

## The Climbing Life of Bill Brooker

### *Margaret Brooker*

As a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Aberdeen Scout Group Bill, aged 12, made an ascent of Mount Keen from a camp at Aboyne, and soon joined a splinter group called Senior Patrol, displacing school rugby in his sporting interests. When fourteen, he cycled to Skye with a fellow scout and they climbed Sgùrr Alasdair. He overheard climbers discussing the Inaccessible Pinnacle. He asked the Warden at the Glenbrittle hostel if it was truly inaccessible and was told that "it is for the likes of you". The next day he donned gym shoes and climbed it solo.

Bill may have been influenced by his late elder brother Ian who was very active in the Cairngorm Club, but he was more attracted to the group of ex-servicemen led by Mac Smith who claimed the Deeside hills and crags every weekend. They camped, made howffs and used the estate bothies, especially in Glen Muick and Luibeg on Mar Estate. They built up a tough, carefree and fun loving culture, which included an intense feeling for the natural and social history of the Cairngorms. No small influence on them all was the figure of gamekeeper Bob Scott of the Derry, an ex-serviceman himself and witty dispenser of hill wisdom and lore.

Into this scene strode the seventeen year old Brooker, along with the late Johnny Morgan and Doug Sutherland. In the years 1949-50 they proceeded to astound the Aberdeen climbing world with over a dozen climbs including: Ben Macdui, Coire Sputen Dearg; Crystal Ridge (W), Anchor Route (W) and Snake Ridge: Creagan a' Choire Etchachan; Winter Route (W), Flanking Ribs: Braeriach, Coire Bhrochain; Pyramus (W): Lochnagar; Black Spout Pinnacle - Route 1, the 3rd Ascent (free from aid) of Eagle Ridge, Giants Head Chimney (W), Shadow Buttress A (W), West Rib (W): Skye - Sgùrr Alasdair; Abrahams Route (W).

Bill was drawn to study for a BSc in Geography at Aberdeen University. There he encountered a band of keen climbers in the medical faculty. Patey, Leslie, Taylor and later Grassick and Nicol, and this led to an outburst of hard exploratory climbing during his university life, pushing up standards to match the best in Britain,

especially in winter using the tools of the thirties; long ice axes and Tricouni nails.

Among his new climbs were Lochnagar; Eagle Ridge (W) (a Scottish jewel to this day), Gargoyle Chimney (W), The Stack: Creag an Dubh Loch; Labyrinth Edge: Beinn a' Bhuid; Mitre Ridge (W): Ben Macdui, Creagan a' Choire Etchachan; Red Scar Route. In Skye with Mike Dixon from Leeds, in 1950-51 he opened up the Coireachan Ruadh face of Sgùrr Mhic Choinnich with Fluted Buttress, Crack of Dawn, and Forgotten Groove. On motor bikes, with his medic friends he visited Nevis, Glencoe, Ardgour, and opened exploration in Applecross with Cioch North Wall on Sgùrr a' Chaorachain.

When the Aberdeen party set off for the Alps in 1952, Bill went by way of his beloved BSA Sloper. In Chamonix he climbed on the classic Aiguilles with Johnny Morgan. At the end of the holiday they crossed the Col du Géant. After a night in the Entrèves woods they climbed the Brouillard Glacier to bivouac on Pic Eccles at the tragic scene of destruction of the small cabin in a rock fall a few days earlier. They crossed Mont Blanc by the beautiful Innominata face and a fine high summit walk in perfect conditions, to descend to the ancient Grand Mulets hut. In the morning they were awakened by a terrible storm which chased them down to the valley; they were glad to be a day ahead.

During 1953 Bill continued to add new routes to the Deeside Cairngorm crags in the summer and winter, often climbing in this period with Tom Patey and Mike Taylor. All are worthy of mention, but those that stand out are the winter ascent of the Eagle Ridge with Patey and Taylor, and the winter ascent of Mitre Ridge of Beinn a' Bhuid with Patey in the same year. In the summer of 1953 he went to Skye with Patey, and they added another five new routes to his favourite Coruisk side of the Ridge, on Sgùrr Dearg including the impressive Thunderbolt Shelf.

After university came National Service as a lieutenant in the Royal Engineers. On return he often wore the trademark black beret while climbing and later on he had a blue UN beret from Cyprus days. In the summer of '55 Bill had the opportunity to spend three months prospecting in East Greenland for a Danish mining company which was an experience he treasured all his life. At the time few

people ventured there, and it was a real wilderness experience. After that he was employed by George Wimpey as a site investigation engineer based in Milford Haven. He then decided to return to University to take Honours and then a teaching certificate.

So Bill had less opportunity for climbing now but in 1958 he formed a partnership with Dick Barclay. They opened up the formidable Central Gully Wall of Creag an Dubh Loch with Waterkelpie Wall and other routes. In Skye they added Dawn Grooves to the Sgùrr Mhic Coinnich Crag. Bill then rounded off this decade of magnificent climbing with a winter ascent of Labyrinth Edge on Creag an Dubh Loch. His contribution to the exploration of the Deeside Cairngorm crags and the neglected Coruisk crags of Sgùrr Dearg and Sgùrr Mhic Coinnich was outstanding, and marked him out, along with Tom Patey, as the most notable climbers of his generation on our native crags.

In 1959 Bill married and started teaching Geography in Aberlour and then became Principal teacher in Keith Grammar School. He had joined the Scottish Mountaineering Club (SMC) in 1957 and kept in touch and climbed with other members when possible. After a couple of years his need for adventure took him to King Richard School in Dhekelia, Cyprus for a three year contract with the Army Institute of Education. It was an ideal base for him to pursue his interest in ancient civilisations and there were trips to Egypt, Jordan, Crete and mainland Greece where he climbed Mount Olympus.

In 1965 he returned to Keith briefly and soon after was appointed Tutor Organiser in Extra Mural Studies, now called Continuing Education, at Aberdeen University, becoming Director before retiring in 1992. Bill always felt he was so fortunate to be paid to do what he enjoyed. He lectured on current affairs, ancient civilisations, climbing and the natural world. Every January he taught a week long course in expedition planning for Combined Services Personnel based in Boat of Garten.

Following the Cairngorm disaster of 1971 when 5 children and an instructor died, Bill was involved with Mountain Leadership training to improve mountain safety.

Although the most intense of his climbing days were over, he remained heavily involved in mountain activities, much of it through the SMC. It was a great pleasure to him when son Iain led him up

Eagle Ridge and in 1986 became a member of the SMC. Bill had been active in SMC committee work since 1966. He became Vice President in 1970-72, President 1972-74 and later Honorary President in 1996. He was Editor of the SMC Journal from 1976 – 1986 and Clerk of the Munro Compleatists which he retained until 1992. For the centenary of the Club in 1989 he was the Editor of the Anthology of A Century of Scottish Mountaineering.

In the 1990s he had more time for writing and had a series on coastal walks and a few individual articles on sledging, cycling and river swimming published in The Leopard. He was a member of the Etchachan Club and was Chair of the North East Mountain Trust, where he was held in high regard, and went to their lectures as often as he could. He went every year to the ex-presidents' lunch of the SMC.

In 1999 he became an Honorary Member of the Cairngorm Club, and gave a talk on "Mountain Memories" at the annual dinner.

During his last few years he was sustained by worldwide correspondence with old friends and had frequent visitors. He remained interested in the outside world and showed a lively interest in other peoples' adventures. His contribution to Scottish climbing was remarkable and will endure as his permanent memorial.

(See obituary page 116)