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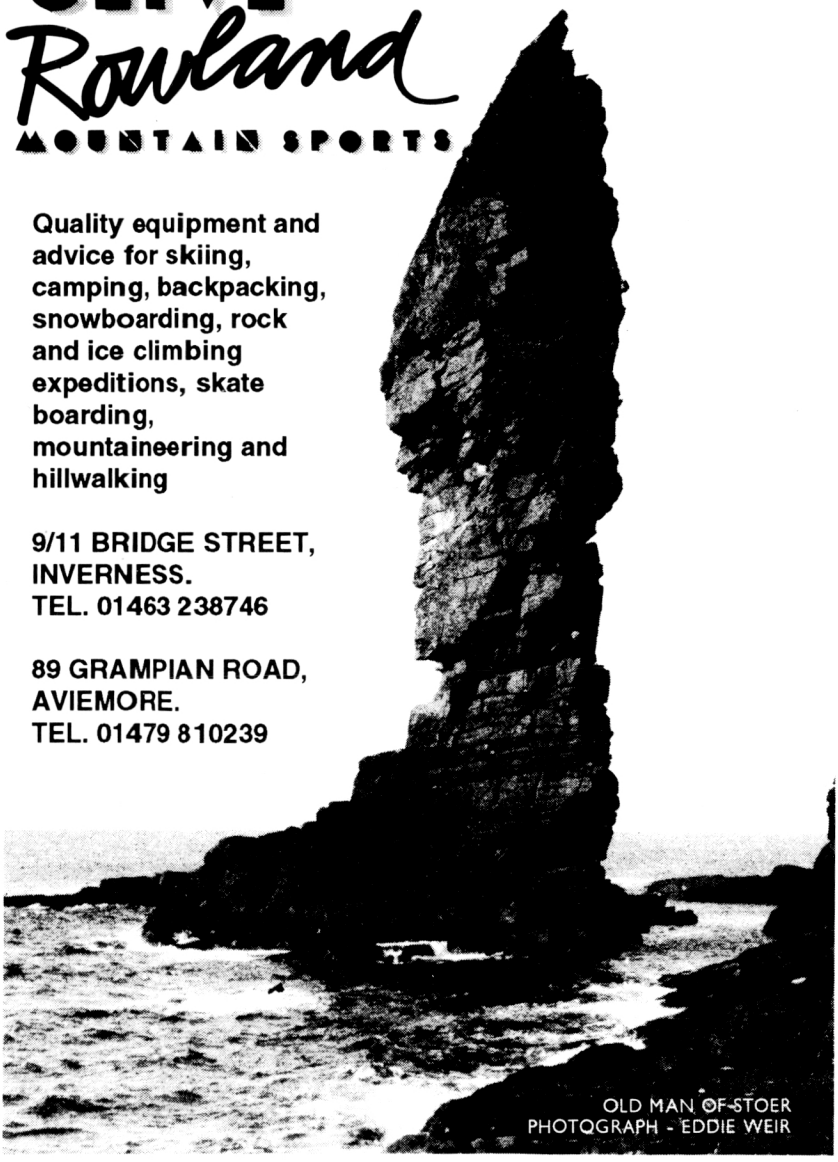

OLD MAN OF STOER
PHOTOGRAPH - EDDIE WEIR



All aboard the S.Y. Erne during the SMC Yacht Meet – Easter 1887.

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HOOKS, TORQUES AND CHICKEN HEADS

A Collection of Winter Climbs

Scottish winter climbing is increasing in popularity every year, and has never had so many devotees. Despite the wide interest, the precise nature of the sport is often misunderstood. Over the last 20 years or so, techniques have evolved, attitudes have changed, and the definition of what makes a good winter route has been transformed. Climbers are fitter and stronger than before, and the emphasis has moved away from ice to more technically demanding mixed routes. The following tales of derring-do, by some of those at the forefront of the sport, capture the flavour of today's top-level winter climbs.

The collection starts with Andy Nisbet's inspiring account of The Rat-Trap (VIII,8) on Creag an Dubh Loch. Ten years on, perhaps no other winter route has equalled this for commitment and sustained difficulty. Compare this with Robin McAllister's description of the first winter ascent of Direct Direct (VII,9) on The Cobbler. Here it is the pure technical difficulty of the climbing which shines through, especially when you consider that it took all day to climb the 35m-long route.

Winter climbing is more than about just physical skill however, and Rab Anderson describes the mental resources required to climb the crux of Raven's Edge (VIII,7) on the Buachaille. In a similar vein, Chris Cartwright recounts Dave Hesleden's inspirational lead of the thinly-iced Foobarbundee (VIII,7) on Liathach, a route that is generally recognised to be one of the most serious ice routes in the country.

In an age of pushing limits, repeats are important too, and Dave McGimpsey takes us up the second ascent of Inclination (VIII,8) on Stob Coire nan Lochan in Glen Coe. For some climbers though, the key challenge is to venture onto terrain which would be unthinkable in summer. Roger Everett gives us a perfect example as he describes the first ascent of The Screaming (VIII,8), a wickedly steep and futuristic line on Beinn an Dothaidh.

The collection finishes with an account of Cornucopia (VII,9), a difficult mixed climb on Ben Nevis. These routes are at the vanguard of today's developments, but given the pace of today's winter scene, they will almost certainly be eclipsed soon. The next few years are likely to be very exciting indeed!

Simon Richardson.

THE RAT-TRAP

By Andy Nisbet

IN THE early Eighties, I thought that Creag an Dubh Loch was the place for the future. In summer, the big open faces with their raking cracklines offer routes of the highest technical difficulty for pitch after pitch. Surely, this is where Scottish winter climbing would go? I was wrong. The cliff has only seen limited activity over the past 10 years. Why? Is it perhaps the epics that have accompanied most of the big Dubh Loch winter routes? Labyrinth Direct and its non-existent belay below the crux, and Norman Keir and Dave Wright's enforced bivvy on White Elephant have passed into Cairngorm climbing folklore. Other tales still remain to be told. How about Alfie Robertson fighting up the top pitch of Vertigo Wall with a failing torch at midnight on the second day, or the occasion when I contracted hypothermia after belaying Phil Thornhill for five hours in a blizzard halfway up Black Mamba?

So what is wrong with the place? There's too much ice maybe, but then only rarely. There's certainly too much temptation to wait for ice, and it's too far from the road to find out if there is any. If there's no ice, there could be snow on the faces instead, but then there could always be too much. And, of course, there is always work on Monday. Back then I didn't work, I climbed on the Dubh Loch instead. Now I work and don't climb big Dubh Loch routes, and life is a little less exciting as a result. Lochnagar is too short, Coire Mhic Fhearchair too well protected, and the Shelter Stone is too escapable.

That's the problem with the Dubh Loch, it's easy to get side-tracked into thinking about other places, so back to The Rat-Trap. It was 1986, and I had turned down the offer of a first season at Glenmore Lodge to leave the winter free for climbing. I knew I couldn't turn down a similar opportunity again, so I was focused on the Dubh Loch. Sandy Allan was focused too, but the season is short. The bivouacs are too long in January and from mid-February onwards, the Central Gully Wall is stripped by the sun. Suddenly, at the end of January, we had a good forecast for two calm and cold days. It was a bit early, but the full moon tempted us out. And not just us, for we met Dougie Dinwoodie at the Glas Allt bothy all set to do Mousetrap. It was a relief to know we weren't competing for the same climb. Mousetrap was the only winter route on the front face of Central Gully Wall, but it takes the obvious easy line (I was cocky in those days). We would start up Dubh Loch Monster and climb the non-obvious easy line on the face to the right. I'd climbed Dubh Loch Monster in summer, and knew that the crux roof low down on the route was split by a thin crack, so it had to be 'possible'. The rest was less immediate and would probably follow after a bivouac. So a hauling rope, stove, food, sleeping bags etc. were added to the normal climbing gear, and we set off at 5am to reach the crag at first light.

The first pitch proved to be a lot easier than expected, but the roof was a different story. Placing gear was incredibly strenuous, but after some

protracted climbing up and down I was eventually in a position to pull over the lip. My hammer pick then lost its top inch (the only time it's happened to me torquing), and my feeling of total confidence was reduced to one of imminent failure. I dangled beside the belay with exhausted arms and minus one tool for the long traverse above. Sandy comes to the fore in these situations: 'You take mine,' and the traverse 'inshallah.' With two tools the traverse was sustained but never desperate, and it was the same for the next pitch to below the Red Wall fault. Sandy seemed happy enough with one-and-a-half axes, but my memory of these pitches was aching arms from the roof. The sack-hauling was time consuming. The bag caught on every knobble, and it was now dark. I say dark, but the cliff faces the rising moon, so it was gloomy rather than pitch black. After the haul-sack took some monster swings on the traverse, it finally had enough and refused to come past an overlap. The decision was made for us – we wouldn't bivouac. It only took one second to let go of the rope. . .

The fault was tricky but had good ledges for rests. Now everything was veneered with thin ice – a bizarre transition between the powdered slabs below and the huge sheet of ice covering the top 120m of the cliff. My energy had dwindled by the time I reached the crackline above. I was close to being hypoglycaemic (maybe one bar of chocolate in 14 hours wasn't enough), and had reached a transitional state when the hours drift by. Retreat was not an option, but upward progress also seemed unlikely. The zombie would find a peg placement, aid up, stand on it, make another move into thicker ice, find a worse peg etc. I continued up towards a roof dominating the gloom above, without the energy to consider how to get past it. After three pegs for aid, I reached the overhang and pulled over onto thick ice. A quick couple of steps led to the icefield and it was all over. Sandy was still awake, and had never encouraged me to come down. He knew I was beyond resisting. Sandy seconded as quickly as ever while the moon slunk behind the hillside. This was well timed since our head torches were in the haul sack. The way above was summer 4c and 5a slabs, but submerged under snow-ice they were a doddle. We emerged on the top at 3am with a mixture of relief and pleasure. Dougie had finished somewhere around midnight. We collected an undamaged sack from the cliff base, and by the time we reached the bothy it was daylight. We had been lucky – the next day it thawed.

DIRECT DIRECT

By Robin McAllister

THE VIEW from the col between The Cobbler's North and Centre Peaks is non existent. There is just an eerie silence, occasionally punctuated by the croaking of a raven. As Dave McGimpsey and I had hoped, the South Face of the North Peak is in full winter garb. The recent cloudy weather has allowed a heavy build-up of rime, and everything is coated in a thick covering of hoar frost.

The previous week, we'd had an extended bouldering session on the initial overhanging crack of Direct Direct. The first sequence had been worked out. It is now time to put theory into practice.

I start up the crack. Steep torquing with front points teetering on tiny footholds, enable a good hook to be reached. Locking off on my hammer, I place a nut at full stretch, reverse the top moves and jump off. Breathing heavily, I notice that I've bent a pick.

Belayed now, I move up again to the hook, and clip the nut. I rock up on my left foot to get a higher torque for the axe, reach through awkwardly, and place a good wire. Instead of pulling up the free rope, I stupidly take the one with the first runner. The torque pulls, and before I know it, I'm lying on the ground, sprawled out in the soft snow.

A cigarette is called for. After a wee break, I climb back up and clip the runner. A high torque allows me to step up and precariously lean my shoulder against the right edge of the groove. After much clearing a poor hook enables me to get my left knee, then my right foot, into the base of the groove. At last I can get some gear and a breather. The groove is good and turfy in places, and yields to bridging and a lot of clearing. A bold step left at the top of the groove, followed by an awkward mantel and I'm at the belay. Dave follows and we sit on the stance. The next pitch looks hard.

The crack above is guarded by an overhang. Hand jamming seems the only way. I work my feet up high, praying the jam doesn't pop or I'll go flying off backwards into space. I find a rest of sorts above the roof with my feet on the slab and shoulders pressed onto the right wall. My back is in agony, so I can't stop there for long. I shove a Friend into the crack and carry on. The wall on the left looks possible, but thin. As I move up and left, I wake up to the fact that there's no gear and retreat is now impossible.

I consider jumping off, but then I find the key. A tiny foothold allows me to reach the upper crack and the security of good foot and hand jams. There's still no gear, but after the next move a ledge materialises on the left. I grab a block and collapse onto the ledge. I'm in luck, for there's a good nut placement here as well. A couple more moves and I gratefully mantel over the top.

It's dark now, and Dave follows by headtorch. I stare into the night. It's going to be very late by the time we get home, but it hardly matters. I'm too happy and tired to care.

RAVEN'S EDGE

By Rab Anderson

THE FLOG up to the foot of Raven's Gully had been quite unpleasant. In fact, it had been really unpleasant, with the snow alternating between unstable hard crust on a soft base, and a soft crust on a hard base. Still, once firmly secured to the foot of Slime Wall it was time to relax while Rob got to grips

Rob Milne on 'Raven's Edge' VIII,7, Buachaille Etive Mor during the first complete winter ascent. Photo: Rab Anderson.





with the initial groove just right of the crest. Rob had tried the route the week before with Robin McAllister and Dave McGimpsey. Their attempt failed at the foot of the big 'open book corner' which soars above Raven's Gully.

Information gleaned from Rob led me to believe that the first pitch was okay, and that the next was a traverse which was 'quite hard'. My game plan had been to get Rob to lead the first two pitches since he had seconded them before, then I would take over for the main challenge of the 'open book corner'. This was soon abandoned at the foot of the route when Rob said that he could lead the first pitch, but that he didn't think he could do the 'quite hard' traverse. Shit, it must be 'quite hard'.

Rob belays some 60m up on stretch and it's time to find out. Some 10m above Raven's I wobble around the edge and see how horrendous a 'quite hard' traverse looks. Seeking information, I ask Rob what gear Robin had got the week before. 'Oh, a tied-off peg in the middle.' 'Quite hard' now sounds quite hard and quite serious. Calves straining I teeter in the middle on balance only. A peg goes in, then another, both tied off. Quite crap.

Nothing else materialises and soon my arms ache as much as my calves did 15 minutes ago. Time passes as do a few tentative attempts. The wall leans beneath an evil ramp forcing me onto my arms and onto the non-existent footholds below. Mind you, a small sod of turf leers at me from beneath the snow near the end of the traverse. Something to go for. I scuttle back to the middle and ask for more information. 'Did Robin get any more gear?'

'No' comes back the reply. 'He just went for it, I think he was quite gripped.' Shit, that's all I need to know. I'm too old to be that bold so I dither again. All I get for wasting more time and strength is a sling over a small notch on the ramp. Whether it's ice or friction holding it on I'm not quite sure, but it looks nice just sat there, so I leave it. Whether Rob has been trying not to psyche me out by keeping the full story from me, I don't quite know. From the titbits I have gleaned I am now quite psyched out, and this is more 'quite hard' than I thought it would be.

I go for it. Arms screaming, I reach up and fire a tool into the mouth of that leering sod of turf, and lock-off on one arm. I momentarily feel fine, and wonder why didn't I just go for it earlier when I was fresh? I try my next tool and it simply rips bits of turf out and bounces off rock. Well-aimed placements are replaced by a wild thrashing action, then the lactic burn of a fast-approaching pump. No way back, one armed pull, lock-off, high heel-hook, try not to kick the sling off, flag the left foot, roll over onto the front points of the right, then the knee, face pressed against snow, try to stand. Just as I think 'I'm there', I suddenly catapult off backwards. 'Mmmh, so that's what Raven's Gully looks like as you drop head first towards it.' A stomach wrenching jerk accompanied by much clattering of gear and I stop with my head a few feet above the gully. I wonder why my right arm feels so heavy, and just as I am turned upright I see the sod of turf

Wilson Moir on the first ascent of 'The Extremist' E5 6b, Black Spout Pinnacle, Lochnagar. Photo: Paul Allen

detach itself from my axe and disappear down Raven's, laughing at me. 'Am I hurt? . . . don't think so . . . good. How far? . . . 20ft perhaps . . . not far. What stopped me? . . . the useless sling on the notch . . . amazing!'

Praying that the gear continues to hold, I haul on one rope while Rob takes in on the other and I scrabble back to the start of the traverse, let the heartbeat and breathing return from 200 rpm, then teeter out into the middle again. I'm not psyched any more, just psycho. I launch out onto the ramp and manage to hang there on one arm to chop out some crap and arrange a sling, hung off something which seems okay. At my high point, where there was some turf, there is now none and I have to continue left for another few moves. Arms burning, sweat running into my eyes, I bridge a corner at the end, haul up on poor placements and get myself together before making the final few moves to the belay. Quite hard indeed.

Others might find the traverse quite hard, or it might be quite easy but it is dependant on a number of factors. They might say that the 'open book corner' above is quite hard, but it could be quite straight-forward, since you are warmed into it by then. The final pitch could quite well be the crux, but it might quite not be. What is a fact by then, is that you are quite tired and quite committed. It's a lot more cut and dried at the top of the route. Failure is not an option, you quite simply switch the brain off and go for it.

I've given quite enough away now, so no more, and you can figure it out for yourself. I'm sure that you too will have been in a situation quite like it yourself at sometime. That's climbing, quite different. Raven's Edge might not be quite Grade VIII but it could quite well be. Who quite cares anyway, it's quite hard and it's definitely quite good.

FOOBARBUNDEE

By Chris Cartwright

AN OVERWHELMING sense of foreboding lent a leaden aspect to the rhythm of my walk. The ghostly stillness of the early morning, while breaking trail into Coireag Dubh Mor on Liathach, only served to enhance my mood. On my first visit to the cliff seven years before, I was swept away by a thin layer of windslab from just below the foot of the cliff. On another occasion I suffered a broken bone from a lump of falling ice. I had now climbed many of the routes in the coire, but like several other climbers, I had become fascinated by the unclimbed thin sliver of ice that sometimes trickles down the hanging slab to the right of Poacher's Fall. I was now heading into the coire with a partner who had never been there before, and was not carrying the same emotional baggage as myself. Added to that Dave Hesleden was strong and fit, and keen to add another route to our free ascent of Great Overhanging Gully on Beinn Bhan the previous day.

Voices drifted up from below, and Dave broke into my reverie to impel a sense of urgency. As we gained height the mist slowly lessened allowing

Dave his first view of the route. With typical confidence he assured me that there was enough ice and névé on the slab to make it feasible, and quickly set off up the initial series of icy grooves. A short traverse right gained a recessed belay, of the slightly dubious variety, under a large left-facing corner. As I took the gear from Dave I couldn't help repeatedly glancing over to the slab. Although the ice build-up appeared to increase with height, it was impossible to ignore the transparent nature of the first 10m. A tied-off knife blade at thigh level provided some respite, but as I stepped onto the slab I was immediately aware that any untoward movement would deposit me below the peg. A small vertical overlap on the right looked hopeful, but cautious investigation revealed this to be blind. I stepped down and pondered the likelihood of sticking to the slab long enough to reach the thicker ice above. Dave's obvious impatience, generated by the level of self-belief that us mere mortals probably should not even aspire to, crystallised my decision to retreat. I climbed back down and we changed over the belay.

Dave quickly established himself on the slab, and soon came to the same conclusion as myself – it was unclimbable. I had already started to ponder the best abseil point, when Dave suggested another option. While I had been grappling with the slab he had been examining the left-facing corner above our heads. He believed that he could climb the corner to a point level with the better ice, and then step across the intervening rock wall to reach the slab. With a scrabbling surge he got himself established in the corner, and quickly climbed to a potential traverse point. The opening of the crack in the back of the corner allowed a good Hex placement and a more leisurely examination of the traverse. In contrast to the power climbing of the corner, Dave gingerly stepped out left, front points skating off downward sloping edges, until a reach to the left allowed a shallow placement in the iced slab.

It was obvious that the next move, transferring body weight from rock to ice, was going to be the crunch. Gently, Dave placed his left points in the ice, and started to pull through to allow his right tool to be brought into play. With a sudden roar he was off. He swung wildly, all arms and legs, across the intervening rock wall before slamming into the corner. With an adrenaline-fed rush he was quickly established in the corner again, confident both in his gear and in his ability to make the move onto the slab. The delicate step left was controlled and positive this time, but the left tool placement was barely in the ice before he was off again. A rational assessment of the problem concluded that the ice on the slab was just not strong enough to allow the transfer of his body weight. The third attempt was successful, with a little tension from the rope just at the point where Dave brought his right tool and foot onto the slab.

Now all that was required was for Dave to negotiate about 20m of dubious thin ice up the uniformly steep slab to reach a hoped-for belay point beneath an obvious overhang. Without any possibility of gear at all,

he tentatively set off. I was scared for Dave, feeling helpless, knowing that he was now totally committed. I watched each move with bated breath, trying to gauge where he would stop if he fell. Was the belay good enough? Could I do anything about it? I concentrated totally on my leader, willing his placements to stay in, and praying that he could hold it all together to reach safety. Up above, Dave was in a world of his own, focused only on his tools and points, and not uttering a sound. Imperceptibly, he gained height through tiny steps, no more than six inches at a time. The ice was so thin that he had to search carefully for the each placement, and gently hook his picks as opposed to swinging them in. Time appeared to stand still until Dave eventually reached the overhang. After some silent work, I eventually received a slightly tremulous 'Safe'.

What more is there to say? Some smart rope work allowed me to use the Hex in the corner for tension to get established on the slab, and then pull it out from above. A strange calm overcame me climbing the slab. It was as though there was a transfer of thought directly to my tools, assessing the relative merits of each placement and then encouraging them to stay in as I made each move. The process was nearly mathematical in its exactitude. The calm was wiped away on reaching Dave when an uncontrolled adrenaline rush took control of our systems. The rest of the route passed in a blur, with steep, but solid ice, leading us ever higher. The echoing voices from earlier in the morning turned out to be acquaintances, and insults were exchanged. Control was re-asserted as we trended right to stay on a broken buttress to avoid the upper avalanche prone slopes before topping out on the final ridge leading to Spidean a' Choire Leith.

Walking back down the Allt a' Choire Dhuibh Mhor we pondered the consequences of a fall high on the slab. All in all, I estimated a fall of 50m. And in case you're wondering about the name – you'll have to figure that one out for yourself!

INCLINATION

By Dave McGimpsey

LAST SEASON was an awkward one. Good conditions rarely coincided with days off work, and flu bugs and lack of driving licences for one reason or another, were not conducive to getting a lot done. So, when Robin McAllister and I walked up into Stob Coire nan Lochan and arrived at the base of Inclination at a rather late hour with only one headtorch, it appeared another wasted day was on the cards. Mindful that persistence often reaps rewards however, we quickly started up the route, which looked in very good condition.

The climb began with a steep ramp which was guarded by a short, bulging corner. Exiting this, I was unable to retrieve my hammer from a nasty crack, which refused to give up the pick it had just swallowed. At least

it offered some welcome protection, so I clipped it, and continued upwards with Robin's hammer instead. He soon joined me at the belay, and began gearing up for the crux. We were already in an impressive position, with the corner of Unicorn soaring upwards to our right, and very steep ground above and below. Standing tip-toe on a block, Robin launched onto the wall above. He hooked up a small corner, but soon returned, perplexed at not being able to find a way of reaching the thin turf ledge at the top. The next go revealed a hidden hook at the top of the corner under a thick covering of rime. I watched nervously as Robin gained the ledge – a fall from here would have hurt both of us.

It was now my turn. Although the hooks were good, the smooth andesite offered nothing in the way of footholds, so much pedalling was needed to gain the only foothold high on the left. The crucial hook turned out to be just a silly button of frozen moss wedged in the crack, and I fell off soon after, when my picks ripped out of the thin turf ledge above. Altogether, it was not an impressive performance!

The next pitch was described as the 'unlikely wall on the left'. It was my lead, but I concluded that it really did look unlikely, and offered Robin the pitch. Being an understanding fellow, he accepted, but soon regretted it when a wrong turn led to no protection and some very unenticing down-climbing. Watching Robin extending himself like this is always exciting, but also nerve-wracking. He slowly talked himself back down to safety, incoherently muttering, and was soon back on line. My chain-smoking subsided as Robin made a long series of wild moves, which hurt my neck to watch, and was up the pitch in double-quick time.

By the time I had seconded the pitch it was getting dark. We exchanged gear quickly in the gathering gloom and I climbed up into the series of chimneys that form the upper half of the route. These were easier than the climbing below, but still very steep in places. With only one headtorch, the climbing was time-consuming, and it was a relief when the route was finished. We staggered back down, and arrived at our friend's car the wrong side of midnight. Our late return had not gone unnoticed, for in our absence, the local constabulary had been chastising us as irresponsible idiots.

THE SCREAMING

By Roger Everett

THE NORTH-EAST Coire of Beinn an Dothaidh presents an escarpment of easily accessible schistose cliffs, riven by deep gullies and compelling crack systems. The steeper buttresses are an excellent place to learn the art of mixed turf climbing, and the cliff also has a number of high-quality gully lines. When I was first getting into this winter game, long ago, I climbed several of the gullies, and well remember the sight of the buttress bounding

the left edge of Cirrus. Its hanging walls were interspersed with small turf ledges, which drooped frozen vegetation and hanging icicles in a series of discontinuous lines. How exciting, I thought, would it be to try to link the howking placements in the turf and forge a route up such steep ground? But such ideas were purely theoretical for me, and I was very impressed when Graham Little started his development of the steeper lines and climbed Pas de Deux up the great barrel-fronted buttress just left of Cirrus.

Time passed and I became more competent and confident. Careful appraisal of the buttress revealed that the lower part, at least, was much less steep if viewed side on from higher in the coire. I was still under the impression that Pas de Deux took the upper, extremely steep section direct, until one day I summoned up the courage to follow its line. I found that it cunningly weaved from side to side to avoid the steeper sections, and then completely outflanked the final overhanging tier. But again my curiosity was raised, since was there not a crack system that went straight up that final leaning wall? On each subsequent visit that crack beckoned, only for my timidity to rule it out as too steep. Anyway, if it were possible, it was so obvious that surely someone would have done it by now?

As so often, the impetus was provided by Simon Richardson, who had also characteristically spotted the line. He too had ideas about a very direct alternative to the lower section, which took those walls that I had admired so long ago from the safe confines of Cirrus. With a settled forecast and a suitable history of weather and conditions, we found that our ideas for the day coincided exactly. We would give it a try.

Arriving at the gearing-up boulder under a blue sky, we gazed up at that final buttress to discover that, now the theory was ominously close to being tested, from all vantage points the wall really did overhang. Even worse, there was clearly a capping beak of overhangs. Such impressions are never very good for one's confidence (moral – never look up too closely!) so we meandered up towards the foot of the climb, zigzagging here and there, looking up, debating and all the time feeling that really, this is silly. But somehow the courage to call the whole thing off didn't materialise and we found ourselves gearing-up at the foot of Cirrus.

The close-up view of the lower section was intimidating, but not hopeless, and with the bravado that comes from knowing that it's not my lead, I arranged a belay while Simon scouted around. The first section was quite bold, on poor hooks and crumbling turf to scrabble into a small niche, from which a very exposed and narrow ramp led out to the hanging arete. Once there, Simon arranged bomb-proof gear and made a few steep pulls on spaced hooks to reach an easy turf line which led up to a fine ledge on the very edge of the buttress. With ever-increasing exposure, it was a great pitch to second. Getting into the swing of things, I took over the lead to tackle (perhaps unnecessarily) all the obstacles on the next pitch as directly as possible. A few steep walls led to the traverse line of Pas de Deux, then more short walls straight up opened the way to a fine open groove which

gave delightful climbing to a commodious ledge below that final hanging wall. First sights were very encouraging – there was indeed a crack, interrupted by small niches, and the whole pitch was draped with frosted turf and moss. Surely this would go at a reasonable standard?

Somehow it had been decided that this was my crack, so Simon anchored himself firmly to the huge boulder belay and wished me luck. Instantly, it became clear that I should have known better. With my first few attempted placements it was obvious that the wall really did overhang, and soon afterwards I learned that the turf was thin, mossy and full of air. But in a few minutes I had got into the first of the niches with the route ahead clear. After a good deal of effort – hanging out from a single tool on a weird undercut – I managed to arrange some protection and launched into battle. Two moves later I was thoroughly pumped, hanging from one poor tool trying to place a Friend in a choked crack. Perhaps I could (or should) have carried on, but no respite was in sight, and linking hard moves while doubtful protection recedes from view is not my *forte*. I clipped into the axe in the slowly disintegrating turf, and somehow it held. A period of recuperation followed, then I set off again, only for history to repeat itself a few moves higher. Even though I had been going very well (for me) on the climbing wall, such fitness just didn't translate to the extended one arm lock-offs required to both climb the route free and protect it. It would have been easier if the placements had been good, but the cracks weren't well suited for torques and the thin turf kept ripping. I just got used to the idea that I was continuously on the point of flying.

I began to think that I really should leave it for someone stronger, bolder and better, but encouraging noises were wafting up from below and I thought I could see some good turf within reasonable striking distance. I arrived at a wider bit of crack, where at least I could get partially wedged and arrange gear in conventional fashion, even if the piece in question was one of Simon's home-made specials, an approximate Hex 15. After a few steep moves I was right under the final roof and launching rightwards on hooks across the overhanging wall to the beckoning turf, but the pump in my arms had drained my brain of the ability to communicate with my feet. For a moment I thought I'd fall out of my wrist loops, but such ignominy was avoided when suddenly both tools ripped and I became, not before time, well and truly airborne.

This unplanned tactic at least gave me the opportunity for an extended rest. On the next attempt, armed with experience and a careful mental rehearsal of the exact sequence of moves, I got myself firmly fixed to the turf which had so spectacularly ejected me, arranged another runner, and then swung out above the void over an overhang and onto a short poised arete. Then it was just a question of avoiding my speciality of grabbing defeat from the arms of success.

So what of the route? It's an excellent direct line, with much fine climbing. Despite our flawed ascent, even allowing for the axe rests, the

grade must be in the higher numbers. While it may be argued that we should have left it for another day, or even not claimed the route, I'm happy to be honest and leave it as a marker for someone to better. I've no doubt that an on-sight free ascent is possible by the talented and strong, but perhaps it may become an example of, I suspect, an increasingly common form of winter climb – a target for a 'red point' ascent with sports climbing ethics.

CORNUCOPIA

By Simon Richardson

EARLY ONE Sunday morning last April, Chris Cartwright and I trailed up through the wind and rain to Ben Nevis. The prospect of a winter climb looked slim, but as we plodded through deep wet snow up into Coire na Ciste, the rain turned to sleet, and at the foot of The Comb it was snowing. At the base of No. 3 Gully it was freezing. We were in luck, for conditions were perfect for what we had in mind – an unclimbed clean-cut corner on the right flank of the gully. After a couple of entry pitches, Chris launched out on to a bold arête. A difficult step left led to a steep wall below the main corner. The climbing was steep and the best line was not obvious, so after an hour on the sharp end, Chris came down and offered me the lead. We pulled the ropes through and I set off.

Chris had set the groundwork. I now knew the correct sequence of moves to reach his highpoint. A good Rock gave me the confidence to lurch up the next few moves to a narrow ledge on the left of the corner. Appearances in winter are often deceptive, and the ledge turned out to be a smooth, sloping shelf coated with loose snow. Struggling to hold on, I torqued an axe in a crack and stepped left. Standing on one foot I wasn't in balance, but at least I was able to rest my left arm. After an age I gingerly placed a wire above my axe, and then hammered home a good angle.

I was now in a position to consider the corner proper, which reared up to my right. Undercut at its base, it had a vertical right wall and a slightly overhanging left face. It looked hard, but the first move over the initial overlap was obvious enough. I stepped right and jammed my right Koflach hard into the wide crack. There was a good ice placement for my hammer and I pulled up. The corner now soared above, with blank hoar-frosted walls to either side. The crack was parallel-sided and too wide to torque. To progress any farther, I needed a foothold, but there was nothing. For perhaps the first time when climbing a winter route I couldn't figure out how to climb it. Sure, I'd backed off many pitches in the past, but always I'd known it was possible for someone who was stronger or bolder than I. This corner looked impossible.

I hung there with my right foot jammed beneath me and the hammer in

Dave Hesleden on Foobarbundee, Liathach. Photo: Chris Cartwright.



the trickle of ice for what must have been nearly an hour. I cursed the rock. I cursed the corner. I cursed the mountain. Surely, there must be a way? In frustration I started to meticulously clear the left wall with my adze. Underneath the layer of frost all I found was smooth rock with no hint of a crack, edge or ripple. About 3m above me I could just make out a dimple under the hoar. If only I could get that high, perhaps I could bridge across to some small holds high up on the right wall?

I carried on scraping until at shoulder height I found a tiny chicken head. The knobble was perfectly formed, shallow and round, and about the size of my thumbnail. I brushed the hoar off with my glove and then used the heat of my bare hand to melt it free. It was slightly rough to the touch. Perhaps this was the key? I kept my glove off and held it between my thumb and forefinger. It wasn't big enough to pull up on, but by leaning away to the right on my pick I could move my foot farther up the crack below me. As I slowly inched up I found myself in a mantelshelf position with the chicken head pushing into the flesh on the outside of my left hand. I was about to fall, and needed something for my left foot, but the chicken head was too rounded and shallow to take a crampon point.

In desperation I had to think of something quick. I moved my left foot above the chicken head and gently placed the vertical outside edge of the crampon frame onto it. I held my breath as I transferred my weight onto my left foot. It held! Slowly, ever so slowly, I stretched my left leg and stood up. I had to get a runner in quick. I grabbed the first piece of gear that came to hand, and pushed it into the crack. Rarely have I been so lucky. The crack was parallel-sided and slightly icy. Too icy for a Friend and not flared enough for a nut, but it was the perfect size for a No. 8 Hexcentric. A millimetre too small it wouldn't have fitted, and a millimetre too large it wouldn't have cammed. I breathed again, and continued up, one point precision front-pointing on the ripples on either side of the wall. Another first-time Rock placement in an icy crack and I pulled over into an overhung shelf a few inches wide. A step right to a niche and the pitch was over.

By the time Chris came up it had taken five hours to climb the corner. It was to take us another four hours to battle up the flared cracks above, and then work out a way through the final steep wall to the top. As Chris fought his way up the off-width, I reflected on the pitch. It had been a personal revelation that it was possible to link a long series of unseen technical moves on a winter route. I knew it was unlikely that I would ever be able to repeat such a performance again, but for the new breed of winter climbers, fit from climbing walls and honed with finer technical skills, a vast world of possibilities awaits.

Roger Everett on The Screaming, Beinn and Dothaidh. Photo: Simon Richardson.

THE CENTENARY YACHT MEET OF THE SMC, 1897-1997

By the time the present issue of the Journal is published, the 1997 SMC Centenary Yacht Meet, planned for May, should also be history.

SAILING and Mountaineering were considered complementary activities by the Founding Fathers of the Early Club. In 1903 Raeburn wrote: 'To beat to windward against a strong wind and heavy sea, has something akin to the feeling of fighting one's way up the ice pitches in a snow gully, or difficult traverses on a steep rock face.' After a yachting race in the Firth of Forth he had rushed up to Ben Nevis and soloed Observatory Buttress. On the summit he met his friends, the Clarks and shared in their afternoon tea with bread, butter and jam. His account continues: 'The weather, that Coronation week, had been glorious. The air was dry and crisp, with a "life" in it that fairly lifted the climber out of himself, and made him feel, as he affectionately grasped the warm rocks of the old Ben, "Nothing is impossible to-day".'

A physical, aesthetic and intellectual polymath, Raeburn had what today we would call a 'holistic' approach. The rocks were part of a larger world. He describes the flora and fauna in detail; fox and vole tracks, croak of raven and song of snow bunting, the gleam of golden saxifrage, and the rose-pink cushions of moss campion all find a place in his world view. On the summit he concludes: 'Of the rest of that glorious evening, I shall not write. I for one shall never forget it.' This admirable holistic tradition continues today. The tigers and tigresses of the present Club, bolts and drills notwithstanding, are no doubt also sensitive to the total ambience of their surroundings.

But what of the 1897 Meet? A report of this Easter Meet, held in April 1897, appeared in the May 1897 issue of the Journal (SMCJ IX, 23, 288-293 and *ibid*, 299-302). The cruise began at Oban and ended at Rothesay. The weather was bad with wind and rain for the first part making the preferred anchorage at Loch Scavaig untenable but better for the second. Climbs were made from anchorages at Rum, Loch Hourn, Loch Nevis, Ballachulish and the Isle of Jura. There was good conversation and songs in the evening and music from the flute of the President (H. T. Munro, no less). There was a considerable amount of photography ('almost every member was an amateur photographer') and this included on-board development of film. In this issue you will find a Munro print of the assembled company on board the *S.S. Erne*. To celebrate the centenary of the Yacht Meet this year's Journal presents some of the mountaineering/sailing exploits of our present members and shows that the holistic approach is still healthily with us.

MOONLIGHTING

By John Peden

FOR SOME reason which escapes me, the vast majority of boat owners go into a frenzy as soon as the first birch leaves turn yellow. Cranes are hired and cossetted craft are removed from their natural element, to spend the winter huddled in some draughty boatyard or shored up uncomfortably in the front garden.

Their loss is immeasurable, for it is no less magical to ride the waves by winter moonlight than to crunch along a snowy mountain ridge; and no harder to weigh anchor on an unpromising January morning than to open the door of the CIC and head off up the Allt a' Mhuilinn. Moreover, a warm saloon is as good a place as any mountain hut to spend a long winter evening in convivial conversation over a glass or two of malt. Perhaps the compulsion to haul out in the autumn is due simply to collective memory of a time when wooden boats needed months of hard graft each winter to keep them serviceable. Technology has its benefits.

The weather at the tail end of 1995 was memorably cold, which suited our purpose well. We had taken the bunkhouse at Doune at the western tip of Knoydart for a week of family entertainment over New Year, and we had brought *Hecla,* our trusty 30ft sloop, to join in the fun.

The passage from Oban to Mallaig on the weekend before Christmas had itself been quite special. Accompanied by a former President of the Club, his French teacher and my wife's brother, I slipped our mooring in Saulmore Bay at 10 o'clock on the Friday evening and headed for the Sound of Mull. It mattered not that the moon had set with the sun. It was a night of startling clarity and the Earth was awash with starlight, punctuated by the silent slash of meteorites. In the north, far from any civilisation, there was a shimmering light which could only be the Aurora. While our ship bowled along before the south-easterly tradewinds, I lay on deck enchanted, watching the masthead brushing the diamond-dusted velvet of the sky. A simple flight of the imagination transported me south to coral seas and coconut trees.

Tobermory was weel-happit and sound asleep as we tip-toed in about half past two. We dropped anchor in Acairseid Mhor on Calve Island: much more snug than the bumpy visitor moorings.

Despite a predictably late start on Saturday we were round Ardnamurchan in good time to watch the sun setting extravagantly into the sea beyond Muck, and we used the last embers of its light to pick our way into the perfect natural harbour of Loch nan Ceall. A ceilidh in the Arisaig Hotel that evening was an unexpected bonus, enlivened by the spectacle of Iain Smart explaining to the local lass he was dancing with that he was indeed

the Flying Dutchman (an entirely plausible claim), and by Veronique winning a fresh lobster in the raffle. Sadly, the organisers had not anticipated visitors: the creature was still at home on Eigg, and no amount of VHF transmission next morning could raise its keeper.

After Christmas the main party assembled on the pier at Mallaig, complete with assorted small persons. The low afternoon sun could make no impression on the penetrating cold. It was as well the weather was fine, for *Hecla's* cabin was packed, quite literally, full with all the multifarious equipment, cases of whisky, musical instruments, food and so on that are essential for a good New Year bash. (Travellin' light? Ha!) The dozen or so crew clung on where they could and *Hecla* settled sluggishly by the stern as I opened the throttle. Sailing was a physical impossibility. The few citizens who had yet emerged from their Yuletide excesses raised a communal eyebrow as we sallied forth to cross the four miles of placid sea to Doune. Knoydart will rarely be seen so Arctic. Deep snow lay down to sea level and the views up Loch Nevis and out to the Small Isles were stunning. The next few days saw intense activity as all and sundry sought to capitalise on such beneficence before the spell broke and normality was restored on the weather front. In these conditions the lower hills at the western end of the peninsula provided excellent Nordic touring, and the slopes behind the bunkhouse were ideal sledging country for babies and small children (of all ages!)

On the eve of Hogmanay, as the first subtle hint of light suffused the eastern sky, four of our party rowed out to *Hecla* with rucksacks and skis balanced precariously over the black water. This uncharacteristically early start was essential if we were to achieve our aim: an ascent of Sgurr na Ciche. There was an over-arching imperative to be back for the start of the banquet at 8 o'clock.

An insidious easterly breeze spoke of the cold clear weather continuing. As we left the anchorage Bla Bheinn and the Cuillin Ridge glowed in the strengthening light, rising provocatively above the indistinct white shape of Sleat. In the half-light we resisted the temptation to take the short-cut through the reefs and islets off Sandaig and motored south awhile before turning east into the entrance to Loch Nevis. This fine fjord, second only to Loch Hourn in its grandeur, was enhanced this morning by the uncompromising whiteness rising from its dark waters, giving the scene a most un-Scottish feel.

Off Inverie, where the loch turns south, the wind freshened and we hoisted sail for an exhilarating fetch towards Tarbet. Before long, however, we were sailing close-hauled, and with pressure of time stifling purist thoughts of beating through the narrows into the inner loch, the engine was restarted. Approaching the narrows at Kylesmorar requires care, for a shallow spit extends a fair distance from the northern shore and we had no

Graham Little on the first ascent of 'Morning Glory' E1 5a, 5b, Sloc Chiasigeo, Mingulay. Photo: Cath Pyke.



wish to spend precious time waiting for the tide to lift us off. The flood tide runs strongly through the narrows. As it drew us in we could see disturbed water ahead where it met the waves driving down the inner loch, setting up a stretch of very steep seas. Romping through this at 10 knots over the ground was more akin to white water rafting than yachting.

The shapely cone of Sgurr na Ciche, glistening now in the sunshine, lured us on up to the head of the loch with all speed. We anchored where we ran out of water, a little way short of Camusrory, and sprachled ashore in the inflatable which was left tied to a tree, along with our wellies. Skiing from the high water mark was a novel experience, (very purist), and we quickly got into a rhythm gliding along the track. The barking of the dogs at Camusrory, outraged by this impertinence, brought forth the keeper who inquired our business. The explanation of our simple plan for the day produced an indignant, 'Ye're all aff yer f . . . . . heids! It'll still be there in the summer!' Somehow I felt he had missed the point.

Undeterred, we skated across the frozen Carnach River and skimmed over the peat hags and normally boggy flats to the foot of our mountain. Alas we were quickly to discover that an ascent on skis was out of the question. Although respectably deep, the snow was baseless and unconsolidated, and the *Malinia* tussocks hereabouts are man-sized. Climbing to the crest of the ridge was laborious and time-consuming. The sun had already passed its zenith by the time we reached easier ground where we paused to rest and refuel. There now seemed little prospect of getting to the top and back to Doune in good time, but it would have been criminal not to make the most of such a day. We gathered ourselves up and headed along the gently undulating crest of Druim a' Ghoirtein, absorbing breathtaking views of the Rough Bounds.

Persistent easterly winds had scoured the right-hand side of the ridge and dumped the snow in deep drifts in the hollows and on the west flank. As we picked our way from knoll to knoll I became aware that my subconscious had not yet relinquished the summit. I was evidently not alone in this, for the party was steadily accelerating. At last Will and Julie saw sense and opted for a less breathless appreciation of the views. Bob's laid-back demeanour conceals a driven man, however, and the two of us raced on towards the subsidiary top which marks the end of the long ridge. This we reached at a quarter to three, only 15 minutes before our 'absolute latest' turnback time. Over half-a-mile and 1000ft of ascent still separated us from the summit, but by now, of course, we were firmly in the mountain's thrall. Without discussion we dropped our sacks and ran. Forty minutes later, after a delightful scramble up the steep upper slopes, we were looking down to Loch Quoich, sucking in the freezing air which greeted us from over by Glen Kingie. There were no other footprints in the snow.

Despite the keen wind and the lateness of the hour, the spectacle

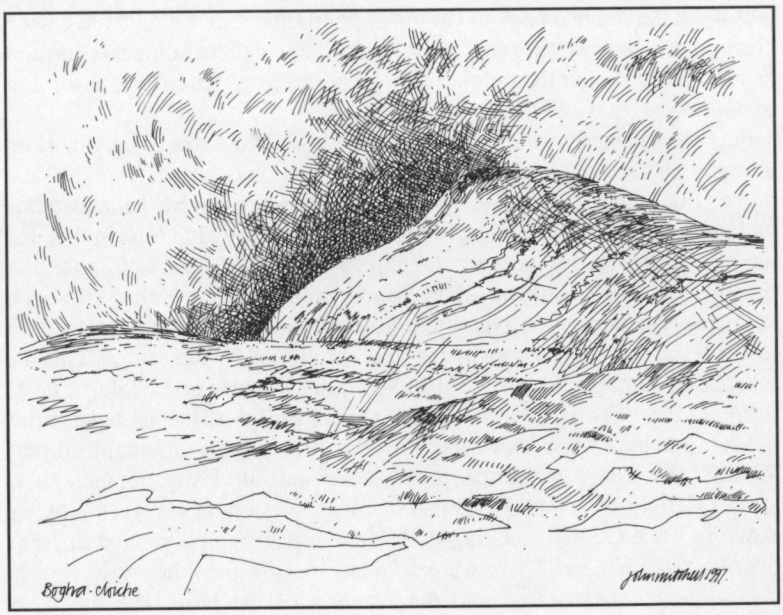
'Hecla II' anchored at Galmisdale with the Sgurr of Eigg in the background. Photo: John Peden.

commanded our attention. We were surrounded by peaks near and far, glinting in the late afternoon sunshine and looking as fine as ever I have seen them. To the west, beyond Morar, the islands of Eigg and Rum were surreal white silhouettes against a dark, sparkling sea, and over Meall Buidhe, far out beyond the Sea of the Hebrides, sailed the Uist hills: Beinn Mhor and Hecla. Or was it perhaps Tir nan Og?

The reverie broke. Night's approaching shadow was stalking the eastern sky and on the loch far below us we saw *Hecla* tugging impatiently at her anchor. While we cartwheeled down the mountainside the sinking sun painted the snow orange and purple and green. Wind-etched sastrugi cast intricate azure shadows, while myriad golden hoar crystals coruscated underfoot. We glissaded and ran and danced over the freeze-dried rocks in a joyous daze.

A big half moon was already high over the hills to the south and a fierce frost was crackling along the shore when we reached the boat, 75 minutes after leaving the top. There was not a moment to lose: all hands to the anchor! With the wind astern and the tide under us we surged through the narrows by the last glimmer of daylight. We gave the engine wellie as we turned the end of the spit, and the off-duty watch hurried below. In the warmth of the Tilley lamp a dram never tasted so good.

We made it to the banquet with 10 minutes to spare; the ceilidh which followed lasted long into the night.



ROCK JOCKS AND SEA DOGS

By Graham E. Little

A grey-green swell lifts our inflatable, pushing it forcibly towards the shore. The outboard propeller crunches onto foam-hidden rocks. The engine stalls; the next wave swings the rubber craft around and rasps it across the barnacled reef. Norman, our boatman, sits transfixed. I grab the painter and leap out onto a wave-washed platform, the surf creaming high around my legs. Rock hopping, I pull the inflatable into a deeper channel, jump back in, then scream at Norman to start the outboard. He does and we limp back to our boat. The next attempt at landing is less eventful and we say a silent prayer.

ROCK-CLIMBING trips to remote Hebridean islands are challenging affairs with the logistics of boat hire and coastal access often the key to success. Add to this the challenge of new routing on storm-lashed sea cliffs and a planned outing quickly turns into an adventure, with marine activity vying with cragging for its share of the thrills and spills. The whole experience is, of course, enhanced by the characterful, not to say eccentric, personalities that are inclined to join one on such jaunts.

I've sailed to and climbed on the lonely island of Mingulay on three occasions. A few personal cameos from these trips perhaps best illustrate the richness and unpredictability of remote island access and cragging.

The first was in 1993 when I was joined by an all-star cast of Chris Bonington, Mick Fowler and Kev Howett.

Rather than endure a slow sea crossing from Oban the four of us fly from Glasgow, and land on the hard sand airfield of Traigh Mhor on Barra. After piling mountains of kit (mostly CBs) into the Post Bus we climb in. Our driver turns in a slow and deliberate manner to observe his passengers. 'Well, well, well, and what brings Mr Bonington to this part of the world?' It is a good question.

Peter Daynes's 30ft yacht, *Liverbird,* slices through the gentle oily swell of the ocean, long trailing vapours still clinging to the Outer Isles. We sit on deck soaking in the rays. The sky is a fresh blue after a spell of unseasonably bad weather. Mick, the inheritor of Tom Patey's stack-climbing credentials, and seasoned sea cliff aficionado, turns a pale shade and then, to our amazement, vomits violently overboard. The rest of the team exchange shocked and sympathetic glances then, after a short, but decent interval, reach for their cameras to record this momentous occasion.

The Biulacraig, our first objective, is certainly steep, but even Mick's appetite for less than pristine rock is dulled by this great, green, guano-splashed vision. Chris is visibly relieved, although Mick's alternative of swimming out to the big stack of Lianamul causes a temporary relapse.

My first full abseil down the central section of Dun Mingulay casts very serious doubts upon my judgment and upon the sanity of Kev Howett, my

partner. The Atlantic licks its lips, I spiral down a free hanging bit of string, the rock stares blankly out at me. So OK, it is the best bit of rock in the World and we did climb two superb routes (The Silkie, E4 and Voyage of Faith, E3) but those moments of fear are with me forever,

☆ ☆ ☆

Our planned return trip in the spring of 1994 had to be aborted due to the serious storms lashing the Outer Hebrides, but in 1995 all systems were go. We sailed from Oban, in the afterswell of a Force 8 on an ex-lifeboat, *Poplar Diver,* (named after a line of poplar trees next to the skipper's garage somewhere in The Midlands). On this occasion it was nearly an SMC meet with Kev and I being joined by Bob Reid, Grahame Nicoll and Andy Cunningham. We dubbed it the Big Nosed Expedition (with Bob Reid as honorary member).

Bob, armed with a tape recorder and a large furry (sea) dog, did his best to imitate a combined Alan Wicker and David Attenborough. His attempts to record the climber in its natural habitat resulted in some entertaining sequences, with the low-wing rush of the great skua and the booming and sucking of the sea adding to the 'on location' atmosphere.

We discovered the delights of Guarsay Mor under a scorching hot sun. An immaculate 50m high wall of clean gneiss rising above a non-tidal rock ledge is just a Rock Jock's paradise. We put up nine routes from HVS to E5, all in the two and three-star category. Kev and I struggled up our own routes but stopped to admire the cool of Andy as he made steady progress up the magnificent A Word with the Bill (E3) – a razor sharp name if there ever was.

On the subject of route names, I get to use Children of Tempest for our third route on Dun Mingulay's main wall (which goes, amazingly, at El). It is the title of a novel by Neil Munro that has, as its climax, the climb out of a great sea cave on Mingulay.

Our return to Oban on the *Poplar Diver* again tested our sea legs and we were not found wanting. The sinking sun burnished the wave tops then slid below the long trail of the outer islands. We arrived at night on a wet and windy pier to discover that the weather had been foul on the mainland for the duration of our trip. Oh! joy.

☆ ☆ ☆

1996 sees a seriously motley crew, packed on to a chartered launch, heading out from Castlebay on a cold, grey, May day. The age range of the 11-strong team is from 17 to 47 – our youngest member, Lawrence Hughes, quickly being nick-named Roof Warrior, after his strange affinity for massive overhangs.

A landing on the beach is out of the question due to the wild sea so we

damply decant onto the rocks to the south. What the hell is this place like in winter?

Cath Pyke and I spend an enjoyable afternoon exploring the cliffs of Rubha Liath in the far south of the island, delighting in the rock and the language that gives us Rubha Soul (E2), although she is too young to remember the album, and The Power of the Sea (E3), and who needs an explanation?

George Ridge's tent is ripped to shreds by the wind and he joins Cath for the night (every cloud . . .). Jim Lowther entertains Kev and I with tales of Eton and Arctic exploration. As the wind howls and the rain lashes down, the newly-married Grahame and Mel Nicoll drink a box of red wine and practice bird songs – at least that's their story. Ropes blow vertically in the roughly teasing wind, the sea explodes from the ocean, we speculate on what can be done and decide to photograph puffins. Crawling back across the island for a well-earned brew, we debate the likelihood of the launch picking us up tomorrow. Despite the continuing foul weather, our boat arrives. As we ferry our wet gear across the slippy coastal rocks and load it into the malevolently bobbing dingy, I reflect upon the need for a new set of criteria to define the success of island rock-climbing expeditions.

Three trips to the wonderful island of Mingulay, memories that are more than the rock, the pitch, the route. An island of magic where all experiences are memorable and transcend the climb; where rock jocks and sea dogs strike a pact so as to relish the touch, the taste and the time. Where we sail but never quite return, for in spirit we have never left.

ASCENSION

Again the flick and twirl and quiver
as he probed and picked, then climbed
a runnel of blue ice. Shards and slivers
tinkled, rattled down the chute
between legs, beneath the balance of his feet.
I watched the axe's steel dull gleam,
its adze and curving pick
strike hard and strike again
the solid cold of comfort.
All blade, point and deterrent.
Even borne lashed to his sac
its message was intimidate.

Donald M. Orr.

THE CIRCUMNAVIGATION

Anon

THIS IS a tale of lang syne, before the SMC abroad had become the SMC at sea; when members who sailed yachts kept quiet about it, lest it were bruited in the Journal. It relates to two ex-Presidents, an ex-Secretary, and a pregnant woman. The event was long before one of these ex-Presidents made nasty remarks in the Journal about the other; in fact in the days when the Journal was a record of climbing achievement or enjoyment, and not for venting inner thoughts or streams of consciousness. We were then perhaps half our present ages, at the peak of our climbing form.

My tale relates to a circumnavigation, now a feature of the Journal, but in a more modest boat, to wit a 16ft open clinker-built dinghy. We had no charts, but the OS maps. In our planning we did not consider this a serious factor, as we expected to keep close to the coast, the males on board being well known for a timidity bordering on cowardice. Indeed, it was this character defect that enabled two of them to evolve as Presidents during a period when the Club had a distinctly salvationist hue, now to be abandoned under the leadership of President Richardson.

Now the rules of circumnavigation are simple, but quite strict. At some point in the voyage one must cross the outgoing trajectory without doing so by turning back. This is a feature rarely encountered in mountaineering. Imagine extending the crab crawl on Meagaidh right round the hill on the same contour.

Our objective was Mull, which according to the Club guidebook of the time, 'is 25 miles from north to south' (and, I can affirm, as a result of my voyage, that it is also 25 miles from south to north) and, 'between 3 and 20 miles wide', according to one's latitude. (The mountaineers in the club can rest assured that I shall not be trotting out many arcane nautical terms. I know how irritating they can be. This one seems inevitable). What the guide book failed to inform us was that it is surrounded by sea. I mean not just salty water, but sea, real sea with big waves and remorseless currents. But to that in due course.

The boat had a nice beamy front end (naut: 'bow'), and flat back end (naut: 'transom') and was called the *Tippa too*. This is an insider joke, too complex to explain here. There was considerable competition to sit at the back end. In the first place it was drier, but also it meant you had grasp of the tiller (the thing that steers the boat) AND the throttle control on the outboard engine. This meant you had total power over the others, and could head fast for the shore if a walrus or other sea monster popped up, or you desperately needed a pee. Unlike being in a yacht, peeing from the side of

a small dingy tossing about in a Force 5 with a lady aboard is not something that can be done with gentlemanly discretion. This fact alone distinguishes our voyage from other recent narratives.

A glance at the world atlas will inform the reader that off west of Mull lies America, some 3000 miles away. In case we lost sight of land, or were blown off course, we resolved, like Jerome K. Jerome's characters, to take ample food. Thus when we left on a September Friday evening from the Argyll shore we were heavily loaded. We nosed over to the east coast of Lismore, and in high spirits, headed south. There were excited discussions of the potential for rock routes on its short but extensive dolomite cliffs. We had planned to camp the night at Eilean Musdail, the lighthouse on the south tip but the swell was breaking heavily on the shore. We should have turned back, of course, but as all had gone so well, and believing ourselves already seasoned sailors, we were seduced by the distant calm of the bay to the north of Duart Castle. Thus we entered the Sound of Mull quite unprepared, ignorant of the fact that the entire volume of the Sound of Mull and the Lynn of Morven were in the process of emptying into Loch Linnhe. This is a period of the tidal cycle known to sailors as 'the flood'. Somewhere in the middle of this, turbulent water, wind and tide came into opposition creating standing waves 6ft high. Anyone who has schussed into 6ft sastrugi will know what it is like. The boat's front end soared into the sky, a body came tumbling towards the back, the boat then plunged into the water, and much water came aboard. After about two such episodes we retreated. However, I am pleased to be able to say that my diary records 'the crew behaved admirably'. Thus were two putative Presidents preserved for future glory. More importantly, the Club was able to profit from the continued labours of an excellent Secretary

The Saturday dawned still and perfect, and armed with experience of 'the flood', we picked our time, and whistled across the Sound towards the south shore of Mull at slack water. A call for coffee brought us ashore at Grass Point where we strutted importantly in front of the tourists brought over from Oban to see the seals. Then on, intrepidly. Beyond the mouth of Loch Spelve great cliffs rose above us. We were a little disquieted by a surging sea that, as it hit the shore, projected sea foam to their very crests. This observation put paid to a theory upon which the entire expedition was predicated; namely, that three strong men and one pregnant women could anywhere pull the boat out of the sea onto the shore, from which vantage we could relax till the sea improved.

The boat weighed down by weeks of food, bottles of whisky, a pregnant woman and three hulking Club members was, even to the landlubbers, obviously overloaded. Desperate measures were called for. Volunteers were sought and found. The boat was nosed towards a small escarpment

while the volunteer balanced on the prow (the top part of the front end). At the right moment he leapt for the rocks shouting 'long live the SMC', and successfully found holds that allowed him to climb up to the raised beach below the cliffs. Another followed in more modest fashion: a victory for mountaineers. The remaining sailors now forged on westwards, while the climbers had an interesting rock traverse along several miles of coast. We all foregathered in a little inlet with a storm beach of polished pebbles, hauled the boat out and camped on a delightful piece of sloping greensward to the caress of a fine driftwood fire. Across the loch the lights of Easdale twinkled mischievously.

Next day, since it was too rough, we snorkelled into a salmon net, but it was empty. By early afternoon the sea was down, and off we headed for Loch Buie with two members ashore, working under the high cliffs, still virtually unclimbed, that form the inaccessible hinterland of this part of Mull. The sea, though calm, was graced by a vast undulating, awe-inspiring swell. And thus we reached Carsaig. Here we faced the paradox of small boating. There are plenty of small boat havens, and plenty of super camping places. There is a great paucity of the two together. At Carsaig there were none. With a gale forecast on our transistor, we moored the *Tippa* with climbing ropes to two reefs that embraced a narrow gut of water. A driftwood fire eased the misery of a drizzle. Shortly, a lady arrived from the 'big house', patronisingly anxious for our welfare. No doubt we looked like ship-wrecked mariners. Rather than go in for complicated explanations we told her that we had lost daddy's yacht, but that daddy's helicopter would soon be here. This being quite normal in her circles she then offered us blankets and eggs. We took the eggs.

Next day was wild, and we watched helplessly as our craft tossed and turned, but our belaying was sound (another explanation for our survival to the age of gerontocracy). The boat survived without a scratch. And so the day after we set off towards the Ross of Mull. The shore was more inviting now, and past Ardalanish point we came upon on that sublime combination of steep rocks, sheltering headlands and shell sand. It was called Traigh nan Gael. What perfection! Greensward, running burn, driftwood, shelter: the closest this crew would ever get to paradise. Our trip to Iona next day, threading between the reefs of the Ross of Mull, was such fun. It was not a serious matter to bump into a sunken rock, and so we could take risks going close inshore, and slaloming through the islets and reefs.

I have to tell readers that there was one constant irritation on this voyage. Once a day, in eight hours, the MV King George V circumnavigated Mull, bearing its load of tourists. It was an affront to our daring, making our voyage of exploration seem as pointless as Ranulph Fiennes crossing the Antarctic plateau. Never mind, we saw bits of Mull no tourist ever sees. We

put-putted through the yacht anchorage known as the Bull Hole, and out into Loch Scridain, and along the wilderness of Ardmeanach, putting ashore at Doire a Gabhaig opposite Little Colonsay. A good 30 miles, this day. There was just time before dark to get up Ben More. One President-to-be did it in 1 hour 30 minutes.

What excitement the next day. We went through the sound of Ulva, something only small yachts can do, and then under ideal conditions. Wonderful terrain, Ulva, Gometra and the Dutchman's Hat the obscene spice islands of the west, and identified as the future location for the Institute for Theoretical Biology once the Nobel Prize had been duly awarded. Such is youthful hope and speculation! And so to Loch Tuath, and coming up was the crux: Calliach Point. Lacking the 'Admiralty sailing instructions' we depended for warning on Alaistair Dunnet's book on canoeing the west coast. His description of rounding Calliach Point had us shivering in our wellies, indeed so much so that we put the pregnant woman ashore at Calgary Bay, crossed ourselves, and said we hoped to see her at Langamull on the north coast. Wiser from our experiences in the Sound of Mull, we attended slack water, and round we went no bother. The anti-climax was intolerable in the face of sustained female teasing.

The north shore of Mull is not a nice place for yachties. However, the *Tippa* nosed effortlessly through the reefs of Loch Chuchain and went right to the head of the loch at Dervaig, where we pulled her out of the water. At the pub we solemnly inscribed her in the yacht book.

Once into the Sound of Mull, the voyage took on an effete character. No danger (except from McBrayne's charging steamers). But the sea was not yet finished with us. Working up the Lynn of Morvern in a strong westerly we experienced the odd and terrifying sensation of the *jabble,* a sea full of standing waves which tossed about as so much chaff in a gale. The effect is created by the reflected wave from shore cliffs. And so to home, round the North end of Lismore.

Thirty three years later I feel able to admit to this adventure, and of course it was an *adventure* because at our level of experience every moment was new and unexpected, a learning experience. How lucky we were to have lived in that age.

SCOTLAND'S LAST MOUNTAIN

By Ken MacTaggart

LAST AUTUMN saw a little-known anniversary in Scottish mountaineering, an important centenary which passed uncommemorated and almost entirely unrecognised. It was an event which deserved better.

In the autumn of 1896 a party of four gentlemen made a long rock-climb to the summit of a minor Skye peak. That in itself was not remarkable in a period when, over several decades, enthusiastic Victorian mountain explorers had scrambled into every corrie and over almost every crest in the Cuillin range.

What made the party's ascent of Sgurr Coir'an Lochain significant was not the intrinsic merit of this little-repeated route, but what they encountered as they reached the mountain's north summit. They looked around and saw no cairn, no track, no sign of any prior visitation. From all sides the peak was inaccessible to anyone but a rock-climber, and they correctly concluded that they had made the first ascent. For the last time in the British Isles, climbers had reached an untrodden mountain summit.

The group was made up of SMC founder William W. Naismith, Professor John Norman Collie, local Skye guide, John Mackenzie, and a friend of Collie, E. B. Howell. The date of their historic ascent was September 12, 1896.

A century on, when almost any hill in the country over 2000ft receives multiple ascents every weekend, both summer and winter, it is hard to imagine the experience of climbing a virgin Scottish mountain. But in the mid to late-1800s, a small band of devotees regularly enjoyed the novelty of making the first ascents, not just of classic rock climbs, but of the mountain peaks.

At the start of the 19th century there were probably 10 unclimbed mountains in Skye which would become Munros when Sir Hugh published his tables at the century's end. Numerous other lesser peaks had never been reached. Skye was remote, and in those pre-Ordnance Survey days was little known to the active British mountaineers of the time, most of whom lived in the south of England. For them, Chamonix and the Alps were an easy trip compared with a long journey by stage coach to Glasgow, then steamer from the Clyde to a distant, barely-mapped Hebridean island.

Today, it seems incongruous that even in the early 1830s, when intimidating Alpine peaks such as Mont Blanc, the Jungfrau and the Finsteraarhorn had already been climbed, Sgurr nan Gillean, Bruach na Frithe, Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr Thearlaich still awaited their first ascents. Skye mountain fever only took off when the adventurous Professor James D.

Forbes and local man, Duncan Macintyre, climbed Sgurr nan Gillean in 1836.

Each subsequent decade saw further slow exploration, but the arrival of the railway to Strome in 1870, with a connecting ferry to Portree, finally ended Skye's long centuries of isolation. A sustained assault on the Cuillin started that year and continued through the 1870s and 1880s. The last Munro to be climbed, still undesignated, was Sgurr Mhic Coinnich in 1887.

The golden age of Scottish mountaineering, which had seen one Cuillin peak after another fall to a sustained assault by the period's best climbers over 60 years, was almost at an end – but not quite. Out on a spur overlooking Loch Coruisk, a neglected summit was set to become, by default, the country's last mountain prize.

Sgurr Coir'an Lochain is not usually ranked among Skye's most impressive peaks. It lies off the main Cuillin ridge, a twin-topped summit on a side ridge curling north from Sgurr Thearlaich and Sgurr Mhic Choinnich. Its location is almost exactly one kilometre east of Sgurr Dearg's Inaccessible Pinnacle, where it stands astride Coireachan Ruadha and the small hollow of Coir'an Lochain.

Most climbers passing by on the main ridge hardly notice this minor summit in the Coruisk basin. At 729m (2392ft), it is dwarfed by the greatly more impressive Coire Lagan Munros. Although it fades into obscurity when seen from the ridge, it shows a radically contrasting aspect to the east. From Coir'uisg, the flat glen at the head of Loch Coruisk, it is an altogether different sight, with steep rock faces on three sides. Massive boiler-plate slabs rear up to a prominent peak more than 2000ft above the glen. This is undoubtedly the reason why it merited a *sgurr* appellation by the native Skyemen in the pre-mountaineering era, at a time when many greater, but less accessible peaks, were still unnamed.

In those days it was known to the climbers by the subtly different name Sgurr a'Choire Lochain. Linguistic purists subsequently advised the Ordnance Survey to inscribe it on their maps as the Sgurr Coir'an Lochain used today. In whatever form, it means the peak of the corrie of the little loch, named after the tiny rocky pool lying to its south, 1900ft up in Coir'an Lochain.

By summer 1896 neither of Sgurr Coir'an Lochain's two tops, the north one at the apex of the main cliff, and the higher main top, from which it is separated by a pronounced cleft crossing the ridge, appears to have received an ascent.

That summer season had been an active one in Skye, and the date 1896 is regularly encountered in the first ascent details in today's guidebooks. The Scottish Mountaineering Club was then just seven years old, but already very active. Many of its notable personalities of the time were

based at Sligachan that year, among them Collie, Naismith, James Parker, Dr. James Collier, and Charles Inglis Clark. Several parties were on the ridge during June, July and August, but the exploration of new rock climbs did not get fully under way until September, which turned out to be a month of unusually good weather.

On September 1, Collie and Howell completed the 2000ft south-east ridge of Sgurr a'Ghreadaidh. Two days later, with Naismith, they climbed Sgurr Alasdair direct from Coire Lagan on the classic route now known as Collie's Climb. On the fourth, Naismith and James Parker scaled the south face of Sgurr na h-Uamha from Harta Corrie, and on the fifth the pair joined Collie and Howell to claim the north-west buttress of Sgurr a'Mhadaidh. September the sixth was a Sunday, so no-one climbed.

Naismith and Collie resumed on the seventh, with a new route on the Sligachan face of Sgurr nan Gillean. More followed in the subsequent days, among them Naismith's Route on Clach Glas. It was a remarkable fortnight in Scottish mountaineering, but it was not over. The night of September 11 found a party of four – Collie, Naismith, Howell and local guide John Mackenzie – camped by Loch Coruisk, having traversed Sgurr Dubh. It was just a day after Collie's 37th birthday.

With a little extrapolation from the scant, business-like notes left by the taciturn explorers, it is possible to construct a fairly accurate picture of the events of the historic next day, Saturday, September 12, 1896.

That morning the party set off from their camp site, 1400ft up the steep slopes to the bottom of the cliffs which form the northern prow of Sgurr Coir'an Lochain. In the style of the time, they wore tweed jackets, breeches, long wool socks and hob-nailed boots. Mackenzie, a Skyeman from the village of Sconser, also habitually wore a flat tweed cap, as photographs of the period show.

Here, in Coireachan Ruadha, the area gets its name from the reddish peridotite which replaces the usual Skye gabbro. The face above them was ominously marked with damp black streaks, and the climbers found the rocks treacherously wet and slippery. They toiled on steeply-inclined slabs, roped together with a sodden hemp line.

They left no precise description of their route, but they did provide a rough sketch of the mountain showing their approximate route zigzagging up the prow. The climbers' notes are not much help – Collie simply recorded the ascent, a brief note of the conditions encountered, and the date in the Sligachan Hotel Climbing Book covering 1893-1911[1]. Naismith carefully wrote down the day's summits, and indeed all those from that summer in Skye, in his minute hand-writing in the small black notebook which records the list of his life's climbs[2]. He then submitted a paragraph on the climb to the SMC Journal for publication the subsequent year[3].

Finally, after two-and-a-half hours' climbing, the four heaved themselves to the top of the enormous rock face, then scrambled up the easier slopes to Sgurr Coir'an Lochain's north summit. They had reached the last unclimbed mountain in the British Isles.

The summit overlooks the minuscule patch of water after which it is named. The view east extends to the north end of Loch Coruisk and Druim nan Ramh, but westwards is blocked by the great peaks of the main ridge towering 1000ft higher, all having received their first ascents in the preceding 25 years. The climbers particularly admired the view of the Inaccessible Pinnacle from here. Collie got out his aneroid and judged the top to be 'about 2450ft in height', an estimate which compares well with today's surveyed height of 2392ft.

We can only speculate on any feelings of achievement they might have had, although new ascents of long routes on virgin rock were no novelty to them. Collie's brief notes do acknowledge that they looked for but failed to find any evidence of a prior ascent, and Naismith records that they built a small cairn. Whether they felt the significance of the historic event or not, the day was far from over for Collie and his companions.

First they crossed the awkward rocky gap on the south-west side, 60ft deep, which separates the north top from the main peak of Sgurr Coir'an Lochain. They followed the ridge running towards Sgurr Mhic Choinnich for some distance, then left it to cross 'some horrid stone slopes' over to Sgurr Dearg, where they climbed the Inaccessible Pinnacle on its summit.

From here they followed the main Cuillin ridge north over Sgurr na Banachdich, its north top which would later be named Sgurr Thormaid in Collie's honour, and Sgurr a'Ghreadaidh. Finally, they left the main ridge at Sgurr a'Mhadaidh, dropping down the Thuilm ridge into Glen Brittle. Even by today's standards, it was a fairly strenuous outing.

Sgurr Coir'an Lochain's north face had to wait 17 years to receive a second ascent, and a fuller account of the route taken[4]. In 1913 Harold Raeburn, J. B. Meldrum and the Wallwork brothers started up the steep edge facing Bidean Druim nan Ramh, but were forced to traverse east on steep slabs under a large overhang. This barred the way to the upper layer of slabs, and was not breached until they reached the left-hand corner overlooking Coruisk. Belays were poor.

Today, the route remains remote and rarely climbed. It has been joined by just a handful of newer routes on the north and north-east faces, and the mountain's west face is apparently still untouched. But some of the personalities who made that inaugural climb have left more memorable legacies than that little known climb on Sgurr Coir'an Lochain.

William Naismith, aged 40 when he climbed Sgurr Coir'an Lochain, is best remembered for 'Naismith's Rule', which estimates how much time

should be allowed for hill-walking, and of course, as one of the founders of the SMC.

John Mackenzie is immortalised in the 3100ft Sgurr Mhic Choinnich (Mackenzie's Peak), being a member of the party which made the first ascent in 1887. He continued guiding in the Cuillin and working as a ghillie, and died in July 1933 aged 76. He is buried in the quiet, Free Presbyterian churchyard at Struan on Skye's west coast, under an unusual headstone, irregularly shaped from several small boulders of gabbro. Despite his undoubted contribution to Scottish mountaineering, he was never a member of the SMC. But perhaps that was not surprising for the time, in an era when a London gentleman would hardly expect his butler to join him at the Reform Club.

The least-known climber in the party that day, E. B. Howell, remains a mysterious figure. He is said to have been a friend of Collie, and was probably English. His name seems not to be recorded against any climbs other than those of that memorable summer in Skye, and he was not a member of The Alpine Club[5].

Norman Collie, born in Cheshire but with a Scottish father, has become the best-known climber of the group, and went on to make many more notable climbs in the Alps, the Himalaya and the Canadian Rockies. Already a renowned chemist, he made an important contribution to organic chemistry and took the first X-rays of a metal object inside a human body. His professional achievements earned him a Fellowship of the Royal Society. Later, he lived out his bachelor retirement in the Sligachan Hotel, where he would sit gazing on summer evenings at his beloved Cuillin. A solitary figure at his reserved table in the hotel's dining room, he attracted the curious whispers of other guests.

Collie died in 1942, aged 83, some weeks after being drenched in a fishing mishap at the Storr Lochs. At his own request, he was buried close by his guide, John Mackenzie, at Struan. The length of his grave is marked out not by grass or a stone slab, but by a line of roughly laid stones, in symbolic imitation of the rocks over which he climbed. He lies at Mackenzie's feet, some say in deference to the man who was his constant guide and companion, not infrequently his leader, and on whose incomparable knowledge of the Skye mountains he was so regularly reliant.

Collie's grave lies in an enclosed hollow by the Voaker Burn. However, travel a half-mile or so up the loop road to Coillemor, or to the headland west of Struan, or any of a dozen points on this coast, and the view opens out. From these spots on a clear day, a more permanent reminder to Collie is visible. The southward horizon is dominated by the Black Cuillin, stretching between the sharp peaks of Sgurr nan Gillean on the left, and Sgurr na Banachdich on the far right. Just to the left of Banachdich, and

slightly lower, the similarly-shaped north summit nestles against it. Probably named by Naismith, the map now records it as Sgurr Thormaid, the Gaelic for Norman's Peak.

Personal Postscript: The precise date of the first ascent of Sgurr Coir'an Lochain was realised only a few weeks before the anniversary date. The author had intended to make a centenary ascent with a small party by the easy route on September 12, 1996, but having recently had his abdomen rearranged by the National Health Service, was judged unfit to do so. SMC office-bearers seemed unaware of the anniversary, and to the best of the author's knowledge, it passed unmarked.

References

[1] Anonymous notes in the Sligachan Hotel's climbing book for 1893-1911, now deposited in the National Library of Scotland by the SMC, were confirmed as Collie's by comparing with known hand-writing samples held by The Alpine Club of London.

[2] Naismith's Notebook of Climbs, SMC Deposit, National Library of Scotland.

[3] W. Brown, *The Coolins in '96*, SMC Journal, Vol. IV, No. 22, January 1897.

[4] E. W. Steeple et al, *Island of Skye*, SMC, 1935.

[5] Howell is unknown to the historian of English and Welsh rock-climbing Alan Hankinson, author of *The First Tigers*, Dent, 1972, etc.

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AN EXPERT CRAGSMAN

John Buchan Articles in the SMC Journal.

By Donald M. Orr

THE FACT that only three articles by John Buchan were submitted to editors of the SMC Journal is at once strange and yet acceptable. It is odd that one so dedicated to mountaineering generally, and rock-climbing specifically, and also who had such a talent for descriptive, well-observed prose did not leave more than a couple of fine essays, a vague reminiscence, and some shimmering chapters about a favourite pastime.

However, reviewing the demands of his editors and publishers, politics and the law, and of his family and friends, there must have been few quiet moments when he could reflect on the climbs and summits he had achieved or plan any new ventures.

Buchan's interest in mountaineering is seen as a minor, youthful aspect of the man. His fondness of wild places and wandering through them, coupled with his love of angling are seen as mainstays of his holiday periods and the delights of his spare time. He has never been viewed as a serious mountaineer.

Yet contrary to the popular notion two aspects stand out:

1. John Buchan never did anything by halves, nor did he maintain casual interests in topics he touched upon. The period of his greatest activity as a climber was as planned and structured as his time at Oxford, or in Parliament, or in Canada.

2. The climbs he ascended, and the summits he attained, are still valid exploits for the contemporary mountaineer. Time, technique and modern equipment have not devalued them. The Cuillin is still one of the most rugged ranges in Britain and a stern testing ground for any aspirant mountaineer.

Buchan, over a period of years, climbed with the best of the Skye guides – John Mackenzie*, and at the same time as many areas of the Cuillin were being initially explored. His dedication in returning year after year to Skye and interspersing his work in the Cuillin with expeditions to the Alps put him among a small, elite band of men whose exploits set them apart from other sportsmen.

Buchan joined the Scottish Mountaineering Club in 1904. Among the routes listed on his application are climbs on Buachaille Etive Mor and Bidean nam Bian in Glen Coe; three major routes on Ben Nevis; 14 ascents on Arran, and various peaks in the north of Scotland.

While in South Africa from 1900-1903 Buchan made many climbs in the Drakensberg Range of Natal, the Zoutpansberg of the Northern Transvaal, and an ascent of Mont-aux-Sources which, at over 10,500ft, was the highest mountain in what was then called Basutoland.

From 1903-1907 he climbed in the Dolomites and around Zermatt and Chamonix in the Alps making ascents of the Untergletschorn, the Riftelhorn and the Matterhorn, among others. These activities were recognised in his election to the Alpine Club in 1906. With this background of technical expertise and wealth of Alpine experience he was well poised to comment on the developments of any aspect of mountaineering.

In 1907 the *SMC Journal* published *The Knees of the Gods*. Set in a future dreamscape, where mountains are full of lifts and elevators, glass-enclosed cafes dominate the summits of most alpine peaks. The mountaineer has become as streamlined and intense as some of our current rock athletes – non-smoking, non-drinking and dedicated to the extreme. In many ways aspects of his comic fantasy of the 1900s have become part of the reality of the 1990s. Writing with a great deal of humour and whimsy, he sets his dream sequence in the Sligachan Hotel. This at once stamps the hallmark of his work; his ability to fictionalise incidents in a factual context and/or setting. Here his well-observed notes about the interior of the Sligachan Hotel and his awareness of the difficulties of the Cuillin, including the then untried, but talked of, continuous traverse of the Cuillin Ridge from Sgurr nan Gillean to Garsbheinn, set the tale on a solid structure that will easily support the fantasy he describes. The Cuillin is seen as the last true mountains worthy of consideration in a tourist world of cossetted 'adventure'.

The stark grandeur of the range must have impressed him when he first saw it in 1903, fresh from South Africa and in need of some excitement in another corner of the world, and this time in the company of his sister, Anna (who also went on to become a novelist under the name O. Douglas). He spent the following two summers on Skye, in partnership with John Mackenzie, opening up new routes. This in many respects was as remote and frontier-like as climbing in South Africa must have been. It should be remembered that the last unclimbed peak in Britain was Sgurr Coir'an Lochain on Skye, which had only been ascended a few years earlier in 1896 by John Mackenzie and party. *(See article by MacTaggart. Ed.)*

Another point of interest is that both Buchan and Norman Collie were climbing in Skye in the summer of 1904, both using the services of Mackenzie and both, presumably, staying at the Sligachan Hotel. While both were professional men and greatly interested in travel and mountaineering, and must have been aware of each other through Mackenzie, it would appear they never met. I can find no reference to either in their fairly

extensive respective writings and one is left wondering what kind of team they might have made if their trips to Skye had overlapped.

These experiences developed a deep respect for the mountain environment that later allowed him to write so authoritatively on climbing episodes in books like *Mr Standfast* and *The Three Hostages*. By 1907, when his first article for the Journal appeared, he was a member of both the SMC and The Alpine Club, had started working for Nelson's the publishers, and had married Susan Grosvenor.

In 1913 the Journal published a review by Buchan under the title *Half Hours in the Club Library*. His study was *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland* by Dr. Samuel Johnson, in two volumes, and published in 1775. It is not really surprising to find Buchan in a reflective mood in 1913 and involved in researches into Scottish literature. This was the year his biography of *The Marquis of Montrose* was published and the event must have given him much personal satisfaction as its martial hero was a stalwart of individual freedoms and the good of the Commonwealth. A considerable amount of his research would later be woven into the intricate strands of his great novel *Witch Wood* (1927).

Buchan finds Johnson's work 'an accurate but colourless itinerary' and finds that it, 'compares ill with Boswell's *Tour to the Hebrides* '. He is, however, commended for leaving the tea shops and coffee houses of London to go and see what was 'the nearest approach to the free and barbaric natural existence about which 18th-century literati talked wisely and knew nothing'. Over all, Buchan feels that at the age of 64 the Doctor was perhaps too set in his ways to appreciate the starkness and grandeur of the Highlands. His intellectual tastes were depressed by the 'wide extent of hopeless sterility'. What appealed to Buchan, and indeed to most mountaineers, was that sense of wilderness whereas the Doctor displays the complete antithesis, typified by this comment on Loch Lomond: 'The islets, which court the gazer at a distance, disgust him at his approach, when he finds, instead of soft lawns, and shady thickets, nothing more than uncultivated ruggedness.'

While acknowledging the dignity and beauty of the work, and Johnson's place among our great literary figures, he feels that the book is 'scarcely a work that calls for frequent re-reading'.

His final contribution to the *SMC Journal* was in 1939 with an article entitled *Pan*. This mirrors an episode in the section, *The Middle Years* of his autobiography, *Memory Hold the Door* published in 1940, the year of his death. Interestingly, the incident published in the Journal is a slightly different version and is dated 1911, whereas in his autobiography he quotes the event as occurring in 1910. Small matter, after all the years, as Buchan's stamp endorses the narrative.

He attempts here to deal with an aspect of the supernatural, an area that had always fascinated him. There are many places in the mountains of Scotland that can be held in awe, especially with the right climatic conditions and a raking light. There are the disturbing effects of avalanche, lightning, mists and Brocken spectres, and in climbing there are countless tales of falling rocks, loose holds and the trundles and tumbles whose timing may be strange but are generally accepted as part of the game. The unexpected and the bizarre are always memorable and often disconcerting. (The personal experience of being almost knocked off a slim stance by an incensed owl, exploding at head height from the narrow chimney we were unwittingly sharing comes to mind.)

Buchan's short narrative is set on the descent of the Alpspitze near Partenkirchen in Bavaria. His guide at one point falls silent and Buchan notices that he is white with terror and staring straight in front of him. They set off running downhill in panic with no real knowledge as to why. On reaching the highway they collapse exhausted and, on recovering he acknowledges their embarrassment on the way home: 'We did not speak; we did not even look at each other.'

While one appreciates Buchan's treatment of the uncanny in *The Gap in the Curtain*, and in his short story *The Wind in the Portico* this little article does seem weak, but as a small note in an autobiography of a very full life, I suppose it gets by with its hint of the goat-footed god and a strangeness in the landscape that somehow can encourage a more primeval awareness within us.

In *The Three Hostages* (1924), Buchan relates a vivid account of chimney, crack and wall climbing, under dangerous circumstances, on the fictitious 'Machray' estate in Wester Ross. The hero's negotiations and appreciation of rock structures and formations clearly reveal the author's capacity on Skye and in the Alps. Many aspects of his novels deal with varying details of hillcraft related to stalking and fishing, and again display his love of rugged landscape and mountain atmosphere, an influence that was to remain with him throughout his life.

* See SMC Journal No. 179, 1988. *Desperate Rock Mountains.*

A VISIT TO SKYE FIFTY YEARS AGO

By W. D. Brooker

I HAD become interested in mountains after climbing Mount Keen as a 12-year-old Boy Scout, and began to explore some of the Deeside hills on outings from Aberdeen. A couple of years later I discovered some of the magnetism of the West Coast by making an Easter cycle tour to Fort William and Ben Nevis with two classmates. One of my companions was keen to continue the experience, so during the school summer holidays Ken and I set off for a two-week holiday to Skye. I kept a diary of this trip and wrote a full description so that the details were reliably preserved. Some of these will no doubt evoke memories of similar experiences in the minds of others whose activities go back to those early post-war years.

The train took us to Inverness and we cycled 26 miles along Loch Ness to the Youth Hostel at Alltsaigh. The next day we pedalled up Glen Moriston, along Loch Cluanie and crossed the divide to reach Glen Shiel. At that time the road was still narrow, and although tarred, occasional tufts of grass grew through a central ridge, well scraped by the undercarriages of passing vehicles. However, this did not detract from the thrill of descending Glen Shiel, swooping down, down, and still on downward, while the mountain walls rose higher and higher on either side. And these mountains were quite different to the broad, plateau-topped hills of the eastern Grampians to which we were accustomed. These were sharp, pointed peaks, rising from precipitous slopes, buttressed with irregular ranks of rock outcrops. To our eyes they looked like mountains, not just hills, and very exciting. Crossing Shiel Bridge I remember looking across at the orange seaweed fringing the tidal shores of Loch Duich and feeling that this was the real West Coast and that we had truly crossed the divide to a different world. It is difficult to convey the sense of remoteness we felt, when modern motoring can make the same journey between breakfast and a morning coffee break.

The road began to climb to the notorious Mam Ratagan, but apart from having to push the bikes up the steepest part I don't recall any problems and we had soon left the gravelled surface of the pass and were spinning down Glen More to Glenelg Youth Hostel at the Kyle Rhea narrows. It had been a long, tiring day and was followed by a rest day during which we visited the ruined brochs in Glen Beag, Dun Telve and Dun Troddan. These kindled an interest in prehistoric features which I have still.

The following day started with the ferry to Skye. The fare was a shilling each, with an additional sixpence for each of the bicycles. The swift current and the course taken by the boat was interesting enough, but the scene was enhanced at one stage by the water boiling with fish leaping and splashing

all around in a feeding frenzy. We were told they were saithe. It was only 26 miles to Sligachan but it was hilly and we had to pedal hard against a stiff breeze. However, our minds were soon taken up by the scene before us as we stopped on the Sligachan bridge.

Our first view of the Cuillin was impressive as Sgurr nan Gillean stood out jet black against a leaden sky, its sides patched with grey screes from which darker gullies and chimneys sprang upward. It was obviously a mountain for real climbers and not for boy cyclists. Six miles of easy going followed and then the tarmac ended. We had been warned that the crossing to Glenbrittle was by one of the worst roads in Scotland and it certainly fulfilled this expectation, writhing over the pass with a surface strewn with stones and pocked with wheel-jarring potholes. It must have been bad enough for cars but on a heavily laden bicycle it was bone shattering. We were well down on the Glenbrittle side but still had about three miles to go when there was a sharp report as my rear tyre burst. The attempt to repair it only lasted five minutes before a ravening horde of midges drove us headlong down the road, wheeling my bike along the verge. At dusk we reached the Youth Hostel, a large wooden building, Norwegian we were told, and capable of sleeping 80 people. Our first impression was that all 80 had dumped their wet boots in the porch, and were now competing for cooking space on the stove and for seats at the long wooden common room tables.

Next morning the mist was clearing from the peaks and we consulted Alex Sutherland, the Hostel Warden, who lent us a map and told us the appropriate route up Sgurr Alasdair, the highest of the Cuillin. At that time the height was given as 3251ft above sea level but it was to change to 3309ft on later maps and is currently at 3258ft (993m). Such Ordnance Survey orogenetic frenzies have affected a good number of Scottish summits and occasionally create minor positional changes as well. Anyway, we set off across the wet, grassy moorland, passed through the rocky portal of Coire Lagan and found the feature which had made me both curious and apprehensive when I read its name, The Great Stone Shoot. I think I had envisaged a kind of giant rock chimney and indeed we found a huge open gully curving upward with vertical sides, but its bed was sloping and filled with scree, easy to ascend although very laborious, as it continually slipped away underfoot. In an hour-and-a-half we had reached the cleft at the top and were able to scramble up the ridge to the right and reach the summit.

Here we met two young men sitting astride the ridge on either side of the cairn. The mist was coming down and we just had time to take in an impressive view of sharp, rocky peaks and a narrow ridge disappearing down into the mist along which the two told us they had come from Sgurr Sgumain. They intended to continue to Sgurr Thearlaich and invited us to join them, so we all returned down the arête to the head of the Great Stone Shoot. Here the way ahead was barred by a vertical wall until I found a

crack leading to a ledge from where the top was easily reached. The ridge continued, so narrow that at times it was a knife edge with a steep drop on either side. It was our first encounter with what we were told was 'exposure' and we were shown how to cope by straddling the ridge at these places. Soon the ridge widened, but then dropped so steeply that we had some difficulty, until our new friends produced a couple of slings which allowed us additional handholds. Ahead towered the dark bulk of Sgurr Mhic Choinnich but by now it was drizzling, so we descended from the ridge by a loose gully which eventually took us into the lower part of the Great Stone Shoot, only a scree slither from the floor of Coire Lagan. The rain stopped and we were fairly dry by the time we had parted with our companions in Glenbrittle after what for us had been a very exciting introduction to the Cuillin.

That evening we went for a walk down to Loch Brittle and when we returned to the Hostel there was a singsong under way. Such occasions were a fairly usual and very enjoyable communal feature of camp and hostel life, in the days before folk singing became established as a commercially based entertainment, and the availability of recorded mate rial reduced the need to memorise the words of songs. Anyway, here were songs to learn which featured climbing and crags and ropes and abandoned maidens. It was all new and exciting. We listened avidly to snippets of conversation between tough-looking men in check shirts; some even had rope slings secured around their waists by metal snaplinks to prove (as if that were needed) their status as real climbers. One exchange I overheard was about an 'Inaccessible Pinnacle', and afterwards I asked the Warden where it was. He told us. 'And is it really inaccessible?', I asked. 'It is to the likes of you' was the unequivocal reply. Even if this was not taken as a challenge, The Pinnacle obviously required investigation to satisfy our curiosity.

The following day the weather looked promising, and we set off up the path used the previous day, leaving the road beside Glenbrittle House and climbing up grassy slopes to pass along the brink of the dramatic canyon which houses Eas Mor. Leaving the path, which continues to Coire Lagan, we struck up the screes leading to the western spur of Sgurr Dearg. The screes gave way to broken rock and we reached the cairn of Sron Dearg, beyond which was a narrow, but easy, arête leading upward to the summit of Sgurr Dearg. 'The Inaccessible' (not yet undignified by the term 'Inn Pinn') rose unmistakably above the top of the mountain from the slope on the other side. It was a great fin of gabbro rock, its far edge sweeping up in a blade of 125ft and the near side dropping almost vertically for 50ft to the slope below the summit cairn of the mountain. Ken's curiosity had been satisfied, so he stayed at the cairn while I descended to the foot of the long knife edge, changed into gym shoes, secured the beret firmly on my head and had a look.

There were plenty of holds and at first it seemed easy, but I became increasingly aware of the exposure. Yesterday's ridge on Sgurr Thearlaich was nothing to this. Later, I was to read this arête described as having 'an infinite and vertical drop on one side and an even longer and steeper one on the other'. Fanciful perhaps, but it was beginning to seem like this to me and I was growing nervous when I came to a stop less than half-way up. The good holds had petered out and there was no alternative to making a couple of balance moves on very smooth rock which must have been polished over the years by the anxious scrabbling of thousands of bootnails. The standard, of course, was only Moderate, but the exposure was considerable and it all seemed very precarious. It was the kind of decision point with which all climbers become familiar, but to a callow 14-year-old it was so unnerving that I still remember it vividly. Once past the critical point the rest went without any problem until I reached the haven of the summit block. Then the reality of my position had to be faced. There was no alternative but to descend and do it all again – in reverse. I was so frightened that I said my prayers and promised God that if I were allowed to get down safely I would never do anything like this again! Thus reinforced with Divine Support I got a grip of myself and very carefully climbed back down. Presumably, I was becoming accustomed to the exposure because this time it all seemed easier – even the crux, which had frightened me so much on the ascent.

With a sense of elation surging through me I rejoined Ken and we set off northward along a ridge leading down to Bealach Coire na Banachdich, the easiest pass between Glen Brittle and the Loch Coruisk basin. The ridge continued easily over two subsidiary tops to the main summit of Sgurr na Banachdich. It was now a perfect day and my diary records: 'The finest view I have ever had, from the Islands in the south to the Outer Hebrides in the west and all the north of Skye itself, the blue sky and sea contrasting with green grass and yellow sands.'

After a last look at range after range of rugged hills fading into the distance in the east, we turned west along the spur leading to Glen Brittle. This terminated in the easy peak of Sgurr nan Gobhar. From its cairn we scrambled down a gully and then by screes and grassy slopes to the Hostel. Tired after a wonderful day we sought our beds earlier than usual that night.

Glenbrittle Hostel was not run on the usual strictly regulated basis, so the next morning we were able to have a long lie and potter about the hostel all day, writing letters, and doing odd chores for the Warden. We also fitted the new cycle tube brought from Portree by the kindly bus driver and were ready to continue our cycle tour the next day. This time we took no chances with the Glenbrittle road and used the bus as far as the main road. At Bracadale we stopped at the shop/Post Office and after penetrating a barricade of scythes, fence wire and other crofting materials reached the counter. It was manned by a very aged and somewhat deaf greybeard with

only a smattering of English, so it took us some time to obtain the items we wanted, pay for them, and extract the right change. A stiff headwind made the second half of our journey to the hostel at Harlosh something of a trial. The famous Dunvegan Castle was the main object for the following day and my contemporary account of this visit to Skye contains all the usual information about it. Perhaps even more enthusiasm was contained in the reference to 'a huge tea' we enjoyed in a cottage for only one shilling and ninepence!

Rha Youth Hostel at Uig was our next destination and was reached by cycling to the shore of one of the arms of Loch Snizort, and boarding a small boat along with two other hostellers who crowded up to let us pile our bikes on board. It was only a small boat, and because the sea was rough I helped the elderly ferryman to row. The hostel was 'delightfully dirty and haunted by rats', which gave us lots of sport in unsuccessfully hunting them in the evening. Our main reason for visiting this part of Skye had been to see the Quiraing, a feature on the great lava escarpment which extends past Portree northward throughout the length of Trotternish. On a day of continuous sunshine we cycled up the gravel road to Staffin, and leaving our bikes at the point where it breaches the scarp, we walked round to explore the bizarre collection of fairy towers, crevasses and basins formed by erosion and landslip of the basaltic lavas. We were impressed by this remarkable rock scenery, and the ease with which it could be reached.

It was time to start our return journey, and on the following forenoon we left for Kyle of Lochalsh together with two lads from Preston. Strong headwinds made for very hard going until past Sligachan, and we only just made the last ferry from Kyleakin at 9.30pm. At Kyle the hostel was a group of unsightly old army huts, but in a magnificent situation. Our companions arrived the following morning, having been delayed by a succession of punctures and forced to spend the night at a B and B near Broadford. It was a fine day, so we hired a boat very cheaply and all went rowing about in the Sound of Sleat. We even visited Skye again under our own steam but the tidal currents were strong and demanded caution. In the evening we enjoyed a magnificent orange sunset and as we watched the last vivid glow reflected on the water, the sound of pipes came drifting over from Skye. It has the ring of a tourist brochure cliché, but it actually did happen like that as a fitting end to a first visit to Skye.

Editor's note: William (Bill) Brooker, the new Honorary President of the Club, was conferred with another honour on Friday, November 29, 1996, when he was made a Master of the University by Aberdeen University. The Laureation Address detailed the mountaineering highlights of my forerunner, including the invention of the pseudo-medical terminology for those suffering from the Munro-bagging disease and perhaps more healthy deeds such as editing the *Century of Scottish Mountaineering*.

THE MAIDS HAVE ALL GONE FROM GLEN BRITTLE

By Ian Walton

'WHAT DO you mean they've moved the phone box ?'

You do expect some changes when you've been gone for 23 years, but moving the phone box a couple of hundred yards down the road really seemed like sacrilege. How many times had I walked over from the campsite to phone home and let everyone know that we were all still alive? How often had we crammed six people into that small red box, to shelter from the pouring rain that always started right after we put down the receiver? That phone box was an icon. But I suppose it honestly did make more sense to put the only phone beside the Youth Hostel, rather than beside the farmhouse that always seemed totally deserted.

It has been more than 20 years since I camped in Glen Brittle with St. Andrews University Mountaineering Club. That end-of-spring-term meet was an annual celebration after final exams. We had celebrated my 21st birthday right there in the campground; somehow I don't remember too many of the details. But, 'where's that bottle of . . . CRASH!' still brings back vivid memories of someone falling flat over the club tent – and it didn't even have guy lines to trap the unwary. We called it the 'Nalley' because it was shaped like an alley and held 'n' people, where 'n' is the traditional large whole number, beloved of mathematicians.

Now I was back for a quick reunion visit with my climbing partner, Andrew. He and his family have conveniently settled in Inverness, albeit with several year-long detours to Finland, Afghanistan and Holland. I have lived in the northern California beach paradise of Santa Cruz (earthquakes excluded), for the last 23 years, so we've moved apart in some ways.

I have developed a fondness for the great Alaskan wilderness; just a hop, skip and jump up the west coast from Santa Cruz (or at most a short flight on the exquisite Alaska Airlines). This story was written as I sat on a curving mussel bar below McBryde Glacier, in Glacier Bay National Park. The others in my group were off watching for chunks of ice calving from the glacier face into the lagoon. I had stayed behind to ferry the six double kayaks up the channel on the incoming tide. Otherwise there was a nasty choice between the quarter-mile walk across (or rather through . . .) the glacial silt, at low tide, or playing dodgem kayaks with the icebergs barrelling out of the channel from the lagoon.

Andrew and I thought a short reunion on the Skye ridge would be fun – a reality check on the changes in the last few years. Some things change in 23 years and some things don't. The phone box has changed. The Glen Brittle road game has not, despite a few largely cosmetic changes to the road itself. The rules of play still seem to be approximately: 10 points if the

other car has to slow down, 50 points if they have to reverse, and 500 points if they go into the ditch. Of course, even in its original incarnation, the game felt much safer than the more recent time that I was driven down to Glen Brittle by an American friend, who insisted on trying to drive on the left side of the single-track road.

So how about the campsite itself? The bathrooms have actually improved – but then that wouldn't be hard. However, the wee footbridge still threatens to slide the unwary reveller into the burn on a dark and stormy night. The campsite is remarkably unchanged even though the musical wake-up call of 'Campsite fees, please' has been replaced by a boring, pay-in-advance system. Most of the tents have changed, but ours hasn't. The old Black's 'Good Companion' stands out like a sore orange thumb, and is somewhat less than weather proof. But it does have character which is entirely missing from the uniform advance of the nylon domes. On the other hand, I certainly wouldn't want to take it with me to Alaska.

The journey to the west from Inverness had already shown some interesting changes. The imminent opening of the bridge seemed like a monumentally bad idea – at least from the folk-song point of view. 'Take the boat over to Skye', and, 'If you've never been kissed in that isle of the mist' seems to lose all of its romance if you can just drive over a bridge to get there. I suppose the National Trust took that important idea into account in its deliberations on the project!

The Sligachan Hotel had changed enormously for the better. The bar was better, the beer was better, the food was better and the staff actually appeared to be pleased to serve climbers. Perhaps the large campsite is taking it a little too far though.

So how about the ridge itself? Has the climbing changed? A lot of the answer to that has to lie in your perspective. The first time I saw them as a teenager, the cliffs of Coire Lagan looked so enormous, and the bogs on the Loch Coruisk path felt interminable. But now I've climbed in Yosemite Valley with its 3000ft sweeps of unbroken granite, and I've slogged over the tussocks of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge's north slope. And I've spent a lot of time paddling beneath the tidewater glaciers of South-east Alaska – or just sitting writing stories beside them. So things look different to me.

Andrew had put it another way one year when we were debating whether I could live with a girlfriend in Scotland, the same way I had in California. It would have been unthinkable when I left Scotland in the Sixties. 'You could do it now – Scotland may not have changed much, but you have,' was Andrew's verdict. It's all in your viewpoint.

So, back on the ridge, there do seem to be more people scurrying along the rock than I remember. The advent of guided parties produces some entertaining moments: there are, count them, the eight people in identical blue crash hats lined up at the foot of the Inn Pin. And there is that chance encounter with Andrew's neighbour from Inverness, as we round a less

well remembered pinnacle. We are trying to decide which way to go when two tentative figures appear from the opposite direction. When we ask them which way they have come they respond: 'Oh, we don't know anything – you'll have to ask our guide on the end of the rope.' And then the neighbour appears. It does make for a good conversation until the clients start getting restless.

Strangely, route finding needs more effort than it used to – I'm sure I never used to abseil going off Sgurr Alasdair in that direction! And my GPS receiver insists that walking over the cliff is the correct way to go, and offers to record how fast I'm moving on the long way down. But the rays of evening light from Garsbheinn are as beautiful as ever. And the islands still float on a magical mystery carpet. My knees, however, just aren't what they used to be. After that descent to the Loch Coruisk path the boggy stretches are quite a struggle in the gathering gloom. It's really hard to negotiate all those tussocks without bending my left knee. In fact, they really are comparable to those Alaskan North Slope tussocks that only a caribou can cross with any semblance of elegance. But at least it isn't as bad as that dreadful night when we carried a stretcher across those same tussocks in the pouring rain, descending from the ridge above Coir a' Grunndha. The bad news then was a rockfall on White Slab and a badly-broken ankle. But the good news is that, thanks to the skill of the surgeon at Raigmore, the victim can still walk today, and lives happily in Oregon.

And, of course, the final comparison is the weather. It has clearly changed for the worse – perhaps we can blame it on global warming. I remember the good old days of lying in the morning sun in the campsite before wandering up to Coire Lagan for an afternoon of climbing. The top of the Cioch had always seemed like it would be a grand spot for a 'bring your own rope' party. (And there weren't any midges in those days either. If you believe that statement, I have a bridge for sale in Arizona . . .) This year we spent four days in Skye and three days prior to that, waiting for clear weather in Inverness. All told there has been one dry spell of 12 hours during my week's visit. So we only did half the ridge. But it was still very satisfying.

To add final insult to injury though, everyone I met in Scotland a year later apologised for the bad weather that summer, and reminisced about how wonderful the weather had been the previous summer. It's amazing what just one year will do to the memory cells, let alone 23 . . . Were there really maids in Glen Brittle?

Lay me out on the pitiless Nordwand
Where the bivouac sites are few –
Alone – with a stone for a pillow
And an uninterrupted view.

(Tom Patey, *The Last of the Grand Old Masters*).

THE CLASSIFICATION OF MOUNTAINS

By David Purchase

1. Introduction:

Of making many lists there is no end, and the climbing of all the hills therein is a weariness of the flesh.

MANY have been the comments that the number of Munroists grows at an ever-increasing rate. What was once a trickle is now a flood. I note, for example, that a compleation year as recent as 1989 puts me firmly in the first half of the list. Less frequently noted is that the *publication* of lists of mountains appears to be following the same pattern. What used to occur about once a decade now seems to happen at least once each year, with no sign of abating. The frustration is that each author devises his or her own criteria for entry, in order that the resulting list may differ from all others. And then, when the list is published, there is often no information which would enable the user to check the validity of the entries or test for omissions.

There are two main objectives for the current work. One is to propose a set of criteria which could be used for the listing and classification of hills; and the other to suggest what should, and should not, be changed in the currently published lists. In doing this I would emphasise firstly that I think historical precedent is as important as the use of criteria based on topographical data, and secondly, that I think it is highly desirable that a basis is adopted which can be consistently applied not only in the Highlands but also in the Scottish Lowlands and the rest of the British Isles. In order to address these objectives the paper will start, after a few points of definition, with a brief description of the more important published lists.

It is natural that an exercise of this type should concentrate on the Munros. The basis to be proposed divides those current Tops which might be worthy of promotion into two quite distinct groups – one group of eight hills which only just qualify, and another of nine hills which are far more clear-cut cases. The former group are neatly balanced by 12 Munros which just fail to qualify, and I shall propose that all these marginal examples are left unchanged, with only the Group of Nine becoming eligible for full Munro status.

2. A few definitions:

It is hardly surprising that different writers have used different terminology in their tables and lists. However the current discussion will be eased by a consistent usage throughout, and so I adopt the following definitions:

mountain – Any point which is regarded, on the criteria being considered, as a 'separate mountain' (e.g. a Munro). For clarity 'separate mountain' is sometimes used but the meaning is unchanged.

top Any point which does *not* qualify as a mountain but which is regarded, on the criteria being considered, as a 'subsidiary top'.

minor top Any local high point which does not qualify as a mountain or top.

hill Any local high point; that is, mountains, tops and minor tops are all hills.

summit When it is necessary to refer explicitly to the location of the highest point of a hill, the word 'summit' is used. Summit can apply whatever the status of the hill in question. But in context the words 'mountain', 'top' and 'hill' will often be used to describe the highest point.

separation The separation between two points is defined in distance and height, with a time derived from them. As this concept is used throughout the paper, it is described more fully in the next section.

the Tables Unless otherwise stated, 'the Tables' refers to *Munro's Tables*, but excludes the 'Other Tables of Lesser Heights'.

For consistency with modern Ordnance Survey (OS) mapping, distances and heights are given in metric units. When referring to the Imperial units in earlier works, conversions are accurate when this is critical to the discussion (for example, the minimum altitude for a Munro is 914.4m) and are then shown in square brackets [ ]. Frequently, precision is not of the essence; for example, 150m and 500ft will often be regarded as equivalent (and then the converted value will be in normal parentheses). Note that horizontal distances are always quoted in kilometres or miles, whereas heights are in metres or feet.

3. A note on separation:

The concept of the 'separation' between two points is used throughout the paper, and so a short description follows. Some more detailed matters are deferred until a later section. In describing separation, horizontal (map) distances are given in kilometres ('km'), normally to one decimal place, and heights are in metres ('m'). Times are calculated from these distances and heights using a walking speed of four kilometres per hour, plus one minute per 10 metres of ascent; these calculations take no account of terrain. The result is taken to the nearer minute.

In considering the separation of a hill from its neighbour, it is convenient to start from the *lower* summit. The distance to any other (higher) point is measured *along the connecting ridge* even if a shorter route is available which involves little extra loss of height. The 'reascent' or the 'drop' (the terms are used interchangeably) is defined as the altitude of the hill, *minus* the altitude of the lowest bealach traversed along that connecting ridge. Determining a required distance from the OS map to 0.1km (the normal accuracy of a grid reference) is difficult in only a few cases. However, the drop is less easy, as although there is often a height given for the summit of even minor hills it is quite rare to have a value at the bealach. But in

practice I have found that a careful interpretation of the contour lines near the bealach enables a value for the drop to be derived which is usually accurate, to 5m or so. For the purposes of classification this is quite adequate, especially if (as in the case of the system to be proposed) small errors cannot lead to the total exclusion of the summit under consideration.

Historically, separations were measured from one summit to another. In his important contribution to the subject, Bonsall[1] introduced in 1973 the concept of measurement to the 'nearest higher ground'; that is, in practice, to the first point reached along a connecting ridge that has the same altitude as the summit in question. Using nearest higher ground has, of course, no effect on the drop but will always reduce the distance – sometimes trivially, but often by a substantial amount. Figure 1 should make this clear. So far as I can tell, the concept has not been used in any published lists, even recent ones, but I shall use it in my own proposals.

4. Some traditional approaches:

Munro's Tables

Any discussion of mountain classification must start with *Munro's Tables*[11]. Munro himself gave no definitions of separate mountains or subsidiary tops, stating only that each decision, 'although arrived at after careful consideration, cannot be finally insisted on'. However, there is strong evidence (see, for example, Campbell[4]) that an important influence was whether the hill was separately named on the OS maps published in the late 19th century. Indeed in eight cases this was taken, in the first publication in 1891, to the extreme of identifying a named point as the Munro and a nearby, *higher* but unnamed point as a top; these anomalies were among a number of corrections planned by Munro but implemented posthumously in the first revision in 1921. (Though the Tables have passed through several new editions and reprints, the editions of 1921 and 1981 were the only ones in which significant changes occurred. It should be noted that, though the words 'mountain' and 'top' are sometimes used in the Tables in the same sense as in this paper, often 'top' is used for 'hill', that is, for any listed point including separate mountains.)

Interestingly, the editor of the 1933 edition, J. Gall Inglis, though making only one change (other than to names) to the 1921 Tables, included a note 'for the next revision' with a description of the conditions that he deemed appropriate for deciding whether a point is a 'top'. He proposed a drop of 75–100ft (say 25m) 'of decided gradient' and with 'some kind of individuality'. He added that three classes required special consideration even if not quite meeting these conditions: the rising ends of long, fairly level ridges; spur tops; and plateau tops.

In his second paper[2], Bonsall demonstrated that the limit for a Munro was in practice equivalent to a separation in time to the nearest higher ground of 30 minutes or more (using Naismith's original formula; at the standard

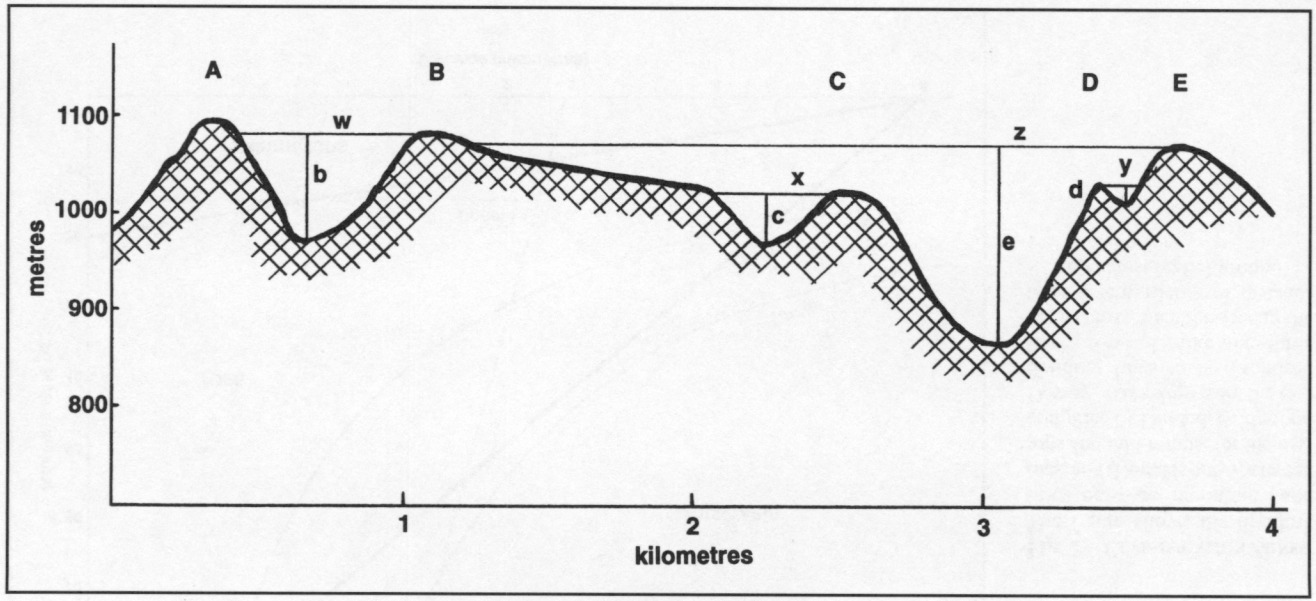

Fig. 1 – Mountains, Tops and Minor Tops

The figure shows an outline of the elevation of a ridge comprising five hills, A to E, with A being assumed to be the highest in the neighbourhood. The 'reascent' components of the separations for B to E are indicated by *b, c, d* and *e*. The separations in distance to the nearest higher ground are shown as *w, x, y* and *z*. It can be seen that, while the separation of B is almost unaffected by using 'nearest higher ground', that of E is significantly reduced and that of C is very greatly reduced. In this hypothetical instance A and E would be mountains, B and C tops and D a minor top. But if separations were measured to the summit of a nearby mountain then C might well qualify as a third mountain since its separation from A would be large in distance, and from E large in reascent.

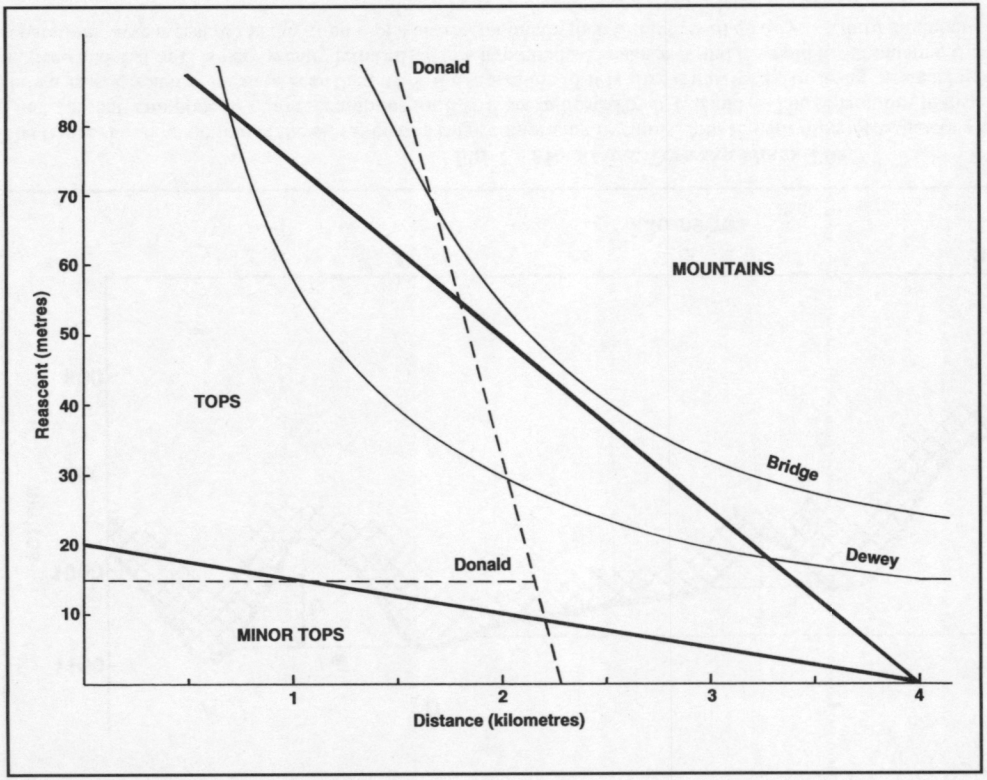

Fig. 2 – CLASSIFICATION ZONES
The figure shows the dividing lines between mountains and tops, and (Donalds only) between tops and minor tops, for the lists compiled by Donald, Bridge and Dewey. Also shown are the two dividing lines to be proposed later. Note: Unlike the three named lists, I shall be using the more severe criterion of 'distance to nearest higher ground'.

pace used herein that time is about 35 minutes). However, there were, and are, plenty of anomalies in both directions.

In logical sequence I should next consider Corbett's Tables[5], though they were published (posthumously) later than those by Donald. However, the Corbett list, with its strict requirement for a 500ft [152.4m] drop, does not assist in the development of a classification system, and it is to Donald that I now turn.

Donald's Tables

Donald's Tables[10] of hills in the Scottish Lowlands were published in 1935. They showed all hills in Scotland south of the Highland Line and over 2000ft [609.6m] high. His list is divided into mountains and tops, though he uses the word 'hill' to mean a separate mountain, and the word 'top' to include all listed hills including mountains. Donald also listed 15 'minor tops' which were, originally, 2000ft contour rings which did not qualify even as tops; subsequent editors have added higher so-called minor tops to his list.

Donald's is the first list we consider with a 2000ft limit. Figure 2 shows the dividing lines between mountains and tops, and if appropriate between tops and minor tops, for his and several other such lists. The dividing lines to be proposed later for these lists are also marked.

Donald's classification rules, which have never been altered, are as follows. He defines a 'unit' as one-12th of a mile or one 50ft contour of ascent. He then states that a mountain must be at least 17 units from other mountains, and that any hill with a reascent of more than 100ft that is not a mountain is a top, adding that a hill may be a top with a reascent as little as 50ft if it is of 'sufficient topographical merit'. He states that, in general: 'While the rules . . . rather lack mathematical precision [sic; a remarkable statement], the actual result of their application is that . . . an 80ft drop determines a 'top' and the 17-unit rule a 'hill'.' For our purposes these rules must be metricated. A 'unit' is 134m of distance or 15.25m of height; hence 17 units (2.25km or 260m or some combination) corresponds to a time between 34 and 26 minutes. It is not unreasonable to say that, as an equivalent rule, a mountain requires a separation of 30 minutes. So far as tops are concerned, Donald implies that any hill with a 25m drop qualifies and that some with lesser drops are included so long as this is 15m or more.

However, Donald measures separation, as already indicated, from one summit to another. This has produced anomalies of such degree that it is surprising that no editor has emended his classification. I take just one example – the ridge of the Ettrick Hills (Section 7) running north-east from Andrewhinney Hill. Trowgrain Middle is near enough to Andrewhinney Hill to be classified as a top. But Herman Law, which is lower than Trowgrain Middle and only a kilometre from it, is classified as a separate mountain – presumably because it is 2.4km (hence more than 17 units)

from Andrewhinney Hill. Measured from the nearest higher ground, Herman Law has barely enough separation to qualify as a top!

Bridge's Tables

Although this paper is primarily about Scottish hills, any basis that is satisfactory for the Donalds should also be appropriate throughout the rest of the British Isles. Some early writers merely extended the Tables to include the 3000ft hills 'Furth of Scotland' and, as the number of hills was quite small, added a comment to the effect that 'we do not know how to distinguish between mountains and tops consistently with Munro's Tables, so if you want to claim the Furths you had better climb them all' – though much more elegantly expressed, of course! Between 1929 and 1962 several lists of hills down to 2500ft or 2000ft, including the fascinating volumes by Docharty[8,9], were published, but they used no new principles. But in 1973 George Bridge published his *Mountains of England and Wales*[3], and his classification method must be described. Like Donald, he used 2000ft (610m) as the height criterion, and evolved a system of classification into mountains and tops which depended on both the distance and the drop in height. (In fact, Bridge uses both 'mountain' *and* 'top' in the sense of 'hill'; the distinction is conveyed by the phrases 'separate mountain' and 'subsidiary mountain'.)

Bridge has a graphical approach to classification. Hills must have a drop of at least 50ft (15m), and *any* separation between summits of more than 500ft, or more than 4 miles, will qualify a hill as a separate mountain. Intermediate points include a drop of 250ft at 1 mile, and 100ft at two miles. Arithmetically, the rule is almost '*distance* x *drop* = *constant*' (200 to 250 in Imperial units). In metric units the equivalent product of kilometres and metres is, in the important region of the graph, about 100. The calculated separation in time is exactly 27 minutes at 150m of height and also at 1 km of distance, and is about 35 minutes at 2 km. Thus a separation of about 30 minutes defines a mountain consistently with Bridge as well as Donald. (Bridge's rule produces greater times for more distant hills with smaller drops, but then the refinement of measuring to the nearest higher ground becomes even more necessary.)

A recent list is that by Dewey[7]. This will not be described in detail, but the separation, shown on Figure 2, is also of the same '*distance* x *drop* = *constant*' form as Bridge's, though with the significantly lower metric value of 60 instead of 100 or so.

5. What are we seeking in a classification system?

Consideration of the historical precedents, experience of the hills throughout the British Isles, and a mathematical background lead me to put forward the following criteria that a good classification system should meet. I regard them all as important, and they are not listed in any particular order. They are hereafter referred to as C1 to C6.

C1. The system should be simple to apply. It should not require data that is not readily available, and it should be as insensitive as possible to any lack of precision (e.g. on OS maps) in that data.

C2. The system should achieve consistency throughout the British Isles.

C3. The results should match currently accepted lists as closely as possible.

C4. The system should classify hills as 'mountains', 'tops' and 'minor tops'

C5. The system should produce a clear and unambiguous result for every hill. That result should not depend on result for any other hill. But . . .

C6. Editorial discretion must be preserved.

Some of these criteria may require elaboration or explanation. For example, it seems to me important (C5) that the classification of any particular 'local high point' should not depend upon whether its neighbouring higher hill is a mountain, top or minor top. (Donald, as we have seen, based his classification on separation from the nearest *mountain*, not even the nearest higher hill, and this is one reason for the anomalies already described.)

There are several reasons why it is essential that some discretion remains with the compiler of the list (C6). Firstly, the terrain can justify a higher ranking than the raw data suggest (though in practice this may apply only in the Cuillin of Skye). Next, there may be local features which affect the classification. For example, in the south-east Grampians (Section 7 of the Tables) there are eight hills with separations all quite close to 2 km and 75m. A strict application of the basis to be proposed would split these into four Munros (Tom Buidhe, Cairn Bannoch, White Mounth and Cairn an t-Sagairt Mor) and four tops (Creag Leacach, Carn an Tuirc, Tolmount and Broad Cairn), but this would be a quite unjustifiable differentiation between very similar hills and the compiler of the Tables would rightly retain them all as Munros. Then there is the matter of historical precedent. This may not be significant for lists other than the Munros and Corbetts, but for them it is of great importance. Overall, a system based on physical parameters should not be regarded as definitive, but as a guide to the compiler. Decisions to override its results being taken for good reasons rather than by accident or oversight.

More surprising may be C4, the suggestion that the classification should allow for minor tops as well as mountains and tops. This calls for some justification.

- The division into mountains and tops, however it may be achieved, reflects a natural and well-accepted concept. Lists which have only one grade of hill invariably have merely a minimum drop for inclusion: this is either large (as with the Corbetts) excluding many fine hills, or small (15m or 30m is often used) which leaves the feeling of many unworthy points being classed as mountains.

- If there is no *minimum* criterion for a top, then it is impossible both in theory and practice to produce a complete list. (Even a list including every point defined by a separate contour ring will not do; for a smaller contour interval on the map would produce more points to record. In the extreme the compiler would need to include every minor undulation, even every rock, if it is above the minimum altitude.)
- Thus it is useful to allow the classification of 'minor top'. This can include all those points which seem important to the compiler, for example, because they are conspicuous on the ground or close to qualifying, even though they do not meet the criteria for a 'top'. The class will also include all such points which are 'tops' in existing lists such as *Munro's Tables* (and should, in my view, extend to those which have ever been tops, now removed). The list of minor tops is, of course, always subjective and can never be complete; but because it enables us to have a minimum criterion for tops it ensures that it is possible to include all *true* tops in any list.

The requirement in C3 to match current lists is also important for the acceptability of any new approach. It leads us, I suggest, to conclude *inter alia* that classification purely by distance apart, or purely by drop, is inadequate to reflect the almost instinctive belief that the closer two hills are, the deeper the intervening drop needs to be to justify both as mountains. This is an explicit feature of the Donald and Bridge lists and was clearly implied in *Munro's Tables.*

Lastly, I suggest that any list should include the data that justify the classification; in practice this will be the separation from the nearest higher ground in kilometres of distance and metres of reascent. This has a number of advantages. It will enable others to check the classifications if desired, highlight cases where editorial discretion has been exercised, and allow swift correction of errors. It will render it easy to give effect to any changes when new information is made available by the OS. And it also allows users to draw up their own lists on other criteria should they so wish.

6. A proposed system of classification:

The system of classification to be put forward here has evolved over the best part of a decade of consideration of the principles and details. Approaches for the Highlands (with a 900m lower height limit) and the rest of the British Isles (with a 600m limit) were for a long time independent but it was heartening to find, towards the end of the work, that they could be combined. An initial approach was based directly on Bonsall[1], ranking hills purely in order of their separation in time, but this soon proved unsatisfactory. The reason is that this method gives too much weight to distance and not enough to drop; for example a drop of 150m is equivalent to a distance of a kilometre, whereas in classification terms the former is a good deal more significant than the latter. Bonsall's separation of 30

minutes is in practice close to saying that the separation must be 1.5km of distance. (On Figure 2, a dividing line based on time would be close to, and even nearer the vertical than that for the Donalds, which already suffer from inadequate emphasis on the drop, especially having regard to the Lowland terrain.)

One early move was to plot the separations (to the nearest higher ground) of all the hills in each region. The results for the Munros and Donalds are in Figures 3 and 4. These plots, and those for England and Wales, led quickly to the realisation that, as might be expected on physical grounds, the reascent is correlated with the distance apart, and hills are clustered around an imaginary line (call it the 'centre line') rising 'NE from the origin' of the graph. For example, looking at the Munros and Tops, the centre line is approximately '*reascent in metres = 60 x distance in kilometres*' – and no hill has a reascent significantly less than 20 times the distance. Of course, I am here referring only to smaller reascents, say up to 100m. For much larger reascents the separation in distance can be as great as you wish.

It follows that the critical decision is the point on this 'centre line' at which a hill might qualify as a mountain. The way in which outlying points are dealt with is then less important, as relatively few classifications will depend on this. In particular it was realised that, however intellectually appealing was a curved dividing line using a formula similar to Bridge's, to do this was complex and unsatisfactory. Look at Figures 2 and 4 together. Such a formula is either too generous near the centre line (as is Dewey[7]), or too severe for close hills with larger drops (as is Bridge[3]). In accordance with C1, the simplicity of dividing lines which are straight was to be preferred.

The two bases for classification, one for the Highlands and the other for use elsewhere in the British Isles, are now defined. In doing this the graphical approach is used. I emphasise that all separations in distance are to the nearest higher ground.

The Highlands

Draw a line connecting the two points 'zero distance, 150m drop' and '4 km distance, zero drop'. Then any hill on or above this line is a mountain (a Munro).

Draw a further line connecting 'zero distance, 30m drop' and '4 km distance, zero drop'. (The second point is the same as before.) Any hill below this second line is a minor top, while hills between the two lines (or on the lower line) are tops.

The end points defining these lines are selected both to match the current Tables as closely as possible (C3), and to use values which have gained widespread acceptability. 150m (500ft) and 30m (100ft) seem far and away the best values for height. There is no similarly obvious value to use

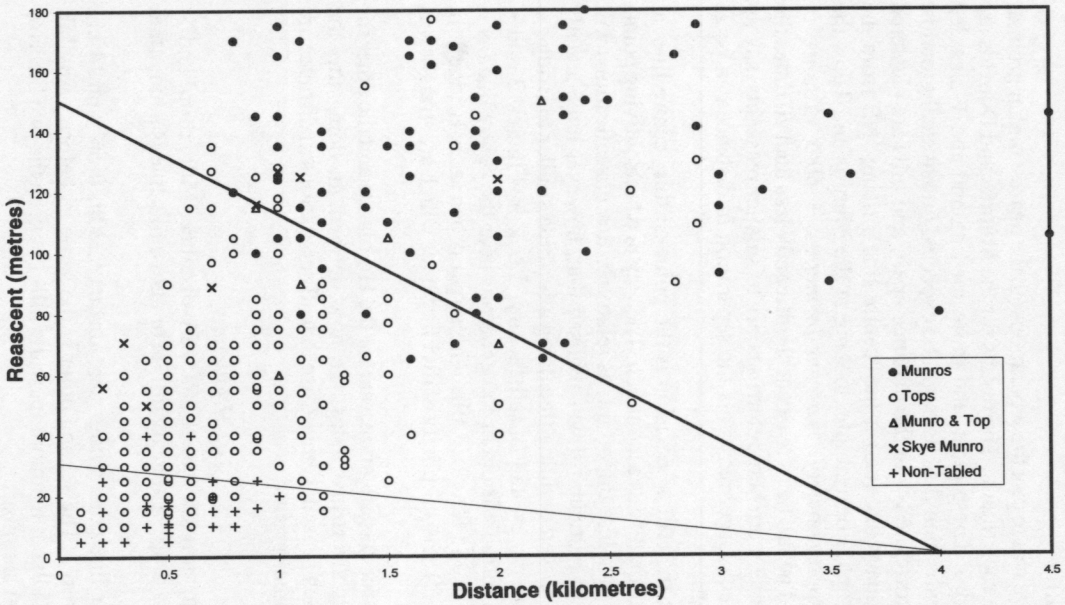

Fig. 3 – MUNROS AND TOPS

The figure shows all Munros and Tops with a reascent of 180m (600ft) or less and a separation in distance to the nearest higher ground of less than 4.5km (nearly 3 miles), plotted by their separation in distance and drop. The symbol indicates whether the hill is listed in the current Tables as a mountain or a top; Skye Munros are distinguished. A few hills not in the Tables are also shown, together with the proposed dividing lines. No attempt is made in this figure (or Fig. 4) to indicate that two or more hills should be plotted at the same point *unless they have different classifications in the current Tables.*

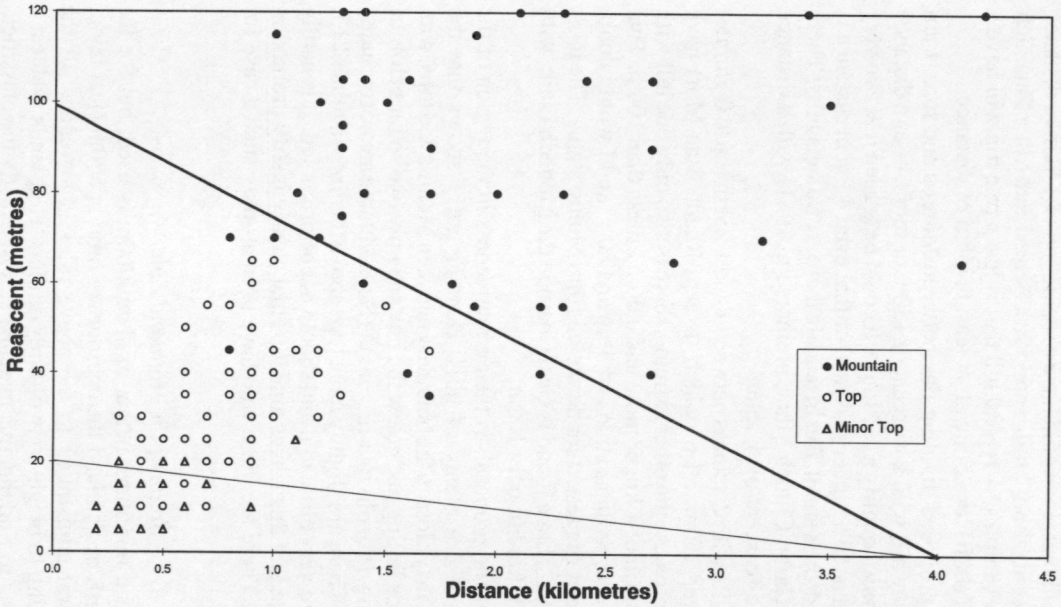

Fig. 4 – THE DONALDS

The figure shows all Donalds with a reascent of 90m (300ft) or less, plotted by their separation in distance and drop. The symbols indicate whether they are listed in Donald's Tables as mountains, tops or 'minor tops' (Section 13). The proposed dividing lines are also shown. Note that the separations are taken to the nearer 0.1 km in distance and nearly always to the nearer 5m of drop. There is thus no physical significance in the horizontal or vertical alignments. However it is clear that in only a handful of cases could more accurate measures affect the resulting classification.

for distance, so I have chosen the convenient one of 4 km (equivalent to 1 hour) – but this is the less critical parameter anyway. The upper line goes through points such as '2 km, 75m drop' and '1 km, 112.5m drop'. A 'typical' hill (i.e. one on the 'centre line' described above) that qualifies as a Munro by a small margin, would have a separation of 1.5km in distance and 100m of reascent (about 1 mile and 350ft). Beinn Liath Mhor Fannaich and Conival are examples. A typical hill that is just a true top will have a reascent of 30m (100ft), or 25m with at least 0.75km of distance.

To clarify the proposed dividing line between Munros and tops, I am suggesting that *any* hill with a reascent of 150m or more, or at a distance of 4 km or more, *must* qualify as a Munro. It could be argued that two very close hills should need a higher reascent, or that even 4 km of distance is not enough if the drop is small. But in real life there are no such hills! There is only one hill (Garbh Chioch Mhor, promoted in 1981) with a distance below 1 km and a reascent over 150m.

There are six hills with distances between 1 and 1.25km (up to 0.75mile) and reascents over 150m, all of which (except Ruadh Stac Mor) have always been Munros. At the other extreme, there is also only one hill with a distance separation of 4 km or more and a drop of less than 100m. That hill is Beinn Bhreac; its separation is 4.5km and 80m, and I would doubt that it has ever been suggested for demotion from Munro status. The most extreme outlier that I have found is Geal Charn in the Monadh Liath, with a separation of 10 km but only 100m.

The true test of the proposals is their effectiveness in the region of the graph where there *are* plenty of hills. Here Figure 3 shows that the proposed line is fairly close to the boundary between Munros and tops, with 12 current Munros falling just below the line and only two so far below as to be embarrassing. (For obvious reasons the Skye Munros are not included in this analysis.) There are slightly more tops above the line – a total of 17, of which eight are very close to it and should not be promoted. It is hardly to be wondered at that this leaves nine tops that clearly justify promotion to Munro status. There are those who have been arguing such a case for years.

South of the Highland Line

In the Highlands a minimum height of about 900m is used, but for the Donalds and Furth of Scotland the appropriate limit is 600m (just under 2000ft). A natural adjustment to the above rules is to reduce all the parameters relating to height to two-thirds of their 'Highlands' values; it was most pleasing to find that this matched almost exactly the classification system already derived independently for these hills. Thus the rule now becomes:

- Draw a line connecting 'zero distance, 100m drop' to '4 km, zero drop', and a further line connecting 'zero distance, 20m drop' to '4 km, zero

drop'. Then, as before, the lines divide the graph into three regions, of mountains, tops and minor tops.

There are two observations to make. Firstly, some might think that the distance parameters should also be two-thirds of those in the Highlands, leading to either (say) $2^1/_2$km in this rule, or 6 km for the Highlands. The latter would significantly worsen the match with Munro's Tables, and cannot be seriously considered. The former would allow some more current Donald's to remain as mountains, but is seems far too lenient – at 2km it would demand a reascent of only 20m. After all, the 50m of the proposed rule is hardly severe. Hence it was felt better and simpler to use 4km (1 hour) of separation throughout. Secondly, it may be thought that the lower limit for tops, which allows all hills with a drop of 20m to qualify, is rather generous. However the rule as proposed is a better match for the Donalds than 30m would be, and Bridge has many tops which do not qualify even using a 20m drop. Hence I concluded that it was better, on a matter in itself of little importance, to maintain the 'two-thirds' consistency with the Highland rules.

7. Some consequences:

It may be of interest to summarise the changes to the three lists in *Munro's Tables*[11] that could follow from the adoption of the proposed classification rules. It is useful to have a simple 'measure' of the amount by which a hill meets, or fails to meet, the minimum requirement, and for this purpose I use a value in metres. This is the difference between the *actual* reascent, and the reascent at the point on the dividing line with the *same separation in distance*. It is worth noting also that the likely error in estimating this measure is typically 5m or less (very rarely up to 10m) whereas in all cases where a change of status is proposed the value is much greater than this. Similarly, an error of 0.1 km in the distance estimate would alter the measure by less than 4m.

As already stated, most significant would be the promotion of nine tops to Munros. These are listed in Table 1 in descending order of 'merit' for promotion. The table also shows the eight tops which marginally qualify, but which I do not recommend for promotion. It is interesting (and convenient!) that there is such a large gap between the two groups of hills. Comment could be made about each hill, but I will confine myself to a mention of two. Firstly, the Affric Sgurr na Lapaich is often said to be the most worthy of Munro status, yet it ranks only fourth in the list. Secondly, the separation quoted in Table 1 for Cairn Lochan is measured from Ben Macdui. The separation from Cairn Gorm is 2.8 km and 116m, and the corresponding excess is 71m; Cairn Lochan is even more worthy of promotion when compared with the hill of which it is currently deemed to be a top.

Next would be the Munros that could be demoted to tops. There is one clear candidate: Carn Ghluasaid, which falls short by over 50m. Next is the

interesting case of Sgor an Iubhair, which falls short by nearly 30m. If a case is to be made for its retention as a Munro (a status it was only granted in 1981), it is presumably either because there are *two* drops (one of 77m and one of about 70m) between it and Sgurr a'Mhaim, or because of its location where an important spur meets the main ridge. As will emerge later I do not regard the first reason as adequate, but the second is a clear instance of a situation where editorial discretion may be appropriate. (All the other 1981 changes are quite clear-cut and their current status are consistent with these proposed rules.)

Other Munros which fall below the dividing line are Creag Leacach, Carn an Tuirc, Tolmount, Broad Cairn, Na Gruagaichean, Aonach Beag (Alder), Creag Pitridh, The Devil's Point, Creag a'Mhaim, Sgurr an Lochain, Saileag and Sail Chaorainn. The first four of these, as already mentioned, are part of a compact group of eight hills, all of which should retain the same status. Nearly all the rest have reascents of 90m or more, are close to the line and should not, I feel, be demoted. It is interesting that

Table 1.

Top	Munro	Sect.	Separation			Excess
			km.	m.	min.	m.
Stob Coire Raineach	Buachaille Etive Beag	3	1.7	177	43	91
Glas Leathad Beag	Ben Wyvis	15	2.9	130	57	89
Spidean Coire nan Clach	Beinn Eighe	13	2.2	151	48	84
Sgurr na Lapaich*	Mam Sodhail	11	2.9	109	54	68
Sail Mhor	Beinn Eighe	13	2.6	120	51	67
Stob na Doire	Buachaille Etive Mor	3	1.9	145	43	66
Tom na Gruagaich	Beinn Alligin	13	1.4	155	37	58
Stob na Broige	Buachaille Etive Mor	3	1.8	135	41	53
Cairn Lochan	Ben Macdui *(see text)*	8	2.8	90	51	45
Stob Coire Sgreamhach	Bidean nam Bian	3	1.0	128	28	16
Beinn Iutharn Bheag*	Beinn Iutharn Mhor	6	1.5	105	33	11
Sgurr na Carnach	Sgurr Fhuaran	11	0.7	135	24	11
Creag Dubh*	Cam nan Gobhar	12	1.7	96	35	10
Sgor Choinnich*	Sgor Gaibhre	4	0.9	125	26	9
Sgor an Lochain Uaine*	Cairn Toul	8	1.0	118	27	5
An Stuc	Meall Garbh (Lawers)	2	0.7	127	23	3
Coinneach Mhor	Beinn Eighe	13	1.0	115	27	2

TOPS THAT QUALIFY AS MUNROS

The 'excess' in the right-hand column indicates the difference – expressed as a time in minutes – between the actual separation and the nearest point on the proposed dividing line between Munros and tops. The nine tops in the upper half of the table are recommended for promotion but not the eight tops in the lower half. However, the hills marked with an asterisk (*) were Munros in the original (1891) Tables which were demoted in 1921. Consideration should therefore be given to promoting the four such hills in the lower half of the table as well.

although the South Glen Shiel Ridge is often regarded as having far more Munros than can be justified, only two of its seven mountains fail to qualify and one of those (Sgurr an Lochain) is extremely marginal. (Although Skye Munros cannot be assessed by the standard rules, I should mention Am Basteir and Sgurr Mhic Choinnich. Both have a reascent of less than 60m, below any other Munro apart from Carn Ghluasaid. However in each case the separation by the 'easy' route is much greater.)

As I have said, there are eight tops that 'just' qualify as Munros, and 12 Munros that could 'just' be demoted. The closeness of these two numbers is an indication that the dividing line is in the right place. It would be possible to move it slightly to reduce one of the numbers, or to ensure that all hills in the cluster in Section 7 fall in the same region of the graph; but if this were done then the corollary is that the other number would become larger. Such a change would also result in less memorable end points for the dividing line, and inconsistencies with the basis outwith the Highlands, and so I would prefer to let the inevitable 'fuzziness' at the boundary fall exactly as shown in Figure 3.

Lastly, affecting *Munro's Tables* are hills that justify inclusion as tops. (My proposals would not require the removal of *any* current tops, as they will all qualify for retention in the 'minor top' category, however small the reascent). I have found only three clear candidates: the SE top of Meall nan Tarmachan, the W top of Druim Shionnach, and Stob Coire Dhomhnuill near Carn Eighe. (For the second of these I am indebted to recent Tables by Alan Dawson[6]). These have reascents between 30m and 40m. There are a few more with a reascent of 25m or so that just qualify, and a few which may have recently been recognised as reaching the 914.4m level, but I

Table 2.

Donald Mountain	Section	Separation		Shortfall
		km.	m.	m.
Herman Law	7	0.8	31	49
Bell Craig	7	0.8	47	33
Swatte Fell	6	1.7	35	22.5
Lowther Hill	8	1.6	40	20
Hillshaw Head	4	1.3	55	12.5
Stob Law	5	0.8	70	10
Talla Cleuch Head	5	1.2	62	8
Tarfessock	10	1.0	69	6
Middle Hill (SW of Pykestone Hill)	5	2.2	41	4
Birkscairn Hill	5	1.4	62	3

DONALD MOUNTAINS TO BE DEMOTED TO TOPS

The 10 hills shown would be demoted to tops under the proposals herein. The 'shortfall' in the right hand column indicates the difference, expressed as a time in minutes, between the actual separation and the nearest point on the proposed dividing line between mountains and tops.

would not put them forward until more accurate measurements have been made.

As all Corbetts have a drop of over 150m, and will clearly all continue to rank as mountains whatever the precise criteria adopted, I now turn to the Donalds. There would be no promotions, and Table 2 shows the 10 mountains which would be demoted to tops under the proposed rules. At least half of these are demoted because the use of nearest higher ground gives separations significantly less than those measured to a mountain summit. Only the last four in the table, with shortfalls below 10m, could perhaps be retained at their current status on grounds of historical precedent. I have also identified six points not in the list which justify the status of top – Shiel Dod in the Lowther Hills is the most deserving example – but further work is needed to be certain that this list is complete.

8. Some points of detail:

It may be as well to cover a few less important matters, mostly of definition, relating to the proposed classification system.

When measuring the separation of a hill from the nearest higher ground, the distance should be measured along the connecting ridge. But in some terrain (Section 7 of the Tables, the south-east Grampians, provides excellent examples) 'the connecting ridge' is not clearly defined. In this case, and subject to the requirement that the route passes through the bealach (i.e. has minimum reascent) any natural route may be chosen. It is most unlikely that the choice will affect the emerging classification, but if there is doubt the lesser status should be selected.

The reascent or drop is simply the hill's height minus the height of the lowest bealach traversed. This definition stands even if there are intervening undulations (e.g., as in going from E to B in Figure 1); the extra height gain thereby incurred 'on the ground' is ignored. This is necessary as otherwise that extra height could lead to a status much greater than the topography justifies. (In theory, if not always in practice, the extra height can be avoided by contouring round the intervening bumps).

There is a potential problem if a hill is connected to higher ground along two high ridges. (I have not found any instance of a hill where it is necessary to consider seriously three or more ridges.) In determining the hill's status, clearly the lower must be chosen if they are different. If both separations lead to the same status, then the separation to be recorded is that nearer to the dividing line. Here 'nearer' is used in the same sense as the 'measure' of the excess or shortfall described at the start of the previous section. For an example, imagine the two separations given earlier for Cairn Lochan, plotted on Figure 3. This will usually result in the separation with the smaller reascent being chosen, but there are a handful of exceptions. Even in these cases a study of the actual topography confirms that the mountain to which the top 'belongs' should be determined by the 'nearer' separation.

One factor that does not enter into the proposed classification process is

the difference in altitude of the two summits being considered. To do so would infringe C1, and perhaps C5 as well. However, in marginal cases I can imagine that editorial discretion might demote the lower hill. Consider, as an example, the range comprising Beinn Eibhinn, Aonach Beag and Geal Charn, north-west of Ben Alder. The centre hill, in fact, has a separation of 1.1 km and 105m and just fails to meet the criteria for Munro status, but should certainly be retained as such on historical and other grounds. However, if it were only 950m high instead of 1114m, even with the same separation (i.e. the same drop), there is no doubt that 'top' would be the right status. This instance is purely imaginary. In fact, there are so few cases where a large difference between the heights of the hills might influence the allotted status that a formal rule would be overkill; the matter should be left for editorial judgment.

My final comment relates to the view that 'we should not promote Stob Coire Raineach [or Glas Leathad Beag, etc. – the equivalent point arose with the 1981 promotion of Mullach an Rathain] because Sir Hugh allowed only one mountain in cases like this'. I would have no quarrel with this if it were consistently applied, but it would mean that many small groups or ranges of hills would have only one Munro. Examples include Ben Cruachan, the two pairs adjacent to Loch Treig, Carn Aosda and Cairnwell, Sgurr Choinnich and Sgurr a'Chaorachain, Ruadh Stac Mhor and A'Mhaighdean, and Conival and Ben More Assynt. If you insist rigorously on a large drop between mountains a coherent list can be derived; but it is not the Munros. (A minimum drop of as little as 150m would leave Lochnagar, Glas Maol and Mount Keen as the *only* Munros in Section 7. If the intervening bealach had to be below 600m in height Glas Maol and Mount Keen would disappear as well). It seems to me that the argument that a complex hill should have but one Munro, whereas a range can have several, is forcing the classification to be driven by the naming practice of the OS in the 19th century. Since the OS still, a 100 years later, seem reluctant to accept that walkers and climbers are among the major users and determiners of hill names, I refuse to concede that names shown on current maps, let alone early ones, should dictate the content of mountain lists.

9. Conclusion:

Many readers, if they are still with me, will be saying: 'What is all this about? Why should we not retain Munro's Tables, and the Corbett and Donald lists, as an historical record, rather than try to evolve any sort of formal classification rules? Let others, if they wish, produce tables of hills on whatever basis they choose.'

This is a perfectly valid approach, and one with which I have some lingering sympathy. However, there are two reasons why I suggest that it is not the right one. Firstly, the pass has already been sold; many changes have been made to the Tables that have not resulted purely from resurveys. The tension between modernisers and traditionalists has meant that those

changes have often been an unsatisfactory compromise. Secondly, there is clearly now a demand for hill lists covering all of the British Isles to a limit of 600m if not lower. To this sympathetic observer, it would be unfortunate if the SMC, by maintaining the 'historical' attitude, allowed its rôle to be taken over by others. One consequence is bound to be a plethora of systems; whereas if the Club took the lead I believe that its views would command respect. Accordingly I conclude with a set of recommendations for the Club to consider. After the first, they are in what I expect to be the order of increasing sensitivity. It will be interesting to look back in five or 10 years to see just how far down this list we have proceeded!

1. The SMC should endorse a system of classification. Of course I should like it to be the one put forward here; but the detail is less important than the endorsement. It would also be useful if a standard usage of 'mountain' and 'top' could be adopted and given effect to consistently throughout the introductions to Munro's and Donald's Tables. At the same time

Table 3.

Hills	Current			Proposed				Proposed with lower limit			
	M	T	Total	M	T	N	Total	M	T	N	Total
Munros	277	240	517	285	175	122	582	311	204	142	657
'Furths'	20	14	34	16	18	5	39	18	19	6	43
Corbetts	221	–	221	221	–	–	221	210	–	–	210
Donalds	87	51 +28	166	77	66	26	169	86	81	40	207
Totals	598	333	931	592	259	153	1004	618	304	188	1110

SUMMARY OF THE EFFECTS OF THE PROPOSALS

The Table shows the numbers of Mountains (M), Tops (T) and Minor tops (N) in each of the regions under consideration on three bases. First, the current version of the published tables (using Hamish Brown's classification of the Furths). Secondly, using the classification basis proposed herein (with discretion used as suggested in Table 1, and retaining all current Skye Munros as such). And lastly, using that basis and *also* lower height limits of 900m, 750m or 600m as appropriate (and with 150m as the Corbett reascent qualification). The middle set of figures shows an increase of 8 in the number of Munros (i.e. 9, less 1 for Carn Ghluasaid). The final set includes a further 21 mountains of 900m or more which are currently Corbetts, and 5 hills which would qualify as mountains despite *not* meeting the Corbett criterion. It is notable that the Corbetts would gain only 10 hills in the 750m-761m range which is fewer than they would lose to the Munroes. It should be added that I have not found any hills with reascents of 150m but not 152m, but there could be one or two such, not yet identified. The totals in the final row of the table differ slightly from the preceding rows, as an adjustment has been made for the 7 Corbetts which are also Donalds. These overall totals in the final row are shown purely for interest, as it is not suggested that the lists are comparable (even without the Furths, the total of *all* 600m hills in Scotland would be much larger). In order to produce a fair comparison, minor tops are included above only if they are or have been tops in the published list or if they are fairly close to qualifying as tops. My own lists include a few more Munro 'minor tops', and considerably more in the Donald region.

the description of Donald 'minor tops' should be brought into line with the actual practice.
2. The classification of the Donalds should be changed as described.
3. The hills that justify 'top' status should be included in Munro's Tables.
4. The nine tops recommended in Table 1 should be promoted to Munro, and Carn Ghluasaid (at least) should be demoted.
5. Eventually, the minimum altitude for a Donald should be taken as 600m and that for Munro's Tables should be 900m. For Corbetts the minimum altitude should be reduced to 750m, the maximum to 900m and the minimum reascent taken as 150m.

By way of a summary, Table 3 shows the number of mountains and tops (and my own count of minor tops) on three bases: the current published Tables; the Tables as modified by the rules proposed herein (with discretion exercised as suggested earlier); and the Tables with the addition of hills down to 900m or 600m as appropriate. (Interestingly, this last change would allow the inclusion of every hill that has *ever* been listed in the Tables – bar one. That one is Sgurr na Creige, north of The Saddle. And the number of Corbetts would actually be reduced, to the benefit of the Munros.) I suggest that the numbers on the third basis support my view that all the above changes could be made without in any way detracting from the quality and authenticity of *Munro's Tables* and the other *Tables of Lesser Heights.*

Finally, I should like to acknowledge the help given by the librarians of the SMC and the Alpine Club, without whose willing grant of access to their collections this paper could hardly have been written.

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SCOTTISH HILL-NAMES – THE IRISH CONNECTION

By Peter Drummond

THE SCOTS and Irish share a common Gaelic heritage, and many hill-names are mutually understandable. This can sometimes lead to a little confusion. Like the Irish climber we met on the windy summit of Croaghan (Cruachan, naturally) on Achill Island, 500m above the Atlantic surf – where else to engage in talk of place-names? – who was puzzled on his recent visit to Ben Nevis to spot signs to Aonach Mor. He came from the town of Nenagh, in Irish An Aonach, the word there meaning a fair, market or assembly. In Lochaber no more is aonach a fair, but a ridge-shaped mountain: in exchange for this information he confirmed to me that the seeming paucity of names of hills on the Irish OS maps was a reflection of the map-makers, not the locals for whom every cnoc had a name.

Our own party could get confused too. We were savouring the prospect of the huge horseshoe culminating in Ireland's highest, Carrauntoohil, from the outflow of Lough Chom Luachra (loch of the rushy Corrie). An Irish father and his son were nearby, the boy excited and chatty: as they left, Ian, normally the party's sage, said – in a serendipitous manner – that they had pronounced the hill's name just as we would of Cairn Toul in the Cairngorms. I had to warn him of the risk of bringing Irish place-name study into disrepute, for the map clearly showed the Irish original of Corran Tuathail – certainly not cairn of the barn – and usually translated as inverted reaping hook. The Irish dictionary gives corran as a hook or sickle, and tuathail as left-handed, wrong, or widdershins: though interestingly, cor tuathail is given as kink.

The summit, two hours later, was a stunning viewpoint, and – befitting its position on the edge of the Atlantic – had echoes of Europe. The huge crucifix of black iron girders was Alpine, the distant views of blue hills and yellow sandy estuaries were Welsh, the close patchwork of hedged fields in the northern view was quintessentially English, but the names to south and east were Scottish – bens and mullachs, bruachs and cruachs, and as many cnocs as you could take. The team that day (for cognoscenti) were Beenkeragh, Mullaghanattin, Broaghnabinnia, Cruach Mhor, and Knockmoyle representing a crowded subs' bench of cnocs. There is even a Buachaille, mapped as Boughil.

The connection between the two Gaelics on either side of the Irish Sea was made not by the Scots, who were 'planted' in Ulster from the early 17th century, but by the Irish tribe known to the Romans as the Scotii who settled in Argyll from the 5th century, and gained territory and influence, political and linguistic, throughout the first millennium and beyond. But the two Gaelics, like British and American English, may have sprung from the

same watershed but found different glens to follow, and became distinctive. This is particularly true of hill-names. After all, Irish Gaelic was the language of a people whose territory was mainly lowland – until the Cromwellian evictions to the west in the 17th century: while Scottish Gaelic territory was mainly highland. The Scots therefore had more practical need of a fuller range of hill-words.

One language, two vocabularies:

One difference that emerges from a study of the two sets of hill-names is that the Irish stock is smaller, not surprising in view of the much greater mountain mass of Scotland. Of some 60 Scottish hill-name elements that occur several times here, only about 20 have exemplars in the Auld Sod. Some others – like ceann (head), dun (fort), sail (heel), sgor (rock pinnacle), sidh (fairy hill), sron (nose) and stuc – are found in the Irish dictionary, but didn't take on flesh in a hill-name: while others still, even though common in Caledonia, seem unknown to Irish Gaelic altogether – such as bidean, monadh, sgurr, stob, and stuchd.

Of course, if Gaelic in Scotland invested its Irish talents well, as youth often does when liberated from the bounds of the parental home, it also forgot a thing or two – or, possibly, in the parental home new tricks were learned after the brood had left. For Irish Gaelic has hill-words like ceide (for a flat-topped hill, as in Keadeen Mountain), screig (rocky place, Skreigmore being on the Carrauntoohil horseshoe), mas (a thigh or a long low hill, Masatiompain on Dingle peninsula), and the splendid obvious stumpa (Stumpa Dulaigh, 784m) – none of these seemed to have sailed with the south-westerlies across the Irish Sea.

But even among those hill-names that are found in both countries, often one word in common contains two quite different descriptions. Consider the four most common Scottish hill-names: beinn, meall, sgurr and carn. Carn exists in Irish Gaelic too, but is almost exclusively used for a pile of stones, usually a burial marker, and not as a hill as in Scotland: the apparent one exception is Carnaween (carn uaine?) in Donegal, standing above an old graveyard on its southern flanks. Sgurr does not exist at all in Ireland, being probably of Norse origin. Meall, with the same 'lump' meaning, is confined entirely to hills in Munster, south-west Ireland, and has no significant representation in the higher hill-names – while in Scotland there are 1000 examples, some of them Munros.

And beinn, chief of the Highland hill-clan, while its roots lie in the Irish beann or binn, a horn or antler, there are few in Ireland, perhaps a 10th of the large number in Scotland: and in further contrast to Scotland they are not the highest hills but the middle-sized ones. The largest grouping are in the west, in the range known as The Twelve Bens of Connemara (The Twelve Pins to those English ears who mistake the soft consonant of the gael). We climbed the highest, Benbaun (binn bhan, white – from its

limestone upper mass), leaving 11 for a day with less Scotch mist: the Gaelic name is Beanna Beola, lips mountains.

Irish emigrants' fortunes:

There are three hill-names that dominate in the higher Irish hills, as listed, 200-strong, in Paddy Dillon's guidebook; cnoc, ben and slieve. Cnoc dominates the higher hills in the south and south-west, including the MacGillycuddy Reeks (properly Na Cruacha Dubha). It is common in Scotland too, but only for lower hills. Ben dominates the west in and around The Twelve Bens and Connaught. Sliabh – usually anglicised to slieve – is the main Irish mountain name in the north and especially in the north-eastern Mourne Mountains: there are more than100 occurrences of slieve in Bartholomew's Gazetteer, thrice the number of bens, and nearly as many as cnocs.

All three of these main Irish hill-names crossed to Scotland. Like all emigrants they had varying fortune. Cnoc flourished, but only numerically: from being one of the elite in Ireland naming many high hills, in Scotland it sank to a much lower social level, being applied generally to knolls. Ben (or beann) was the great success story, becoming the main Scottish mountain word and marrying into the top families, from Ben Nevis (Beinn Nibheis) downwards.

But what of poor sliabh? Logically, it should have been the front-runner in colonising the Caledonian world, from its heartland in the north-eastern Mountains of Mourne, running down to the sea, in sight of the Scottish coast. There are several on Islay and a few in Argyll like Sliabh Ghaoil, mountain of love – where a nasty fate caught up with eloping Diarmaid and Grainne. There are a few sliabh names on Speyside, but the word there means a moor or slope of a hill, not a summit. In western Galloway there are a number of hills called slew, a name suggestive of sliabh bending to a foreign tongue like grass in a gale, forced down onto minor hills of under 400m. Flattened thus, it failed to disperse its seed from these slender Scottish beachheads to the broad sunny uplands beyond.

But many other seeds fell on fruitful ground in Scotland, blossoming in new forms in fertile upland territory. Cruach (or cruachan) means, in both countries, a rick of hay or peat, and by transference a hill, usually with steepish sides: Ireland has the high Cruach Mor and the holy Croagh Patrick (respectively an O'Munro and an O'Corbett), Scotland has Cruachan itself and Cruach Ardrain. The latter also contains the element ard (height), which in Scotland is usually found in mere settlement names (Ardrossan, for instance) while across the water it is often a substantial hill like Ardnageer at 644m in the Blue Stacks.

Dun is another hill-name element that changed a bit in the crossing. In Ireland it means a fort, usually a prestigious one, home and castle to a prince or king: but there are no excavated authentic examples of a hill-fort on a dun. In Scotland dun (sometimes spelt dum) does mean a hill-fort, and is

found everywhere, from Edinburgh's Castle Rock (dun-eidinn), Dumyat (the hill-fort of the Maetii), Dumbarton Rock (hill-fort of the Britons), to Dun Cana on Raasay and hundreds of others, many with legends of battle attached. Two other Irish words for fort or castle are caiseal and cathair, and the last of these is the source of Caher, the bold peak on the Carrauntoohil horseshoe: perhaps the concept of hilltop as castle was the inspiration of Scotland's several caisteal peaks, like the shapely granite tor of Arran's Caisteal Abhail. Most caisteals – figuratively not historically named – lie in the south-west, many in sight of Ireland.

Shedding light on Scottish names:

Knowing the Irish genetic inheritance of some names can help us understand them better. Take cul, which in Scottish Gaelic translates as 'back of (anything)' – which leaves Cul Mor and Cul Beag a little short on explanation. In Irish, the word originally referred to the back of the head and was then transferred to hills of that shape, like Coolmore in Donegal. Inverpolly's Cul Mor now makes more sense, as a steep-sided close-cropped hill! Or take Conival – several – and cognates Cona Mheall, an elusive name in the North West. There is a Convalla in the Wicklows, which Paddy Dillon's book *The Mountains of Ireland* 'translates as ceann an bhealach, head above the pass: a plausible interpretation, certainly, shedding light over here.

Further daylight can be cast on the common name-element suidhe, the individual hills Ladhar Bheinn (Knoydart) and Vinegar Hill (where?), and the uncommon but distinctive names with adjective preceding noun. Sui means seat and in Ireland is often used for the reputed resting places of saints and figures of legend, for instance Seadavog for St Davog in Donegal and the several Seefin hills – one of them just west of Carrauntoohil – from Suidhe Fionn (the legendary hunter). He had a seat in Skye too on Suidh' Fhinn above Portree: and other suidhes often have personal connections in the Irish style – Suidhe Fheargais on Arran (Fergus – first king of the Scots), or Suidhe Chatain on nearby Bute (St Chatan).

Ladhar Bheinn of Knoydart is usually translated as hoof or claw mountain, aptly enough. In Ireland ladhar is a place-name element indicating a convergence of rivers or hill-ridges – quite thought-provoking in a Scottish context, too. Vinegar Hill is less well known: it lies east of the dreary Drumochters, and is said by early 20th century toponymist, Alexander MacKenzie, to be a corruption of a'mhin-choiseachd, the easy-walking one. But for such a corruption to stick must surely have been due to the fame of Vinegar Hill in Ireland, which is anglicised from (Cnoc) Fiodh na cGaor (field of the berries), but was given real fame as the site of a major battle. Perhaps someone passing along the Mounth had heard of it in Ireland and made the Scottish parallel, which stuck.

In Gaelic, adjectives usually follow the noun, as in Beinn Mhor. In older Scottish Gaelic the order is sometimes reversed, usually with adjectives of

colour, size or age, especially in the west. (See my argument, SMCJ, XXXV, 1993, 351-352). We find this pattern in Ireland in places, confirming its origin in their Gaelic – hills like Seanleeve (Sean shliabh, old hill), Glasdrumman (glas dromainn, grey-green ridge) and Beglieve (beag shliabh, small hill): but curiously, no big hills as in Scotland's several Morvens, while we in turn have no beagbheinn.

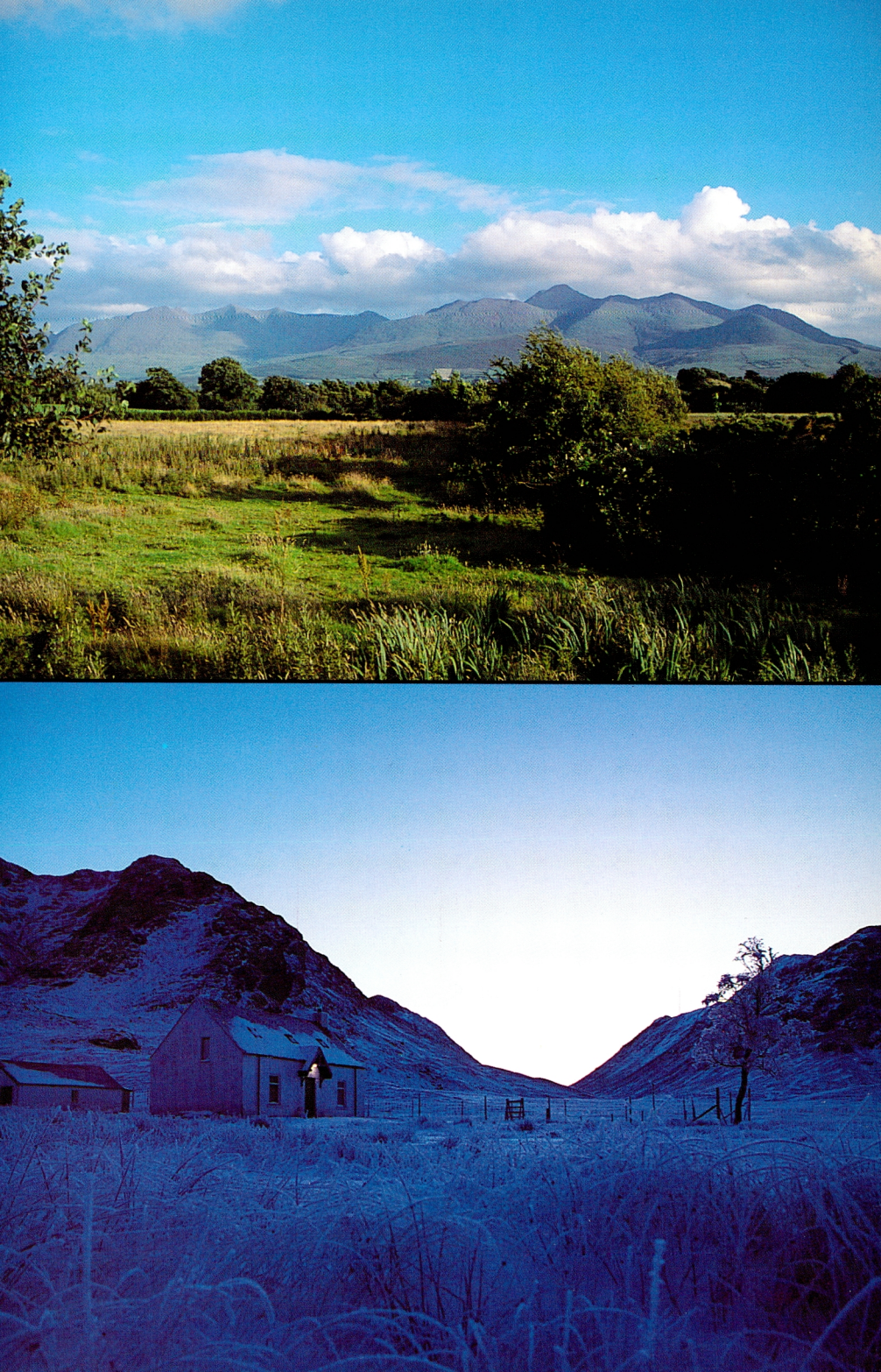
There is another Irish place-name element worth holding up to the Scottish scene – cuilleann meaning a steep slope. We look anew with raised eyebrows at our Cuillin hills (Rum and Skye). Their name has been the subject of considerable speculation, with one uniquely Irish connection proposed, by the eternal romantic Walter Scott, suggesting a link from Cuchullin, Ossianic hero. Others – present author included – have argued for a Norse connection from kiolen. Now cuilleann, steep slope, is certainly apt: but two facts stand ranged against it; that almost every high hill-name in Rum and in Skye are Norse (the individual Skye sgurrs were later names within the Cuillin cirque); and the absence of cuillean names leapfrogging from Ireland up the south-west and the southern islands, as might have been expected – with the possible exception of Gualachulain at the foot of steep Beinn Trilleachan.

And what can the connection be between the devil mountains? In Scotland we have The Devil's Point in the Cairngorms, a Victorian figleaf for the original Bod an Deamnain, devil's penis. Over in County Mayo stands the hill Devil's Mother at 645m. Its original name appears on the bilingual Irish OS map as Magairli an Deamhain, literally the devil's testicles. The Gaels clearly shared the earthiness of many peoples before organised religion pulled faces at the practice. Iceland, for instance, whose Vikings had linked Scotland and. Ireland too, has a mountain called Uptyppingur, which appears to mean erect penis – without the Gaels' devilment! But I digress from the Irish connection

An Irish legend echoed:

But one of the most striking gems of our 1996 Irish expedition, an emerald of a hill, is Ben Bulben (Beann Ghulbain) near Sligo. Not very high at 525m – not even an O'Graham – and indeed really a subsidiary top of Truskmore. But who could failed to be moved by its dramatic appearance, a flat plateau top of considerable depth suddenly rounding over 90° to drop vertically down in the western cliffs, rough-seamed by gullies, to a steep, but easing, slope running down to the coastal plain. In plan like a ship's bow, in profile like the prow of a Phoenician warship. Now gulban in Irish (and Scots) Gaelic can mean beaked, or more specifically the curlew. But authoritative Irish work links it to Irish hero Conal Guiban: and the mountain is home to the legend of Diarmaid, Grainne and Fionn. Told in one sentence, the former, lover of the second (which made the third jealous) died at the tusk of a fourth, the hill's wild boar, but only after Fionn had spitefully denied him a sip of the hill's life-saving water. The legend clearly had Arthurian

Evening light on MacGillycuddy's Reeks and Carrauntoohil, Ireland. Photo: Niall Ritchie.
Early evening at Lagangarbh with 20° frost in prospect! Photo: Matthew Baker.





dimensions, for the tale seized the contemporary imagination among the 'exiled' Gaels in Scotland. And there are five or six hills of this name – in addition to many places linked to one or other characters in the soap legend – chief among them being Ben Gulabin in Glenshee. In almost all of these cases, nearby features – lochans, rocks, hill shoulders – usually carry the name torc, the boar. Ben Gulabin is also – perhaps coincidentally – a flattish-topped, steep-sided, and prow-nosed hill.

Cloud and drizzle restricted our appreciation of Ben Bulben on 1996's Hibernian trip to the view from below, from the church graveyard of a different hero, W. B. Yeats. The ascent is straight-forward from the north, the back-door route, as I had found a few years earlier on my first exploration of the island. It took me less than an hour. As I approached the trig point, louping over the boggy pools, two curlews flew up from the rough moor.

MOVE

A lark above the quarry,
beyond the sheep cropped turf, piping
a march across the summer light
and a climber trembling in silhouette.

Hand, shaken out to ease the tension,
cancel the heat effects,
dismiss the bird's distraction,
floats back to the sharp edge of the
moment.

Eyes scan for flake or fissure,
memory holds, hard facts issue
no second chance, no rehearsal.
The lark rises on a summer thermal.

Donald M. Orr.

The Coire Lair approach to Sgorr Ruadh. Photo: Alastair Matthewson.
Aerial view into the crater of the erupting Mount Ruapehu, New Zealand. Photo: Iain Young.

A PARTIAL HUT ROUTE

By Bob Richardson

THE ARTICLE by Alec Keith (SMCJ, XXXV, 1995, 625-628) on his athletic cross-country traverse of all the SMC Huts in four days prompts me to add some comments. The idea of an SMC Hut Route had been floating around for a year or two before Alec's trip in 1994. The geographical location of the huts offered the opportunity to carry out a lightweight and, for SMC members, cheap route through a large sector of the Highlands. There was also the physical challenge of covering the distance in the minimum number of days. Hamish Irvine and I had talked about it briefly and, learning of his schedule, I timed a maintenance trip to CIC so that I could watch him limp in at the end of the second day of his successful four-day trip. I myself had contemplated the idea for some years but had never (as usual) done anything about it. Anyway, now the thing has been done, I feel free to add my bawbee's worth of comment and record my efforts in the genre. Either in whole or in part, a Hut Route is potentially the best extended hillwalking (or running) expedition in Scotland.

The route as followed by Alec and Hamish is a Hut Route, but it isn't a Haute Route. I had always felt that, to be ethically satisfactory, such a trip must involve a significant number of summits in a logical progression. This implies either taking more than four days or being very fit. The geographical situations of Lagangarbh, CIC, Raeburn and Ling are tempting, and form the apices of a considerable range of hill country, but the distance involved in getting to Ling from either Raeburn or CIC turn that leg into either a rapid and exhausting exercise in the horizontal, or a multi-day epic with a long stretch between interesting hills. The legs of a route between the Central Highland huts are all accomplishable in one day. Also, by starting from Raeburn and going across country to Lagangarbh, Alec and Hamish had (a) taken the easy option, (b) left out the most interesting leg – that between CIC and Raeburn. My preferred route would have been Lagangarbh, CIC, Raeburn, Ling. This offers the best opportunities to use the run of the ridges in a more or less high-level route. I had jokingly suggested to Hamish that a handicap system be established with a 'par' time of 70 hours and a reduction of one hour for every Munro climbed from the actual time taken. This would encourage some interesting tactics to record a minimum handicap time.

My initial interest came from a suggestion of John Gillespie's some years ago for a weekend trip from Lagangarbh to CIC and back. This seemed like a good idea, but the weekend chosen was wet and the most memorable aspects of the trip were the mist, cold, and a number of hazardous stream crossings. We went over the old road to Kinlochleven and then round the back of Sgor Eilde Beag, and then along over Na

Gruagaichean to the col before Stob Coire a' Chairn before dropping down to cross the Nevis Water and eventually cross the CMD arête to reach the CIC. The next day we took a more direct route back along the track from Achriabhach to cross the Mamore ridge at the col east of Stob Ban. That weekend was an educational experience in survival but convinced me that, given a reasonable state of fitness and decent weather, such trips could be fun. On a later occasion, heading for Lagangarbh from Tyndrum via Ben Alder Cottage, I spent a glorious sun-soaked day from CIC traversing from Mullach nan Coireachan to Na Gruagaichean en route to the Devil's Staircase and Lagangarbh. This leg, in either direction, is highly recommended in itself. Of course, Ben Nevis and Tower Ridge should be included by the non-geriatric.

In July 1995, I was due to go up to CIC to paint the interior. It is one of the Custodian's privileges to have the opportunity to have the Hut to himself for a few days and spend them washing down walls and throwing paint about. Over the years, I have been remarkably lucky in the weather on these trips and have usually managed a ridge or two in the lunchbreak or in the evening. With the Hut Route in mind and aware of the need to test out my ideas about the CIC to Raeburn leg, I negotiated an open ticket with my wife, packed my bivouac bag and took a single ticket on the Fort William bus.

I arrived at CIC on a dreich, damp Sunday evening. There were two Grampian Club members in residence but they decided to flee the next day (whether this was due to my painting activities or the weather is open to discussion). Monday it drizzled and there was nothing to tempt me from my labours. By contrast, Tuesday dawned bright and clear (it was in fact, the first day of the glorious late summer of 1995). By three o'clock the main room had received a single coat of paint and, unable to resist the temptation, I set out for my annual canter up Observatory Ridge. This is a great route to do solo on a good day, although it is at its best on a late June evening with the sunlight streaming up the Allt. The climbing is sufficiently exposed to keep the attention from straying but not so technically demanding as to discourage one from admiring the rock scenery around. I reckon it to be the best solo scramble on the Ben.

The top was reached in 65 minutes from the Hut for the second year in succession, proving that the days of sub-60-minute ascents were behind me. Passing quickly through the throng on the summit, I headed for the top of Tower Ridge and descended to the Hut. On the way down I had the malicious pleasure of meeting, just above the Little Tower, two lads I had passed at the foot of the Douglas Boulder on the way up. Leaving them suitably impressed, I continued down to the original descent route into Observatory Gully and arrived back at the Hut in 2 hours and 10 minutes from starting out. I was obviously not sufficiently unfit and decision time was upon me.

The prospect was not altogether pleasing. I was far from my previous fitness levels, had a decrepitating knee, inadequate food, and would be carrying more weight than ideal. The plan was to go over Aonach Beag and the Grey Corries and then continue eastwards in two days, climbing as many summits as appeared sensible. I had a bivouac bag, sleeping bag and mat, but no stove. My food supply was mainly decomposing cheese, raisins and trail mix with a couple of packets of noodles to be consumed at Raeburn. Some semi-respectable clothing also had to be carried for the bus journey back to Glasgow. Altogether, some serious effort would be called for. With any luck it would be raining in the morning.

At half-past five the next morning the sun was warm, the sky was cloudless and the Bullroar slab was bone dry. I had no excuse. Shortly after half-past-six I started up the long drag to the summit of Carn Mor Dearg, keeping the pace down and stopping frequently to gaze across at the Ben. The sun was high enough to illuminate everything but the Orion Face and it was an impressive and rare sight to see so much of the north face picked out in detail (no camera of course). An uplifting start to what was going to be a long day.

The drop down the other side to the bealach took me out of the sun and then I went reluctantly up the dreary slog to the Aonach Mor – Aonach Beag ridge. Dehydration was one of my main concerns and I took care to fill a litre bottle at the stream off Aonach Mor as I knew there was likely to be no good water until beyond Stob Choire Claurigh. The replenishing of the water bottle was to be a constant concern over the next two days as, although never running, I was constantly pressing on. Passing over Aonach Beag, there was a dramatic contrast between the bare, wind-scarred earth on the summit and the lush growth of grasses just a few hundred metres farther east and at only a slightly lower altitude. A remarkable example of the effect of a change in micro-climate. From previous experience on an afternoon ramble from CIC, I knew that the direct route to the east col from the end of the ridge was an interesting example of high-angle grass and once was quite enough, thank you. The safer route is to go south along the ridge towards Sgurr a'Bhuic until just past the top of the slabby buttress (the one with an interesting overhanging wall on its north face) and then drop eastwards to pick up the line of the old march dyke and fence across the bealach to Sgurr Choinnich Beag.

The next section over Sgurr Choinnichs Beag and Mor and along to Stob Choire Claurigh was delightful; the legs still fresh, the sun warm but with a cooling breeze, the visibility good – a total contrast to the last time I had been on this ridge on the back half of a mist-enshrouded Tranter round and pushing to get it finished by dim daylight. This time I had the opportunity to enjoy the views and, at closer hand, examine the curious patterns made by the slow-growing lichens on the quartzite, their intersecting circles making designs reminiscent of Pictish patterns. The rock was also deco-

rated with crampon scratches; reminding me that, one February many years ago, Jimmy Marshall and Robin Smith had come this way, taking a day off from their legendary week step-cutting new routes on the Ben. When I got home I dug out my copy of the entry in the old SMC Hut Book and it is worth setting out in full (spelling and punctuation as in original):

11th Feb. Carn Mor Dearg, Aonach Beg, Sgurr Coinnich Beg, Sgurr Coinnich Mor, Stob Coirie nan Easain, Stob Coirie na Claurigh, Beinn Bhan.

R. C. Smith, J. R. Marshall (Through leads).

Timetable: 1200 HOURS: Left CIC.
1835 HOURS: Entered Spean Bridge (Bar).
1920 HOURS: Entered Bus to Fort W.
1945 HOURS: Repulsed from Hell's Kitchen.
1946 HOURS: Entered Rendez-vous.
2000 HOURS: Left (Nae Juke Box) for Jacobite Arms.
2030 HOURS: Entered Argyll Bar, Dominoes.
2100 HOURS: Left Argyll Bar.
2110 HOURS: Arrrested.
2115 HOURS: Police station: Interrogation, Confession, Humiliation
2155 HOURS: Dismissal.
2200 HOURS: Further reiving.
2205 HOURS: Peaing Session.
2215 HOURS: Entered last Corpach Bus.
2225 HOURS: Distillery.
2350 HOURS: Re-Entered CIC.

Now, that's what you call a rest day.

From Stob Choire Claurigh my logical route would have been over Stob Ban and down the south ridge to pick up the track to Creaguineach Lodge, but I had never climbed the Easains so I headed for the Lairig Leacach bothy. Coming down the corrie I came across a burn running in a little gorge. Two small waterfalls, a rowan tree, a patch of grass – a little Xanadu among the peat and heather. I stopped to eat the rest of my rapidly-decomposing cheese and a rotting banana. If it had been later in the day I would have been sorely tempted to bivouac there. As I sat beside the burn I reflected how many of my epiphanic moments among the hills were connected with this combination of water, rock, surrounding hills and sky.

However, the Easains and distance called and I went down to pass the bothy to cross the headwaters of the Allt na Lairig. As I approached the bothy, I saw a male and a female standing down at the stream and another

male outside the bothy. Passing the couple, I wished them 'Good Day'. No word in reply, only vacant stares and a half-grin from the man. Up at the bothy the other male was urinating beside the gable end. Leaving these couthy bothy folk to their Highland idyll, I crossed the Allt na Lairig and headed for Stob Coire Easain.

If you are going for distance, even lightweight hill-walking boots will become heavy on the feet after a while. I was wearing a pair of hill running shoes with high ankles which are ideal for summer hill-bashing but with these on my feet and about 12 kilos on my back, the screes on the north-east ridge of Stob Coire Easain did not look inviting. To avoid them, and stay on grass as much as possible, I dog-legged right and left across the west side of the hill. This delivered me almost to the summit without setting foot on rock and had the additional advantage of taking me past a number of springs of cold water which issued from between the prominent bedding planes of the rock. On the summit it was a relief to drop my sack and trot across to Stob a' Choire Mheadoin.

As I was ascending the slope to the summit I saw a file of men coming down. Evenly spaced, wearing T-shirts and long trousers, with uniform style of rucksacks, they signalled the military. As I passed about 20m away, no-one as much as looked at me. After this and my encounter at the bothy I began to wonder if I was invisible or was already a ghost. Coming back from the summit of Stob a' Choire Mheadoin it was my turn to think them ghosts for they were nowhere in sight. Now, I am not yet too slow on my feet and only a few minutes had elapsed, but they must have ascended from the col to the summit of Stob Coirie Easain at some pace. Resuming my now noticeable load and glad to have the last summit of the day behind me, I wandered down along the south ridge. This is a magnificent stroll, good going underfoot, gently undulating downwards with wide vistas to east and west. Highly recommended.

Eventually, as the ridge began to rise again, I dropped diagonally down to cross the river. (It was running low but this could be a difficult crossing after heavy rain.) As I approached the Allt, I heard whistles blowing and could see figures running about in the heather about 100m up the opposite slope. Obviously, military games were in progress. Their rucksacks were neatly lined up beside the path. Impressed again by their fitness and reassured about the expenditure of taxpayers' money, I strolled on.

This is a lovely strath. The alder trees beside the water are huge in girth, there are wide meadows of good grass, the stream flows over rock slabs and through deep pools. It invited stay, but I was locked into my immediate goals and continued on. This glen, and it's neighbour of the Aimhann Rath, seem to convey an atmosphere of times long past, of people's presence and the passage of cattle along these old ways through the hills. Few places in the Highlands have given me such an impression of an old landscape and former way of life.

After the pleasures of the last miles, the huge expanse of mud and rubble exposed by sorely shrunken waters of Loch Treig and the sad debris and dereliction of the Lodge changed the mood. The first time I had passed the Lodge (back in the Fifties) there had been children's toys outside and a swing in the trees. Now it was only a store for the recent clip of wool. Across the bridge and on along the track to Corrour I began to relearn the discipline of marching on the level. It was now after six o'clock and I was somewhat surprised to see a girl of about 10-years-old come towards me on a mountain bike. She was followed by her father, also on a bike, wearing a Panama hat and with a fishing rod strapped to his bike. They reassured me of my corporality by greeting me, but where they were going at that time of day and where they had come from I was left to wonder. I followed their tyre tracks all the way through the boggy bits up to Corrour Station.

Beinn na Lap had been on my mind since the Grey Corries. It was a logical part of my 'high level' plan but to get from there to Beinn Eibhinn looked unamusing from my study of the map. The alternatives from the summit were to go north-east across some probably boggy ground towards Strath Ossian House and then slog up the steep east side of the glacial trough, or to take a longer but easier line eastwards towards Corrour Lodge and skirt above the forest. Altogether, Beinn na Lap had lost attraction as the day wore on and, anyway, I had to leave some room for improvement on my route for the younger generation. To avoid any last-minute temptation, I took the road along the south side of the loch.

It was now well into the evening and I reckoned I had done enough to justify stopping for the night. About two-thirds of the way along the loch I saw what I was looking for. Down at the shore there were the remains of a fire and a pile of dead wood alongside a fairly level patch of grass. Obviously, a spot where anglers had come ashore from a boat. I unrolled my mat, unpacked my bivouac bag and sleeping bag and lit a fire. Being able to cook some noodles and brew coffee was an unexpected bonus and as I lay in my bag with the little waves lapping on the shore, the embers of my fire still glowing, and the mass of Beinn na Lap bulking against the still luminescent sky it seemed like a damn good day.

Of course, the wind dropped at midnight and the inevitable ensued. The next five hours were spent buried deep in my bag dividing my time between dozing and killing midges. Shortly after five in the morning I carefully planned the exact sequence of rapidly-executed movements which would be required to get me dressed, shod, packed and on my way with minimum torment. These executed, but not rapidly enough, I went on my breakfastless way through the silent woods at the beginning of what promised to be another fine day. Once on the move the midges were not a problem and I padded along the edge of the road to the foot of the loch. Not a dog barked as I passed the houses.

I stopped to eat at the bridge over the Uisge Labhair. The sun was already

warm and it was pleasant to sit on a rock slab at the side of the stream enjoying the sight of the rushing water coming down over the slabs with the hills rising up on either side of the broad glen. There was a feeling of light, space and the promise of another fine day on the summits. At my back there were planted trees, estate roads and houses but, facing to the east, I could only see the open strath and the hills. The planned route lay over Beinn Eibhinn and the summits to Loch Pattack, so I turned off the track leading east to the Bealach Dubh and headed northwards over the rising moor to Glas Choire.

Undoubtedly, the best way to do long cross-country trips is solo. You have the advantages of being able to make your own pace, shout, curse, sing, and generally achieve an appropriate state of mind. If you are travelling hard, the falling glycogen levels and rising endorphins can generate a state of elated weariness which is not unpleasant and is best enjoyed in solitude. Solitary travel satisfies a basic human need and to do it in fine weather over remote hills is a rare pleasure. The problems arise if you do something stupid, but risk-free enterprises are boring by nature. The foregoing philosophy did suffer a temporary dent when I put a leg into a heather-obscured hole in the ground heading up to Glas Choire and pitched forward to wrench my decrepit knee. Waiting for the pain to subside, I had the opportunity to estimate the time required to limp back to Corrour. However, subside it did and I limped on. (Incidentally, a telescopic ski stick is strongly recommended for this game. Invaluable for stream crossings, emergency crutch and general flourishing to celebrate the joy of being.)

The isolated range of summits from Beinn Eibhinn to Carn Dearg form a gently undulating, mainly grassy, ridge with wide prospects. They cry out to be run on a sunny day. My years and condition, and the now noticeable heat kept me to a walk and, once again I regretted not having tried this trip years ago. Second-day fatigue and the heat kept my pace down and the heat had generated a haze that reduced visibility, but it was fine to stroll eastwards on this high broad ridge looking down into the broad corries on the north side and over towards the hills between me and Loch Laggan. (Another possible variant to the route?) The going was good. In some places, especially the plateau east of Geal Charn, the grass was like a hay meadow and yet (pace the comments in the Central Highlands Guide) I saw no deer or any other sign of life along this whole ridge. This plateau also held the remnants of a snow field and I was glad to refill my water bottle where the stream fed by it plunged over the lip down to Loch an Sgoir.

East of Carn Dearg, I was disinclined to follow the rise of the ground over the last top and turned north-eastwards to descend to the obvious track in the glen below. Besides, my water bottle was empty again. Even on the ridge the heat was now uncomfortable. On the way down I passed through considerable numbers of deer – the only ones I saw on the whole trip. The

track led me easily down to Loch Pattack where the heat was now really oppressive. The sight of cultivated grass, fences and the general air of human presence brought about a need for mental re-orientation. Solitary hill travel can change your perceptions. This feeling of unreality was reinforced as I approached the junction of the estate roads at the east side of the loch. A man and a woman on mountain bikes appeared from the east and disappeared down the grassy road towards Laggan. They were dressed as for a cycle run in a city park, carried no packs, not even a cycle pump. Their casual approach to this 'wilderness' through which I was laboriously walking was unsettling. I felt cheated.

Beyond Loch Pattack my route took me up the side of the wood and over the long stretch of gradually-rising moorland to the southern end of the ridge leading to The Fara. Glycogen levels were now running low, the heat was uncomfortable and there was no water. As I wearily slogged up to the distant ridge over the dried-up moor I thought enviously of Hamish jogging down this ideally-angled descent. (Alec had opted for the low-level route along the Loch Ericht track.) At last, the broad swell of the ridge top was reached and I went more easily along with the expectation of a gentle stroll to my last top. Having walked off my map somewhere east of Geal Charn, the considerable drop and re-ascent came as an unpleasant surprise. However, progress continued and somewhere in the haze ahead lay The Fara and a (presumably) downhill finish.

Now I was walking along wearing running shorts, with a salt-stained Lifa vest rolled up to cool the costals and a bandanna tied round my skull to protect the back of my neck; a bumbag slung to the front, a rucksack on the back and a pair of sunglasses on an unshaven face completed the ensemble. The three neatly-dressed hillwalkers – long trousers, sleeves rolled down against the sun, neat sun hats, map case at the dangle – appeared up a dip in the ground so fast that I did not have time to even whip off my impromptu keffiyeh. They were polite although obviously startled and allowed me to look at their map in order to check my route intentions. Leaving them to continue southwards, I went on to reach the little stone hut that marked my last summit.

When planning my route I had decided that the aesthetic finish was to strike north from the summit of The Fara and head across to Loch Caoldair from where there is a path down to the road close to the Raeburn. This looks alright on the map and avoids the long tarmac plod along the road but I should have known that going across the grain of moorland is never a good idea. This last stretch involved knee-high dead heather, bogs, positive thickets of bog myrtle and three deer fences unequipped with stiles. Not recommended to the weary. (Hamish by contrast, starting off fit and frisky on his Hut Route, had found this line quite acceptable.) At last, I came under the crags and down to the loch. I had previously walked up this way from the Raeburn a couple of times and remembered it as a pleasant stroll

along clearly-defined paths. Either through my weariness or rampant growth of the local vegetation, I now had difficulty finding the path and fought through the undergrowth until a more evident path was found at the little boat house. After that, the way was relatively easy down past the lochan to reach the road and the final 100m or so of tarmac along to the Hut.

Twenty-seven hours of travelling and just over 5000m of ascent (the distance is unmeasured and is fractal anyway). This route could be run in the daylight of a summer day and would be one of the finest mountain runs in Scotland.

All the way along The Faras I had been looking forward to reaching the Hut and having a shower. As the ground was dry and frequently cracked I should have known this was a delusion. True enough, the water pump spat out about a pint and then coughed to dryness. I managed, with difficulty, to get enough water out of the burn for a wash down and to cook a packet of noodles. Later, I hitched down to the phone box at Catlodge to report my survival. Naturally, it wasn't working and I was so disgruntled that I walked the whole way back without trying for a lift. Truly, it is better to travel than to arrive. The next morning I walked over to Dalwhinnie and through stopping for a coffee and a bacon roll, missed a bus by five minutes. Two hours of lying in the sun beside the A9 passed pleasantly enough before the next one arrived and took me south. I am told that I was quite quiet for a few days.

Further Thoughts and Suggestions:

There is obviously no one Hut Route and that is one of the beauties of the concept. Every traveller can design his own and do it in one grand sweep or in discontinuous sections. A good challenge would be to run between Lagangarbh, CIC and Raeburn in a weekend. With a support party at the huts, this should be within the capabilities of a fit mountaineer or the average hill runner.

Having argued the case for a CIC to Raeburn (or reverse leg), and executed it, I have left the problem of connecting Raeburn and Ling at the theoretical stage. The most logical route north from Raeburn would involve a long road and track section over the Corrieyairick Pass to Fort Augustus. From there the path over to Glen Moriston could be followed and then it would be back on the road up to Loch Cluanie. Then it's Munros *a la carte* all the way to Achnashellach. Depending on the number of summits, this could take two or three days. I suppose I had better try it some time. The complete trip would occupy a week, but I may leave that to someone else.

A MERRY DANCE

By Malcolm Slesser

I FIRST noticed it out of the corner of my eye. It worried me like some irritating piece of dirt. It was May and crisply clear, a day when breathing air was like the first sip of a good claret after a hors d'oevre of vinaigrette. It was way back when Smart was still a frisky acolyte doing solos on Salisbury crags. It was early in the day, and when I at last took in this distant dark speck there were few shadows to bring it into relief; nor could I tell if it was steep. Nor was I sure upon which hill it lay – I was relatively new to the Highlands then. But it looked interesting. Well you all know the feeling. You file it away for future reference; only I forgot.

Years later, I think, I saw it again, only I didn't know it at first. This time it was nearer and more in profile. Wallace and I were skiing the south Cluanie ridge at the Easter meet in 1983. It was just a glimpse between blatters of hail. Even as one-time general editor of SMC guides I couldn't recall this crag. Bill was ahead isolated by the screaming wind so I couldn't ask him. Bennet, who has edited the latest guide would know (he has a memory like a CD-ROM), but then you know what guide book editors are like. They're never going to tell anyone about a new crag until they've had first crack at it, are they? Think of Lurg Mhor and Roger Everett.

But with Bill ahead, and some exacting slopes to deal with, the whole matter slipped my mind till I got home.

It took some time with the maps to place it. There was nothing in the *SMCJ* to say Bennet had got there first. The thought of a sizeable unclimbed crag raises in a climber a sort of naked desire that makes sex seem trivial. My chance came one lovely June day when, having an Indian climber to entertain, we headed north. It is quite a responsibility showing off our native hills to a Himalayan veteran. Fortunately Scotland, the fickle mistress that she is, was decked out in all her beguiling loveliness. Not a hint of the foul mood she occasionally puts on. We had tent, gear and food. A perfect prospect, and my friend was game for a carry in.

Actually, we couldn't see the crag from where we camped, a tiny patch of greensward alongside a nascent burn, with a gnarled old birch guarding us. I warned my friend that the crag might turn out to be that usual thing of some rock bulges interspersed with grassy ledges; no belays and no drama and no route. As we came round the hillside on a rising traverse the first vision was of an upper bulge that looked distinctly out of my class. At the foot, there were happily no cairns, no arrows or 'I LOVE DB' scratched on the rock, no fossilised human droppings, not so much as a sweetie paper. Could this really be virgin territory? The urge to climb overcame my natural timidity. The impending crag looked rather severe. I briefly wondered whether I should wait for a larger, more competent party with a block and tackle. No-one would ever find us here if we ran into trouble. But

my friend was enthused. The rock, I was glad to see, was not quartzite – a rock I tend to distrust, but rough and holdworthy.

A rowan stuck out of a crack 6ft up, and I rapidly belayed to it, thus, as politeness demanded, giving the first lead to my guest. The crack petered out some 30ft above, but seemed, anyway, to reach beyond the immediate bulge. Anja, for it was he, grabbed the rowan, stood on it, and surveyed the wall, his brown hands delicately exploring the texture of the rock. Suddenly he was off, moving in smooth *pas de bas,* hooching a little (it seemed appropriate), and had gained the top of the crack at the crest of the bulge before he came to a prolonged stop. I dozed in the glorious morning sun, watching the light flicker on the lochan below. It was then I heard a sound not heard for many a year. The ping-ping-ping of a piton being driven in. No wonder the man's sack had been heavy. Anyway, it reached that delicious note of high C, and two hoochs later six more feet of rope had left my hands. Pause. No scraping, no remarks, not even heavy breathing. And then as if a decision had been made, the rope slowly left my hands – 40, 50, 60ft. 'I'm at a belay,' he shouted down, with an undoubted note of jubilation in his voice, but it could have been the nervous shout of someone who wanted to share his predicament. I didn't spoil it by asking.

It was nice, and after the piton (which I had to leave in place, having no hammer), it was without any possibility of runner, rather like the top pitch of Ardverikie Wall. The next pitch was mine, and I was happy to see that we were tied on to a massive chock embedded in a V-crack. There wasn't much of a stance, but the way ahead looked just my speed, slabby, if thin, but with nice sideways over-lapping rock that would surely take nuts. And so it proved – just like the first pitch of Spartan Slab. The rock, getting warm by now, lured me on and on, from runner to runner, until just when I felt the weight of 130ft of rope proving too much there was the ledge, commodious with a massive boulder behind. To my satisfaction it was not a ledge one could walk off. This really was a route. I sat on a heather couch and could scarcely pull it in as fast as Anja climbed. 'That was just a dance,' said he. And so it was. We called it the fox-trot pitch.

Above, things seemed a trifle more strenuous, but my leader was unabashed. Now girt with some of my nuts he struck off to the right and into shadow, searching for weakness. I had already schooled him, given my cowardly nature, of the need to put in plenty of runners. After running out half the rope the only sign of life was an occasional twitch and a continuous avalanche of tufts of heather and moss. Anja is a Buddhist. For him to destroy nature thus must mean something desperate was going on. This was emphasised by the whirr of a passing stone. I shrank into the rock face.

This third pitch, when it came to my turn offered an explanation. After the steep slab there was a short wall, whose top surface had an hour before been covered with moss and heather. It was succeeded by yet another short wall. And no placements, either. My struggle to the top was quite a tarantella. 'Mine too,' he said.

Pitch 4 legitimately fell to me. I viewed it with a mixture of awe and apprehension, wondering whether the time had come to mention my advancing age, number of dependents etc. etc. Frankly, I'm not now too good 10ft beyond a decent runner.

Well 10ft up, there was such a runner, and though the crag was now more holdworthy, it was also steeper. A chimney broke the face above, offering the comfort of the womb as I perched with my back on one side and feet on the other, searching for that essential belay. Ahead was one of those interesting moves where the rock is overhanging, but within the chimney one could actually rest. Good thing. My power to weight ratio is not what it was. With two tiny nuts in place I forced an unwilling mind into the next upward movement. Surely soon I could honourably give up and pass the lead to my friend, but as I looked down, my confidence in being able to retreat was undermined by being able to see the whole of the face beneath. Upwards it would have to be. Actually, the holds were not bad, and with a set of movements reminiscent of a Strathspey step (I was humming an auld Scots air to keep my cool) I ascended what proved to be no more than severe. A jug presented itself, to which I gratefully looped a long sling, and whooped with joy at seeing a line of holds for the next 20ft. Then life came to a stop. The rest looked distinctly for the new breed of climbers reared on exercise machines and climbing walls. I settled for an excellent nut belay, for I had one decent foot hold, and called up Anja, who wafted up effortlessly. 'The waltz pitch,' he said.

He was now like the bull fighter honed for the finally rapier thrust. I could sense his excitement, his belief in himself. With a glint in his eyes he relieved me of the gear and went forth. The chimney had given way to a crack, disappearing out of sight. Anja moved as only one with a superbly fit body and trained mind can move. Delicately, without hesitation, from minuscule hold to sloping edge and on again. I was quite certain I did not want him to fall off. I tried to reinforce my confidence by re-examining my belay, but it seemed increasingly inadequate. By now he had topped the crack, and I saw his hands move out of sight. Then a mantelshelf, a grunt, a pause and call for me to come.

I would never have done it without a rope from above. It took me back to some terrifying moments on the Campanile Basso. 'What shall we call this pitch,' I remarked 'fandango?' He shook his head: 'Just a merry dance.'

My turn, pitch 6. The fact that I was still alive and well encouraged me to reflect on the wisdom of proceeding farther. We were on a commodious shelf, ideal for a bivouac, enlivened by a garden of roseroot and saxifrage. The sun beat down, creating in me a drowsy enjoyment of my situation, with no desire to alter it. The wall above overhung. It was perfectly clear to both of us that I could never lead such a pitch. The good news, as far as I was concerned, was that after several sorties up a few feet and back again, Anja came to the same conclusion. With the smugness that comes from

climbing mountains rather than mere crags, we opined that this pitch was definitely for the new breed of crag rats, and that wise old (and middle-aged) mountaineers should now retreat. And this we did.

You may wonder just where is this crag. I leave this mystery as a bequest not to my generation, or even the one after that, but to the new generation, who now make the rules. But when the climb is finally completed, may I suggest it be called – The Merry Dance.



BEN NEVIS – THE TOUGH WAY

By Alec Keith

There was an obscure exchange of FAX and E-mail messages on p.744 of the 1995 SMC Journal for which an explanation has been requested.

THE 1990s offer some great opportunities to celebrate the achievements of the pioneers by making a few sporting centenary ascents. You can get a strange sense of satisfaction from pulling on shabby, moth-eaten old clothes and, armed with little more than a few conversational gambits, spending the day clinging to some mossy classic, secretly longing for your rock-boots and a rack of Friends. You too can savour the situation, as a union of porphyry and Harris tweed interposes the most slender obstacle to an airy slide into the glen. And this sub-sport is growing in popularity, with no less than two separate teams being reported on the North East Ridge of Aonach Beag in April 1995 – although there are lingering doubts about the then President's ethics in choosing to use the gondola for access.

While the pioneers put up many fine climbs, I've always been more impressed by the lengths they had to go to get to the hills, something easily overlooked by today's motorised mountaineers. But few measures can have been as extreme as those adopted by William Brown and William Tough to climb the North East Buttress of Ben Nevis on May 25, 1895. As centenary climbs go this was an obvious plum, even if it was only to commemorate a second ascent. And so it was that in the early months of 1995 the buttress became an object of ambition to a large circle of climbers, the chief topic of the smoke-room at night and the focus of many critical glances during the day.

Tough and Brown's efforts involved a 45-hour marathon effort from Edinburgh by a bewildering variety of transport, and recreating their journey was obviously going to be far more bother than getting up the North East Buttress. That was one of the idea's main attractions, but speedier forms of rail travel (Scotrail's efforts notwithstanding) meant that the trip would have to be done much more quickly. Preferring others to do my planning, I looked around for an open-minded logistician for company, but found only Derek Bearhop. Bearhop showed initial promise, his administrative skills honed at the cutting edge of the Civil Service. But it was either Bearhop or the West Highland Railway that refused to fit in – the point is still in dispute – as it was soon clear that, for Derek to take part, Tough and Brown would have had to have done the whole thing by car at

the weekend. Only a little persuasion was needed to enlist Matthew Shaw in his place. A climber of impeccable historical pedigree and the grandson of G. G. Macphee, Shaw exhibits many of his forebear's habits, having a natural affinity for grass and an obsession with the collection of the obscure. (Is there anyone else whose *Munro Tables* show that their owner, having bagged all the hills in the book, has then made a start on ticking the list of Compleaters, both alive and dead?) Moreover, he was already a veteran of other re-enactments such as the notorious Black Shoot and a gondola-free visit to Aonach Beag's North East Ridge. But for every plan he hatches he has a clutch of sub-plans incubating, and I lived in fear of being dumped.

The amount of travel, the expense, and the general lack of sleep which our plans entailed would have been utterly repulsive as applied to anything but the North East Buttress, but it just had to be done. In the week leading up to the big day we were faced with a couple of minor crises, both caused by what passes in this country for a rail network. The first difficulty, Scotrail's policy of only allowing one bicycle on each train on many services, even on the main line from Edinburgh to Inverness, was overcome by renovating an old folding shopper bike which could be passed off as hand-luggage. The second obstacle was more serious; having run/cycled from Kingussie we would need to catch a train which passed through Tulloch at 8am, but this was the infamous Deerstalker express, due for the chop the very next day and, as it was a dozer service from London, you were not allowed to get on anywhere between Glasgow and the Fort in case you woke somebody up. It seemed that you could get off anywhere if you really insisted. Scotrail were quite certain that they wouldn't be stopping for us.

There seemed little we could do in the face of such customer-hostility. Perhaps we could hold up a sign on the platform to tell the driver that the wrong sort of leaves were on the track and jump on when he stopped? But even if that happened the train would probably still be packed with anorak-clad types savouring the thrill of the last ride of the Deerstalker. The alternative was to jog an extra 10 miles to Spean Bridge then hitch to the Fort. Again this was utterly repulsive, but there was a certain gloomy satisfaction that we were doing something quite out of the common, which deepened in gloom as our arrangements waxed in originality. We decided just to turn up at Tulloch and see what happened. We also sensed a perverse symmetry in our dilemma as it was due to time-tabling difficulties with the then recently opened West Highland line that Tough and Brown were forced to adopt their convoluted approach to the Ben in the first place.

To my relief, and mild surprise, Shaw appeared on time at my central Edinburgh flat on the Wednesday evening, and we made our way to Waverley with an assortment of bikes, sacks, a hawser-laid rope and a



Above: Matthew Shaw (left) and Alec Keith outside the Alexandra Hotel, Fort William before setting off on their centenary climb of the North East Buttress of Ben Nevis.

Below: The intrepid pair on the summit. Photos: Keith Collection.

couple of G. G.'s old axes, our outfits causing a few raised eyebrows among the capital's more fashion-conscious citizens. The train ride proceeded without incident and we got off at about 10.30 or so. Very grey and miserable was Kingussie when we reached it, rain was falling dismally, and a dense white mist hung low upon the hillsides. We pedalled west for a few miles in the dark to Laggan, and here made a minor departure from the original itinerary to join in at a party to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Laggan pottery coffee shop. Luckily, the revellers were already sufficiently well oiled to not need too many explanations about us or what we were doing; we were made welcome, wine flowed freely, and an ethnic clothes seller took a keen interest in Shaw's plus-fours. Some time well after one we were put in an office and rested fitfully until four when it was time to crawl down to the kitchen to have breakfast and sneak away without waking the pottery's dogs.

The morning was heavy and dull as we cycled for three miles or so to a spot just before the Falls of Pattack where the road used to contain a hump on which it was possible to get a university minibus, its passengers and a trailer airborne. No such fun today, however, as the spot is even more famous as the place where Brown tells us that there was 'a sudden report, resembling the simultaneous opening of six bottles of Bouvier' . . . followed by Tough's despairing cry: 'Your tyre's punctured.'

Planning for this incident had given us many hours of innocent amusement. Inquiries at off-licences for Bouvier had produced no more than blank looks; we compromised on Taittinger but only bought one bottle as our livers were less absorbent and our finances decidedly more limited than those of Tough and Brown. The bottle made a pleasingly loud report, but we were uncertain as to how to dispose of the contents. We drank most of it while wrestling with this dilemma, then put the last bit in a cycling drinks bottle. I hid the shopper in a ditch, Shaw unsteadily mounted the remaining bicycle with a pyramid of ropes, axes and rucksacks piled up on his shoulders, and I started jogging along behind in my boots. You may not have tried running in boots before – my advice would be not to. My knees' advice would probably be to not bother with the running either.

We operated in three-mile shuttles, Shaw choosing some ethically more relaxed footwear for his share of the running, and we leap-frogged each other from time to time, each suspicious that he was doing less cycling and more running than the other. The sun was making a feeble demonstration, but its rays passed almost unnoticed in the moral gloom which now fell upon the expedition. Soon we had settled into a distrustful rhythm and knocked off the 16 miles to Tulloch in a couple of hours. Here we abandoned the remaining bicycle and sat down to have a rest and nervously wait for the arrival of the Deerstalker.

Guy Lacelle high on 'Terminator' V,6+, Mount Rundle, Alberta, Canada. Photo: Alan Kerr.

Our fears about the train proved unjustified; it stopped, we got on without waking anyone except the guard who said we shouldn't but that we could, and we completed our journey to Fort William in comfort on a mattress unaccountably located in the guard's van. This success put us in the Fort at 8.30, so we reckoned we now had time for a full breakfast in the Alexandra Hotel – justifiable, of course, as this was the base used by the pioneers 100 years before, albeit for lunch.

An hour or so later we were sweating off an uneasy mixture of bacon, tea, eggs, toast and sausages as we flogged up the grass slopes of painful memory that lead up by the tourist track from Achintee past the Halfway Lochan and round into the deep cleft of the Allt a' Mhuillinn. A few bodily disorders developed – our ageing trousers itched, we were pretty shattered after our early start, and my own system was still suffering from a bad sailing experience a few days earlier. We staggered over the bouldery path under the dark and dripping crags of Carn Dearg and the weather began to cheer up, the sun shone occasionally and a blustery wind helped dry the rocks. The CIC came into view and the winter snow gleamed cold and ghastly out of the gloom as we skirted round the steep frowning basement of the North East Buttress into the foot of Coire Leis. Clouds were moving rapidly across the summit as we followed what must be the original line rightwards up grotty loose ledges and moss to gain the buttress. It was most exasperating to find, wherever a friction grip was necessary, how persistently one's sodden knickers and boots kept slipping on the wet mossy surface, and how unreliable was the hold thus obtained.

On reaching the First Platform we rested by a small stone man, our climb towering, crag over crag, above us – an inspiring sight. After a while Shaw woke me and we made rapid progress up the ridge, pleasant scrambling over slightly greasy rocks with a few more awkward steps blocking our way from time to time. I wobbled around, still mentally and physically at sea, and took my time while Shaw prospected the route ahead and tried not to get too impatient with me.

Eventually, we found our way barred by a steep little bastion. Though this is now known as the Mantrap, it seems from Brown's description that it was to the slabby rocks on the left that the pioneers were referring. Shaw was keen to avoid the historically correct line and tackle the pitch direct so I had to remind him of the ethics of his situation and drove him at the point of my axe to explore the rocks on the right. This was the original line, nowadays justifiably avoided, but we were soon standing at the base of the Forty-foot Corner. A soggy rope lay strewn on the rocks beneath us, witness no doubt to someone's recent winter epic. We roped up for this pitch which Shaw led in fine style by a series of ape-like lunges from polished ledge to polished ledge until there was nothing more to climb and

we raced up the last few feet of the ridge into sunshine on the top of the Ben. No overflowing hospitality in the Observatory for us though, not even a mug of steaming coffee. We had a bite to eat and knocked back the last of the Taittinger, but then some very noisy trippers were approaching so we turned and fled the summit, enjoying a glissade down the Red Burn before the usual body-mashing back down the track to Achintee.

We reached the Nevisbank Hotel at five, in good time for the next stage of the journey. Being the less wasted of the pair of us, Shaw headed off to the Alexandra to send the appropriate fax to the Journal Editor to advise him of our success while I lay in the sunshine and looked out for our driver. Tough and Brown had taken the mail-gig back to Kingussie, an option not available to us. However, Hamish Irvine has a red Post-Office type van and had allowed himself to be persuaded by offers of whisky to return from his Inverness work to his Aviemore home via Fort William. He turned up more or less on time though we were a little disappointed by the casual approach he had taken in dressing for his cameo role in the proceedings.

We headed back east to Kingussie, stopping on the way to pick up our abandoned bicycles and the empty champagne bottle, and to collect our stuff from Laggan, arriving with five minutes to spare before the Edinburgh train left. As the bike space was already taken, only the shopper came with us, the other being left with Hamish to sort out another day. The Editor, however, was not there to welcome us on our return to Waverley at 10.10 that night, after 27 hours of (almost) continuous travelling.

As we get older, so the noteworthy centenary ascents will start getting harder, and it'll be time to look for other objectives . . . such as bicentenary ascents. See you in the queue at the foot of the Dee waterfall on Braeriach on July 17, 2010.

I must acknowledge heavy reliance on William Brown's excellent article, *The N.E. Buttress of Ben Nevis.* SMCJ vol 3, p. 323 et seq, used both for inspiration and for quotation but left unacknowledged in the text for an easier read. A bottle of Taittinger is offered to the first Club member to correctly identify all 19 borrowed snippets – entries by December 1, 1997. The Editor's contribution in the last Journal should be attributed to Gilbert Thomson. Thanks also to Matthew Shaw for his helpful suggestions on what should be done with this article.

Editor's note: Mr Keith and his various press-ganged companions are to be congratulated for their sustained efforts to return to the energetic and inspired times when the Club was young and every route was new. This may be a time for those who sniff at new-routing to take stock and remember what it's all about. For those without access to the original Brown article, it is reprinted in *A Century of Scottish Mountaineering.* I have no doubt that the bottle of Taittinger will be won. Finally, to remind interested readers, Tough was apparently pronounced *Tooch.*