

SAMPLE CHAPTER

AMONG
THE
SUMMER
SNOWS

Christopher
Nicholson



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I

IF THERE IS still a god, I sometimes think, he is not the great, crotchety being who was supposed to keep watch over us all. That ancient deity has fallen asleep or forgotten us, or he has become distracted by other concerns, or has lost patience with our pettiness, and instead we now have small gods, local gods, each with his or her specialist affiliation, a bit like a vicar with a parish. The river gods drip with mud and slime, the tree gods are long-limbed, spotted by mould, hairy with lichen, the desert gods are thin, shadowy creatures that move in the rippling hazes. The sea gods may be glimpsed like seals in bright water, their sleek, dark, bewhiskered heads appearing and disappearing in the troughs between waves some distance offshore. As for the gods of summer snow, I imagine them as short and muscular, trudging each late spring over the mountains to take up temporary residences in their allotted snowbeds. Deep in the ice, their features set in a disgruntled expression, they squat in silent, blue trances.

I first began to write about summer snow ten years ago. I had a plan for a book that opened in autumn, with the earliest falls on the Scottish mountains, and ended in summer with a walk to a great corrie in which the snow almost never melts entirely. The book went wrong when, a few months along the way, my wife Kitty fell ill. From then on, snow seemed much less important. For a while I tried to continue writing as if nothing had changed, but I could no longer justify the time away from home that walking in the mountains would involve. Besides, so much of what I felt about snow involved delight, and my main emotion now was one of deep foreboding. Before the summer was near its end, I gave up.

This short book, a decade later, is not about grief or consolation, at least not directly. It instead describes some walks to those last snows, the snows of late summer. That section of the old book, as I conceived it, was always the most interesting.

That there should still be any snow in Britain during the summer is strange. Summer is a season for easy living, a time of bees and foxgloves, roses and honeysuckle, light clothes and gentle breezes. Yet snow, a little snow, survives in the Highlands of Scotland. It does so not on the tops of the mountains, not like the bright white crown that sits on the head of Mount Fuji in Japan; this snow is much more obscure, hiding in isolated, difficult-to-get-to places under cliffs and crags, in clefts and carries away from the sun. Here the crystals gleam and glitter, shadow-bathing, hanging on to their essential selves. Some collections of snow are small caches of melting crystals, but others are as big as football pitches. It is their depth that really astounds. They can be as much as ten or twenty feet deep. Deeper, even. Higher.

Whenever I come upon one of these big snowbeds I do so with a degree of incredulity. That snow should still be here,

so much snow, in the heat of the year, is enough for my mind to stand back amazed. The snow is counter-intuitive; its existence challenges the usual idea of what is possible. Then the amazement begins to give way to something less easy to define, a complication of thoughts and feelings.

Within this complication, among much else – curiosity, admiration, melancholy, elation – is uncertainty. The uncertainty of summer snow is part of its attraction, without a doubt. If I merely wanted to look at snow, any snow, if there was nothing more to it than that, I could go to the Alps. It's the lateness of the snow, the rareness of the snow, the improbability of the snow, that draw me up to the Highlands. The idea alone puts me on edge. Will any snow still be there? What will it be like? How big, how small?

I also know that walking to summer snow, especially in the early part of any walk, is good for thinking. Something about the business of walking, of gaining height, of negotiating uneven ground, something about the rhythm of walking, opens up my mind in an unusual way. This doesn't happen on an ordinary mountain walk, not to the same degree; the fact of the snow is critical. Perhaps, again, it is a matter of edge, but I think that I think better. I think about snow, but I also think about other things, and I even find myself thinking about thinking. When I reach some snow, if I reach some snow, I have an extra surge of mental energy. After leaving it, on the latter part of the walk when I am more tired, my thoughts tend to be old ones that I've run through before. Later, when I've recovered, I start thinking again about what I've seen and felt. A long period follows, in which all this beds down into memory.

One afternoon a few Octobers ago, a friend happened to ring with news of snow falling in the Cairngorms; there had been a report and photo in the Aberdeen-based daily, the *Press*

and Journal. The first snow of the year. I was by the seaside in Kent, and as I browsed along the beach the sky was blue, the air soft and balmy, the light so sharp that every pebble was picked out in perfect focus. A herring gull – lemon legs, quizzical eye and blood on its beak – jeered over the decaying carcass of a porpoise, while the Channel waves turned and broke with the consistency of cream.

A forecast suggested that there might be more snow over the next week. On a whim I drove up; stayed the night in the Borders, and then drove on. From Perth northwards, I found myself scanning the dark, whale-like bodies of the mountains ahead. At last, as I came past the village of Kingussie and looked beyond the golden birches that lined the road, I sighted a paler mountain, draped in a cobweb. Since it was a good ten miles away, and since a cloud, also pale, hung on the shoulder of the mountain, the web might have been part of the cloud, or even a hallucination; but as the view expanded to include other mountains, I knew it could only be snow. A long road took me far above the treeline. A shower drifted towards me, and snow began to fall in little polystyrene-like beads that melted on the warm glass of the windscreen, and scurried over the tarmac. The clouds, low and heavy, lifted to open a gap through which a red sun shone, slanting a light that gilded a distant drape. It was late in the afternoon, and when the sun sank and the light grew grey, the snow seemed to float above the darkening land.

First showers like these are the opening passages in a long account. As the autumn advances there are further falls on the mountains, some light and tentative, others longer and more determined. Much of this early snow melts, but then the wind shifts to the north-east and winter closes its jaws. Now the snowfalls are heavier and more frequent. The snow spreads itself over the mountains, filling troughs and hollows,

submerging rocks and boulders. Nothing melts in the cold air; the burns are frozen hard, even the cliffs are encrusted with ice. Around the new year the weather turns damp and soggy, and a small thaw begins to set in, but by now the snow is so well entrenched that it holds its ground. A few days later there is an immense blizzard. In late January and early February more storms follow, and the snow grows ever deeper until some point – maybe March, maybe April – when a southerly wind asserts itself. Then comes the big melt, and suddenly the mountains are no longer white but piebald. A final storm brings more snow, but after that a larger and more comprehensive thaw takes place. If you were to watch the disappearance of the snow over the Highlands accelerated into a matter of hours, on a speeded-up film, it would be like seeing lights dimming and going out on a dark night. By midsummer there are hundreds of pieces of snow left, but by late summer only a few are still shining. These are the last snows, the survivors.



In preparation for the trip I spread out my maps of the Highlands and marked black crosses on all the places where I hoped there would be snow. Around Ben Nevis and in the Cairngorms, those were the two main areas. Some snow might lie further north, above Glen Affric, some further south, near Glen Coe, but there would be no snow near the west coast this late in the year.

I intended to stay in Scotland for all of August, but I wanted to keep things flexible. One warm evening I met an old friend. He hasn't been to the Highlands for many years, and nor is he that keen to go. What attracts him aren't quiet mountains but hot landscapes, simmering with fertility and colour. My interest in late snow has puzzled him for a long time.

‘A month?’

‘Yes. Unless I change my mind.’

He leant forward. ‘Why might you change your mind?’

‘I might . . . I don’t know. It may rain all month. I may get bored.’

‘But what is it? What’s the attraction?’

‘There are lots of reasons. The snow is often very beautiful, in an odd kind of way. And it’s surprising. It’s surprising that it’s there at all, but it’s surprising in other ways too. It’s never quite what you expect.’

He eyed me. I could see his point: there are, on the face of it, more likely things to be interested in than summer snow.

‘When I first went to Venice,’ I said, ‘I was slightly disappointed. I was disappointed because it was perfect. It perfectly matched the image of Venice in my mind. Nothing surprised me. But summer snow always surprises me.’

‘But you’ve been there before. You must know what it looks like by now.’

‘Not really. I know but I don’t know. It’s always different. Every year is different. And I feel different things about the snow every time.’

‘Okay,’ he said.

There was a pause. I felt a little defensive. ‘I don’t know exactly why I’m interested,’ I said. ‘I am because I am. If I did know, maybe that would be the end of it. Why are you interested in hot places? Because you went on holidays to the Med as a child. I went on holidays to Scotland.’

‘So it’s nostalgia? That’s it?’

‘No, I don’t think it’s that. In childhood things get laid down in the brain, that’s all I mean. I was bowled over by Scotland when I was a small boy.’

‘What if you get up there and the snow’s melted?’ he asked.

‘If there’s no snow at all? Anywhere? That would be interesting, too, in a way. But there’s almost always some snow, at least in August. One snow almost never melts. In the whole of the twentieth century it only melted three times.’

This was my trump card, and he seemed moderately impressed. Then said, in a wistful tone: ‘When I lived near Brighton I had a girlfriend who said that the pieces of dirty old snow by the motorway were like bits of her past that she’d rather not have.’

I was disconcerted by this remark. He was talking about roadside slush, filthy stuff, nothing like the snow in the Scottish mountains.

I pointed out that I wasn’t alone in liking summer snow. In recent years, more and more people in the Highlands had become interested. Admittedly, the numbers were still quite small, but I wasn’t a lone eccentric.

What I didn’t tell him was how concerned I was about my physical fitness; that, not boredom or bad weather, was why I thought I might end up coming back before August was out. It wasn’t so much my age, although I’d just turned sixty, a birthday that no one views with any great enthusiasm, but that ten months earlier I’d had an operation on my lower back. At a follow-up meeting with the surgeon, I’d asked if it would be okay for me to carry a rucksack in the summer. Well, he said cheerfully, it should be. But then he qualified himself. Not too heavy a rucksack. A light rucksack should be fine. Not too much weight. I see, I said.

As if a creaky back wasn’t enough to cope with, I also had a dodgy left foot, a chronic problem under the bones of my second and third toes. This foot had been going on for years, and it had been X-rayed and ultrasounded and prodded and manipulated any number of times. Once there was a definite

diagnosis, then a different diagnosis, then no diagnosis at all. Perhaps nerve damage, perhaps a neuroma, perhaps a bursa. It had become a mystery.

I went again to the lower limb consultant and he gave it a steroid injection. ‘We may as well try. If it works you should be able to tell in a week or so. Where are you walking?’ I mentioned the Highlands, whereupon he gave me a lovely professional smile and wished me luck. I couldn’t interpret his smile, but I didn’t think it reflected any confidence in the efficacy of the injection.

A week later, and the foot felt just as it had done before. Hot and bothersome. Maybe, I told myself, I would be able to walk off any pain, as one walks off a tight muscle; or maybe I should walk only on alternate days, giving the foot a chance to recover. The notion that it might be best not to go up to the Highlands at all did cross my mind, but I rejected it. I was sixty, and if I didn’t go now, when would I? I had no intention of being beaten by a rogue foot.

My son confronted me as I was sorting through gloves and anoraks.

‘How’s your little finger?’

With some wariness I looked down at my hands. ‘Fine. Why?’

‘Everything else about you seems to be packing up, so I thought I’d check,’ he said.

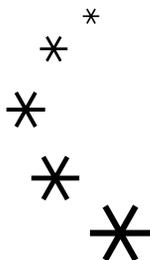


England in early August – the woods dark green, the wheat light gold, red admirals feeding on blackberry flowers, marbled whites drifting over the meadows. The swifts that nest every year in the church up the lane had just departed, one of the

climactic moments of summer. They were travelling south; I drove north. There was a great deal of news on the radio. The latest on the US presidential election, the implications of Brexit, the threat of ISIS, fighting in Syria, terrorism in France. Dear God. The world's woes.

On a stop at a motorway service station, I drank my coffee and absorbed the scene. As if running counter to the news narrative, there was a sensible, matter-of-fact air to it all. People checking mobile phones, people standing in queues. Families on holiday, wearing shorts, T-shirts, sunglasses, baseball caps. A man in a shiny suit sucking the end of a pen, a woman in a blue tracksuit pedalling an exercise bike in aid of charity. 'Seriously summer' read the sticker on the plate glass window. Outside, Britain's post-industrial economy was on the move. Among so many thousands of people using the motorway that day, I was probably the only one with snow in mind.

It's true: there are many more likely, more obviously important things in which to be interested. Yet summer snow has preoccupied me for years and years. I've wondered if it may be a little to do with the business of writing. The pale screen of my laptop, or the white of paper, as a sheet of snow on which I make certain marks. In idle moments, I've even found myself typing an asterisk that reconfigures itself as a snowflake . . .



Still, I don't really think that writing explains much. More probably, it began when I was six years old and living in a pebble-dashed house on the outer edge of south London. Even then, as a little boy, I felt a constraint in the suburban environment, a sense of life hemmed by fences, roads, traffic, lawns and hedges. That Boxing Day snow came as a liberation. I loved the way it stacked as neatly on the tops of gateposts and walls and fences as if it had been edged by a ruler, and I loved the alternate creaks and crunches when I walked on it and the seething shiver when I pushed against the privet hedge in our front garden, and the flop of sound that a piece of snow made when it fell from a rooftop. I loved the silence, how silent our road was, although I could hear the sharp scraping noises of a shovel as one of our neighbours cleared his driveway, and I loved the arrow-like indentations left by birds' feet and the bent branches of the trees and the smoothness of things. My sister Clare and I could no longer tell where the road ended and the pavement began, and so we walked on the road, and if a car did appear it was only creeping along, we could easily get out of the way. We swept a space in the yard and put out crusts for the birds, and filled a Fray Bentos pie tin with warm water so that they had something to drink. Within a couple of hours it had iced up. We knocked out the ice and filled the tin again. When more snow fell, the flakes descending in mazy lines, we ran round trying to catch them in our mouths, and later we snowballed Bacchus. He was a rescue mongrel with black fur and brown eyebrows and a white shirt-front, and we loved him. We used to sit in the bath, chanting 'Who's the best dog in the world, who's the best dog in the world? B - A - C - C - H - U - S, the best dog in the world!'

That long, snowy winter is my first memory of what might be described as a public event. The Cuban Missile Crisis of

October 1962, two months earlier, when the world blinked and recoiled at the prospect of nuclear war, has left no trace, and nor do I have any recollection of the assassination of President Kennedy in November 1963, but I can remember that when we went tobogganing Clare and I wore knitted balaclava hats and that Clare's balaclava was red and mine blue, and I can remember that my anorak was dark blue while her anorak was creamy-white with a flower pattern, and I can remember how my wellington boots filled up with slush and how terribly cold my feet were as I plodded home in the fading light with the snow orange under the street lamps. The snow lasted for nearly three months, and there were days when the roads were blocked and we missed school. Then it ended, and the world returned to its normal, tight, unromantic self, but I was left with a permanent blaze of white in my memories.

Was that how it began, or was it Scotland? Scotland was my other country. Not every year but most years in my childhood we drove up there for our summer holidays, visiting my aunt and uncle, who lived on the coast north of Aberdeen, and borrowing their caravan to explore the Highlands. The country was the antithesis of suburbia, the quintessence of wildness. It had lochs, pine forests and mountains. Its wildlife included eagles, wild cats, pine martens and otters. Secretly, I felt as much Scottish as English.

This wasn't only a matter of romantic sentiment; some hard facts backed me up, or at least what I thought of as facts. My surname was Scottish, there was a proper Nicholson clan, and when my parents went Scottish dancing on winter evenings at the local Caledonian Club, my mother wore a long pleated skirt in the Nicholson tartan, the cloth chequered green and blue. She was entirely English, but my father was Scottish. That is, he had been brought up in England, he had the most

English of accents and he had never lived in Scotland, but his parents and grandparents had been Scottish and he was therefore Scottish by blood.

Blood was critical, I felt. My blood was half Scottish, half English: if it were analysed, would my mixed ancestry show up in two separate streams?

At times I was a little confused. When Scotland played England at rugby or football, it was hard to know which side to support, and things became difficult when, at the age of seven, I was sent to a nearby school for boys run by an eccentric Scottish headmaster who wore a kilt and tweed jacket, and had a bone-handled dirk in his thick woollen socks. He was a ferocious old man with a neck like a bulldog. To my astonishment, he insisted that in the winter terms any boy with a Scottish association should also wear a kilt. 'But I don't want to,' I told my father, 'I can't wear a kilt! I can't!' A kilt was a skirt, it felt sissy; in my panic I was ready to renounce any links to Scotland. My father told me that lots of other boys would be wearing kilts and that I would soon get used to it. I never did. After all, this wasn't Scotland, it was south London, and if, having collected me from school, my mother had to go to the shops, I would stay in the car, hiding my bare legs from public view.

Almost no Scottish history was taught at the school. I learnt that 1314 was the date of the Battle of Bannockburn, someone told me about Robert the Bruce and the spider, and I vaguely imbibed the tale of Bonnie Prince Charlie's flight after the Battle of Culloden in 1746, but I had no idea what lay behind any of it. Even if I had known more, would it have made any difference? I was so infatuated with the idea of Scotland that I tried to speak with a light Scottish accent, chanting place-names to myself. Killiecrankie. Crianlarich.

Tulloch. Loch. ‘Lochhh.’ ‘Mo-o-o-r-r.’ ‘Bur-r-r-n.’ Burns seemed better than streams. In my mind they connected to fire, liquid fire, tumbling down the mountains. When I was grown up, I decided, I would definitely live in Scotland, in the Highlands. For years I believed that when we went to Scotland, on those summer holidays, we went uphill.

It would be handy if I could conjure a specific childhood memory – a hot day in the mountains when I was eight or nine, and saw a snowbed at a certain distance, and ran towards it and fell upon it. A photograph of Clare and me posing by the snow would be even better, confirming those holidays as the origin of my interest in summer snow. But in those pre-digital days people took many fewer photos than they do now, my father probably had only enough film for twenty-four exposures each holiday, and there is no snow in the albums. Did we find it on our walks? I think we did, but where, and was it once or several times? And, if so, why don’t I remember it more clearly? Why, instead, do I merely have a glimmering sense of that old snow?

In my mid-teens our family holidays ended, but I continued to come up to the Highlands by myself. At sixteen, equipped with a second-hand copy of Keats’ poems, wearing a pair of inadequate felt boots and carrying my father’s old rucksack, a thing of heavy canvas with narrow leather shoulder straps that gouged the thin flesh on my collarbones, I spent three weeks tramping the mountains. When I was twenty-two I and a university friend walked from the west coast to the east; by now I had a better rucksack, but wore heavy boots with metal shanks. I clumped along. Not only do I remember the blisters, but I still have their scars on the backs of my heels.

When I was twenty-six I came here with a new girlfriend. Like me, Kitty had been brought up in London suburbia, and she

was also intensely romantic about wild landscapes. She introduced me to the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, I introduced her to the Highlands. We caught the night sleeper from King's Cross to Fort William and woke as the train was crossing the great expanse of Rannoch Moor. Bog, cotton grass, thin birch scrub, pools of dark water. Not the usual scenery in which to fall in love, maybe. After we married, we continued to come up to Scotland; after we had children, we came up as a family. After she died, I came up with my son and daughter and we buried her ashes on the top of Quinag, her favourite mountain, far in the north-west, from which the views reach to the sea and achieve a blueness more blue than any other I know.

I thought about some of this as I drove along the motorway. How places come to acquire deep personal meaning. But I also thought that if I had lived all my life in the Highlands I might have well been driving in the opposite direction, heading south in search of green fields, lanes lined with cow parsley, footpaths linking old churches and quiet pubs. I wouldn't have been on the hunt for summer snow.



After crossing the border I took a detour. Some miles west of Gretna Green lies the village of Mouswald where my Nicholson ancestors lived a few generations back. I went to the church, a striking whitewashed building with a slate roof and a little tower, prominently placed high on a bluff above pastures in which brown and black cattle were grazing. It was a bright day with low cloud, and a breeze that rustled the leaves of the beech tree near the church. Some white gulls meandered by, and the air smelt faintly of salt. In the distance, light shone on the waters of the Solway Firth. I had never been here before.

In the churchyard stood more than a hundred upright tombstones, reddish in colour, all facing away from the direction of the westerly wind and rain. Sandstone is noted for its durability, and the inscriptions, running back to the eighteenth century, were as sharp as if they'd been cut a few years ago. By a clipped yew bush I found a large stone, some seven feet high, a memorial to Jonah Nicholson, farmer, of Howthat. Jonah Nicholson was my great-great-great-great-grandfather; born in 1747, he died in 1833 at the age of eighty-six. His wife, Ann Carruthers, is the next name on the stone, dying three years before him at the age of eighty-four.

What was their life like? An account of Mouswald in the 1790s, given by the minister, the Reverend Mr Jacob Dickson, paints a picture of a quiet agricultural parish. The farmers grow oats, barley and potatoes. The population is six hundred and twenty-eight. There are forty-eight farmers, sixty cottagers, two millers, ten day-labourers, one hundred and forty-two horses, seven hundred and fifty-three black cattle, three hundred and eighty-six sheep. 'Everyone keeps a pig.' 'Each marriage, at an average, produces 5 or 6 children.' 'No account is kept of children dying under 2 years of age,' he writes, presumably because infant mortality was so common. It felt good to see that below Jonah and Ann's names on the memorial was that of their first child, John, who died after just thirteen days.

The memorial was very possibly erected by Christopher Nicholson, their fourth son, who became the vicar of Whithorn. I was named after him. It is often said that memorials honour the dead, as if that was all that needed to be said, but there is something to add about the use of stone as a medium. Stone is among the most enduring of materials. Inscribing the names of the departed in hard stone so that they can still be read generations later is an implicit assertion that the dead are worth

remembering, that their lives were worth living, even if they lived only for a few days. The same is true of writing in general. To notice something enough to write about it is, at the least, a tacit acknowledgement of its value.

How that was half a mile from the churchyard. Not even a hamlet, it was a modern farmhouse with some older outbuildings, and a sign on a wooden fence that warned of guard dogs. So this was where my four-times-great-grandfather, to whom I owed the fact of my existence, had lived. I had a suspicion that while he might have been pleased at my visit to the graveyard, he would not have begun to comprehend my attraction to summer snow. Other things surely occupied his mind: the cutting of hay, the condition of his animals, the business of putting food in the mouths of his family. In all likelihood, if there had been summer snow in the low hills near Mouswald, he wouldn't even have noticed. I may be wrong. He lived long before the age of mass refrigeration, and it's possible that the sight of snow in August would have intrigued him.

Driving on towards Glasgow, I was aware of a niggling anxiety. Was I going up at quite the right time?

Deciding when to visit the Highlands is tricky. If you go in midsummer there is always plenty of snow on offer, and this is a good time to see specialist birds like dotterel and snow bunting, which breed high on the mountains. Yet there are good arguments for going later, for as the snows melt they become more curious. They develop characters, although even as I write that I feel a qualm: how can a piece of snow possess character? But their individuality becomes more distinct with the advance of time. They show signs of their age. They sag and ripple and crack, and exhibit new and intriguing features – tunnels, arches, bridges. And, day by day, their survival grows more and more precarious.

Should I have been making this journey earlier, in mid-July? Or earlier still? The amount of snow left in late summer depends upon the amount of snow that falls in the preceding months, and then upon the speed of melting, as determined by the weather. Sun, rain, wind. All highly variable.

The previous year, I knew, had been freakish. A cool spring had been followed by such a cool summer that there had been repeated falls of snow on the mountain tops. No less than eight days in June had been snowy, and a prodigious quantity of snow had survived deep into August. This year seemed much more average.

In May I'd made a flying visit to the Highlands, and as the aeroplane crossed the Cairngorms I peered from the porthole and saw snow beneath me. I drove up to Ben Wyvis, the hulking mountain north of Inverness. Robins and willow warblers were singing furiously in the woods at the foot of the mountain. Young conifers pushed out spurts of brilliant green growth, bracken unfurled muscular fronds. The air was warm and friendly. Yet, on climbing the Ben's steep shoulder, I found myself in a cold fog. Ben Wyvis isn't a mountain that I know well, and I walked along to the summit cairn. There I ate my sandwiches and wondered where any snow might be. A cyclist – I'd overtaken him on the climb – pedalled up and we had one of those laconic, downbeat conversations that often seem to take place in casual encounters on the mountains. Would the fog lift, probably not, sod's law. But the fog was thinning even as we spoke, and I suddenly made out the light of something brighter. Two shallow snowbeds lay in dips of ground, like bunkers on a golf course. Then larger slabs of snow materialised along the mountain's steep southern flanks, a procession of pale ghosts. The sun burst through and a magical transformation took place: the snow shone, the stones glittered with fragments



of mica, and from some far-off vale there floated a cuckoo's faint call: cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo.

The sound of early summer. Since then, the weather up north had been generally mild and cloudy. It wasn't easy to know how things would be, but only a little snow might have survived. I shied away from the possibility that there might be none at all.

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