

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Scotland's Mountains before the Mountaineers*, Ian Mitchell, Luath Press, 1998. £9.99

The beginning of mountaineering as an organised sport in the middle of the nineteenth century was the catalyst of mountaineering literature, of interest to people who had begun to go to the mountains for no other reason than they wanted to climb them. Prior to that time, the author tells us, the mountains of Scotland were visited by people who were not intent on climbing but may have done so incidentally, whilst prospecting, map-making or escaping from their enemies. It is these people who are the subject of the book, not the mountains, as the title might suggest. However, not all of these people wrote accounts of their travels and those who did were not primarily concerned to record their incidental ascents. Hence, written records of routes are comparatively imprecise or lacking. Nevertheless, the author conducted an extensive literature search for evidence of high mountain visitations and, if a case could be made, first ascents.

The author's findings are set out under four headings, the Central Highlands, the Cairngorms, the West Highlands and the Western Isles. Thus, the section on the Cairngorms begins with Agricola, Mons Graupius and Bennachie, and proceeds chronologically with the evidence of Timothy Pont in the sixteenth century, John Taylor in the seventeenth century and Thomas Thornton in the eighteenth century. Thereafter, sources are more numerous, including Thomas Colby of the Ordnance Survey, the Rev. George Keith, minister at Leith Hall and William MacGillivray, Professor of Natural History at Aberdeen University. Inevitably, some of these travellers are also important in the other three areas of Scotland, necessitating some repetition of biographical detail, but readers will appreciate the focus on areas well known to them, such as the Cairngorms.

In evaluating his many sources for evidence of ascents, the author draws on his own personal knowledge of the hills, to make some convincing route identifications. Indeed, he contributes to the on-going debate over the escape route of the fugitive Prince Charles Edward Stuart after Culloden. However, many of his sources were inevitably a little disappointing, in not providing adequate evidence of routes taken and obliging the author to resort to such phrases as "it is reasonable to assume...", "it is not impossible that he traversed..." and "could well have climbed...". If you define your subjects as those people who had no particular interest in climbing mountains, then any written records that they compiled are not likely to provide evidence of ascents.

The book is written in an engaging style and includes eight magnificent colour reproductions of mainly nineteenth century paintings. A bibliography of over 160 titles is a measure of the author's search for evidence in historical sources, although a footnote system of referencing might have been less disruptive of the continuity of the text than his less than rigorous use of bracketed references. Incidentally, the publisher seems to have made a curious error in the date of publication ('First Published 1988') on the copyright page, which should confuse future bibliographers! The publisher is presumably also responsible for several typographical errors in the captions. The author concludes with a short chapter which he somewhat tenuously relates to his travellers in the past, in which he sets out his views on the question of access to the hills today and the related issues of land ownership and blood sports. However, the strength of the book is surely that it will challenge the reader to add to this very substantial compendium of pre-mountaineering ascents, near ascents and possible ascents of the Scottish mountains, both within and beyond the four areas which the author covers.

*Who Owns Scotland*, Andy Wightman. Canongate Books, 1996. £25

That this book has become so topical ahead of a Scottish Parliament, is due in no small part to the enthusiasm of its author. Andy Wightman has provoked debate on Land Reform in Scotland and devoted much time to that debate. The task of unravelling land ownership in Scotland has rarely been tackled. The only official survey dates from 1872 with a thorough review by McEwen in 1977. The present author strives to correct and update that work. Despite "the entertainment and long cultural tradition" of doing so, he "does not seek to criticise landowners". He is looking for patterns and principles and opening up the debate to the people of Scotland. The book traces the historical context of land ownership in Scotland, then documents the currently known information by (pre-1975) county. The changing patterns since the earlier work are discussed in chapters on agriculture, sporting estates, forestry, crofting and the conservation landowners. In the third section Andy Wightman discusses the issues that emerge from the work.

By its very nature such a book is out of date before it reaches the shelves. Despite considerable effort, over 30% of land is not accounted for. The work and the debate are on-going and a further (major) revision is due soon. This book defines the agenda for Land Reform in Scotland and challenges politicians, academics and other interested parties to take the debate further. It provides interest on each of these levels, whether for dipping into or for detailed study.

D.T.

*The Munro Phenomenon*, Andrew Dempster. Mainstream Publishing, 1995. £14.99

An enjoyable read from the author of 'Classic Mountain Scrambles in Scotland.' This A4 sized hardback book covers the history of Munro-bagging - and anything notable that has ever been associated with the Munros. Firstly the author gives us a brief but fascinating biography of the man who first compiled and gave his name to the list as well as a biography of the first person to climb all mountains on that list. He moves logically through history recalling any notable feats and achievements relating to Munros as well as explaining the sociological changes that led more and more people to the hills. He summarises the many awe-inspiring Munro linked achievements and records set mainly over the past three decades and tries to explain what drives people to head to the hills. Changes to Munro's list as well as other hill classifications (Corbett's, Donald's, Graham's, etc) are discussed in detail along with descriptions of the criteria used for these lists.

Conservation, recreation and safety issues are briefly discussed, as is the humorous side of hillwalking and climbing. The author's own attempt at humour doesn't quite fit in with the rest of the book and this section sits rather uncomfortably in an otherwise factual (and somewhat statistical) book. However, this is a thoroughly researched and well written summary of all to do with Munros and Munroists, full of interesting facts and figures. It should appeal to all Munro-baggers, be they beginner or compleat, active or retired.

CPM

*Recreation Ecology, The ecological impact of outdoor recreation and ecotourism*, Michael Liddle. Chapman & Hall, 1977. £55

Our population, once local and rural, has become increasingly mobile and urban. This move to an indoor lifestyle has led to interest in outdoor leisure pursuits for recreation. Accompanying this, there has been an exponential rise in ecologists interested in the effect on our fragile environment. Initial concern for species found on paths and tracks has

widened considerably in this young science. After considering the forces involved, this book has chapters on soil, plants and aquatic as well as land animals. It draws from a wealth of global examples, but from a North American perspective. It applies scientific measurement and modelling to problems that we could only estimate - such as the relative amount of bare ground created by trail-bikes or horses as compared to a walker - the short result was four times. Experimental work presented includes the study of a sheep as a man approaches - a rise in heart rate occurs before any change in behaviour. The book lays out what is happening and leaves it to the reader to take the next step and respond. With location and species indices and over 900 references the reader is well able to pursue any topic of interest. It is not a book I would sit down to read from cover to cover, but one I read a little at a time.

D.T.

*Deep Play*, Paul Pritchard. Baton Wicks, 1997. £16.99

As the winner of last year's Boardman/Tasker Memorial Award for Mountain Literature, you know even before you open the cover that you're in for a treat with this collection of 18 tales of derring-do, encompassing adventure climbing from North Wales and the Outer Hebrides to Patagonia and the Himalayas. Paul Pritchard has been at the forefront of bold British climbing for over a decade. His routes on the sea cliffs of Gogarth and the Llanberis slate quarries are still cutting edge, and with Johnny Dawes, he is responsible for Sron Ulladale being developed into one of the world's leading locations for hard on-sight traditional climbing. Indeed, it is the Sron Ulladale chapter, 'On the Big Stone', that particularly sticks in my mind, describing, as it does, how a half-baked notion inspired by photos in 'Hard Rock' was turned into a rain-soaked, midge-tormented but ultimately stunningly successful free ascent of the grossly overhanging 'The Scoop', Doug Scott's tour-de-force from 1969. It appears that getting to the crag was as much of an adventure as the climbing itself: Johnny Dawes cornering his van on two wheels on the Loch Lomond road, shopping in Fort William for supplies of cabbage, olive oil, vinegar and petit pois (hardly the standard food to fuel a few days climbing in the wilderness!). Fortunately, fishermen took pity on them and left two trout at their tent after being waved at from half way up the cliff.

But as well as the quality of the stories which are told, it is the quality of the writing itself that captures the imagination and transports the reader to alongside Pritchard as he tackles a particularly exposed pitch: "That feeling grabbed me again. That same feeling as when I first went to the Verdon at sixteen. The space, the updraught, the freedom. This is why I go climbing."

In addition to the successes, there are also the failures, with one almost costing him his life. 'A Game One Climber Played' tells of a fall off a relatively easy route in Wen Zawn at Gogarth, which ended up in Pritchard falling onto rocks at the bottom of the zawn, and then being stuck wedged underwater for about ten minutes until his belayer could get to him. More shocking than the injuries to the body is the inference of how inviting death can appear: "Someone takes my hand - she must be knelt beside me. I don't open my eyes, nothing need be physically gestured. Then the hand slips inevitable away and I am left in a cavernous night with all the contentedness of a young child dozing in the afternoon. This is it, the most beautiful part of all my life. Utterly final. "Paul." A distant voice calls out. "Paul, wake up." Nearer now. "WAKE UP" "Leave me alone. Let me sleep. Let me go."

In amongst all this are stories that cover more familiar ground to readers of the adventures of climbers, but always written in unusually honest and personal way: of being banned from climbing in Pakistan, new routing on Baffin Island, north of the Arctic Circle, and in Patagonia, and of course, the obligatory Chapter 1, describing how it all began. If this book serves no other purpose, it shows unequivocally that British adventure climbing did not die with the arrival of sport climbing. Read this book the first chance you get - you will not be disappointed.

S.S.

*The Living Mountain : a celebration of the Cairngorm mountains of Scotland*, Nan Shepherd. Aberdeen University Press, 1977. This has been published again in *The Grampian Quartet*, Nan Shepherd. Canongate, 1996. £8.99

This is a delightful gem which is as fresh as when it was first written 30 years before publication in 1977. The author takes us on her very personal journey to the Cairngorms. Finding first the high plateau she takes time to discover the many attractions of the "recesses". She takes in "rock, sun, scree, soil and water, moss, grass, flower and tree, insect, bird and beast, wind, rain and snow - the total mountain."

"So my journey into an experience began. It was a journey always for fun, with no motive beyond that I wanted it. But at first I was seeking only sensuous gratification - the sensation of height, the sensation of movement, the sensation of speed, the sensation of distance, the sensation of effort, the sensation of ease: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life. I was not interested in the mountain for itself, but for its effect upon me, as puss caresses not the man but herself against the man's trouser leg. But as I grew older, and less self-sufficient, I began to discover the mountain itself. Everything became good to me, its contours, its colours, its waters and rock, flowers and birds. This process has taken many years, and is not yet complete. Knowing another is endless. And I have discovered that man's experience of them enlarges rock, flower and bird. The thing to be known grows with the knowing." "Five miles from Glenmore and safety, crawling down Coire Cas on hands and knees, the boys could fight the wind no further. It was days later till they found them; and one of the men who was at the finding described to me their abraded knees and knuckles. The elder of the two was still crawling, on hands and knees, when they found him fast in the drift. So quick bright things come to confusion. They committed, I suppose, an error of judgement, but I cannot judge them. For it is the risk we must all take when we accept individual responsibility for ourselves on the mountain, and until we have done that, we do not begin to know it."

The beauty that she found is still there for us to discover today. Sadly some of the problems are too and many are continuing to grow. I found this a fascinating read.

D.T.