

BOOK REVIEWS

On The Other Side Of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands, James Hunter. Mainstream, 1996. £17.50

James Hunter is the author of *The Making of the Crofting Community* and several other books on the Highlands and its people. He was also the founding director of the Scottish Crofters Union. *On The Other Side Of Sorrow* looks at the roots of conflict between Highlanders and environmentalists - Highlanders whose Gaelic culture demonstrated a strong environmental awareness a thousand years ago and environmentalists whose ideas owe much to nineteenth century romanticism. Drawing on his wide knowledge of the history and literature of the Highlands in support of his argument, the author suggests that the interests of Highlander and environmentalist are not as diametrically opposed as is sometimes assumed and that revitalised Highland communities can offer the best hope of restoring biological diversity to a devastated countryside. "If it makes sense to reinstate Scots pines to settings from which Scots pines are today known to have been artificially stripped, might it not be equally acceptable...to restore people to some at least of the many glens from which human beings were removed...? Is there not as good a case for the social rehabilitation of our glens as for their ecological restoration?" Sensitive environments can only be sustained with the support and commitment of local communities. The challenge for environmentalists is to work with communities and not against them. *On The Other Side Of Sorrow* offers a vision that such a coming together could take place in the Highlands. The protection and nurturing of a unique but threatened environment could also be the vehicle to redress the historic injustices suffered by the indigenous population of the Highlands.

W.A.C.

The Voice of the Hills, The Story of Ben Humble MBE, Roy M Humble. Pentland Press, 1996. £17.50.

The Voice of the Hills is the remarkable story of Ben Humble who overcame total deafness to become one of the pioneers of Mountain Rescue in Scotland. The author, since his uncle's death in 1977, has had access to everything ever written by Ben, and has used his notes to such effect that the book is almost autobiographical. He served as one of the first voluntary instructors at the Scottish National Sports Centre at Glenmore Lodge in the Cairngorms, and my reason for approaching this book with such interest, was because this was where I met him. I was a teenager sent up by my school in Clackmannanshire for one of these new courses in the 1950's. I am only one of many who have him to thank for happy memories of bivouacking at the Shelter Stone and learning to hill walk, navigate and orienteer competently. He was a crusty character, his deafness a handicap which frustrated his bright mind. He refused to learn to lip read but, relying on his intuition and scribbled notes, was an able communicator.

This book describes his early life in Dunbarton and his first career in dentistry. I was surprised, as a fellow dentist, to read of his significant contribution to early dental radiology and forensic dentistry. In spite of his success in this field, he gradually turned to journalism, photography and books of which he wrote six, including a now classic history of mountaineering in Skye. His whole life had turned on a trip to that island in 1929 when by

chance he met John MacKenzie, a pioneer of climbing in the Cuillin. His tales of way-faring (he disliked the modern word 'hiking') and howffing make amusing reading, and he was an early advocate of Scottish Youth Hostels. His true legacy is his contribution to safety in the hills. He was involved in the Mountain Safety Committee from its inception in 1936 and played a large role in the formation of the Mountain Rescue Committee of Scotland, foreseeing the rise in climbers numbers even then. He was their accident recorder for many years, creating an invaluable fund of safety and rescue data.

This book is for anyone who loves the hills of Scotland. To see them through the eyes of this gritty and independent Scot whose life was a response to the challenge of deafness, is an inspiring story. The only voice he could hear, the voice of the hills, will be familiar to all Cairngorm Club members too.

E.M.M.

The Joy of Hillwalking, Ralph Storer. Luath Press, 1994. £6.95.

Another very readable volume of short stories from the publishers who gave us the unforgettable 'Mountain Days and Bothy Nights'. It is just as inspiring and is an encouraging departure from the usual R. Storer format of the guide book. There is a subject here for everyone, be it camping, the elements, flora and fauna, scrambling or accidents. Even food and sex, they are all there. In 'Snow' he observes 'You're going to find this hard to believe, but there are actually people out there, fellow human beings who don't like snow'. He then goes on to suggest that a genetic defect may be to blame. Always asking questions, he made me sit up and consider my own attitude to the stuff, and this book is constantly doing that. Whether you agree or not, his often very humorous politics are always there. His mileage is never in doubt.

If you like the hills but have not been out for a while, this book should inspire you. If not there's always the Brookside omnibus or cleaning out the toaster. The Titcomb Basin, Curved Ridge, avoiding groves of succulent berries, it's all in this excellent well priced volume. The Luath Press strikes again.

D.H.B.

Exploring the Highlands of Scotland, Stephen Whitehorn. Wardlock, 1995. £16.99.

Well here it is, yet another Guide to help you explore the Scottish Highlands. Having said that, this is a high quality volume and some of the photographs within its 190 pages are quite superb. Whether you fancy Sandwood Bay or Ben Hope in the far north, Lochnagar by the Staic Buttress nearer home, Ben Venue or a rugged lochside walk on the Isle of Skye, there is something here for all in the 32 walks. The book employs a grading system based on conditions from late spring to autumn, with no allowance given for significant snow cover.

I really expected not to like this book, with its 'walk 200yds, turn sharp R' approach, but it appears very well researched. There are useful pieces of information in the Overview/Interest sections which accompany each route. Duration times and relevant rail, bus and postbus services are given along with expected underfoot conditions. I'd borrow it rather than buy, or recommend it to those who appreciate having their walks planned for them.

D.H.B.

Burn on the Hill. The Story of the first 'Compleat Munroist, Elizabeth Allan. Bidean Books, 1995. £17.80.

Many of us are aware that the Rev. A.E. Robertson was the first 'Munroist', but who knows the first person to have visited all the 500 or so tops over 3,000 feet listed in 'The Tables'? This was the Rev. Ronald Burn who accomplished the feat in 1923 when he was 36 years old. He has been rescued from somewhat undeserved obscurity by means of this entertaining mini-biography written and published in limited edition by Elizabeth Allan, herself a hill walker. His obituary in the SMC Journal says he was 'a most interesting and striking personality', though perhaps a more accurate description would be eccentric. This book is based largely on a set of his recently discovered diaries, describing his hill walking exploits between 1914 and 1927. Despite being of small stature, with a permanently bent back and handicapped by what seems to have been poor diet and equipment, it is clear that he possessed prodigious energy and stamina, and could cover ground at amazing speed. However, I found the most interesting aspect of his diaries is their description of the country people he met on his walks. He was in the habit of overnighing at remote, still inhabited cottages. Since he had the Gaelic and was intensely interested in folklore and place names, he established a close relationship with many keepers, shepherds, estate workers and their families. Thus place names such as Pait, Camban, Dessary, Alltbeithe, Lochivraon and Corrou, which are now ruins, bothies, hostels or submerged, come vividly to life. Elizabeth adds considerably to this by assembling a nice group of photographs which illustrate several of the people and places mentioned. As you progress through the book, you glimpse much harder, more self-reliant and more slowly placed communities than exist today. I was intrigued to learn that even up to around 1920 the postie walked twice a week from Morvich to Altbeithe (Glen Affric) via Glen Lichd and the Bealach an Sgairne - a round trip of 18 miles!

Being laced with social history and character portrayal, this is a mountain book with a difference. Although Elizabeth leaves us wondering about meanings and chronology at a few places, her book is a good read (note her punning title) and is recommended. It has local interest as well: Ronald was born at Old Deer, though he spent most of his life in England, and Elizabeth lives at Westhill.

J.J.C.

Mountain Footfalls: a Calendar of the Scottish Hills, Ian Mitchell, Mercat Press. 1996. £8.99

From a Burns Supper (with exploding haggis) in Corryhully to Hogmanay at the Slugain Howff, the Scottish hills and their bothies feature again in a month by month account of hill-going adventure (and sometimes misadventure) which is Ian Mitchell's latest contribution to mountain literature. Strenuous days and convivial nights are once again the order of the day - with Corbetts appearing more often than in previous books. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Mountain Footfalls*, however, is the sub-theme - what the author describes as 'echoes'. The Highlands, which the great ecologist Frank Fraser Darling described as 'a devastated landscape', were not always as empty of people as they are today. Although the destruction of the Gaelic culture of the Highlands and the systematic removal of the bulk of its population took place largely in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, pockets of population remained until relatively recent times. The 'echoes' of the

past which run parallel with the doings of Mitchell and his friends explore the memories of some of the last survivors of these communities - as well as focusing on some better-known figures such as Maggie Gruer of Inverey and Bob Scott of Luibeg. Access and ownership issues, too, come in for attention. In his consideration of the 'Battle of Glen Tilt' and the far-sighted attempts of Cairngorm Club President James Bryce to get his 'Access to Moors and Mountain Bill' through Parliament at the beginning of this century, or of the Letterewe Accord and the involvement of the great Scottish socialist John Maclean with the Lewis land raids of 1920, Mitchell has given this book a context which is much wider than that of his earlier works.

W.A.C.

Storms of Silence, Joe Simpson. Cape, 1995. £17.99.

Joe Simpson first came to public prominence following publication of his book 'Touching the Void' - a highly compelling account of an escape from the clutches of death. What appears in this book as the focused nature of the man, is central to the story and to his survival. The reader admires the man if not necessarily the author. Simpson's next book 'A Game of Ghosts' is autobiographical in nature - a succession of amazing escapes from positions of danger. The reader visualises a young daredevil climber who has long since used up any cat-like allocation of nine lives. The exploits go well beyond the average person's experience. Recognising that such will to survive requires an impressive degree of egocentricity the reader can excuse it.

What then of 'Storms of Silence'? This is a book divided into two parts: one long, one short. In the first Simpson describes trips to Gangchempo and Cho Oyo in Nepal. In the second he describes a trip to Peru as a guide on a commercial expedition. In part one, Simpson by now the notorious victim of numerous broken bones, fails to make either summit and indeed in both cases goes only a very little way beyond base camp. The reader, no longer carried along by triumph over adversity, gets a closer look at the man. Stripped of the glamour of adventure he appeared, in my opinion, wanting. Part one left me with an impression of a book padded out to fill the requisite number of pages, written by one who recognised his self-centred attitude but could no longer find either outlet or escape from it. Frankly I found it irritating. In this section Simpson describes pubs, an encounter with an attractive female school teacher, drunks in Llanberis and the ethics of chess. Deprived of the summits he so clearly craves, he seeks to find himself among the burning Ghats of India and passing Tibetan refugees. Change is difficult to achieve. The character which I found so evident in this book remains to the fore. Simpson, on a glacier below Cho Oy, dismisses a collapsed Tibetan with the words "we're climbers not baby sitters". He is clear that a climber does need to be selfish to succeed. Simpson's book demonstrates the problems faced by climbers when physical limitations restrict their ability to succeed.

Part two of the book is more hopeful. Simpson moderates his ambitions and those who pick up this type of book to read of ascents and summits can enjoy the description of the ascent of Ranrapalca. Simpson's female encounter in this section (with a Belgian woman whose husband had recently disappeared on a climbing trip) shows a softening of the hard and frustrated image of the earlier pages. I could have done without his musings on the problems of the world at large, but that aside, found the second part of the book much less annoying than the first.

These days there is so much mountain literature. 'Storms of Silence' does stand out

because it is different. I would not say, however, that I enjoyed it. Deprived of his climbing exploits I was not left with a picture of a person or an author I could admire.

M.G.

Scotland's Mountains: an Agenda for Sustainable Development, Andy Wightman. Scottish Wildlife and Countryside Link, 1996. £4.00 (Available from SWCL at PO Box 64, Perth PH2 0TE)

Commissioned by SWCL on behalf of a number of conservation and recreation agencies with an interest in the ongoing debate over the future management of Scotland's mountain areas, this booklet was produced to coincide with the meeting of the European Intergovernmental Consultation on Sustainable Mountain Development which took place in Aviemore in April 1996. In his introduction, SWCL Chairman Michael Scott says "We hope that this report will help to inform guests in Scotland for this meeting about the special qualities of the Scottish mountains, and also remind all who care for these mountains that, although Scotland may be geographically peripheral, we can and must have a central role in driving forward sustainable policies for all mountain development." Andy Wightman provides an excellent summary of the issues facing Scotland's mountain areas and one which is beautifully illustrated. He is keenly aware of the failures of policy under successive governments, which have led conservation agencies to become landowners themselves in order to protect and sustain threatened environments and species, and he is not overcome by enthusiasm for the present government's adoption of the 'voluntary principle' as the solution to these problems. The closing pages offer a 'Scottish Agenda for Sustainable Development' with eight specific proposals which address such issues as land use, public ownership, involvement of mountain communities and strategic planning, but the most telling comment comes at the very end when Wightman writes "We have the opportunity to transform Scotland's mountain country into an area capable of standing scrutiny against international environmental standards, and one which can also provide a high quality environment for economic development, wildlife and unrivalled recreation. All that is needed is political will."

W.A.C.



CONTRIBUTIONS

All contributions will be considered for the Journal, and the Editor reserves the right to edit, abridge or omit material submitted for publication. Main articles should be between 1,500 and 3,000 words in length and shorter ones are welcome. Articles on computer disk are particularly appreciated, and contributors should contact the editor in advance, so that computer formats are compatible.