

## **Terra Incognita - The North Slope Tors of Ben Avon.**

*Hugh Spencer*

We are in one of the strangest places in the Cairngorms. The great grey stones to be found elsewhere on this hill are here too but in a crowded abundance and in an extraordinary arrangement of shapes, sizes and patterns. We are in a vast sculpture gallery created by nature but so redolent with atmosphere as to possibly involve the hands of the gods. This is a very unusual place, an eerie place, and perhaps a secret place for it is mentioned in no texts, not even the sacred ones by Seton Gordon, Alexander, Firsoff, and Watson. Welcome to the north spur of the West Meur Gorm Craig on Ben Avon.

(The West Meur Craig is the 1023m top marked but un-named on OS maps at GR 154036. It is named on the Harvey 1:25,000 map of Ben Avon).

I was a small boy when I first climbed Ben Avon. I had already climbed Lochnagar but this was very different. We breasted the top of the Allt Phouple under a dull grey sky and there etched black on a patchwork of Spring snow were the great tors - a landscape as strange to me as a child in the fifties as anything I had seen in books or films.

I have that first image in my head today, nearly 60 years on, like a photograph. It was the beginning of an addiction to Ben Avon that has never left me. I have been compelled to wander this hill in summer and winter at least once every few years for most of my life and can never drive over the Lecht or be anywhere with a distant vista of the hill without stopping repeatedly to study it through my binoculars.

Sometimes my wanderings would take me down northwards from the plateau to the amazing rhino horns which are the Clach Bun Rudhtair, or into the Caol Ghleann, or sometimes along the estate track from the Linn. Always on these occasions my eye would be drawn to this north spur of the West Meur Gorm Craig. There seemed to be something different here, an oddness to the colouring, a strangeness to the shadows, an indication of something meriting a closer look. But even through binoculars nothing conclusive could be

gleaned and this northern spur of Ben Avon is on the way to or from nowhere significant. For an exploration it would have to be a destination in its own right or a major and pathless diversion from the normal ways on the hill .

One hot midsummer day in 2003 I made this journey to the hill. I would forego the wonders of the plateau tors and the summit and instead explore the shadows and markings on the northern slopes which had for so long beguiled me. It was a journey of such singularity I would make it again every summer for the next four years before feeling replete.

I cycled to Inchroy from Corgarff, a rough ride compared to the Tomintoul approach but the sudden view of the hill and its northern slopes from high on the track is wonderful and a fitting prelude to this journey and it still takes less than an hour. From the Linn of Avon I climbed the Carn Fiachlach spur to the col below Meall Gaineimh with its giant slug. My wife and I bivvied here one moonlight night with wine, a fire, and a steak dinner all to celebrate our twenty fifth anniversary - such being the grip this hill has on me. Serious addictions always impinge on family life. Water was readily available from the big pool hidden in the nearby Clach Ban - itself always worth a diversion to explore and to make yet another attempt to find its hidden subterranean passage mentioned in one of the early Club journals.

Onwards now to the 885m col at GR 160045 and it is here that the north slope reveals its first surprise and something unique in the Cairngorms. Looking down the slope to-wards your right, north-westwards, you will spot an amazing giant stone block about half way down - a huge piece of a tor dislodged from the plateau in the ice ages and now slowly sliding, or maybe tumbling, downwards in geological time . It sits on the slope tilted at just about the angle one would expect a block of this size to topple. Drop down to it and eat your lunch under its overhanging side to test your luck in the geological time stakes. You may not believe it is tumbling but query the potholes on its bottom upside down edge.

It is a short leftward slant downwards from here to the rocks of the Clach Fiaraidh. This outcrop turns out to be much much larger than it looks from above, a sort of two tier structure with a deep canyon in the middle. There is a lonely feeling to this place which is

not surprising as very few people venture onto the north slope hereabouts - a "no mans land" between the hill's main thoroughfares.

Across from here to the south-west is our main objective, the north spur of the West Meur Gorm Craig and now revealing a line of intermittent rocks and tors on its back. The plan now is to go over to the spur and follow this line up to the highest tor. You may be tempted to forego this objective due to the necessary descent and re-ascent and with the excuse the rocks and tors don't look so interesting from here as to justify the effort. Don't be so tempted. The tors on this spur are very big, structurally extraordinary, and the whole place highly atmospheric. If like me you are fascinated by Cairngorm landscapes or by big rock formations, then the exploration of this spur is something you will relish.

So we drop down now south-west to the burn at GR 153048 from where a green swathe avoiding the heather leads quickly up to the spur. Climbing the spur soon becomes a slow wander between and around a fascinating array of giant blocks, tors, outcrops and boulders and a feeling of being in a "lost world". Indeed one might be climbing the back of a Stegosaurus. And its a game of I - Spy because every shape and feature to be found in Cairngorm tors are all here in just one half mile, plus innumerable new ones. There are squeezey corridors into rooms, chokestones, elephants' backsides, cohorts of blocks standing guard like a stone army, or are they tombstones, gargoyles, warts like fossilised dinosaur eggs, and more, and best of all a wall with a bas relief of carved figures reminiscent of the temples of ancient Egypt.

From the highest tor one could carry on up to the plateau, visit the plateau tors, and finish by dropping down to the Glen Avon track via the mighty Clach Bun Rudhtair tors. My preference has always been to descend back down the spur so as to view the exhibits again but from the different perspective. By this time of the day the shadows will be lengthening to add even more atmosphere.

This also enables a visit to what is probably the least visited corrie loch in the Cairngorms and possibly the least seen as it is visible from no-where on the plateau. This is the little bowl of Lochan nan Gabhar. There is a black and white picture of it in V.A Firsoff's book "On Foot and Ski in the Cairngorms" where it appears

a dark and inhospitable place. One winter I skied down from the Stob Bac an Fhurain to one of the few points on the hill from where the loch is visible and this confirmed the impression. In fact it is a pleasant place with a waterfall and a flat green platform by the shore probably ideal for a camp or bivvy. I have not tested this for it remains the only significant corrie in the Cairngorms in which I have not spent a night.

This omission will be my excuse to make this remarkable journey yet again. I hope you too will make it and especially if you are also a Ben Avon druggie. It's a big hit befitting of this hill. Variations are possible but do make sure it is a fine, preferably sunny day, for in mist it would be a complete waste of time.

The absolute Cairngorm romantic will end the day lying on the grass in the evening sun beside the track back to Corgarff listening to the curlews and oyster catchers down by the infant Don and watching the dancing hares on the hillside beyond.