

# ESCAPE TO EIGG

## Roger Coutu's account of a singlehanded cruise around the Inner Hebrides is this year's winner of the Marcon Log Trophy

I've been dreaming of sailing up the West Coast of Scotland long before I even owned a boat. I had studied all the sailing directions and in hindsight I had become what you would call an armchair sailor.

*Escape* is a Trident 24 bilge keeler and this was the second season I have owned her. She was my US Navy retirement present that I bought to keep myself sane. We belong to the Troon Cruising Club and last year I sailed in circles around the Firth of Clyde for the entire season getting used to her idiosyncrasies. That was enough for me, it was time to lose the baby teeth and stretch the legs. So where shall I begin this narrative... with preparations of course.

I started dropping hints to my wife that I wanted to make this cruise and didn't get much of a response. Undoubtedly she was hoping I would forget about it and happily sail within a 30 mile radius all my days. However, at the beginning of April (and no we hadn't fallen out) she asked when I planned to depart. Bingo! I was off and it was time to move into high gear. In the ensuing months I installed an anchor windlass, upgraded to 8 mm chain, and installed a water stowage/pumping system. Simultaneously the boat was working against me and things were breaking unexpectedly, most impressively the diamond stay spreaders failed which required the mast to be dropped for repair. Finally, the boat was ready and this is where my adventure begins.

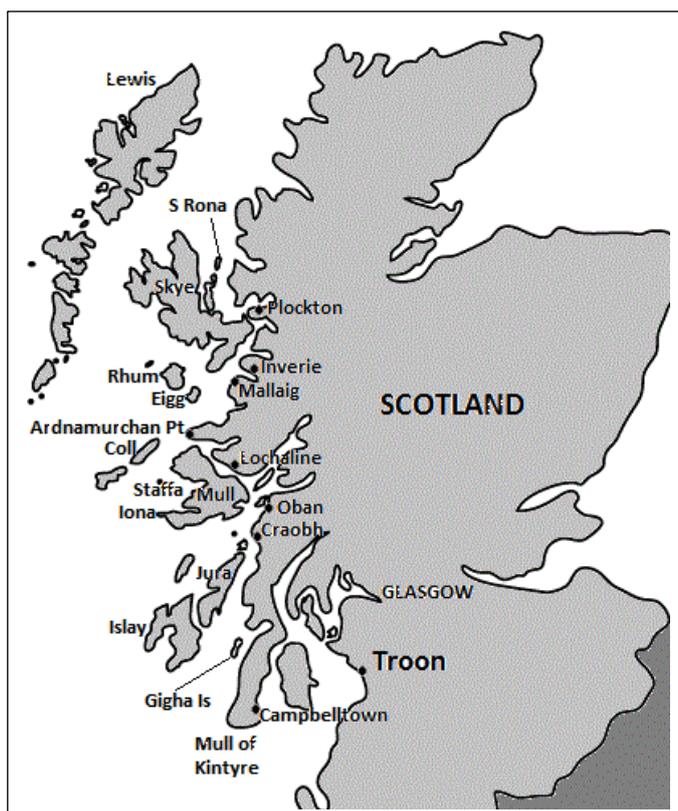
*Friday, 13 July*

**Troon to Campbeltown.** 33.8 nm, 8 hours, departed at 1015 en route Sanda Island with force 3-4 easterly winds. My plan was to anchor overnight and round the Mull of Kintyre the following morning. All was right with the world

and I was flying the drifter since it was a down wind run. However, 10 miles before reaching Sanda the wind shifted from the north and increased in strength. This meant that Sanda was no longer a favourable anchorage so I diverted to Campbeltown and tied up to their pontoon.

*Saturday, 14 July*

**Campbeltown to Ardminish, Gigha via the Mull of Kintyre.** 42.8 nm, 9.5 hours, departed 0600. In hindsight the forecast wasn't very good, W/NW force 4-6 winds. The vast amount of guidance on how to properly round the Mull of Kintyre could make your head spin and it did, thinking I was well schooled I got stuck in. My plan was to remain 2 miles off the coast and enjoy a smooth sail by proceeding south of Sanda around Patterson's Rock. However, due to my impatience it wasn't very smooth and I was soon beating my way through some pretty nasty overfalls... the wind remained against my nose 75 percent of the passage just like the forecast said it would. The sprayhood kept me fairly dry but the few waves which did make it





*Escape on Eigg – Roger's first experience of drying out which he found 'a very noisy and prolonged process'*

over the bow were enough to let me know that my "Creeping Crack" cure didn't work... my windows were leaking. Anyways, after battling my way north Gigha rewarded me with a stunning anchorage, the water was turquoise, and the sun was shining. Upon arrival I discovered *Hallmark* from Troon was anchored next to me. The following day while I was off exploring the island and visiting the botanical gardens, *Bali Voe* from Troon pulled in on their return trip from Ireland. I had dinner ashore with Jim and Margaret and then we all went on board *Hallmark* to drink some of John and Jenny's Highland Park. As for the windows, undeterred I covered them with my dodgers as a temporary fix.

Monday, 16 July

**Gigha to Carsaig Bay, Sound of Jura via MacCormaig Isles.** 23.6 nm, 7.25 hours, departed 0830, W/SW force 3-4. I stopped to anchor for lunch at Eilean Mor, MacCormaig Isles which are located at the mouth of Loch Sween. The island is absolutely gorgeous and John Paul Jones is supposed to have lived here

for a short while. After eating, I rowed ashore to visit the bothy, Saint Cormac Chapel and the Celtic Cross. I was the only person on the island and felt like Robinson Crusoe until two other boats arrived with their BBQs... after the population exploded to eleven I knew it was time to get moving again. Continuing north I anchored in Carsaig Bay for the night, it took me three attempts get the hook to set because the bay was full of weed. Once settled I discovered my mobile phone wasn't receiving coverage so I rowed ashore and walked 2 miles to Tayvallich on Loch Sween to call home, drink a pint and have dinner. Upon arrival I bumped into John and Jenny who were leaving *Hallmark* on a mooring and returning to Troon via car.

Tuesday, 17 July

**Carsaig Bay to Craobh Marina, Loch Melfort.** 14.3 nm, 3.25 hours, departed 0730, W/SW force 3-4. I have visited Craobh during West Highland Week a couple of years previously while crewing on a race boat. The marina is in a great location, it was exciting then but it certainly wasn't now... it was sleepy



Plockton, an idyllic east-facing sheltered mooring renowned for its mild climate and picturesque village

hollow and nobody was about. No problem, the purpose of my visit was to purchase diesel, pick up charts for north of Ardnamurchan (they didn't have) and await a favourable tide for transiting the Cuan Sound.

Wednesday, 18 July

**Craobh Marina to Loch Aline, Sound of Mull via Cuan Sound and Oban.** 31.3 nm, 8.75 hours, departed 1000, W/SW force 3-5. I have heard they are planning to build a bridge between Luing and Seil Island which would prevent yachts transiting the fast moving Cuan Sound in the future. I was both nervous and excited about the challenge that lay ahead as I eased my way around the island of Torsa slowly inching my way closer to the sound. I had the tide all figured out and I was precisely on schedule and on course... and then it was over in a flash since the sound is less than a mile long with a 7 knot current. By the time you realize you are in it you are out of it... after a quiet laugh to myself for mentally over cooking the transit I threw a reef in the main off Easdale Island and continued to sail north via the Sound of Kerrera. Upon entering Oban Harbour I tied up to the Oban Sailing Club pontoon and walked downtown to purchase charts from Black's Chandlery, stores at Tesco and a cool box from Argos. Weighed down, I took a taxi back to the boat. Upon departing, the harbour was congested with boats and ferries moving in every

direction. After clearing Oban I sailed NW to Loch Aline on the Sound of Mull where I anchored for the night. I went to bed armed and dangerous now that I had the additional charts. My confidence was high and I was eating up the miles. I was looking forward to rounding Ardnamurchan Point the following day.

Thursday, 19 July

**Loch Aline to Loch Ailort via Ardnamurchan Point.** 47.6 nm, 11 hours, departed 0815, W/SW force 3-5. Passed Tobermory on my port side at noon time, thought briefly about heading into port but discounted it for several reasons: I've been there before, it was early in the day and the conditions were favourable for rounding Ardnamurchan. A couple of hours later I passed Ardnamurchan lighthouse .5 nm to starboard. Suspecting that Troon boat *Tarragon* was in the area I sent Jack a text stating I was rounding Ardnamurchan and heading for Loch Moidart. He replied that he was at the very top of Loch Ailort which happened to be the very next loch north. It took me nearly an hour before I replied. In the interim I was studying the charts, sailing directions, and tidal vectors, etc to see if it was possible to rendezvous with him. What I discovered wasn't good reading and entry was even discouraged by the sailing directions. This would be a true test of my piloting skills since Loch Ailort is infested with rocks and I would be arriving with less than an hour remaining until

HW so many would be hidden just beneath the surface of the water and if I grounded I would be in deep trouble. So the challenge was on and that's where I headed. I am sure glad I did, this loch was the most wild and remote of all the highland lochs I visited during this trip, it was magnificent! Upon arrival Jack and I celebrated my arrival with a few drams of "Morrison's". The following day I rowed ashore and took the bus to the Glenfinnan Memorial, afterwards I had dinner on board *Tarragon*.

Saturday, 21 July

**Loch Ailort to Mallaig Marina.** 20.8 nm, 4.75 hours, departed 0530, SW 8-9 (+24 hour). The forecast was very poor and I was running for shelter from the gales, and so was what appeared to be every other boat on the west coast. Just prior to entering port the mainsheet captive clevis pin chose to do a disappearing act. I managed to tie the mainsheet off and upon arrival it was temporarily fixed it with a stainless steel bolt since I didn't have a clevis that size on board. The marina is new and had only been open ten weeks so I had to shower above a restaurant downtown. Mallaig is a true fishing port and they eat very well here. The mussels at the Clachain Inn were some of the best I've ever eaten and were presented on top of a fish stew. It was a feast for a tenner and I couldn't finish it. The owner must have appreciated my compliments for the new chef he'd imported from Edinburgh, later in the evening he bought us both a free round.

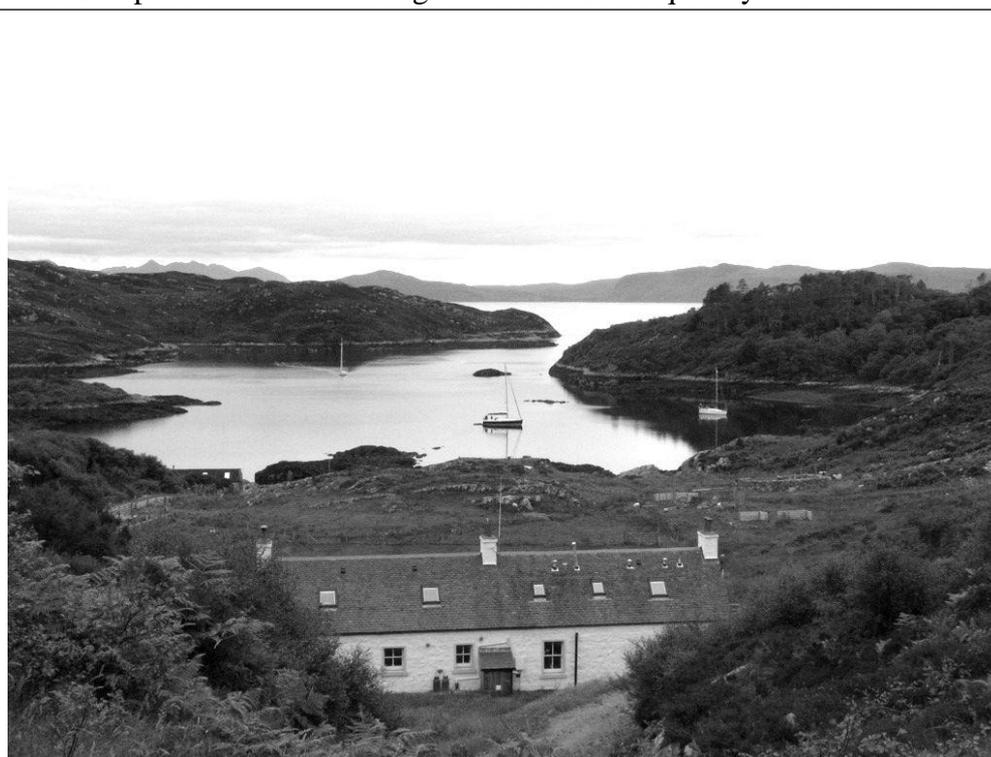
Monday, 23 July

**Mallaig to Plockton via Kyle Rhea.** 28.1 nm, 5.5 hours, departed 1330, W/SW 4-5. Prior to departure I had replaced the impellor on my 1GM and soon discovered the cover was leaking so I had to pump the bilges every half hour throughout the entire passage. Kyle Rhea is twice as long as the Cuan Sound and also has a fast running tide, sailing through the eddies and whirlpools

was great fun. After passing the Kyle of Lochalsh and going under the Skye Bridge I took a right and arrived in Plockton. I was surprised to see so many boats and it was impossible to identify the buoys or designated anchorages. I eventually found a suitable spot amongst the moorings to drop anchor. Soon thereafter while stowing the boat, John from local boat *Sleeping Eagle* shouted over and asked where I was sailing to. Although I didn't have a plan I replied Rona and he asked if he could sail in company with me since he was also single-handed.

Tuesday, 24 July

**Plockton to Arcarseid Mhor, Rona.** 23.1 nm, 4.5 hours, departed 0800, W/SW 4-5. Prior to departure I fabricated a gasket for the impellor cover out of a bit of rubber sheeting I had on board. I sailed in company with *Sleeping Eagle*, and upon passing the Crowlin Islands we were confronted by a security boat in the Sound of Raasay who felt it necessary to remind us we were travelling 5 miles south of a submarine exercise area... although clearly outside the area we didn't argue but headed west until we were .5 nm from the Raasay coast and then resumed our journey north. Just prior to entering Caol Rona the internal compass on the tiller pilot failed which placed it out of commission. This is a significant piece of equipment when you are single-handed. Consequently I was unable to



Arcarseid Mhor, Rona: 'More beautiful than I could ever imagine...top of my list'

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leave the tiller unassisted for more than 30 seconds for the remainder of my cruise. Coffee, lunch, foul weather gear, etc.... from now on everything I could possibly require throughout the day needed to be at arm's length and pre-staged. And every time the heads were used it was a gamble leaving the tiller unattended so I monitored my coffee intake very carefully. I do not use "the side" when single-handing, the only time my harness comes off is when I am down below or when the boat is stopped.

Anyways, I arrived in Rona safely and was rewarded with a spectacular anchorage... it was more beautiful than I could ever imagine and is at the top of my list of favourites. John and I walked ashore, enjoyed the views, and met the gamekeeper only to discover he was originally from Mauchline 5 miles from Troon. I had pre-dinner drinks on board Clyde boat *Ziggy Stardust* followed by dinner on board *Sleeping Eagle*. The 48 hour forecast continued to report that the winds were to become northerly, so my plan was to begin heading south tomorrow to be favourably situated for sailing outside the west coast of Mull when they did turn. Rona was my furthest destination, 305 miles from Troon.

#### Wednesday, 25 July

##### **Rona to Inverie, Loch Nevis via Kyle Rhea.**

49.1 nm, 10 hours, departed 0630, W/SW 3-4. Firstly, I called home to wish my wife a happy birthday and let her know where I had hidden her card and present. Heading south, I passed Portree to starboard and encountered a school of dolphins between Raasay and Scalpay. Thereafter I retraced my steps, passed beneath the Skye Bridge and transited Kyle Rhea before entering Loch Nevis. It was a very long day and throughout I experimented with tying the tiller off with a bit of rope, this allowed me to take my hand off the tiller albeit briefly but it still couldn't be left unattended. I stopped at the village of Inverie that evening which is located in the Knoydart region, although famous for being isolated from the mainland road network it was very popular. I used one of the Olde Forge's "free" moorings with the condition that I eat dinner there. I ate my £20 scallop dinner with Knoydart's longest resident (John x51 years), met the guy who dove for the scallops as well as the local ranger. My log book contains the note "use pier to right of Olde Forge" which resulted from me having to strip down to my

boxers to retrieve my dinghy when returning to the boat.

#### Thursday, 26 July

**Inverie to Eigg via Arisaig.** 29.2 nm, 7 hours, departed 0730, W/NW 3-4. On this passage I briefly stopped in Arisaig at the top of Loch nan Ceall so I could purchase diesel and stores. This loch is narrow with many turns so you motor through it but it is well marked with perches so it is easy to navigate. Upon arrival in Arisaig I found everything I needed was conveniently located but the concrete pier closest to the fuel pumps was very rough. Use plenty of fenders and be alert to chains hanging over the pier, a potential prop fouling disaster was narrowly avoided upon departure. Afterwards I crossed the Sound of Arisaig and anchored in Poll nam Partan bay on the Isle of Eigg. During the night the weather unexpectedly developed into a SW/W force 7 and I was very exposed to the swell. The following morning's forecast indicated the strong southerly winds would continue so at HW I relocated to a sheltered drying harbour north of the causeway. This was the first time drying *Escape* out and I discovered that it is a very noisy and prolonged process. Once dry I did a walk about, removed some minor weed from the prop shaft, and made a brief venture ashore. The island is privately owned by 40 residents, they generate their own electricity and one building contains restaurant, pub, P.O., shops, etc.

#### Saturday, 28 July

**Eigg to Coll.** 23.8 nm, 4.75 hours, departed 0400. W/NW 3-4. Departed early to avoid drying out again. While raising the sails I discovered the roller furling reefing line had become snarled during the previous day's storm and in my haste to depart before daybreak it wasn't discovered in the dark. It was an easy fix but would have to wait until arrival since heavy swell precluded a trip to the foredeck with the tiller tied off. Proceeding under mainsail alone I anchored in Arinagour Harbour on the Island of Coll several hours later between the stone beacon and pier. Prior to entering the harbour and to my amazement I saw seven basking sharks feeding which made me wonder whether they are as rare as we are led to believe. Upon arrival I had the furling gear fixed in minutes. It turned out to be a beautiful sunny day and every person on the island appeared to be in a cheerful

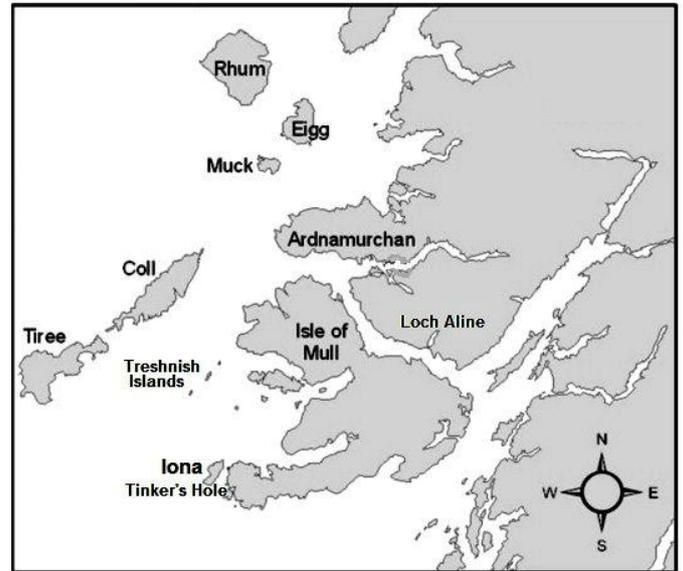
and friendly mood. The Coll Hotel did my laundry for £10 and I was invited to an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday house party which I had to decline due to an early departure the following morning to catch a favourable tide.

### Sunday, 29 July

**Coll to Tinker's Hole via the Treshnish Isles, Staff & Sound of Iona.** 27.1 nm, 4.25 hours, departed 0250, W/NW force 4-5. This passage was the most memorable sail of the cruise with plenty of adrenalin pumping because there was zero room for navigational error. I sailed on a beam reach the entire morning with a strong tide behind me, entering the the Treshnish Isles between Lunga and Fladda in the dark. It was an absolutely thrilling and a bit of a crazy thing to do... it was also the only time on the cruise I wished someone was there to share the experience and pump their fist in the air with me. I then continued on to the Sound of Iona, swinging by Staffa an hour south to take some pictures of Fingal's Cave. Sailing through the Sound of Iona was surprisingly enjoyable because it was full of rocks and has some seriously shallow bits in the middle opposite the cathedral to keep you honest. Nevertheless, the favourable winds and deep water close to shore allowed me to easily tack between them and sail the entire length. I turned the corner and arrived in Tinker's Hole under sail, to discover Troon boat *Cracker* was the only boat at anchor. Since it was 0700 in the morning and I was hungry I reached for the fog horn to announce my arrival and get Brian and Gillian to put the kettle on. After their departure the anchorage became very busy. I had an after dinner drink on board Dunstaffnage homeported *Tangon* with Paul and Linda from Edinburgh. This anchorage is very scenic and therefore popular. However, the through traffic on a sunny Sunday afternoon was excessive so the next time I'm in the area I'll anchor in David Balfour's Bay which is located around the corner.

### Monday, 30 July

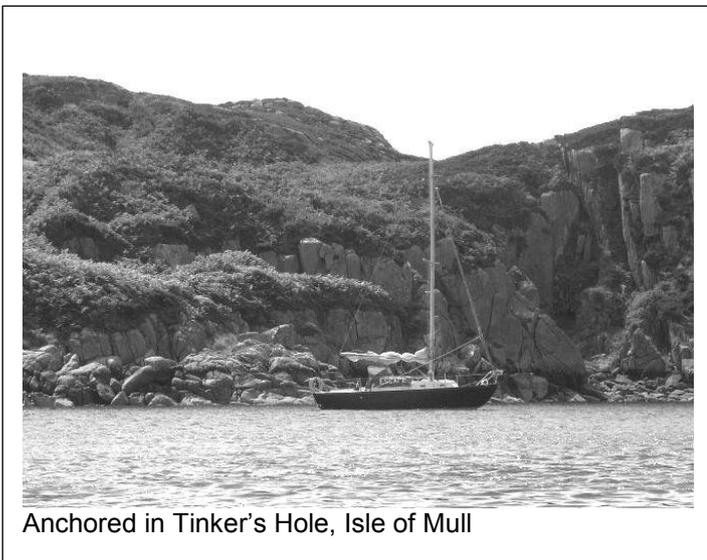
**Tinker's Hole to Loch Tarbert, Jura via Colonsay.** 36.9 nm, 12 hours, departed 0600, W force 4-5. Arrived at Scalasaig Harbour in Colonsay at LW to pick up stores. I briefly tied up to the concrete pier south of the ferry terminal which is only possible if you are a bilge keeler since the water was 1.5 metres at best. En route the small shop I inspected the drying harbour for



possible future use, good thing I did since it would be a very poor choice in a storm. Underway again, I headed east to Jura and entered Loch Tarbert, anchoring off the bothy at noon time to await HW so I could continue exploring the loch beyond Cumhann Beag. Loch Tarbert is spectacular and feels very remote with raised beaches at the entrance. The water is dark and peaty looking just like their whisky, water visibility is less than 2 metres. During the waiting period I rowed ashore to visit the bothy and sign the guest book before taking a nap. While weighing anchor, a fitting on the windlass broke so it joined the growing out of commission list. Nevertheless I continued my journey to the "Top Pool", also known as "The Hole". I used the engine alone since the piloting is very restricted and there are no charts for this part of the loch, instead you line up painted marks on the hill side, go very slow and keep your fingers crossed. Upon arrival at the Top Pool my engine overheated so I dropped anchor to investigate but could not find the fault. However, upon restarting the engine it began cooling again so I raced to get below Cumhann Beag since it was very exposed to increasing westerlies and the tide was beginning to fall. Once south of Cumhann Beag I found a place to anchor and celebrated with the steak I had purchased earlier in Colonsay.

### Tuesday, 31 July

**Loch Tarbert to Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland via Sound of Islay.** 52.4 nm, 13 hours, departed 0230, W/SW force 4-5. I departed early intending to catch a double tide, round the Mull of Kintyre and anchor at Sanda Island. The Sound of Islay has a 5 knot tide with huge eddies



Anchored in Tinker's Hole, Isle of Mull

and whirlpools. Everything was going great until I was 15 nm north of the Mull... the engine overheated again. I hove-to for further investigation and still couldn't discover the cause so I decided to continue under sail alone. This decision was very brief since I was making very slow progress and I had no chance of making the tidal window. I then decided to give the Mull a wide berth and sail to my new destination, Rathlin Island. Three hours later, at 1330 the Coastguard put out a flash weather report stating a strong wind warning was now in force, the wind was shifting to the east and a force 7 storm was imminent. The forecast was very accurate and I was located five nautical miles north of the East Lighthouse on Rathlin Island. Soon I found myself unable to make any progress to windward and unable to clear the east coast of Rathlin Island against the strong easterly wind and tide. I briefly thought about turning around and heading to Port Ellen on Islay but I was growing tired and knew that it would be high risk to try and do so with the current forecast. My next decision was to try and approach the island from the west and I contacted Belfast Coastguard to notify them that I didn't have an engine and would require assistance in entering Church Bay against the prevailing wind and tide. Once assured that they were en route I closed the island and headed west which was downwind. I had no problem heading in this direction... 9 knots under sail alone, the overfalls were gigantic and the sailing conditions were absolutely crazy. *RNLI Red Bay* arrived shortly thereafter to spoil my fun but I did manage to convince them to allow me to sail for a few more miles since I was making such good progress but just north of the West

Lighthouse they attached the tow rope and I was forced to drop the sails. Upon arrival in port the engine was stripped down with a vengeance, the thermostat was removed and all inlet hoses were cleaned of heavy salt deposits. It resumed cooling again and I could think of nothing else that I could do to fix it. That evening I ate a fish supper in a garden shed with a family on holiday from Denmark, one of the women was celebrating her birthday. The storm was now in full force and would remain so throughout the following day, the garden shed leaked like a sieve.

*Thursday, 2 August*

**Rathlin Island to Troon via the Mull of Kintyre.** 57.4 nm, 10.5 hours, departed 0540, N/NE 3-4. Departed early to catch slack tide at Rathlin and a fair tide around the Mull of Kintyre. The Rathlin overfalls and whirlpools remained formidable until I was well clear of the Northern Ireland coast. I motor-sailed all the way home primarily because I was afraid to turn the engine off. However, I would have needed to do so anyways since .5 nm from the Mull coast it became flat calm, and upon passing Sanda Island to starboard the wind died completely... the dog had lost its bite and my voyage was approaching the end. At 1620 I arrived back in Troon unannounced and was very surprised to see a couple of the older members waiting to catch the lines.

This year I discovered the joy of single-handed sailing primarily because I wanted to go sailing and did not have crew standing on the pier when I snapped my fingers. Making the decision to sail solo was liberating but for me it has become addictive because of the mental and physical challenges it contains; reaching the finish line is not optional. A review of my logbook indicates that I spent 45 days at sea and accumulated 1,092 miles this season, with crew onboard for just 112 of them. My 623 mile west coast cruise was the centerpiece and throughout the three week trip I was presented with one challenge after another; learning to deal with them and persevere is what turned it into a real adventure. This season it sometimes felt like I was never home but as someone reminded me... it does take a long time to go places at 5 mph. Anyways, I am hoping that by sharing my story it will encourage others to sail a bit more next year. I know there is a lot of water out there but perhaps our paths will cross.

RC