

## THE FREEDOM OF SKYE.

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IN the summer of 1944 Skye was no longer a prohibited area, and I spent a most memorable holiday rambling and climbing amidst the Cuillin and elsewhere. I experienced again the joy of making good friends, both on and off the hills; the kindness, hospitality, and generosity of the Skye folk; the character of peace and beauty in the countryside; the delicate colouring and subtlety of line which give to the scenery a quality of almost magical loveliness. I saw again the lovely colouring of the hills; the grandeur of huge crags balanced with apparent insecurity on narrow precipitous ridges, sometimes looming gigantic through mist, sometimes stark in the sunlight; the dizzy rush seawards of 1,000-foot cliffs, vertical for the greater part of their height, black and grey of basaltic columns looking as though carved by human hands from the living rock; the wide, empty, living plain of the sea itself, its edges lace-fringed with the dancing surf, now breaking against wall-faced cliffs, now upon the shores of beautiful sea-lochs deep-cut into the heart of the land. A symphony is remembered; a perfect whole blended from perfect parts, sound, colour, and texture all contributing to its flawless composition.

My arrival at Kyleakin was accompanied by sunshine and rain squalls; the hills were glorious to look upon, with their rich colours accentuated by the water which descended their flanks in streams swollen by the showers, crystalline in the sun. This weather was typical of that which favoured me in the days to come; Skye weather at its best, with the wind blowing from north or north-east and only occasional showers to vary the sunshine. It was one of the finest summers in living memory. Glen Brittle looked lovely in the afternoon light—and Nancy MacRae's enormous tea in my honour rounded off most effectively the blending

of æsthetic and material factors, which together occupied my mind.

On the following morning I set out alone for the peaks. I was the only guest at the Lodge, and almost the only visitor at Glen Brittle, so much of my time was spent in solitary rambles. There were a few showers early in the day, but very soon it became a wonderful day for views, and the colouring everywhere was glorious. I have seldom seen finer views than I saw that day. I climbed the rough, stony buttress of Sgùrr nan Gobhar, then ascended to the summit of Banachdich, which was covered by a light mist. Thence I descended into the deep cleft between Banachdich and Sgùrr Thormaid—Norman's Peak, named after Norman Collie—and scaled the steep west face of that impressive spire. From its summit I was rewarded with a splendid Brocken Spectre, my shadow being thrown on to the cloud surrounded by a perfect circle of rainbow colours. The great ridge of Sgùrr a Ghreadaidh sprang up before me like a huge bow, extremely narrow and formidable in appearance, with black precipitous crags dropping hundreds of feet into the corries below. However, on closer acquaintance the ridge proved easy to climb, and the traverse of the twin summits was followed by the ascent of Mhadaidh's highest peak. From this airy pinnacle a truly marvellous view was displayed of Loch Coruisk, with the peaks of Rhum beyond. I often noticed that when the Cuillin's tops were clear these lower peaks were in cloud. I now decided I had done enough for the first day, and descended direct into Coire Ghreadaidh and thence back to the Lodge.

Next day I decided to visit a section of the Main Ridge which I had never previously explored, so I set off for my first visit to Coire a Ghrunnda, intending to follow the Ridge right to its southern end. This intention I carried out and had a most interesting day. On the way to Coire a Ghrunnda I saw two splendid stags, which were still near the mouth of the corrie on my return. I had never been to the head of this magnificent ice-worn corrie before and was greatly impressed by its enormous size. The lower part is flanked by the tremendous crags of Sron na Ciche and the western

rugged and broken shoulder of Sgùrr nan Eag. The climber is confronted with a most formidable barrier, consisting of the great wall of glaciated slabs which is characteristic of this corrie. However, there is a weakness in this great barrier at its northern end by which access is gained to the upper corrie. This is a whole mountain world in itself, the great jagged peaks rising up all around the loch there, Lochan Coire a Ghrunnda. On the north are Sgùrrs Sgumain, Alasdair, Thearlaich, then the crags of the Thearlaich-Dubh chasm, followed by Sgùrr Dubh na Da Bheinn and, on the south side, the steep ridge of Sgùrr nan Eag. For sheer savage grandeur it is a scene which must have few equals anywhere, and in the Cuillin it is only surpassed—if indeed it is surpassed—by the sinister majesty of Coire Lagan.

I climbed from the corrie to the north shoulder of Sgùrr Dubh na Da Bheinn, from which a fine view of Sgùrr Dubh Mhor was obtained. Thence to the summit of Dubh na Da Bheinn was a steep scramble, the upper part being in cloud. To get off this summit in the cloud was not easy; twice I cast around and landed on the edge of vast cloud-filled gulfs before I found the true line of the Ridge. Coming out of the cloud was dramatic; suddenly a view of the lochan, far below in the corrie, appeared, then a great rock tower on the ridge ahead, lastly the rugged mass of Sgùrr nan Eag, its summit still cloud-capped. Skirting the vertical wall of the tower, I embarked on the fine steep ridge of Sgùrr nan Eag and reached the summit just as the cloud cleared from it. From this point the views were grand—Glen Brittle and the open sea to my right, Soay and Rhum visible ahead, Coruisk and its surrounding peaks, with Blaven a superb dominant in the background, on my left. The Ridge for some way now was rough, but usually fairly wide, and it was not until Gars-bheinn was reached that it narrowed again. For a short distance here it was very narrow indeed, with a sensational drop on the left side, but as the summit was approached it became less sensational and the actual summit-peak was much easier to climb than it had looked from the ridge, whence it appeared to be a sharp, very steep cone.

Conical and steep it certainly was, but the holds were many and large. From the summit I ran down on steep scree almost the whole way to the moor below, over which I tramped back to Glen Brittle. On the way I had a fine view of the enormous and most impressive slabs which rise from the bottom of Coire nan Laogh almost to the top of the Main Ridge in one huge unbroken wall. I also again saw the same two stags near the entrance to Coire a Ghrunnda.

On the next day (September 2) a climber asked me to join him, and we climbed the Window Buttress on Sgùrr Dearg, an enjoyable route on impressive crags. I went on and climbed the Inaccessible Pinnacle. There was a high wind, and the solitary ascent of the longer eastern ridge of the pinnacle, with big vertical drops on both sides, was a thrilling experience. The ridge is so narrow that, for most of the way, the climber is looking down both sides simultaneously. Both the rock walls down which his eyes travel are absolutely vertical, and continue downwards for a most impressive distance. The views were again wonderful, Rhum looking very fine and the whole long line of the Outer Isles—over 100 miles—showing up very clearly.

September 3 was an off-day, and I lazed about, looked at salmon leaping in the mouth of the burn, bathed, and read. I now, for the first time during this visit, had leisure to absorb in repose the great beauty of this lovely glen. It seemed to me that the essence of its beauty lies in contrast; the great jagged grey peaks towering above the purple, green, and yellow-brown moors, gently sloping to the shores of the loch, itself grey-blue with white surf breaking on its beaches. Nature's savagery blends with the work of human hands, indicated by the scattered habitations and cultivated ground apparent in the midst of these wild, untamed surroundings. The whole picture seemed to me to offer a perfect example of the right relationship between the human and non-human elements in nature.

On the following day a party from the neighbouring Youth Hostel and myself set out to visit Rhum. Owing to the state of the sea and wind, however, we did not get very far. It was very wet and squally, with a steep, choppy sea,

and Ronald Macdonald decided that we could not get to Rhum, so we visited Soay instead. This is a very pretty, wild little island, and in spite of being soaked to the skin we enjoyed our visit. We were entertained with true Highland hospitality by Ronald's father and mother, a splendid old couple who insisted on giving us large quantities of their own food although we had all brought our own, and hanging the wet clothes of the ladies all over their small kitchen to dry off the worst of the soaking. They lived in a historic old shieling, one of the oldest which are still inhabited. The wind had slightly abated for our homeward voyage. I was interested to see the old "Minerva," a craft well known to Skye visitors of pre-war days, in Soay's little harbour; also to find a very large conger occupying most of the bottom of the small boat which took us off shore.

On September 5 I went out alone again and climbed Sgùrr Sgumain by its imposing north buttress. This climb is considered a "moderate," but there is only one pitch which might sometimes demand the rope, except in a very high wind. However, a good deal of the rock is very loose, and the climb does not appear to be done often. I then went on over the summits of Sgùrrs Alasdair and Thearlaich, descending again into Coire Lagan from the Thearlaich MhicCoinnich col. The climbing was never difficult, although there are several steep and narrow places which have to be negotiated, but it was always interesting and required care. I shamelessly avoided the *mauvais pas* on the west ridge of Alasdair by climbing a chimney to the right of it; the rock was extremely wet and I was wearing rubber-soled boots, as my nailed boots had given me blisters. It rained all day—it was almost the only wet day of my holidays—and the clouds blowing about the tops made the great pinnacles and arêtes very impressive to look at; even more awe-inspiring than they appear in clear weather.

In four days I had now climbed sixteen Cuillin peaks, thirteen of which were "Munros." The fact of being alone for these climbs had given me an extraordinary feeling of intimacy with these great crags, and this feeling became intensified during the days that followed.

September 6 in my diary claims, "walked to Talisker by Loch Eynort, back over the moor. A lovely day." Loch Eynort is certainly lovely; it cuts into the high moors south of Talisker, then suddenly bends round to the north. It is narrow, remote, and utterly peaceful. On its shores cattle graze, paddling in its cool waters. A few houses form a small settlement on its upper reaches. Everyone seems happy. It is hemmed in by high moorland hills, those on one side being planted with trees, mostly conifers. The fins of basking sharks, or dolphins, are seen above its surface.

Having crossed the moor, I came to a steep, winding descent which led me down to Talisker, as lovely and peaceful a place as I have ever seen. To the south towered the huge cone of Preshal More, its north face cleft by a great gully rising from its base to its summit. Below it the moors stretched seawards, forming one arm of the lovely bay. The other was also moorland, ending in a great craggy cliff hundreds of feet in vertical height. A fantastic "stack" stood sentinel to the bay. The dwelling-places consisted of two or three shielings and the manor house, almost hidden by the trees of its little park. Scarcely a sound disturbed the silence of this lovely sunny day. Two happy old men chaffed each other in Gaelic over their haymaking. Happiness and peace were the dominant characteristics of this altogether charming place.

On September 7 I climbed Sgùrr MhicCoinnich, the great wall-sided mountain at the head of Coire Lagan. It is named after Alexander Mackenzie, the famous Skye guide of former days. The climb is easy—as climbs go—the ridge narrow and quite thrilling at times, the views superb, especially down the eastern wall to Loch Coruisk and back towards Sgùrr Dearg's great eastern crags. The savage serrated ridge joining this peak to Sgùrr Banachdich looked immensely formidable—and inviting. Magnificent, too, were the spires of Sgùrrs Thearlaich, Alasdair, and Sgumain, soaring into the sky across Coire Lagan. During the descent from Coire Lagan I looked back (I am always looking back!) and saw a superb rainbow completely spanning the corrie and entirely contained by it. The apex of

the bow was well below the ridge of MhicCoinnich, and its two ends rested on the flanks of Sgùrrs Dearg and Alasdair.

I had developed a sore foot during the last day or two, and therefore changed my plan to walk over to Sligachan. I drove over instead, and spent the day, which was very wet, resting. All the peaks were white with snow when the clouds cleared away.

The following morning I again set out for the hills, this time up the Bhasteir Corrie—as grim and savage a place as you will find in the Cuillin. Having climbed Am Bhasteir, I thought I would visit the notorious *gendarme* on the west ridge of Sgùrr nan Gillean. This rocky policeman is not so savage as he looks; in fact, he will cause no traffic stoppage unless those who accost him are either affected by giddiness or physically defective. Anyway, I climbed over him without any difficulty and with considerable admiration for the splendid narrow arête on which he stands. He literally overhangs the arête on both sides when you are seated—or kneeling (I did not stand up!)—on his head, which is itself only a foot or so in width. The thrill of one's position is accentuated by the (quite false) appearance of insecurity in the architecture of the ridge itself, which appears to be on the point of collapsing. If it should ever take it into its head to do so, and someone happens to be on it at the time—well, it is a long way to the bottom!

After climbing over this *gendarme* I followed the west ridge to the summit of Sgùrr nan Gillean, one of the loveliest peaks I have ever seen. The view was grand; the greater part of the Main Ridge was clearly visible, the Pinnacle Ridge uplifted its savage spires in the direction of Loch Sligachan, the ridge of Sgùrr nan Gillean itself stretched downwards and again upwards to Sgùrr na h-Uamha. Beyond Glen Sligachan rose the Red Hills, terminated to the south by that grand mountain with the beautiful name, Blaven, the “Peak of the Flowers.” I went on down the Ridge and climbed Sgùrr na h-Uamha, a peak which is seldom visited but is well worth climbing. Thence I descended Coire an Glas and followed the Sligachan Burn back to the famous old climbers' inn where

I was staying. I saw many stags peacefully feeding in Coire an Glas.

The next day yielded a fine day's climbing in the company of Bill Wood (if you don't know who he is you will soon find out if you go to Sligachan!). We made what we think may have been a new route up the second pinnacle of the Pinnacle Ridge. It was a fine climb on excellent rock, and gave a direct ascent of this pinnacle from its foot in Coire Bhasteir to its summit—almost straight up the face, probably about 600 feet. We used the rope for about two-thirds of the ascent, but unroped again on the summit and climbed the Pinnacle Ridge unroped, except for the short overhang just below the summit of the third pinnacle. We then descended the west ridge of Sgùrr nan Gilleán, over my old friend the *gendarme*, down Coire Bhasteir, and so back to the hotel and a huge meal. As part of our route was thought to be new, we entered up the climb in the Climbers' Book.

I took it easy on the 11th and bussed to Armadale, seeing much of the beauty of this loveliest of islands and enjoying the relaxation of an off-day. At Armadale I spent some time watching numerous herons and wild geese grouped on the rocks off the coast or swimming in the sea. This was the first time that I realised that the heron has affinity with the sea. I visited Ardvasar and chatted with a number of the local people, then went to look at the Castle. I don't know whether I trespassed or not; anyway I entered the grounds and shortly found myself about to enter the back door of the Castle! This seemed an impertinence, so I retired in good order and did some exploring on the coast. The mainland opposite looked grand in the sunshine; Ben Sgrìol, Luinne Bheinn, and Meall Odhar very impressive.

Next day Wood and I went to Carbost. Wood had business to do there in connection with his Customs job, so could not join me on the hills, but he very kindly gave me a lift to a point midway between Carbost and Talisker, which I badly wanted to visit again. I had a wonderful day in glorious sunshine. First I climbed the great gully on Preshal More, which I had noticed as so conspicuous on my first visit. Preshal More appeared to me to be well worthy of exploration





PRESHAL MORE

*W. A. Ewen*

from the point of view of rock-climbs ; it is a very fine peak, and if it were less remote would probably be popular with cragsmen. Actually it is obviously very seldom climbed, as the rock is almost devoid of nail-scratches, and the more obvious routes are of more interest as gardens than as climbs. Even the great gully, which positively demands exploration, has hardly a nail-scratch in it. The ascent is not technically difficult except at the top, and then only on account of the extreme instability of the rocks. Very careful and delicate movement was necessary here, and every hold had to be carefully tested. The rock was steep, loose, and treacherous. The interior of the gully was very fine and impressive, the remoteness of the situation adding considerably to the thrill of the climb. I descended the crag on the opposite side and climbed two pinnacles in a great wall-sided cleft which had obviously been placed there just for that purpose! Both were slightly scratched—but only very slightly—probably by Wood himself when he climbed this peak on an earlier occasion.

I now found myself in a lovely wild stretch of open moorland, with Preshal Beg raising its flat-topped summit before me. This is a most remarkable mountain. Like Preshal More, it is formed of columnar basalt, but in its own case this formation shows the most extraordinary regularity. All the columns are cut off clean along their tops in a dead-straight line, and the superimposed conglomerate, which forms the actual summit, gives it the appearance of an enormous cake. It is a few feet higher than Preshal More, so its title of " Beg " is misleading, though it certainly *looks* smaller.

Next, I followed the line of cliffs back to Talisker. I have never seen such cliffs ; there can be few finer anywhere in the world. For several miles their average height is close on 1,000 feet, and at several points they exceed this height. Except for 100 feet or so at their base they are absolutely vertical and are formed of gigantic basalt columns, black or dark grey in colour. Great stacks, broken arêtes, crazy pinnacles, and collapsing gullies abound ; the observer rubs his eyes and thinks he is dreaming. Wood told me he had once had to rescue a sheep-dog from one of these precipices

and never wanted to repeat the experience. I fully believe him.

As I was leaving the cliffs I entered a little gully with a stream running along its bed. Suddenly an eagle flew down the gully, passing not 10 yards from where I was standing. As it passed it looked at me in a wholly uninterested manner, then continued on its way. Few people can have had the good fortune to see an eagle in flight at such close quarters. Its eyrie was probably on one of the crags forming the walls of the gully.

My holiday was now nearing its end, and one section of the Main Ridge of the Cuillin still remained unexplored. Bill Wood could give me another day, so we decided to cover this section and to look for Mallory's climb on Sgùrr a' Mhadaidh while doing so. We set forth for Coire na Creiche in fine weather, but it is a long way from Sligachan to the foot of Mhadaidh and, when we reached it, we had to decide whether Mallory's climb or the Main Ridge was to absorb most of our attention. I was particularly anxious to traverse this section of the Ridge, and Wood, who lives in Skye, did not mind which we did, so after a rather perfunctory attempt to find Mallory's, which may or may not have been successful, we climbed to Mhadaidh's highest peak by the Thuilm Ridge and left Mallory's to another visit. We then traversed the other three peaks of Mhadaidh, the three peaks of Bidein Druim nan Ramh, then An Caisteal, Sgùrr na Bharnich, Bruach na Frithe, down the Fionn Corrie, and so home. The rope was not used, except for a short abseil executed by Wood when descending from one of the peaks of Bidein. A good deal of easy rock-work was involved, one of Bidein's summits proving not so easy. It was altogether a splendid day and I got a very good appreciation of the northern section of the Main Ridge from it. At the foot of the Fionn Corrie a drop of "neat and strong" sent us both back to supper in a most comfortable state of mind and body!

I had one more day to enjoy before returning home. The morning brought heavy rain and an appearance of more to come, but the weather improved later and after lunch I set out to explore the enormous 500-foot red granite crag which

springs like the prow of a ship from that side of Marsco overlooking Glen Sligachan. The Climbers' Book contains an entry by Odell which intrigued me, since it describes a route which he discovered up this crag. He says that it should repay exploration and comments on its fine appearance and the good quality of the rock.

On reaching the foot of the crag—or, rather, the point on the Glen Sligachan track immediately below its foot—I saw that it was even more huge than I had thought. It extended right across the face of Marsco below the summit, which was covered with cloud, and seemed to offer a very extensive field for exploration. However, there was a wide though shallow amphitheatre immediately above me which looked exciting and from which Odell's route appeared to start. I made for this and reached it after a rather laborious scramble over scree. What a grand place it was! The two sides of the amphitheatre formed arêtes hundreds of feet high, their tops lost in cloud. The centre was a great wall of reddish rock, steep at the foot and apparently almost vertical higher up: what lay above could not be seen. I started off on what I took to be Odell's route, but I must have been mistaken in my calculations, for after about 80 feet of climbing the route petered out altogether at an impassable corner. I looked around and could see no other way at first; then I noticed that a high patch of scree, mentioned by Odell as a point which should be made for, lay away to my left on the farther side of the amphitheatre. Without descending I set out to traverse across the face of the amphitheatre to reach it. This was not difficult, as climbing goes, but it gave a fine, rather exposed traverse on good holds right across the great red wall at an average height of 100 to 150 feet above its base, gaining height at the finish on to the scree. I now had trouble again in trying to trace the route. A broken ledge, very exposed and narrow, led back on to the face and looked like an impasse, although the cloud which swirled about it may have caused it to look more fearsome than it actually was. Directly above me a series of great steps, rather like a huge crooked staircase, looked preferable, and I chose this way. I mounted this

giant's staircase up into the cloud; it curved round to my right then ended abruptly. I was at the summit of the crag.

I now set about the problem of descent and decided that a steep gully to my left looked hopeful. I climbed down into this, crossed it, and came out on to broken rocks which led obviously and easily downwards. Scree soon appeared, and almost at once I walked out of the cloud and saw the glen below me. I also saw a party of friends from the hotel who had left soon after I did, also bound for Marsco. I joined them, and we returned together to the hotel, baths, and supper.

So ended an unforgettable holiday in Skye. To part from my many good friends was hard, and harder still to leave the island which I love so well. However, I look forward to seeing it again, and them again, and I hope it may be soon—though one of them I shall not see again, for he has since lost his life on Scafell.

Keats wrote that beauty is truth, truth beauty. For many who believe that this is true, their spiritual home will ever be found in Skye.