



SIGNING THE VISITORS' BOOK AT THE SHELTER STONE.

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VISITORS' BOOK AT THE SHELTER STONE.

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THREE years ago I wrote a short article in the *Cairngorm Club Journal* dealing with the inception of a Visitors' Book at the Shelter Stone at Loch Avon. I described how a party of us had gone there in August, 1924, and had left a Visitors' Book to furnish a record of those who visit that rather outlandish region. To that article, this is the sequel. On visiting the Shelter Stone this summer (1929), we found that five winters had left the book in a dilapidated condition. Its stout covers had gone, and much of the writing in it, on account of the dampness of the pages, was fast becoming illegible. If the book was to remain a permanent chronicle it was necessary that it should be removed. We, therefore, took it away with us and have left a new one, Volume II, to take its place. The next problem was to find a suitable resting-place for Volume I. One friend thought we might present it to the British Museum, while someone else suggested the National Library in Edinburgh! It has been thought most serviceable, however, to transfer it to the archives of the newly-formed Club Library. It is now there, with a new and rather more imposing binding, and with its pages, which were sadly out of order, properly arranged, for any member of the Club who cares to inspect it.

It will be found that the annals of the hardy adventurers, who have either visited the Stone or spent nights under it, make most interesting reading. Their number also is by

no means small. Some of the pages of the book have unfortunately got lost, but from these that remain I have compiled these statistics. After the Book was left in 1924, ten names appear. The first, and possibly the second, original page is, however, amissing, and the date of the first of these ten visitors is as late in the year as September 4. My own account of the inaugural ceremony is, alas, gone! In 1925, the number of visitors was one hundred and thirty-two, the first being on June 7 and the last on August 28. As the first recorded visit of 1926 is on July 18, there is evidently a hiatus so far as the end of 1925 and the beginning of 1926 is concerned. The number of visitors who signed the book in 1926 was one hundred and thirty-six, the last being on September 21. The number of signatories in 1927 was one hundred and thirteen, the first being on April 4 and the last on August 30. A small crop that year, but probably a page is again missing at the end. In 1928 the number was one hundred and eighty-eight, extending from June 3 to November 4. Finally, in 1929, we have one hundred and twenty names between March 7 and August 20, the date on which we removed the book and installed its successor. I am not prepared to guarantee the absolute accuracy of these figures, and I hope no one will demand my head if they are wrong, but, at anyrate, they are not far out. It is refreshing to think so many people should surmount the difficulties which beset the wanderer in these parts, for the Shelter Stone is by no means easy of access. Certainly one cannot envisage charabanc parties being brought to it, if the idea of turning the Cairngorms into a National Park ever bears fruit!

It can easily be gathered from the accounts in the book that the Shelter Stone is not a comfortable place in which to spend a night. One sojourner remarks that the Corrou Bothy in the Larig is a palace in comparison. I can testify to that personally. I spent a night on one occasion at the Shelter Stone. Well, it is worth it for the experience, but —! The true enthusiast is prepared of course to suffer in body for the good of his soul, and perhaps, if he is lucky, he will not be called on to suffer. This is, however, a

typical version of what the man or woman who stays over night at the Shelter Stone has to endure. I quoted it before, but it will bear repetition :—

Arrived 11 p.m. Had a drink. Sweltering heat, though snow on hills. Knocked a hole in the roof with my head! Went to sleep. Wakened 2 a.m. with blanket round my neck. Lit primus. Overcome by fumes. Extinguished stove. Burned fingers in doing so and jumped up and bumped my head on roof. Try to sort primus. Eureka! Water boiling! Tea has a funny taste. Sandwiches have a paraffin flavour. All in the game, I suppose.

That emphasizes the incommodious character of the place, but it does not mention the intense cold which has to be endured. My main recollection of the night I spent there is the futility of trying to sleep when one is freezing, and the joy which I get in restoring my circulation by doing strenuous physical jerks on the shore of Loch Avon at 3 a.m.

Staying at the Shelter Stone is a subject which lends itself to humour, which is not unnatural! One comes across statements like the imbecile observation that the Shelter Stone is the next largest stone after the earth. One person displays wit in his remark that the spirit is willing but the paraffin is weak. Others demand the installation of electric radiators and hot baths. One of the happiest efforts in the book is a sketch in Tom Webster's style of three drenched men descending the Garbh Uisge to the Shelter Stone. This is followed by the line—"they cooked, they ate, they slept, they freezed," and then there is another illustration, which is described as follows :—

Three dry men. See how they run ;
They all run out of the Shelter Stone,
To thaw their bones in the rising sun.

Occasionally the Shelter Stone seems to have been overcrowded. To this the following tale bears evidence :—

Last night a party of two men arrived after we had gone to bed. The Stone thus sheltered seven of us. Five lay in the large room, two in the entrance hall. It is well in a party of this size to bring along one or two whose faces won't spoil by being jammed and scraped against the walls of the shelter.

He is a bold man who bathes in Loch Avon. Yet one person writes that the loch is a pleasant place in which to bathe. Most of us will agree with the remark made by a subsequent commentator, "for those who like it."

The surroundings of the Shelter Stone are particularly magnificent. Even when the sun is shining the piled up cliffs and the utter desolation produce a sombre effect. When the rain storms gather overhead and the mist is swirling on the sides of the mountains, the blackness and gloom is intensified a hundredfold. To be alone in these circumstances might easily be a terrifying experience. Men have been known to fly in panic from the summit of Ben Macdhui to escape from the imagined presence of the supernatural. There is no mention in the book, however, of such experiences. Perhaps those who have gone there alone have had their minds too occupied with the practicalities of their situation to have bothered over the possibility of ghostly visitants. The attitude of mind revealed in the following sentences (deplorable as it may be!) possibly preserves the sanity of the solitary traveller. "Sorry I am not a word painter else you might find a vivid description of a most inspiring loch. At present I must satisfy my inner cravings." There is a regrettable scarcity of poets. Some Gaelic verses appear, but the only ones in English, which are not meritless, are these :—

From the broken Barns of Bynack I shall see the sunrise gleam,
On the forehead of Ben Rinnes and Strathspey awake from dream,
And again in the dusk of evening, I shall find once more the lone
Clear waters of the Green Loch, in the Pass beyond Revoan.

The most interesting signature in the Book is that of the Prime Minister, Mr. J. Ramsay Macdonald. Along with a party from Lossiemouth he appears to have spent the night August 19 to 20, 1926, beneath the Shelter Stone. Even the most hardened Tory might respect a Prime Minister who has done that! The names of various members of his family also appear from time to time. Indeed, the first signature on the book, as it now exists, is that of his eldest daughter, Miss Ishbel Macdonald. One feature of the book is the number of University visitors. All the Scottish

Universities contribute a considerable quota, while Oxford and Cambridge are also represented. It will be seen from the dates which I mentioned before that visitors are practically confined to the summer months. The latest recorded visit in any year is that of a party on November 4, 1928. They give no description, however, of what the Shelter Stone was then like. The earliest recorded visit is that of Mr. James Doak on March 7, 1929. Writing of that day he says :—

Fine day. Loch Avon frozen with layer of snow on top. Shelter Stone full of snow. Ascent over Cairngorm easy. Feith Buidhe blocked with snow.

I cherish a hope that some New Year, when the Cairngorm Club are at Braemar, they may find their way to the Shelter Stone. The difficulties would of course be considerable, as to plough up Glen Derry in deep snow would not be an easy job. Perhaps some time it may prove feasible.

The Visitors' Book has, I think, served its purpose well. It has shown the lovers of these mountains to be by no means a small band. Adventuring in the Cairngorms is the pleasantest escape imaginable from a world of streets and houses, and, for those whose blood demands such an escape, may the Shelter Stone long have an open door !