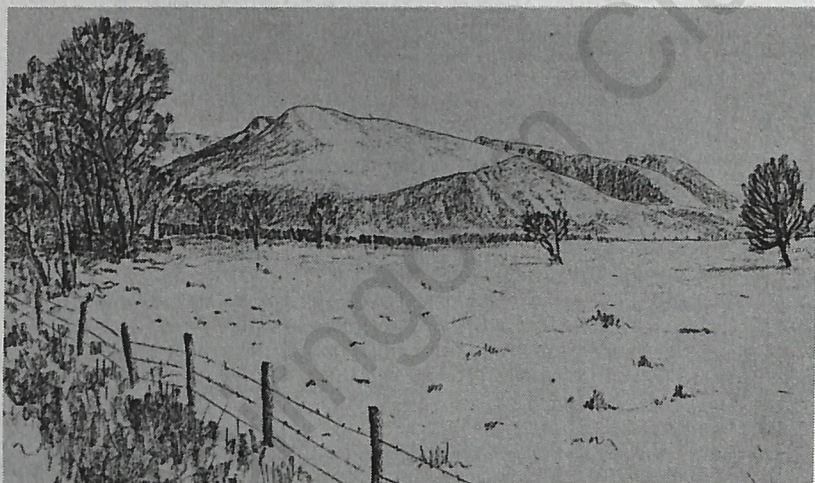


GREY CORRIES, GOLDEN DAYS

MIKE KENT

My days in the Grey Corries began one Aberdeen Spring Holiday, late on a Friday afternoon. Friends were motoring down to stay in Lochaber for the long weekend and I took the opportunity of a lift, arranging to come back with them on the Monday night. Leaving Aberdeen early in the afternoon, I was very soon standing alone just off the A82 outside Spean Bridge.



View of Grey Corries Massif from near Spean Bridge.
(Drawing by Mike Kent)

The weekend weather promised to be settled, with high pressure squatting over the country like a great warm hen, protecting all us wee birds from the vagaries of the normal climate. It was 4.30 p.m. and I set off briskly wanting to camp high on that first night. The road climbed steadily across open grassland then plunged through vernal green mature larches into the depths of the Leanachan Forest. After another 2 km the farm of Leanachan appeared, alone in its clearing in the forest. There, concentrating on avoiding unplumbed depths of mud, I lost the path that I wanted so I struck straight up the hill through the trees heading for the disused tramway that ran from Loch Treig to Fort William during construction of the aqueduct to the smelter. Now it lies abandoned along the contour of the hill just fifty metres below the 'parallel road' at 260 m. Those shore line signatures of a long gone ice-dammed lake are well enough known in Glen Roy but also can be found on the hills around Glen Spean. Once I reached this tramway which is now overgrown with forest vegetation, I

followed it eastwards to join up with my originally intended path. In a short distance I came to a bridge, still standing, with the track left across the firmest part of the structure. Deciding that I was no Blondin I scrambled down through the ravine it spanned.

At the next bridge my neck hairs danced. There confronting me at its end was a notice which ominously warned 'Poachers! You are being watched!' Is this the route the Fort's salmon thieves take into the hills? A highly predictable one if it is. A brief interlude of industrial dereliction followed as I walked up the Cour, or Allt Coire an Eoin, to the deserted quarry and dam, then, up by rushing water onto rock and heather, out of the trees and away from these depressing signs of humanity. Nature is always left to tidy up the place after us and our mountains suffer most in that respect. Many industrialists must feel that a man-made heap of rubble looks no different from the natural version.



'JCB gouge' between Aonach Beag and Aonach Mor. (See page 36)
(Drawing by Mike Kent)

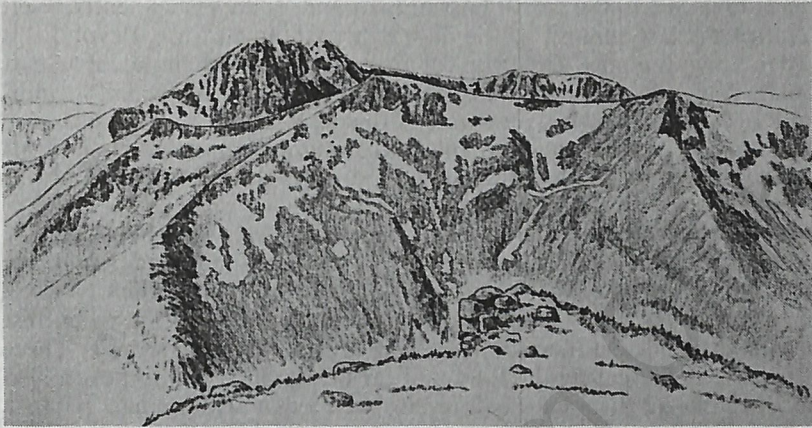
I knew that I had barely an hour of daylight left, so I sought a camp site by the Allt Coire an Eoin close to An Guirean, a rocky prominence square in the middle of the valley. Nothing ideal was found, everywhere being rank heather and pretty soggy, but needs must and the tent was soon pitched near the burn where it ran in thin sheets over wide, water-worn slabs. I cooked in the lee on convenient slabs under the bank of this stream and soon the wind and the sun were gone leaving a sky of astounding clarity and a night of frost and stillness.

Next morning, muesli and tea, then on my way with the sun streaming down Glen Spean and mist filling all the glens. Creag Meagaidh I could see above the inversion haze but ahead, to the south,

the view was cut off by the ring of cliffs from Sgurr Choinich Mor to Aonach Beag. I climbed up quickly onto Tom na Sroine and looked out across forest, mist and smoke towards the Great Glen. Now on the ridge of Stob Coire an Fhir Dhuibh (unnamed on the 1:50,000 O.S. sheet) I walked over loose slabby rock and short vegetation along the sharp rocky spine of this hill which offers magnificent views of the cliffs of Aonach Beag and Aonach Mor. The dip between these two hills appears as if excavated by the bucket of some giant JCB. The snow gathered there reflected a green luminosity onto the base of the shaded cliffs of Aonach Beag, a quality of light impossible to capture with mere pencil.

I scrambled down towards the nearer col between my hill and Aonach Mor then found the way up its ragged face over granite blocks and snow fields. I felt a little relieved that I had brought my ice axe and not let the extra burden it represented persuade me into leaving it in my friends' car. From Spean Bridge the lying snow had seemed of little consequence and with 4 days' food, tent and winter clothing I was by no means 'travelling light'. Hungry, I reached the plateau of Aonach Mor and settled down by the cairn for lunch. I was soon joined there by an Englishman from Manchester who had come up from Glen Nevis. The hills which I had felt belonged to me some few hours before were already getting populated. I had forgotten that for once the Aberdeen local holiday and Easter coincided, one being a movable feast, the other being fixed. In any case it was the weekend and this, I reasoned, was a popular area. Thankfully not as popular as the great Ben across to the west where already I could see figures dotted along the summit, with others crocodiled out along the Carn Deargs. The snow was still fairly thickly plastered in the gullies, but not as much as I have seen in other years. The sun was comfortably warm by now, but a chill still lingered in the clear air. I had toyed with the idea of descending to reascend on Carn Dearg but the sight of the height lost between it and Aonach Mor persuaded me otherwise. It is in fact something like 400 m descent and I had no wish either to sacrifice that hard won altitude or to join the hordes on the other side.

Leaving my lunchtime companion I moved off in the general direction of Aonach Beag. The cornices were massive and looking none too stable but as I climbed towards Aonach Beag another problem revealed itself. The whole dome-like summit of the mountain was covered in a cap of ice with apparently no break in it. Although presenting no excessive slopes it was almost impossible to make progress without crampons, but progress I had to make. Eventually I contoured around this icy pate until I felt in a position to tackle it, protected and well away from the cornices. Hacking crude holes (I hardly dare call them steps on such a meagre slope) in the glazed surface I slowly made my way to the summit near the cliff's edge. My descent from this convex ice-rink was along the same path back to more secure rock and vegetation.



Ben Nevis seen across Carn Dearg
(Drawing by Mike Kent)

As I continued eastwards along the cliffs I was compelled to pause frequently and admire the view across Glen Nevis to the panorama of the Mamores. The Grey Corries must provide one of the finest viewpoints for these their sister hills, and their constant presence across the glen gives a satisfying sense of altitude. The changing backdrop that they make is for me a lasting impression of that weekend on the Grey Corries ridge. Memorable too was the overwhelming impression of height presented by Ben Nevis when seen from the slopes of Aonach Beag. It rears up from Glen Nevis like a vast breaking wave. You see the back of this 'surf' rising over a thousand metres from the glen below in a steep unbroken slope. Even when partly obscured by the other hills around, it still looks massive and pre-eminent. You realise why it is the honeypot that it is.

After scrambling out to the outlier, Sgurr a Bhuic, I found my way down the steep slopes on the eastern flank of Aonach Beag to the start of Sgurr Choinich Beag. This and many other peaks on the Grey Corries ridge have that same Nevis-like quality of breaking waves and thus they had seemed from Aonach Beag. There is a well known aerial photograph taken from above Fort William which shows Ben Nevis, Carn Dearg, the Aonachs and the Grey Corries as retreating echoes of each other, all with the same basic underlying shape. The folding of the ridge has produced near vertical strata in the corries to the north of Sgurr Choinich Beag which adds to the singularity of these hills.

It was late afternoon when, on the summit of this latter hill, I stopped and brewed-up again. My companion this time (for by now companions were almost unavoidable) was a lad from Nottingham, also camped in Glen Nevis. We chatted for a while about those many mountaineering sons of Nottingham, not a few of whom have at some

time gravitated to the North East of Scotland, some permanently. I left him for my last summit of the day, Sgurr Choinich Mor. Beyond this lay my own intended campsite for that night. In a shallow corrie east of the ridge, below Stob Coire Easain, at 875 m lie two small lochans and I scrambled down over scree to this spot and a perfect site. The Mamores were my silent companions that night when all others had left the hill. I slept little though, as the wind strengthened from the north-west and the tent flapped noisily.

Next morning I thought I had said goodbye to fine weather. The hillside was shrouded in cloud but even by the time I had struck the tent, the cloud base was lifting and sun was glinting in Glen Nevis. I clambered over scree, back onto Stob Coire Easain and into the mist and bitter wind. On then to Stob Coire an Laoigh and a puzzle. These tops were now clearing of cloud and far below, in a similar position to my lochans of the night before, isolated on a wide ledge, another lochan of equal size. But this one was unmarked on even maps of the latest survey and combining with the effects of the obscuring mist threw my navigation into temporary confusion. All the more so since these water holes seem to be a characteristic of this ridge, yet another one (charted), lying below the ridge some kilometres further on from where I thought myself to be. What criterion selects a lochan for inclusion on the map? There seemed to be little to distinguish between these fellows.

After the top of Caisteal the ridge seems appropriately man-made. Here the strata are exposed in the ridge itself, forming a near vertical wall of several courses like the remains of some fortification. I found a place on the lee side of this natural dyke with a convenient square hole into which I fitted my stove and made my mid-morning cuppa. Now the clouds were lifting fast and once again the Ben was clear seen over the intervening tops. The quartzite ledges ran for hundreds of metres along the ridge giving the opportunity for a fairly exposed ridge walk on top of the ramparts or, a more comfortable windless scramble along in the lee of the ridge.

From the summit of Stob Coire Claurigh the view is stunning. Westwards, the successive ridges enclosing the Grey Corries stand superimposed like stage scenery until Ben Nevis itself terminates the scene. Southwards, the Mamores of course were with me always with the hills of Glencoe beyond, but between us now stood the lonely outlier of Stob Ban. I sat and watched a lone walker slowly ascend to its perfect point of a summit, stop, then slowly descend again. An exercise in futility? Could he see my own futility?

The ridge now swung northwards and I descended towards the north top. At this point a further neat piece of confusion arose from the map. What appears to be a higher contour surrounding a top at 1110 m (263743) is in fact a circular depression formed in the ridge itself. The summit is some 200 m further to the east on a nicely pointed corner of the ridge. There is a very similar hollow on the Five Sisters ridge in Kintail, just below the summit of Sgurr na Ciste Duibhe.

Maybe there, that is the 'Ciste Duibhe'.

I left my rucksack at the north top of Stob Choire Claurigh and scrambled down and out along the pleasing arête to Stob Coire na Ceannain. This is truly a summit on which there is room for one person only. Here I sat wondering at Sgurr Innse on the opposite side of the Lairig Leacach. From this viewpoint it has all the appearance of some desert Butte in Arizona.

Having missed Stob Ban, I had only one more top on the ridge to cross and that, Stob Coire Gaibhre, seemed an anticlimax below, and northwards, on the other side of Coire na Ceannain. I could see the slope down from it was an effortless stroll back into the Leanachan Forest. After collecting my sack, I decided to make my way down from the last top into the Lairig Leacach below Coire na Gaibhre and in this way avoid the forest. First though, I luxuriated in the sense once again of being alone on the hill, of having no ties, no plans to rush anywhere and no need to leave this ridge. Tomorrow I would meet my friends in Roy Bridge but now I had the hills to myself again. North-eastwards, thick cloud obscured the Cairngorms and I was thankful for coming west for the weekend: not usually the right decision.

I camped that night by the Allt Leachdach on sheep cropped grass. The night was still and cold and when I awoke next morning the tent was stiff with frost. I sat in the doorway watching the shadow of Cruach Innse creep down the slopes of Coire na Gaibhre, the frost melting in the sunlight, and when finally, it reached the tent, I rose and ate. This day passed slowly, no hills to climb and a heat of unseasonal intensity. I sunbathed and struck camp late, strolling down the track then up onto the slopes of Croc nan Ceann Mora to gain access, without entering the forest, to the intriguing monument marked on the OS map. This monument turned out to be as enigmatic as the map entry. It was a small statue of a Presbyterian minister (or a statue of a small minister), sometime painted and holding-what? A Bible? It has long disappeared but in the mannie's cupped hands I saw silver coins. What kind of totem or idol is this, associated with such an iconoclastic (in the proper sense) religion? His nose has worn away from the attentions of less religious or superstitious passers-by, giving his face a cadaverous gloom. But I would dearly like to know what he is paid to do. The effect on me of his eyeless stare and this evidence of latent superstition, was one of a certain depression of spirit.

I turned my back on this dour figure and followed the 'parallel road' at 261 m again to the east for some 3 km until just above the farm of Chlinaig. There I dropped down to the Spean and found the ramshackle bridge high above the gorge of the river. In another 2 km, my far from grey days in the Grey Corries were ended as I entered Roy Bridge and located my friends.

That night, Mother Hen left. The weather finally broke, snow and wind swept down across Scotland from the north and the summer retreated for several months.