

FERLA MOR

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“The strange phenomenon of Ben Macdui variously described as Am Fear Liath Mor, which is sometimes corrupted to Ferla Mor or worse, and even Ferla Mhor (a crowning indignity for the aspirate denotes the feminine) or Am Fear Glas Mor, The Big Grey Man, has excited the imagination of the public and particularly the mountaineering fraternity, for the last fifty years or more.” The quotation is the first paragraph of Affleck Gray’s preface to the first edition of his book *The Big Grey Man of Ben Macdui*, and I take the liberty of quoting it because I am the cringing ignoramus responsible for eliciting the parenthetical blast of condemnation. This unforgivable faux pas was unwittingly penned in a letter I wrote to Gray in 1966, giving him details of some of my experiences of the now legendary Grey Man. He quite rightly took me to task at the time; but having acquired a smattering of Gaelic since then, it is unlikely that I shall ever again cast such a slur on the Ferla Mor’s undoubted masculinity.

The various psychic or pseudo-physic phenomena reported by walkers and climbers from Ben Macdui and other localities in the Cairngorms are recounted at length in Gray’s book. There were no well authenticated accounts, indeed there was little more than a few meagre hints in local legend and folklore, to justify belief in the existence of a mountain spectre on Ben Macdui until an astonishing tale was divulged by Professor Norman Collie F.R.S. at the annual general meeting of the Cairngorm Club in Aberdeen in 1925. His long-concealed secret - it dated back to 1891, was subsequently published in the press, and in Vol. XI, No. 64 of the Cairngorm Club Journal in 1926. My friend the late Hugh Welsh, one time President and later Honorary President of the Cairngorm Club, knew Collie well and during our many discussions on matters pertaining to the Cairngorms he described Collie as austere, honest and sincere, but so sensitive and reticent that unless he had genuinely experienced the phenomenon and considered it worth others knowing about it, the story of his encounter would never have been told. Briefly, the story goes thus:

Professor Collie was returning from the summit cairn in a mist when he began to think that he heard something other than merely the noise of his own footsteps in the snow. For every few steps he took he heard a crunch, as if someone was walking after him but taking steps three or four times the length of his own. Collie told himself “This is all nonsense,” but he listened and heard it again, though nothing was to be seen in the mist. As he walked on the eerie crunch, crunch continued behind him and he was seized with a dreadful terror. Taking to his heels he ran, staggering blindly among the boulders for four to five miles towards Rothiemurchus forest. Professor Collie concluded his story by saying “What you make of it I do not know, but there

is something very queer about the top of Ben Macdui and I will not go back there by myself, I know?"

From Collie's statement it is clear that he did not see any kind of ghost or apparition, large or small, grey or otherwise. Nevertheless the concept, if not the proved existence of a Grey Man was known to a few people for a number of years before Collie's story was publicised. Dr A.M.Kellas, a very experienced mountaineer who died in Tibet with the first Mount Everest expedition, also had an eerie encounter on Ben Macdui. On learning of Collie's experience some 12 years after it had happened, he told Collie that one June night he had seen a man climb up from the direction of the Lairig Ghru and wander round the summit cairn, near which his brother was sitting, and then descend into the Lairig again. Dr Kellas rejoined his brother to find that he had seen no one.

These two phenomena are difficult to explain and perhaps also to reconcile. In the one case, sounds but no shape or figure; in the other, a man-like figure but no sounds and the figure seen by only one of the two people present. The two are so much at variance that it seems probable that two distinct agencies were involved. Two Grey Men perhaps, one only audible and the other only visible! Or perhaps the sensory organs of some people are far more acute than those of others. The latter is of course quite correct, but no living person has yet seen a ghost. Or even - and one should not lightly dismiss even the faintest possibility out of hand - some people do possess powers of extra-sensory perception beyond the comprehension of ordinary people. This may be so, but frankly I do not believe it. The only powers of extra-sensory perception that I would accept are the powers of deduction and thought possessed by the human brain. That these may go badly astray at times is so well known that the point does not need stressing. While I certainly would not claim to be an expert in psychical matters, I think that a review of my own Ferla Mor experiences will help put some doubtful minds at ease.

During my sixty years or so knowledge of the Cairngorms I've visited the Ben Macdui summit cairn on over 50 occasions, covering all seasons and a wide variety of approach routes, which have included rock and snow climbs as well as easy walks. I have frequently camped in the corries and on the plateau, in some years for days on end and sometimes in very mixed weather, and have slept out shelterless on the plateau a few times, though the weather is often so changeable that I would not recommend this course to anyone. Yet in all those years there were only four occasions in which Ferla Mor merited some kind of mention.

The first was in September 1939 and a simple explanation was forthcoming. Peter Marr my friend and one time climbing companion and I were both serving apprenticeships at the time in Aberdeen, and at the start of the local autumn holiday we packed our kit at 2pm and set off on bicycles to spend a long weekend at Corrour Bothy. Dusk was falling as we entered the little village of Inverey and knocked at Sandy Grant's door. He had been

stalker at Luibeg cottage near Derry Lodge from 1926-37, and as Peter's mother was related to him, etiquette required that we could not pass without at least enquiring after his and Mrs Grant's health. Sandy was a tall man, slow-spoken with a soft highland accent, and so gentlemanly and considerate that two more hours elapsed before Peter and I got away on the road to Derry, our belts considerably tighter after a large helping of excellent venison. It must have been about midnight, quite dark and moonless but with a star-lit sky, when we walked wearily on to the flat, gravelly approach to the then site of the Luibeg footbridge near Preas nam Meirlach, the Robbers' Copse as it became more familiarly known to Aberdeen climbers. Only the occasional bellow of a rutting stag and the scrunch of gravel beneath our heavily clinkered boots broke the silence. Suddenly, we halted simultaneously as we both noticed the spectral vision at the same moment. Above the dark-capped pines of the Robbers' Copse towered a menacing figure, hooded and gowned in white and at least 20 feet tall - the perfect ideal of a ghostly giant. Mystified, we stared at it for about a minute, trying to determine what it could be. We were both familiar with the story of Ferla Mor but dismissed that possibility as unlikely, since we were several miles from the summit of Ben Macdui and a mile or more from the foot of the Sron Riach. Nonetheless the apparition was disturbing, but as we had to pass near it or make a long and tiresome detour, plucked up sufficient courage to make a cautious investigation. What a let-down, or maybe relief! The eerie figure was revealed as a wavering column of smoke rising from a camp fire concealed in a hollow at the edge of the pines. I need hardly say that when we accepted the campers' invitation to join them in a cup of tea, we vouchsafed no hint of our earlier qualms. Had we been genuinely frightened? Not really, but if you consider that we had done a hard morning's work at our trade then cycled 70 miles with heavy rucksacks, it will be obvious that we must have been physically and mentally tired and thus very susceptible to vagaries of the imagination.

My second encounter with Ferla Mor occurred in a much more typical atmosphere, with conditions very similar to those experienced by Professor Collie, except that there was no snow on the hills. It happened in October 1943 when I was enjoying a few days well-earned leave from the army. By then I had climbed Ben Macdui eight or nine times, and as it was seldom possible to find a climbing companion at short notice in those war-time days, I was hill walking on my own. A few months earlier I found a scalp with long, blond hair among the scree, about 600 yards north-west from the summit. It had belonged to one of the crew of a bomber which had crashed on Ben Macdui in mist. "God rest his soul" was my thought as I buried the scalp beside the cross which marked the crash site. But that had been an otherwise enjoyable day, just as this promised to be until dark clouds swept across from the west in front of a strengthening wind. As I looked westwards from the plateau the swirling cloudbanks blotted out the cliffs of An Garbh Choire Mor and advanced rapidly towards the Lairig Ghru. Evidently a storm was

brewing. Even as I retraced my steps past the ruins of the Sapper's bothy the sky became ominously dark overhead and the first tattered fingers of mist raced by in the teeth of the wind. The mist quickly thickened, reducing visibility to 20 yards, so that all I could see was the faint track underfoot and the vague outlines of rubbly granite all around.

At that time I was physically very fit. Wearing army denims and boots, and carrying a .303 Lee Enfield rifle I could jog along over rough ground and cover 14 miles in under two hours. This day I didn't have a rifle, but carried a .38 revolver to pot any mountain hare or ptarmigan that chanced across my path. I had no qualms about this. Rations were in very short supply then, stalkers and gamekeepers equally scarce, and being a reasonably good shot I wasted few bullets, and little time departing the scene. Altogether a hard case you might think; not the kind of weak-minded person likely to see a ghost. Up until then I thought so too, but alas, my self-confidence was to be disagreeably shattered.

A short distance above Loch Etchachan lies a little pool by the Ben Macdui path. Above it on the west rise steep slopes littered with huge screes, among which the now vicious wind snarled and whined. Above the wind I heard a different sound, just like a loud footstep. It was followed by another...then another...separated by quite appreciable intervals, perhaps a couple of seconds. "It's Ferla Mor!" was my instant reaction. No time was given to analyse and reject this idea. Through the eddying mist a strange shape loomed menacingly towards me, receded then came charging straight at me. Without stopping to think I whipped out my revolver and sent three rounds rapidly into the wraith. Crack! Crack! Crack! When the shape came on I turned and hared at breakneck speed down the path to Glen Derry.

Often since then I have felt thankful that I was so supremely fit at the time, otherwise I would almost certainly have suffered some injury on the descent, probably on the steep, gravelly section of path at the head of Coire Etchachan, where pebbles rolling under foot present some hazard to a careless traveller. Often too I have been asked "Was it really Ferla Mor that you saw?" At the moment of shooting I had no doubt, but certainty lasted only for the few moments of panic. Down in Glen Derry when the cold light of reason re-asserted itself, several possible explanations presented for consideration. The most probable is that the sound of footsteps was caused either by a falling rock dislodged by wandering deer, or by some freakish effect of wind in the rocks; while the ghostly spectre was indeed a wraith, but of cloud and all too easily transformed by a too suggestive imagination into Ferla Mor. Alternatively, the figure could have been a deer or even a man, magnified by the mist into a peculiar, menacing giant. Such a ghastly possibility did occur to me down in Glen Derry, and I suffered some uneasy moments contemplating the consequences of possible murder; but the absence of shouts or cries of distress seemed proof enough that no human other than myself was involved.

Nowadays I am more than ever convinced that all of the Ferla Mor

phenomena arise from natural causes and can be explained quite rationally when studied closely. Two later personal experiences give this view considerable weight. In July 1957 I was camping at around 3,650 feet in the snowy Corrie of Ben Macdui while studying the snow bunting. That month was a very wet one, the Cairngorms being veiled in cloud for days on end and with rain most days. On the evening of the 17th, after writing up my notes I was sitting in the tent smoking a contemplative pipe when I heard a curious soft whistling. There was steady rain and dense mist all around, but I ventured out to investigate. The mysterious whistling continued and came nearer, and then out of the mist stepped a truly gigantic figure of a man. Once again the distorting and magnifying effects of the mist were at work, but not too much this time as the whistler was revealed to be Colonel Pat Baird, well-known mountaineer and Arctic explorer, who was carrying out a study of climate and snow-lie on Ben Macdui. Pat was a very tall man, and knowing well the effects of mist on size and aware of Ferla Mor, had considerably announced his pending arrival by whistling a warning. This was just as well since he was wearing gym shoes and his noiseless approach could easily have given me a sudden start - or perhaps he had heard of how I had shot Ferla Mor and had no wish to provide a possible target!

Anyone who has read this far may be sneering with disdain or smiling pityingly by now. I wouldn't and shouldn't blame them, but now must stress what I mentioned earlier. Given the proper conditions, which implies some genuine physical factor or factors which are inexplicable at the time, plus the knowledge of the Ferla Mor stories, people who are otherwise sane and sensible can persuade themselves that they have seen or heard the Big Grey Man. I unwittingly played the leading role on one such occasion which involved three English visitors to the Cairngorms.

In summer 1972, still studying snow buntings, I camped several weekends on the high plateau at heights of around 3,700 feet. Towards the end of June, enduring once again the vile weather so often prevailing on the snow bunting nesting grounds, I felt early on Sunday afternoon that I'd had enough, so packed my kit and tent and set off in mist and rain towards distant Cairn Gorm. The alpine meadows at the Feith Buidhe cleared of mist as I crossed them, but the cloud base repeatedly lowered and lifted, each time leaving behind arms of mist which lingered in hollows and on ridges. Forging the rain-swollen Feith Buidhe gave some difficulty, and while casting up and down the south bank looking for a reasonable crossing I chanced to glance back along the way I had come. Three people appeared out of the mist and halted abruptly on seeing me. I thought little of this, soon found a crossing and climbed steadily towards the Ben Macdui-Cairn Gorm path which traverses the side of Cairn Lochan. Halfway to the path I stopped and looked back again, not only to see the same three people but also to see them halt again. "Curious" I reflected, but when the mist descended I plodded on and up for a few minutes, until the clouds unexpectedly lifted for a few minutes

to reveal rain-swept slopes. Stopping, I looked back once more - and again my three followers drew up sharply in their tracks. By now I realised that something was amiss although I had not guessed the reason. It seemed as if the three were playing some odd kind of game, trying to stay hidden from me in the mist. There was absolutely no question of their reluctance to catch up on me. When the mist fell again I remained motionless, leaning on my walking stick. A few minutes later voices became audible, then suddenly the cloud was blown away and there the three were, only 30 yards behind. Slowly they approached, at first casting rather apprehensive looks which slowly changed to sheepish smiles when I greeted them. They were two young men and a girl who had come up Cairn Gorm on the chairlift and walked along the plateau before the weather deteriorated. Then, uncertain of the route back, they had seen a huge grey giant playing tricks with them in the mist, appearing, disappearing and reappearing, all in a very disconcerting manner. They had been, they admitted, more than a little frightened, thinking that I was Ferla Mor. I was quite taken aback. They were talking about me! Admittedly I am above average height and well built, but to be mistaken for the Big Grey Man seemed a doubtful compliment. Nevertheless I could appreciate their predicament, a wry turn of thought taking me back to my own eventful mistake. Now, wearing grey trousers, a grey cagoule and carrying a large old-fashioned frame rucksack on my back and a smaller one with camera equipment slung over one shoulder, little imagination was required to transform me into Ferla Mor if the observer knew the story, and the mist played it's usual magnifying tricks.

After I had given them directions to the Fiacail a' Choire Chais path, they departed in a happier frame of mind along the mist shrouded path. But there was a finale to the tale. With my heavy load it took me another hour to reach the cairn at the top of the Fiacail a' Choire Chais, where I heard voices from the corrie, at that point quite steep with broken crags on the west and a large curving snow wreath at the corrie rim. Leaving my pack at the corrie rim, I went to investigate. It was the three walkers again, this time stuck on rocks near the snow wreath and hopelessly lost in the mist. Following my shouted instructions they climbed up to the rim of the corrie and safety, then I led them round to the cairn and showed them the start of the narrow gravel path they had missed earlier. My comment was: "Maybe you'll remember your Ferla Mor - a benevolent ghost, not a malevolent ogre."