

## AN GARBH CHOIRE.

W. THOMSON HENDRY.

“ The great amphitheatre of cliffs, two miles across, which stretches from Cairn Toul to Braeriach, has no parallel in these islands. . . . ”

THE quotation is from the “ S.M.C. Guide to the Cairngorms,” which, strangely enough, goes on to describe fewer than ten climbs on the 2 miles of cliff. The Garbh Choire seemed to offer a promising field of exploration, the results of which are described below. In addition to the notes on new climbs, brief descriptions of several unclimbed buttresses are included to indicate what may still be done without giving rise to any overcrowding of routes.

In describing the corries, the features are taken from left to right, and these terms are used throughout with reference to the climber ascending. The climbs were made, for the most part, by George Lumsden and the writer ; but Pinnacles Buttress and the four gullies in this corrie were first climbed by the Tewnion brothers, and A. Tewnion accompanied us on the ascent of Campion Gully and of Braeriach Pinnacle.

### GARBH CHOIRE MÒR.

Except possibly in the neighbourhood of Chokestone Gully, the cliffs from Sgòr an Lochan Uaine to the Braeriach col, although continuous, are too broken and vegetated to present good routes of any length. To the right of the col are five main buttresses which we named West, Crown, Sphinx, Pinnacle, and East. The first three are separated from each other by deeply indented gullies, but the line of demarcation between the latter two is less marked.

THE WEST BUTTRESS is the smallest, much broken and vegetated, and of little importance. The West Gully is short, without interest or difficulty, but it provides a simple way of descending.

CROWN BUTTRESS was so named from a rock formation at the top. There are, apparently, no records of ascents. A short climb was made on the buttress immediately to the right of the West Gully. Starting over steep red slabs, the route continued over perfect rock and provided interesting and not very difficult climbing.

The Great Gully is a wide scree shoot with two easy indefinite pitches. It carries an apparently everlasting patch of snow at the summit. This would make a splendid snow climb and would be very steep at the top.

SPHINX BUTTRESS is the largest of the buttresses. The Sphinx, a peculiar rock formation on the right-hand side and about half-way up, is guarded on three sides by smooth walls of rock and is joined to the main mass by a short sneck. Above it, almost at the plateau level, stands a pinnacle with a short sneck beyond composed of filthy rock. The left side of the buttress rises steeply, and indeed overhangs at places, and is cleft by several parallel chimneys. Any climbing here would be of a difficult nature.

To the right of this and left of the Sphinx is a shallow gully which widens at the top. A branch runs up to the sneck of the Sphinx. Another (unclimbed?) gully to the right of the Sphinx, containing a big pitch half-way up, also sends up a branch to the Sphinx, narrow and overhanging. Between this and Pinnacle Buttress is a smooth, slabby part of the cliff in a large recess, featureless and less steep than the rest. The shallow gully to the left of the Sphinx was climbed by Tewnion in July 1941. Hendry and Lumsden have descended the buttress as far as the top of the Sphinx.

PINNACLE GULLY ("Guide," 156).—Parker and Alexander were forced into this gully when attempting to climb the pinnacles on the buttress. The gully, which presents no difficulties, sends a branch to the sneck above the first pinnacle.

PINNACLES BUTTRESS.—This is formed almost entirely of the pinnacles. The boundary on the right is a steep, narrow chimney starting from slabs. It, too, has an open branch, steep and grassy at the top, leading to the sneck above the first pinnacle.

A snow-field of considerable dimensions lies throughout the summer at the base of this buttress; the depth of the *randkluft* will vary, but is usually about 10 feet.

The direct route over the pinnacles starts over some low rocks above the snow-field and to the right of Pinnacle Gully. For 250 feet the cliff is broken, and easy scrambling over this and the chaos of boulders above leads to the foot of a crack 80 feet high splitting a large slab lying on the left of the first pinnacle. The crack is climbed to the top, after which the route lies over piled boulders overlooking Pinnacle Gully. From a square block covered with vegetation the route lies up the wall on the right to a broad grassy ledge, which is followed to the end. A choice of routes to the summit of the pinnacle is now open, either by traversing to the right across a very exposed face and by working up on small but adequate holds to the summit, or by surmounting a series of mantelshelves on the less exposed north face.

The summit is not extensive. From it a drop of 15 feet leads to the narrow and crumbling sneck above which the second pinnacle rises for 120 feet. Several routes are open and, while without difficulty, care is necessary. From the second pinnacle the summit is reached in 20 feet without difficulty. 350 feet. Difficult.

EAST BUTTRESS.—Steep and lofty for some time, this buttress soon deteriorates and becomes an open grassy slope. The precipitous part is cleft by three gullies, deep rifts for 150 feet opening out on to grassy slopes above.

#### GARBH CHOIRE DHÀIDH (DHÉ).

MONOLITH GULLY.—This gully, the first, looking from left to right, is well seen when approaching the corrie by the Dee and appears as a formidable black rift extending the whole length of the sgòr dividing the Garbh Choire Mòr from the Dee corrie. (This sgòr is unnamed on the O.S. maps; Sgòr a' Garbh Choire seems appropriate, and a name will be useful.—ED.)

The climb starts just where the Dee reappears after running a subterranean course for some 200 yards. After

a steep grind up grass and scree, one enters the shallow bed of the gully, which for 200 feet is fairly steep but always easy. A small chokestone pitch is interesting if taken direct.

After this the gully steepens and the walls close in. Here a few steep, slabby pitches crowned with scree bar the way, but little difficulty is encountered. This is quickly followed by large piled boulders, which were found to be loose. After another short scree patch the gully divides; the right branch is indefinite, steep, and shallow and of little interest. Except at the start, where the rock is very steep and exceptionally rotten, there is little difficulty in climbing this anywhere. The rib between the branches may be climbed as an introduction to either and is moderately difficult.

The left branch offers better climbing. Forty-five feet of wet mossy rock, offering only minute holds, lead to a cave. A difficult movement to the right, round the top chokestone, again on very small holds, is followed by an unsatisfactory climb over large unstable boulders to a second smaller cave about 45 feet above the first. In 20 feet the ridge of *Sgòr a' Garbh Choire* is reached, and further scrambling for 150 feet leads to smooth slabs at the base of the monolith. (The more modest form—tooth—would be an equally suitable but more hackneyed description!) Although the rock is very smooth the slabs and the tooth may all be climbed direct. The descent on the far side, leading almost immediately to the plateau, is an easy scramble. 600 feet. Moderate.

SLAB AND GROOVE.—To the left of the Dee an oblique crack will be seen terminating in a cave above which the gully appears to have little character. The route lies up a steep slab about 250 feet high on clean, fairly sound rock, but wet in places. This was climbed up the right-hand side to an overhanging wall of 5 feet which was climbed by keeping well into the right wall up a series of sloping shelves. The final step round a corner on to the top of the wall was definitely difficult. Another 20 feet brings the climber to the top of the slab, from which he is able to see the course of the gully up to the right. So far the climbing took one hour.

The gully is featureless, practically without pitches, although there are six sections of about 60 feet steeper than the rest of the gully bed and, if possible, more rotten. The gully is wet almost to the top, where the angle steepens and the gully contracts to a narrow crack some 150 feet high. This last section was found difficult owing to the lack of stable holds. 600 feet. Difficult.

THE DEE WATERFALL.—Various ascents and descents on either side of the waterfall have been made. The ascent to the right is to be preferred, as the rock is good. The true right bank is clothed in vegetation and is an unpleasant climb, up or down.

CHIMNEY-POT.—Between the Dee cascade and the easy rocks on the right-hand side of the corrie is a huge buttress which appears too formidable at all points. From the back of the corrie, however, a dark chimney is revealed, offering a possible route of ascent. Twenty feet of wet rock brings the climber to the base of a great pointed dividing rib cleaving the gully in two. The left branch is wet, dirty, and of moderate difficulty. The right branch, with its black initial chimney, its piled boulders and huge final chokestone, attracts immediate attention. The chimney, about 20 feet high, is topped by a chokestone over which a waterfall tumbles. The back-and-knee method was used to reach a small foothold on the left wall from which the chokestone may be assailed direct. From the scree patch above, another chokestone pitch of 10 feet is climbed on the left. Another scree platform follows, leading to the gigantic chokestone and final through-route, which is reached over the large rectangular blocks on the left wall. The tunnel portion is about 8 feet and is climbed by back and knee. The whole pitch is about 150 feet high and is, to say the least, difficult. The top of the rib is reached in a further 20 feet.

While the difficulty lessens, extreme care is needed on the next section, which is wet and rotten. The first chokestone encountered may be climbed direct or passed on the left, the second more or less directly and with a careful eye on the abundant loose material above. At the top the rock

becomes steeper and yet more rotten, and a way of escape on the right, on sounder rock, may be preferred. 700 feet. Difficult.

#### CHOIRE BROCHAIN.

The RED GULLY, on the extreme left of the corrie, is the easiest way of descent. Full of scree at the top, it develops into a natural staircase in its lower reaches.

WEST BUTTRESS.—The only climb recorded starts near the foot of the West Gully, works across the buttress, and continues to the top in or near an open chimney ("Guide," 158 and 227). Hendry and Lumsden attempted to follow this route, but failed to identify description with reality until the final chimney was reached.

CAMPION GULLY leaves the West Gully on the left-hand side, near the foot of the main gully. The subsidiary is open, scree-filled, and unpleasant for about 150 feet. The first pitch, a chokestone 6 feet high, may be climbed direct or by using the left wall. The second pitch, 25 feet, is steep slab, chokestone, and water, and is passed on the right. More scree leads to a third pitch, rather higher than the second, and the main obstacle in the gully, two massive blocks above a cave. A through-route leads to the top of the first block, from which a delicate movement out to the right enables the upper chokestone to be taken on that side. The fourth pitch is also of the cave variety and is climbed on the right for about 15 feet. Some difficulty may be encountered in making the final pull. A fifth steep, slabby pitch makes a good finish to the climb. 450 feet. Difficult. Three-quarters of an hour.

WEST GULLY, climbed in 1898, consists of scree and slabs, with steeper rocks at the top, not of any great difficulty ("Guide," 157).

BLACK PINNACLE, Central Buttress, was climbed in 1911 by J. A. Parker, H. Alexander, J. B. Miller, and W. A. Reid, but their route was not direct. The new route starts, as did the original, over the slabs at the foot of Central Buttress Gully and continues up the great slab on the right of the pinnacle base. The first party climbed the gully and

Sgor an Iochain Uaine

Chokestone Gully

West Buttress

Pinnacles Buttress

Monolith Gully

Dee Waterfall

Chimney Pot

Red Gully

West Buttress

West Gully

Black Pinnacle

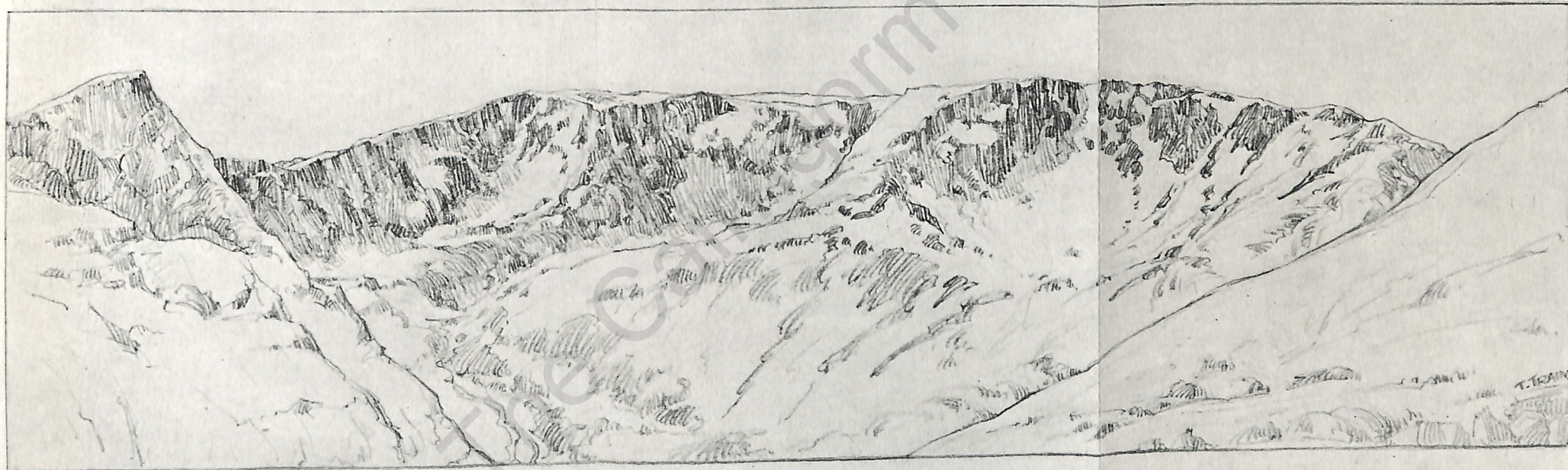
C.D. Gully

Broerach Pate

East Gully

East Buttress

Ben Macdui



Garbh Choire Mòr

Garbh Choire Dhaidh

Choire Brochain

its left branch ("Guide," 158). The top of the slab overhangs this branch gully, and from this point a traverse to the left was made to a point between the two hillward pinnacles. These were speedily climbed, as was the outermost prong which was not included in the pioneer bag.

A steep descent was made into the branch gully, from which the plateau was reached via the Central Chimney. 500 feet. Moderate.

**CENTRAL CHIMNEY.**—Although Central Buttress Gully branches about half-way up the buttress, a narrow chimney continues in the direct line. The first pitch is about 100 feet up; it is a chimney of about 8 feet, topped by a chokestone and designed for back-an-dknee climbing. Two more pitches of a similar nature follow. Wet in its lower reaches, it improves with height and makes a delightful climb. 300 feet. Difficult.

**CENTRAL BUTTRESS GULLY** was first climbed by W. N. Ling and H. Raeburn on snow to the col behind Braeriach Pinnacle ("Guide," 158). Central Chimney makes a better climb than either branch in summer.

**BRAERIACH PINNACLE** ("Guide," 157-158, 227).—From the bifurcation in Central Buttress Gully our route lies directly up the wall on the right (cairn). An easy traverse back to the right leads to a small platform, from which a steep and exposed face was climbed by combined effort. About 50 feet of very difficult climbing ends in a small grassy niche on the west side of the pinnacle. The route now lies up the very exposed ridge and continues difficult for 60 feet to a narrow, V-shaped chimney. This is started on the right after a difficult traverse and is climbed by straddling. Loose rock adds to the difficulty here. From a small platform above, a hazardous traverse on the very exposed face is made and the summit boulders 6 feet above gained by horizontal ledges. On the ridge the angle eases off and easy scrambling follows for 200 feet, over three subsidiary pinnacles, to the main top. For some 250 feet the climbing is continuously very difficult and exposed. 650 feet. Very difficult.

**EAST GULLY** ("Guide," 157) was climbed in April



1901, when no pitches were visible. Six appear in summer, all of moderate difficulty and all more or less wet. In 1940 four Junior Members—Hendry, W. Lumsden Walker, L. Durpo, and G. Morrison—traversed into the gully, above the first pitch, from the Central Buttress and climbed to the top. In 1942 Hendry and Lumsden descended the gully, taking in the first pitch. 600 feet. Moderate.

**EAST BUTTRESS GULLIES.**—The East Buttress is cleft by several gullies and close to East Gully by two or three short, steep chimneys. On the right of the buttress two conspicuous gullies catch the eye, one with a double-barrelled start, separated from its neighbour—farther to the right—by a rib large enough almost to be regarded as a subsidiary buttress.

The first we called Pyramus Gully; both branches and the intervening rib were climbed. The right leg of the pair is the more important, and the two join about 300 feet up. The left branch is moderately difficult, the rib perhaps a little stiffer.

The climb starts as a steep scramble from the scree shoot of East Gully to a shallow basin formed of water-worn rock. The basin is common to both branches and is harder to vacate than at first appears. Above this the route lies over piled boulders for 35 feet to the first pitch where back-and-knee work for 30 feet brings the climber to a natural staircase (30 feet) leading to the second obstacle. This wet bulge was climbed on the right for 30 feet to reach a third slabby pitch about 80 feet high, providing delightful climbing of a not too difficult order.

Above this the gullies join and a further 100 feet of easy slab follows. The gully steepens again, but the slabs provide good holds and excellent climbing for another 100 feet, above which the rock deteriorates. Eighty feet from the summit the gully branches, the right fork providing only dirty scrambling and a poor finish. The left is a narrow chimney with a final chokestone of good, rough rock. 600 feet. Moderate.

The left leg is dirty, clothed in vegetation, and harbours five small pitches of no great difficulty.

THISBE GULLY.—This is a larger gully than its neighbour and lies to the extreme right of the corrie. The first pitch is of the chokestone variety and is mildly difficult. Above it a natural staircase leads to a steep, smooth wall, climbed at first by a crack on the right and then up the middle until an overhang forces one to the right again. The third pitch is a chimney and chokestone, climbed inside the crack; after a nasty bend is passed, the chokestone proves easy. The fourth follows immediately and is climbed by the back-and-knee method. The fifth goes easily, although steep and wet, to a double chokestone obstacle which is passed on the left. The section above was unpleasantly littered with recently fallen boulders, many of them unstable. The sixth pitch is definitely difficult: a narrow crack, 18 feet in height, is climbed by jamming the right knee while the left leg performs an experiment in friction on the inclined plane outside. The final pitch is a large chokestone, taken on the left, above which scree slopes lead to the summit. 600 feet. Difficult.

Although reputedly inaccessible, from the climber's point of view, the Garbh Choire will reward the resourceful climber willing either to camp near his objective or to start from a more comfortable base at an uncomfortable hour.