

A WALK ACROSS SCOTLAND

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The exigencies of work, family, etc. have prevented me from attaining the ambition of many other hill walkers, namely, to become a Munroist. In recent retirement years, however, I pondered attempting a less time-consuming target such as solo ascents of the much fewer 8000 metre peaks. This particular idea I quickly discarded on account of not having the necessary gear. On another tack, I have always wanted to have a taste of Knoydart (until 1996 unknown territory for me) and to traverse Corrieyairack, the only other long distance Scottish pass that I had not walked. I decided, therefore, to combine the two by tackling one of the 'classic' trans-Scotland treks i.e. Mallaig to Montrose. This has been done hundreds of times before, and the only virtue in setting down my story is that it might encourage other elderly members to think of trying something similar. The trek has been popularised since 1981 as a back-packing expedition by 'The Great Outdoors' magazine who loosely organise a group event at the end of May each year. This used to be called pretentiously the 'Ultimate Challenge' but it is now the 'Great Outdoors Challenge.' I could not manage May so settled for the last two weeks in June 1996 - in the event an inspired choice, weather-wise.

The two major prior considerations were route and logistics. With regard to the route, I was not entirely confident of my long-term shoulder strength or stamina, so opted conservatively for lower-levels and relative shortness. These choices inevitably resulted in a fair amount of road walking, which although not ideal, turned out to be quite pleasant since the roads I used had little traffic on them. I also made it easier by including two rest days in the total of 14 that I allowed, as well as six nights in hotels: five and two nights were spent camping and in bothies, respectively. The total distance was 283 km (an average of nearly 24 km per day), most of which I had not walked before; the total height climbed was 3970 m. With regard to logistics, my first thought was to appeal to my friends in the Marines who could supply copious back-up transport, and a rescue helicopter on constant stand-by. However, Peggy, my wife, thought this plan would attract too much unwanted publicity for the Club, and as a better alternative, very kindly volunteered her own services. Without her substantial help in ferrying supplies I could not have achieved more than a few stages. For camping I used a Saunders Jetpacker ultra lightweight one-person ridge tent weighing about 1.4 kg. This is an excellent product, the only snag being that to secure complete watertightness it is necessary to pitch it very accurately in order to avoid the outer and inner fabrics touching: accordingly, in stony ground it is not always easy to find the ideal position for pegs. Backpacking breakfast consisted of a pre-prepared mixture of muesli and dried milk powder moistened as required with hot water, and a marmalade sandwich. Lunch was a brew of Batchelor's

dried soup, sandwiches, fruit cake and fruit. Supper was a reconstituted pack of Reiter Travelunch dried meal (reasonably tasty and stomach-filling, as well as being extremely convenient), a 'Now' chocolate biscuit and fruit. Drinks were invariably a pre-prepared mixture of Nescafé and dried milk. Initial weight of the rucksack with three days food, including six large apples, was about 10.5 kg; most days it was probably about 9.5 kg.

So, having spent the night at the Marine Hotel, Mallaig, off I went across to Inverie on the 'Western Isles' mail boat, full of romantic feelings, pleasant anticipation and some excitement. Pausing only to read the poignant inscription on the monument to the seven men of Knoydart, I took the first of many steps eastwards on a clear, dry and warmish morning. Beside the Brocket memorial stood the first two of many deer that I saw en route: they watched my slowish progress intently. Resisting the temptation to capture one for use as a pack-carrier up-hill, I pressed on. At the top of the Bealach Mam Barrisdale I also resisted the temptation to divert along the barely discernible track to Luinne Bheinn: massed dark clouds had gathered and I was anxious to pitch the tent in dryness. I arrived at the camp-site outside the Barrisdale Bay bothy just in time to meet a hillwalker from Kilmarnock who was packing his gear after descending from Ladhar Bheinn thus completing his Munros. I said it was a privilege for me to be the first person to congratulate him. I then proceeded to occupy the patch of nice, green sward that he had vacated, and to enjoy the lovely setting, made even more idyllic by grazing deer.

Despite the expected midge attacks and development of itchy spots, I had a good night and was on my solitary way right early. Intermittent drizzle did not spoil my appreciation of the switchback path and magnificent scenery to Kinlochhourn. My only human company was two canoeists making their way slowly along Loch Hourn. Whilst taking an early lunch at Kinlochhourn I idly read the map, looking forward to some smooth, level walking to end the day. To my chagrin I realised there was a previously unnoticed 230m climb up to the level of Loch Quoich. However, a steady plod saw me to the top. Passing Loch Coire Shubbh I remembered how 250 years ago almost to the day, Bonnie Prince Charlie had skirted it on his way north, evading Hanoverian troops positioned nearby. The numerous knolls thereabouts must have provided useful cover for him and his companions. At the road alongside Loch Quoich I encountered two prostrate figures. These were Croatian hillwalkers who had trekked cross-country from Glenfinnan. They had run out of food, were near exhaustion and were waiting for a hitch towards Fort William. I was relieved later to see them waving to me from a passing van.

My planned campsite that night was somewhere along the west side of the spur of Loch Quoich that points North to Alltbeithe bothy. In fact, this idea materialised because I found a good flat space about 400 metres from the bridge and below the track to the bothy. Not having secured permission to camp from Glen Quoich Estate I was slightly apprehensive about stopping

there. My feelings turned to near alarm when just before supper time I noticed a truck (only the fourth vehicle I had seen all day) cross the bridge and turn along the track below which my tent was situated. Either the occupants, who I suspect were checking on a herd of cattle near Alltbeithe, did not see me or were not interested because they did not stop then or on their return 30 minutes later. Accordingly, I was able to settle down to prepare supper and to pass the drizzly night undisturbed.

Continuing beside the Loch, I passed some of the time trying to spot the location of the now submerged Glen Quoich Lodge and thinking about Ewen MacPhee, allegedly the last bandit of Scotland who lived early last century on a similarly submerged island somewhere west of Gairich. Three or so kilometres below the dam, Peggy, having motored from Fort Augustus, met me with a welcome change of clothes and a razor. Feeling slightly more human I made good time to the Tomdoun Hotel where I downed a delicious pint of beer. I was then able to have a leisurely lunch stretched out on Inchlaggan enjoying glorious sun and scenery. Peggy had told me in the morning that she had confirmed my hope that it would be possible to find a campsite beside the Allt a' Bhiora just East of Ardochy House. The spot I eventually chose was delightfully secluded in a sylvan glade where that evening I was lulled to sleep by the tinkling stream.

After again road-walking eastward, I left the A87 at a track leading to Muneriegie croft and then picked up another good one which traverses the east side of Loch Lundie. Eventually I was confronted by the only potentially serious block on the whole walk: I had planned to enter Inchnacardoch Forest at a bridge shown on the map as crossing Invervigar Burn, but found it collapsed. Luckily, the dry conditions enabled me to ford the burn without difficulty and so avoid a long detour, only to be faced on the other side by the highest deer fence I have ever seen. Again luckily, I got over this without damage to either myself or the fence, and then walked along forest tracks to the public road with its magnificent pine trees on the left hand side. My mid-afternoon bath at the Lovat Arms hotel in Fort Augustus felt very luxurious. Peggy had found an excellent restaurant at the Lock Inn, and so that evening we indulged ourselves there. The following day she left for home leaving me to enjoy a quiet time reading the Sunday papers, drying the tent and strolling round the village. At 6 am on Monday, missing breakfast, I left the hotel for the long haul over the Corrieyairack Pass. The day was near perfect, still, cool to warm, and dry. After being appalled by the severe erosion at the start of the track, I moved on happily, trying to imagine being in the company of drovers, redcoats or BPC (again). There was, in fact, a complete absence of human company all the way across except for a motorcyclist whom I passed when approaching the summit. My curt greeting of 'Hi' conveyed, I hope, my disapproval of his exploit. I learned later that a group of Germans had traversed the pass on four-wheeled motorcycles the day before. Can nothing be done to stop the actual and potential damage caused to the track by vehicles? Outside Melgarve bothy I was warmly greeted

by the boiler-suited Mr Meek, a retired crane driver from Glasgow. It turned out that he and a few other hill walking friends were in the habit of renovating mountain bothies in their spare time - a very public-spirited activity, though they had no formal connection with the Mountain Bothies Association. They had been asked by the Laggan Community Council to do their best with Melgarve, which they have improved very impressively. His friends had just gone, leaving him to do odd jobs. Later, he refreshed me with a brew and we had a very enjoyable half-hour together, swapping experiences and knowledge. At Garva Bridge I was met unexpectedly by Peggy who had motored from home. It was nice having someone to help me erect the tent near the bridge and to give me fresh socks, Around 8 pm I had another scare when a convoy of five land-rovers sped westward over the bridge. I expected being turfed out for trespass, however, they returned later without stopping. What were they up to, I wondered. Perhaps viewing the herds of deer that came down off the hill in the evening to feed on the sweet grass by the river, and then stayed there all night.

Despite striking camp early, and disturbing the deer, I was met near Crathie by an attentive Peggy who relieved me of the tent and sleeping bag, and then drove back to the Royal Hotel, Kingussie where we were to spend that night together. I chose to walk the quiet A86 and B9152 (old A9), and on them was amused to pass several gate-houses which are now completely cut off from their mansions on the other side of the new A9. After a hotel breakfast the following morning I made my way uneventfully, but enjoying gracious Strathspey and a light pack, to the Coylumbridge Hotel for another night with Peggy.

Then to the Lairig Ghru and very familiar ground. Opening the gate beside the caravan site I somehow managed to cut my finger quite badly on the latch. The resulting stream of blood gave rise to visions of a medical emergency and the abandonment of the walk. However, skilful application of plasters and holding the finger vertically at shoulder height staunched the flow, and I decided to proceed. Luckily, the injury caused no further problems. At the Pools of Dee, whilst enjoying lunch in good weather, I became aware of a flock of screaming gulls approaching from the South. I thought they were protesting at my presence until I noticed a pair of eagles wheeling high above the flock. Had the eagles been making a raid on the nesting site at Loch nan Stuirteag? Corroul was my overnight stop. I had the place to myself except for the resident field mice, who were more than a little nuisance. As soon as the light started to fade and I had entered my sleeping bag, they emerged noisily from the fireplace and started to run about the floor. If I kept motionless they would cheekily stand on their hind legs about a foot from my face. With their huge ears and oversized whiskers they really are cute, but the idea of them actually invading my person kept me awake until I resorted to semi-suffocation in an almost totally enclosed bag. The combination of mice-induced insomnia and the concrete floor made getting up next morning unusually pleasant.

During the previous late afternoon I had been very surprised to hear a couple of metallic clangs which seemed to originate from the base of Carn a' Mhaim. With the naked eye I could not see anything to explain the phenomenon. However, a solution offered itself when I passed the junction of the main path and of the one to the White Bridge. It was clear that the Scottish Rights of Way Society signpost had been very recently renewed, so I presumed that SRWS members had been busy. Because I was meeting Peggy at the Linn of Dee car park for lunch, I took the Glen Lui route. At the Robbers' Copse I passed a Dutch campsite - the third Dutch group that I had met so far. I suppose I encountered about 20 walkers on the whole trip, but, interestingly, the Dutch were by far the most numerous. They all told me that they adored Scotland.

Having dumped most of the weight in the car at the Linn, I had an easy passage to Braemar where I stayed two nights (the first with Peggy) at the Fife Arms in a spacious room overlooking the main entrance.

Missing the hotel breakfast again, at 6 am I was on the road to Invercauld Bridge where I entered Ballochbuie, having previously obtained precautionary permission to walk through the Royal estate. In the forest I took a path which traverses the bealach between Cnap a Choire Bhuidhe and Cnappan Nathraichean, and thereafter joins the land-rover track to Gelder Shiel. Gathering my things together after a brew at Gelder bothy, I realised with dismay that I must have dropped my sun hat on the path. This article is an essential part of my kit because without it my bald head would quickly become unbearably sore. Not wishing to retrace my steps in a possibly vain search, I decided to push on whilst pondering what to do. My eventual idea was to utilise the towel I was carrying as a sort of burnous. Unfortunately, the towel was not large enough to fasten firmly and comfortably under my chin so I determined to call in at the Ranger's Office at the Spittal of Glenmuick in the hope of scrounging some string or twine. On explaining my problem to the ranger she said "You don't need string, you need a hat" and immediately produced a large box full of hats of all kinds, scarves, gloves, etc. This was the lost property brought in from all corners of the estate and unclaimed for months or years. I was allowed to take my pick - a natty baseball cap which saved my pate for the rest of the hike. Then south-east up the Allt Darrarrie mini-ravine and over to the Shieling of Mark in gathering mist and rain. From this direction the bothy is hidden until the very last moment : a little compass work is advisable. Peggy and I had visited it twice before and knew it to be in reasonable condition. However, as the result of recent work it is now, in my opinion, one of the best overnight stops in Scotland. As well as being very weatherproof and mice-free it has a good fireplace and furniture, including raised bed-frames and, luxury of luxuries, a 5 cm thick foam mattress. In consequence I had an excellent night's sleep, again with sole occupancy. The bothy book showed it to be much frequented by Great Outdoors challengers.

Next morning it was over Muckle Cairn, playing hide and seek at the top with deer among the head-high hags, and down to Glen Lee. Up till this point I had enjoyed very good weather on most days, but mid-morning at Loch Lee the heavens opened in a torrential downpour that lasted the rest of the day and most of the night. My route was on the Whisky Road through the Clash of Wirren. I was surprised that the broad land-rover track on Eskside turned at the summit into a much narrower path, single track and feet-soakingly heathery lower down. My overnight stop was on a pleasant, level grassy bank just downstream from the keeper's house at Stoneyford on the West Water. Some weeks beforehand I had obtained readily-given permission to camp there from the keeper. This place is on the Hunthill Estate, whose attitude I contrasted with the adjoining Gannochy Estate which is liberally dotted with signs warning against fires and camping. Peggy delivered the tent to me at Stoneyford and I erected it during a lucky, brief respite from the rain. However, the next 15 hours were a good test of how to keep a tiny tent's ground sheet dry in monsoon conditions. It is not a matter of water ingress through the tent as how to deal with water dripping from one's external clothing and rucksack.

Despite the wet I had a reasonably good sleep, packed up in moderate rain and set out road walking on the final and longest stage of 30 km. Towards the opening of the Glen I was met again by Peggy who had stayed at Brechin and who took my heavy items. By that time the rain had ceased and I finished in virtual dryness. After climbing slightly breathlessly to the top of the Caterhuns I wondered whether it would not have been wiser to go by the low level route via Tarfside and Edzell airfield, but in compensation I was rewarded with a lovely long distance view of my end point at the coast. As encouragement, Peggy walked a few kilometres with me into Brechin having parked there earlier, and later we had a picnic lunch together in the grounds of House of Dun. Thence to journey's end - the crumbling dunes of Montrose - something of an anticlimax without cheering crowds and a welcoming band, particularly since it was my 69th birthday. There was, however, a kind of celebration later at home in that we shared a bottle of champagne with the neighbours.

What, then are the lasting impressions? Gratitude at being able to experience more of the unsurpassed beauty, grandeur, and wildlife of Scotland. I counted 51 species of bird in the 14 days including some uncommon ones such as snipe (Loch Lochy), greater spotted woodpecker (Inchnacardock) and twite (Corrour). I saw a lot of other wild life including red squirrels, Sika deer (I think) and a red deer fawn. Apart from a slightly sore toe which soon cleared up, I thankfully suffered no physical problems either during or after the event. I also admit to some feeling of satisfaction at having done it. An uncanny accompaniment was that on almost every day of the walk I heard cuckoos. Perhaps they were mocking my effort, but, yahboo, I had the last word.