

Walking the Dee Watershed

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A long time ago, I was filling an idle hour looking at maps of our beloved Deeside, when it occurred to me to try and work out where the watershed of the Dee ran - perhaps I had been inspired by the rumbustious account *Walking the Watershed* by Dave Hewitt¹, which relates the much more ambitious expedition of walking the watershed of Scotland between the Atlantic and the North Sea. My watershed was easy enough to discover, in fact, for many miles around the head of the Dee it ran along the county boundary, tracing a route across some of the highest of the Cairngorm peaks, Ben Avon, Beinn a' Bhuid, Ben Macdui, Braeriach, before swinging in a southern arc to cross the Carn Ealar, the Iutharns, the Cairnwell, Glas Maol, Mount Keen and Mount Battock. Less well defined, but also interesting, was the watershed to the east of the great mountains.

A project was born: to walk the whole watershed in consecutive stages. Flush with enthusiasm, 2003 took me well past the half-way stage, but then came a hiatus. If my legs last out, at some time in the future you may read of the southern stretch, but this article is a summary of the diary of the northern section, from Aberdeen through to the farthest west, the watershed with the Feshie. The fascination of all watersheds is being high on a ridge above two valleys, in this case always the Dee on one side, and on the other at first the Don, then the Avon, the Feshie, the Tilt, the Shee Water, the Isla, and the two Esks, and, as a bonus, no need to worry about stream crossings!

Stage 1: Brimmond Hill to Glack, 6th March 2003

A lovely spring morning, blue skies, sunshine, and little white clouds, and still clouds of snowdrops all around in the garden. I knew that we had to go! As we conveniently lived on its slopes, Brimmond Hill seemed the obvious place to start, so Frances and I set off straight out the back door, across the field and up the hill to the starting gate at the viewfinder (266m.). Like stout Cortez, we gazed west, but were not really able to pick out much of the route. Down on the broad track that leads to the little western car park, and then straight across to the farm track, we skirted just to the north of the latest carbuncle of Westhill housing, and eventually reached the Hill of Keir. This was delightful surprise, a rough grassy

¹ Hewitt, Dave, (1994) *Walking the Watershed*, TACit Press Glasgow.

pudding scattered with bits of gorse, and lovely old single larch trees, a bit stunted, but game, like old Caledonian forest, and in the centre the day's trig point no. 2 (222m.), with 360° views, stretching back to Brimmond, and on to the snow-patched slopes of Morven, with glimpses of the bigger hills beyond, and the Loch of Skene, super-scenic between us and the bulk of the Hill of Fare. We turned our backs on the view with regret, and dropped to cross the B979, then made our way up the farm track to Rogiehill, and Auchronie Hill. A sweep-sweeping little flock of redwings passed overhead, our first interesting wild-life. Really on a watershed-feeling ridge now, as we dropped northwest down the gentle nose to meet the road, and then a gently rising track to another hamlet of converted steadings. We cut up through stubble field at the side of a house to the top of the hill, searching for trig point no. 3, found in a grassy enclosure, circled by scattered fine old beeches, and right next to a pair of standing stones, about four feet high, with scattered stones clustered behind them, looking like the decayed entrance to a barrow-wight's lair. A trudge along busy the B977 road followed, before we turned up the track to Letter, between hedges sheltering a flock of yellowhammers, and then went cross-country to Lauchentilly, and a barn full of inquisitive young woolly cow faces. The farm track to Nether Lauchintilly passed fields with my first lambs of the season, lots of twins, and quite big, playing in a little sandy dip with a turnip pile by the side of the road. A very muddy rise led to Glack, sited just on a col in the ridge, a mini-street of abandoned old farm bothy buildings, plus the standard giant barns, and a little square stone farmhouse. Then quite steeply up bracken, bilberry and heather to trig point no. 4, with perhaps the best all-round view of the day, directly south over a quarry to the Barmekin, with the Hill of Fare beyond, around northwest to the ring of hills leading to Bennachie, back over much of our day's route to Brimmond again. Down in the flat valley bottom between us and the Loch of Skene lay the grey square of the roofs of Dunecht, from whence we caught the bus back to Kingswells.

Watershed distance 10.3 miles.

Stage 2: Glack to Learney Crossroads, 17th April 2003

This spring has been amazing. It has hardly rained for six weeks, and last week the temperatures in London and Cardiff have reached 80°F. Here it has been over 60° for several days, and the bees are working overtime bringing in great loads of pollen - golden brown, white, and chrome yellow. And on 16th April the swallows arrived back, first one, then two, and are now at their usual perches on the telegraph wires. The day for Stage 2 was one of these glorious spring days, hazy blue and already quite warm. I was on my own this time, as the haze slithered into white mist

just past Elrick, and it was with difficulty that I recognised the gate where we had descended from Glack Hill at the end of Stage 1. Larks were singing fit to bust unseen in the milky mist on the farm track down to cross the A944. Still no view except looming dim whaleback ridges, so I decided that rather than struggle across ploughed fields to the ridge only 100 feet or so to the right, I would stay on the road, swapping long views for the flowers on the south-facing verge - the first violets of the spring, ground ivy, wild pansy, emerging leaves of sweet cicely. By the time I exchanged cheery greetings with old couple watering their garden at Sunnybank Cottage, it lived up to its name, and I turned aside to the trig point at 201m. through a field full of sheep who chased me back to the road, and the metropolis of Glenwood. Short cuts through Tillybirloch brought me to the B9119, at Auchintoul. This unlikely spot is a real watershed, with the Auchorie Burn 100 yards ahead draining to the Don, and the Bethlin Burn less than half a mile to the east to the Dee. The streams draining from the NW side of the Hill of Fare to the Auchorie Burn thus all needed to be circumnavigated.

I turned off the main road, meeting an ancient car, with two quite ancient ladies who stopped for a chat - was I going all the way up the hill? the ancients one asked. She had been up many times, but not any more, and the less ancient one hoped I had refreshments with me. Now it was getting really warm, with (intimidating!) views ahead up to the ridge of the Hill of Fare. For 20 yards I put my feet over the watershed before crossing the burn again to reach a ruin in an idyllic setting, sheltered under a last big tree. Here a track was marked on the map up the hillside, but it seemed to cross a great tract of gorse. Nothing for it but a jungle traverse, without machete, to where the gorse was burned, and I was soon covered in charcoal - hands, clothes, map - before I reached the thank-god grass. Why is it that every time I climb the Hill of Fare I end up in some awful pickle? The track was there alright, a wide, sunken path, but now jammed full of gorse bushes, so nothing for it but the deep heather along the flanks. Luckily before too long I reached a burnt strip, which took me up the shoulder quite a way, but then abandoned me. The next bit towards the edge of the wood was real purgatory, hummocky ground covered in man-eating heather, and a severe shortage of even animal tracks. After some very slow and sweaty going, I finally made it to the wall along the edge of the wood, where I sat in welcome shade and attempted to clean my hands so that I could apply more sun-cream without blacking up.

Heading straight into the sun, I saw the trig point with a lovely wall leading to it, which I leapfrogged to try and find the least-worst going. Now the heather was slightly shorter, and I was glad to see a line of shooting butts stretching across the broad summit of the hill - surely there

would be a path between them. But no, and the heather became worse, interspersed with tussocky grass, and what would normally be impassable bog, but was luckily just damp after all the dry weather. Heading west, I did find a track, and turned to follow it, but it died after 100 yards, so I headed west again, the gently convex slopes limiting the horizon. I will draw a veil over the awful heather that followed, before I finally reached the beautiful open larch woods, with a blissful logging track straight along the ridge in front of me, taking me delightfully and quickly to the B993, just at the watershed col. An anticlimactic struggle through the woods on the other side, in search of the 332m. trig point, led to a strategic withdrawal, and then I left the watershed for the day, for a lovely easy wander, through estate woods, rhododendron-lined, and idyllic grassy tracks, past Learney House, along beech avenues to Torphins, and a lift back to my car and home.

Watershed distance 10.8 miles; cumulative 21.1

Stage 3: Learney Crossroads to Tullochvenus, 15th May 2003

This stage runs north from the Learney crossroads, and over the hills to Corrennie and the B9119. It was Fiona's turn to accompany me on the Great Watershed Bash, and as the logistics of A to B walking were beginning to be a bit difficult, we took two cars, and shuttled around before starting off from the crossroads. (In a purist moment I had earlier insisted on walking from the Torphins col down to the crossroads.) Woodland and meadow meanderings led us to the 327m. hill, and down to Ewens Croft, another of these nice wee cottages nestled in the dips and hollows of the land, and then to Denwell. As we approached the little farm, tucked in between its buildings, we enthused on its lovely rockery, ablaze with phlox and pansies, and other rock plants growing from crevices in the stone wall. A tiny little body came out to talk to us, she couldn't have weighed more than 6 stones, in cardigan and trews, joined by her husband, a real old farmer in brown moleskin patched all over. She was bursting to talk, and he soon warmed up to converse too, telling us about their granddaughter aged 12 and how she loved to come and stay, and had told her teacher all about getting a bull for the cows, and how when a cow was looking dead in the field, she had said she knew it wasn't, it was only sunbathing. And of course lots of talk about the weather, and how it was not the same at all at all, and how her husband had been just up on the hill, when a tornado came by and picked up a dead tree that was lying around. The postie arrived, and we took our leave, being ushered through a beautiful blacksmithed wrought-iron gate, and taken to see the gate post that an oystercatcher had adapted for a nest by picking out the

rotten wood from the top, and laying three large olive and brown spotted eggs.

We had to cross our watershed briefly, up along a purling little brook, and then I took to the heather to the post marking the summit of Green Hill, set in a little patch of grass, with flowering cloudberry, and a magnificent 360° degree view - Cairn William and Bennachie, all over the Don plain, squared with brilliant yellow rape, to the sea beyond, across to the Hill of Fare, round beyond to the south watershed hills, Mount Keen, Lochnagar, and a white palisade of the Cairngorms, probably looking into the Beinn a' Bhuid corries, and then round to Tap o' Noth. Afterwards I trotted down again to meet Fiona at the col between the Green and the Red Hill.

The next stretch was an act of faith, trying to find a way through the belt of wood, onto the Red Hill. Luckily the detail in the 1:25,000 map showed a fence line running through, and after a bit of woodland wandering backwards and forwards, to see where any weakness lay, particularly along the edge of a thick and impenetrable stand of mature spruce, we found the fence, and it soon led us out onto a tongue of open moor sticking into the wood. A wide swathe had been cut through the heather, which made for marginally easier going, but not by much. Still, the fence led us straight to our goal, even if there were stretches of it that were the nastiest tussock grass, and the views were opening out again to the far snowy hills, and across the beautifully green bowl to the north. Craigievar Castle looked spectacular, tucked in its little fold of woods, flag flying over warm ochre turrets. A lovely feeling of being on the top of the world, to say nothing of being on a watershed! Soon we found a track, running down to the bealach beyond the Red Hill (where a track runs across north to south) and then on up Benaquhallie, delightfully easy going and more lovely views. At the top we walked round the trig point (today's first) three times, trying to spot Fiona's house, the watershed start on Brimmond Hill, and scanning out our route ahead, over Craiglich, Pittendreich, Pressendye, and the hulk of Morven beyond. Then we made a brief detour to the amazing cairn, the tall skinny stone man standing proud on the wide stone platform south of the summit, before swinging down along the wall dropping quite sharply, turning south through grazing to reach the road and our car. There really is a special feel to the watershed, with the vales of Dee and Don spread out on each side of you. Watershed distance 7.5 miles; cumulative 28.6.

Stage 4: Tullochvenus to Queen's View, 4th June 2003

This was meant to be a little walk to fill the gap in the watershed between the descent from Benaquhallie and the Queen's View above Tarland, and

so it did, but involved a long circle beginning and ending at the station square at Lumphanan - yes it did use to have a station, as we discovered from careful examination of the map, the Ballater line curving north from Banchory and then south again to Aboyne. The map had promised a Military Road leading north from the very English-looking church with a spire at the top end of the village. It was a delightful track through the woods, very well made, and spookily resonant of the tramp of red coats and white gaiters. It followed quite high above the side of the stream valley, with lovely views back through rolling hills towards Deeside. Then we clambered over the first of dozens of gates, squelched through a boggy bit, and reached the road, joining up with our descent from Benaquhallie.

We potted along the road, stayed by ice-creams from the Tullochvenus shop, with magic views north to Bennachie and the ridge of hills stretching round to Tap o' Noth in their bright spring green, splashed with the yellow of broom and gorse. Views seem much better at walking speed, and the sunshine polished everything up marvellously. Turning south up the rising road towards Bogentassie, we were soon very obviously on the watershed again, with views behind and before. A fence led up to the trig point of Mill Maud hill, and a view of all the southern watershed hills lined up before us, round to Lochnager, with its rippling fringe of supporters. Dipping down to cross the main road, some agile gate climbing and electric fence ducking got us on to the slopes of Corse Hill. This was lovely easy going, at first just on grass, but then changing to heather, and blaeberry, but always with the track of a wheeled vehicle which meant that we had one path each and could talk easily all the way up. We discussed Pen Haddow and his recent rescue from an ice floe when down to his last day's food after reaching the North Pole - and pontificated about how they have it far too easy compared to the good old days of Nansen and Mawson and Scott. We had been intrigued as we approached the top of Craiglich to see two figures on the top by the cairn - pinching the watershed glory from us? Only as we pulled up the last steep bit did we see that they were a couple of sticks, and a little solitary rowan tree, right next to what had obviously been a fine round cairn, of mortared shaped stone of some six feet high and ten feet round, beside our second trig point of the day. Near at hand below us was the green and pleasant Howe of Cromar, a patchwork of grassland and green wheat, edged by the broad wooded ridge falling away from us and rollercoasting up to Mortlich. Beyond, the great hulk of Morven, with behind it peeping out the corries of Beinn a' Bhuid, with two staring eyes of snow patches. Then the shoulder of Morven leading round over Pressendye, to ripple up at the northern slopes of our Craiglich.

A handy cart track dropped down N through well spaced woods, and then a field track took us down to the road, where the gates were adorned with publicity to try and prevent the proposed giant quarry and landfill. We popped around the corner to the Queen's View indicator, then quiet roads and woodland tracks meandered the long way back to Lumphanan. Watershed distance 5.3 miles; cumulative 33.8.

Stage 5: Queen's View to the A97 above Tarland, 12th June 2003

A two-car convoy out, to leave one on the watershed of the A97 above Tarland, the other back at Queen's View. We wandered up a pleasant sandy track into the dew-wet woods, eventually taking to convenient tractor spools, running straight uphill, to the high-level traversing forest track that runs around the top of Pittendreich, through the immature woods. After that, the way was straightforward, but lovely in the warm sun round and up the shoulder of Pressendye, being surprised that what looked like the top really was - we had both thought that it was one of the hills that played the fool on you. We sat on the cairn, gazing round as we had our lunch, arguing over the which hill was which, and tracing the watershed route back to Brimmond Hill on the horizon. The way along the ridge to Lazy Well was a pleasant jaunt, the landscape plotted and pieced where the heather was being managed. Again a rolled-up-sleeve day, and as usual far too much clothing carried! The way up to Baderonach Hill seemed to be of slightly different geology, as the grassy slope was bright with tormentil and bedstraw, in contrast to the heather wastes at our backs. On the summit were the second trig point of the day, and a beautifully constructed honey-pot shaped memorial cairn. The tracks (for once) were just as shown on the map, due south, and then sharp west to the edge of the tiny Overlook Loch, on its bank a boulder three-foot square, carved with old men's faces². Into the trees then, and onto a grassy untrodden track that seemed to lead in the right direction. It's always spooky in the woods when you can't really tell which direction you're going, and the track got boggier and wilder, and the trees pressed in on each side, but then we got a glimpse of water through the trees, and there we were, back at the road by the little Witchcock Loch. We had crossed one stream going down the wood, but close inspection of the map revealed a drain that divided into two, one branch running south to the Dee, and one north to the Don, and there was definitely no exit south from the loch - so we decided our watershed credentials still held. Watershed distance 8.4 miles; cumulative 42.2.

² Donald Hawksworth describes this and other sculptures in *The Art of Cromar*, Cairngorm Club Journal, (2007) no. 108, p. 273.

Stage 6: A97 to A938, the Traverse of Morven, 17th June 2003

After weeks of balmy dry weather, the forecast was now for at least showers, but nothing daunted the convoy proceeded to Glen Gairn, where we left Fiona's car at the top of the pass and drove round in mine to the same parking space used at the end of Stage 5. A boggy, then deepish heather slog up the first slopes, with disturbed curlews calling, led to a very pleasant track along the side of Bonlee Hill, and we pottered along, in glorious sunshine, Fiona in her swimsuit top! A coffee stop once we'd followed the wall onto Craig Wangan, gazing north-east over the forests and ridges, getting our Bucks and our Taps mixed up as usual. Our ridge seemed to be not only a watershed, but a weathershed. To the north there were still blue skies sunshine and white woolly clouds, to the south the murk over the plain was thickening, and the sky was a deepening grey. The wall soon became a line of ancient fence posts, but these led us faithfully almost to the end of the day. A footpath took us upwards, over Little Cairn, and then Mid Cairn, a delightful stretch of bilberry mixed with cloudberry, its white giant bramble flowers sprinkled all around. At this stage we were amazed to descry a human figure - the first met on the watershed since Day 1. A level march took us to the large summit cairn with the trig point in its little stone fort just to the north.

Then we were off again, losing height directly, following the faithful fence down the broad west ridge. Although the sky was now grey, there were lovely views across to Lochnagar, with the rarely seen silver of Loch Muick to its flank, and the knobbls of Ben Avon against the western skyline. A wild place, no sign of Ballater tucked deep in the Dee valley, few tracks in sight, and no roads. The fence divided, and we took the northwest line, ever down along the ridge, among golden plovers flying and peeping. I hadn't realised how much height we would lose (must read maps more carefully in future!), and there was a final steep little defile on the exact watershed at Clac of Bunzeach. A steepish pull up the ridge opposite, as I plodded up to the spectacular stone man (worthy of a Wainwright sketch), which had been prominent sticking up like a needle from a long way back. The faithful fence led to the next mini-top, before we were brought up short by a sword gash, a 100-ft. deep cleft of steep rock and scree, the Slacks of Glencarvie. My minimal geological knowledge suggested that this must have been an overflow channel from melting ice sheets. The fence plunged straight down what looked like a pretty loose and nasty slope, but a little reconnaissance showed steep grassy slopes around to the south, to yet another exact watershed. Our sudden appearance had disturbed a bird of prey, which from its angry swearing as it circled above us made me think it was a peregrine - it must

have had a nest on the rocky outcrop, but we couldn't spot it, so we went on our way leaving it to its peaceful wilderness.

At the enormous cairn on the top of Mona Gowan, a heavy shower came on, the sky was deep grey all around, and it seemed that the remainder of the day would be miserable. Looking back, Morven seemed only a step behind, looking west the next top seemed a long way off. However, the positive act of setting out again seemed to wave a magic wand, the going down was easy, the going up didn't seem so far after all, and more amazingly we were in sunshine, though how this managed to penetrate the grey sky I don't know. So we had a tea break, sitting back to back on the O.S. 'pile of stones' on the grassy top. The final, almost level stroll to the summit of Scraulac was a delight, across close-cropped turf, past exposed peaty patches mosaiced with drought cracks, and grouse families with bundles of fluffy just-airborne chicks, the mums luring us along with broken-wing rushes. Civilisation was now in sight, down in Donside there were silver loops of river, with the road rising up towards the Lecht beyond. Abandoned at last by the faithful fence, we made for a couple of cairns on the rim of the hill, passing some really nasty bogholes, and there suddenly directly below us was the main road, and the car. A grand day, with every foot of the way (in both senses) on the watershed! Watershed distance 9.4 miles; cumulative 51.8.

The Big Push

The A938 to the Tilt Watershed, 18th-21st September 2003

Day 1

Having reached the serious mountain stretch of the watershed, I persuaded my husband Ken that an Expedition was called for, and after poring over maps we decided that the best ploy was for me to be dropped at our previous last point on the A97 col above Tarland, while he drove to the Linn of Dee, got out his shiny new bike and pedalled back to Invercauld House, before walking in to Loch Builg, a place that has often seemed ideal for a camp, and which lay slap on the watershed. After the best summer in years the weather forecast was still goodish, as I set off up the steepest bit of the day, direct from the road, the little hump and then the big hump of Carn a' Bhacain, along handy little deer tracks, through a brown and grey and gold landscape, although the sun wasn't too far behind the high cloud.

The little lochan on the way to Camock Hill was dried and black, and just beyond the top, there was a whole family of cairns. On the slopes leading up to Brown Cow Hill, the only memorable feature was a gulch, like a mini Slacks of Glencarvie. Otherwise the contours were so gentle that no summit was in sight, just an ever-receding horizon. At Meikle

Geal Charn, there were outcrops of quartz and boulders on top, and a fence to follow down the ridge, directly into the wind with eyes weeping. Ken soon joined me at the ruins of Loch Builg Lodge, and we put up the tent, and cooked supper as the cloud gradually thickened and dropped onto the top of Culardoch, and the drizzle began. So we retired to our bijou tent, and essential reading material (for Ken "I thought I might be spending a long time in the tent" Anna Karenina!). A big skein of geese gossiped overhead, circled for a bit, and settled down onto the far end of the loch in the twilight.

Day 2

Ken was making breakfast at 6.45, and we packed up as the sun crept down the hill slopes behind us, reaching us just in time to dry the soaking flysheet a little. A stream gully, carefully taken on its left bank to preserve the watershed, led us to the ridge of Carn Dearg and Carn Drochaid, which would be respectable hills were it not for the giant mass of Ben Avon towering above them, with all its ridges and lumps and bumps. It seemed a long way up to the two granite warts of Stuc Gharbh Mhor. The way ahead was now very obvious, around the big bowl on our left, past the impressive face of the Clach Choutsaich, with streams on the right falling to the Avon, on the left to the Gairn, round to the main summit. We trotted easily down to the Sneck, and plodded up the other side, and across the featureless plateau of Beinn a' Bhuird to the tiny cairn of the north top, then off into the unknown, down the stony/grassy west ridge, towards two tiny lochans. Then we were in a shallow basin, the dreaded Moine Bhealaidh, which was amazingly wet given the summer, with sluggish ditches winding here, there and everywhere, so that it was impossible to know quite where the watershed was, but we slithered across it, coming to better ground as we turned north on the broad ridge leading up to Beinn a' Chaorainn Bheag. Here were the first signs of civilisation, a couple of cairns, and a path leading down between the sweet little tarns on the col and up to the top of Beinn a' Chaorainn itself. The last lap was down the ridge to the west, coming to a wide grassy plateau, which would have made a lovely high campsite, but we were aiming for the Lairig an Laoigh cut deep into the hillside another 100m. below. Perched on the rim looking down, it seemed impossible, but steep grassy slopes did eventually cork-screw down to heather and stones, and the black peat-haggy valley, just about exactly at the col. We couldn't find a dry spot, so wandered around the corner to camp by the Hutchison Hut for the night.

Day 3

There was cloud on the tops as we set off at next morning, to contour back round into the Lairig an Laoigh and pick up the watershed again, and there was cloud at the top of Stob Coire Etchachan, though it seemed to be rising, and then there were amazing views down onto the cloud hanging around in the trough of Loch Avon, and across to cloud-capped Macdui. Down the ridge to Loch Etchachan we went, and round its northern flats, to the foot of the Carn Etchachan cliffs. These looked pretty formidable, but the boundary, and the watershed, went straight up them. I knew that we had gone up that way once before, and again we managed to wiggle up quite easily, if steeply, popping out on the ridge just about at the summit cairn. As we turned southwest along the ridge, I saw clear blue in the sky to the north, a sharp delineation with the cloud, which gradually worked its way south, turning it into a glorious day by the time we had got to Macdui. I love that valley of the Garbh Uisge Mor high on the east summit slopes, a real Shangri La. The purling stream runs through banks covered with the most vivid emerald moss. There are tiny lochans, with mini sandy beaches. Beyond the rim of its bowl the ground falls away to the black hole of Loch Etchachan, and its outfall tumbles down to the gash of Loch Avon. A beautiful serene place it seems, but so high that it would be a terrible place to be caught in bad weather. Enough poetising! We pulled up the stony flank to the south, and followed the stone heaps to meet the path, and the people coming up from Loch Etchachan. They were lightly clad, and going disgustingly fast, and I cursed them inwardly as I plodded in their wake past the tumbledown minibothy, and up to the cairn. But I forgave them as we lolled in the sun and ate our lunch, and gazed at the view. As always it seemed as though to go across to Braeriach would be only a hop and a skip, as the Lairig Ghru just disappears. My planning had envisaged that we would do just that, aiming to camp at Loch nan Stuirteag, but we were running rather late. Anyway, off again, over point 1295, strictly following the boundary and watershed over the boulder fields, and joining the path again at the steepish little drop down to the Lochan Buidhe plateau. The watershed passes just between the two burns, and we then turned to follow the March Burn down to the Lairig Ghru. This turned out to be quite scary, as the slopes fell away and became really steep, with the stream in a rocky gully. Ken behind me, over-loaded with the tent, slipped and slid down 30 feet or so on the steep grass, so after that we teetered down pretty carefully. About two-thirds of the way down the stream disappeared into a tangle of boulders (just as the map showed!) and gradually the slopes began to ease a little. Anyhow, all did go alright, and we found ourselves down at the col, out of the wind and in the sunshine in the middle of the afternoon. Then I threw a wobbly, and declared that this

was quite far enough for today - the slopes on the Braeriach side looking not much better than those behind us. So we found a lovely campsite just on the edge of the first of the Pools of Dee, and slothed around in the sun, drying the tent, which had been packed soaking wet, dangling my feet in the pool, watching the sun glitter on the water, and to my great surprise discovering minnows/sticklebacks, anyway little fish with lots of fins, swimming in the pool. How on earth did they get there? The pools have no obvious inlet or outlet, the water flowing underground (which is why it's impossible to say if the March Burn flows to the Dee or the Spey.) And they must be almost frozen solid most winters. When the sun finally went over the hill, and the midges came out (though not too desperately) we retired to our sleeping bags, though the voices going through the Lairig continued far into the gloaming.

Day 4

We were off early from the shadowy glen, climbing up the steep slopes which turned out to be surprisingly easy, and not nearly as steep as the previous day's descent, to reach the ridge of Sron na Lairige, and in and out of the mists and a cold wind to the summit of Braeriach. Once on the plateau we navigated by rough compass bearings, keeping to the highest ground above the wells of Dee, and glad to see the Einich cairn loom up, and when we met the corrie edge there was no need to worry about route finding. To satisfy summit fever we continued down and then up the stony slope to the top of Angel's Peak, clear of cloud, before backtracking a little to pick up the long ridge leading south-west to Loch nan Stuirteag, where the autumn leaves of the little woodrush in the sward were like flickering red flames. From there it was a pull up the long bare shoulder and tops of Monadh Mor into the wind, with the dark clouds brushing the top of Bheinn Bhrotain over to the east. The watershed took us almost due south, on the long, long ridge of Cnapan Mor and Cnapan Beag, the going getting worse as we got lower and the heather got longer, and seeming to last for ever until we at last came out on the boggy footpath to the Feshie, at the watershed with a new river. The weather was deteriorating, with black skies hiding the high peaks, so we settled down to the ten-mile slog out to the Linn of Dee, grateful when the boggy path became a track at Geldie Lodge, stayed by tea at White Bridge, and thankfully reaching the car just before the rain.

Grand total for the four days 52.5 miles, of which 42.6 on the watershed and 12,330ft of ascent. Cumulative watershed distance 94.4 miles.