

## Aonach Eagach Ridge Forty Five Years On

(Sub title - In Praise of Glucosamine & Chondroitin)

*Steve Chadwick*

Forty years Ago Today  
Sergeant Pepper taught the Band to play,  
(with apologies to the Beatles).

Well that's not exactly the words, but it kind of fits. Forty six years ago two callow youths who had climbed no more than a season's VS rock in the Peak District, bought crampons and wooden shafted Salewa axes and headed north from Sheffield one Easter, hitching rides to Glen Coe. For us it was the first time north of the border, we had absolutely no experience of a hill of any size and no experience of snow and ice!

We hitched our way North and camped in Glencoe, just below the road at a place known as "The Meeting of Three Waters". This was not far from the cottage where Hamish MacInnes then lived, just down the road from what is marked on the OS as Alt na Ruighh. Bad weather descended, as it often does in Glen Coe, and frustration in youths is a bad thing. Eventually we had just one day to go, so when our last day dawned snowy with wind thrumming the tent guys of our Vango Force 10, we determined to do something.

We geared up and set off through driving snow to the approach of the Eastern end of the Aonach ridge, without any description of the route. We had heard it was long and interesting. After an ascent we knew we were at the start of the ridge when to go north was to go down and to go east was obviously the wrong way. So we turned left into the snow and the howling wind.

To be honest, I don't remember much of the route. Visibility was not good and we never saw more than 20 to 30 metres in front of us which was probably just as well – had we been able to see what lay before us, we might not have gone on. I do remember, just after the first top, we came to a drop which we could not see the bottom of, so we abseiled off into the unknown.

I have memories of a pinnacle or two, covered with snow, and a..... step wall which I climbed, clearing snow with my Dachstien mitted hands. We took most of the ridge direct as the flanks on either side looked way too scary, even for young lads high on testosterone and ambition. The heart beats strong in youth.

We finally reached easier, more continuous ground and thought that the hardest must be over, but through the snow our route went on and on, as we headed up to the last Munro. It was then that we met some, to us, old dudes, who had come up direct from the valley just for the Munro. They looked at us with some incredulity as we appeared from the East, out of the snow, and asked if we had just come along the Aonach Eagach ridge? We answered honestly that we thought we had, but we hadn't been able to see much. One guy kind of smiled and said "You must me mad."

There followed some thirty years of fixated climbing, and, living as we did in Gairloch, the temptations were many, and grasped with enthusiasm. I was then posted to Africa for nearly 20 years, and in a blink, I am back based in Aberdeen, complaining to the locals about clearing frost from my car windows. They would say "This is Nuffin! Last year we heed snaw frae November tae February!"

So what can I do, a solo old fart, back in a town he does not know, and where nobody, bar a few old climbers, knows me. Maybe I can at least walk the hills again, even if I can't climb.....Let's try.

I need companions and I like people, so I applied to the Cairngorm Club, and went on a few meets. There was a meet in Tyndrum.....and a seed of an idea kindled in my mind. Wouldn't it be fun to climb the Aonach Eagach again! How hard could it be? Memories are very suspect things; they only remember what they want to. They forget the length of the way and the void yawning either side of your feet that you could feel, even if you could not see. So I paid Marj my £32 and tried to organise a partner, but none was forthcoming. So as a last resort I called an old acquaintance Alan Kimber, who runs a West Coast guiding establishment. Did he have someone who could go with me? He did, and plans were made. In the event, an old climbing partner, Drew Yule, from my 1970 Dundee Bedalbane Rock and Ice days called me and said he could come.

We all met up at the Clachaig Inn car park and sorted out cars. My guide was Spike Sellers, a soft spoken, very competent guy, who

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