

SEVENTEEN CAIRNGORM MUNROS :
a father's log

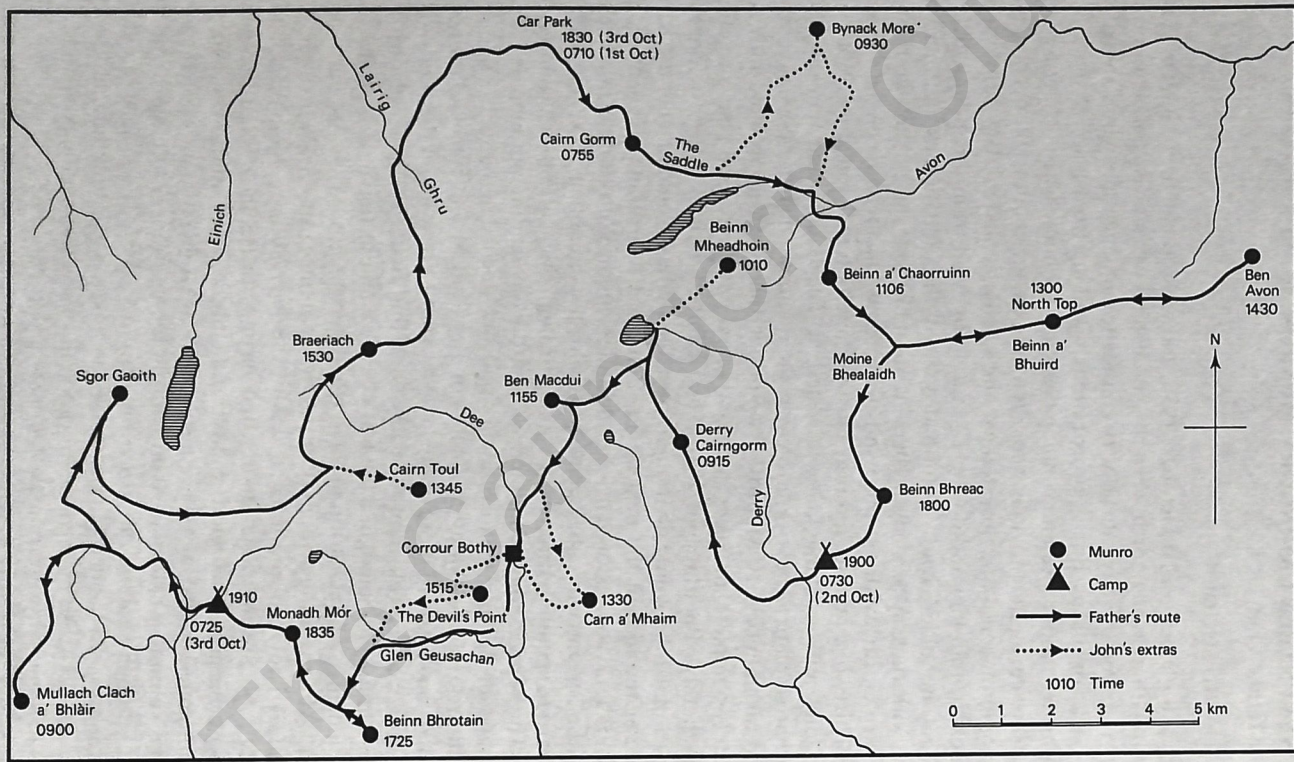
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Not yet 8 o'clock on 1st October, 1986, and we stood on the summit of Cairn Gorm with a strong north-westerly gale behind us and wisps of cloud racing past. I viewed the days ahead with confidence and mentally patted myself on the back for all my fitness preparations - walking from place to place at a Cambridge conference and running one km back home when delivering a car for a service, all the previous week. It had been one comfortable evening that my common-sense had deserted me and I had accepted my 19-year-old son's request to join him and do the 17 Cairngorm Munros in three days "before you get any older, Dad". John had done all the preparations and there we were with rucksacks, sleeping bags, tent and rations for 3½ days on the top of Cairn Gorm. With a strong wind at our backs I had felt fine on the ascent.

Thirty five minutes later my illusions lay shattered around me. With legs like jelly and creaking knees I rested at The Saddle and quickly made alternative plans. They were to cover the minimum distance possible and to avoid all unnecessary Munros! I would let John dash up isolated hills and sedately complete an easier circuit myself. I put the revised plan into effect immediately! Pointing out that I had climbed Bynack More before, we agreed that John would do it on his own and that we would meet at the River Avon at the foot of the next target, Beinn a' Chaorruinn. The gentle walk down Glen Avon restored my morale and strength. With cloud-capped peaks and the strong wind the scene was wild and humbling. I keenly looked forward to spending three days walking through the heart of such country.

The rendez-vous completed with hardly any waiting on my part (!), we passed over Beinn a' Chaorruinn in cloud and lunched in the shelter of one of the impressive meltwater channels running from Moine Bhealaidh towards Glen Avon. Leaving most of our heavier gear to pick up on the return later that day, we then relied on the compass to find Beinn a' Bhuid's North Top in the cloud. We bemoaned the loss of a view on this fine upland stretch, but the challenge of navigation in thick cloud kept us busy. I say 'us' but I mean John. After coming within 10 m of the summit cairn on his first compass traverse, I relaxed and left the rest of the navigation to him. We found it tricky to locate the ridge linking Ben Avon with Beinn a' Bhuid, largely I suspect because the wind veered suddenly to the south-west and was accompanied by driving rain, but soon we were trying to stand up in the wind on the summit tor of Ben Avon and photograph our most easterly Munro. Dark thoughts about aborting the venture entered my head on many occasions as we headed back into the teeth of the gale and the rain towards our rucksacks, but by the late afternoon the worst was over and the wind was back in the north-west, much colder now.

As darkness struck at 7.30 p.m., we were camped next to a tributary



stream flowing into Glen Derry. We stayed awake long enough to cook a vesta and to discover that we were carrying enough rations for a week! John had allowed as the evening ration for two of us 4 soups, 3 vestas, a large packet of macaroni, a large packet of dried potato and 2 pints of milk pudding! He remembered a former trip to Greenland with me where he had always been hungry and he was determined to get it right this time. We resolved to leave our surplus food in Corrour Bothy the next day.

Early next morning saw us toiling up the long incline to Derry Cairngorm into the teeth of a north-westerly gale punctuated by sharp sleet and snow showers. Repeatedly we found ourselves blown off balance as we crossed boulder fields and, once again, forbidden thoughts were soon to the fore. I was able to staunch these as I rested and ate raisins huddled behind a stone at the edge of Loch Etchachan, while John nipped up Beinn Mheadhoin. Next, Ben Macdui, glorious in its desolation with cloud and a blizzard. But the use of a well-marked track had again raised our morale and the fact that the next leg was down-wind was decisive. We agreed not to abort! I dropped down to Corrour Bothy while John did Carn a' Mhaim. The clouds thinned and out came the sun. How quickly fortunes change! I found myself eating bilberries beside the River Dee and, in an amazing fit of over-reaction, I stripped and bathed in a shallow pool. Fortified with bilberries and relieved of surplus food, we pressed on to the head of Glen Geusachan, John via Devil's Point and me via the low route. I was most impressed by the spectacular evidence of recent snow avalanches in the glen, where gentle, vegetated slopes were strewn with isolated boulders, often with no lichens on them.

Tea time at the head of the glen was the crunch point of the trip. If we could climb Beinn Bhrotain and Monadh Mor and reach Glen Eidart that day, then we had a viable distance left for the last day. If not, we would need to cut the third day short. Four o'clock seemed the latest we could leave Glen Geusachan. John made the rendez-vous at two minutes past four. Half a cup of bilberries and half a cup of raisins later, we started the steep haul to the col at the back of Coire Cath nam Fionn. Resting occasionally, we ground upwards and envied the flocks of geese effortlessly flying above us and across the col. Needing a constant injection of food, we broke out into the sun on the col. Here was a different world. Though still windy, the clouds had cleared and views were magnificent for their clarity. Beinn Bhrotain and Monadh Mor were a joy. Adding to the long views were frequent sightings of deer, hares and an eagle.

We made camp on a small grassy patch in Allt Luineag only metres from the rushing stream. We managed to stay awake for the meal though we just couldn't wait for the dried foods to reconstitute properly. Sleep was absolute by 9.00 p.m. and almost survived the shrill bleep of our alarm the next morning. One look outside in the dawn and thoughts of abortion quickly surfaced. Clammy cloud obscured everything in the valley. The trouble was

that we could not abort without a long walk, so there was nothing for it but to carry on. Boots were difficult to put on now and revealed a surprisingly large number of tender spots on our feet. By dint of compass, stalking tracks and a regular input of food we visited Mullach Clach a' Bhlair. How unfortunate that this distant bump qualifies as one of the Cairngorm Munros! Sgor Gaoith was more exciting in the cloud, but in order to ensure we had climbed it we went some way beyond it! A pause on the summit was made memorable by the bellows of the stags in Glen Einich reverberating up the cliffed couloirs of the glen.

The cloud lifted as we made our way through the hummocky moraine on the plateau south of the head of Glen Einich on our way to Angel's Peak. John popped up Cairn Toul while I decided to examine and photograph the semi-permanent snowbeds of Garbh Choire. (It sounded a convincing excuse at the time!) On round to Braeriach, the last Munro. In celebration the cloud dropped down again as we photographed the scene.

I don't like to remember much of what followed. The descent to the Lairig Ghru seemed interminable, the boulders in the bottom of the Chalamain meltwater gap enormous and the peat path back to the carpark like treacle. A small stream near the car park turned out to be too much and on my last jump of the trip I fell in fair and square. At such a humiliating and wet moment the whole expedition seemed ridiculous. One hour later, however, as we munched haggis and chips in the car, the perspective was different and deeply rewarding. We had gained a feeling of deep exhilaration through moving swiftly and independently through wild country. Frequently we could look to the most distant mountain visible and know that we had been there just a little time before. We could look at deer running effortlessly over the wild slopes and feel for a moment that we were like them. We could talk and think of things which are difficult to fit into an impatient modern life style. Strangely, our sore and aching limbs made the recollections all the more precious.

Postscript: John's full route including all 17 Munros involved a distance of 113 km and 6730 m of climbing. The 'fathers' route involved a distance of 93 km and 5240 m of climbing - and it felt like it!

