

BOOK REVIEWS

Isolation Shepherd. Ian R. Thomson. Bidean Books, 1984. £5.95.

Ian Thomson provides the reader with a fascinating account of life as a shepherd at the western end of Loch Morar from 1956 until 1960. The life which he and his family led in this isolated place, was a hard and lonely one. There were none of the modern comforts which most people expected at that time; their lives must have been very similar to the lives led by many previous generations of shepherds.

We learn not only how the family lived but also what shepherding involved during the seasons. The author describes the characters of his various sheep-dogs – some having more desirable traits than others! His knowledge of the hills in this area naturally became considerable, geographically and historically and he recounts a number of interesting stories of past events.

Not only was Ian Thomson a shepherd, he was also a ghillie during the stalking season and again, his accounts of the tactics used to locate the deer and then select, shoot and bring down the quarry, makes extremely interesting reading.

This book is an excellent acquisition for the Club library and is well worth reading, whether or not the reader is familiar with the area.

G.M.S.

The Ridiculous Mountains. G.J.F. Dutton. Diadem Books, 1984. £7.95.

As the title suggests, this book is for those who want some light reading. It is certainly one of the funniest books I have read for a long time. It is also an excellent book for 'dipping into'. Each chapter is self contained – the book being a collection of articles written for the S.M.C. and indeed, some for our own *Journal*.

I am sure that many of the trips that the author and his friends embark upon, will sound very familiar to us, particularly his account of the problems created by sudden Summer mist on a Munro with a summit only marginally higher than a nearby 'top'. The trip up the final Munro by a Minister, his congregation and friends, was one of the most amusing accounts, especially when this tee-total expedition 'back-fired'.

G.M.S.

Beyond the Ranges. 5 years in the life of Hamish MacInnes. Hamish MacInnes. Gollancz, 1984. £9.95.

Hamish MacInnes provides the reader of this book with a most interesting collection of experiences, from several trips deep into the Amazonian Jungle on the trail of Inca Gold, to taking off in a hot air balloon from the top of Ben Nevis.

I must confess to not normally being an enthusiast for travel books, but the account of his 'Inca' trips became more fascinating as one read on. Mr. MacInnes spares us few details of the trials and discomforts which he and his party had to endure. This makes a refreshing change from the glowing descriptive accounts one normally reads. We learn of the difficulties of obtaining help from the apparently truculent local Indians; the regular attacks from a wide variety of not particularly pleasant insect life; the problems of making a trail through dense Amazonian jungle. Whether they find their Inca Gold and what else they did find, I'll leave to those who read the book to learn.

These experiences form the larger part of the book, but the following chapters I found to be equally interesting, but in an entirely different setting. Much of these chapters are imbued with Mr. MacInnes' experiences with film and television crews.

It is obvious from his writing that he enjoys the challenge of organising and co-ordinating an Outside Broadcast film. He provides the reader with a very clear picture of the problems faced by the camera and production teams. He gives some hilarious accounts of his exploits, particularly his one (and only?) trip in a hot air balloon. He is ready to describe and praise the skill of the helicopter pilots about whom one otherwise hears so little.

He describes at length his role as chief mountaineering adviser to a film starring Sean Connery. His account would certainly influence our viewing of the film, if we managed to see it now.

This is a very readable book, written by a top class mountaineer about his many exploits. He spares us nothing and gives us an insight into many aspects of the climbing world, of which many of us would otherwise remain in ignorance.

G.M.S.

Speak to the Hills: an Anthology of Twentieth Century British and Irish Mountain Verse. Ed. Hamish Brown and Martyn Berry. Aberdeen University Press, 1985. £14.50.

Upwards of six hundred short poems, all related to hills or mountains in one way or another, if sometimes rather loosely (Mull has mountains, but that is hardly enough to make any poem about Mull a 'Mountain poem'). What is a reviewer to do? This is absolutely a book to dip into, and an attempt to read consecutively brings quick indigestion, yet I could dip and dip until my copy deadline was long past and still no doubt have missed many things that would have delighted or moved me.

What will you find if you dip? It could be a poem by a well-known name. Masfield's 'Up on the Downs', perhaps, and the sudden shock when 'the gods came', and that 'something' in the last stanza that acquires the poetic charge of everything before it, bringing the whole life-story of the downs together in one moment of perception before the lengthened last line leads back to the 'bare' today-life of one-thing-at-a-time; or perhaps MacNeice's fierce warning to those who seek answers in the hills of the questions that their answers must meet in this same world of back-down ('Under the Mountain'). If you light on one of these you had best withdraw for a little before dipping again, for they set too hard a test for much of the verse that here seeks to live beside them. On the other hand you could encounter MacDiarmid on an off-day, an encouragement to any who feel they could do as well as he.

Or you might plunge into the section 'In Lighter Mood', where nobody is trying to live with the giants, and rollick through the tale of John Christopher Brown, a climber so dedicated to the extremer reaches of his sport that 'The Very Severs nearly bored him to tears — and he felt about girls much the same', and how he fell for the beautiful Mary, 'as fair as a jug-handle hold at the top of a hundred-foot lead', and won her in a singular climbing competition whose details it would be unfair to give away. Mind you, you might instead find yourself plodding lugubriously through the laboured humour and halting metre of — whichever item it is I'm thinking about. No matter; nobody will make you drag on to the end, and now would be the time to move, or move back, to the more serious sections of the book.

Look there for the sudden moment of engagement, when your own store of mountain memory will be touched and illuminated by the poet's vision: Joanne Weeks as she lies lazily, listening to 'the loud/Drip, drip, dripping/Of time, as it slips/Down a slate-green waterfall', or the terrible finality of William Bell's 'there's nothing we can do to help him now'. Not every writer who achieves such a moment can sustain the intensity though a whole poem, and you may have to pass over places where the mere cutting up a sentence by lines into rhetorical sections, or wanton distortion of its syntax, is thought to make it poetry. You may be distressed to find you have been made poignantly conscious of the writer's profound emotion but are shut out from sharing it — in Hamish

Brown's long love-affair with Brandon of the blessed what oath was it, and why now goodbye? You may be unhappily aware that a writer is trying to share with you an emotion which was real and deep to him, but which he lacks words magic enough to raise from an appearance of banality. Yet again and again you will find true poetic moments, truly conveyed, and now and then, aside from the great names, a whole poem that holds its charge clear through, like David Watkin Price's 'Up Paths Which Scrawl', pursuing the image of a path as written on the hill by some great but shaking hand through a tightly-wrought structure in which it sets a question to which on the achieved summit there is a glimpse of an answer that will restore what the shaking hand has broken, such a poem as is not unworthy to sit at the feet of Masefield or MacNeice.

It is good to have a book in which such things may be found.

D.M-G

Smythe's Mountains – The Climbs of F.S. Smythe. Harry Calvert. Gollancz, 1985. £14.95.

In the preface to this book it is claimed that Smythe's writings expressed a simple delight in mountaineering of the modest type such as anyone may seek. He is also depicted in the book as one who 'exhorted the masses to savour the bouquet of mountain experience', but at the same time was frequently castigating trippers and tourists and anyone who dared to rob him of his solitary enjoyment of the hills.

The author gives in this book a record of Smythe's brilliant career as a climber, rather than writing a biography. However some account of his life, activities, and character are inevitably included.

Smythe was a delicate child with an over-protective mother. He appears to have been no good at games while at school, and is even described as a misfit and a 'loner'. Chronic ill-health had much to do with this.

At 8 years of age he climbed a 6000 foot hill in the Alps and this was his introduction to the sport.

The author gives us the history of his early attempts at various rock faces in Wales and in the Alps. He was often by choice a solitary climber, but teamed up with Longland, Bell, and others to pioneer much British rock climbing. He is described as liking simple mountain wandering as much as celebrated ascents. He was apparently more of an ice and snow expert than an expert on rock faces.

Smythe and Graham Brown's famous climb on the Brenva Face is described, as is also the deplorable quarrel and controversy which followed. Smythe obviously had tremendous skill in seeing and picking out unknown routes when difficulties were encountered. The book also shows that he knew when to accept defeat, and that had his advice been taken on various occasions it would have been a help to those he was with. He is also described as one of the greatest of mountaineering photographers.

The author discusses at length Smythe's claims to be selected by the Everest Committee and apparently considers he should have been chosen rather than Irvine for the 1924 attempt, and that he should have been chosen as leader in subsequent expeditions. It seems that Smythe's activities as a 'professional' mountaineering journalist also counted against him. I think many readers might disagree with some of the author's arguments here, and possibly support the Everest Committee's choice.

One must remember that that in most of the period covered by the book, high altitude climbing was done without oxygen. Smythe himself scorned all artificial aids, and would not use pitons.

The book teaches us how often climbing skills can be nullified by the chance encounter of terrible weather (sometimes tying down men at high altitudes for a day or more), by small miscalculations in planning of portage and supplies; and also shows how many a day of skilled and dangerous work can end up in discovering that the route

chosen was impossible. It also shows how hazardous can be the descent after an objective has been achieved or nearly achieved.

Smythe died at the early age of 49. He had more than once been left to go on alone when even experts like Shipton had been halted. His 'final triumph of judgement' is described as the occasion when he turned back on Everest when he was within 1000 feet of the summit. He only just managed to get back alive.

Calvert's book is well worth reading.

S.A.B.B.

Walking the Tops – Mountain Treks in Britain. Rex Bellamy. David & Charles, 1984. £9.95.

The author describes a round-dozen day walks in the hills from Dartmoor to Canisp. He has an easy readable style, and he manages to surround each walk with sufficient anecdote and background information to make them come alive. This is not a detailed guide, but should serve as a stimulus, particularly to the Scots, to do some walking south of the Border.

Incorporated in the text are words of advice on hill-walking, mostly good advice, but to say that 'hill-walkers should not need ice-axes' is hardly good sense. His experience on the Five Sisters, described with disarming candour, would suggest that he has not learned all his own lessons.

The book is nicely laid out, but it is a pity that the photograph purporting to show the Five Sisters shows only Ben Attow.

Nevertheless, an enjoyable book for a long winter evening.

J.M.C.G.

Walking through Scotland. David and Kathleen MacInnes. David and Charles, 1981 (Second impression 1984). £6.95.

This work describes eighteen walking tours in Scotland, varying in duration from two to eight days. The walks are reasonably spread, with three in the Southern Uplands, six in the Grampians, four in the North-West Highlands and two on islands – Arran and Mull. Each tour is divided into sections which can be accomplished in one day, with some indication about availability of overnight accommodation and public transport.

Interestingly, each section is described twice in detail – once in each direction, so that the walker may more readily assimilate the guidance given as he plans, or proceeds on, his journey in the chosen direction.

In connection with many of the routes, the authors mention the main historical and geographical features of the places involved. The routes are of course largely hill-tracks, but some parts are pathless, and warning is carefully given about sections where the terrain might cause problems for inexperienced walkers. Generally the walks are over saddles or passes rather than summits, but in several cases, including Ben Venue, routes over tops are described in detail, and where hills of interest are close to a route, they are usually mentioned.

At the end there are notes of advice on various matters, such as Public Transport and Accommodation, Route Finding, Countryside Manners and Safety. This book makes interesting reading and gives much useful information for those planning to sample the pleasures of the Scottish hill-country.

L.McA.

Mountain Lakeland. Tom Bowker. Robert Hale, 1984. £8.95.

The Lake District, that pearl of the English countryside, which has brightened up the lives of many a hard working man or woman from industrial Lancashire and been written about so often – is there anything further that can be said about it? Is there some small corner that has escaped an author's attention? Yet somehow this small area with a few comparatively insignificant mountains continues to inspire attempts at putting pen to paper. Tom Bowker's attempts clearly stem from deep affection for Lakeland and much knowledge of its mountain scene.

He has written a descriptive account of the principal fells with anecdotes thrown in. There are suggestions and comments about routes, but it is not a guide book in the sense of Wainwright. You are expected to have your own maps and use your initiative. It is not in the least comprehensive and cannot be said to give enough topographical and descriptive information to encourage the aspiring walker, scrambler and perhaps even climber, as is claimed in the introduction to the book. The ascent of Scafell Pike from Wasdale is advocated but which route from Wasdale does he mean? There is not much description here either.

As for the aspiring climber there is even less help. Mostly it is negative – descriptions of climbs he did not succeed in climbing. It is enough to put an aspiring climber off the game altogether. It is a great pity as Lakeland was one of the birth places of rock climbing and has much to offer the newcomer to climbing.

This is no literary masterpiece and the photographs are entirely black and white. But the enthusiasm of the author does show through to provide nostalgic reminders for those who know the Lakes, and some encouragement to the newcomer to get out the maps and study them in detail.

P.W.B.

Climber's Guide to the Cairngorms. Allen Fyffe and Andrew Nisbet. SMT, 1985. £7.95.

North-east Outcrops. D. Dinwoodie. SMT, 1984. £5.95.

Both of these rock climbing guides are long overdue and very welcome. The Cairngorms volume covers the whole of the Cairngorms which at one time were to be covered by five volumes. One volume never appeared and the rest date from some years ago.

In the new guide individual pitch technical grades are given for very severe and harder climbs. This will be welcomed by the hard climber and brings the area into line with climbing areas elsewhere. For the more modest climber, the guide is less helpful than it might be.

On a recent trip, a climb on Dividing Buttress of Beinn a' Bhuird was sought. Sentinel route is mentioned in the new volume but it tells us nothing about the grade, or length or much about where the route is. We are referred back to volume II of the old series of guide books. The new guide is not, therefore, truly a comprehensive guide as its sub-title suggests. The modest climber or the novice climber will have a hard time finding suitable routes in this guide. This is a pity as it brings a gulf between the hard rock climber and the more general mountaineer.

In a national climbing magazine, a reviewer of the North-east Outcrops volume dismissed it disparagingly for the multiplicity of short climbs at modest grades which it contains. I disagree. There is a comprehensive guide which includes the hard climbs, as well as the easier ones. There are some good hard climbs in the area and the publication of this guide has stimulated much activity so that already a supplement has been published. There are climbs in this guide to suit all tastes and of that I am glad.

It is a good guide with enough detail to identify the climbs. Let's get out the rope and go down to the sea cliffs!

P.W.B.

The High Mountains of Britain and Ireland: A Guide for Mountain Walkers.

Irvine Butterfield. Diadem Books, 1986. £16.95.

This lovely book describes all the 3,000 ft mountains of Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland by dividing them into 133 one-day excursions. Twenty-seven of its thirty chapters deal with Scotland and the remaining three chapters are devoted respectively to England, Wales and Ireland.

Each chapter describes one particular area. Each area is subdivided into groups of mountains usually centred on one valley which will give the most convenient access. Each group of mountains is listed and described briefly at the start of each chapter. Useful information is also given on rail and bus services, accommodation, stalking, lengths of walk and suggested times for covering itineraries. Two times are suggested for each itinerary; one for fast walkers and one for the more leisurely. One or two routes are described for each hill and each mountain group is accompanied by a detailed map marked with the route(s).

The book is lavishly and beautifully illustrated with photographs which emphasise the most attractive features of each hill. Many of these photographs come from the cameras of well-known hill-men. The book includes the now customary warning on safety and appendices give details of shelters, refuges and howffs with map references, estates on which they are found and stalking dates for each estate.

One of the main aims of the book is to suggest helpful and economical routes for gaining 'Munros' and because of this the most enjoyable and interesting routes are not always featured. It can be seen as a useful complement to Munro's tables and to the recent illustrated Munro guide. Like these, its emphasis is firmly on the highest hills, which limits its appeal for the more general mountain lover. However, it is still a delightful browse. Its size and price dictate that this is a 'fireside' book, to be enjoyed at leisure before or after a day on the hill. Its weight certainly disqualifies it from a place in the rucksack but its content and presentation justify the higher than usual outlay for a climbing guide.

G.S.J.C.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The Editor welcomes a constant supply of material for the *Journal*. The main articles, by tradition, should be from 1500 words to 3000 words in length. However, smaller articles would be appreciated, particularly for the Notes section. Good quality black and white photographs, together with maps and drawings would also be welcome provided that there is no infringement of copyright. All contributions must if possible be typewritten 'fair copies'. The Editor reserves the right to edit, abridge or omit material submitted for publication.
