

Bohemia, the westernmost province of Czechoslovakia. The prisoners were searched on arrival. Murray's thick wad of toilet-paper manuscript was found, and he was interrogated by Gestapo officers, who believed it to be a coded account of troop movements. They took the manuscript from him, and destroyed it. Even to a man of Murray's mental resilience, it was a severe blow.

During the years of his confinement, Murray's health deteriorated. Towards the end of the war, Red Cross parcels were prevented from reaching the camps. The inmates of Murray's camp had to survive on black bread and minimum rations of potato and turnips. When possible, they would catch and kill dogs and cats, and eat strips of their flesh. Tuberculosis was rife. 'I am literally a skeleton,' Murray wrote in a sad letter to a friend. His fingernails became corrugated through vitamin deficiency. His hair had thinned. He could not walk ten yards without stopping to rest, could not walk at all without dizziness. He assumed that, even if he were to survive the war, he would never again be able to climb mountains.

But through all this, the dreaming continued. In Bohemia, in secret, Murray restarted the manuscript that had been taken from him on his arrival. Weak from lack of food, he became imaginatively uninhibited. 'I shed,' he remembered, 'any reticence about feeling for beauty.' When he closed his eyes, the mountains and glens sprang to mind, vivid in every detail. He dreamed of the violet dusk of moors, of the green water of the sea lochs in which he had once swum, and the beaten-gold sky of dusk seen from the Buachaille's top, and then he wrote of these things. During the last year of his confinement, he recalled, 'I had not once thought of myself as imprisoned. I lived on mountains, and had the freedom of them.'

On May Day 1945, Murray's prison camp was liberated by American

troops. A month after his release, Murray returned to Rannoch Moor. Weak and emaciated in body, but exhilarated in spirit, he climbed the Buachaille again and on its summit he stayed, looking out over the Moor, in the space of those wide skies.



By the time I set out to cross the Moor in November, Coruisk's rich summer light had ceded to autumn's browns. The air was cooler, and in place of the long evenings of July and August were quick dusks.

I had hoped for an early onset of winter, because I wanted to make an ice-bound traverse of the Moor, following its frozen waterways from one side to the other, on skis or even ice-skates. This was something which I knew had been done once before, in the 1950s, and I greatly liked the idea of keeping to a single element for the crossing, of using only water to cross such an expanse of earth. But my father, who had agreed to accompany me on the crossing, pointed out two minor problems with my plan: neither of us could ice-skate, and the weather was damp, so we would sink. I acknowledged the force of his logic; walking it would have to be.

We caught the sleeper-train north together from London. The romance of the train, its Edwardian miracle of conjuring you to a different land while you sleep, was still perceptible. We left Euston Station – fast-food outlets, the tannoy's squash-ball *bing-bong*, crushed beer cans in corners, the shifty body-mass of the crowds – and woke to chilly air, white mist and a stag disappearing into the drizzle. Fog pooled in the low ground. At Rannoch Station, we stepped down from the train and on to the Moor.

That morning, we began to learn the habits and the obligations of the Moor, its resistance to straight lines of progress. As Murray knew, going on the Moor is slow, to be measured in hours, not miles. Much of the Moor is loch, and much is peat hag, and between the lochs and the peat hags bog streams wriggle, their water dyed black and shiny as oil.

We leapt from hag to hag, jumped peat crevasses and picked our way through the maze-work of stream and tussock. Later, crossing a nameless river, I saw a big trout arrow across its pool and set chevrons rippling out over the surface. Here and there, sunk in the peat, we came across the big swooping roots of ancient pine trees, thousands of years old. How I would love to have climbed one of those great pines, I thought. Peatbogs are so preservative of wood that, during the Second World War, the US Navy used 3,000-year-old white cedar logs, recovered from sphagnum bog in New Jersey, to build the hulls of their motor-torpedo boats. From one of the stumps I took a loose dolphin-shaped fragment of wood, stained a deep brown by the peat. In another black bank, I found a white stone, bedded like an eyeball. I brushed it clean, and turned it in my hand as I walked.

The Moor's vastness and self-similarity affected our perception of distance. Objects and movements showed more clearly in its sparseness. So extensive was the space within which we were moving that when I glanced up at the mountains west of the Moor, to try to gauge the distance we had come, it seemed as though we had not advanced at all: that, like explorers walking against the spin of pack ice, our feet fell exactly where we had lifted them.

Hours into the day, we stopped for shelter in a ruin named on our map as Tigh Na Cruaiche. A rusted iron brazier stood in one corner.

Otherwise, the interior was empty. It smelt green. We sat on stones, and looked out through the doorless entrance. Beyond the series of wooded islands slung across the centre of Loch Laidon we could see the Black Corries – the high holding grounds of deer, snow and fog – and the air which gathered in them had a deep cold blueness of tone. I thought enviously of Murray, who had returned after the war to cross the Moor on a hot August day, with only his dog for company. Halfway across, he had taken off all his clothes, put them in his pack, walking naked for the rest of the day, bathing here and there in pools and loch bays. Perhaps, I daydreamed, on the right winter day – bright sun, no wind – it might be possible to combine the traverses, and ice-skate naked from one side of the Moor to the other . . .

Later, on the top of a fifty-foot-high knoll, we sat and ate black rye bread with cheese, watching rain fronts gather miles away in the mouth of Glen Coe and then billow towards us over the ground. Velvety rags of lichen hung from the rocks on the drumlin and rippled as wind passed over them. My father pointed west: a kestrel, hunting fast over the ground. Then it stopped, hung, collapsed its wings and dropped hard into the heather.

That far into the Moor, the vast space we were in resolved the land around us into bacon-like bands: a stripe of sky, a stripe of white cloud, a stripe of dark land, and below everything the tawny Moor. The Moor's colours in that season were subtle and multiple. Seen from a distance it was brindled; close up, it broke into its separate colours: orange, ochre, red, a mustardy yellow and, lacing everything, the glossy black of the peat.

It took us all that day to reach what I had come to think of as the Moor's centre, the Abhainn Bà – the point where the River Bà flows

into Loch Laidon. We stopped there, for dusk was spreading over the Moor, and pitched a small tent. We lay talking in the dark: about the ground we had covered, the ground still to go, about the odd mixture of apprehension and awe that the Moor provoked in us both. Our sleeping-place was cupped in a curve of the river, on a miniature floodplain that the winter spates had carved out and flattened: a shelter in the middle of the Moor's great space.



In a land as densely populated as Britain, openness can be hard to find. It is difficult to reach places where the horizon is experienced as a long unbroken line, or where the blue of distance becomes visible. Openness is rare, but its importance is proportionately great. Living constantly among streets and houses induces a sense of enclosure, of short-range sight. The spaces of moors, seas and mountains counteract this. Whenever I return from the moors, I feel a lightness up behind my eyes, as though my vision has been opened out by twenty degrees to either side. A region of uninterrupted space is not only a convenient metaphor for freedom and openness, it can sometimes bring those feelings fiercely on.

To experience openness is to understand something of what the American novelist Willa Cather, who was brought up on the Great Plains, called 'the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands'. To love open places – and they have, historically, not been loved – you have to believe, as Cather did, that beauty might at times be a function of continuous space. You have to believe that such principalities might possess their own active expan-

siveness. Anyone who has been in an empty sea, out of sight of land, on a clear day, will know the deep astonishment of seeing the curvature of the globe: the sea's down-turned edges, its meniscal frown.

Open spaces bring to the mind something which is difficult to express, but unmistakable to experience – and Rannoch Moor is among the greatest of those spaces. If the Lake District were cut out of Cumbria and dropped into the Moor, the Moor would accommodate it. The influence of places such as the Moor cannot be measured, but should not for this reason be passed over. 'To recline on a stump of thorn, between afternoon and night,' Thomas Hardy wrote in *The Return of the Native*, 'where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathland which filled the whole circumference of its glance, and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead, gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrepressible New.'

For Murray, it was not even direct exposure to the spaces of moor and mountain that consoled him during his prison years, but the memory of that experience. He knew that these places continued to exist; this was what sustained him.

In 1977, a nineteen-year-old Glaswegian named Robert Brown was arrested for a murder he did not commit, and over the course of the following days had a confession beaten out of him by a police officer subsequently indicted for corruption. Brown served twenty-five years, and saw two appeals fail, before his conviction was finally overturned in 2002. When he was released, one of the first things he did was to go to the shore of Loch Lomond and sit on a boulder on the loch's southern shore in sunlight, to feel, as he put it, 'the wind on my face, and to see