



# 1

## *Exquisite Beauty and Mystery*

# Glen Carron and Ben Hope

ARRIVING in Glen Carron (see 'Wester Ross' map, pg. 16) in late September, I switched off the car headlights, my eyes taking time to adjust to the moonlight. I could make out the hills about me in solid, bold silhouettes against the slightly translucent black of the night sky. The starry night views were so splendid that I left the warmth and comfort of the car to stand in awe of the majesty rising around me like a crescendo of praise.

### ***Majesty***

*The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim  
the work of his hands.*

*Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night  
they display knowledge.*

*There is no speech or language where their voice is not  
heard.*

*Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the  
ends of the world. (Ps. 19: 1-4)*



## A CLEARING OF MISTS

Scenes bathed in moonlight are captivating, and hiding all the intricate details, present more of an impression, suggesting vague outlines of wood and field. I was intrigued to see something like snow up in the high corrie and had wondered whether the first flakes of a new winter had fallen. But with it looking 'like snow' gave me pause to doubt and yet I couldn't think what else it could be with just that level of light, leaving me puzzling again and again. Eventually I went to sleep, but as in the manner of sleeping in the car, I periodically awoke and peered bleary eyed, intrigued, up towards the high corrie, still wondering. My attention was captivated by the brilliance of the heavens with vast clusters of stars rare to be seen in such profusion that I was left in awe and worship of the Creator. The skies really were proclaiming the work of his hands.

The sense of immensity of the universe on a very clear night makes you feel miniscule, in total awe of the magnitude of space, the ageless stars making a human lifespan feel so very finite, of such brevity as to be totally insignificant if plotted on an infinite timeline. To be alone under such a sky is to feel truly inconsequential and puts all of man's proud achievements into perspective.

*When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
The moon and stars, which you have set in place,  
What is man that you are mindful of him  
The son of man that you care for him? (Ps. 8: 3-4)*

Creation is there to enthral. We should be in raptures and profoundly feel its mysteries. Although made in God's image, we are products of his creation as God reminds Job:



GLEN CARRON AND BEN HOPE

*Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades?  
Can you loose the cords of Orion?  
Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons  
Or lead out the Bear with its cubs?  
Do you know the laws of the heavens?  
Can you set up God's dominion over the earth?*  
(Job 38: 31-33)

How fleeting a thing it is to be human and yet within the soul there is a longing for permanence—"he has also set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (Eccles. 3:11). Forever there's been a deep desire to vault above the tragedy of death, to attain an unending sense of being, to belong to something higher and of enduring quality that knows no decay nor end. Such a sky awakens these very longings and for some inspires praise for the Maker, one who made us and filled us with immortal aspirations as a consequence of being made in God's own image.

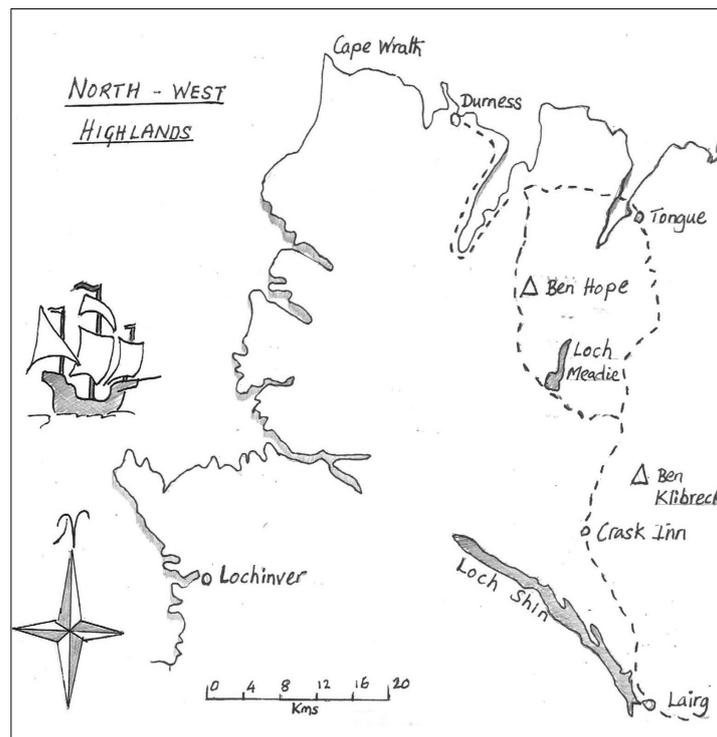
When morning dawned, the light on the corrie revealed a light coloured scree that had looked whiter still in the moonlight and had so softened and blurred its hard edges as to give it the appearance of a smooth sheet of snow. Moonlight certainly brings a poetic quality to the common things of day, making night vistas worth seeing in spite of the chill and inconvenience of the hour.

I discovered late in life the joy of winter hill-walking, taken up out of a sense of despair of how few outings could be mustered over the sparse summer of the north. With the end in sight to complete 200 Munros, it hastened my pace, giving fresh impetus to complete the glorious round.



## A CLEARING OF MISTS

A late winter ascent of Maol Chean-dearg above Glen Carron was memorable for the views of the Torridon Mountains from its summit and for the crazy descent down a snow shoot from near its summit. Normally being a solo walker made me aware of the precariousness of my situation. Whether it was tiredness after a tediously steep ascent, or the sudden impulse to throw caution to the wind I don't know, but before I properly took stock, I had removed my plastic survival bag from my small backpack and unfolding a section the size of a toboggan, I sat down and went careering down a narrow and steep gulley before digging in my heels when fear dictated. At least I knew





## GLEN CARRON AND BEN HOPE

there was no sudden cliff drop as I had earlier painstakingly wended my way up this very route. It was exhilarating to recklessly speed on down, sometimes bruised over the tops of boulders or wayside debris, and I whooped and laughed. It did no good to my survival bag but gave me great joy.

Ben Hope (see 'North West Highlands' map, pg. 20)—the most northerly Munro was likewise tackled in the winter. The evening before I had dined at the Crask Inn on a selection of fowl a French party had shot earlier that day, the only other occupants in the inn, singing raptures about the game. The Crask Inn is wonderfully unpretentious, a place resisting the urge to modernise, with its stone-flagged floors and simple bar left unattended when the owner takes feed out to the sheep on the hill. When he returned he placed muddy boots beside the hearth and hung his waterproofs from a beam above the fire making a pool on the flags below that shortly began to steam away to nothingness.

### *Star display*

That night I spent in the car up on the pass above the inn, on the flanks of Ben Klibreck, the car thermometer read eight below zero. The constellations spread out so numerous and breathtaking that it was hard to close my eyes, not for the cold, but for the sheer brilliance of the heavens. What a gift—relishing this wonderful display all on my own, a spectacle it seemed for a private audience. With every chilly awakening the huge constellations had shifted, seemingly wheeling about the naked heavens on some colossal axis. It was hauntingly beautiful, making one thirst for knowledge of the stars, to know their shapes and position. It seems that our Neolithic forefathers who raised immense stone circles in



## A CLEARING OF MISTS

alignment with solstices were in awe of the celestial bodies, noting how the sun and the moon interconnected with seasons and fruitfulness, guiding their agricultural cycle. Such knowledge mingled with much mystery kept those ancient ancestors from arrogance and held them in awe of something far greater than their human endeavours and led them to worship. The Babylonians and the Greeks were intimately acquainted with the stars, drawn by wonder, keen to discern their mystery because they were acutely aware of the night skies under which they ate and talked, loved and died. We in our brightly lit cities have so far alienated ourselves from the night skies that most of us are pretty clueless about constellations. The familiar knowledge of the stars known to ancient laymen has become the specialised field of the astronomer.

### ***Shout to the Lord***

The next morning was extremely crisp—the lower lying regions of earth remained ashen and moribund as yet untouched by the dawn light. Three voluminous columns of cloud rose vertically above the frozen scenes in a strange fashion that caught the eye. Dawn touched these columns, suffused them with a pale pink to match the snowy peaks, which rose resplendent in search of the light. Dawns are often unremarkable but this one was an exception—it brought the world alive with gladness and made you want to sing to the Lord.

*I will sing and make music with all my soul,  
Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn.  
I will praise you, O LORD, among the nations;  
I will sing praises of you among the peoples.*



GLEN CARRON AND BEN HOPE

*For great is your love, higher than the heavens;  
Your faithfulness reaches to the skies.  
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens,  
And let your glory be over all the earth. (Ps. 108:1-5)*

The reference to 'Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn', makes me recall the songwriter Noel Richards, who referring to his own habit of taking 'quiet times' dismissed the term, asserting that these should be 'noisy times', as he so enjoyed starting the day singing to the Lord. How the Lord must delight in the exuberance of his children. I am sure hearing the first utterances of 'Good Morning Lord' from the awakening Buhid tribal folk of Mindoro, in the Philippines whom we used to live with, warmed his heart just as much as our hearts were warmed when we heard our toddler calling out from his cot, 'Morning Eesh!'—Eesh being his pronunciation of Jesus.

Loch Meadie was all iced over and the huge herds of deer that had ventured down to the road seeking food, licked the salt from the tarmac. The dawn light intensifying upon the tops of the peaks flushed them with a deep orange pink, vibrant against the ice-blue skies and gave this dawn an exotic air, bringing to mind the opening stanza of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam as translated by Edward Fitzgerald:

*Awake! for Morning in the Bowl of Night  
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:  
And Lo! the Hunter of the East has caught  
The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light.*

Leaving the warmth of the car for the rawness of that early morning chill was challenging. My legs were reluctant to get



## A CLEARING OF MISTS

into their stride on the sudden steep rise of Ben Hope, but the winterland enthralled. Where the heather grew longer, snow, wind and ice had created much more substantial heather shapes like lumps of bleached coral. Up on the high ridge, wind and chill had left delicate trceries on the surface of the snow, rather like the scallop edges left in the sand at the sea's edge. The summit dome was windswept, so much so that only a thin layer of snow remained upon which the frost raised delicate motifs, large and shiny like crystal stones, fused with filigrees of frost. The concrete summit cairn was quite transformed with snow and ice crystals, and having been 'stretched' horizontally by a raging wind, looked magnificent in the winter sun like an Art Nouveau sculpture.

### ***Miniature wonders***

These were unexpected delights I had never seen before, their rarity making them all the more special. It's easy to miss these miniature wonders if the mountain seems off-limits in the grip of winter or early in the morning, when caution would keep you down in the glen. And I believe that is a metaphor for choices in life. Perhaps too much caution keeps us from ascending the heights and reveling in something rare and more wonderful. Or it can be our own indolence, our love for ease and comfort, or opting for what is predictable that keeps us from scaling the exalted ridges that transcend high above the turbid flow of life.

*He made the earth by his power;  
He founded the world by his wisdom  
And stretched out the heavens by his understanding.  
(Jer. 51: 15)*



GLEN CARRON AND BEN HOPE

Wasn't I glad I spent freezing nights in a car so that I could see afresh the heavens stretched out by his understanding.

## MEDITATION & SUGGESTIONS

### 'Night sky'

*Part of the theme of this chapter is about opening our eyes to the wonder of the stars, the magnitude of the universe that leads to wonder and to reflect on the brevity and seeming insignificance of our passing, a speck of time in eternity.*

Look out for a clear night sky and drive out into the country for a night time stroll to marvel at the stars. You can check out the immediate weather forecast as it is presented on an hour by hour prediction on the weather website eg <http://www.bbc.co.uk/weather>—keying in your specific location.

Feel the immensity of the night sky and how miniscule our mortal lives are in comparison. It's rather sobering. Isn't it amazing that this magnificent God of the whole universe is mindful of us: Read Psalm 19:1-4 and Psalm 8:3-4 (quoted in this chapter) as you contemplate the heavens and consider too these verses:

*He who made the Pleiades and Orion,  
Who turns blackness into dawn  
And darkens day into night,  
Who calls for the waters of the sea  
And pours them out over the face of the land –  
The Lord is his name. (Amos 5:8)*



## A CLEARING OF MISTS

*He spreads out the northern skies over empty space;  
He suspends the earth over nothing.  
He wraps up the waters in his clouds,  
Yet the clouds do not burst under their weight.  
He covers the face of the full moon,  
Spreading his clouds over it.  
He marks out the horizon on the face of the waters  
For a boundary between light and darkness.  
(Job 26: 7-10)*

These are not scientific observations of the heavens, but they are full of wonder and adoration for the one who made them. A modern scientific mind remarked:

The fairest thing that we can experience is the mysterious. He who knows it not, can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle. ALBERT EINSTEIN

Taking up this theme of wonder that leads us to worship, Warren Wiersbe commented:

Wonder and worship go together and worship leads to depth. Wonder and worship help us put daily life into perspective, and perspective helps us determine our values. This may explain why modern society wants entertainment instead of enrichment, and a good time rather than a good life.

Our spirits long for eternity which the night skies inspire. For the believer there is the expectation of a new body,



GLEN CARRON AND BEN HOPE

far more splendid than our current one, that will not experience illness or decay. In view of this do you honestly still fear death? Bring your concerns or praise to the Lord—be assured of his greatness that the sky above suggests. If you do not share this faith, consider God's heavenly revelation through the stars, of how we are part of something vast and mind-blowing. Reconsider the psalmists thoughts, 'What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?' This declares that God does know of your existence—he created you—and he knows and is concerned for you. In Psalm 139: 13-16, it is more explicit, 'You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made ... My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body.'

### **Sunrise/Sunset**

Make an 'appointment' to watch a sunrise/sunset. Try to be intentional about this—check the aforementioned website to note the time of sunrise/sunset. Currently in early February in Central Scotland, every sunrise averages out at about two minutes earlier every morning and every sunset two minutes later than the previous day and so be encouraged to combat the winter blues by noting the days lengthening approximately four minutes a day or twenty-six minutes extra daylight per week! Note that it's best to watch the sunrise half an hour before the actual rising as the colours are at their best beforehand, and likewise plan to stay half an hour after sunset for the same effect.



## A CLEARING OF MISTS

Leave behind your mobile, your i-pod and consciously allow your senses to be absorbed by the details, the formation of the clouds, their changing hues, the deepening blue of the background, the air on your skin, first or last shafts of light upon your eyelids. Celebrate what an amazing artist is our God to have set the natural order into such conjunction. Give voice to your praise; or if you enjoy singing, take a lead from the psalmist:

*I will sing and make music with all my soul,  
Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn.*  
(Ps. 108:1-2)

Re-capture your child-like wonder and give it voice. Creation is there to enthral. If you have children, plan a sunset walk together—I remember my father doing that with us and these were special family moments of sharing.

### **Beauty in the small detail**

There's grandeur in a mountain panorama, and great beauty too in the small detail. An ascent of Ben Hope in the clutches of a huge winter freeze made me aware of the beautiful tracteries that frost and wind form at low temperatures—the concrete summit trig point was transformed into an Art Nouveau style piece of sculpture. Make the effort to see new things in what seems commonplace at a cursory glance. Study the stamen of a flower; a moss grown wood, the varieties of shells and pebbles that make up a beach. Think of times when you have been amazed by the beauty of something seen—a new-born foal; the tiny hands and finger nails of your first-born; the faint mauve of apple-blossom;



GLEN CARRON AND BEN HOPE

the laden dew on hedgerow cobwebs. If you take photos, why not search for details to capture.

Consider that God is interested in the small details of our lives and isn't just there for the crisis. Cultivate the attitude of a young child towards a father who is interested in and responsive to our efforts to relate. Thank God for all the details he has finely orchestrated and how these combine into a form of symphonic sublimity to create the big picture grandeur.

Check the attitude that is always pressing on, racing against the clock which so often fails to notice these details.

