

Some Winter Days

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All the Munros in winter, now there is a challenge!!!! Several years ago I did wonder if I might tackle it, and although recent poor snow conditions and the discovery of the delights of cross-country skiing have deflected me somewhat, I have certainly had some exciting winter days on the hill. My definition of a winter ascent is one that necessitates equipment (ice-axe or crampons) or skills only used in winter IRRESPECTIVE of the time of year. Our New Year ascent of Beinn Heasgarnich, when we had to go searching for any snow, would not qualify as a winter climb, whereas a May holiday weekend up Bruach na Frithe in thigh-deep snow would.

My first ever Munro was actually done in winter conditions with a newly acquired instrument called an ice-axe, which I had read was recommended equipment for snowy terrain. I had absolutely no idea I was climbing a Munro (the height of Broad Cairn being conveniently hidden by a map crease), even less how to use this new piece of mountaineering apparatus. The ascent was quite dignified, the descent, however, consisted of an unladylike crawl on my backside with my newly acquired metal stick flailing uselessly behind me. The next winter I went to a Glenmore winter skills course to rectify this lack of knowledge, though I do still have grave doubts as to whether I could self-arrest on steep hard snow.

My first really 'impressive' winter ascent was in April 1983, during a Galloway Mountaineering Club meet at Dundonell. We planned to do a traverse of Sgurr Fiona from north-west to south-east. None of the party had been on the mountain before, but we knew its reputation and had fortunately taken full rock-climbing / winter-mountaineering equipment. Our leader, a very capable chap, disliked early starts. This was to become our downfall, as we began the walk late at 10am, arriving at the summit of Sgurr Fiona at 3pm. As the least experienced person in the party, I was asked to decide whether we should turn back or not (!!!!!). From my now petrified point of view, there was little to choose between a very steep icy descent to Bidein a' Ghlas Thuill and a long walk back to the car, or the original plan of contouring beneath the pinnacle ridge to the cars at Corrie Hallie. I chose the latter. Slowly the weather started to deteriorate, the clouds and the steep snow slopes merging to become one white mass, with what seemed yawning blackness below. I was truly terrified, absolutely seized, breathless, mostly with fear, with each step. We continued, now roped, underneath the pinnacles, reassured somewhat by the presence of apparently fresh footsteps ahead. Just as I was starting to get used to the situation, the descent route became barred by a vertical cliff, but those footsteps

were still tantalisingly visible below us. We did not know it at the time, but we were now attempting to descend the difficult step on the Corrag Bhuidhe Buttress. The next 100 metres were to take us three hours and four belays, and we finally reached the col before Sail Liath at 7pm. The cars were at Corrie Hallie, we were on avalanche prone slopes and there was only one hour of light left! Our leader decided to descend on safer snow slopes towards Shenavall Bothy. We arrived there at 11pm, the inhabitants at first disbelieving our statement that we were not going to stay the night. The doctor (me) had a Surgery to attend in Turriff at 9am the next day!!

The walk back to the car, which we thought would be the least of our worries, was an epic in itself. It had now been gently snowing for several hours, and the path we had planned to follow soon disappeared under this new snow. We were forced to use a compass on very broken ground, our leader, a supreme navigator, announcing at one point that he had never been so lost in his whole life! We got back to the cars at 4am, I to work for 9am, some patients noting how well I looked "nice rosy cheeks, doctor", the effect of 18 hours of wind and snow. By the afternoon I was having severe difficulty producing a full sentence without slurring my words or forgetting my train of thought, and that evening fell asleep standing upright whilst talking to a neighbour!

In a similar, though less serious, vein, there was a winter walk with Peter Bellarby in the Cairngorms. Both of us are renowned for appearing at the Burns' Supper in Muir Cottage, Inverey, just as the soup is about to be served. Our companions, therefore, only started to get concerned when we failed make an appearance for desserts. Lost, perhaps? Well no - a 'controlled' detour, but never really lost. The basic problem had been a wrong forecast. Peter and I had set off for Beinn Bhreac, believing the weather would soon deteriorate. Walking across the Mòine Bhealaidh, towards Beinn a' Chaorainn, not a snowflake falling anywhere, Beinn a' Bhuid beckoned. Grey skies but not the forecast blizzard. Needless to say, the bad weather and the two of us arrived at the summit plateau of Bhuid at the same time. We decided that I would navigate by putting Peter in front and using him as an attack point for the bearing. We were aiming for the land rover track on the plateau, probably in retrospect a rather stupid thing to do, as it would have been covered with snow. The main problem, as far as I could see, was NOT to walk over any cornice that might be lingering over the east cliffs of the hill. I did not want to go into the Dubh-Ghleann either, as this would involve a long and tedious valley walk, but the overwhelming fear was not to veer too far left and in the almost white-out conditions over a cornice. Forty-five minutes later, now out off the mist, we stood at the top of a glen: the Dubh-Ghleann awaited. I had avoided the cliffs by going too far right! Until then, I had often wondered if it was an advantage to be light and small (but having less muscle strength) in soft snow. Ghleann Dubh was to leave this no longer in doubt, as poor Peter, probably cursing my

'controlled' route choice, was left floundering in banks of soft snow as I much more easily plodded on ahead.

To end this trio of epics I will describe a walk into Sheicheachan Bothy beneath Beinn Dearg, the basic idea being to do the very remote Corbett, Beinn Bhreac. Three of us set off from Old Blair in February 1986, in lovely weather conditions with clear blue skies and fresh snow lying on the tracks above 300m. We set off at 5pm, not feeling the slightest urge to push the pace. The bothy was only two to three hours away, the route clearly demarcated by a land rover track. Oh what an inexperienced view that turned out to be! What do land rover tracks become when drifted over with snow? Unfortunately darkness coincided with our arrival at such a camouflaged piece of track, but still full of misplaced optimism we plodded on in what we hoped was the right direction. Then suddenly, as happens when you are lost, 'things' started to feel wrong - the ground was going down when it should have been going up, the slope felt steep when it should have been shallow. Fearing we might miss the bothy, we veered north-east to aim for the Bruar Water. By luck, I think, more than skill, we arrived and relocated ourselves at the weir on the Bruar Water just south of the Allt a' Chaise. There was now barely a mile to the bothy, but it took us nearly two hours, the snow getting deeper and very soft. Exhausted, we awoke the next morning, our boots frozen solid, with no heart to walk the long miles to Beinn Bhreac, climbing Beinn Dearg instead.

At least I got to Beinn Dearg. Sometimes I get nowhere of great significance. I hope this will not offend (it would certainly NOT offend her) but one of my more crazy moments of winter Munroing involved the scattering of the ashes of my great-aunt Ethel. She died at the grand old age of 96, a veteran of the Moray Mountaineering Club, with fond memories of the Cairngorms before they were developed for the ski industry. A long time before her eventual death she hinted she would like somebody to scatter her ashes on a hill. At the time I had only Braeriach left to do locally on my first round and, being a true Munro-bagger, I thought this suggestion would perhaps kill two birds with one stone ... so to speak. Her eyes lit up with glee at this suggestion. "That was my first ever Cairngorm. How absolutely marvellous!!!" "OK," I replied, "but you have got to die in winter, promise!!!!" Ethel managed to live through two rounds of Munros before eventually (and with great relief) she died in late October 1996 - winter? Her ashes stayed in my house while I hoped that the weather would improve, upsetting several visitors who shared the same bedroom. Eventually nagged into submission, I decided to lay them to rest in February 1997, hopefully getting a winter Munro into the bargain! I heard the weather forecast, but persuaded myself, as one does in the circumstances, that the 70mph winds would NOT arrive till I was off the hill. I was left in no doubt as soon as I got out of the car, being blown backwards within yards of setting off. Mmmm. Ethel and I were NOT getting a winter Munro that day. I

struggled as far as I could, crawling on all fours down to the Lairig Ghru. As I staggered towards the shoulder of Sròn na Lairige, I persuaded myself this would do, as it was part of Braeriach. I have grave doubts if she as much as touched the ground, as with amazing swiftness the wind tore her ashes from the urn and sped them north. Always the optimist, I continued upwards, managing about 400 metres, before a wall of wind blasted down Coire Gorm making forward movement impossible. If walking into strong wind is difficult, walking with it behind you is unimaginable. As I retreated, limbs flayed about uncontrollably, tripping up other parts without warning, my gait emulating a puppet-on-a-string!!!.

I suffer from poor distance vision ("We'll meet at the fence, over there." "What fence?") but have on occasions found it very useful. For some peculiar reason I had suggested a winter ascent of Aonach air Chrith (on the south Cluanie ridge) by its north ridge. Peculiar, as I had taken one look at this ridge in summer and decided, being alone at the time, it was not for me. That November day the snow was down to the road, the conditions overhead ideal, but soon I had second thoughts. At first I tried the restrained "It is quite narrow at the top," but as we got progressively higher, this became "It is VERY narrow on top," trying to make myself sound concerned but knowledgeable. My companion, Roger Robb, recognised something was amiss. "You are unusually quiet today! Is something bothering you? I'm enjoying the silence. Might make you scared more often." By the time we reached the final summit slope, I had persuaded myself I was making a fuss about nothing, the north-east ridge looking broad and easy. Then suddenly the hill disappeared. Roger looked down and joined me in reflective silence. Poor eyesight helped by allowing me to concentrate on the narrow field of focused vision immediately ahead of me, so that I managed extremely well to ignore the visual fuzziness everywhere else. I have a strong memory of the ridge becoming a knife-edge at one point and going *à cheval* on the rock, a manoeuvre the horse-rider in me particularly enjoyed. However the climb down shortly after this to an acutely-sloping ice-covered slab, is not a position I would like to repeat too often. Roger muttered that he should have taken a rope, I was silence personified. The exposed ridge was short-lasting, leading almost immediately to the summit cairn. Fear became pride and delight as we looked down on a magnificent view, the black waters of Loch Quoich tinged yellow, the setting sun casting eerie shadows as it plunged behind low clouds around Sgurr Mor. We continued to Maol Chinn Dearg, the wide easy ridge contrasting well with our Alpine *arête* on Aonach.

Moments like these make winter hill walking special. In summer the light is sometimes flat, the views hazy, but in winter the short days often bring spectacular sunsets and great atmospheric clarity. Roger and I had two stunning New Year expeditions in Skye in 1997 - the year of the heavy frost. The scene had been set for these epics the year before, when we climbed Sgurr nan Eag

from the Glen Brittle Hut. In 1996 any fallen snow had been blown off the ridges to accumulate in large amounts on the lower slopes. We ascended the mountain from its southern slopes, soon finding the mixture of soft snow on top of loose scree slow and tiring. With each step you slipped twice - firstly into the snow and secondly as the stones beneath gave way. We were very aware that the forecast was for the weather to deteriorate later that day, and had promised ourselves that we must turn back if we had not reached the summit by 2pm. Exhausted by the constant slipping, we reached the top with ten minutes to spare, but with valuable experience that would stand us in good stead for the next year.

Sgurr Alasdair was our New Year's Day walk in 1997, a year when a long spell of low temperatures had frozen the ground solid. Unlike our experience on Sgurr nan Eag, the conditions were perfect for climbing a scree slope, the loose rocks being iced together, and the Stone Shoot offered a pleasant way to the top. The air was unusually still that day. No wind blew, making the sea as smooth as glass, reflective as a mirror. We watched transfixed as the spectacle of the fading day unfolded around us. At first we saw the sun above a bank of low cloud, its image mirrored as an orange ball of light on the greying sea. For several moments, the scene before us was inexplicable and odd. We saw the sun disappear suddenly below the clouds, yet its orange reflection remained etched on the darkening sea, the wedge of colour lingering on the water, prolonging the last moments of the day.

Two days later, with no knowledge of a weather forecast, we set off for my 'friend' Sgurr Dubh Mor. That term is laced with sarcasm as this particular mountain and I have a long history of trying moments together. From our expedition on Eag we realised that an early start was essential, and left the Hut at 7am, so that the walk round to Coire a' Ghrunnda was mostly in the dark, on paths hard with ice. Getting into the Coire was probably one of the most difficult parts of the climb, as we had to surmount a slab covered in thin ice. Once in the Coire, however, the snow was remarkably soft and strenuous. The sky was at first clear, but we watched horrified as thin clouds drifted in. Was the weather changing? Would we have time to climb the hill and still get back to that difficult ice-covered slab before nightfall? We arrived at Sgurr Dubh an Da Bheinn, now thick with cloud, anxiously aware we had still a lot to do before our turn-back time of 2pm. From considerable experience (none pleasant) I knew route finding is all important on Sgurr Dubh Mor - the correct way would be reasonable, the wrong almost impossible. Without clear visibility it would be pointless to continue.

Then something wonderful happened - suddenly the cloud broke to reveal the Cuillin in all its splendour in full winter coat, jagged white peaks against a pale blue sky. The Inaccessible Pinnacle, alone, was bereft of snow, its narrow grey fin clinging precariously to the white slopes of Sgurr Dearg.



Sgurr Alasdair and the Inaccessible Pinnacle from Sgurr Dubh an Da Bheinn

The descent to beneath Sgurr Dubh Mor was surprising easy on good firm snow, and we roped up to contour round the south of the pinnacles. Slightly south of the main crest, Roger started upwards. Three belays took us to the summit ridge, the most difficult obstacle being an icy, acutely-angled slab covered thinly with snow (Grade II). It was 2.15pm. Belayed from the summit cairn, brimming with new-found confidence I walked straight across the final narrow ridge, only to realise on the way back that my footprints were supported by thin air! The view was stunning. The clarity of the blue sky sharpened the snow-covered peaks of the Cuillins and deepened the blue water of Loch Scavaig. The descent was not as bad as expected, as I found it easier to lower/slide myself down that haul myself up. The sun, now to the west, reflected pink in the snow, the evening shadows exaggerating every scar on Sgurr nan Eag - an Alpenglow in Scotland!!!! As we safely descended past the difficult slab and into the darkness, the land strangely quietened by winter's frozen grip, we realised we had been privy to something very special. Winter at its very best.