

A SOLO ASCENT OF THE MUNROS AND CORBETTS (-1/50,000th)

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It all started in 1978 when I bought a camera. By good chance I happened to find a post as GP trainee in picturesque New Galloway. At first I photographed from the roadside, but as time went on I found myself walking further and higher in search of better views. The routes were often trackless and often done alone, my off-duty rarely coinciding with others free time. One day I persuaded a friend to take me up Corserine, the local big hill. It was partially cloudy that day. I watched mesmerised by the twisting motions of clouds up and down the North Gairy Ridge. I had never imagined clouds could dance so delicately. From that moment I was a hill walker.

I cannot remember when I first thought of climbing the Munros and later the Corbetts by myself. It must have been quite early on as my Munros Tables had solos marked with crosses and accompanied ascents by ticks. A cross was greeted with immense satisfaction - a journey completed where the sole responsibility for the route, the vagaries of the Scottish weather (and it's forecasting), and the risk of injury were mine alone. I had to be careful, concentrate and learn.

In July 1995 I ascended Streap, my last solo Corbett / Munro. It was the end of a long journey lasting 16 years and 600 hills. I will not bore you with the majority of enjoyable but routine hill days, rather concentrate on the more memorable outings; my successes and probably more amusing, my failures and errors.

So I will begin with something really impressive - going up the wrong hill! I have done this only twice, both on Corbetts. In December 1988 I set off from Dunmaglas House to climb Carn na Saobhaidhe. I was aware it was a long walk, and probably wishing the miles away started to ascend what I took to be the correct hill. On reaching the summit I looked around, pleased and relieved to have got 'there', only to see across endless miles of Monadh Liath peat hag, a rounded lump very similar to the one on which I was standing, but obviously much higher. As I plodded the extra miles between Beinn Bhuraich and Saobhaidhe, I told myself that I deserved them for my lack of concentration. My second error was only discovered after I was off the hill. By then I was beginning to be more adventurous, learning to cope with more difficult conditions on shorter and supposedly easier days. The cloud base was 300m at best, the hill Meall A'Phubail from Glensulaig. Easy - straight up and down from the bothy. However there was something about the top of the hill, despite its cairn that did not feel right. Unsure of myself, I later worked out that I had ascended 747m, east of the Corbett. Believing it to be straight up from the valley, I had not bothered with compass bearings and must have deviated from the correct line. However, it is worse to realise you

are not quite where you should be when actually on the hill, as happened when I descended to the east rather than the west side of The Brack, and was faced with an unexpected view of a large stretch of water on my right instead of left (Loch Long). To suffer the stomach-churning panic that accompanies this feeling of being lost and out of control is to be avoided at all costs. At moments like these, you become very aware how insignificant you are compared to the vast emptiness around you.

However, sometimes mist surrounds you like a reassuring blanket. I well remember the pleasure and feeling of security that followed my ascent of Gulvain. I gloried in the dampness, the greyness, the fact that I was never going to have any views. The clouds blanked off everything except the grass and boulders at my feet. It was a special two dimensional day with me, the hill and nothing else. I could feel his moods and he mine. I felt so safe *because* I was alone.

There are further advantages in walking solo. It is easier to turn back or alter route without losing face. Excluding injury, when obviously others would aid rescue, I feel that the flexibility of being one's own boss adds greatly to safety on the hill. You can be lulled into a false sense of security in a group, as happened in a 15 hour epic in blizzard conditions on An Teallach with the Galloway Mountaineering Club. I once descended then re-ascended 300m and 3km on Ceathreamhaim to avoid a few metres of ice. Decisions however, sometimes seem to be made from instinct rather than logic as the following two tales will demonstrate.

One June weekend I set off from Craig to bivy overnight on Sheasgaich and Lurg Mhor. I always remember the strange purple glow in the north sky from Beinn Tharsuinn. Approaching the cliffs of Sheasgaich, the isolation and complexity of the route ahead suddenly became overwhelming. I was overcome with ever rising waves of panic, and despite trying to talk myself through this fear, found myself turning tail and almost running back up Tharsuinn. My headlong dash away from Sheasgaich continued all the way back to the car, never once pausing to reconsider. Something horrible was lurking in these cliffs! Next morning I saw from the hostel window that snow had fallen to 300m. It had not been forecast. Another similar episode occurred on one of the most wonderful of hill days. I had ascended Ben More Assynt from the unusual easterly direction of Glen Cassley. After a snowy start, the day became crystal clear, the snow crisp. For the first time in my life on reaching a summit there was not a trace of human activity. The cairn was unrecognisable in its icy mantle, no footpaths or footprints seen, my crampon marks blending into the roughness of the ice. I felt completely and utterly alone, the vast emptiness of Sutherland stretching behind me. I gloried in the isolation, the knowledge that I had this magnificent mountain to myself, ice and cornices moating it from Conival. I started off for this hill, but found that the walking messages from my brain were not getting through to my feet. I tried to force myself on with reminders of having done this ridge in winter

before, but the fear of avalanche overcame any logic. 'Sheasgaich-foot' prevailed with a safe descent.

Sometimes isolation is enjoyable but often its anticipation is quite frightening. When I am worried by the miles ahead and the risks of being by myself, I think of the view of A'Mhagdhein ten kilometres away along the trackless shore of Lochan Fada, the 967m hill stunted by distance. I looked at her, told myself it was a perfect day for a long walk, that I would be quite safe and got on with it, having a splendid outing. I have developed a long walk rule: stop every two hours to refuel and rest. Am I the only person to associate home made asparagus and blue cheese fillo tarts with Beinn Tarsuinn, hummus and celery pie with Ruadh Stac Mor? I enjoy my food and part of the pleasure is making 'goodies' for the hill. How can I forget the magnificent feeling of looking out from Seana Braigh across a sea of pink cloud and into an orange mid-summer sunset towards the peaks of Coigach. There was no sound. Only colours touched my senses. It was easy to imagine I was alone on this earth. There may be risks and anxieties being oneself, but the rewards can be very special.

I have ascended hills whilst injured but have only once damaged myself on a walk. I had been dropped off a Auch, planning to do the ring of five Corbetts north of Tyndrum and to return to the car parked in the village. Two kilometres into the walk, on a very steep part of the track, I felt the unmistakable tearing sensation of a ruptured calf muscle. It is a condemning indictment of our society that I continued to hop and hobble the eight kilometres back to the car rather than hitch a lift on the main Glasgow to Glencoe road. I felt safer in my hills than in a stranger's car.

I have been pounded by heat on several occasions. In June 1983 I set off at 5am to climb the Aonachs and Grey Corries meeting several like minded individuals on Aonach Beag, attempting to avoid the most extreme heat. Even so, I became breathless on descent into the furnace at the end of the day. Lack of water curtailed an overnigher from Beinn Aighenan to Stob A'Choire Odhar. I knew things would be difficult from the start as the Kinglas River was just a trickle, the only water on the ridge being found on Albannaich. I managed to get as far as Stob Ghabar before the need for moisture overcame my wish to finish the intended expedition. Lightning has encouraged rapid descents of Baosbheinn and Dheiragan, the former stopping a conversation with other walkers in mid-sentence, the latter providing a puzzle till I worked out that the buzzing was my ice axe sizzling with static electricity.

My solo ascent of Ben Lomond came during the second round of the Munros, but it is my first outing that lives in the memory. In these early days I walked in fast spurts, stopping frequently to recover my breath. During these gasping stops an older man would catch me up, walking with the more measured efficiency which I would come to learn. Eventually we both decided that this was being rather anti-social, so we walked together. We talked, I enthusing about hill walking, he about his distant children and recent

bereavement. At the bottom of the hill he pleaded with me, tears running down his face, to join him for a drink. This had been his first happy day since the recent death of his wife. Now he felt that life was worth living.

Snow has given me some interesting days. On Carn Dearg in Glen Buck I coped with gale force winds, freezing temperatures and a mixture of deep snow and wind-scoured ice. Visibility was not quite white-out, the contours implying that I was unlikely to walk over some hidden cliff or cornice. However, when ascending Geal Charn from Carn Dearg on a beautiful day, I picked my way up the steep snow slope towards a path. Wrong! A few paces later I realised it was a fracture line in the snow, and that I was on the wrong side of a cornice. I have been alone in white-outs on three occasions. On Cairn Toul and Meall Garbh I had an eerie feeling of knowing that my sense of vision had been switched off, the only sensory input being from the touch of the wind and the depth of the snow below my feet. I jumped on hearing voices on Cairn Toul, believing some men to be almost next to me, only to discover later that they must have been at least a kilometre upwind. While skiing down Meall na Meoig I could only tell up from down by pushing ahead snowballs to find whether they fell away or towards me. The lack of any sensation of touch in my feet due to the skis, making the indeterminate horizon physically nauseating.

I have tested the friction coefficient of a survival bag on Beinn Dearg Mor. I was on an overnigher, and decided on a direct descent rather than return by the same route. Stupid! I soon realised that there was not enough time to complete this before dark, and should have bivied between Ben Dearg Mor and Bheag. I spent a most uncomfortable night in my orange survival bag, trying not to slip down the very steep heather slope into the jaws of a deep snow-filled gully. In the middle of the night the bag gave up the struggle and disintegrated, leaving me in a wet sleeping bag still trying not to slip into the abyss. I spent the remaining hours of darkness pretending to be some rock climber dangling in a hammock on an extreme rock face.

Skye! anyone who loves it should avoid the next paragraph.

Until Bidein Drium Nan Ramh I loathed the place. Ugly scree-covered lumps! Nothing compared to the space of the Cairngorms or Maoile Lunndaigh, my favourite Munro. I did have a soft spot for Ghreadaidh, she (I sex the hills, but that is another story) being the first Skye hill I did by myself. From An Dorus I took a long time to persuade myself upwards, knowing I had very little scrambling experience and no head for heights. I was petrified of what lay ahead, but if I was to climb all the Munros this fear had to be overcome. Dithering and unsure of myself I set off, ending up glorying in the narrowness of her ridges and the security of the rough gabbro. Sgurr Dubh Mor however was another matter! I set off reassured by a good forecast and the knowledge that I seemed to cope quite well with this difficult scramble during the 1983 Club meet to Skye. As I started up the steep face of the mountain it began to drizzle, the mist swirling over the summits. I began to

feel very much alone. I tried again and again to get up the mountain but always returned to the same narrow ledge. I was attempting to avoid climbing a wet slab and not being at all successful! Frustration led to anger till I literally threw myself at the offending obstacle. My trunk stuck and I slithered up like a caterpillar. Climbers would say I had discovered a friction hold, lesser mortals an eighth point of contact in addition to the seven of feet, hands, knees and bum. The descent was no less spectacular as I made numerous attempts to bypass the 'unavoidable', leaving the hill with torn shorts, bleeding hands and in tears of fear and relief. The next day again promised good weather. I *know* I was the only one up Blaven. Nobody would have been so stupid as to follow my semi-vertical crawl on scree and mud up some unknown gully - the Fraser route direct, in the pouring rain.

Of course it is good to have hills like Sgurr Dubh Mor and dear Ben Klibreck. If hills were always easily attainable then part of the challenge of the mountains would disappear. Ben Klibreck, an easy solo in winter. Alarm bells should ring when I think things are simple. The first attempt was rather rushed due to the impending arrival of bad weather. I should have altered route and climbed by the quickest way, but was determined to try from a southerly direction. In my haste I started to climb too soon from Bealach Easeach, was drawn upwards by some terraces ending on a very steep snow slope covered with avalanche debris. The second attempt was doomed to failure from the start, but forecasts have been known to be wrong, so I set off, the inviting summit cone sparkling white in a clear blue sky. An hour or so later I sat in a whiteout near Meall Aillean and eventually gave up, descending into hailstones coming directly from the North Pole. On the successful attempt I muttered to myself about lack of snow, to be met by a sheet of ice on the final slope. I chipped away with the axe until impatience got the better of me. On went the crampons and I was on the top in minutes. Friends at last! What a wonderful hill!

And so the journey ended on Streap in 1995. Midges in the car had made an early start on Carn Mor a merciful release, my morning walk being rewarded by an unexpected cloud inversion on her summit. Clouds appeared by the time I was 600m up Streap so there were no views, no uncontrollable sobbing that had accompanied my last solo Munro, Sgurr Fiona. A definite anti-climax, yet the best was still to come. I descended directly into Gleann A' Chaorainn and looked back. Streap had disappeared in a wall of white while dark clouds shrouded the Carnaich ridge, my original planned line of descent. Suddenly lightning exploded on either side of the glen and in front of me. I disintegrated, not from fear of this awesome sight, but from the anthropomorphic feeling that it was nature's way of congratulating me. After all, had not the sky looked down on me all those years? I staggered, choking with tears back to the car.

Munros - 1.3.80 Broad Cairn - 12.6.94 Sgurr Fiona
Corbetts - 13.9.79 Broad Law - 14.7.95 Streap

Postscript

The 1/50,000th is of course the Inaccessible Pinnacle. I have not done this solo, my excuse being that I do not own a rope. It was a wonderful feeling ascending Sgurr Dearg on my own on a beautiful day, able to relax with no thoughts of climbing this magnificent but rather frightening object. You may think I dislike the hill - far from it. Was he not especially selected as the best possible 40th birthday present? The weather for once obliged and I finished my second 'round' bawling "Happy Birthday" to myself from the summit. Great stuff!

Do not look in the Munros Tables for my name. "I am not a number. I am a free man". (The Prisoner, ITV).

