on the work for the money, it was something I wanted to do and will be forever grateful and glad I made my choice all

these years ago. I am one of the lucky ones, I was employed in a job that I really enjoyed for most of my working life of over forty six years.

I returned to Edinburgh and lived with my mother and the rest of the family, but forestry is in my blood and I was lucky to get work with Edinburgh Corporation Forestry Department where I remained for eighteen years as a specialist in removing dead, and dangerous trees in the city streets, parks and confined areas, before starting in the forestry business on my own in the same line of work with a partner.

That is another story.

Postscript to this story.

With my wife, I made a nostalgic return to Moyle in the summer of 1993. The road over Mamratagan has not improved much over the years, still very rough, with passing places every half mile or so.

The bothy, the Newfy's house, stables are no longer there, and no sign of where they once stood. We drove further up the forest road and came on a house where a forestry worker and his wife lived. They kindly invited us in for a cup of tea, when I explained why we were there.

I asked some questions about Jack and his family and he informed me that Jack had died two years previously. Ian his brother, who I knew as a young lad, had been killed in a terrible crash on the mountain road and there was a monument to his memory erected at the entrance gate, which I failed to notice when we came in. The sisters? He did not know anything about them. I can only assume they married and moved away from the district. The man moved into the area as a "incomer" ten years previous to our meeting. As we left, I thanked him for his hospitality and on our way out I found the monument and paid my respects to Ian.

I would like to have taken a walk over the hills. Followed the burn to the "bowls" of trout filled clear water. Maybe too have seen a Roe deer browsing in the heather. To have spotted a buzzard circle in the sky overhead, a forebearer perhaps of one of the brood I had watched over all those years ago. Alas, I did not have the time to turn back the years and partially relive them.

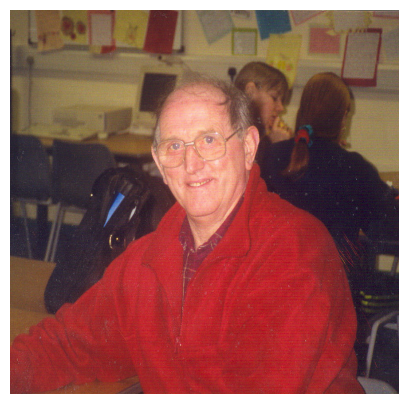
Those wonderful days in a place where time, it seems, stands still.



Self at Bonchester Bridge 1950/51



Self employed 1970s



Self today 2008