

BOOK REVIEWS

Mountaineer, Chris Bonington. Diadem Books 1989, £19.99.

This is a departure from the usual Bonington book. For a change, the text plays second string to the photos. These cover his entire career as a climber and photo-journalist in a sort of photo-autobiography. The text is just sufficient to fill in the details of the various expeditions, with a page or two at the start of each chapter and smaller paragraphs scattered among the pictures, which are informatively captioned. The book proceeds in a rough chronological order, and it is interesting to see how equipment has improved over the last 30-40 years. Indeed, some classic designs first got an airing on Bonington expeditions, e.g., the Whillans sit harness designed for Annapurna South Face 1970, and still in use today.

This is a coffee table book, large and glossy with text simple enough to be understood by non-climbers. However, enough technical details are given to interest the more knowledgeable. One criticism – which may be a problem with autobiographies of successful careers in general – is that from time to time, he appears to be blowing his own trumpet a bit loud, and over-dramatising certain events. With a book like this though, you don't really buy it for the text. Just enjoy the superb pictures.

S.S.

Classic Mountain Scrambles In Scotland, Andrew Dempster. Mainstream Publishing Company (Edinburgh) Ltd. 1992. £14.99.

Before I picked up this book, I did not think that I had done any serious scrambling, merely some casual hands and knees work in the course of climbing some Munros. The first thing therefore was to find a definition of 'scrambling'. The author addresses this in his introduction, and although loathe to be pinned down precisely suggests that "a walk becomes a scramble when you have to use your hands and; a scramble becomes a rock-climb when you start using a rope" is as near to a definition as is possible. So perhaps I have done some scrambling after all!

The author then goes on to define a grading system that he uses throughout the book. Ranging from 1 to 5, with Grade 1 being mostly walking and Grade 5 "extremely serious, highly committing and demanding scrambles" such as the traverse of the Cuillin Ridge. The Aonach Eagach in Glen Coe and An Teallach are given Grade 3.

With the exception of an appendix which covers a few technical aspects of rope work, most of the book is devoted to descriptions of 50 scrambles. More than a quarter of these are in Skye with another quarter on Ben Nevis or in Glen Coe. Each description is, in the time-honoured fashion, a guide to following the route and is illustrated with a simple sketch map and a number of photographs, most of which appear to be included for their scenic value rather than as aids to the route itself. On some routes the level of detail appears to be minimal, but is probably sufficient to guide the climber along the intended path, particularly when the route is an arete and to deviate would entail descending near-vertical cliffs.

All in all, this is a book for the more adventurous who, having done some simple scrambling, feel the need to keep the adrenaline pumping by tackling more and more 'interesting' routes, or for the rest of us, to read in bed and dream!

D.P.

Second Man On The Rope: Mountain Days With Davie, Ian Mitchell. Mercat Press. £6.95.

Ian Mitchell and Dave Brown have already made a mark on the mountain literature scene with "Mountain Days and Bothy Nights" and "A View From The Ridge", the latter being the joint winner of the 1991 Boardman-Tasker Prize. Their depiction of the Scottish mountain scene – bothy, hill and the weather in all its infinite variety – represent a grass roots experience with which most of us will find something to identify or recognise. In this latest offering, Mitchell has gone solo – at least where writing is concerned. His erstwhile co-author is however, very much present as he leads Mitchell up classic climbs, generously accompanies him on Munro-bagging expeditions and resolutely promotes the faith that bothying and weekendng are the purest forms of mountain experience. The book is an affectionate portrait of the relationship between two men united by their love of the Scottish hills. In the process it describes some of the range of experiences possible in those hills – Aonach Eagach in winter, thirst on the Cuillin Ridge, floundering through a flooded plantation in Glen Pean – and a variety of the characters who are encountered in such places, not all of whom contribute to the camaraderie of the hills or the "fight against cultural entropy". There is an underlying hint of nostalgia for the pre-Goretex world of their younger days, but equally, a looking forward to new experiences. The book ends on a positive note as Mitchell completes his Munros, enjoys a memorable night of celebration at the new Scott's Bothy and relishes the prospects of adventures still to come.

W.A.C.

The Cairngorms, S.M.C. District Guidebook, Sixth Edition, Adam Watson. Scottish Mountaineering Trust, 1992. £17.95.

This is the sixth edition of a guidebook which was first published in 1928. The guide covers the same area as previous editions, that is the area west and south of the A9 and north of Pitlochry, and has a similar format. There is an introductory chapter providing an overview of the natural features of the area, its natural history and its human associations, and the character of the hill walking, climbing and skiing. Then follow chapters on the various groups of hills that make up the Cairngorms.

The routes on and over the hills are very well described, accompanied by much interesting and informative comment on features and associations of the route. Each chapter has an introduction on the geology, natural history and human history of the area covered, a clear sketch map, and recommendations for further reading. The book is not intended as a rock climbing guide, but the chapters have summaries of the opportunities for rock and snow climbing available in the area covered, including the sea cliffs and the potential for ski-mountaineering. The book is illustrated with 88 fine colour photographs.

The author's wide and deep knowledge of the Cairngorms is evident throughout the book and there is a wealth of information in it. Apart from its obvious utility as a guide to travelling in the Cairngorms the book can be read with considerable enjoyment away from the hills, and for any hill lover is truly a guidebook to the Cairngorms.

P.H.

The Cairngorm Glens, Peter Koch-Osborne. Cicerone Press 1991. £4.99.

This attractive little book, subtitled "A personal survey of the Cairngorm Glens for mountain bikers and walkers", consists primarily of descriptions and maps of the principal low-level tracks. The author knows this ground intimately both as walker and mountain biker, and has included useful and interesting information on topography, natural history, grades of tracks, relative difficulty of ford crossings, and the degree of comfort and shelter offered by the area's bothies and shelters. Among several new tit-bits, I learned that Loch Builg provides a crop of high-quality eels every few years.

The style is reminiscent of the Wainwright 'Guides'. Thus, the text is hand-written rather than type set, the numerous very detailed maps are hand drawn and annotated with commendable clarity and accuracy, and most of the bothies and shelters in the area, together with other local features are pleasantly recorded with the author's line drawings. I was pleased to see that the location of the Secret Howff of Slugain is not divulged, though perhaps it is not known to the author.

About 30 glens and route are covered, including some such as Glen Loin, that are visited very infrequently. On the other hand, the scope is somewhat less than that of the corresponding S.M.C. District Guide, particularly to the west and south. For example, the Minigaig Pass, Glen Callater, Glen Muick, Glen Tanar and the Angus Glens are not included. As expected from the recent publication and the author's meticulousness, the information in the book is very up to date. It is surprising however, how quickly some things change in the hills, and I notice a few details that are now incorrect. Thus, Delnadamp Lodge is demolished, the Cullardoch shelter is not in the position shown and the footbridge over the Quoich at Allanoich is now restored.

Most Cairngorm Club members have an ambivalent attitude to mountain bikers, particularly, when like me on one occasion, they see a pair attempting to ride up the path from Loch Etchachan to Ben Macdhui. Members should have no qualms about this book, as the author is at great pains to stress his environmentally-friendly approach. I am not a mountain biker but have occasionally used a folding bike to ease my passage to, and from the end, of a hill walk. I bought this book because of its intrinsic interest to walkers as well as bikers, and for the extra information it offered over the standard guidebooks.

J.J.C.

The First Munroist, Peter Drummond and Ian Mitchell. The Ernest Press 1993. £13.95.

Sir Hugh Munro was not, of course, the first Munroist, he never completed them. The Rev. A. E. Robertson was the first to achieve this and his story is told by two latter-day mountaineers, both former residents of Aberdeen. This enjoyable account of the life and times of 'The Rev.' has been compiled from old records and includes many photographs of interest to all lovers of the Scottish hills. It must be said that Munro-bagging was not a pursuit that could be followed by many in these Edwardian days, but the comfortable life of a country minister with a private income enabled the Rev. to become a mountaineer of note, together with both his wives. There are several references to the Cairngorm Club in chapter nine which deals with early problems with access to the hills, including a quotation from Sheila Murray's book. This read should not be missed by any present-day Munroists, aspiring Munroists, humble walkers of the Scottish hills, and those interested in the history of our pastime. The book is worth getting for its delightful photographs.

P.R.W.

Icewalk, Robert Swan. Jonathan Cape, 1990. £7.99.

There seem to be an increasing number of explorers venturing to the opposite ends of the earth, getting there by some unique means or under some novel umbrella. Robert Swan's book is not just a travelogue of yet another such venture. The photographs themselves are well worth looking at. Often they not only set the scene, but supplement the text with clear, sometimes dramatic illustrations of events. The most unique feature of this party was that its eight members were drawn from seven countries. This mixture of nationality, language, culture and physique formed the central part of the story, which for me became the fascination of the book.

The idea for this particular trip first germinated as Robert Swan was nearing the end of his three-man journey to the South Pole. Over time it grew and developed, nurtured by lecture tours, his contacts and friends, concern for the environment and his involvement with the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. This resulting trip led to him becoming the first man to walk to both poles, and in so doing, drawing attention to the increasing dangers of environmental pollution. The story of the journey itself is an interesting one, of how each member of the group coped or failed to do so with the many stresses encountered, and how the roles of each clarified. The particular and unexpected problems thrown up by conflicting cultural values, related to such issues as acceptable ways of handling illness, injury and overwhelming fatigue. One major difficulty which was suspected, but the full extent of which had not been foreseen, was the physiological problems encountered by a young, coloured American whose body is adapted to the rigours of excessive heat but not those of extreme cold. It would have been easy to slide in with a report of squabbles, and occasionally the book seems to head that way, but the author avoids the temptation, explains the circumstances, and pays tribute to the different forms of courage displayed by each member. I found this to be a lively and informative book which was difficult to put down, perhaps not easy to read in bed because of its weight and size, but certainly gripping enough to try to do so. The photography was the icing on the cake.

G.M.S.

My Ascent of Mont Blanc, Henriette d'Angeville. Harper-Collins 1992. £17.99.

A most delightful book which has been translated from French. Mlle d'Angeville was the daughter of an aristocratic French family, born in 1794, whose grandfather had been guillotined and whose father had suffered during the French Revolution. She lived within sight of Mont Blanc and resolved from an early age to reach the summit. She achieved this ambition on September 4, 1838 at a time when women were not supposed to do "things like that". She wore 21lb of clothing "A voluminous belted cloak, fleece lined plaid, peg-top trousers and thick woollen stockings over silk stockings. A close fur-trimmed bonnet with a green veil matched a long black boa, a black velvet face mask and deep fur cuffs". How much more interesting it would be if the ladies of the Cairngorm Club dressed so well today. This is the most enjoyable mountaineering reminiscence I have read, and I recommend it to all. Unfortunately, a missed decimal point in the conversion factor given for the pre-Napoleonic unit of measurement, the toise, makes nonsense of the heights of the mountains. For example, Mont Joli would be 2,666,232m by this factor, whereas its height is 8748ft, or if you must use the ridiculous Euro-measures, 2666m.

P.R.W.

Scottish Hill and Mountain Names, Peter Drummond. Scottish Mountaineering Trust. 1992. £9.95.

This book contains a very comprehensive list of Scottish hill names drawn not only from the Highlands, but from all over Scotland. The author indicates the particular Scottish difficulty of defining the meaning of many of these names, as many derive from languages no longer in use. Most are rooted in four languages, two of which have died out – Brittonic, which was spoken mainly in the south-east and Old Norse, which was in use along the north and west fringes and in the isles; and two languages which are both in a serious state of decline – Scots, which was widely spoken in the south and east and Gaelic, which was in use all over the Highlands and even in south-west Scotland. Of the four, Gaelic is the most important as far as hill names are concerned. The book is well researched, and it translates and explains the meanings of names where this is possible. In some cases it is not clear from which language a hill name is derived. This is sometimes caused by the spelling having become corrupted with time, or in some cases the Ordnance Survey printing the spelling wrongly when the area was first surveyed, and these spellings have become accepted.

The Cuillin, for instance, has been spelled 16 different ways in its English version, and the author explores various possible meanings. His favourite is clearly 'high rocks' from the Old Norse word 'kjollen', but it could mean 'sea holly' if derived from Gaelic. Many of the Gaelic names refer to colours, animals, birds, parts of the body or legends from the past, but of the latter, many have been lost largely due to the massive depopulation which has left some areas virtually empty of people. The author has however, collected many that have survived. Most of the names have origins from many centuries ago, but there are some more modern such as 'Sgurr nan Spainnteach', the Spaniard's Peak, which dates from a battle fought in Glen Sheil in 1719, and more recently, 'Sgurr Mhic Choinneach', named after the Skye mountain guide, John MacKenzie. The book is well laid out with footnotes on each page to assist with Gaelic pronunciation, and it is pleasantly illustrated with pen sketches of mountains, hill features and wild life. It makes very interesting reading, and would be an invaluable reference book for those with an interest in the hills and their names.

G.E.

The Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal. Vol XXXV No.183, 1992. Edited by K. V. Crocket. Published by The Scottish Mountaineering Club.

The meat of the Journal is the usual mixture of well-written articles. Of particular note were Robin Campbell's review of "Munro's Tables 1981-1991", which ended with the sound advice that even the demoted Munros should be climbed, and Alan Dawson's amusing "The Language Barrier" – a note on the troubles experienced by the English with Gaelic hill names.

Finally, Rob Milne's tale "The Crack" ends with a discussion of the proposed revision of the Scottish winter grading system. This is dealt with more fully at the start of the New Climbs Section, which gives a comprehensive list of all winter routes of Grade V+ up to the end of winter 1991-92 and their suggested new grade (Climbs of Grade I-IV are largely unaffected by the new proposals). The section continues with the list of all that is new in 1992. Miscellaneous notes raises a couple of interesting points about Sgurr nan Gillean. Firstly, the height of Knight's Peak is brought into

question – is it above 3000ft? If so, should it be a top? Secondly, a note is made of a little known south top of Sgurr nan Gillean, reached from Bealach a' Bhasteir. The list of newly-completed Munroists includes one or two Cairngorm Club members. Also present is the ghouls' guide to who got killed where, when and how – the Scottish Mountain Accidents section, which contains one amusing incident. A total of 159 man-hours were spent looking for a rescuer who wandered off down the wrong glen during a callout. The usual reports of SMC activities, reviews, obituaries and adverts comprise the rest of the volume. A very entertaining read.

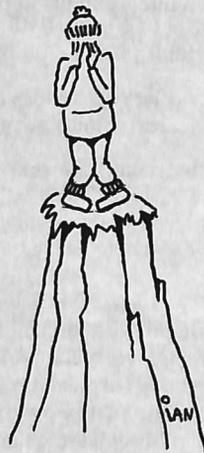
S.S.

The Fell and Rock Journal, No. 73 (1992).

The Club Library receives journals from several kindred clubs. Since I did my early walking and climbing in the Lake District as a student more than 40 years' ago, and have returned there most years since, my favourite journal is that of the Fell and Rock Club. This issue is, as usual, beautifully produced with colour plates and black-and-white drawings. The mixture of articles is wide. June Parker has written on walking the levadas in Madeira and includes a couple of interesting tips on avoiding vertigo. Ron Young tells the mathematically inclined how the earth was weighed using Schiehallion. Two articles which strike a chord were by W. A. Comstive on looking for puffins at the top of Sgurr na Coinnich in Skye (Yes!), and another humorous article by Pat Andrews on how a hut full of members decided what they would do that day. Marjorie Alferoff, who is in her eighties, writes a lovely article of reminiscences describing how she was introduced to climbing by her father, and later, sadly, how he died on the hills and was buried wearing his climbing togs and boots. As they say, "and so much more besides", but you must read it for yourselves and enjoy it as much as I did.

P.R.W.

VERTIGO



Ian Stuart

Mountain Bothies Association Journal. December 1992.

As a charity for maintaining (and not as we are reminded, a club for using) bothies, the M.B.A. has done a splendid job for nearly 30 years in conserving a heritage which is all too vulnerable to climatic and sometimes human attack. This issue of its Journal packs 34 items and 20 photographs or illustrations into 50 small pages, ranging from the bureaucratic (accounts and address lists) to the emotional (poems and politics). Somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, there are two relatively substantial articles which may be of particular interest to Club members. One by Jim Cosgrove, deals with the renovation of the Feith Uaine bothy the 'Tarf Hotel' – a typical story of organisation, transportation, construction and sheer hard work by dedicated volunteers. The provision and upkeep of bothies in the Cairngorms is a matter of increasing debate. It is good to hear that this well-known, but perhaps less-frequented haunt has been the focus of M.B.A. effort. The other, by David Hillebrandt, concerns "Environmentally Friendly Dumping" – a review of the problem of human faeces in mountain areas around the world, including references to the meagre medical literature, the minimum safe but ecologically over-indulgent number of toilet paper sheets per wipe (5), and various horror stories from Everest, Torres del Paine and Cwm Idwal. Dave Minter later provides a commentary in relation to Scottish bothies, around which the problem also exists. The rest of the Journal will, in varied ways, evoke memories or stir the thoughts of all those who have enjoyed these shelters and their ambience.

K.J.T.

CROSSWORD

Here are the answers to Robin Howie's crossword which was on page 42 of the 1991 Journal, for those who have not yet solved the clues.

ACROSS – 1 The, 5 Rip, 6 Conch, 7 Egg, 8 Pal, 10 Boreal, 11 Sad, 13 Arc, 14 Rosebay, 15 Rhu, 16 Sun, 17 Martin, 18 Rum, 19 Beg, 20 Elgol, 21 Tor, 22 Ayr.

DOWN – 1 Treasurer, 2 ECG, 3 Union Street, 4 Sheil Bridge, 5 Replays, 9 Lochnagar, 12 Drummer, 19 Bla.

CONTRIBUTIONS

All contributions will be considered for the Journal, although the Editor reserves the right to edit, abridge or omit material submitted for publication. Main articles should be between 1500 and 3000 words in length. It would be particularly appreciated if they could be on computer disk. If submitting black and white photographs it would be helpful if the negatives were available. Transparencies can also be used.