

My First Munro

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To misappropriate Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged, that hill walkers in Scotland, whether Scottish or not, will remember their first introduction to Scottish mountains, and the ascent of their first Munro. In my case the two events coincided and it is not so much that I will always remember the occasion; rather I will never forget it.

It was June 1949. I was 19 and had been hill walking for about 3 years, and rock climbing for about a year and a half in Snowdonia and the Lake District, mostly with my climbing partner, Brian. He was my senior by a year or so and had more experience of rock climbing, having been introduced to the sport by his big brother. We were working lads, living in Liverpool, and as the five and a half days working week was the norm, our regular climbing tended to be a hectic affair between Saturday lunch time and back home again on Sunday evening.

We had heard about the big mountains in Scotland and Murray's *Mountaineering in Scotland* which had not long been published, further fired up our enthusiasm to visit them, with the Cuillins of Skye our objective. This was to be our first proper climbing holiday. We didn't have our own transport and couldn't afford the train, so having synchronised our holidays and scrounged the Saturday morning off, Friday evening saw us on the outskirts of Liverpool waving our thumbs at traffic travelling north. A succession of lifts got us to Glasgow next morning and then to Glen Nevis youth hostel by Saturday evening, with the expectation of continuing to Skye the following day. However, in our Sassenach ignorance we had not allowed for the isolation of Skye on the Sabbath at that time. Never mind, there was a great big mountain across the glen and we would fill in the day by climbing that.

The weather was darkly overcast when we left the hostel. There was no bridge across the river then and we duly took off our boots and socks and waded across it. Following the path, and instructions from people at the hostel, we duly found our way to the Allt a'Mhuilinn and the C.I.C. Memorial Hut. By this time it was raining,

as it was for the rest of the day, and the clouds were right down to the base of the cliffs. Our intention was to climb Douglas Boulder and Tower Ridge, but which of the ridges and buttresses we could see below the mist was the Boulder? Brian had been given a new nylon climbing rope for his recent 21st birthday and also a copy of Abraham's *Climbing in Britain*, published in 1909, which he had brought with him more for light reading and historical interest than as a guide book. We tried to reconcile the drawing of the ridges and buttresses in the book with what we could see below the clouds and set off to what we hoped was Douglas Boulder and Tower Ridge.

To a couple of climbers used to the detailed descriptions in the Lake District and Snowdonia climbing guides, Abraham's account of the routes on the Boulder were very vague and indeed somewhat confusing; hardly more than start at the bottom at some point and climb to the top. When we got to the bottom of our chosen cliff we did just that, Brian in the lead, up into the murk above. Again as climbers used to the well-scratched climbs in the Lakes and Snowdonia we were a little disconcerted at first by not finding any nail marks, but we pressed on. The climbing turned out to be not too difficult and it would have been a particularly enjoyable outing on a good day. On this occasion there was a little added frisson of excitement engendered by not being sure where we were and expecting to encounter something beyond our capabilities. We didn't, and ultimately reached the top of the buttress and found the situation somewhat resembled the description in Abraham's book. We were then more sure that we were on the right route and unroped for the climb ahead. The mist was all around us and we couldn't see far, but we were aware that we were among impressive rock scenery, and the seriousness and length of the following scramble up the ridge was real mountaineering. In due course we came upon the steep face of the Great Tower, but the brief description in Abraham's book had prepared us for this and we found the ledge to circumvent it on the left. There was snow still lying in the chimney! We were supposed to be on our summer holidays – but it was lying at an easy enough angle and we were soon back on the ridge to see the dramatic final section of the ascent, a true ridge, narrow, running straight, and with steep drops on each side. We cautiously traversed to a notch, the famous Tower Gap, and though it was not all that deep, given the

exposure, we roped up to cross it. A short section of the ridge followed and a further scramble brought us to the snow-covered summit plateau. We stood and looked at each other, two wet, bedraggled, and humbled climbers. As was common at the time we were wearing government surplus clothing and my jacket was a parachutist's smock, originally camouflaged, but dyed navy blue to hide the pattern. The dye was running in the rain and the water dripping off my fingertips was blue. But we had done it, and the tension we had felt since we set off on Douglas Boulder eased and we just stood and looked at each other and burst out laughing.

We found the summit cairn to claim the ascent then turned for the slog down the mountain to the Youth Hostel, breaking out of the cloud about halfway down. This time we didn't bother to take our boots off to wade the river, Brian stopping in mid-stream to wash the blue dye out of his new rope. Next day we used up much of our meagre financial resources to buy return tickets for the train to Mallaig, then took the ferry and bus to Glen Brittle where we booked into the Youth Hostel. Food rationing was still very much in force and we had sent on parcels of food to be picked up there. Next day we set up our tent in the corner of where the present camp site is, but then we had it to ourselves until a party from the St Andrews University Mountaineering Club joined us at the weekend.

After pitching the tent we left immediately for Coire Lagan. This time we had the SMC Guide to the Isle of Skye, essentially the pre-war edition with an appendix of new climbs. I still have it, rather tatty now, but with dates in the margins of when we climbed the routes. That edition gives only general descriptions of climbs, but we must have been impressed by that of the Western Buttress of Sgurr Sgumain – "... it affords 1600 feet of continuous rock-climbing ...", and went for that. It was raining slightly as we approached the climb, but the rain stopped as we started up the rock, the sun appeared, and we had bright sunny days for the rest of our stay. It was a great climb and a good introduction to climbing in Skye. We had no weather forecasts but knew that Skye could be a very wet place, so we tried to pack in as much climbing as possible while the good weather held. Neither of us had watches, but that didn't matter with the long June days; we got up when we wanted, went out, and came back when we'd had enough. We were surrounded by rock and ridges, and for a

couple of budding climbers we were like kids with the run of the sweet shop. We climbed Sgurr Alasdair by Collie's Route, and followed the ridge to Sgurr Mhic Coinnich, crossed over to Loch Coruisk via Coire a Ghrunda and back over the Dhubs, gained the Cioch by the Cioch Direct, up Sgurr Dearg by the Window Buttress and on to the Inaccessible Pinnacle, climbed up the West side, down the East ridge, and up the South Crack, and traversed just about all the peaks at that end of the ridge. In the middle of the second week we packed up the camp, walked over the Bealach a' Mhaim and established another nearer Sligachan, from where we climbed Sgurr nan Gillean by the Pinnacle Ridge, and explored the northern peaks and ridges, including the climbs on the Basteir Tooth. In all this time we mostly had the Cuillins to ourselves; we rarely met other people on the ridges, and I think we met only one other climbing party other than the members of the St Andrews club. On our last climbing day, with the weather still holding and conditions dry, we climbed Waterpipe Gully; a great end to our holiday.

We packed up the camp that evening and slept overnight in our sleeping bags by the side of the road at the bus stop to make sure we didn't miss the bus next morning. We reversed our travels of two weeks previously by bus, ferry, train, and thumb back to Liverpool, our last lift leaving us near to where I lived. We had run out of money by that time and we walked to my home where I had to borrow some money from my mother for Brian's tram fare to his home on the other side of Liverpool.

That holiday in Scotland left a deep and abiding impression in my mind, exciting and eventful. The experience led to successive summer holidays among the Scottish mountains – including another visit to Skye – and eventually to my seeking a job in Scotland to be nearer them. Joining the Cairngorm Club soon followed, and, as they say, the rest is history. The Big Ben was my first Munro, and I picked up a few more in Skye on that holiday with Brian, though I don't think we knew what a Munro was at the time. I have been fortunate to climb many more since, though sadly not all, but, as I wrote at the beginning, I can never forget the first.