

TO THE END OF THE WORLD

Cycling to the fringes of human settlement

by Philip Arnold

Outside the Glasgow Airport in southern Scotland I quickly assemble my cycle — first the front tire and pedals, then my panniers, bivy, and sleeping bag. It is colder than I expected. The thick gray clouds appear on the brink of a late spring rain that will swirl in the increasing winds. It is early in the morning. I'm tired, apprehensive, and several hundred miles from the end of the world, my destination. I pull my bike under me

and begin pedaling in the only direction that matters, north.

Almost 2,500 years ago, a Greek mariner named Pytheas sailed out of the Mediterranean, took a sharp right, and journeyed into what was then simply known as the Outer Ocean. He followed rumors north to a mysterious island called Ultima Thule. Skirting Arctic waters, Pytheas not only discovered Ultima Thule but encountered an impassable ocean where the land and sky and sea congealed into "something like the element that held the universe together." In a region uncharted and unmapped, Pytheas claimed to have reached the end of the world.

Like Pytheas, I wished to have the world at my back, if only for a moment. My plan would be to find Ultima Thule and to look out on what was once the world's last horizon. Because a quest is as much about the road as what you find at the end of it, I decided to dust off my Giant Sedona ATX and screw on a pannier rack.

My first day of cycling on the Scottish mainland takes me to the bonnie banks of Loch Lomond, where a beautiful stretch of scree-sloped ridges towers over a deep and tranquil body of azure water. I stop at the Drover's Inn and, without blinking an eye, order a meat pie and a pint of stout, opting for substance over style.

Few believed Pytheas's claim to have sailed to the end of the world. The idea of Ultima Thule simply didn't fit into the worldview of the cartographers of antiq-



uity. But the legend of Ultima Thule did catch on and eventually came to symbolize the land at the farthest boundary of the world. Ptolemaic maps from around this time also show Ultima Thule in a geographical position above Scotland with no lands further north.

My ride from Crianlarich to Fort William brings me through sweeping moors and glens. I stop for a brief moment at the pass of Glen Coe, and take in the surreal grandeur of the towering peaks, alpine corries, and deep ravines. If not for the soreness in my legs, this would be a moment of physical transcendence. I leave Fort William and head for Inverness along the Caledonian Canal. When not overwhelmed by the sublime beauty of the Scottish Highlands, I'm overcome by

the headwinds that funnel through the narrow passes of the deep-cut valleys. To give a life to this unrelenting adversary, I bear down on my pedals as if propelling my bike straight for the heart of the dragon whose breath blows down from the hinterlands of the north like a gauntlet. Glycogen can only get you so far up the road. I didn't need better carbs, I needed better metaphors.

At Thurso, a small port town that lies along the northern rim of the Scottish mainland, I take the first ferry available and sail across the Pentland Firth to the Orkney Islands. The Orkneys are for me a stepping stone on my journey north, but because the next boat will not leave for the Shetlands for several days, I decide to explore what scenery the outlying islands have to offer. When the ferry finally leaves the Orkney mainland for the Shetland Islands, I'm sad to leave behind this silent borderland to the North. To actually experience the Orcadian landscape viscerally, with its contours of hilly moorlands and valleys, I had to cover it on my bike, pedaling out each long and lonely mile.

By the time I reach Lerwick on the Shetland's Mainland island, along the same latitude as St. Petersburg, Russia, I'm ready to ride. The Vikings divided the clock into ax-time, wolf-time, sword-time, and so on. I steel my resolve and point my bike in the direction of the world's end. It's dragon-killing time, I tell myself, at least until I begin pedaling. Every mile is a struggle

into a Hyperborean headwind that leaves me whimpering like a baby. In this treeless, wind-scarred landscape, I think of the poet William Blake who said, "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough." The winds I had cycled through in the Highlands were cake. These North Sea winds are the kind that make you want your mommy.

From the northern tip of Yell, I can see Unst off in the distance. By the time I unstraddle my cycle in the tiny village of Uyeasound, I've covered 50 miles, no great distance but the hardest traveling of the trip. Exhausted, I pitch my bivy and fall asleep under a summer twilight that never darkens through the night. With Viking pragmatism, I unpack my bike down to one water bottle the next morning, and with only 12 miles of road between me and the end of the world, I muster every synapse in my body to fire.

Where the road finally ends the island continues on. I lay my bike down in the grassy moorland and start walking. After a mile of avoiding dive-bombing Skuas, I see blue water on the horizon ahead.

The tip of the Isle of Unst is shaped like the gaping jowls of a dragon, its mouth formed by the fjord of Burrafirth. I stare out into the expanse of the North Sea. Here be dragons, the old maps proclaimed. Terra Finis, the end of the world.

The uncanny isolation of the place has a strange calming effect. The world behind me feels far away, as far as it has ever been. I should be ecstatic, I think. I should be high-fiving the puffins that fly by. Instead I stare off beyond the cliffs and watch as the sun ignites the waves into a thousand filaments, illuminating this moment where the past truly lies behind me, where no future lies ahead, and the present simply is.

After what seems like hours, I step back from the cliffs and turn. I begin the journey back to my bike, back to Glasgow, back to my friends in the States, and then it hits me. My eyes swell with tears. My quest is over. At the moment I turned, the end of the world was no longer ahead of me but became more of a memory with each step away from the cliffs. The notion of standing at the end

of the world had inspired me to cycle over every hill, through every nasty headwind and midday shower. I had convinced myself it was worth it, that great depths are necessary for great heights. And now the dragon, which I had resolved to challenge every inch of the way north, no longer fought back.

Along the way it happens: the road becomes a path into an interior region where what we seek is what we become. In the old days, when someone claimed to have discovered Ultima Thule, it would appear on the next map farther north on the horizon. What mattered wasn't geography but the notion that our desires are meant to be elusive, that every destination begins where one ends. When I finally see my bike up ahead, I realize that Ultima Thule is still out there — in every direction — waiting. I climb on my bike, clear the odometer, and begin pedaling. **AC**

Philip Arnold is from Boone, North Carolina, where he enjoys cycling the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. His writing and photography have appeared in The Iowa Review, North Dakota Quarterly, Rattle, Sou'wester, Birmingham Arts Journal, and Cerise Press.

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