

...and so it flows

My earliest memory of the river Tay, although I hadn't seen it then, is Moira Macgregor. We attended the same school, and in Primary Seven sat behind her.

I was fascinated by her hair. It fell in long dark-red ringlets as far as her shoulders. When she moved her fingers through it - a gesture which preceded the moment she would raise her hand to answer a question - the ringlets rose and flowed over the back of her hand, and I fancied I could hear them rippling.

Moira was clever.

It was a geography lesson.

"Can anyone tell me the name of the longest river in Scotland?"

This was my moment. I remembered my dad, full of little rhymes and homilies, once saying 'Spey Spey mighty Spey glide away to the far-off Bay.'

My arm shot up. I was almost out of my seat. "Miss, Miss, I know! It's the Spey!"

I wondered why Moira still had her hand in the air, and why Miss Yuill wasn't smiling her congratulations at me.

I lost contact with Moira when we moved on to secondary school. As can happen with childhood friends, gradually we drifted into different currents then flowed our separate ways.

Time passed, sometimes meandering, sometimes in a torrent.

I discovered hill walking, and discovered Scotland.

It was a cold, snowy, misty day. We plodded up and through a grey haze-laden landscape, and so I was unprepared for the moment the clouds suddenly lifted. Sun slanted from under the canopy of fog to reveal the dazzling slopes and shadowy corries of the hills on the opposite side of the glen - and below them, waters dancing in response.

"What's that river down there?"

My companion, more experienced than me, did not need to consult the map.

"It's one that has many names," he said.

"Unlike most of us," he continued, "rivers often take on many nomenclatures as they flow through land and life. That one down there also goes by the moniker of Cononish. You probably know it better as the Tay."

He pointed to a towering peak in the distance.

"That hill over there. A wee burn burbling out from one of its corries is its source."

I scanned that far-off mountain, determined that two streams of thought - of curiosity and of ambition - would soon converge.

In due course I climbed that towering peak, Ben Lui, not once but many times. I ascended its Central Gully in winter, explored the hill from different directions, visited its neighbouring peaks. A greater imperative than wishing to find the source of the Tay was driving me. As my mountain wanderings spread, like water on a flood plain, curiosity about the source of the Tay, while never leaving me, became a tributary to ambition.

One day, on the summit plateau of Braeriach I experienced my watersmeet. A quiet gurgling under the sodden sedge, a tiny liquid seepage freeing itself from its muddy shackles and sliding, slowly, sinuously, growing in confidence and aided by gravity, until, under its own impetus, it bore inexorably towards the lip of the plateau's edge and tumbled, flashing silver and grey, into the hollows beneath.

This might just as well be the Tay, I thought. The fact that it was the Dee was irrelevant. Standing spellbound, I realised that the birth of a river was, wherever it occurred, a miracle.

David Carson. arch 2022