

CÀRN EIGE AND MAM SODHAIL.

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CÀRN EIGE and Mam Sodhail, on the borders of Inverness and Ross, are the two highest hills north of the Caledonian Canal, and probably among the most inaccessible in Scotland. By this is not meant that there is difficulty in their actual ascent; in point of fact, on their heathery slopes and moss-covered uplands, one could almost ride a pony to their highest points. The inaccessibility consists in their distance from any public place of resort. When it is stated that they are some 18 miles from Shiel Inn on the west side, and the same from Glen Affric Hotel on the east, the truth of this will be easily seen. If the mountaineer wishes to explore this lonely district, the best way, in fact the only way, is to put aside all expectation of ordinary comfort, and to tackle it with nothing but a knapsack for luggage, taking one's chance at the few foresters' or shepherds' houses to be met with by the way. There will thus be found, save perhaps during the actual shooting season, a ready highland hospitality, a bed, and simple, yet substantial, fare.

I had had some experience of this kind of life for about ten days in Glen Strath Farrar last May, spending a delightful time rambling over the breezy summits of the many 3000 feet tops that flank this beautiful glen. Crossing over An Riabhachan (3696), and Sgùrr na Lapaich (3773), I easily obtained quarters at a forester's house at the west end of Loch Mullardoch in Glen Cannich—a convenient basis for climbing the Mam Sodhail range. Perhaps the most comprehensive way of doing this range, as well as the best way of viewing it in its most characteristic aspects, is to begin work at the eastern spur, Tom a' Choinich (3646), walking from thence in a westerly direction along the magnificent ridge to Càrn Eige, and then, turning south, scale Mam Sodhail. From this point you may descend back

to Glen Cannich by the Gleann a' Choinich, or cross over into Glen Affric by the track which leads down the Coire Ghaidheil.

An excellent shooting path, which zig-zags up the steep northern shoulder of Tom a' Choinich, led me with a minimum of toil to a height of about 2500 feet; here the path degenerated into a track, and trended easterly, so I kept to the ridge and gained the top in about two hours' time from the loch. The summit is marked by a small badly built cairn. A delightful ridge walk of about four miles now lay before me. The ridge, relieved from monotony by three or four ups and downs, never descends below 3100 feet, and presents no difficulty; it is a mere walk, though in places the going is somewhat rough and stony. It is flanked on either side by great corries, but as far as I could judge from a hasty survey, no rock climbing in the strict sense of the word could be had among them, for the general nature of the ground might be described as that where the division between what is perfectly practicable and what is absolutely impossible is always sharply drawn.

In another two hours I was standing beside the large cairn which crowns the summit of Càrn Eige (3877), the highest hill in Ross-shire, and thirteenth in order of altitude in Scotland. The day had more than fulfilled all expectations, and the most distant points in the horizon stood out in unrivalled clearness. It is not often one has the rare good fortune to make out with the unaided eye Macbrayne's steamer crossing from Strome Ferry to Portree on the one side, and on the other the dark sails of the fishing boats rounding the Black Isle in the Moray Firth. Away in the south-east lay the Cairngorms, a long and somewhat indistinct ridge, their height so little in evidence that they ran the risk of being unobserved. Looked at from this point, Cairngorm's rounded top lay farthest to the left, the neck-band of snow in Coire Cas being easily recognised. More to the right the high flat tableland of Ben Muich Dhui; then Braeriach, with its three well-known north-facing corries picked out in snow. Sgòran Dubh was somewhat lost, as the ridge tailed off

towards Glen Feshie. Over the dull table-land of the Monadh Liadths the tops of (the Athole) Beinn Dearg (3304) and Beinn a' Ghlo appear. The Creag Meaghaidh range (3700) is the next great mountain mass in the horizon. A prominent dip separates it from Beinn a' Chaoruinn (3437): through this dip I easily recognised Geal Charn (3688) in the Ardverikie Forest, with just the tiniest bit of Ben Alder (3757) appearing over his right shoulder. To the right of Beinn a' Chaoruinn Beinn Eibhinn (3611) appears, while far away in the distance, peeping up over his west shoulder, Ben Lawers (3984) is seen. The Corrour Hills—Meall a' Bhealaich (2771), Sgòr Gaibhre (3128), and Carn Dearg (3084)—come next. Much farther away in the same direction I could dimly distinguish three lumpish-looking hills, probably some of the Glen Lyon hills, above Innerwick; nearer hand Cnoc Dearg (3433), just at the east side of Loch Treig. Then the two graceful peaks of Stob Choire an Easain Mhoir, the west peak rising to a sharp point (3658). More to the right the splendid ridge of Stob Coire an Easain culminating in the high peak Stob Choire Claurigh (3858). In the gap between this and Stob Choire an Easain Mhoir I could make out away in the dim distance Beinn Creachan (3540) and his outliers at the head of Glen Lyon. Binnein Mòr (3700) next, then Aonach Mor (3999), Càrn Mòr Dearg (4012), crowned by Ben Nevis (4406). Ben Nevis looks extremely well from here, its magnificent north-east face, with all its ridges and masses of naked rock, standing out in profile. Sgùrr nan Conbhairean (3636—3634 in *one-inch* map) rose up almost due south, and only some eight miles away, into a sharp and stately peak. Far away in the same direction Bidean nam Bian (3766), that grand mountain mass which dominates over everything in Glencoe, could be plainly seen; also the twin peaks of Beinn a' Bheithir at Ballachulish and another of the Benderloch Hills, probably Beinn Sguliaird (3058). The two "sugar loafs" of Sgùrr nan Ceathramhan (3614) and Garbh-leac (3676) are no great distance off. Then the many peaks of Lord Burton's forest about Loch Quoich—among others,

Spidean Mialach (3268), Gleourach (3395), and Sgùrr a' Mhóraire (3365). In the distant horizon were Gulrain and Sgor Dhomhail, in Ardgor, the latter being distinguished by its peculiarly shaped flat top. Sgòr na Ciche (3410) stood out well, its last 500 feet rising to a sharp point. Ladhar Bheinn (3343), with its flat ridge sharply terminated by a precipitous drop on either side. The Saddle (3317) and his dependents—this is a fine-looking hill, shewing some good pinnacled ridges. Sgurr Fhuaran (3505), at the head of Loch Duich, the summit of which is like a cone with the tip sliced off horizontally. Then Beinn Fhada's flat range (3383). South-west and quite near Beinn Fhada is the high hill Sgùrr nan Ceathreamhnan (3771), sometimes mistaken for Beinn Fhada, from which fact, doubtless, the latter (popularly known as Ben Attow) has so often been accredited with 4000 feet of elevation. The peaks of Rum, South Uist (the most distant hill seen is Beinn Mhor, 82 miles off), Skye and Lewis, with the sea so still, so blue, flowing between them and the mainland. Then the Torridon Hills—Alligin, Liathaich, Beinn Eighe, dark, grim, and foreboding, Slioch's great mass, the Teallachs, with Suilven and the other Sutherlandshire giants. The long, flat ridge of An Riabhachan immediately to the north on the other side of Glen Cannich shuts out any detailed view of the many peaks to the north of Loch Monar. Sgùrr na Lapaich, a large yet well-proportioned peak, behind which are the rounded gray uplands of Sgùrr Fhuar-thuill (3439) and Sgùrr a' Choir Ghlais (3554), while much farther away in the same direction appeared the big lumpy mass of Ben Wyvis (3429).

An hour passed all too quickly in drinking in this magnificent scene, but Mam Sodhail still reared his head in front. An easy descent of some 600 feet over stones and moss led to the broad saddle-shaped bealach, and a steep pull up placed me beside the cairn of Mam Sodhail (3862). This cairn is no mean thing, being one of the largest, next to that on Ben Lawers, that I have ever seen on a hill. It has in its centre a deep cup-shaped depression into which one can get, and, sheltered from the wind, take an all-round view in

comfort. The view (see page 170) was much the same as that on Càrn Eige; suffice it to say that Ben Sgriol (3196) on Loch Hourn side was now seen—it was invisible from Càrn Eige, being hidden by Sgùrr nan Ceathreamhnan. Another hour was spent in imprinting on my brain the picture before me, so that

“ these beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye :
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart”.

Descending to the bealach, a traverse was made along the western slope of Càrn Eige. For a wonder the walking here was easy and pleasant, with none of that ankle-twisting which is, as a rule, the invariable accompaniment of a traverse. Reaching the neck between Càrn Eige and Beinn Fhionnlaidh (3294), a green grassy hill with bits of rock cropping out here and there, I struck down the steep sides of the corrie to the wee lochan, snugly walled in by the steep north face of Càrn Eige. The course of the burn which runs out of the loch was followed to Loch Lungard, and a pleasant walk of some two and a half miles brought me to my starting place about six o'clock in the evening.