

has a positive, if laid back, view of life. As we reached the coll at the start of the ridge, Drew pulled out as he was not feeling well, so Spike and I set off, through light winds and a fresh dusting of snow. I won't bore you with climb details. I'm sure many of you will have climbed the Aonach Eagach, and know it well. All I can say is **don't trust rose-tinted memories!**

Was it really that long? Were there so many pitches to short rope? Was the descent such a never ending knee strain? Yes, is the answer to all of the above! So 8 ½ hours later a very stiff man reached the Glen Coe roadside, but it had been a great day; thanks Spike! That evening we all swapped tales of the days on the hills, as you do. The chat was amiable and happy. We had all climbed our goals, and basked in that glow of a good day.

Thanks to Marj Ewan, Colin Brown, Stan Urbaniak, Jim Bryce and Judy Middleton for the crack and company. I calculate that if I wait a further 46 years to climb the Aonach Eagach again I will be 112, and if still alive I will probably be using a Zimmer frame.

A Pilgrim's Tale

We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go
always a little further:

James Elroy Flecker

Duncan Macrae

Celebrities, when interviewed, are often asked the question, "What is the book that changed your life?" Not being a celebrity I was never asked that question. However, as is my practice, I am going to tell you anyway!

The book was entitled "Always a Little Further", by Alistair Borthwick, first published in 1939. I read the book while a young Boy Scout in 1949 and I was immediately hooked – line, sinker and all. Borthwick's story (no character is fictitious) relates how he and his chum, having camped a few times on the outskirts of Glasgow, decided to embark on their first ambitious expedition to Arrochar and

the Cobbler. Here they met a guy by the name of Hamish who regaled them with dales of derring-do on big mountains to the North and West. Borthwick and his chum were as hooked as I was, and this started them off with a string of adventures and climbs on the best known Scottish mountains, meeting a succession of interesting and eccentric characters along the way. Incidentally, I also met Hamish on my first ambitious expedition to Skye in 1953, more of which later.

Alistair Borthwick's story must have implanted itself in my subconscious because my own story mirrors it closely.

I shall start at the beginning. I was a keen member of the 27th Aberdeen Scout Troop at High Hilton Church. I first went camping with my "Be prepared" pals in 1949. It was a time of severe austerity and food and money were scarce, particularly in our council housing estate. Ration books were still in use. At the time I was delivering newspapers for the princely sum of 5 shillings a week (25p). I was paid on a Saturday morning with two half crowns, one of which was given to my widowed mother; with the other one I could buy all my food for a camping week-end.

Six or seven of us would meet on a Saturday morning with our ex-WD steel framed Commando rucksacks and bicycles at the Post Office adjacent to Hilton School. The Post Office was notable, being run by Willie Rennie, a local hero who had played football for Aberdeen and Scotland. Hilton School no longer exists but the standing stone which stood in the playground still does, complete with tricouni scratch marks.

We would wobble our way the eight miles or so to Templars Park, loaded with packs and tents, and many of us wearing kilts, a sight to behold! In order to vary the scenery we would travel by the Old Bridge of Dee and South Deeside Road one Saturday and by the North Deeside Road, crossing the Dee at Milltimber, on the following Saturday. Our annual summer camp, a week in July, was the highlight of the year. We would head off into darkest Aberdeenshire and camp in such exotic places as Tough, Tarland, Ballater and Ballogie. The journey was by an open sided lorry, carefully packed with each Patrol's gear, six tea chests of pots, pans, ropes and all sorts of other camping stuff, plus seven ex-army bell tents (one for the latrines). Additionally there were the scouters'

“Stormhaven” and “Niger” ridge tents plus Troop equipment. On top, there were 40 or so Scouts with their rucksacks and kitbags, clinging on. “Health and Safety” had not been invented in those days!

Such camping experience led to a succession of hikes and minor ascents. There was a one day hike from Templars Park to Cairn Mon-earn, overlooking the Slug Road. Then there was the Cairn Kerloch hike, followed by the ascent of Clachnaben. Finally we tackled Scotland’s most easterly Munro, Mount Keen. This was on a two night camping expedition over the Easter weekend of 1953. Starting from Ballater on a Friday night, I, along with three fellow Scouts, ascended Cairn Leuchan to the south. We slept on the bench seats and wooden tables in the so-called ski huts. It was a cold, frosty night, well below zero. Next day we followed the path, invisible at times, to descend into the head of Glen Tanar. We climbed Mount Keen and then camped in grassy Corrie Bruach on its northern slope. It snowed heavily all night but next morning we dug ourselves out and walked to Glen Tanar and Aboyne. Life was getting more interesting!

In the autumn of 1952 I had left the Grammar School and started an apprenticeship as a ship draughtsman with Hall Russell & Co. Shipbuilders and Engineers, Aberdeen. I did not realize it at the time but I was also to serve a parallel apprenticeship as a rock climber. Shipyards have always been a breeding ground for hill walkers and climbers and Hall Russell was infected with them. During that time my work mates introduced me to snow and ice climbing in the Great Eastern Corrie of Lochnagar. It was my first ascent of what became my favourite mountain and I stopped counting after 120 ascents. The climbers at Hall Russell included Kenny Winram, probably the leader of the pack, but I climbed mainly with Raymond Ellis, Dod Adams and Fraser Henderson. These guys disappeared overnight in the mid and late 50s, going to Canada, Australia and New Zealand, respectively, partly as Scots do and partly to avoid National Service.

I thought National Service was a good idea and volunteered in late 1959. I had my first visit to England courtesy of the RAF. I trained as a “medic” and tried, in vain, to be posted to the Mountain Rescue Units at either Leuchars or Kinloss. Instead I was posted to Singapore and whilst based at RAF Changi Hospital I made occasional trips up-country as a medic attached to the Jungle Rescue

Team in Malaya, (the "emergency" had not yet started). While in Singapore I bought a Snipe Class sailing dinghy and learned to sail.

Following de-mob in late 1961 I returned to my drawing board at Hall Russell but soon secured a position in Hong Kong, and married my ever patient fiancée of some six years. In June we travelled to Hong Kong where I plied my trade as a Naval Architect for the next 25 years. The Chairman of the company I worked for was none other than Mount Stephen Cumming, the man who achieved the first ascent of the Cumming-Crofton route on the Mitre Ridge of Beinn A Bhuird in 1953.

At this point the Editor has limited me to three concluding topics.

Skye, 1953. This was my first ambitious expedition. Mother had passed away a few days after my 17th birthday and I was now my own keeper. My climbing companion was Philip Barron, a fellow Scout and still a Grammar School pupil. Through my contacts with the Hall Russell climbing mafia I had a rough idea of how to proceed. First, a visit to the HQ of Aberdeen Journals in Broad Street, not to visit the office but to make clandestine contact with one of the van drivers. For a packet of 20 Senior Service cigarettes Philip and I would be picked up at the Fountain in Woodside at 11pm on Friday night, and driven to Inverness. Little did we know that we had to throw out bundles of papers at every agent from Woodside on! Eventually we crossed the sea to Skye and started walking from Kyleakin. A travelling fishmonger who was heading for Portree offered us a lift, which we gratefully accepted. We should have refused. At every croft and homestead along the way we had to stop to sell fish, but eventually two tired would-be mountaineers were deposited at Sligachan. We camped at the bridge and watched the sun set over Sgurr-nan-Gillian with some trepidation. Next morning we rose early, struck camp and as we started packing our sacks a funny thing happened. It started getting dark! Had the universe gone crazy? Neither Philip nor I owned a watch and it took some time to realize that we had managed to sleep around the clock. Despite this set-back we set off for Glen Brittle. As we turned off onto the Carbost road a motor cyclist stopped and asked us if we wanted a lift. We were both amazed and confused. One motorbike, three men, two full rucksacks....was the guy out of his mind? Well, we accepted the

lift and the kind Englishman dropped us off at the Glen Brittle Hostel, leaving us to continue our way to the camp site. It was dark by now and we turned, not left into the proper site, but right where the river enters the Loch. Loud snores emanated from the scattered tents. On the following morning we found that our neighbours had departed for the rock and for the next two days they ignored us completely. There was hostility in the air. They certainly knew what they were about, equipped with nylon ropes, vibrams, skipnet bunnets and thick Glasgow accents, but with no friendly words. Then one day a member of the tribe tripped over and uprooted a guy-line on our tent. When I remonstrated I was asked, "Where are you from anyway?" "Aberdeen", I replied. A pregnant silence followed, then the call went out "They are not English, they are from Aberdeen". Suddenly we were overcome by kindness. Our neighbours had noticed that we had little food and no easy means of procuring more and we were besieged with tins of food, including Pemmican and other delicacies. Our neighbours were, of course, members of the Creag Dhu Mountaineering Club, from Clydebank, led by no other than the Hamish from Alistair Borthwick's book.

Philip and I did not do any serious climbing on that visit. We scrambled up and down long scree chutes in heavy mist and summited Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr Mhic Choinich. The classics, Window Buttress, the Cloch and the Inaccessible Pinnacle would have to wait until next year. And Philip went on to become a world renowned liver transplant surgeon, living in Ottawa.

Shallow Gully, Lochnagar, 1958/59. I was attracted to Shallow Gully, not because it was the last major gully on Lochnagar to remain unclimbed in winter, but because it was first climbed by Miss N. Bruce and H.A. Macrae (no relation). What kind of Macrae would allow himself to be led by a lady? Time for.... things to be put right! On our first attempt in 1958 Fraser Henderson and I failed. I came off at the crux but the belay held. I fell about 30 feet and fractured two ribs. A year later, in February 1959, conditions were perfect and we tried again, and succeeded but it was not easy. The climb took 9 hours, ending in clear bright moonlight, (there were no head torches in those days). We missed the last Strachan bus back to Aberdeen and spent Sunday night in a hayloft at Balmoral. On the Monday we were docked half a day's pay, but it was worth it!

Envoi I last met Hamish McInnes at a reception at the Palace of Holyrood some years ago. My younger son Kenneth was receiving his Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award for mountaineering and Hamish was doing the presentations. I asked him if he remembered Glenbrittle in 1953. He replied, very politely, that he did. The infamous had by this time dropped the “in”. When I retired aged 50 and returned to my beloved Scotland, I felt I was too old and rusty for rock climbing. I bought a small yacht, a Westerly 22 built in 1965, and based her at the Lochaber Yacht Club, Fort William. For many years I sailed “Kelpie” around most of the West Coast Islands with some of my old climbing mates as crew. The island we missed was St. Kilda, but you always have to leave a target for the future!

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The Glamour of High Altitudes

John Buchan

An article for the *Spectator* magazine first published in 1904, with an introduction by **Roger Clarke**

Introduction John Buchan is today best-known as a writer of popular fiction and the author of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), his most famous novel. This established the genre of the spy thriller and influenced subsequent espionage writers such as Graham Greene, Ian Fleming and John Le Carré. His literary work is also notable for its historical novels and biographies.¹ In addition, Buchan had a distinguished career as a public man of affairs. Born in Perth in 1875, his early education was in Glasgow before graduating from Oxford with a first in Classics and qualifying as a barrister in London. He then joined the so-called ‘kindergarten’ of bright young men

¹ The popularity of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* has endured and it has never been out of print since it was first published a hundred years ago. It has also been filmed several times, first by Alfred Hitchcock in 1935, and most recently for BBC television in 2008.