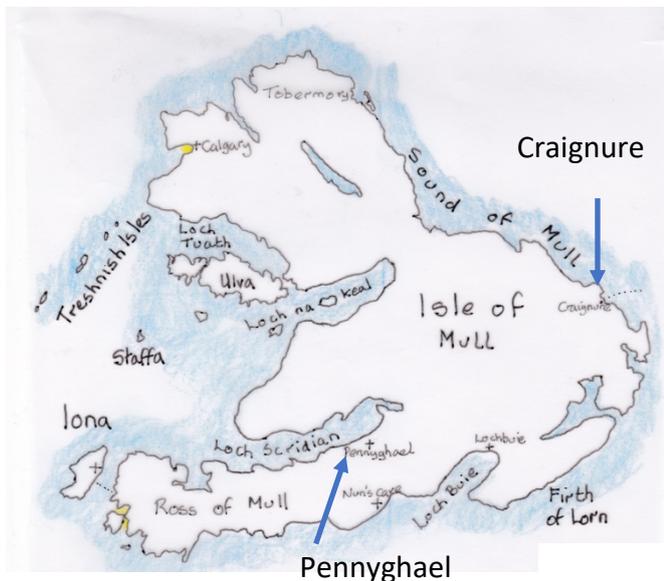


Mull: Pennyghael: a wayside marker

A highlight of our young family life was an annual summer holiday, invariably to a Scottish isle, invariably involving a ferry. Journeys regularly taken, a valued staging post along the way of life. As ships slipped their mooring in successive years, I experienced feelings of leaving normal life, pulling up the drawbridge for a period, keenly anticipating a new normal (for a week of two).



Ferries are work-a-day vessels, vital for island life, with a bustle and nods, bar and café. But it is on deck that relaxing tourist and seeking pilgrim intermingle along the ship's rail. I've travelled in both guises, and have found that one intentionality can seep, unbidden, into the other. Watching for the breach of a dolphin, seeing the panicked flap of an anxious auk; "is that a puffin?" as rapid wings trailing a hint of orange-webbed feet, beat a hasty retreat from ferry's bow. Then, look, the light of Lismore, a wayside marker, arresting attention, pausing pilgrim and tourist, to wonder about what they may encounter in landscape and light, sight, sound and soul.



Some years ¼ million people take the journey from Oban by Calmac ferry to Craignure on Mull, then whisking by road through the magnificent, bleak Glen Mor, onwards west along the Ross, skirting Loch Scridian to Fionnphort for the Iona ferry.

Yesterday's travellers took different routes, more time. For centuries tramping the drove road, herders with cattle, tinkers with temptations, leavers and returners, meeting along the way. Further back still, pilgrims progressed. Like today's travellers, each guided by signposts along the way, each valuing a pause, for rest and refreshment, in body and soul.

At Pennyghael, rests a relic from those days. A stone, carved on each side with an ancient cross. Once set along the pilgrim's way, then fractured, separated, abandoned. In the 1980s the two parts were reunited and set for safety outside an Estate Office. Whilst its story is untraceable, a finger may trace the cross outline, connecting seekers and pilgrims across the ages.

Today's lockdown may feel in an in-between place. What was once certain and routine, possible and normal has been left behind. What may be possible, the new normal is yet to be reached. Like the Pennyghael cross, we may feel fractured and lost. Like the Pennyghael cross, this may be a liminal place to pause, to consider reassuring words from the heart of a pilgrim of old:

*He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will neither slumber nor sleep. Psalm 121*

and ponder anew, on our true calling, the path and destination of our way.

