

SUTHERLAND UNSEEN.

Dr W. LUMSDEN WALKER.

THE sky gradually grew darker as we drove steadily north; the rain which had been threatening for the last few hours began to fall. After this introduction there will be little difficulty in realising that this was the summer of 1946, the month of July; to be precise, the 31st. Dr W. T. Hendry and I, after one of those early starts for which we are so celebrated, had left Aberdeen at 11.30 A.M. in his car and were now well on our way to Inverness, our ultimate destination Ullapool. The rain was still falling as we drew up at the Youth Hostel; and throughout the discussions of the evening it continued to cast a prophetic gloom on our plans.

To our surprise August 1 dawned lightly; it was obviously the day for a good climb, but as I was not by any means in training, a climb involving no long distance. This I had demanded and this I was granted. We motored to Loch Lurgainn and left the car by the roadside, at the western end of Stac Polly, and made our way, in brilliant sunshine, to the foot of the western end of the hill, our intention to climb the west ridge, traverse the summit, and descend by the east ridge. At this point I shall quote Hendry's log verbatim: "We contoured round into the shallow Coire Gorm and up steep slopes to the foot of the western ridge. We passed the foot of Baird's Pinnacle at the base of the south-west ridge. The face rises in three definite tiers—grassy ledges intersected by steep rock walls, the last of which leads to the summit plateau. The rock is sound and, for the most part, clean." Inglis Clark's description is excellent: "It was essentially a rock-climb, the great slabs of rough sandstone set almost vertically, affording excellent friction grips, but refusing hitches when they would be most desirable."

The first wall was ascended about its middle by a steep but simple grassy groove, which led us directly on to the first grassy ledge. Here we roped and I led on (from this point we led alternately), following the ledge along to its right edge. Here we found an obvious route up a crack to the right, and then, following a series of grassy ledges to the left, finishing up a steep vegetated wall. Above this we found ourselves on a wide but steep platform, which we followed again to the right edge until we were directly above Baird's Pinnacle. The rocks now above us were set at an easier angle than those of the main wall above the platform. We followed up this ridge, which led on at an easy angle, giving the most magnificent views to the north and south. We had, of course, a view continuously to the west, a view which, on the more exposed portions, I gazed at with some distaste. On these rocks there seemed to be nail marks, a pleasing sign of previous human visitation. At this point the climb, up to now of a merely moderate standard, began to increase somewhat in difficulty. A steep pitch led to a small stance, which, by a left traverse, brought us on to a flat rectangular platform. Here was the crux of the climb. At the side was a large, loose rectangular block and above this a narrow vertical crack in a narrow wall. We ascended the loose block and, both standing on this somewhat inadequate platform, we climbed this next pitch by combined tactics, Hendry being rather severely trampled upon. Above this pitch there is a large platform providing a very good belay, and from here, by a simple traverse to the right, one may find a cairn from which there is a simple through-route under a chockstone in a chimney leading directly on to the summit.

From here, after a short pause for refreshment and to admire the view (had we but known it, we were only once again to enjoy a summit view), we traversed the ridge to the east top. Our expectations had been roused by the S.M.C. Guide's description of this summit ridge, and I fear we were both somewhat disappointed with its standard, although this disappointment was more than compensated by the glorious scenery all round us. To the west lay the

Atlantic, silver blue in the sunlight, to the south the beautiful Loch Lurgainn, backed by Ben More Coigach and the inspiring mass of Fiddler's Peak; eastward the shapely masses of Cùl Beg and Cùl Mòr; to the north Suilven, the mountain of which so much has been written and of which we had such high expectations, one of the fixed items on our itinerary. A last look round and we descended rapidly by the east ridge, traversing round the hillside on its lower slopes back to the car and thence to the Hostel.

By next morning the weather had reverted to that state of inclemency for which this summer was so noted. Nevertheless Cùl Mòr remained our objective and we left the Hostel with all possible haste—indeed, with a haste which seemed to fill the Warden with some degree of mistrust—and followed the road from Ullapool, in the direction of Elphin. Just beyond a stretch of water, which, had we been able to see its far side, we should probably have recognised as Lochan an Ais, we stopped the car and reluctantly stepped out into what can be best described as the materialisation of the impersonal B.B.C.'s words: "Gale warning." Even more reluctantly we changed into climbing boots and stepped on to the moor, sinking, on the drier parts, only to our ankles in water. From the car we headed directly for the col between Creag nan Calman and An Laogh. To the north side of, and above, Lochan Dearg we struggled through heather and boulders, leaning against a wind which made even the thought of conversation intolerable, along the base of the cliffs of what the map would have assured us, had it been possible to take it out, was Cùl Mòr. Needless to say, our view ended about 200 feet up the cliffs. Our only desire now was to find a relatively sheltered route to the summit. Soon—I suppose it *was* soon—we reached a wide green gully. This gully cleaves the steep buttress of black rock, separating it from the higher rock, which is not terribly steep. We scrambled up the bed of this gully, which was wet and full of filthy vegetation, but nowhere of any degree of difficulty, the only anxiety being the obvious signs of very recent falls of rock; falls which the shrill whine of the wind seemed to warn us might happen again. No such misadventure,

however, overtook us, and we came, after some 500 feet, on to a grassy band, which, on a clear day, may be seen bisecting the south face of Cùl Mòr. Once over this we climbed the final, approximately triangular buttress by heather, grass, and rock—which, under better conditions, might afford a pleasant afternoon's scrambling—arriving ultimately at the summit at a point about 20 yards west of the cairn. Here I had an excellent view of Hendry and the cairn, but of nothing else, and it was impossible, therefore, to fix our route by comparison with surrounding features. From here, after lunch on Creag nan Calman, we walked to Sròn Gharbh and descended by the south-east nose of the Sròn, to join the path between Loch an Laogh and Lochan Fhionnlaidh back to the car. Back to the car—what blessed words these are—dry clothes (even if we did have to change in the rain), food, and a rapid drive to Inchnadamph, where we relaxed in the blissful comfort of the hotel.

Rising reluctantly from the luxury of our beds, and turning the hotel calendar to August 3, we came down in good order to breakfast. The weather again seemed threatening and, by the time we had left the hotel, the threat was realised; the Highland rain was falling once again. Silent it may be, but, during this week, soft and gentle it decidedly was not! We walked up Gleann Dubh, past Glenbain Cottage on the north side of the river for some 3 miles, and then climbed steeply to the col between Beinn an Fhurain and Conival, and thence over large and extremely unpleasant blocks of rock which seemed to wind interminably into the mist above us, to the summit of Conival. From here we followed the ridge to Ben More Assynt. This ridge is quite easy but is difficult to locate in mist (we vouch for this), and is summed up by Hendry in the log (written on the spot and, no doubt, in a spirit of some prejudice) as tiring and unpleasant. From this summit (3,273 feet) the ridge leads south-east to Càrn nan Conbhairean. It is grassy, rocky, and narrow, and leads over several pinnacles. In the S.M.C. Guide it is compared in standard with the ridge of Aonach Eagach, but I should class it as not only shorter but decidedly easier. It is not at all difficult, even under the conditions we met.

We scrambled down wet rock and grass to Dubh Loch Mòr. In bad weather this could lead on to difficult or rather treacherous rock if descended on the northern end of the ridge. From here, had we paused to think, we had a pleasant walk round Garbh Coire, over the Breabag-Conival col back to Glen Dubh and the hotel, where dinner was calling us so insistently. Alas! we did not pause to think; we did not linger to glance at our map; in ever-thickening mist we followed the stream out of Dubh Loch Mòr. Had we paused for even a moment's consideration it might have struck us as odd that the stream which flows from Garbh Coire into Dubh Loch was now flowing out! In this euphoric state, and our thoughts only of food and possible symphonic variations on the theme of a dinner-gong, we walked gaily down Strath Oyckell.

I refuse to recall to memory the following few hours; suffice to say that we retraced our steps, ascended (or nearly so) Breabag, and traversing round the Cùil Dhubh, dropped happily into the Blessed Valley of Gleann Dubh. It was now nearly 9 P.M., but a perfect Highland evening; the wind had fallen; the rain had stopped; the mist lingered only on the high tops; Loch Assynt spread its glories before us; and, with a song in our hearts and milk, of the bounty of the shepherd's wife at Glenbain Cottage, in our stomachs, we tramped, tired but elated, into the hotel.

The Sabbath dawned; Sunday, August 4, and a calm lay in the hotel as we came down (late) to breakfast. (How kind this hotel is to the unpunctuality of the climber; how well this inn follows the Highland tradition of hospitality.) Three members of the Moray Mountaineering Club joined us and mentioned that their thoughts had turned to Suilven; would we care to come along in the car with them? With alacrity we accepted the invitation and in (for us) a remarkably short space of time we were speeding southward along the road. We motored to the north end of Loch Awe and here we left the car. You will note that until now I had made no mention of the weather. There is, I feel, no need. Perhaps the wind was less strong. Perhaps the rain was heavier. It is difficult to judge these features dispassionately



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SULVEN : MEALL MHEADHONACH FROM CAISTEAL LIATH

R. L. Mitchell

after a few days. The mist was certainly as thick. We set off to the north of Loch Awe and Loch na Grouagaich over streams where footbridges are provided. It is just possible that the water in the streams is deeper than that on the moor. True it is we rarely sank below our knees. Our friends were to ascend Suilven from the north, and then return over Canisp. We were set on at least inspecting Caisteal Liath. It is a weary trudge to the east end of Suilven, but some of the misery is to be avoided by keeping to the higher ground. From our starting-point we went by the north end of Loch a' Chroisg and the south side of Loch Fada. Here, once more, the rain stopped but, to our dismay, the mist lifted only patchily, and we could get no clear view of Suilven or Canisp. We traversed round the east end and along the southern flank of Suilven, pausing in a cave under a boulder just below the middle peak (we imagine, the peak was invisible) for food. At last we reached Caisteal Liath, decided upon and, after a little difficulty, finally located Ramsay's Gully. Up to now our day is best described in Hendry's words in the log: "A devilish hard plod." We roped up at 3 p.m. and led off on our usual system of alternate pitches. The log of the climb reads thus:

1st Pitch.—Climbed the bed of the gully and traversed out to the right over grass, then up and back to the gully bed again.

2nd Pitch.—Climbed the gully bed and then traversed up and out to the right below a large slabby wall.

3rd Pitch.—A long grassy climb leads back to and overlooks the gully.

4th Pitch.—Led out to the right over a grassy gravelled gully (loose) and thence up steep grassy blocks to a narrow ledge at the foot of a rocky exposed nose. There is severe exposure here to the right and all stances are on loose grass (which in this case was very wet). No hitches are available. Here I must digress. This nose Hendry climbed direct; it is the only route. I attempted it and can only say I disliked it extremely. There is no great technical difficulty but there is no sure rock stance; there are no belays, and one is standing throughout on very loose wet grass. I never had a greater feeling of insecurity. From here the route continues up steep grass.

5th Pitch.—A black vegetated wall is ascended to the left, and then the route leads up to a large stance at the foot of a slab, with a good rock bollard—the first hitch we had found.

6th Pitch.—Continues up the vegetation round the corner to the right. A short crack leads on to further grass.

7th Pitch.—One hundred feet of scrambling up steep heather to the left leads to an open gully. This is climbed up the centre and later on the slabby right wall. From here, easy scrambling leads to the summit.

Once on the summit we rejoiced, our spirits not to be damped by mist or rain. We fed happily, and followed along the summit ridge. We traversed the middle peak by what we are sure was the wrong route—a series of narrow ledges on the south side—with a gale driving rain into our faces. The rest of the ridge afforded no difficulties—the famed hiatus gave us no trouble and we continued over the east top and down the east ridge, to come once more out of the mist. We continued along the high ground to the south of Loch Meall a' Mhùraich to Meall na Braclaich (which made definitely easier going than the morning's route) and thence back by the north of Loch a' Chroisg to the road and the hotel.

The sun shone brightly through our curtains and awoke us relatively early in the morning of August 5. We packed up our belongings, said farewell reluctantly to mine host of Inchnadamph, and drove along the north side of Loch Assynt. Once more its waters sparkled and the hills on our right shimmered in the heat. We changed into shorts (to the great delight of the clegs) and rapidly ascended the Spidean Còinich of Quinag. Here, once more, we had the most glorious views—from Ben Hope and Ben Loyal in the north to An Teallach in the south. Time, precious time, however, was passing, and we descended to motor through country of indescribable beauty to Lochinver, happily arriving there at 2.50 P.M. After a short halt we turned southward along the coast, to stop at the roadside to eat a loaf and a vast quantity of cheese which we had purchased, along with other cheer, in Lochinver. Never have I eaten half a loaf so quickly! We stopped once more, just beyond Inverkirkaig, and walked along the path on the north side of the Kirkaig, a most delightful walk, to a point just east of Loch a' Ghlinne Sgoilte, where we feasted our eyes on our beloved Suilven and on the other northern peaks. At

length we returned to the car and proceeded in good order to the Ullapool Youth Hostel.

On August 6 we motored south to Loch Droma, stopping just short of the east end. We then contoured round the side of the hills to the west side of Loch a' Garbhraim and then up the river to Loch Coire Lair. The weather was good, very good, and we gazed with joy at the slopes of Cona Mheall and Beinn Dearg. At the end of the south-east ridge of Cona Mheall we could see a prominent, snake-like grassy gully, lined with orange sand. On the right (east) side of this was a prominent buttress, which appeared, and, in fact was, the true continuation of the south-east ridge. Parker had said that this south-east ridge might afford interesting climbing; and it was with this in mind, and also the remark of the S.M.C. Guide: "Cona Mheall has a fairly serrated ridge which should afford some interesting work," that we ascended the hill-side to the buttress. About 1,000 feet above the loch and just after a wet pitch in the gully previously mentioned we came on an easy fan-shaped slope, above which the buttress became definite. Here we left the gully and traversed out to the right to the steep foot of the buttress, where we built a cairn. A 50-foot initial pitch on good, sound rock gave promise of excellent climbing, but this was not altogether realised. Higher up the ridge becomes wider and indefinite. The route followed was as direct as possible and marked with cairns. Steep pitches and easier scrambling connected wide turf ledges. Some of the climbing was delightful, but none of it was difficult. The rock is sound and the route would afford a very pleasant scramble of moderate difficulty to the summit of Cona Mheall, the true ridge terminating at a blunt pinnacle and connected to the main ridge by an easy sneck. From the summit it was a pleasant walk to the summit of Meall na Ceapraichean. Our luck now deserted us; the weather changed suddenly and, in wind and driving rain, we set off for the summit of Beinn Dearg. From here it was an easy descent by the south-east ridge, overlooking the inspiring Coire Ghrada. It should be noted that the true top of Meall na Ceapraichean (3,192 feet) is at the south end

of the ridge; the 3,150 contour to the north is only a point on the ridge.

We had one day only left; the next day was August 8 and we had to return home. We started from the hostel early and drove gaily by Loch Achall to Rhidorrach, our target Seana Bhragh. For once we were early, and we gloried in our conscious virtue. Suddenly a bump, a skid, a curse from Hendry, and our car lay with two wheels in the ditch—immovable. Our gloom was little relieved by the arrival of an ancient man on an ancient bicycle who, with poorly concealed pleasure, informed us: "Indeed, many gentlemen had slipped into that ditch and it was a very hard job to get the little cars out." However, he suggested that help might be found at Rhidorrach Lodge, a mile ahead. This was so and, joined by the chauffeur with jacks, planks, ropes, and other impedimenta we started to get the car back on the road. At this point we were joined by a postman and a keeper, the postman observing that "the last car to go into the ditch was very difficult: we had to push it on to the loch side and over the rough stones for a mile." The gentle north Highland accent, which I usually find so pleasant, for once grated on my ears. We were lucky. A half-hour's struggle found the car once more on the road and so, after a suitable exchange of thanks and largess to the ancient who, it appeared, was the road-mender, we drove up to Rhidorrach Old Lodge, beyond which a car cannot go. From here we walked by the path near the east end of Loch Daimh, then across to the Allt na Caorach and, by traversing the north shoulder of Meall nam Bradhan, steeply up the hillside to Loch Luchd Choire. We were both tired and found this very hard going. Had we been fresh it would have been a most enchanting walk. From Loch Luchd Choire we chose one of the prominent buttresses on the north-west face, leading up directly but slightly to the left (north) of Craig an Duine. There are three large buttresses flanked by two others, shorter, but perhaps steeper. We chose the middle of the three and this led us by a grass and rock scramble to Craig an Duine summit. It rises in 150-foot steps, and from below gives the impression that it

might afford interesting work, but it is disappointing. It would afford an alternative line of ascent to the north ridge of Craig an Duine. The Craig an Duine Pinnacle affords no difficulty either in ascent or in descent, and from here it is a walk of about a mile to the summit of Seana Bhraigh. From the summit we descended the west ridge over the col to the south of Meall nam Bradhain and over the River Doucharry to join a path marked on the O.S. Map leading northwards to Rhidorrach Old Lodge. It is very heavy going over bog and rough moor and the path is not to be found. I think we should have done better to have retraced our previous route.

Our week had ended. We turned our car southwards again and slowly the peaks of Sutherland disappeared in the mists behind us. It was our first visit to these hills, but we both vowed it would not be our last. There is everything here: material for the rock-climber, a vast territory for the hill-walker, a paradise for the photographer. Despite all the villainy of the weather the country fascinated us and called on us to return. Such were our thoughts as we drove southwards into the rain.