

## Musings on Past Journals

*Eric Johnston*

As the fortunate possessor of a complete set of the Club Journals I have enjoyed dipping in to them from time to time. Now that I am an armchair climber I have been able to look at them afresh and appreciate better what a wealth of interest they contain, not just about the Club and its personalities and the development and changes in the climbing scene, but also the changes in social attitudes, particularly to nature and the environment. For example, early in the last century a member remarks casually how he had twice killed adders in Glen Ey. The persecuted osprey is recorded as disappearing completely by 1904, happily to return some 50 years later.

The first Journal issued in 1891 (one shilling (5p) - a price held till 1921) is a gem. There was a beautifully written article by James Bryce, the Honorary President, MP for South Aberdeen later to become a Viscount and OM, and future President of the Alpine Club with a mountain in Canada named after him. Then a piece about the Blue Hill, a favourite Sunday outing for Aberdonians in my youth, with a recommended route via the Green, Windmill Brae, Hardgate and Bridge of Dee. It is a great viewpoint and had an indicator which included Lochnagar and Ben Rinnes. Hugh T. Munro has a description of a Cairngorm outing full of topographical detail reminiscent of the painstaking work which went into the Tables published the same year. It is interesting to note that after the first completed round in 1901 by his contemporary the Rev. A.E. Robertson, 22 years were to pass before they were completed again. The Munro phenomenon was a long way off; there were only eight Munroists at the end of the war in 1945. This is not really surprising as the Tables were looked on mainly as a useful guide and aide-memoire. My early copy, which has a foreword stating wistfully "it is a pity that some most attractive elevations such as Suilven and Stac Polly fail .... to find a place in any of these Tables ", is full of pencilled dates of when I climbed a particular Munro.

In 1918, Sir Hugh, who by then had succeeded to the Baronetcy of Lindertis near Edzell, wrote another article for the Journal *Three nights in the Cairngorms* which shows another side to his character. In it, he mentions that he still aspired to stand on the three 'tops' which he had not yet climbed and that "Raeburn, Collie, Garden, must combine to haul me up on a rope". Sadly he died the following year with his ambition unfulfilled. His night adventures in the Cairngorms ended with him arriving in Braemar at 4.30 am "with some trouble we woke up the people

at the Fife Arms and were royally entertained". Changed days indeed! In his article he mentions his friendship with Donald Fraser the stalker at Derry Lodge who reminisced about stalking in Mar Forest with the Kaiser and Prince Henry of Battenberg - the Prince was the finest rifle shot he had known and could shoot a stag through the heart at 400 yards. Fraser spent the winter months mounting stags' heads and, using cast horns, claimed he could make a much better head than nature could produce.

One of the great controversies over the years has been the desirability of building a road from Deeside through Glen Feshie to Kingussie, first mooted by General Wade in 1724. The attraction to climbers was a quick route to the West coast and the Club debated the proposal several times. In 1913 the subject was raised with a proposal that the National Road Board should get involved and in 1918 and 1924 the idea was supported by the Club - Braemar was described as a 'cul-de sac', which many would consider one of its attractions, and in 1960 after a prolonged debate the majority, including myself, were against. All this was grist to the local Press, as was the suggestion in 1899 that Aberdeen should draw its water from the Avon rather than the Dee, tapping in at Inchrory. This idea, first made by a Club member and opposed by other members, simmered on for some time.

In 1908 five Club members set out to climb "the six highest Cairngorms in one day" but "our friends did not anticipate that we would succeed" (*see Past Proceedings, p. 402 of this Journal, Ed.*). Succeed they did and were picked up by 'wagonette' in Glen Eunach after 19 hours climbing. This time was eventually described as a 'record' for others to challenge and in 1932 the time taken by R.P. Yunnie, the only member of his party to complete the round, had come down to just over 15 hours. Yunnie had several first ascents to his name and was a frequent contributor to the Journal. The Club President was not pleased and wrote in the Journal "racing over hills is not true mountaineering and is to be condemned - don't do it again". However he did relent a little and continued "I happen to know all those who took part in this adventure, and realise that they all have the true climbing spirit". Yunnie came to prominence during the war when he won the Military Cross as second in command of the unorthodox long-range desert group 'Popski's Private Army', the title of a best-selling book. By the time I did the round (1961), followed by V.C. Wynne-Edwards (1963 and 1968), it was featuring in the Guide to the Cairngorms and had been described in the *Journal* as 'something of a classic'. The irony is that the six tops are not the six highest Cairngorms'; Beinn Mheadhoin is 40 feet higher than Ben Avon.

One notable change over the years is the clothing worn on the hills. In the photograph of the group taken at the unveiling of the Club Indicator



on Ben Macdhui in their raincoats, they might be standing at the Castlegate on a wet day. Old clothes were the thing until Ventile and then Goretex with brighter colours came along. The indicator, first proposed in 1913 but not erected until 1926, was funded by public subscription as a memorial to Alexander Copeland, the first chairman of the Club. The photograph reminds me of a letter I found in the Club files several years ago. It was from Percy Unna demanding back the generous subscription of £5 he had made to the memorial fund. It was written when he found out what form the memorial was to take. Unna, a wealthy Old Etonian and SMC member, did not approve of cairns, signposts, indicators etc. and had firm ideas about keeping the hills 'natural'. He is someone to whom the present generation of climbers owe a great debt, as the man who bought mountains and gave Glencoe, Ben Lawers, Goatfell, and parts of Torridon to the National Trust of Scotland under strict conditions. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to buy the Cuillins. I presume he got his £5 back.

The advertisements in the early Journals are interesting. The Palace Hotel in Aberdeen (since burnt down) always had a list of the crowned heads of Europe and celebrities who had patronised it. The boot shop adverts showed the different nailing patterns available. Tricouni nails were ideal for the heathery climbs of the Cairngorms. Also, they left a trail on the rocks which helped climbers identify and follow routes! On snow and ice there was little need for crampons if you had tricouni. Robert Lawrie of London was the well known alpine specialist where I bought a Stubai ice-axe. You rang the bell at a private house near Marble

Arch to be ushered in to meet Mr Lawrie, a charming man who knew all the big names in the climbing world.

Climbers look back nostalgically to their own Golden Age, but I do think the early climbers with just a map, compass and perhaps an aneroid, had the best of it, planning their routes without recourse to guide books, quickest routes and times set out "like a railway timetable" as J. Norman Collie put it according to Hugh Welsh. They also had the exhilaration of running down the great scree shoots like that of Sgurr Alasdair on Skye, a pleasure which I can recall. All the small scree stones have long since slid down the slopes as climbers inevitably damage the mountains. In the 1898 Journal there is a complaint about the length of the heather in the Lairig Ghru, the writer saying that "something should be done about it": the reverse of our problems with paths today! The National Trust for Scotland and others are thankfully doing something about it, and trying to restore some of the damage, an expensive business which all climbers should support.

And so I conclude this piece of rather indulgent nostalgia by saying that I'm sure all Club members will agree how indebted we are to the industrious editors and the contributors who have made the Journal possible and so successful over such a long period.