

DAYS ON DEVIL'S POINT.

R. O. MACKAY AND J. B. McDONALD.

WE arrived at Derry Lodge by car about 10 A.M. on the Sunday, September 17, 1939, intending to spend two days walking amidst the hills, obtaining that solace and renewal of spirit which is, for me at any rate, one of the greatest attractions of our native hills. It being the height of the stalking season, we conferred with Donald McDonald, then keeper at Derry Lodge, as to where we might go without interfering with sport.

Sunday was spent exploring the Robber's Copse, thence over Càrn a' Mhaim, down Sròn Riach, and back to Derry. The weather was ideal, and McDonald obtained many fine shots with his camera. Our day over, we dined in style in the car, but were quite ready for another repast when we visited our kind and hospitable friends at Derry Lodge.

Monday we intended should be a short, easy day, and it was suggested to us, by Donald McDonald, that we should explore a cave on the south-east face of the Devil's Point. The cave, he assured us, could be seen from Glen Geusachan, and suggested we should climb up the gully at the entrance to Glen Geusachan. He had never visited the cave himself.

We reached the Glen half an hour after noon and made for the gully on the south face of the Devil's Point. In order to shorten our journey as much as possible (forgetting that the short cut is not always the quickest way), we proceeded to scramble up the flat slabs of rock which lie in profusion around the base of the Devil's Point, but we had not attained much higher than the 2,000-foot level when it became apparent that we were stuck. Rain was threatening, and McDonald suggested we should give it up as there did not seem to be any further footholds; there had been few

enough for some time before. However, a fissure in the rock some 6 feet above us could just be seen, and I rashly suggested that if we could only get up to that point from our then precarious stand, we could traverse the rock, and thereafter would easily reach the gully. We managed the additional height, and McDonald by quick balancing got safely across the face to a much surer foothold. After I had started to make the traverse, he was very keen (having got safely over himself) to take a film of my effort, and I, having visions of Hollywood fame, paused whilst he prepared his camera. This proved wellnigh disastrous. Handholds were non-existent and footholds not much better. I felt my grip giving and cast my eyes downward for some place to break my fall. As I half-fell, half-slid, I observed a tuft of heather some 15 to 20 feet below and westward. I managed, somehow, to get to that tuft of heather with no more damage than a torn finger and badly bruised elbow. McDonald, unable to assist, continued to work his camera until I made my happy landing, when, so great was his relief to see me come safely to rest, he stopped filming. Our track now lay up the gully which we then proceeded to negotiate. The gradient is very steep and there are few pitches. Indeed, in large measure the underfoot conditions are such that one has to go very carefully on what is little better than slabs—so prominent on Devil's Point—covered with some slight growth. To rest anywhere during the remainder of the climb was wellnigh impossible, and we had to content ourselves with occasional standing pauses in the bed of the stream which gushes down the gully. In one of the halts we did manage to achieve, we chanced to see the remains of an eagle's eyrie on the east side of the gully. Some film shots of this were taken under very difficult conditions and we both resolved to return in the breeding season in the hope that the birds might have taken up house again, and it might be possible to obtain a film.

Towards the top the gully breaks into two separate arms, neither of them too well defined. We took the one on our right. A wall of rock with an opening about 2 feet wide faced us, but with an entrance step of about 5 feet. With



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McDonald's aid I managed to get over the step and through the opening. He, however, was hampered in that, naturally enough, he did not wish to take off his rucksack with his camera inside and run the risk of involuntarily dropping it into Glen Geusachan below. Having no rope to which his rucksack might be attached, and being unable to get through the opening with it on, he decided to take the left fork and leave me to explore the right. Shortly after McDonald departed I found myself in what might be described as a small amphitheatre with rocky sides. A feasible way up the rock was discovered, and I soon found myself at the top with my difficulties over. McDonald was there to greet me. We had reached the summit shortly after 3 P.M.

“ Who would not roam again your wind-swept corries,
And breathe anew the strong keen air of dawn.
Who could forget the aftermath of glory
Crowning a day of sport . . . at set of sun;
When memory conjures up your riven summits,
Your sculptured crags and wildly rushing streams,
We see ye still. ”

On April 8, 1940, we returned to the gully in the hope that McDonald might have the very good fortune to obtain a film of the eagle's eyrie with occupants. He took the same course over the slabs as on the previous occasion in order to gain entrance to the gully, but I proceeded further up Glen Geusachan. The latter course, if one approaches the gully from its western side, though longer, is easier than the former. There was a good deal of old soft snow in the gully, but we reached the vicinity of the eyrie without incident and actually got to within 20 feet below the nest. We could see no sign of life and decided that whether there was life or not, the further ascent was not a climb for a party of two to make. We were quite willing to believe “ *ars longa, vita brevis* ”—and not put it to the test in pursuit of cinematographic art.

Regretfully turning aside from our objective, we decided to make for the top once more. Care was required on the soft snow, which gave very little footing. Indeed, I personally felt it to be more dangerous than on the previous occasion when we had to contend with the bare rock. We took the

route McDonald had taken on our first visit. He got well ahead of me and on to the summit plateau. From there, in film-director attitude, he hurled down instructions for the completion of the climb whilst he took films of the gully, and I did my best to look like "man attempting the impossible." I complied with his requests until, having reached the summit plateau, he asked me to go down again some distance in order that he might obtain a further shot from a different angle. Not being under contract, and the juice of the orange appealing much more strongly to me at that moment, he had to content himself with filming the disposal of that, alas, now rare fruit. Flaunting the directorial power brought a lucky climax. I had barely finished my gastronomic exercises when we observed three eagles in flight over Glen Geusachan. They soared right over Devil's Point and disappeared into the clouds farther up the Lairig. McDonald quickly switched his camera from the mundane to the sublime and now treasures a beautiful study of poise and grace.

R. O. M.

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On July 19, 1941, I was spending a week-end at Braemar and was fortunate enough to persuade Donald McDonald to act as guide to the cave which he maintained existed on the west face of the Devil's Point. I confess I was rather sceptical of its existence, as R. O. Mackay and I had searched for it on two previous occasions without success.

Five of us set off by car to the White Bridge. The day was glorious as we walked up Glen Dee towards the Lairig Ghru. At the junction of the Lairig and Glen Geusachan we left the path and, crossing the Dee dry-shod on stepping-stones, made our way up Glen Geusachan. Some 300 yards up the glen, beyond the gully climbed on previous visits, we were able to discern about 500 feet below the summit ridge of Devil's Point an indentation on the rock face which might suggest the entrance to a cave.

We surveyed the steep hillside through binoculars, but even with their aid we were unable to see into the cave. Our survey did disclose large slabs of rock, so prominent

a feature on the face of the Devil's Point, which had to be circumvented.

Donald McDonald thought the climb possible, so he, my son Sandy, and I set off in an attempt to reach the cave. The others, having no previous climbing experience, decided it was beyond their powers and resolved to content themselves with the enjoyment of the peaceful glen.

After two hours scrambling and climbing, most of which was fairly easy under the dry conditions, we reached the cave. It measures about 12 feet deep, 6 feet wide, and 7 feet high. It faces due west and has the appearance of having been formed through the rock being split by lightning. Small stalactites pendent from the roof would seem to indicate that the cave had been formed many years ago. The interior is fairly dry, and it would be possible to shelter in it overnight. Not far below there was a strong smell of fox, but we saw no trace of them.

Just as we had finished congratulating each other on the success of our pioneering work, I spotted on a ledge near the back of the cave a small piece of candle. Slightly subdued I reached for the candle and found it resting on a small Oxo tin.

Truth very often being stranger than fiction, it did contain a message! Wrapped in oiled silk was a piece of paper, slightly wet, but bearing the legible inscription, "Affleck C. Gray, Joseph M. McKay, Aberdeen University, 1929."

Unfortunately, we had neither pen nor pencil with which to add our names to that piece of paper left by those real pioneers over twelve years ago. I had my map upon which my name was written, so I tore off the portion and placed it along with the original piece of paper back in the tin.

Looking down upon Glen Geusachan, now losing itself in the lengthening shadows of Monadh Mòr and Beinn Bhrotain, I was tempted to continue the ascent to the summit and come down via the Corrou Bothy. However, we had to rejoin the companions we had left in the Glen, and with Donald McDonald in the lead we made a careful descent without incident in about three-quarters of an hour.

We retraced our steps towards the Dee, and on reaching

the Salmon Pool indulged in the luxury of a refreshing swim. The pool is very deep, and there is excellent diving from a large rock. Eight salmon, hovering motionless with nose upstream, scarcely noticed our noisy splashing, and from the bank Donald McDonald observed the swimmers approaching quite close to them before they flashed away to safety.

J. B. M.

