

Neil Gunn Writing Competition 2016/17: Adult short story section

Commended: The Fank by Martin Campbell

"Knowledge is high in the head, but the salmon of wisdom swims deep."

THE FANK

When a tree is blown over and falls into your neighbour's land, it's his firewood. When one of his sheep dies from eating acorns and leaves from the branches of the tree, it reverts to being your tree because the roots are in your ground. That doesn't need some lawyer in a suit to decide.

The Lairg lamb sale looked like a lifeboat getting ready to launch. Men in yellow and green oil skins, faded by years of creasing, moved around in the smirring rain, shuttling between holding pens and the auction ring. The going price for ewe lambs and wethers in the ring varied by the hour. Deals were done outside the ring. The price of twenty ewe lambs scribbled on a bill of sale, scored out, renegotiated between two men, sealed with a handshake. The auction ring in the cavernous shed was the only place that prices were shouted, the auctioneer's voice distorted by an ancient PA system, sounding like announcements for trains at Rogart railway station on a windy day. The bidding was at speed. Only the auctioneer and buyers, with a nod or the flick of hand, knew who was bidding and who had won. No Facebook "likes" or customer satisfaction star ratings to decide which sheep to put your money on, just the name of the farm or the reputation of the crofter was enough to guarantee the quality of the sheep, year on year.

There were a few strangers each year, but not many. Absence of a bidder usually meant a death, and a toast in the bar at the end of the day by those not facing a long drive south.

"Cammie Legget – a good man."

Ewan Ross didn't know Cammie well, but enough to bang the bar and get glasses raised. Cammie's seven acre croft was bordered on one side by Ewan's 12 acre strip of hill land, West Tulrain, and on the other by younger brother Davie Ross' larger croft, Loubcroy. All

three crofts were accessed by the Balcharn back road, a rutted track that would tear the sump off any vehicle with less than a foot of ground clearance.

Cammie had worked his croft for 28 years and had lived there for 12 of those, moving out of the family house in Dornoch after his wife died. Lifetime crofters died quickly in old folks homes, like wild birds put in small cages. First the plumage went dull and feathers fell out, then the will went. Death for Cammie was preceded by one last, confused attempt to return to the croft, walking for hours across fields in the dark.

Ewan's and Davie's east-facing plots were recorded as Crofts 134 and 136 on the Crofting Register cadastral maps; neat boundary lines, defined dominoes of land either side of Croft 135. In reality, the terrain in Balcharn meant that the borders between crofts were agreed by crofters and marked by a peat wall or painted stones placed across rocky outcrops. On better land, a straight ploughing line was dragged through the peaty soil. Any fencing was around bogs and the deeper gullies, to keep the sheep out. The grass was coarse, and the souming was only one sheep per acre, boosted to two per three acres because both Ewan and Davie's sheep wandered freely across Cammie's croft.

The timing of Cammie's death was bad enough for Cammie, but in the bar that night Ewan and Davie were thinking that it could not have been much worse for them. Neither had heard the saying that a croft was a bit of land surrounded by legislation, but they soon came to believe it.

The bequest of the tenancy of the croft to Cammie's son was subject to consent by the Crofting Commission. For that to happen, the boundaries for all three crofts had to be re-mapped. All this came at the same time as the Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances (HLCA) scheme was being introduced. Headage payments, for numbers of sheep and cattle, could be claimed (article 7 of EC 2603/1999). Additional compensation was also payable to crofts that were in Less Favoured Areas (LFA). Less Favoured by the weather, by God or just by people in More Favoured Areas? Ewan was never sure. For Ewan and Davie it was

a lot of forms to fill, but they had little choice; the return on lamb sales each year didn't even cover the cost of sheep pellets for the winter and they had to chase every penny going.

Fixed costs of the croft were expensive, but savings could be made. On a rare trip south to an Aberdeen trade fair, Ewan had been shown the wonders of the Logic multi-feeder. It was a 300kg capacity dispenser that could be hooked onto a tractor, had in-cab control and counted the number of sheep pellets it released as it trundled across the field. It cost what Ewan would pay for a second hand car.

It was his daughter's cat that gave him the idea. She had sealed the ends of a toilet roll tube, cut a hole in the cardboard and pushed in some of the cat's favourite treats. The cat spent hours rolling the tube across the carpet until, randomly, a treat would spill out. So was born the "Ross roller". Ewan ran a metal rod through an oil drum, punched a hole in it, then part filled it with pellets through a funnel. He dragged it behind the tractor across the hill, dropping pellets on every turn of the drum. He stayed dry inside the cab, and the sheep loved it.

Dividing fences had to be built before the HLCA inspector came to count the eligible sheep and before that the man from the Less Favoured Area (LFA) scheme was to visit to establish if the crofts could be classified as LFA. But even before the line for the fences could be set, the brothers Ross had to fork out more money to some remote croft mapping service - "one man, a computer and a bank account, basically," - in Davie's view, to "*officially survey the boundaries and assist with dispute regulation*". The mapping service offered no discount for having no disputes to regulate.

The posts were spaced evenly. Some had to be cut, stapled to the wire and left dangling in the wind over a gully or outcrops of rock. As the brothers worked, the flock of North Country Cheviots watched, randomly stamping and then running as if chased, from one strip of land to the next, through the narrowing gaps in the fencing. At the end of three long days Ewan and Davie had strung boundaries lines roughly where they should be. Ewan nailed together

some old timber to make gates. No hinges or gate posts, just gates, tied with orange string in the gap between two fence posts near each of the crofts. Job done.

The sheep on the crofts were identified by compulsory left-ear tags, loops of numbered plastic. In the rest of the UK it had to be yellow tags, but in Scotland any colour except red (for replacement tags) and black (microchipped sheep) was OK. West Tulrain and Loubcroy had a rainbow ears flock. Ewan and Davie had a deal with the supplier to take leftover tags, regardless of colour, as long as they had the right numbers for the year. They had some yellow tags, but there was also orange, pink, purple and blue/green stripes. The colour was whatever came to hand from a battered tin box, clipped to ears when they gathered the sheep in West Tulrain's drystane fank for their first vaccinations. Tags worked out around a pound each and there was the extra expense when some fell out, or got snagged and ripped out in gorse bush, or when the ears became infected. There was no farm payment or compensation scheme for that.

By tradition, Ewan and Davie looked after Cammie's croft until someone else took it on. Cammie had no sheep, so it was just keeping the place wind and water proof and lighting a fire every few weeks, to dry out the damp. Croft 135 had a kitchen and a cosy box room, where Cammie had slept. It was cosy because the entire floor space was taken by a massive wooden bed, bought at a hunting lodge auction by Cammie's father. It had to be broken down and re-assembled and the bedroom door re-hung, to open out rather than in. For such a bargain price, it was worth it, according to Cammie. The living room had a wood burner, a table, two stuffed chairs and a gas cooker, fed by a cylinder through a hole in a wooden pane of the window. Against one wall was a mahogany linen press, with three deep shelves above and four drawers below. The decorative cornice, which had topped the antique storage cupboard, had been sawn off to allow it to fit below the ceiling. It had been bought in the same hunting lodge auction. Both rooms in the croft were floored with a wiry brown carpet that looked like it would stop a bullet.

The feel of the Cammie's place was lived-in, smelling of humans, in comparison to the Ross brothers' crofts, which felt visited, occasionally; somewhere warmer than outside, to shelter until the weather blew over. The brothers decided to invite the official from the Less Favoured Area (LFA) scheme to meet them at the bleaker West Tulrain, but they gave the counting sheep HLCA inspector directions to Cammie's more comfortable croft. There was two weeks between the visits.

The three crofts qualified for LFA status for being handicapped by geography, topography and climate, and to prove it the man from Agriculture and Fisheries scratched a front wing on his car when he slid on the muddy track and hit a rock on his way out.

The HLCA, sheep-counting inspector confirmed the date of his visit by phone, and told Ewan that his estimated time of arrival was 15.10, according to his app.

Ewan waited in the rain at the road end from three o'clock and James, the inspector, apologised when he pulled up at half past. Ewan walked in front of the car, up the track to Cammie's croft, guiding the four wheel drive around the worst of the pot holes.

James was all business when he got out of this car, shaking hands with Davie and again with Ewan. They spread the official mapped boundaries sheet on the table.

"Yes, that matches with what I have here", said James, tapping his iPad. "Perhaps if we start with the sheep on Loubcroy, since it's the larger croft?"

"Aye, I've got them ready", said Davie, standing.

The early February light has started to fade as Davie untied the gate and led James down the field. Plastic roofing sheets, against the new fence, a line of broken pallets and a potato box had been tied together to pen the sheep. They grouped in the bottom corner as the two men approached, then moved, without any spaces appearing between them, along the fence, straining against the wooden pallets. James went further down the hill, to get them moving again. He held a tally counter in his hand, clicking as the sheep broke for the space.

After repeating the exercise, he walked back over to Davie, who stood leaning on his wooden crook, impressed with the speed of James' thumb on the counter.

"OK, Mr Ross, I think I've got the number, but if we open your homemade pen there, I'll count them as they come through the gap, just to make sure."

"Or I could just tell you how many sheep I have," Davie muttered under his breath, as he lifted one of the gates clear of the mud and angled it to allow the sheep to escape.

They walked back to the croft and went inside for James to clear the rain off his screen and tap in the numbers. Davie had the fire open and three glasses on the table.

As James came in, Ewan had poured three whiskies from a half bottle. *"Now we'd be sorely offended if you didn't accept our hospitality after your long drive James, on such a terrible day too."*

"Oh, well, now, that's very kind, Mr Ross, but I can't really drink. I have to drive back to Lairg tonight..."

"Och, nonsense man!" Ewan said, patting him on the back. *"Sure, it's a straight road and there'll be nobody on it except yourself. Look, I'll put some water in it, and you'll hardly know you had it."*

James lifted the glass that was handed to him, following the brothers' lead and they clinked together, with a "slainte". He held the glass against his lips, letting in as little liquid as possible.

"Now what far flung places are on your list for tomorrow, James?" Ewan said, putting down his glass and reaching for the bottle. *"Maybe we can save you some time with directions."*

"Oh, the satnav is pretty reliable, thanks, Mr Ross. If I can just get to the postcode, I can usually see the croft at a fair distance. It's usually the only place around," James said, smiling. *"Now perhaps we should do your sheep now, before the light gets too bad?"*

“Yes, yes, you’re probably right enough,” said Ewan. “Just let me get back into my waterproofs there, and we’ll be off. You’ll be pleased to know that it’ll be a lot easier to count my sheep, James. Unlike my brother here, I have a proper fank, older than you and me, it is.”

The rain was coming down harder. James peered over the dry stane dyke into the circular enclosure. Ewan’s sheep looked calmer than his brother’s flock, James noted, more secure and sheltered in the solid structure perhaps, Same ragbag of ear tags, though, and half-bald, scruffy wool slip. If sheep were homeless people, this is how they would look, he thought.

Ewan had walked to far side of the fank.

“Ready when you are James”, he shouted.

James took out his tally counter and open the gate half way, as Ewan walked around the sheep, tapping them with this crook. James kept a strong hand on the gate, to let out just one at a time. After ten minutes the fank was empty and the men were walking back to Cammie’s croft.

James had the numbers on the Hill Livestock Compensatory Allowances form and pinged off before he left Cammie’s croft. He prided himself on efficiency.

As did Bill and Ben. The lift, the fetch on Davie’s croft, shedding ten sheep and penning the rest in Ewan’s fank; fifteen minutes or less. Ross MacDonald of Lairg, cousin to Ewan and Davie, didn’t need to enter Bill and Ben in any sheepdog trials to know that they were good. They were trained on his hand signals, fast and keen to work.

The headage compensation money, for both flocks that James had counted, was split three ways. Ewan and Davie kept 40% each and Ross was given the rest for his trouble. That was fair. That didn’t need some lawyer in a suit to work it out.