

Pining for Caledonia

In the Scottish Highlands, memories of an ancient forest

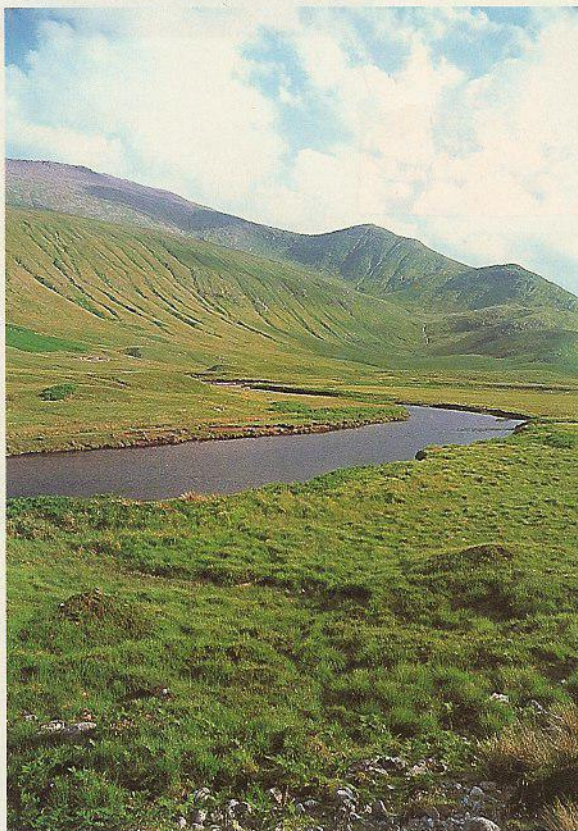
You can see the wind coming from way out on the loch. It turns the water from silver to gray; it hits the glen, then races up-slope as the heather starts to rattle and hiss. It slams the hills like a conquering horde and they give

way, their browns and grays and begrudging greens, all close-cropped and hunkered down. Save for a solitary croft house, its chimney smoke streaming parallel to the ground, there is nothing in this part of the Scottish Highlands to challenge the wind.

A lamb curls into the lee-ward depression she's made in peat-black soil, and waits. My wife, Mairi, and I find a spot behind a lump of rock and do the same. The land seems to have surrendered long ago to this wailing, cloud-choked sky.

Mairi was born here, and her love for the Highlands is ferocious and unconditional. My feelings are more conflicted. There are centuries of loss hidden beneath us, and not only the long-lamented ghosts of clan folk lost to war. Wind pummels this land because Scotland's ancient forest has been stripped away, leaving forgotten roots and leaves and limbs moldering underfoot—the Highlands are haunted as well by the ghost of this vanquished forest.

For thousands of years the Great Wood of Caledonia covered the Highlands' entire width, from Beaully Firth to the Argyll coast, a towering



The Highlands: ancient ghosts, centuries of loss.

forest so thick neolithic settlers with stone axes couldn't penetrate it. But time, the iron ax, and empire-building dealt the forest a mortal blow. Only one percent of virgin timber remains, a few tattered remnants hidden in glens and on scattered islands too steep or remote to exploit.

Until I saw a fragment of the Wood of Caledonia at the Strathfarrer Preserve—the largest, last whisper of what Scotland once was—I couldn't measure its loss. Scotch pines covered every slope, red branches arched against blue sky; tender new leaves sprouted on alders, blaeberry, cowberry, and innumerable plants I'd never seen before. I walked on ground thick with humus, peered through an infinity of textures, smelled air sweet with sap, thick with birdsong.

That memory comes to me as the lamb shudders, then buries its face in fleece. The wind tears a hole in the cloud and a solitary shaft of light breaks through, cutting an amber path along the treeless glen below. The beam crosses a small loch, and suddenly its storm-gray water explodes with dazzling light. Then it's gone. Mairi smiles at me and flashes her look. I know. The High-

BY GUY HAND



SCOTCH WHISKY, THE PRIDE OF SCOTLAND, MUST MATURE FOR AT LEAST THREE YEARS IN OLD OAK CASKS. LACKING OLD OAK FORESTS, MOST DISTILLERIES IMPORT CASKS FROM SPAIN OR THE UNITED STATES.

