

## INTO THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

*JOHN FLEMING, February 1942*

For six months the noise of industrial Lanarkshire had been in my ears. The soot, grime and dust had filled my nostrils and eyes. I had spent the best of the time in the heat and sweat of the melting shop in a steel-work. This was a sudden change for one who had lived his life by the sea and wandered afar in the mountains and glens of Argyll. With ever-increasing intensity, the call of the hills pulled me irresistibly into the open. The roar of furnaces melting, the crash of scrap falling from the magnet cranes, the beat of the pneumatic hammer dinned into my brain, emphasising the command of industrialism and war; but behind it all were the weekends. In them was, and still is, the escape to peace and quiet. An all-engulfing tranquillity, which can only for me, be found in the heights and valleys, flowed over me in these all too short excursions and carried me on to the next escape. I have come to bless the far-seeing persons who organised and started the Scottish Youth Hostel Association, which makes it possible for one such as me to betake myself into the most beautiful, and often loneliest, reaches of this Scotland, unsurpassable for beauty and grandeur. Add to this the meeting and companionship of, kindred searchers and you have an organisation which can justifiably claim to be doing its part to uphold the national morale.

It was with this background that I began to plan for my holidays. The Cairngorms had been in my mind's eye for some time, and had been put off last year, as I had been giving service at a school camp; but was it now feasible? I had ten days at my disposal, but was it possible to find a companion or must I risk it alone? At last my plans were made, but it had to be a lone journey, unless I met in with someone en-route. Reading the S.M.C. guide made it clear to me that I could not see everything in ten short days, but I decided that with Aviemore Hostel as my headquarters, I would do as much as physically possible in my stay, and to save time I would hasten north by train.

John Fleming Brewing Up



John Fleming

Thursday (July 17th) found me, complete in kilt with rucksack on my back, in Buchanan Street Station, Glasgow, and by dint of being early, settled down on a comfortable seat in a Pullman coach. At last the guard's whistle, and at precisely 10 a.m., we steamed out into the morning sunshine. The journey could not be fast enough for me, Stirling, then Perth were left behind without regrets. Next Dunkeld and Pitlochry, and my interest quickened as the country was not quite so familiar. Through the Pass of Killiecrankie to Blair Atholl, reminding me of the story told by H.V. Morton of the origin of Atholl Brose, and of how it was responsible for the choice of the coat-of-arms used by the Duke of Atholl, and the motto "*Furth Fortune and Fill the Fetters*". From this point the railway begins to climb in earnest, and the two engines panted like an athlete straining for that wonderful solace called his "second wind", which enables him to go on for miles just when he thought he was finished. The country becomes progressively barer and barer, and I moved along to the dining car for lunch as we slowly made our way up into Drumochter Pass and the river Garry below. A shower of rain reminded me that just a year before I had cycled up through this pass in rain and had found that more to my liking than the effortless journey by train. The summit (1,504 ft.) reached, the tempo of the wheels on the rails quickened, and, as I glimpsed Loch Ericht sunk in the hills of Badenoch, my pulse quickened too, as they seemed to beat out Cairngorms, Cairngorms, Cairngorms. At 2.20 p.m. we sped into Aviemore, under the shade of Craigellachie, with the immense range of the Grampians to the southeast, rising behind the expanse of Rothiemurchus Forest.

Aviemore is a straggling little hamlet for such a big station, which seems to extend the full length of the village, giving it an air of bustle. The casual observer may be deluded but it is a restful and almost sleepy clachan, where one can browse and ruminate in peace among its forests and by the shores of its several lochs. The hostel sits on the main road at the Kingussie end of the string of houses and hotels which make up Aviemore. On arrival I found the hostel rather quiet and the warden having an afternoon rest, so I left him undisturbed. By 5

o'clock things brightened up, and having signed in, the inner man called for attention and was not denied.

The light was good, and the cumulus cloud over the mountains demanded a photograph, so I set out with my camera for what I hoped was going to be, for it, a busy week. Up the face of Craigellachie, and soon Speyside and Rothiemurchus lay below, but overshadowed by the greatest mountain range in Britain, and an ideal subject for a panorama. It took me seven exposures, but I returned to the hostel satisfied that it was worth it.

The common-room was seething with new arrivals, cooking, or talking, but all happy and tired after a day in the open. Where can there be better camaraderie than between open-air wanderers, sitting back after an evening meal, at the end of a day's exertion? Everyone was happy and brotherly, whether it was in sharing tea from the pot or giving advice as to routes for the morrow. It was now I met Jim J., a cyclist from Edinburgh. He wanted to know if he could go to the top of the Lairig Ghru and back in one day. We got talking and it came out that he too was a keen photographer, and so we started comparing his Rolleiflex with my Super Ikonta. Nothing was more natural than we should join forces for the next day, the plans were made, and routes worked out and then to bed.

At 6 a.m., the morning did not seem too promising, but enthusiasm is difficult to damp, and we jumped out of our sleeping bags, lit the stove, breakfasted and made up our pack meals. Soon after seven we quietly stole out and down over the Spey, and away through the tree-lined avenue to Coylum Bridge. Rothiemurchus Forest is a labyrinth of passes and tracks, and we lost our way twice before reaching the Cairngorm Club Bridge. From there, the way into the Lairig was clear and we hit a steady pace through the wonderfully wooded paradise. Quiet it was as we strode on amid the Scots pines and the ground community of blaeberry and heather. It seemed an enchanted land as the morning brightened, and it did not take much imagination to think of the innumerable anthills of pine needles as the dwellings of the "Little Folk", so dear to the heart of the Gael.

At long last we climbed above the trees to look back over the forest to Speyside and Aviemore, with jets of steam rising from the station. Looking back may be pleasant, but to look ahead is thrilling and uncertain. There was the Lairig Ghru at last, deep set in the hills which rose steeply on either side and were lost in the mist. Down below, the Allt Druidh tumbled its way through its narrow-cleft gully, sending up sweet music to our ears. But that is only conical Carn Eilrig on the right, and rounded Castle Hill to the left, and we must push on before starting the real ascent. The path is well defined and makes good walking, though the peat is soft in places. The weather is a problem, and it is uncertain whether the mist will rise or fall, but no matter we shall take the chance.

We cross a little burn and through the mists ahead, we see very steep slopes, which must be Creag an Leth-choin, the Lurcher's Crag, so it is time for us to leave the path and strike up the shoulder. Before long we are enveloped in mist and experience the wonderful and ever-changing fantasies conjured up by the swirling. Soon the going changes from heather and crowberry moorland to boulder-fields with occasional clumps of blaeberry in sheltered nooks and crannies. In this mist, the slope seems never ending, but our judgement was good and the first cairn (3,365 ft.) loomed ahead. This is the lower of the two peaks of the Lurcher's Crag, and so, taking a compass bearing from the map we made for the second peak, which is nearly half a mile away. It seemed easy, for soon we saw it straight ahead, and we rested on the edge of the steep cliffs.

Our next objective was to reach Cairn Lochan on the way to Cairngorm, but the rain started, and visibility was restricted to a few yards. Here the canny Scot temperament came to the fore, helped by the fact that so far, our direction finding had been good. To travel by map and compass would mean getting the map wet, so we decided we would trust to our sense of direction. Walking at an angle of  $45^{\circ}$  to the cliffs would take us to our objective, so with light hearts we set out. On, on, and never the semblance of a doubt came to us, but Cairn Lochan just refused to emerge from the sea of mist that circled about

us. Up slopes and down into gullies we went, mile after mile, till at last we stopped to wonder. Is it possible we had gone wrong? Let us try again and hope the mist will rise for a fleeting moment to get a sight of something. More miles, and nothing to show for it but capes glistening with rain, and then our hopes were fulfilled. Up went the mist, and down below us we spotted a gully strangely familiar, but unbelievable. Surely that is not the Lairig? But the truth will out, and we had to admit to ourselves, that for the last four hours we had been going around in circles. Disappointed but wiser men, we descended and made our way back to Aviemore without so much as one camera shot. The Cairngorms had taught us our first lesson, and we decided to try again the next day, but to take no chances in the mist, and use a compass when we could not see our next objective.

To know mountains only in fine weather is to have a very incomplete knowledge and a poor appreciation of them, and so it was not with rancour, but with expectation that we rose the next morning earlier than ever, eager to be off. At five of the clock, we silently sneaked from the dormitory hoping, but little knowing the glories the day held for us. By 6 a.m., we had breakfasted and made up our day's rations and were away on the same programme as yesterday. We tested the direction of the wind, looked at the sky, and kept on. As is usual, the mountains rose into the morning clouds, and as we left Rothiemurchus behind, these same clouds came down to envelop us and then rise again. Once more leaving the Lairig we trudged steadily up the Lurcher's Crag and were rewarded by a glimpse of Loch Morlich surrounded by its glory of pine trees. Only a glimpse and nothing more, for the mist encircled us and we held our compass course to the second summit cairn. Here we rested for a few minutes and were granted a brightening of the weather, sufficient to let us take some camera shots, and to give us a sight of Cairn Lochan a mile or more over the plateau.

Eastward from the cliffs over which a lurcher is supposed to have fallen when chasing a stag, there is, over huge boulders, a drop down into a grassy col, Miadan or meadow of Creagan Leth-choin, and so, by

a gentle rise to the western end of Coire an Lochain, where vegetation becomes much sparser as the last rise to Cairn Lochan is tackled. Here we found little cushions of the moss campion still in flower, but little else. At this point, the mist came down again, and as we reached the summit plateau, the visibility was reduced to a few yards, and a strong wind was blowing, causing the mist to swirl more than ever.

It is indeed an awesome feeling to be walking through mist when every small stone or cushion of moss, seen vaguely at a few yards, seems to be the sought for cairn seen at a distance. Hurrying forward, one or two steps brings you up against the object, and you feel very foolish for letting your imagination run away. Is it any wonder that living in such close harmony with and reach of such experiences, Highland folk are superstitious and imaginative?

Ultimately, we did find the cairn of Cairn Lochan (3,983 ft.), perched on the edge of the corrie of the same name. Here long tongues of snow lay several feet deep in the gullies of the corrie, and our luck once more changed. We were rewarded with a clear view of everything but the summits of Ben Macdhui and Cairngorm. We wandered round the edge of the three great corries of Cairngorm, with their snow wreaths which are visible from Speyside, and on the edge of Coire an t-Sneachda sat down out of the wind to eat some of our rations. Away before us stretched the undulating plateau for miles, until it rose into the clouds to the summit of Ben Macdhui on the right, and over the valley of Loch Avon straight ahead rose Ben Mheadhoin. To the left, again in the clouds, the last cone of Cairngorm was lost. Turning around, we looked down into the corrie with the weathered rocks, as if they had been put down by some giant bricklayer who had forgotten to finish his task. Further below, the pines of Rothiemurchus began, and in them, Loch Morlich, nestling like a silver ornamental pond and across the valley the forest bounded by the serpentine course of the Spey.

Though we knew there was little chance of seeing anything from the summit of Cairngorm, we ascended into the clouds, and made our salutations to the cairn (4,084ft.). Without wasting any time, apart from

regaining our breath, we came down out of this region of wildness and spectral shapes into bright sunshine and headed southeast towards Loch Avon. On the way, I was surprised to see a solitary rabbit bouncing slowly over the rocks nearly 4,000 ft. above the sea. Also, on this barren expanse we found thrift, which until now I had associated almost exclusively with seashore vegetation.

Shall I ever forget my first view of Loch Avon? It did not come into sight until we came on to Stac an Fharaidh, and there it lay almost a thousand feet below, a mile and a half in length, with the river Avon flowing out of its eastern end. From this height, the shallows of the loch could be noted by their lighter colour, but the most impressive aspect of the scene was its absolute loneliness. Except for the valley out through which the river flows, the loch is enclosed by high cliffs, cut by deep corries and gullies, down which cataracts foam, all of which led Queen Victoria to exclaim "*nothing could be grander and wilder*".

Down one of the gullies we scrambled, often using the course of the cataract as our stepping stones, and finding in this sheltered spot, heath dog violets and globe flowers. Down, down, until almost at the margin of the loch, and then along by its side, clinging at times by hand to steep slopes which rose out of the very lochside. In about a mile, we reached the little stretch of golden sand at the western end of the loch, and fording the Garbh Uisge, scrambled to the Shelter Stone. There has never been a built habitation by Loch Avon, or a boat on the loch, but this huge stone weighing some 1,400 tons, and lying on top of smaller boulders furnishes a welcome resting place and refuge in this remote glen. Except for a narrow entrance, the stone has been packed round by boulders and sods to make it windproof, and inside there is enough room for about ten persons to sleep. At the back, the height is about five feet eight inches, though at other parts one must stoop. The floor is spread with heather, and in a tin box on a ledge just inside the door, there is a visitor's book now in its sixth volume, having been started in 1925. The present volume makes interesting reading, as it contains comments written on the eve of war by a party who slept under the



stone, not knowing that war had been declared. There is also an entry by a lone voyager, who brought in the New Year in snow and solitude. Could warmongers like Hitler but be persuaded to take such lone trips to realise man's insignificance in the scheme of grand nature, surely, they would be weaned from their purpose, and realise that all beauty whether moral, spiritual or physical depends on harmony.

Sitting by the entrance to the Shelter Stone, eating a sandwich, we watched an eagle, monarch of the skies, sail lazily overhead and come to rest on one of the high crags clustered around the top end of the loch. Behind us, dominating the scene, is the Shelter Stone Crag and Carn Etchachan, and to the west of these the Garbh Uisge, rough water, leaps and bounds its way down a thousand feet to the loch below. Our route lay up the side of this cataract, and as we climbed using hands and feet, rain started to fall. Luckily, we reached the top, and had time to photograph the loch below, before it was shut out by mist (see photograph below).

Loch Avon



John Fleming

It must have been a scene such as this that inspired Byron to write his poem “Loch-na-gar”. For here indeed was the complete antithesis of beauty “*tame and domestic*”. On the plateau we found a magnificent snow-bridge twenty or thirty yards long under which the Garbh Uisge chattered and murmured. The rain became heavier and following the river we travelled south towards Ben Macdhui, heading into a wind of 50 or 60 miles per hour. Down lashed the rain, and visibility was zero, but this was comparatively pleasant compared with a sudden change to driving hail which stung and hurt, besides numbing us as we pushed on with heads down across this bare flat plateau.

Two hours saw us on Ben Macdhui (4,296 ft.), with no improvement of the weather, so without halting we headed north to find the March Burn. Here was the burn, and so down we went out of the clouds into the Lairig Ghru. But the March Burn drops down to the summit of the Lairig, and we were coming into the mouth of the great Garbh Choire well on the South side of the Lairig summit, so this burn was the Allt a'Choire Mhor, which left us with an extra two miles to cover before Aviemore was reached. Nothing daunted, and eating the last of our sandwiches, we set out with a swing up this famous Mounth Pass with its boulder-strewn floor, and on to the Pools of Dee. These pools are not the source of the River Dee but give birth to a feeder of this river. At the pools, the river is subterranean, and not visible until they are left behind on their southern end. Once past the pools, the summit (2,733 ft.) of the pass was soon reached and the boulder-fields, alive with ptarmigan, left behind.

We made short work of the descent to Rothiemurchus, and on this part of the route met two men, the first humans we had seen since 6 a.m. Through the forest to Coylum Bridge and so to the hostel just as the clock showed 10.30 p.m. Though it was late, the warden let us cook our meal and eat as everyone went off to bed, and we relaxed delightfully tired after a long day full of beauty and inspiration, of rain and shine, filled with the wonders of this land, this Scotland.

Let me here pay tribute to Jim J., that though he had never done any hill walking before, and though he wore only cycling shoes, he kept up

with me and never once complained. Indeed, he finished the day convinced that cyclists miss the best of the country.

Having unexpectedly spent two days at Aviemore, Jim had no time to cycle back to Edinburgh, so he decided to take the train. We rose late, had breakfast and sauntered out to spend the forenoon visiting Loch an Eilein. These small lochs, cradled in the forest, bring the necessary sylvan contrast to the rugged and barren mountains, and throw these features into greater relief. Loch an Eilein is beautifully wooded, but the centre of interest, as the name suggests, is the island.

On this island which was a stronghold of Alexander Comyn, Wolf of Badenoch, there is a priory which was restored by the Grants in the 16th century but is again in ruins. In its precincts, the osprey nested as late as 1900, but the ravages of ruthless collectors caused it to desert and since then it has been seen no more in the district.

The fertile Strathspey has not been immune from marauders, and clan fights. The land of Rothiemurchus was taken from Comyn, a Norman family, by a Shaw, but now belongs to the Clan Grant. Many have been the skirmishes round the lochs and among the trees.

Returning to Aviemore we lunched at the "Pot o' Luck" tea-room, as we were too lazy to cook for ourselves, and shortly afterwards I said farewell to Jim as his train drew out carrying him back to more mundane matters.

The next day turned out very wet, and so I did not venture far from the hostel until the evening when the weather faired. Then I strolled east from Coylum Bridge and chanced upon little Loch Pityoulish and was entranced. Despite all that has been said and written about Loch an Eilein, this loch is the gem of Rothiemurchus with its reeds and lilies, its pines and its birches. Here it was that a Captain Shaw wrested Rothiemurchus from the Lords of Badenoch in the 14th century.

Two quiet days on the low ground rested me sufficiently to be restless for the hills again, and it was with eager heart that I rose next morning at 5 a.m. and set out an hour later to explore the mountains to the west of the Lairig. Setting a stiff pace, I soon walked myself fully awake over ground that was fast becoming familiar, and before the

morning was far advanced, I stood in mist at the summit of the "gloomy" pass. Slowly the morning mists rose, and as I came abreast of the Garbh Choire most of the steep slopes of Ben Macdhui on the left had emerged. Then conical and precipitous Cairn Toul was displayed in full sunshine, with shadows in its hanging corrie and "Soldier's" corrie. I stopped by the Tailor's Stone, where the three hapless tailors lay down to die one Winter's night so long ago and looking back watched the mist rolling and swirling off in Choire Bhrochain of Braeriach, realising why it was named the "porridge pot".

The River Dee was murmuring its way down the glen, and I must follow it as far as Corrou Bothy, in the shade of the very prominent Devil's Point and facing the Ben Macdhui-Carn a'Mhaim ridge. Once here, I took off my boots and forded the ice-cold river and visited a few lads who were making a stay at the bothy. The bothy is an old disused stalkers' bothy, which is left on the latch for any wanderer to use. It is very small, but it is amazing how many people can bed down, each trying to avoid the many leaks in the roof (see photograph below).

#### Corrou Bothy



Having eaten a couple of sandwiches, I set out up Coire Odhar to the summit peak of Devil's Point, turning ever and again to view the Lairig as it gradually fell away below me. Then the summit (3,0303 ft.) and a wonderful panorama to the south; the River Dee winding away down Glen Dee to turn east towards Braemar, and deeply cleft in the hills to the west, Glen Geusachan deep in shade, despite the sun, so deep are its sides, and dividing Devil's Point from Beinn Bhrotain.

The air up on top was keen and invigorating, so off I went, north across the boulders, round Coire Odhar then Soldier's Corrie, and on to the last jumbled mass of slope leading to Cairn Toul. The sun shone down, but at the peak cairn (4,241 ft.), it was cold when I stopped. Away to the east lay Derry Cairngorm, and further still Lochnagar, but turning to the west the great mass of Ben Nevis stood out fifty miles away, and further south, at some twenty miles, Ben Cruachan by Loch Awe. Nearer and easily recognised, the twin cones of Ben More and Stobinian at Crianlarich, and many more tops I have known at closer quarters.

So much for the distant view, but much of interest lay at my feet. Moving over to the edge of the ridge, I looked down on little Lochan Uaine nestling so beautifully between Cairn Toul and Angel's Peak (Sgor an Lochain Uaine) and emptying its overflow into the Garbh Choire to join the infant Dee several hundred feet below. At the back of the great corrie, falling some thousand feet, was the cataract that becomes the Dee. Rising on the plateau of Braeriach at the Wells of Dee, the river takes this great drop in the first two hundred yards of its existence and drops out of the very snows themselves which then in July had not melted.

From Cairn Toul to Braeriach, there is a glorious ridge walk of three and a half miles round the corries and all of it above 4,000 ft. Nowhere else in Britain is there such a long stretch at this altitude, and every yard of it on such a day as I had, defies my attempts to describe it. Round to Angel's Peak where, the snow wreath of the Garbh Choire Mhor can be best viewed. This is the only snow in this country which has never disappeared in living memory and may easily be the last

remnant of one of the glaciers which flowed out of these corries. Then round on to the flat top of Braeriach, so expansive and still carrying snow. Braeriach has two summits, one the Einich Cairn at 4,061 ft., and the other above Choire Bhrochain at 4,248 ft. Midway between these, and in a little hollow, lie the Wells of Dee, consisting of several small springs in the soft shingle of the plateau. Before leaving Braeriach, I was impressed by the cliffs of Choire Bhrochain, perpendicular and high, and away below some two thousand feet, the Dee lay like a linen thread in the bottom of Glen Dee.

Evening was drawing on, so I hastened north from the last peak along the descending ridge to Sron na Lairig (3,860 ft.), and from there down on to the summit of the Lairig, where again, the ptarmigan were numerous and not in the least shy. Keeping up my steady pace, I managed back into Aviemore by nine o'clock, ready for a meal which I cooked at full speed. Except for the few greetings made at Corrou Bothy, I had not spoken with anyone since early morning, but at no point had I felt lonely. There is companionship in the hills, and inspiration and peace for those who go out to seek it.

My days were now few, so I decided to leave Aviemore and head towards Ballater. The trek through the Lairig to Braemar is twenty-nine miles long, and no easy one with a heavy pack. It is especially trying tramping over the great boulder-field on top of the Lairig, as the pack is inclined to swing. However, I set off early as usual, and was again lucky with the weather. Traversing once more the familiar paths, I pushed on steadily, making my first halt well over the summit. Down past Devil's Point, then turned east round Carn a'Mhaim into Glen Luibeg, and so with a last glance at Ben Macdhui and Derry Cairngorm, I entered Mar Forest at Derry Lodge. Crossing the Lui Water at the bridge, I increased my pace on the road to reach the famous Linn of Dee, in its deep cleft course, and with its tremendous flow of water.

After the hills, hard roads bring aches to the limbs and fire to the feet, but the wonderful forest lands by Inverey and Mar Lodge did much to take my attention from these discomforts. At last I hirpled into

Braemar just five minutes too late for the last bus to Ballater. However, finding a comfortable house in the square, I had tea and then a perfect luxury, a hot bath. With two hard days behind me, I turned in early and heard nothing of an air-raid alert until mentioned at breakfast next morning.

I spent the morning wandering in Braemar, through a light rain and glorying in the beauties of the forests of Deeside. These forests are grander than those of Speyside, and do not show the ravages of cutting so markedly, but Ballater was my destination, and as I did not relish sixteen miles of road walking, I boarded the bus.

This journey is one of arboreal beauty unexcelled, with great castles and mansions flashing into view, Braemar Castle, Invercauld House, and most impressive of all, Balmoral Castle, and so to Ballater. Here I found, a delightful hostel for my last night, so I dumped my pack and went out to view Ballater. A small town, clean and orderly, made to look impressive with the royal arms above the smallest of shops. I was particularly pleased with the bakers' shops and did full justice to their wares. The evening was passed pleasantly by song and story in the common-room, and since I was going for the early Aberdeen train, I bedded down on a couch there so that I would not disturb the rather full dormitory at that time in the morning.

The journey home came as an anti-climax to a perfect week, and as the train hurried me south and home, I lay back travelling again over the high tops, (see photograph on the opposite page), feeling in the memory the mist, rain and sunshine, but above all a deep sorrow in my heart that my stay had been so short.

## Cairn Toul



John Fleming

**Editor's Note:** John Fleming, father of Club member, Joan Fleming, died in 1948 at 36 years. This article was found amongst his personal documents along with boxes of his black and white negatives.