

BOOK REVIEWS

The Speyside Way, Sandy Anton, Cicerone Press 2002, 104pp, ISBN 1 85284 331 4, £8.00.

Cicerone Press demonstrates sound judgement in choosing this Cairngorm Club member, and a stalwart of the Scottish Rights of Way Society, as author of their guidebook. Sandy spent his early years in Moray, and more recently has enjoyed researching the history of this area. He leads us from Buckie on the Moray Firth to Aviemore, as well as on the spurs to Dufftown and Tomintoul. Each chapter is clearly laid out with distance, height gained, time required, car parking and facilities encountered. There are small maps for each section, but the reader is encouraged to use the official map or the relevant Ordnance Survey ones.

The author provides a concise historical perspective which brings to life the past and present occupants of the area. We learn of the large-scale salmon industry in the nineteenth century, using the old ice house at Tugnet and the development of Kingston as a shipbuilding and timber exporting centre. Many bridges of differing construction are described, and contemporary accounts of 'the muckle spate' of 1829 show the enormous destructive power of the Spey and its tributaries. Growth and decline of villages *en route* are explained in relation to agricultural and commercial developments, and visitor centres nearby are clearly indicated. Sandy shares his enthusiasm of vistas to the hills and mountains, and indicates flora and fauna to be seen by the observant walker or cyclist. The many distilleries may provide an incentive for some to travel this route, and there is a separate chapter on whisky production.

This is a book to encourage us to open our eyes to the many delights of the Speyside Way, and to appreciate so much that we may not have noticed while driving to the Cairngorms. At 18 by 12cm, it is a good size for the pocket and is light enough to be carried to enliven the journey.

Hazel Witte

Walking in Scotland's Far North, Andy Walmsley, Cicerone Press 2003, 160pp, ISBN 1 85284 377 2, £10.00.

This compact 160-page guide covers the area to the north of a line from Ullapool to Bonar Bridge, but excludes the lowlands north of Dunbeath and east of Thurso. The 62 walks described cover various approaches to the five Munros as well as most other hills, supported by sketch maps, distance and height gain. It provides information on most villages and their facilities as well as accommodation, campsites and parking, all linked to walks nearby. The reader is left in no doubt that even the shorter routes can be challenging. Longer traverses include the Assynt Horseshoe from Quinag to Canisp by way of Conival and Ben More Assynt, while the low-level walk to Sandwood Bay is lovingly portrayed. The sparkling text and excellent colour photographs provide a sound basis for planning several walking holidays in

Caithness and Sutherland - just remember to take waterproof boots and midge repellent.

Hazel Witte

With Friends in High Places, Malcolm Slesser, Mainstream Publishing 2004, 256pp, ISBN 1 84018 848 0, £15.99.

This interesting book is not a formal autobiography, but rather scenes and reflections from a long and adventurous life. In the 1960s Malcolm Slesser was, in his own appraisal, "well enough known as a mountaineer but not in the top flight." He was a member of the Anglo-Scottish-Russian expedition to the Pamirs on which Robin Smith and Wilfred Noyce slipped to their deaths, and also climbed in the Andes, and in many other parts of the world. These expeditions are well covered in the book, but the chapters that really fascinate are the accounts of several explorations in Greenland, where virgin snow peaks and rock pinnacles fringe unknown glaciers under the midnight sun.

Interspersed in the text are more reflective chapters on topics such as risk and safety in the mountains. As a 'survivalist' Slesser contrasts his own attitude to that of the more reckless of his peers, many of whom are no longer with us. The change in climbing techniques is brought home by two accounts of winter ascents of Crowberry Gully, the first in 1947 - hemp ropes, step cutting and meagre belays; the second in 2000 - front pointing, banana picks, and bomb-proof ice screws. Slesser also muses on the mountaineer's 'footprint', our impact on our environment: "The future of wild land cannot be divorced from the future of ourselves."

For me the only false note in the text is what Hamish MacInnes describes in the foreword as "some personal observations on the late Dougal Haston, which should have been long forgotten." Otherwise the impression is of a life-long love of the hills and wilderness, and of the friendship in these high places.

Lydia Thomson

The Ecology, Land Use and Conservation of the Cairngorms, edited by Charles Gimingham, Packard Publishing 2002, 224pp, ISBN 1 85341 102 7 hbk, £74.99, ISBN 1 85341 117 5 pbk, £39.99.

This is a multi-authored, well-produced and well-illustrated book, organised in three parts. The first part, the Ecological Basis, consists of chapters on the physical geography, vegetation and fauna of the region. This is followed by chapters on land use, agriculture, woodlands, deer and grouse management, fisheries, and recreation. Part three, The Future of the Cairngorms, comprises two chapters by the editor: *Towards an Integrated Management Strategy* and *The Cairngorms in the Future*. Clearly this is a book for the library and not the rucksack. But what, exactly, are its aims? These are to establish clearly why the region is especially important, to define the priorities of its natural heritage and to "consider the guiding principles and options for future administration and management." I think these aims are achieved, at least

for a non-expert reader like this reviewer. I would like to have seen more on archaeological aspects but, as a layman, I found the chapters comprehensive and largely comprehensible. (But as a layman you accept much, uncritically). The team of authors impressed and reassured me. Some are even Club members and you cannot get a higher recommendation than that! In some ways the timing of the publication was unfortunate, occurring before the boundaries of the National Park and the planning function of the Park Authority were settled. I support the book's closing sentiment: "A unique opportunity is now opening up to make lasting provision for the sympathetic and integrated management of this superb area", but confidence I have not. The weak Park Authority must work to earn our confidence and this book will provide one of several baselines against which its performance can be judged.

Alister Macdonald

Climbing Free: My Life In The Vertical World, Lynn Hill with Greg Child, Harper Collins 2002, 270pp, ISBN 0 00710 273 9, £18.99.

Climbing Free begins with a fall. The injuries are only moderately severe, but the cause, forgetting to tie in, spectacular. So begins in 1989 Lynn Hill's self-reflection of her life as a world-class climber: "I needed to pay more attention - not just to how I climbed but to how I lived." This culminated in 2001, in her pulling together her experiences into the chronological, autobiographical narrative of this book.

Early chapters follow her family roots and early athletic prowess in swimming and gymnastics until she is wowed, aged 14, by her first rock climb in Southern California. Quickly she is immersed in a climbing community and location, the area called Joshua Tree in the Mojave Desert. A number of chapters entertainingly describe the culture, characters and craziness in the zany, hippie, post-Vietnam climbing scene. The early loss of a brother-in-law on the South Face of Aconcagua reinforces her conviction that mountaineering and ice climbing are not for her. Yosemite in the '80s, living an entire summer on \$75, and 'freeing' the Nose route of El Capitan in 1979, aged 18, leads to a period as stuntwoman in Hollywood. Her partnership with John Long (Largo) takes her to big walls in Colorado, competition athletics and television stunts. With the end of this relationship she moves to New York, majoring in Biology and 'the Gunks' climbing area. A new gang includes Russ Raffa, whom she marries in 1988. Competition climbing follows, pitted in her first year against Catherine Destivelle. By 1989, she is ranked as No. 1 in women's sport-climbing, but her spectacular fall prevents her competing in her 4th World Cup final in Leeds. 1991 sees the end of her marriage and a move to Provence. As part of the North Face climbing team she summits a 4,000-foot rock-face and her highest peak. With no urge to move into mountaineering realms, in answer to the question posed to her by a Vietnamese fisherman, "What are you looking for up there?" she concludes, "I would do more with less," and "the greatest sense of fulfilment in my life is connected to people."

So much for content. In style the writing is lean, economical and functional.

The book is at its best when describing other characters. For me the most amusing reading lies in the portrayal of climbing cliques and cultures, and her clear depiction of what it takes and means to climb 33 pitches non-stop. The photography divides into two: beautiful, professional, colour climbing shots and more playful black-and-white shots probably begged, stolen or borrowed from friends. These give a slightly more informal glimpse into what is unsaid in the text. A weakness in the book is the lack of appendices and bibliography. The former could for example have documented the chronology of Hill's and others' achievements.

I would certainly recommend the book to both climbers and mountaineers, particularly for the character vignettes. No climbing knowledge is needed to read the book as technical information is clearly and effectively explained. It isn't classic-read material, principally because of the lack of style and warmth. So perhaps not the one and only book to take on that 3-week adventure. Would I buy it - yes, in paperback for half the price. Not available! So borrow it (from me!).

Jean Robinson

Dougal Haston: the Philosophy of Risk, Jeff Connor, Canongate Books 2002, 232pp, ISBN 1 84195 215 X, £16.99.

Inside the cover of this book is the claim: "For all those who wonder what motivates men and women to risk their lives in the mountains, this portrait of a driven, tortured personality provides the answer." Unfortunately, for this reviewer it provides only a few sketchy clues.

All accounts of major climbs by the participants themselves describe the thrill, the adrenaline rush, sometimes the fear. Often the description is so graphic that the armchair reader finds it hard to put down, as for example in *Touching the Void*. A biographer, on the other hand, has to select from the material the subject left for him, and Haston, admitted by his peers to be one of the finest mountaineers of his time, is not a great writer. The author, however, could have made more use of Haston's own book *In High Places*. For example, the statement that "the story of the first ascent of the Eiger Direct is well known," is followed by almost nothing on the climb. We are merely told "Haston produced one of the most bravura performances in the history of alpinism." Beside the physical skills and challenges, there is for most climbers the sheer scale and beauty of the mountains. It seems that Haston is probably unique in his lack of response to them.

Certainly extracts from his diaries support the description of Haston as 'driven', though hardly 'tortured'. But while his personality - heavily self-centred, always looking to increasing challenges - has aspects in common with other top climbers, he seems to me to be unusual and often disagreeable in his attitudes to society and other people. For example, after killing one pedestrian and injuring others while driving, his girlfriend commented: "Dougal seemed more concerned after the accident with what was to happen to him, rather than what had happened to those hikers." And from his diary, at the time of the televised ascent of the Old Man of Hoy: "I find the present company so facile, so boring, so insular." However, his

noted taciturnity, and his determination not to allow personal matters to disrupt an expedition, meant that he fitted in successfully and was a major contributor to many.

It was a tragedy for climbing when Dougal Haston was killed, at 36, by an avalanche. He was skiing off-piste; the pistes were closed because of the risk of avalanche. Whether he took an unreasonable risk was much debated at the time, but one friend said "I always thought he would push it too far and die on a mountain."

Frances Macrae-Gibson

The Evidence of Things Not Seen, W H Murray, Baton Wicks 2002, 352pp, ISBN 1 898513 24 1, £25.00 hbk, £12.99 pbk.

This is an autobiography, completed shortly before he died in 1996, and rounded off by his wife Anne, by one of the early doyens of Scottish climbing, and climbing writing. The author is probably best known for *Mountaineering in Scotland*, but wrote many established mountaineering classics and also several novels.

Murray was heavily involved in World War II, and owed his survival to the honorable conduct of a German tank-commander in the Western Desert (a 'fellow' mountaineer). He became a prisoner-of-war and lived to experience other aspects of the German character at the hands of the Gestapo. It was during these years that, in the face of great practical difficulties, he wrote *Mountaineering in Scotland*, a diversion which helped him to retain his sanity. With time on his hands meditation also became an interest. After the war he decided that banking was not for him; he thought about entering a monastery, but after a trial period decided (fortunately for us) to stay outside in the (?) real world and make his way as a writer.

The central body of the book is devoted to three major Himalayan expeditions: the 1950 Scottish expedition to Eastern Garwhal & Kamaon, four months in the footsteps of Tilman and Shipton; the 1951 Everest Reconnaissance expedition, deputy leader; 1953 Api/Namba West Nepal expedition, at the same time as the successful Hunt/Hillary/Tenzing expedition to Everest. He sums up his thoughts on these expeditions thus: "The richest Himalayan experience comes in exploratory travel and climbing, not in the siege of a big peak." In the 60s and 70s he led several treks for Mountain Travel, where everything was laid on: "It was enjoyable, but it was not the same."

Then there are chapters on Tom Patey (on the Stac of Handa), Ben Humble, Rob Roy MacGregor, Conservation (the saving of Glen Nevis) and the Unna Rules. A most enjoyable book, especially for armchair walkers and climbers; a mixture of first-hand vivid description and philosophising; evocative of the days of tricouni-nailed boots, wooden-shafted iceaxes and coir ropes; hardly a piton in sight!

John Gibson

Mountains of the Mind: a History of a Fascination. Robert Macfarlane, Granta Books 2003, 306pp, hbk ISBN 1 86207 561 1, £20.00, pbk ISBN 1 86207 654 5 £8.99.

For once, the blurb is not too far off the mark: this book "is at once an enthralling cultural history of the Western love affair with mountains, an intimate account of his own experiences in the world's mountain ranges, and a beautiful meditation on how memory and landscape intertwine." True, the world-wide account actually boils down to a dozen or so brief and often imprecisely located episodes in the author's climbing career; but if several of these happen to occur in the Cairngorms, the Laggan hills or even Ben Nevis, few Club Members are likely to complain. More far-flung experiences are reported from Switzerland, the Tien Shan and the Rockies. These pages, scattered amongst the total of 300 or so in the book, provide a personal commentary, for author and reader, on the broader theme of the book.

This theme is the changing attitudes (of Europeans - Americans, Asians, etc. do not get a look in) to mountains over the ages. These attitudes developed over the centuries: from simple fear of the unknown and the dangerous, to growing recognition of the evidence amongst mountains as to geological time. Somewhat later, glaciers came to be appreciated both for their strange formations and for their movement: obvious, slow, but (*pace* global warming) inexorable. Then came the 'Pursuit of Fear' - of precipices, of avalanches, of cold, of altitude - as an objective to be sought during leisure time, and most recently escapism or at least escape from the city or from the modern world. This is not expedition mountaineering; the author himself, and many of those whom he cites - Petrarch, John Evelyn, Edmund Burke, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Darwin, Mark Twain - are concerned with personal revelations, usually when alone. Even so, rather little of the book is concerned directly with beauty or even moral philosophy. Instead, mountain perceptions are linked to wider worlds, of religion, or science, or class, nation and family. In fact (though Macfarlane does not put it this way), there are influences both ways, from mountain experiences towards the re-forming of attitudes to nature, lifestyle and personal conduct, and from individual (or national, or class) mentalities towards explaining the 'fascination' of ascending to, and descending from, the heights. All this has been done before, of course: for example by Arnold Lunn in *A Century of Mountaineering* in 1957, and in many an introductory or final chapter in expedition or biographical accounts. But as described above, Macfarlane applies the personal touch, takes a broad view, and is not concerned to record every notable mountaineering event or personality. Here are no Hillarys, Messners, Hastons or even Pateys; instead, as well as the above notables, we get Mr Bean and the Rev. MacCorkendale dying together on Mont Blanc, Lords Tennyson, Kelvin and Curzon, and (somehow or other) Boswell and Johnson on the Buller (*sic*) of Buchan.

The long (50-page) penultimate chapter is simply entitled *Everest*, and is almost entirely about Mallory, who died in 1924 near the summit, on his third attempt. To my mind, this chapter fits oddly with rest of the book, unless one is interested in late-imperialist and very British romanticism. However, other than using photographs to illustrate landscapes, perhaps it is difficult to explain the mountaineering experience to non-believers better than with "Because it's there".

The earlier chapters of the book, and the final 5-page peroration *The Snow Hare* (on Beinn a'Chaorainn (*sic*) near Loch Laggan), combine happily some fine and personal writing, and a broad swathe of history, science and philosophy. The author, who is not yet 30 but has lost three fingers to frostbite, is a Fellow of English at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. And/but his prose is not pedantic (even though earlier pages contain sillion, traumaturgy and majuscule!). For those who think and feel as well as do, the book is a splendid read.

Ken Thomson

The Hillwalker's Guide to Mountaineering, Terry Adby and Stuart Johnston, Cicerone Press 2003, 252pp, ISBN 1 85284 393 4, £14.00 pbk.

This book, written by a mountain guide, Stuart Johnston, and his erstwhile hill-walking client, aims to equip those who wish to progress from straightforward walking in the hills to more difficult scrambling and mountaineering, without going the whole hog of taking up rock climbing. It begins by examining the differences between a walk, a scramble and a rock-climb, and explaining the grading system for scrambling. The second part (130 pages) covers 'Skills for the Hills': chapters on general equipment, navigation, mountain weather, techniques for safe progress, both unroped and roped (50 pages are essentially an introduction to rock-climbing), winter hazards, equipment and techniques, and first aid. The writing is generally clear, and the text well laid-out and illustrated. However, it is difficult to know to what extent mountain skills can really be learned and digested from a book. But to be fair, there are a couple of pages encouraging novices to take Winter Skills courses, or a beginner's rock-climbing course. For those of us who still venture to the hills in our older clothes, some of the material on equipment is revealing: "the days when one pair of boots was purchased for all seasons and all routes are on the way out," and "a rucksack liner or dry bag is essential." What happened to the old dustbin bags? But most of the advice is sound, if some of it perhaps a little obvious.

The third part of the book, taking up 90 or so pages, is 'Mountaineering in Britain', descriptions of 12 classic scrambles, including the Fiacail Ridge, Curved Ridge, Aonach Eagach, the round of Coire Lagan, and Tower Ridge.

An odd book, then, a cross between a guidebook and a training manual. Perhaps compulsory reading for Mountain Leadership Certificates? Maybe a good start, but no substitute for learning from experience.

Lydia Thomson