

## The big white dogs of the Haute Maurienne

*Alister Macdonald*

This story comes from a September walking holiday in that part of the French Alps confusingly called the Haute Maurienne and which is more obviously the valley of the river Arc. This runs east – west, along the southern edge of the Massif de la Vanoise. The Alps to the south of the valley are called the Cottian Alps and those to the north are the Graian Alps. The region is a delightful assemblage of villages, meadows, side valleys, a profusion of snow capped peaks and not a few glaciers. Visitors can conveniently get there from the Lombardy Plain, ie from Milan or Turin, a route which provides a particularly attractive approach to the Alps, rising abruptly as they do from the plain. The region is rich in history and pre-history.

As the main thrust of my account is very critical of just one aspect of the region I will praise its attractions for just a little longer. My wife and I were based in the village of Bonneval sur Arc, altitude 1800m. It is the last village as you drive north and east on the D902, which on passing Bonneval, swings north to cross the Col de l’Iseran (2764m) to the famous, (infamous in my view), ski resorts of Val d’Isere and Tigne. Bonneval comprises houses built of stone slabs with remarkably little wood visible, either structural or decorative. Seen from the surrounding heights the village looks like a Neolithic settlement, and at ground level the modern Neolithic is very attractive. Some years ago the village was cut in two by an avalanche but now it is in good commercial shape, catering for skiers in winter and walkers and tourists in summer. Upstream the neighbouring village of l’Ecot is similarly of modern Neolithic design, but off the main road and reached by a dirt track. Upstream of l’Ecot the extensive post glacial flood plain of the Arc is unstable and raw and a very attractive approach route to a number of tops, cols, corries and refuges. The more distant main tops are the Levanna Central (3619m) close to the Italian Parco Nazionale del Gran Paradiso and the Grande Cimarella (3676m). Closer by lie la Bessaneas (3592m) and Ouille d’ Arberon (3554m). As walkers we enjoyed these as a backdrop to our efforts. A typical example was the walk up to a magnificent corrie and refuge, the latter being advertised in advance,

on a rickety old wooden board; “ Refuge des Evettes à 5 minutes. Pâtisseries Maison: Tartes à la rhubarb sauvage. Tarts au Beaufort”. Oh the joys of the Alps combined with French cuisine. We learned to love Beaufort cheese, the speciality of the whole region. And now for the big white dogs.

We first learned of them from a leaflet obtained from a tourist office quite late in our holiday. Printed in several languages it announced the following “In the course of your walk you may encounter the local Guarding dogs. These are large white dogs whose task is to guard the flocks.” It went on to explain “that the return of bears, lynx and wolves to the mountains has prompted a revival of the traditional practice of using dogs to guard the flocks. These dogs are born and raised in the sheepfold, and form strong social and affectionate bonds with the sheep. Their natural instinct is therefore to defend them. As soon as a guarding dog (also called a Pastou) scents danger he places himself between the flock and the intruder and barks a warning. If the intruder fails to heed the warning, the dog may be provoked to attack”. There then followed a lot of detailed suggestions as to what the intruding walker should do and not do when confronted by a Pastou, ending with the information that large signs indicate the presence of the dogs. Our first encounter with the dogs came near the end of our stay.

On a grey afternoon we had decided to drive down the valley to Modane and undertake a forest walk in a side valley penetrating the Vanoise National Parc. The attraction was the forest, an ancient larch forest set on a hillside, conveniently reached from a roadside refuge and car park. We enjoyed the walk very much. The way marking was clear, there was a variety of fine views and some of the ancient trees were enormous, almost on the scale of Redwoods. Near the end of the circuit we had to descend to an amphitheatre close to the refuge and our car. Sheep could be seen scattered across the amphitheatre but by the time we had descended they had been gathered together by the sheep dogs, controlled by the shepherd. And then we saw the other dogs, the big white guard dogs, variously positioned. Our return route would take us through the amphitheatre and naturally we tried to keep well clear of the sheep, and the guard dogs, which were pretty big. Think Labrador and double the size. They strutted and barked fiercely and would not let us pass. We kept well away from

them and eventually called out to the shepherd, who was conspicuously out of sight. The dogs then responded to some remote command and retired, letting us continue on our detour around the flock. The extra distance was not seriously inconvenient, but crucially, it was possible. The flock could have been positioned much more inconveniently in the amphitheatre and we might have had to retrace our entire route in order to get back to our car. When we reached the refuge we entered with a sense of relief. So that was that, an unpleasant disturbance at the end of an otherwise nice walk.

The next encounter with the guard dogs was rather different. On our last day I opted for an afternoon walk, up the steep hillside from Bonneval to meet the long distance path GR5 (Lake Geneva to the Mediterranean) which contoured high up along the valley wall. It would enable me to reach the village of le Villeron from whence I could walk back to Bonneval, along the valley floor, taking in some prehistoric paintings on the Rocher de Chateau. It was hot and the walk up the very steep grassy slopes to the GR5 proved very difficult. The ground was dry so traction was not a problem, but both the gradient and the route were. First I tried a hint of a path through a dried up ravine but had to retreat in the face of an impenetrable rock wall. I settled for an oblique line, clawing and heaving upwards, hoping to gain height to intercept GR5 which undoubtedly lay high above me. I struggled for a long time, gaining impressive height and keeping a safe distance from the area where the valley wall was near vertical, but I failed to find GR5. During this time I had noticed a few sheep scattered across the slopes and thought nothing of them. And then, whilst scanning the view upwards, I saw, standing on a promontory, a big white dog. It was surveying its territory, along the valley and downwards. I immediately ducked down, hoping to be out of sight. I was immediately aware that if I could not retrace my route then I was in trouble. And worse, were those few sheep scattered about and below me part of the dog's flock? I started my retreat promptly, driven by rational assessment and sheer fright. "Was I going to meet any more guard dogs on the way down?" was the question which nagged at a sub conscious level, but I was too preoccupied to face directly. It was a long descent, necessarily obliquely angled to avoid near the vertical sections, but eventually I was able to cross a shallow gully which led to an expanse of less

steep ground where I was hopeful that I could circle round any guarded flock. Eventually I reached terrain which was manifestly sheep free and really rather nice. So I sat down and enjoyed the view – an immense void of the Arc valley in brilliant autumn sunshine, and pretended that all was well with the world. But it wasn't and I was still experiencing the fear of being held captive between fierce dogs and impossibly steep hillside....so much for the Parc National de la Vanoise!

The leaflet explaining the role of the white guard dogs was published by the Ministry of Agriculture. The extensive literature made available to visiting walkers makes no mention of them. In a region where walking, both long and local distances is actively encouraged, it is clearly unreasonable for these guard dogs to be allowed to behave in the way they do. On my return I should have written to an MEP about the matter, but I never got round to it, partly because I believe the French farming lobby is immensely powerful. Perhaps I am wrong to assume that other walkers have been inconvenienced by the practice and perhaps no one has seriously suffered on the hillsides. I am, however, quite clear about my own solution to the problem they present. I cannot imagine ever returning to walk in the region where these dogs prevail, which is a pity as the Haute Maurienne is magnificent.

## **In Praise of Windfarms**

*Editor*