

The Mine in the Cave

I suppose I would have been about 11 and David 8 when all this occurred. So about 1950. My recollections are of course through the eyes of a child.

We were up at the croft in Coigach, Camusglashlan. David and I were at a loose end. Dad was on the roof. I have a photograph somewhere with him working on the roof and that is exactly my image. Cement trowel in hand focused on the job in to be done, as he always was, somewhat irritated by two bored boys wandering around and not being useful.

‘Can't you find something to do’ he asked.

So there we were wandering along the shore towards Far Bay as we had done before many times, looking for something to do. There was a cave on the way, a dark black slash in the cliffs. I remember it as having very large boulders further in, not that easy to climb over, blocking the entrance so we had not gone very far into the cave before. At high tide the water flooded deep into the cave, blocking the entrance, so there was the possibility of getting trapped.

The picture to the right gives a good idea of how the cave looks from the outside today, with my Granddaughter Emily in the entrance at low tide.

So David and I were that bit older, that bit braver that day, and decided to go deep into the cave. Childish stories of monsters lurked at the back of our minds. It got darker as you went in and rock pools with limpets and sea anemones, their tiny tentacles fully extended, shrank from us. The clicking of damp seaweed waiting for the tide to come back. It went back quite a long way.

I remember the rock of the cliff as black, and the cave as dark inside. I remember it all quite clearly, I think.

So there were David and I, looking into the dark damp cave. We decided to see how far it went in and made our way over the slippery boulders over an outcrop of rock with pools with limpets and sea anemones. The Cave got narrower and then, deep in we saw a round metal globe, maybe 3 to 4 feet in diameter, jammed between the rock sides. It was claustrophobic in there. I examined it, fascinated. It was a perfect globe except that it had a circular hatch bolted on top. The cap was held in place by a ring of nuts, there were about 12 of them. Intrigued and full of curiosity we run back up to Dad on the roof, asking him to come look at what we'd found. Irritated again, Dad asked if we couldn't see that he was busy and not to come back till lunchtime. Disappointed we wandered over to the road end and found George Frame and old Murdo sitting as usual on their rock, smoking their pipes. The pipes had metal covers with little holes, which I've never seen anywhere else, to stop the wind blowing the tobacco out. George Frame lived in the Croft at the end of the road on his own and old Murdo (Murdoch McCleod) lived in the Croft a few 100 yards up the road. I don't remember anything old Murdo said, but he believed in fairies. George usually had a few words.





There is George in this local painting, sitting forever on his rocky outcrop at the end of the road with his sheepdogs. George, someone told me, was from an orphanage in Aberdeen and had been adopted by a long dead old lady who had the croft at the road end. I know George died in 1981 at the age of 82. I know now his mother's maiden name was Bowe. His death Certificate reference is Coigach Ref: 190/1. He was buried in Badenscallie Burial Ground. So he was born about 1900. He was the local postman, bicycling into Achiltibuie to collect and distribute the mail. We always got mail addressed to us at Camusglashlan and he always accepted a glass of whiskey for his effort.



Fig. 14.43 The loch of Reiff enters the sea through a channel straightened by man. The former postman's house (George Frame's), now modernised, was the last inhabited thatched house in Coigach, 1972.

George could read a little. When he retired his successor couldn't read and would present the letters at eachcroft asking if any were for them; and our postal service stopped.

"Aye Aye", he greeted us as he always did. We excitedly explained to him that we had found this interesting thing in the cave, explained that it had a metal cap held in place by bolts and we wanted to see what was inside.

He was prepared to help and equipped himself with a hammer and an adjustable wrench. We wandered across back to The Cave, skirting west of thecroft to avoid incurring Dad's ire, and proceeded to take the nuts off. This wasn't easy as they had been there a long time, but with the hammer and the wrench, one by one, George was able to loosen and remove them.

When he lifted the heavy hatch off we peered excitedly in, expecting something interesting, some fascinating mechanism perhaps. It was a let down. A circle of what looked like sparking plugs from a car was on the inside of the cap and what looked like a rectangular battery box. Wires connected the battery to the sparking plug like fittings. Really my memory is hazy. Inside the globe itself was even less interesting. It seemed to be a collection of sacking bags which, if my memory serves me right, were sprinkled with dusty grey granules. If only I'd had a camera with me.

Convinced now that we had something to interest Dad, we loaded the awkward heavy metal hatch onto George's shoulders and set off up to thecroft to show him our prize. It never occurred to any of us that Dad would be anything other than impressed, after all we had found something to do.

Dad, finally having had his attention drawn to the circular lid, came down off the roof. He examined our trophy in silence, ignoring our excited chatter. Then demanded to know where we've got it and we proudly told him what we'd done. He was angry. I never recollect him as that angry before or since. He was incandescent. He couldn't believe what we've done; and that George had done it with us. That George had dismantled some sort of mine with his children was beyond him for a few moments I think. Years on I can well understand why, but at the time we had hoped he'd be interested. I'm not sure that he ever spoke to George again. I don't recollect exactly what he said to George, but it was along the lines of imperilling his children, idiocy, irresponsibility. George, who retrospectively was not the brightest, I think just stood stolidly there quite unable to appreciate that we had just dismantled a German magnetic mine, and that in some way it was a problem.

So great was my father's rage that I never, right up to his death in 1995 raised the subject with him again. I do remember him saying that after the war he had always regarded Camusglashlan as a safe place, a refuge from his six war years, where his children were at no risk and could roam free. But even here war and weapons had shattered his illusions and intruded on his life.



I have since tried looking at pictures of German mines, but my dim memories make it impossible to be sure what type it was. The above picture is the nearest to my mental picture. I think it was a magnetic mine, because it had no 'horns' of the traditional type sticking out. But I cannot be sure.

When I first took Elisha to Camusglashlan some sixteen years later I wanted to show her the mine cap which I remembered Dad had built into the little garden wall outside the house. It was gone. Later I went round to see Kenny McLennan (young Kenny). I'd played with him as a child when we were eight. Kenny's father (old Kenny) was a crofter with a small farm at Blairbuie. Blairbuie is derelict now and 'young' Kenny lives in a local small croft. I went round for coffee and asked him if he remembered the incident, and to my surprise he did. Apparently Dad had called the army bomb disposal squad. They'd come and removed what seemed to be the detonator cap on the basis the detonators could still take your fingers off. Then they'd removed the bags of explosive but left the empty mine casing where it was. Somewhere in some archives there must be a record of the bomb disposal work, but I doubt if I can find it.

Apparently it was quite a local event. Kenny told me that the crofters, and he was with them, went round in a boat to inspect the empty casing. Being crofters they felt sure it must be useful for something. They blocked up the hole and dislodged the casing. They towed it round to Reiff and it was carried up to Blairbuie farm. They tried smoking fish in it, but it was not successful, and in the end, it was left to rust away forgotten and useless.

The Coigach Peninsula is on the coast of The Minch, the channel that runs between the Outer Hebrides and mainland West Coast of Scotland. In WW2 it was a very busy shipping route, and consequently frequently mined by the Germans. After the war there were hundreds of thousands of forgotten mines, laid by both sides. Big efforts were made to clear them, but this one must have found, deep in our cave, a hiding place, until two curious little boys found it, and with the help of an old crofter, took it to pieces.

Robert Stevenson. September 2021