

## The Grahams

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I finished the Grahams on **Druim na Sgriodain** in 2003, in the usual awful Completion weather. The Grahams are the newest of the four lists in *Munro's Tables*<sup>1</sup>. They were first published by Alan Dawson in April 1992, in 'The Relative Hills of Britain'<sup>2</sup> which also listed all the British Marilyn's, i.e. hills of any height but with a drop of 150m on all sides. In November 1992, completely independently, Fiona Torbet (née Graham) published in the magazine *The Great Outdoors* a similar list, though only of hills north of the Highland Line. The two authors later met to organise a definitive list of hills between 2,000 and 2,500ft with a drop of 150m. It was agreed that the collective name should be 'Grahams', which proved a fitting memorial, as Fiona Torbet was tragically murdered several years later, whilst on a walking holiday. There are 224 Grahams including the recently demoted Corbett **Beinn Talaidh** in Mull.

Being a relatively new list, I had climbed several of the hills before they were mentioned in *Munro's Tables*. My first Graham was **Culter Fell** in 1979. I was working in Lanark at the time and had only been hillwalking for a few years, and it was the first hill I ever climbed without the reassuring presence of a path. I well remember looking at the contour lines on the map and thinking: this is going to be very difficult and steep!! Now of course such a relatively gentle, grassy slope would be counted as an easy hill, but not then. I was absolutely delighted to get the top, in my usual manner completely alone and without anybody knowing where I was. No reassuring mobile phone communication in those days!

Having a love of the Galloway area also meant that I had climbed all of the south-west Grahams early on, though they would be in the Donalds list at the time. Particular favourites are **Mullwharchar** and **Craignaw**, the backbone of the wonderfully remote and rough hills between the ranges of the Awful Hand, which includes Merrick, and the Rhinns of Kells, including Corserine. When I did them in the 1980s there were no paths, in fact no people, the tussocky terrain making for long but rewarding days. The views from these hills are just as beautiful as from any Munro. In fact, the butterfly-shaped Loch Enoch, amongst a sea of rusty-coloured autumn grass, is as good as it gets. Then there was an autumn 'bracken-swim' to ascend **Lamachan Hill** from Glen Trool. I found the only way to progress through the head-high vegetation was to use a breast-stroke technique! Once past this barrier, the easy grassy summit ridge was a delight.

From my various homes, Grahams have frequently been the nearest local hill. From Dumfries, **Queensberry** is a well known landmark,

though not as obvious as the lower Criffel to the south. It looms like a small Schiehallion, conical and distant, from the higher part of the town. In Turriff, I made numerous ascents of **The Buck**, helped by the high road from Lumsden to Dufftown, and the close proximity of the Clashindarroch cross-country skiing woods. If snow conditions did not allow skiing, I would be tempted up the easy north ridge from the high point of the road. Now in Inverness, the local Graham is **Meall Fuar-mhonaidh**, a hill which I drive past when working as a locum in either Foyers or Fort Augustus. It dominates the west side of Loch Ness, being particularly spectacular from the consulting room in Foyers, the morning light emphasising the roughness of its face. From its summit, the whole of Loch Ness can be seen.

Of course, there are views. By their very definition Grahams have good ones! The best? One of the most stunning is from **Millfore** in Galloway, for its magnificent head-on panorama down the bog known as the Silver Flow. Deep and very wet, a rare floating bog on which, even today, it is impossible to walk safely. However, in my opinion, by far the best view is from **Stob na Cruaiche** in Rannoch. Its central location and the lack of nearby hills means it has unobstructed views of Glencoe, Nevis, the Mamores, Ossian, Lawers, Achaladair, Cruachan and Blackmount, and of course the easterly Rannoch hills. Go on a summer's evening to catch the fading sunlight on the mountains, and you will wish to be nowhere else. I gave up counting Munros when I reached fifty!

The normal response, on hearing someone is doing the Grahams, is to ridicule them as being too easy. Oh dear! I well remember an expedition with Peter B. to **Shee of Ardtalnaig** on the south side of Loch Tay, where we thought the walk would be a quick 'up-and-down job'. We started from the farm of Claggan, believing the ascent would only take a few hours, as there was a landrover track most of the way up the hill. Peter, who was suffering from a sore back, was understandably rather hesitant and slow, but I was not much faster, as we soon encountered masses of soft, deep snow. There were periods of whiteout conditions which caused problems in the never-ending, almost flat summit ridge. It seemed to go on and on and on..., very physical and very draining. It took us four and a half hours to reach the summit! We descended off the steeper south-east nose, arriving at the bottom of the hill just as the weather improved. Peter's suffering continued, however, as he had followed my 4WD Subaru into a field at the top of the road. The local farmer and I watched with hilarity and much discussion, as poor Peter struggled to get his car out of the mud. I suppose the farmer had every right to be upset about the hole that Peter was rapidly digging in his field, but seeing the struggle was probably the best local Sunday entertainment he had had for some while. Eventually the poor car was towed out of its misery.

There are, of course, extremely remote Grahams. The classic is **An Cruachan**, between Lochs Monar and Mullardoch, and almost 9km from Iron Lodge. Roger and I cycled in on the Saturday, did the Corbetts Faochaig and Aonach Buidhe, camped near the lodge, and did the Graham on the Sunday. Unfortunately, the weather was rather cloudy, so limiting the views. However, looking south down the Allt Coire nan Each from the lower slopes of An Cruachan, shafts of watery sunlight were focused like beacons down this remotest of glens, giving it added atmosphere. We were perhaps the furthest away from anywhere significant that it is possible to be in the whole of Scotland.

Equally remote but done in much better weather were the northerly **Ben Armine** and **Creag Mhor**. I slept overnight in the car at Badanloch Lodge and cycled the 12km to the east side of the two hills. They reminded me of Galloway – easy-angled and grassy on one side, steep on the other. The views were rather bland and hazy, only a few mountains sticking out of the flat, northern moor.

One of the areas that I thought would be very rough under foot, but proved surprisingly easy, was the expedition to **Beinn Gaire** and **Croit Bheinn** which I did from Glen Moidart. The long east-to-west summit ridge of Beinn Gaire was very pleasant walking, though there was a fair pull to get to the attractively conical summit of Croit Bheinn. Surely, the north slope of this mountain must be one of the steepest in Britain. There was a tremendous aerial view directly down Glen Aladale, the equivalent of paragliding with a reassuring bit of grass beneath your feet. In perfect weather, I continued north to the Corbett Sgurr na Ba Glaise, making a circular traverse of the far end of Glen Moidart. The worst terrain was actually below Assary near the River Moidart, where the marked footpath was floating in an enormous bog.

One of the most enjoyable expeditions was to **An Stac** at the west end of Glen Pean. The scenery to the west is typically rough and wild Knoydart. I used the good stalker's path from Oban bothy to get beneath Cnoc Gorm, reaching the Graham summit as the sun was setting. There was a magnificent view down Loch Morar towards Rum, the water of the loch a mixture of purple reflections from the dark sky and orange glow from the disappearing sun. That evening, I spent a cold night in a bivvy bag not far from the summit, watching the colours disappear in the west. The next morning I decided to be adventurous and return via the Corbett top Beinn Gharbh and the two Munros, Coireachan and Thuilm.

An equally excellent trip was had to the Letterewe Wilderness in the hunt for **Meall Mheinnidh** and **Beinn a Chaisgein Beag**. Needless to say, I also included the Corbetts Beinn Lair and Beinn a Chaisgein Mor. In the evening I walked in, camping overnight just south of the Fionn Loch causeway. The next day, in excellent weather, I easily managed the two

northerly hills in the morning, making myself lunch at the campsite, and walking out over the two Loch Maree mountains in the afternoon.

Stupid outings? In 1980, when working in Montrose, I used to walk with a nurse from Brechin, whose local hill was the **Hill of Wirren**. He had been up this hill several hundred times, so I was happy to dispense with a map. It was decided to have a walk on my last evening in the area, starting from the south at Bridgend. It was to prove the longest walk we ever did! Setting off at 6 p.m., we did not get back to the car till midnight. We reached the summit with no problem, but in gathering mist and dark, with only a compass and no map, we had no idea how to get off. (N.B. A compass is little use without a map). Eventually after walking around in circles for hours, we decided just to descend – and you guessed it, we ended up on the wrong side of the hill in Glen Esk. Twenty kilometres later, via an unplanned trip to Edzell, we arrived back at the car.

Memorable outings? Being adopted by a dog whose local walk was **Beinn Mhor**, near Dunoon. It was quite obvious that he knew how to get up the hill and even on to **Beinn Bheag**, his owner telling me that he had on occasions been found running home from the north end of Loch Eck via the middle of A815! However, I was impressed by his loyalty when he continued on to **Creag Tharsuinn**. I do not think he had been there before, as he kept quite close to my side. At the other end of the country, there was the ascent of **Meall an Fheur Loch** from the west end of Loch Merkland, done in commando style due to the foot-and-mouth restrictions at the time. Ridiculous really, as I had been nowhere near any source of infection, but necessary in the climate of hysteria. And then Geoff C. and I ‘happened’ to find our way to the summit of the Arnisdale Graham **Druim Fada** during the Lowe Alpine Mountain Marathon, it being, in my opinion, the best attack point for a control high up on the ridge. It was just as well that I was into ticking summits, as several people had great difficulty finding this control, and had to relocate their position from the very bottom at the loch shore, with a 400m climb back up the hill.

Rough outings? Combining the three Grahams **Beinns Bhreac**, **Molurgainn** and **Mheadhonach** (to the west of Loch Etive), from the high point of the B845. Climbing the first two was very enjoyable. However, I made the mistake of trying to avoid Meall Dearg by contouring round its west flank. The terrain was extremely rough and wet, and very slow going was made worse by confusion caused by the lack of forest on the area. The OS map clearly shows an extensive block of wood, which does not exist on the ground. Once I reached Mheadhonach, feeling rather the worse for wear, I was rewarded by a magnificent view down Loch Awe, but I will not be climbing that hill from that angle again.

Of course, last but not least, climbing the Grahams gives you the opportunity to go to unusual areas, for example the remote areas to the north of Beinn Wyvis and to the Outer Isles. I well remember my

curiosity on the Paps of Jura, seeing what appeared to be a woman carrying a set of golf clubs up **Beinn Shiantaidh**. The puzzle was solved when she unfolded a large kite on the summit of the hill. I joined in her enthusiasm, helping to launch this object into the air, a difficult task in the calm conditions of the day. Waves of laughter drifted from the summit, as I tried to hold on to the kite, and boulder hop as fast as possible, as she struggled to get it to fly. We could imagine the headline news: 'Experienced hill walker breaks leg flying kite'!

So this may have given you a taste for the Grahams, and their quality is even more obvious if I remind you that they include they include the magnificent **Suilven** and **Stac Pollaidh**. Now all my Grahams are done, what else to do? Well there are the thousand-odd Graham Tops<sup>3</sup>. That should keep me busy for some time!

### *References*

1. *Munro's Tables*, ed. D.A. Bearhope, SMC 1997.
2. *The Relative Hills of Britain*, Alan Dawson, Cicerone Guide, 1992.
3. *Graham Tops and Grahamists*, Alan Dawson et al., TACit Tables, 2004