

A ROCK-CLIMBING NOVITIATE IN SKYE:  
SCALING THE COOLIN PEAKS.

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[*Some youthful members of the Club made their first visit to Skye last August, and, with little initiation in rock-climbing, ascended a number of the highest peaks of The Coolin, "doing" the Inaccessible Pinnacle, for instance, three times in five days. Their performance was quite remarkable, considering their youth and inexperience; and the subjoined account of it, by one of the adventurous party, will be found highly interesting.—EDITOR.*]

FOR some time we had been keen to do some serious rock-climbing, and a few expeditions on the more difficult courses at Souter Head had convinced us that there was only one sport in the world. Consequently, after the Easter meet of the Club at Crianlarich, Rusk and I decided that our summer vacation should be spent, in part at least, on a holiday in Skye. Arrangements were made and we were fortunate in securing accommodation at the post office in Glen Brittle. Before the time for departure arrived we were able to make up our party to three by the inclusion of Herbert Mackintosh, whose performances at Souter Head convinced us that in him we would have a safe and competent companion.

We had considerable misgivings about the ultimate success of our expedition, as it was planned for the month of August. All our friends were most pessimistic and remarked that we were sure to get plenty of rain, as August was the worst month in Skye. These fears, however, were quite unfounded as it turned out. Rusk and I set off one morning from Aberdeen on our motor-

bikes; Mackintosh at the last moment was unable to come for the first week. The bikes behaved splendidly, and we reached our intended destination, Jeantown, comfortably in the evening. Next day's run was to be to Kyle, and thence to Sligachan, where the bikes were to be left, as we were to walk to Glen Brittle. We got to Kyle by noon after some exciting work on the road from Strome Ferry to Balmacara, especially on the hill immediately above Strome Ferry station.

About two o'clock we landed in Skye. It didn't look a bit different from the mainland, though we felt as if everyone ought to be carrying coils of rope and wearing huge-nailed boots. However, there is one particular in which Skye does differ from the mainland, and that is that the roads are a trifle worse. The road was comparatively good as far as Broadford, though we did see workmen repairing it, just outside Kyleakin, with the aid of a rake. Evidently they go in for appearances, and ruts are not seemly in their sight, but to rake these ruts is a matter of little labour, for the surface of the road is such as may be found on any pebbly beach. Between Broadford and Sligachan, however, it is different. The surface of the road is a little better—in fact it has had tar-macadam put upon it, but that must have been long ago. It is not the surface that is so noticeable here, it is the gradient. There are two terrific hills on the road, with hairpin bends galore, and any one familiar with fixed engine motor-bikes will be able to gauge our efforts that day. Eventually we managed to overcome all difficulties and got on to the comparatively level road along the lochside to Sligachan. The weather, hitherto splendid, broke at this point, and we had a heavy shower for the last four or five miles; we comforted ourselves with the reflection that we were almost within smelling distance of our destination.

By the time we had finished tea at the hotel the rain had stopped, and, leaving our bikes and heavy coats, we set out for Glen Brittle, carrying our other belongings with us. The way lay up the valley of the

Allt Dearg—a torrent that rises among The Coolin and descends to join the river Sligachan. It is a beautiful stream with numerous waterfalls and magnificent pools. Before long we were on the summit of the pass and looked down into Glen Brittle. The hills were swathed in thick mist, but the Waterpipe Gully showed up well on our left hand. Descending quickly into Coire na Creiche, we soon gained the road that runs from Carbost to Glen Brittle Lodge, along which the remainder of our journey lay. Just as we reached the lodge the mist cleared, and we had a magnificent view of the stupendous cliffs of Sron na Ciche; it was worth walking fifty miles to see, let alone to climb. At the lodge we met another climber bound for the post office—a Swiss doctor, whose subsequent performances on the crags seemed to us little short of miraculous. Together we crossed the river and made our way to the post office, where we were met by our landlady, Mrs. Chisholm. We arrived just in time for dinner. We introduced ourselves to two members of the Rock and Fell Climbing Club, who were also on their first climbing visit to Skye; and after dinner we exchanged experiences, and it was late before we retired.

When we looked out next morning we were enchanted with the view. Sgurr Banachdich, Dearg, Mhic Choinnich, Alasdair, Sgumain, and the precipices of the Sron na Ciche were all free from mist, and to us, fresh from the beautiful curves of the Cairngorms, they looked even more stupendous than they really are. After breakfast we decided to go to the top of Sgurr Dearg and take a view from there to get our bearings, and see the famous Inaccessible Pinnacle, about which we had heard so much, and which, as mountaineers know, is no longer “inaccessible.” We had scarcely got on to the shoulder of the mountain when the rain came down and the wind got up, and altogether it became very unpleasant. We persevered, however, and in spite of the thick mist we ultimately got to the top and saw the Pinnacle looming up through the haze; it looked

tremendous—so tremendous that we gave up any hope of climbing it even after three weeks of training. We climbed down and went round to the eastern end to have a look from there. We even climbed up a bit, but the arête seemed to go straight up, the holds seemed to vanish, and we climbed down again.

Having found a comparatively dry spot (the rocks were streaming with water), we sorrowfully commenced to eat our lunch, and had almost finished when, in the lulls of the wind, we heard the sounds of song and laughter. Hastily finishing our meal, we ascended the slope to the western end and there beheld our Swiss friend on the well-known "mantel-shelf"—or, rather, he was just below and was attempting to effect a lodgment on it. He had removed his boots and was in his stocking-soles; he said there was less chance of slipping that way (we took his word for it, but have never imitated him). He kept on feeling for hand-holds and didn't seem to find any. This was not encouraging, as he had been up the Zmutt ridge on the Matterhorn, and if he couldn't find satisfying holds, how were we to find them? After about ten minutes he succeeded in getting on to the "mantel-shelf" and soon was on the top. No sooner had he got there than he threw down the end of his rope and invited us to come up. With considerable misgiving I tied on the rope and began my first rock-climb in Skye. The commencement was not very difficult, and I soon found myself just below the "mantel-shelf" and began to look for hand-holds. I was able to get a fairly satisfying one out on the right, and by using it was able to get another for my left hand: I found the rope most useful here, though I never had my weight on it. The fact of having a rope on helped me to keep my balance during the trying pull on to the "mantel-shelf," which slopes considerably to one's disadvantage. From the "mantel-shelf" to the top is easy enough, and I soon joined the doctor on the summit. Rusk followed quickly and soon was beside us. The weather conditions were not such as to encourage us to linger on the top, and almost

immediately we began to descend the eastern arête. We found this more trying than ascending the western side as the holds were almost invisible in the mist. We reached the foot, however, sound in limb and well-pleased with our first ascent in Skye. The weather cleared almost as soon as we had descended, and the wind dried our clothing before we got home. I shall always look back on the 10th of August, 1920, as one of the landmarks of my climbing experiences. To climb the Pinnacle had been one of our greatest longings, and lo! we had accomplished it on our first day!

The next day was dull, and mist hung about all the peaks. We decided that we would try an easy climb, and, accordingly, we set off after breakfast for the West Buttress of Sgumain. The climb afforded no serious difficulty except at the final rock tower, where the holds were small and sloping and very wet from the rain of the previous day. We accomplished the climb, however, and a short scramble led from the buttress to the top. The day was still young, and we looked about for fresh peaks to conquer, deciding in the end to traverse along to Alasdair. The ridge here is very narrow, and the way is rendered sensational by several pinnacles and gendarmes. We did not know they could be avoided on the right, and ultimately decided to traverse downward to the left and reach Alasdair by means of its buttress. After some sensational work on small holds in rotten rock we succeeded in doing this; and reached the top of the highest peak in The Coolin. We later discovered that this buttress is classed as infinitely more difficult than the traverse of the ridge even over the gendarmes. Our homeward way was down the great stone shoot, of which the less said the better: it would be an ideal place to which to send the ex-Kaiser for stone-breaking purposes; the utility of his work would appeal to all Skye climbers.

The third day of our holiday was magnificent; and having heard of the excellence of the climbing to be had on the Window Tower Buttress of Sgurr Dearg, we

decided on an expedition thither. The grind over the screes and slabs to the foot of the buttress was toilsome on such a fine day, but it was eventually accomplished and we attacked the buttress. The climbing, while interesting, is not very severe, and we were soon on the main ridge of Dearg. It was scarcely mid-day, and with the day so fine there was the prospect of a good view from the top. Accordingly, we set off and soon arrived there. The Pinnacle looked very fine—so fine, indeed, that we decided to try the eastern arête on our own account. We succeeded in the attempt. The climbing throughout is excellent and the holds ample; the views on each side are exhilarating in the extreme. We were very proud of having done this difficult climb unaided. Rusk descended the western end by means of the doubled rope, while I went down the eastern end again. So ended the third of our expeditions: we had already made five good ascents and two descents.

The next day was fine, but we decided that we would have an off-day—not that we were tired, but we felt that if we climbed every day we would have done all the climbs in our power before our third man turned up. The weather held, and the following day was still finer. We decided that it could not be wasted, and set off for the buttress of Mhic Choinnich. This magnificent buttress rises fully 1000 feet above the little loch in Coire Lagan. Its ascent turned out to be the finest climb we had yet attempted. The whole climb is difficult enough to be interesting, especially the last 200 feet or so, which is up a very exposed face, where the holds are small and the angle very steep. I would strongly urge all visitors to Glen Brittle to do this climb, especially if, like us, they are novices at the start. The rock is good, and danger is reduced to a minimum. We decided to go back *via* Dearg, and set out along the narrow ridge westward. Skirting the left side of An Stac we reached the top of Dearg and repeated our performance of two days before by climbing the Inaccessible Pinnacle—for the third time in five days.

We felt that there was a danger of our becoming *blasé* about it, so we agreed not to do it again until Mackintosh had joined us.

The next day, Sunday, was depressing; the rain descended in sheets all day, and the only excitement was got from watching the little burns fill up and the river rise steadily. We estimated that the rise in the river was quite eight feet. No climbing was done that day.

Monday was fair but dull, and we set off early for Sligachan to meet Mackintosh, who, we concluded, would probably arrive about five o'clock. We had scarcely got started when the rain came on again, and we were well soaked by the time the hotel was reached. Mackintosh did not turn up, so we resolved to take our motor bikes back. Over the journey I will draw a veil. It will suffice to say that we took three hours and a half to do the twelve miles—there were over half-a-dozen unbridged streams to cross, and the surface of the road on the Carbost side of the hill was extraordinary. It was such that I wonder a wealthy American hasn't bought it and shipped it over to the States as a curiosity.

We started out next day with the intention of climbing Bidein from Coire na Creiche and coming back over the ridge by way of Mhadaidh and Banachdich. We got to Coire na Creiche but no farther. We spent the day loafing about looking at the Waterpipe Gully. In the evening we were greatly pleased to see Mackintosh, who had motored across from Sligachan.

In celebration of his arrival we decided on doing the Cioch by Cioch Gully on the following day. Unfortunately, the day proved wet. Heavy, sad-looking clouds hung about the peaks, and when we did get a blink of sunshine the glimmer from the cliffs showed that the rocks were very wet. We were able, however, to accomplish our project on the day after, and found the climb exceedingly good despite the condition of the rocks. The archway pitch was a considerable waterfall,

and the last pitch completely baffled us, the "small holds on the left wall" being invisible under a film of running water. We accordingly made a traverse out under the slab and soon gained the top. Mackintosh distinguished himself by attempting the finish of the Cioch "direct," but had to be assisted with the rope over the last bit. We did not stay long on the top as a cold wind had sprung up. We descended by the Eastern Gully, coming down the second pitch on the doubled rope. This is a magnificent cave pitch which, to the best of my knowledge, is yet unclimbed.

On the afternoon of the next day we did the Window Buttress again. Mackintosh climbed through the window, using my head as a foothold. He gave himself a playful kick-off with his edge nails; my hair is beginning to grow again!

On the following day we did our greatest effort—the round of the peaks of Coire Lagan. We approached the ridge by way of the North Buttress of Sgumain and crossed to Alasdair along the ridge over the gendarmes. The day was fine, and the only regrettable thing was that, owing to mist and wind coming on, we were unable to do the Inaccessible Pinnacle, at least not without considerable risk.

For the next three days we did nothing except walk to Carbost. This journey we did in just under five hours; as we walked farther than merely to Carbost, we covered quite twenty miles in that time.

Our next climb was the Cioch again—this time by the ordinary route up the Eastern Gully and the slab. We had intended to do the whole of the Eastern Gully, but the mist came down and it got very cold, so we gave up the idea. We tackled some boulder problems in Coire Lagan, one of which was accomplished in truly noble style by Mackintosh. As the boulder overhung for the first five or six feet and was quite without holds except those seen with the eye of faith, the climb was highly creditable.

Our next effort was the crowning glory of the holiday



—a whole day on the Inaccessible Pinnacle. We climbed it by every known route, and certainly invented one variation, if not more. Our bag included the south-west crack, and a climb on the north-west corner, which overhangs for about twenty feet: a traverse has to be made to the right and the finish is by Raeburn's crack. This was a grand day—there was scarcely a cloud in the sky, and the rocks were almost uncomfortably warm. I think we climbed the pinnacle about twenty-two times between us that day.

This was our last day of really good climbing. Rusk and Mackintosh went to Sgurr nan Gillean and did the west ridge over the gendarme. Owing to my being badly burned by the sun (I adopt an unconventional attire on the tops of the peaks in warm weather), I thought it inadvisable to do anything strenuous, so spent the day in Coire Lagan. Ultimately, the midges drove me to the rocks, and I did the Cioch and completed the Eastern Gully round. Two days later we left for home.

This is quite the finest holiday any of us has had. We look forward to many more like it. The comfort to be had at the post office is marvellous. When I say that we were as well looked after as we would have been by Mrs. Birse at Clova, members will realise what a paradise for the mountaineer Glen Brittle is. I would advise all intending visitors to Skye to apply to Mrs. Chisholm for lodgings, and all who go from Aberdeen should make several expeditions beforehand to the cliffs at Souter Head.