High Corrie, Isle of Arran

Vivien Martin recalls inspirational times ‘between mountain and sea’

‘The setting, between mountain and sea, is beautiful; the views breathtaking.’
For more than 40 years now my family and I have been regular visitors to Arran. The landscape there is so wonderfully varied that each visit can feel like being on a different island altogether. However, for me, the place that holds the most lasting interest is the tiny clachan of High Corrie, perched on a raised beach below the imposing mass of Arran’s highest mountain, Goatfell, and above the picturesque village of Corrie, five-and-a-half miles north of Brodick.

Certain places have an intrinsic sense of awe. High Corrie has powerful juxtaposition of mountain, sea and sky creating in us a strong response. I first got to know High Corrie in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when we came over from Glasgow to spend our school holidays there. Being a large family, a minibus had to be hired to take us all down to Ardrossan, onto the ferry to Brodick and along to the road-end of the precipitous track that climbed up to High Corrie itself.

The track was too steep and rough for the minibus, so my parents, the six of us children, our luggage and the trunk were all deposited by the roadside and, with a grin and a cheery wave, the driver was off to catch the next ferry home. The massive trunk was too heavy to carry, so the unloading began. We were all given something to carry - sheets, clothes, tennis rackets, rusty and mismatching golf clubs - and off we went. The track was steep and twisty, but the goal at the end of it was ‘Burnbank’.

Traditional Settlements

It was a small whitewashed cottage, where we spent some of the best summer holidays of our lives. The nine whitewashed houses that make up this tiny settlement sit tucked into the shelter of the mountain slope and give insight into how the traditional settlements of a past era would have looked. The setting, between mountain and sea, is beautiful; the views breathtaking. The High Corrie Burn flows past the clachan, while further up the rushing White Water was a favourite picnic spot on the way up to Goatfell.

Here was the perfect base for we were free to roam the surrounding hills, fish (usually unsuccessfully) in the burn, explore rock-pools on the shore, cycle round the island or attempt (very unsuccessfully) to hit golf balls all the way to the sea! However, while as visitors it’s possible to enjoy the physical beauty of a place, the people who live and work there are often as important as the landscape itself. Getting to know some of them, as we did, added tremendously to our appreciation and love of that place.

Arriving at ‘Burnbank’, my father James Dey, then a departmental head at the BBC in Glasgow, and my mother Joan, a teacher in a difficult school in the East End of Glasgow, would be greeted by the playwright and poet, Robert McLellan, and his wife, Kathleen, whose home was in the cottage opposite. For my parents High Corrie, and the stimulating company there, was a time to treasure; a refreshment of mind, body and soul before returning to the pressures and challenges of life in the city.
Profoundly Influenced

In many ways Robert McLellan was at the heart of this intellectual life. He, like my father, had fought in the war and been profoundly influenced by the experience. Although living and working in very different environments, both were steeped in the deep Scottish intellectual tradition, and were firmly committed to improving the well-being of their fellows. My father had a tremendous admiration for Robert, describing him as "a man of generous spirit who really had the welfare of Scotland at heart."

Born in 1907 in Lanarkshire, Robert McLellan wrote mainly in Scots, his two best-known plays being *Jamie the Saxt* and *The Flowers of Edinburgh*. He also wrote drama for radio, short stories and beautiful poetry, my own favourite being *Arran Burn*. Today many people will know him best for the classic guide *The Isle of Arran*. The McLellans' home was often full of visiting writers, artists and even politicians.

To us as children, Robert McLellan could seem rather formidable - especially the year our cat decided to dig up part of his beloved garden. But he was a kind and generous family man with an intelligent and gentle wife. He died in 1985 and is buried in nearby Sannox. Much loved on Arran, his achievements are still celebrated through the annual McLellan Arts Festival and Poetry Prize.

Delighted in the Time

Others gravitated into this remarkable intellectual ambience in High Corrie, finding in the change of circumstance and surroundings the inner balance and reaffirmation of purpose they needed. It was here that Alastair Hetherington (1919-1999) came whenever possible. A former editor of *The Guardian* and later controller of BBC Scotland, he delighted in the time he could spend there, writing several books including *Guardian Years* and *A Walker's Guide to Arran*.

While further up the track was the cottage owned by Ian Finlay (1906-1995), then Director of the Royal Scottish Museum in Edinburgh. A fine writer and broadcaster, he too had a huge concern for Scotland, both in the fine arts and the built environment.

Artists were also attracted. John Maclauchlan Milne (1886-1957), who had been greatly influenced by contemporary French artists, became famous for his paintings of Paris and the French Riviera. Settling there in the early 1940s, he applied these 'continental' skills to the landscapes around him, producing some of his finest work.

For the leading illustrator Jessie M. King (1875-1949), High Corrie was also a special place. Family holidays had been spent on Arran and a Gaelic-speaking nursemaid, Mary McNab, filled her with a love of Scotland and its folklore. From 1911 she and her husband, the designer E A Taylor, ran successful summer painting schools from their home. Taylor took up the
pipes, which, it is said, he would play to round up students scattered on the surrounding hillsides!

**Part of a Celebration**

Another artist with longstanding family connections was Margot Sandeman (1922-2009). Margot had spent many happy painting holidays on the island in the company of her fellow-artist and good friend, Joan Eardley. In 1973 she and her husband bought one of the cottages. Her love for that place was celebrated in 1984 with a series of 21 beautiful small paintings, her 'Sonnets'. She also contributed a sequence of canvases as part of a celebration for her friend and neighbour, Robert McLellan.

High Corrie is unique. Designated by Historic Scotland as of 'outstanding historical interest', it is a rare and exceptional example of an ancient Celtic agricultural community, situated mid-way between hill and shore, with land that would have been both held and worked in common. At the centre the houses are grouped together, gable-end to the sea. To this day it's like taking a step back in time.

Those who have lived, worked and been inspired by High Corrie in the recent past have left their legacy through the paintings, books, plays, poetry and film that we can access today. There is still a strong continuity with that past - McLellan and Finlay connections continue - but it is alongside a new generation who live and work there. A small place, but definitely a remarkable one.