

APPROACH TO THE HILLS

JOHN NISBET

Perhaps a better title would be 'A Chapter of Accidents,' but that would give entirely the wrong impression. Instead I have borrowed the title from Eric Shipton's chapter where he describes how he came to enjoy walking and climbing on the hills. My story, though not so dramatic, may strike a chord with others of my generation, now in our mid-70s. What was it like two generations ago for a youngster first discovering the attractions of the Scottish hills?

The first time I fell down a cliff was on the Moray coast when I was seven. My cousin and I were returning to Cullen along the shore from Sunnyside Beach, a rough track, and I suggested it would be easier to climb the cliff and walk back through the fields. On the steep part at the top, I pulled on an old root of gorse and tumbled down the grassy slope to where my disapproving cousin had waited. I sprained my ankle, but persuaded him to tell my mother that I had hurt it on the rocks. Climbing might be excusable: falling was not.

It was my brother Stanley who introduced me to the hills proper, in Arran in 1932 when I was nine. He was ten years older and his stories of walks with his friends on the Scottish hills impressed me. One July evening, he took me up the slopes of Beinn Bharrain behind the farm in Pirnmill where we were holidaying. I assumed it would be easy to climb to the top, but there are patches of scree before reaching the ridge, and my first venture on the loose stones was too much and we sat down. In the calm of the evening, the sun was beginning to drop behind the distant Paps of Jura over the Mull of Kintyre. To me, the view was unlike anything I had experienced before. I remember vividly the thoughts that passed through my mind at the time. Possibly in the descent I would slip on the scree and hurtle to my death: but in my state of exultation I did not mind (so I said to my brother) because this experience had made it all worth while. I was a serious child, and my brother was understanding and did not laugh.

An old diary entry for 10 July 1934 reports that I climbed Beinn Bharrain that day, looking for sheep with Stanley and the farmer at Alltgoiach where we were holidaying, and the nearby Beinn Bhreac on July 14. By 1935 we had climbed all the hills on the western half of Arran. Now I was able to enjoy scrambling on the summit rocks of Casteil Abhail, and as a ten year old I revelled in the physical exertion and the achievement. There was also that feeling of rapture that I had experienced on my first venture on to the hills, even when it was misty and wet and windy, the great expanse, the solitude, the sense of a greater world. A favourite walk was to a lochan in the corrie of Beinn Bhreac, crystal clear with a little beach of red granite gravel, where we could picnic and paddle and sometimes even swim. I visited it

again sixty years later, in 1998, when my brother was 85. We walked up the path again together and the scene was unchanged.

Next year, July 1936, saw my introduction to the Scottish Highlands (again with Stanley) and to two of its common characteristics, midges and rain. On the first day we cycled from Dunfermline to a camp site at the foot of Ben Ledi, for which, my diary indignantly notes, we were charged 1s.6d. Next day (to quote my diary "The midges were so bad that in the morning, although it was raining, we got up, and after getting the tent packed, we got away as quickly as possible, at about 6.45am. It poured so much that we stopped at Inn and had breakfast there... At Bridge of Orchy we pitched our tent on an exposed position because of midges. It was a fine evening, there being no rain but just wind. (Next morning) the rain was coming down and there was a gale blowing, and later it was so bad that we shifted our tent to a quarry. The rain continued, and in despair we went to the hotel and ordered supper, bed and breakfast.")

This was at enormous expense which we could not really afford, but Stanley had his Post Office Savings book with him. Embarrassed at not having ready cash for the hotel, we waited till the nearby Post Office opened, only to find that the person behind the counter was the hotel proprietor. "We waited till 12 to get a train to Tyndrum from where we intended to cycle home. We missed this, and also missed the bus. We determined to dash (across Rannoch Moor and) through Glencoe. We did this, doing the 26 miles in 3 and a quarter hours, and although we were soaked, enjoyed it. We both had punctures before Ballachulish... and had tea at Clachaig Inn... We caught the train home." This was my first sight of Glencoe, in mist and rain. I wrote in my diary, "We enjoyed it." I'm sure that was an understatement: I had never seen mountains like this before. I was thrilled, and I resolved to come back as soon as I could.

The next visit to Glencoe, however, does not seem to have impressed me in the same way. This was in 1937, a hostel tour with two of my brothers and an older friend. The tour gave me my first Munro, Carn Dearg by Loch Ossian - "Loch Ossian is a wonderful place," I wrote in my diary. The pass from there over into Glen Nevis was an exhausting struggle; but we climbed Ben Nevis the next day. Then came the cycle trip south across the Moor of Rannoch, in mist and rain against a head wind. In my diary I described it as "the most barren, the coldest, the wettest and the windiest road in Britain."

By the summer of 1938 I was now 15 and thus fully experienced to go to the hills without an older brother - and even to 'lead' a group of younger boys. So four of us set out on a cycling tour which I planned. As with many novice planners I set a hard programme, averaging over 50 miles cycling daily, 70 miles on the first and last days, and two 4000 feet tops on the 'rest days.' Yet we did it all. We had neither map nor compass: at Aviemore Post Office I copied the route up Cairn Gorm on the back of an envelope. From the top, looking over into Loch Avon, we saw what seemed to be a sandy

beach and on impulse dropped down to the loch without thinking of the climb back. Then the mist came down, and remembering tales of walkers lost in the mist I suggested following the river down for safety (which would have taken us 15 miles out of our way to Tomintoul); but mercifully we opted to risk it through the mist. As a result of this, and several other later foolhardy adventures on the hills, I have never felt able to make righteous pronouncements about the folly of inexperienced climbers.

Nowadays people buy expensive mountain clothing and equipment; we went in our oldest clothes and our worn out school shoes. We had no money: the hostels were a shilling a night (5p) and we carried our own oatmeal for porridge. There were no courses or advice for beginners, and Ordnance Survey maps at (18p) were beyond our reach. It is remarkable that we didn't run into trouble, but the idea never worried us.

By 1939 I had three main leisure interests: golf, walking and climbing, and girls - definitely in that order of priority. My diary records that I played 506 holes of golf in the first three weeks of May, with a best round of 76 and 767 holes in the five weeks following. In the early months of the year, a school friend, Edward, and I roamed the local hills in Fife on our bikes: East Lomond, Dunglow, the Cleish Hills and the Ochils. In the Easter holidays we went to Monachyle Youth Hostel in Balquhiddy, and from there climbed Ben More, Stobinian, Stob Coire an Lochain and Meall na Dige "and got thoroughly wet". Then we crossed the rocky ridge of Stob a' Choin in mist "and nearly ended in Loch Katrine", then on to Ben Vorlich above Loch Earn "glorious view... got soaked."

By now I was a little better equipped: I had a compass, a half-inch to mile map of Central Scotland and an OS inch to mile tourist map covering from Loch Lomond to Loch Tay. That was it: we used cycle capes if the weather was bad, and since we wore our school shorts even in snow - only our bare legs got wet. No one had ice axes; only aristocratic Alpinists could afford these.

It may seem absurd that I spent 1940, a crucial year of the war, sitting examinations, playing golf and wandering across the hills of Central Scotland. In the Easter holidays, Edward and I climbed Cruach Ardrain and Stob Garbh; in the long hot days of the summer we went to Loch Ossian again and climbed Ben Alder from there. Stanley and I camped at Lochain na Laraig as I had resolved the year before and climbed in the Ptarmigans, taking with us a portable radio to listen to the news of the Battle of Britain.

From 1940 until I joined the RAF in 1943, every holiday was spent on the hills. Now I preferred to take a tent, a load too heavy for cycling; and so the bike was left at home and I caught bus, train, the mail-boat for Ben Starav at the head of Loch Etive, or hitched lifts, once on a goods train across the Moor of Rannoch. Then I discovered the delights of sleeping under bridges, though with the discomfort that sheep had usually been there before me. One enjoyable week discovering the Cairngorms was spent in Bob Scott's

bothy in Glen Derry, which we had to ourselves since wartime had emptied the hills of walkers. Also I came to discover the enjoyment of walking alone on the hills. In this way my tally of Munros grew to over 30 before the war took me away.

In these three years, almost all these vacation expeditions involved some excitement or other. I recall our adventure on Aonagh Eagach at Easter 1940 after an unusually heavy snowfall. Edward and I had been staying at Glencoe Youth Hostel - we were still just inexperienced schoolboys, with no equipment for winter conditions. We each broke a branch off a rowan tree to use as an ice axe of sorts. Starting from the west, we got half way along to the start of the more difficult part of the ridge, and then decided to stop and descend into Glencoe, a route definitely not recommended in the guide book. We found ourselves on 50 degree slopes of soft snow, plunging our rowan branch deeply between each step. And so we got down, quite thrilled with our day. Looking back now, horror rather than thrill is my reaction. I resolved to go back some day and finish the ridge, but I could not have guessed that it would be 55 years before that ambition was realised.

1946 saw me back in Britain, and at the end of the year gathered two friends to bring in the New Year at Crianlarich Hotel. This was the start of an annual gathering until 1950. After seeing the New Year in, we somehow or other managed to climb Ben More on January 1. We might have chosen a lesser hill but we seemed to have plenty of energy. On New Year's Day 1948, emerging above the mist, we saw the Brocken Spectre. In 1950, I started the new half-century by glissading out of control over the line of rocks near the summit: Doug was 400 feet below me and threw himself on my spinning body, with my ice axe strapped to my wrist flailing wildly. I was unconscious for 20 minutes, and the axe slashed my jaw and punctured my temple: I still recall the sight of the square hole when I looked in the mirror back at the hotel, but miraculously no serious damage was done. With the help of the others I walked off the hill and in the evening rode pillion on Ian's motorbike to Killin, and the nearest doctor. He put a couple of stitches in my jaw without anaesthetic, and I didn't feel anything.

In July 1951 I proposed to my future wife in a tent in Glen Slugain. In April 1952 we were married in Yorkshire, and spent our honeymoon at Kingshouse Hotel. A friend met Brenda in Aberdeen Station, and seeing her rucksack with climbing boots and an ice axe, remarked "Going climbing"? "No," she replied, "I'm going to get married"!

In later years my son Andrew took me up, appropriately equipped this time, some of the classic climbs: Crowberry Ridge, Tower Ridge, Observatory Ridge, Raeburn's Gully on Lochnagar in winter and the Pinnacle Ridge of Sgurr nan Gillean. When it came to my 75th birthday, I celebrated it by climbing Half Dome in Yosemite. Then, for the time being at least, I finished off my record in much the same way as I had started at the age of seven. We climbed the 11,000 feet Sonora Peak in the Californian Sierra Nevada; I was

taking a photograph of the others on the summit, but couldn't quite get them into the frame - and so I stepped back! I just bounced down over the volcanic rock, uninjured. Whatever fates had watched over me through all these years were still kind.

NOT LONELINESS BUT SOLITUDE

There is in the mountains no loneliness, except
 that which is carried to crag and cleft,
 deep within the crevices of one's heart and mind,
 and which the searching wind can never find.
 No one is alone on peak or ridge,
 above the valley, vexing midge,
 with buzzard mates and calling sheep,
 for here one learns what friends to keep;
 and down the mountain slopes the burn
 chatters with rocks on its downward turn.

There is in the mountains no loneliness, except
 that secretly borne in a heart bereft,
 and here no misty thoughts but certitude;
 it is not loneliness but solitude
 that enfolds the walker striding high,
 and makes his innermost being sigh
 to see the timeless, infinite scene
 of furrowed, brow-like hills serene;
 and here the whispering wind and laughing sun
 are clearly heard and speak of fun.

There is in the mountains no loneliness, except
 that hidden with a skill so deft,
 for not all faces are openly exposed,
 and there are those with darker thoughts enclosed.
 But even when inner thoughts are clouded,
 here too one's soul ends peace enshrouded,
 for though in solitary paths one walks,
 one is not lonely when nature talks;
 and here stones tell of distant days
 while grass proclaims remembered ways.

George Philip

The poet's daughter Sandra is a Club member