

THE GLEN OF THE BIRCHES

HAMISH M. BROWN

What does one do after the Munros have been ticked off? The Corbetts perhaps? (The Corbetts indeed for, per foot-poundage, they are better value.) The Donalds? (Nae bad either.) Not being a ticker of lists it is not a problem I've faced. Scotland is too full of good things to concentrate on any one mountain game. Being in the hills is more important than the esoteric things we do there.

If I consciously collect anything it is islands, especially in summer when Scotland sinks and seethes under the pressures of rain, midges and visitors. My earliest passion was tracing water to or from its source, a habit picked up in The Valley of the Thousand Hills in Natal as a boy, and pursued ever since. It is a grand way of meeting the charms of slippery schist or discovering the richness of mountain flora. Historically, rivers (and the passes that usually top them) were far more important than the barren summits. After all, on top, all one can do is come down!

Each year I have enjoyed a coast-to-coast walk as part of the Ultimate Challenge. This is a sort of non-event Event for it is completely self-determined as to style, speed, route and anything else. On such crossings I have always enjoyed mixing days over long mountain crests or following down rivers. The rivers come in to their own towards the end. Five days of deluge following the River Don from its source did not even discourage one year. Last year it was the River North Esk: the one grey day on a sunny crossing but none the worse for that. The North Esk is the river of Glen Esk.

The South Esk is the river of Glen Clova so Glen Esk hardly needs the addition of North to its naming. The North Esk headstreams spider the moors above Glen Clova so, having wandered from Loch Morar, the start for Glen Esk was Dan Smith's youth hostel of Glen Doll, a social night during which the good weather broke down. We set off into a gale that had the trees shimmering silver in the wind.

It is a gey pech up those slopes overlooking Glen Doll but even the stops produced magic touches like the diamond-bright jewels of water held in the leaves of lady's mantle or the vixen that appeared out of the cloud and took her time sniffing across the slope a mere twenty yards off. My companions were two young nurses: Sandy, an Irish lassie, and Claudia, from Germany. Neither had been in Scotland before. Neither had done any walking except to break in their boots (visions of heavy tramping in the night wards!)

The cloud was down to top-of-forest-level so we zig-zagged blind to the plateau country but just where was impossible to say. I explained to the girls the difference between being lost and merely mislaid. Claudia at once suggested the difference was they were the first and I was the second. I was not going to be let out of sight, not round a single

peat hag. Loch Brandy was a target easy enough to hit and when we found ourselves on its corrie rim within four minutes of a time estimate given an hour before they thought this was magic. I always think so too when tricky navigation works out. Thanks be to St Silva!

We cringed by a cairn on Green Hill ("far away" Sandy suggested) to have a snack. Procrastination failed to move clouds. We never did see Loch Brandy. (The crags were edged with creeping azalea, a bonny alpine.) We tramped off on timed bearings along the well-named Long Shank as an alternative to the ominous sounding Burn of Slidderies. A great deal can be read into the names hereabouts: Watery Knowe, Black Hill of Mark, Wolf Hill, Hunt Hill, Benty Roads and the like.

There was an extraordinary crevasse-like hole in one snow bank but the Long Shank gave springy walking of blissful ease before turning into a fine example of the local peaty chaos. As always there seemed to be endless bits of dead hare lying about. (Why?) On Mount Keen one year two shot off at our approach and 'hared' round a peat hag just ahead, one to each side. There was a second's pause and then a great thud and two hares spun into view over the hag. Walt Disney could not have bettered it. We all just about died when a grouse rose at our feet and went flapping off in a distraction display. There were nine eggs. Later we saw dipper and pipit nests and at night a thrush chick landed with a clatter on a car roof beside us.

We came down to the Water of Unich and with all the visible snow rims pouring melt water into it there was no chance of boulder-hopping. It ensured we had a chilly paddle. (Water of eunuch perhaps would have been better.) I crossed and then came back for the girls' rucksacks before scampering to a ruin to put on a brew. Ignorance has some advantages—but they will not forget their first river crossing.

The descent by the Falls of Damff and the Falls of Unich is one of the most memorable miles in Scotland. Very few gorges can surpass it. The blaeberry patches were artificially vivid in colour and the spraying waters would soon be hanging gardens. We tramped down an old path, a gem of its kind compared to today's indecent scourings by bulldozers.

The O.S. do not bother showing the bridge across the Lee and if there is one thing worse than bridges shown not being there it is the opposite. (We even have the odd Wade bridge that has never made it onto the map!) We boulder-hopped across—and then I saw the bridge up the gash in the pearly-grey sculptured rocks. Being a coward I did not point it out.

Loch Lee never seems a very cheery water. Perhaps it is too haunted by sad memories of all the departed peoples of a century ago. The lodge's kennels were built of solid granite, far better building than the dispossessed had ever known. We stopped to look at the ruined churchyard and had a last brew while Claudia replastered a blistered heel. Several eighteenth century stones here are still in good legible

condition. A local teacher, Alexander Ross, was a poet once admired by Burns, but now forgotten.

Invermark Castle is a pepper-pot of a tower, with nasty loopholes at ground level and the entrance with its iron yett fifteen feet up the wall. Not much you could do to it if armed only with an ice axe! It stands at glen junctions and must have been a thorn in the flesh to cattle thieves, mercenaries, gangrels and smugglers—of which the area had its share. The castle was built by Sir David Lindsay of Edzell who lived a cultured life in the brief years before the bloody 17th century came in, and who made Edzell Castle such a unique creation. Claudia was interested to hear he had introduced German miners to work the glen. (The old workings could still be made out.) Sandy noticed the door above ground level and compared it to Irish round towers, without knowing we would see one of Scotland's two Irish towers at Brechin the next day.

The original route cut over Hill of Rowan and we took this rather than the hard surfaced road down to Tarfside, our destination. It has a narrow gap of a pass cut in the heathery slopes. On top of the hill is an odd conical cairn which is the dominant feature of Glen Esk. Our weary legs rejected a visit but I could tell them it was built by an Earl of Dalhousie in 1866 'in memory of seven members of his family already dead, and of himself and two others when it shall please God to call them hence.'

As we straggled off the hill Claudia asked if we knew what her name meant. With a sigh she said "the lame". Never mind, we were at the old cross stone (one of the earliest Christian carvings in the country and starkly simple and right in that setting), and the Parsonage was at the foot of the brae.

There is no name or B & B sign but the Old Parsonage is a home much loved by walkers. (The next night Mrs Guthrie did three sittings for dinner and had thirteen tents on her lawn.) Routes are regularly 'bent' to take in a night at the Parsonage. The roadside episcopal church has been restored very pleasantly. Historically this was a Jacobite and episcopal region—and it suffered accordingly after the Forty Five.

It is amazing what tea and pancakes, followed by a bath can do to those who have tramped for nine hours. The supper table beat us as usual though. What contrasts that day had given: the plover-crying moors in the mist, the wonders of the Unich, bleak Loch Lee in the rain, the Hill of Rowan in rainbowed evening, the silver of waters which we had traced from threads on the brown tweedy heights to the wide satins of Glen Esk, the glitter of the trees, the birch trees that form a tapestry all down to Edzell. This is called the Glen of the Rowans but it is really the Glen of Birches. Tarfside too is haunted by history. The Fungle and Firmounth come over from Deeside and many a pony stepped out for the Clash of Wirren and the south with the local distillation on its back.

The sun shone the next day for the walk down to Edzell and on to the sea. We had run into friends at The Parsonage so we ambled and chatted along the traffic-free south bank with the landscape growing greener and richer by the mile. The Muckle Burn of Kiltrie produced a 'ciste dubh' of a pool (and a brew afterwards) and beyond The Rocks of Solitude we pulled up a waup-loud brae for a last look back to the hills.

The river became too hemmed in by farmland to walk easily so we took in Edzell Castle and Brechin instead before an evening hike to the sea at Montrose. I can recommend a stravaig from Morar to Montrose and, looking back, we three agreed the days of following the Esk were as splendid as any. We had not sought Munros (well we actually did one or two), there were no Corbetts (quite a job to miss one) but we had enjoyed the many varied delights of moor and mountain. We travelled paths steeped in history (and black peat) and it was watching Sandy and Claudia discovering this kingdom of adventure that was my reward. Poor lassies, they had to return to London. We live on its fringes.

