



Coigach peaks

[photo by *Donald Hawksworth*]

## Madrigals and Mountains

RICHARD C. SHIRREFFS

For a group of hill-minded students who wish to recuperate from a bout of examinations, there can surely be no better course of treatment than a week in the hills. So last Easter a group of eight of us set off for six days' climbing centred in the Ullapool Youth Hostel.

The first morning saw us raring to go, but we were none too confident of the weather, the cloud being fairly low. As we left Ullapool, the hill we had chosen as a mild starter to the week, Ben More Coigach, was still capped with cloud, but by the time we set off from the car it was showing signs of clearing. To give the cloud longer to lift we tackled first the adjoining top, Beinn Tarsuinn, which offered some interesting views up towards Stac Polly but was otherwise largely a trudge towards an ever-receding top. By now the cloud was definitely rising, leaving us in no doubt that we should go on. On the east ridge of Ben More Coigach we unstrapped our ice-axes, but the snow turned out to be mostly of an ideal firmness on which walking was almost as effortless and safe as on a staircase.

We were disappointed to find no trig point (one O.S. sheet marks one, but the other gives only a height), and perhaps we omitted the most interesting part of the hill by not going along the arête to Garbh Choireachan, but the cloud was threatening to come down again. However we made up for this omission by glissading down a long snow slope. The boldest amongst us, after comparing the coefficients of friction on snow of his trouser seat and polythene, produced his brilliant orange polythene bivouac bag and was in a few seconds far below us, but for the rest of us it was the slower wetter process of lying on our backs on our cagoules!

The next day the weather was still not what we desired for some of our loftier objectives, so it was decided (as it could not have been more misleadingly expressed by one of us) to 'nip up' Stac Polly. Most of my readers will know, I am sure, that although it barely reaches 2,000 feet Stac Polly is not the sort of hill for any but the fittest to 'nip up'. The ascent with its several rests was not particularly eventful, but at the east top we had to sit through quite a snowstorm when we could not even take out our madrigal book to pass the time. When eventually the snow went off, we had a marvellous view to the north as the ground, now slightly white with fresh snow, gradually came into sight through the cloud still swirling around us. The walk along the ridge of Stac



Polly, now with a lot of thin fresh snow as well as deep pockets of old, called for considerable care and often agility, which made it all the more satisfying to scramble up the final low buttress to the summit.

As we expected to be back at the car in plenty of time, we had not carried lunch with us, but the hill was more of a climb than we had foreseen and we lost a lot of time sitting out the snowstorm, so we ended up lunching at about 3 o'clock on a sandy beach on the shores of Loch Lurgain. Some 20 yards offshore was a small island which aroused the exploratory instincts of one of our group and led to the discovery of a new use for bivouac bags – as waders. We saw later from an old 6-inch map that this island had once been accessible by stepping-stones, a much less exciting way to cross water. Perhaps the island was a favourite spot for climbers to relax after tackling Stac Polly.

On our third day we at last woke to find the sun out and the clouds away from Beinn Dearg, one of our objectives now revealed for the first time and looking very enticing in its snow-cover. Despite the favourable weather three of our eight did not yet feel fit enough for the proposed round of four Munros, so we were only five who made an early start from the head of the Glen na Sguaib forestry road.

We very soon came on to extremely hard snow, the result of the night's severe frost, and quite low down we were having to cut steps, though often hard kicking was enough. Our route took us, at a rate varying considerably with the texture of the snow, on to and along the ridge bounding Glen na Sguaib on the south-west. The many small corries cutting into the ridge were topped by spectacular snow cornices, and it was a relief to be able to walk the length of the ridge following a stone dyke which we assumed to be built on terra firma.

We reached the top soon after 1 o'clock. The few clouds there had been earlier had now dispersed, and we had a marvellous view in all directions – away to the east we could make out the sea horizon of the Moray Firth (some 75 miles away) and to the south-west, white hills seemed to stretch infinitely into the distance. Although the map indicated a trig point we could see only a curious hemispherical lump of snow about 5 feet high with a deep crescent-shaped trough cut out by the wind around one side. Whatever was underneath, this lump made a useful place to lay a camera for a delayed action shot of all of us.

From Beinn Dearg down the slope to the col at the head of Glen na Sguaib was quite hard going on steep snow, sometimes icy, sometimes soft to quite a depth, and we were glad we had not chosen this way up. As the way back from the next top, Cona Mheall, took us past the col again we were able to leave our rucksacks there and stroll un-



laden to the top. Back at the col we thought Meall nan Ceapraichean looked no distance away, but it turned out to be one of those long plods up a gentle but relentless gradient. However, it was an interesting walk with rocky edges on our left and smooth snow slopes to the right. In the changing light the hills to the north made an even more impressive view than earlier, most of them clearly identifiable by their distinctive shapes, and all looking much more isolated than when one is in amongst them.

The descent off Meall nan Ceapraichean was rather tricky, as the snow would change abruptly from a deep layer of soft snow, to ice right to the surface. A run down the snow was certainly out of the question. Fortunately we usually managed to avoid the hardest ice and only once or twice had to cut steps. When we reached the foot of this slope, we were in some doubt about whether still to tackle the fourth top, Eididh nan Clach Geala. It involved, so the map said, only some 500 feet of climbing, but time was wearing on as we had taken longer than expected over the last descent. In the end because it was such a fine evening, we settled to take in the top.

Although the conditions underfoot were really good (consistently firm snow which you could walk up like stairs) the climb seemed as if it would never end – probably by now we were all a little tired – and we began to doubt the map. But what a marvellous view rewarded our perseverance. The sun was just setting over distant An Teallach and tingeing with pink the snow-capped hills to the north. And away to the north-west we could see some of the Outer Isles projecting above the sea horizon. I need hardly say that the silence was broken not a few times by the clacking of camera shutters.

Our descent to the car was quite brisk as the light was now fading. We followed the ridge down until the snow was broken by patches of heather which made the going awkward, and then dropped to the path in the valley, which brought us back to the car just as the last light faded.

The next day, although the weather was again good, we preferred a less strenuous day and chose to go up the coast to Achmelvich, stopping off, of course, at the bakery in Lochinver. At Achmelvich we spent some time exercising that little known but most useful public right which exists in the Scottish foreshore – the *ius spatiandi*. I conceive that there is a conspiracy amongst the powers that be to conceal from the public this their right to spaiate (?) on the area between high and low water marks of ordinary spring tides, perhaps in the hope that the right will eventually be lost by desuetude. However I trust that members of



the Cairngorm Club will heed the objects of the Club and the fact that the foreshore may be a useful means of access to certain Scottish mountains, and that they will now energetically use the foreshore for recreation and whatever else the ill-defined term *ius spatiandi* may include.

We were hoping for a third good day when we might tackle An Teallach, but next morning there was no disputing that any form of ascent was ruled out, and after a long period of indecision we decided to walk up the Gruinard valley. As we left the cars we wondered if the weather might not after all break up, and we got some 5 miles up the valley quite dry, chatting with much mirth about schooldays. However when we reached the point where the river flows out of Loch na Sheallag the rain began. Had the bridge promised by the map been still there, we would probably have taken a different route back, but its lack was perhaps fortunate for the rain very soon settled down to a persistent wetting drizzle and any other way back to the cars would have been slower (and wetter!) than the way we had come. Back at the hostel we found we were not the only ones to have experienced the rain, and as a place of popularity the drying-room was second only to the stove. The hot water pipes were quickly given a colourful lagging of steaming socks.

Next morning the weather had improved and indeed was sufficiently good to entice two of the girls in our party to go down to the quay at about 7 o'clock to see if they might buy some fish fresh off a boat. As I was usually first to be up and get coffee brewing, I was therefore somewhat surprised, at the time when I was beginning to wonder if the girls would ever get up, to see them outside carrying something. Apparently their offer to purchase had been countered with a 'Take these, they're slightly damaged and we can't sell them'. Whatever the fishermen may have thought they were certainly better than any from a shop.

The weather, though fair, was not settled enough for going high, and we agreed to visit Loch Sionascaig behind Stac Polly, said by one of our party to be one of the finest lochs in Scotland. With its many arms it certainly must have one of the highest ratios of perimeter to surface area. Our first stop was at the crest of the ridge linking Cul Beag and Stac Polly, not for a rest but for a short spell of madrigal-singing (this was the first day when we had both remembered to bring a madrigal book and had the weather to open it). We did wonder if we might disturb any wild life, but we were conceited enough to think we had better voices than the native grouse. After this we followed a route,



sometimes track, sometimes rivulet, through the Black Grove to the south-east end of the loch. After crossing some hummocky ground we came down to a stream which looked uncrossable because it had a deep sandy channel and was too wide to jump. But we came upon a tree which though broken or fallen had continued to grow horizontally half in the water and reached almost right across. Happily we all managed to negotiate this far from ideal bridge without falling in.

For lunch we found a little shelter from the biting wind by the ruins of a shepherd's cottage, of which there had once been several here. This shelter did not, however, avail against the hailstones which interrupted our eating. Hailstones have an uncanny ability to bounce and penetrate everywhere, and for once even a bivouac bag was found useless.

After this we were never without showers, but in between the sky was quite clear and Loch Sionascaig was as blue as the Mediterranean ever is. This area is an exceptionally beautiful one, with Stac Polly and Suilven dominating much of the scenery. It would be wonderful to do a complete circuit of the loch from near Inverpolly, but we were tied to return to the cars and had to cross the loch by the only bridge in the area at a point where Loch Sionascaig proper is linked to one of its eastern subsidiaries by a narrow channel. The crossing was rather hazardous as the bridge consisted of a plank 15 feet long with the cross-section of a railway sleeper and was set above deep water at right angles to the strong gusty wind. There was one limp wire for a hand-rail, but we managed to achieve a feeling of security by pulling the wire taut (it was well anchored at each end).

As it was still quite early when we reached the cars and as it was the last day for four of us we decided to celebrate with afternoon tea at Achiltibuie. Here, though we seemed to be the only visitors that day, we were made very welcome and willingly served with fine home baking and as much tea or coffee as we wanted, in a most comfortable lounge.

That night there was a fairly heavy fall of snow, but fortunately (perhaps unfortunately!) not enough to keep us from moving on. As we did not wish to go straight back to Aberdeen by the way we had come, the four of us who were leaving chose to go by Poolewe-Gairloch-Kinlochewe-Achnasheen. The road in some of the higher parts near Ullapool demanded considerable care because of the snow, but further west on ground more exposed to sea breezes the snow disappeared. The weather was neither good enough nor bad enough to inspire much photography and apart from road works and Good Friday traffic there was little to hold us up, so we arrived at Achnasheen in time for lunch



at the Station Hotel. As hostelling need not be a culinarily deficient way of spending a holiday (if travelling by car I like to take at least a pressure cooker and a French coffee percolator) we would have been quite happy with a light snack, but in the end we opted for a proper lunch in the hotel dining-room, where we fed very well.

To conclude our holiday (apart from an uneventful drive home) we entertained ourselves over coffee in the hotel lounge by listening to the delightful, if unconventional, tuning of the hotel piano.

