

A passage to Crinan

Alexander McCall Smith flips effortlessly from grammar to yachting, if only his hazardous passage through the Crinan Canal was such plain sailing

I use the expression rite of passage a little bit loosely. In fact, we use most terms a bit loosely these days, but that, of course, is another matter altogether. Which brings me to the use of the word great – which is an adjective – as an adverb, as was done recently by a prominent unelected official in Downing Street when he described a process as ‘going great’. To what depths have we sunk? Fifty fathoms.

A rite of passage is really a ceremony of some sort rather than an experience, although an experience may be a rite of passage. So, baptism is a classic rite of passage, while one’s first kiss, parking fine, or pay slip are all milestones rather than rites.

And fathoms? Well, that is to do with the Crinan Canal, which is, in the loose sense, a rite of passage, but is not really a ceremony. It is, of course, a passage, in that the Crinan Canal takes you from Ardrishaig to Crinan. I have just been through the canal. I had sold my old boat, although it is a truth universally acknowledged that one rarely actually sells a boat, as boats usually go on the market and stay there for years. However, we were fortunate to find Mark Cameron, a yacht broker of rare talent, who operates in those latitudes. Mark not only managed to sell my boat within days but also skilfully negotiated its replacement from DDZ Marine in Largs. There the new boat’s hull was painted in British Racing Green before Dino Zavaroni and his team sent me on my way up Loch Fyne.

Ahead lay the Crinan Canal – a waterway talked about wherever Scottish yachtsmen congregate. There is a certain machismo in the way in which people will talk about the size of the scrapes they received while making that journey. Your hull damage sounds merely cosmetic to me – you should see what the canal did to my stern! Tales also circulate of people who have attached their steadying lines too firmly and have ended up suspending their boat from the sides of a lock.

Realising my incompetence, I arranged for two highly expert sailors, Bill and Sue Rosier, to accompany us. They were well prepared and the boat, covered in fenders, inched towards the first lock. And that is where disaster struck: both the bow and stern thrusters – engines designed to make the boat manoeuvrable – tripped out. That was an electrical issue – and electrical issues, in my view, are nobody’s fault, they are Acts of God. However, it is awkward when you enter the stone and concrete embrace of a narrow lock to discover that you have

very limited means of controlling where you are going. Even Bill, who can do most things remarkably well, was taken aback by this development.

Going into the first section of the canal, we encountered a freelance canal pilot busy completing somebody else’s journey. One should never be too proud to take on further help, and this ebullient and energetic man, who gave his name simply as Charlie, was quickly signed up to join our crew. I have great confidence in people called Charlie. The gold standard, I believe, is set by Charlie Maclean, the great whisky expert, to whom all other people called Charlie look for guidance and inspiration. The pilot Charlie proved to be a great asset, helping us through lock after lock.

We did not make it in a day and we stopped for the evening on a pontoon, where Mark Cameron appeared to mop our brows. That evening we went to dinner in that most wonderful establishment, the Crinan Hotel, where we sat and looked out over a view that must surely have been designed by angels in their flight.

The next morning we were popped out of the final lock like a cork out of a bottle and set sail for the Sound of Iona and Coll beyond. The sea was calm; the air languid; the light that bathed that bit of Scotland was lambent. After Coll, we headed for Muck and Rum. A whale surfaced beside us. Whales, I think, like British Racing Green. It breathed its sigh and then returned to the depths. Gannets dived too, and then reappeared. I thought of happiness, and of how lucky we are when we are in the right place, at the right time, to be vouchsafed it. ☺



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