



STAC POLLY FROM THE SOUTH

*L. B. Perkins*

## AMONGST THE NORTHERN MUNROS.

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DURING the last two years, time was found, between Club excursions, to visit the mountains in the North of Scotland. Altnaharra, Inchnadamph, and Ullapool were the centres in 1949, and Ullapool was visited again in 1950. We climbed Ben Hope, Ben Klibreck and Ben More Assynt in addition to the Fannichs, the Beinn Dearg group, Ben Wyvis and Fionn Bheinn. In all cases, the approach was made by road—a large car being used—and every effort was made to get as near to the hills as possible. The road journeys did not lack interest; in fact, the outward journey in 1949 resulted in a letter from a certain Chief Constable. Going north, a wait at a level crossing was made worth while by the delightful sight of a race between a cyclist and a train. The race started at a nearby station, and it was not until the cyclist dismounted and opened the level crossing gates that one realised that this was part of "British Railways." Alarm and despondency was spread on some mornings when acute symptoms of engine trouble developed soon after starting. Experience, however, led to the removal of the coat tucked round the engine before, and not after, starting.

BEN HOPE.—Altnaharra is a good centre for this, the most northerly Munro. With a good approach from the south, giving views of Ben Armine and Ben Klibreck, Altnaharra is easily reached from Aberdeen in one day.

Ben Hope is 17 miles from Altnaharra, and the road running through Strath More is now in reasonably good condition. A parking place for a car is to be found in a road quarry approximately one mile to the north of Altnacaillich. The route we took was, as usual, an easy one, and led up to the col between Craig Riabhach and Ben Hope itself. The summit was reached in two and a quarter hours. We would explain that times given in this article include all stops for meals, cups of coffee, taking photographs, admiring the view, and just resting. The summit of Ben Hope offers good views of Ben Laoghal, and the indented

northern coast of Scotland. The ascent, which presented no difficulties, can be varied by traversing Craig Riabhach, or possibly Leitir Mhuisseil, the "step" below Craig Riabhach, although this latter appears to be somewhat overgrown with bushes and birch trees. From above the "step" Leitir Mhuisseil seems to merge into the bottom of the glen, although a considerable height separates them.

The falls marked on the 1 in. map on the Alltnacaillich are well worth a visit. Dun Dornaigil should be inspected of course, but a better example, carefully preserved, can be seen in Glen Beag, near Glenelg.

**BEN KLIBRECK.**—Next day we climbed Ben Klibreck, the route commencing at "Klibreck," the farm on the shore of Loch Naver which was visited the previous evening, when some alarm was occasioned by murderous sounds coming from a wood close to Altnaharra. The possibility of herons and bitterns being the cause was discussed, but we were reluctantly forced to the conclusion that the birds were only capercaillies. Compared with Ben Hope, the ascent of Ben Klibreck is uninteresting, although Ben Klibreck is the higher. Three hours were taken for a rather leisurely ascent, and part traverse to Meall Nan Con—the summit—where the implements of ordnance survey triangulation were found, including two car batteries. These, we understand, require to be carried down, recharged, and taken up again daily, but then, the Ordnance staff get paid for climbing mountains.

**BEN MORE ASSYNT AND CONIVAL.**—From Altnaharra, we went to Inchnadamph, where trout fishing is of great local importance. Mountaineers are very welcome here as they do not require to be placed on the fishing rota. From here we climbed Spidean Coinneach of Quinag, Stack Polly, and a rather long day was spent in connection with Suilven. The path from Little Assynt to Suilven is still in good condition, possibly kept so by the feet of anglers who fish in Loch na Gainimh. The wall (English for dyke) which divides Caisteal Liath from the rest of Suilven was duly admired—were sheep once grazed there?—but no time was wasted on the top, on account of inclement weather.

The ascent of Ben More Assynt had been delayed, not so much on account of the delights of the hills just named, but in hopes of a clear day, and when this materialised, we made an early start, and were well up Gleann Dubh by 10 A.M. This route, with the name "Traligill," bringing back memories of the limestone country of Yorkshire, is entrancing, particularly if one has a smattering of geological lore, and can appreciate what is seen—the folding, the thrust planes, the dykes, the hills, and the caves. "The Geology of the North-West Highlands of Scotland" should be consulted before visiting this area.

From Gleann Dubh, up the tributary to the col between Beinn an Fhurain and Conival, and thence up the ridge to Conival, presented no difficulties. It is necessary to pass over Conival twice in order to reach Ben More Assynt, and return to Inchnadamph. Whether this counts as two ascents of Conival is, perhaps, debatable—it depends how urgently one needs to increase one's bag of Munros. The summit of Conival offers views of Ben More Assynt, and better still, to the north, the grand sight of Na Tuadhan. This spectacular hill receives the honour of being shown as the frontispiece of the book previously mentioned, but is shown only as a spot height on the 1 in. map. The ridge joining Conival and Ben More Assynt is traversed with little difficulty, but many ups and downs. Ben More itself has two cairns, each having good claim to be the summit, and the conscientious must visit both.

At this time, unfortunately, we had not developed the habit of taking "rubies," and thus missed the pleasure of a double celebration. Named after a Swiss guide, a "ruby" comprises sugar lumps soaked in whisky. More than one should be taken at the summit of each Munro. They are an excellent antidote for the effects of cosmic rays, which, as is well known, make mountaineers annoyed with each other. The ridge of Ben More Assynt extends lengthily southwards, and if followed, leads far from home. The total time for the round, Conival—Ben More Assynt—Conival from Inchnadamph was nine hours, the descent being made in heavy rain and mist. So much for the "first clear day."

BEINN DEARG (ROSS) is, like this article, a composite affair, and according to the "Munro" tables, consists of five separate mountains, Beinn Dearg (3,547 feet), Cona Mheall (3,200 feet), Am Faochagach (3,120 feet), Meall nan Ceapraichean (3,192 feet), Eididh nan Clach Geala (3,039 feet), and Seana Bhraigh (3,041 feet). Our first real view of the massif was from the shores of Loch Broom outside the Royal Hotel, Ullapool, and in the afterglow of a grand May day it really deserved the name of "Red Mountain," stretching, it appeared, to bar the head of the Loch in a series of symmetrical peaks. Next day was as good as its promise, and we were joined for the day by another party of three. The cars were parked in a small road metal pit on the Garve-Ullapool road, just beyond Loch Droma. Following a path marked on the O.S. 1 in. map, we soon reached Loch a' Gharbrain, and after this, our route took us up the ridge of Leac an Tuadh. One of our friends then cut across by the end of Loch nan Eilean, making for a steep face to the South ridge of Beinn Dearg, whilst the rest of us continued along the ridge of Leac an Tuadh until just before entering Choire Ghrunda. Here, the other two visitors turned back, and we entered the corrie. Following the advice of the S.M.C. Northern Guide, we continued along the west bank of the Loch, but why this is advised as a route, and the other side as very dangerous, we have still to learn!

A considerable snow field was encountered after leaving the col between Cona Mheall and Beinn Dearg proper. Short of this snowfield we found—and left—a very fine plant of the silene growing by the side of the burn. On the Northern Ridge of Ben Dearg is a march dyke which leads to almost the summit cairn, which we found later in mist, but did not linger. We retraced our steps to the col and continued north-east up a gentle slope to the summit of Cona Mheall, which was clear, and gave quite a view. Leaving this top, we just caught a glimpse of our lone companion on the North-West Ridge; we ourselves looking, as ever, for the most gentle route, returned to the col and down the burn to the loch which we found to be quite passable

on the east. We picked up our energetic companion paddling in the Allt Lair, and eventually found the other two "hiking" along the road to Ullapool. Discussing our plans for the following day, we did consider the possibility of investigating the other tops of Beinn Dearg, but the day itself was far too good to waste on peak bagging, so we had a picnic instead, and left Seana Braigh alone for another year.

June 1950 found us back in Ullapool, and without hesitation, the Braigh was definitely first on the list. Inquiries were made about getting permission to take the car beyond Loch Achalt, but these were not very promising, so we decided to go by the Inverlael route. This was a wise choice, for the walk through the recently planted forest, and up the shoulder of Druim na Saobhaidhe afforded some beautiful views of Gleann na Sguaiù leading up with the main summit of Beinn Dearg at its head. A well-marked path leads up the shoulder. Keeping to the north of the Druim, it eventually leads to the Coiran Lochan Sgeirich, after which it peters out, and leaves one on rough country, badly defined on the O.S. maps, which is actually a retaining wall of the head waters of the River Douchary. The final slopes to the summit of Seana Braigh are quite gentle. We retraced our steps to the col, and keeping more to the south, avoided the broken ground, and followed an even slope running west to the summit of Eididh nan Clach Geala. The mist came down just as we reached the summit, but lifted as we made our way down the ridge to the Druim, and so back to Inverlael where we had left our car eight hours previously. Now only An Faochagach and Meall nan Ceapraichean are left to do, and they will have to await another visit to the Loch Broom district.

THE FANNICHS.—A study of the current edition of the Ordnance 1 in. map suggests that the Fannichs are a group of nicely rounded hills. The Cairngorms themselves are often described in this way by railway passengers, and it may be suggested that the survey in the Fannich area was carried out in such a detached way, a number of errors and omissions being established during our visit.

There are nine Munros in the Fannichs, and they can be covered in three comfortable trips.

A car can easily be taken to the road leading to the fishing lodge at the side of Loch a' Bhraoin, and from the lodge itself, after crossing several bridges, the way led up to the ridge named Druim Reidh, from where Loch Toll an Lochan was reached. Several easy routes are available from the loch to the summit of A'Chailleach, the most westerly of the Fannichs. To the north-east of the summit a deep channel, possibly a glacial overflow channel, offers a geological problem. From A' Chailleach, we circumnavigated the false top at the head of the corrie, suitably guided by a track and reached the top of Sgùrr Breac in a short time. At this point, a cloud descended, and the route was determined by compass. The descent, which was intended to be direct to a point high up on the Allt Leac a' Bhealaich, was one of those all too familiar ones, where the contours entice one away from the true direction, until it is realised that one is 1,000 feet and one or two miles away from the intended point. Fate was, however, probably looking after us, or was it providence? We found subsequently that the nice easy rounded ridge we intended to follow had a number of 50-foot and 100-foot steps, not shown on the map. We reached a point well down the Allt Leac a' Bhealaich, and getting a good view of Loch Fannich, could establish our exact position, in spite of errors on the map. A long trudge over to the car appeared inevitable, but at this point, Smith announced that he had climbed ninety-nine separate Munros, and intended to climb his hundredth on that day. He marshalled several arguments, and, as often happens, we found ourselves climbing before we had agreed to do so—in fact, we were half-way up before all possible complaints were exhausted.

From near the upper tributaries of the Allt Leac a' Bhealaich to the summit of Sgùrr nan Each was as uniform a climb as we have met, 1,500 feet in one mile, each step like the last, and not even a stone to fall over. The summit is very narrow, and offers good views in every direction.



CONA MHEALL, FROM THE NORTH

*L. B. Perkins*



Four of the Fannich mountains were tackled in an easy eight-hour day, two days later. From a point on the Dirrie Mor, the road from Garve to Ullapool, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles to the west of the end of Loch Droma, the car was parked in a quarry with difficulty. There is a much better and bigger quarry, 100 yards further along, but we didn't know that then. The path alongside the Allt a' Mhadaidh was followed up to Loch a' Mhadaidh, on reaching which we found ourselves on the spit of land to the north of the loch. It was a very hot day, and we waded the loch, with glee on the one face and anguish on the other. A convenient route was then taken to the summit of Meall a' Chrasgaidh, no difficulty being occasioned. An Teallach and the Ben Dearg range could be seen in a heat haze. A little lochan midway between Meall a' Chrasgaidh and Sgùrr nan Chlach Geala promised a welcome oasis, especially as it lay in a snow girt hollow. Descending to the loch, we were amused at the tameness of some deer who would hardly get out of our way. This tameness was noticeable in other Ross-shire forests, in marked contrast to the timidity of the Cairngorm stags and hinds. From the lochan, an easy ridge walk took us up to the summit of Sgùrr nan Clach Geala. The Geological Survey honour the precipitous west face of this mountain with a full page plate in one of their memoirs, whilst the Ordnance Survey give it only one or two half-hearted scratches on the 1 in. map.

We retraced our steps to the lochan to get to Sgùrr Mòr, which is the highest of the Fannichs, and gives them the characteristic skyline view, so familiar to those having climbed in the district. If an excellent footpath down the glen to the Allt a' Mhadaidh can be resisted, the way to Ben Liath Mòr Fannaich is simple. The hill itself has no special features, but at one point on the route, clearance of stones to form a path has resulted in a very prominent landmark, as the path is some 2 feet below the general level. From Ben Liath Mòr Fannaich the route down to the Allt a' Mhadaidh is fairly simple, but long. One is apt to assume that the descent is short, on account of the 500-foot drop from Sgùrr Mòr, but Ben Liath Mòr Fannaich is one

of the hills which takes a lot of getting off, and not much getting on to, when approached from Sgùrr Mòr.

Much later in 1950, a week-end was spent at Garve, a week-end stolen from winter, as it turned out. The hotel was left in sunshine and frost on a morning late in October, and Grudie Bridge, on the road to Achnasheen, was soon reached. Here the road up to Loch Fannich was taken, but it should be remembered that the old road, running on the north of the loch, is the one required for An Coileachan and Meall Gorm. The car was again parked in a road quarry, about 1 mile from the eastern end of the loch. From this point the ridge was ascended to the little loch feeding the burn running into Loch Fannich, and from there the route to an Coileachan was simple. Another hour brought us to Meall Gorm, two and a quarter hours after leaving the car. The day was clear, and Stac Polly was clearly discerned, with other hills farther north easily identifiable. Slioch, Ben Eighe and Liathach were also clearly visible, as were the Glen Affric hills to the south. On Meall Gorm there is an excellent shelter made by local ghillies from the slabby rock, which provides shelter whichever way the wind blows. A path down to Fannich Lodge ends near this shelter. The path is well graded, and appears to have been paid for on a yardage basis, as it zigzags profusely.

Whilst climbing is supposed to be the all important feature of our holidays on the west coast, motoring and hotels have a great fascination. The latter especially deserve a little space in any descriptive article. Our first stop in 1949 was at the Hotel at Altnaharra. Despite its inaccessibility, this is a comfortable fishing hotel near Loch Naver, and the food was excellent. It was our base for climbing Ben Hope and Ben Klibreck. Inchnadamph Hotel, near Loch Assynt, was a revisit after four years, and if we missed the delightful hostess of our earlier trip, we were glad to see several "kent" faces among the guests. The situation of the hotel is delightful, its windows giving excellent views of Loch Assynt with its old Castle of Ardvreck, and of Quinag.

At Ullapool there is a fair choice of Hotels. We found

the Royal Hotel made excellent headquarters for Beinn Dearg and the Fannichs. The management were most sympathetic to climbers. Early or late meals were served willingly, and to get an early breakfast in hotels on the west coast is something to remark on. The Railway Hotel at Achnasheen, from which we climbed Fionn Bheinn, is a bustling centre of road and rail traffic, but we found that it is also a delightful country hotel, where guests are really welcomed and looked after. The same understanding of the needs of climbers was found there, and also at the hotel at Garve, from which we climbed Ben Wyvis and the southern tops of the Fannichs.