

## THE CAIRNGORMS AND LA GREINA - TWO REMOTE MOUNTAIN SANCTUARIES

*BRYAN CYRIL THURSTON*

*Now in his eighties, Bryan Thurston recently joined the Club. Born in Suffolk and studying architecture in London and living in Switzerland since 1955, he has noted some marked similarities between the Cairngorms and an area in the western Lepontine Alps in the south of that country (see drawing and photograph below). Lying between peaks over 3000m high, the Greina plateau and pass (2355m) connects the Swiss cantons of Graubünden and Ticino. It has several trails, served by mountain huts. Bryan has sent us the following remarks, poems and artworks.*

One day in about 1970, I discovered a wild mountain paradise which was different to many alpine districts but resembles parts of the Cairngorms. There is a similarity between the Lairig Ghru with the Devil's Point and Cairn Toul and the southern flank of Plaun la Greina with Piz Zamuor (see below).



For many years., the Greina was threatened by a hideous hydro-lake, but I fought, through the means of art, against this scheme, and with success - the Greina is now a Natural Trust Area, recognised as of national importance. And again, at the end of 2018 I was engaged in the "making" of a second Swiss National Park centred around the Greina plain and comprising the high Adula mountains. To my disappointment, the Grison inhabitants in the north rejected the project, although in the south the Ticinese were in favour.

It was my grandfather Arthur Herbert Thurston who initially established my love of Scotland, telling me of how I, when three years old and sitting on his lap, went in my father's three-wheeled car and sidecar, for a holiday in Scotland! From this early time, the love of wild and unspoiled land was laid down for the rest of my days becoming the inspiration for many artworks.



*Glatscher dil Terri (drawing)*



*Corries of Ben a' Bhuid (watercolour)*



*River Dee, Aquarelle*

*Passo della Greina with Pit Terri, Aquarelle*

In later life, I had exhibitions of my artwork and architecture at the Pier Arts Centre, Stromness (where I was friendly with the late Orkney poet George Mackay Brown as well as with his nephew the Orcadian artist Erlend Brown), and at the Mackintosh School of Architecture in Glasgow. For numerous years I was deeply engaged

with architecture “The Mother of the Arts” and as a member of the Swiss Verbund (SWB) and working with the Swiss League for the Protection of Nature (SBN).

*As well as a keen and accomplished artist, Bryan has written many poems inspired by the Cairngorms. Here are a few.*

#### A MOUNTAIN DAY OF 1948

I cry: "*Watch out, do not tread on the tiny snow bunting*"  
Which is creeping through the somewhat "sculpture-formed"  
summit rocks.  
To descend down Coire Raibert to the translucent, lapping waters  
of Loch Avon.  
Clambering the arctic sedge grasses to creep into the dark of the  
Carn Etchachan Shelter Stone.

Oh, to ascend the cascade water-roar of the burn Garbh Uisge  
Mor  
A riddled, frantic water-flash, in high-steps of large dark-rock  
boulders!  
From the dissolute gravel-wastes of Ben Macdhui,  
To traverse elevated, slanting upland,  
Jumping the fast flow of the Feithe Buidhe and the March Burn,  
Onto the western shoulder of Cairn Lochan.  
Striding, descending its northern ridge, way back down to Loch  
Morlich.

#### SGORAN SONG

Epos, vast epical Cairngorm mountain.  
Fleeting, surging, serene; aloft - alone  
*tread, slog, no shelter - nor rest.*

## SGORAN DUBH

Oh, sparkle Sgoran dark Dubh of fascination,  
in drenching rain-blast.

In mountain mist a halo-divine, my shadow is a Brocken spectre.  
Could it resemble a "Celtic crown" of many rounded summit-  
heights?

Solitary birch, rowan, a few lower-down sentinel Scots pines.  
Upland of wild-bog-moor of cotton grass in  
Wilderness of delight, where the burn Am Beanaidh  
Turns its downward course, in abrupt curvatures,  
With small intervening pools.

*swamp-bog of curlew. dunlin, green and redshank - 'tis their  
lively habitat!*

To reach the expansive freshwater stretch of remote Loch Einich,  
after fleeing from midge-swarm:

'twill never be forgotten, the water-sparkle in all God's eternity!

## CORRIES AND TORS

One tremendous slash of silver rocks, rock-strewn elevated  
alluvial plain.

Meandering-sparkling burn - vividly lit lochans of my guts!

Tors at intervals of the ridgeline Beinn Mheadhoin, Beinn  
a'Bhuird, Ben Avon.

These large rock outcrops (wherein Bryan's bones should be  
embedded) are great huge stony lumps – shattered.

## CAIRNGORM MUCKLE SPATE

*"In Scotland's boun's sin syne*

*We hinna hed anither spate*

*Like auchteen twenty-nine"*

L. B. Perkins, *CCJ* no. 91 (1957)

Wildest fury in remote Luibeg,  
 Roots of Scots pines undermined by floodwaters,  
 The largest stones rolled into the channel  
 After torrential rain-fury, the river Am Beanaidh  
 Swells into a fast-flow Muckle Spate, the water rush  
 Takes even some fallen trees as twigs,  
 Even branches in the mad fury downstream  
 To get further down, somewhere "clogged".

### CONCLUSION

Frost, warmth, snow, rain, wind and tempest  
 On Sgoran's bleak, lofty, remote hardest retreat.  
 With power and violence undreamt-of at lower height  
 The utter bareness of the Sgoran Dubh mountain group  
 Is of majestic scale and repose:  
 Cairngorm Oblivion.

*Bryan extends an invitation to Club members.*

I am very sure that some member of the Cairngorm Club would really like la Greina. I could, for example accompany to the southern or northern foot of this expansive unspoilt mountain area (a Swiss National Trust Area). Unfortunately, and most probably at my age, in spirit 18, although in body 86 years; I might get up let's say to the Scaletta Swiss Alpine Club (SAC) Refuge; probably even not; but getting down would be a thing of impossibility! However, I could advise on routes, on mountains to climb, the easier and the more difficult. The Tectonic area of la Greina is of utmost interest, as well as the morphology of glaciers, drumlins, moraines, potholes etc. If one also stays at the SAC Refuge Motterascio of an early morning one usually sees a golden eagle pair skirting the eastern mountain flank which is in morning light, on the lookout for the many marmots. Of an early evening one again sees the eagles flanking the eastern side of the Alpe di Motterascio again searching for marmots! To climb to the east,

Piz Terri there are two main routes, both not very difficult, the others impossible! Starting at the Refuge one climbs up without a path ever a bit steeper up the side valley Valle di Güida, where often high up summer snowfields must be traversed. One emerges at the upper reaches of the Gletscher Dil Terri (Bergschrund), from here up slippery slate slabs, one step up and three down! (rather like climbing the Paps of Jura: not quartzite but slate) then one reaches a chimney, which is very easy to climb up onto the western ridge. I have only climbed Piz Terri three times, once with the Swiss composer Armin Schibler who wrote a long work for instruments and voice, protesting the hideous planned hydro-lake. His Shetland sheepdog also came up with us, and so the first dog that I climbed Piz Terri with. We stamped his foot in the slushy-moist slate grit and his foot was then stamped onto the guest book which by the way had a hole partly through it from lightning strike. One should never climb this mountain in a thunderstorm!

The other most wonderful mountain, which is lower and quite easy to climb is Pizzo Coroi; leave Motterascio, skirt the beautiful Lago di Motterascio (on the way back from Coroi: have a cooling swim naked from the strenuous days climbing) to Crap la Crusch. This is the very centre of the Greina, where the Plaun la Greina and the high moor Alpe di Motterascio converge. It is a transfluence pass, whereby only a few centimetres of height decide whether the water flows into the Rhine over the Plaun la Greina; or to the south over the Alüpe di Motterascio into the Po. From here one clammers up steeply, without a footpath to reach the long eastern ridge of the mountain, Pizzo Coroi. Follow it to the summit cairn and an extensive view unfolds over the whole slightly curved Greina high plain. It is magnificent then to descend from Coroi's summit to the north, sliding slipping over the vast sea of slate slabs, where if you lift the upper one the lower slate slab has a limonite rust ring from the weathering of time. Now somewhat further down: there was a wonderful small, so shimmering white glacier; Gletscher da Riaple (now completely vanished). Now the scree descends into two tiny manganese colour tarns. From here one has to find a gully way

down from the desert of slate, steeply down to reach somewhere on the Passo della Greina and so via Crap la Crusch and this time to Motterascio perhaps to climb down the timber ladder to enjoy the mountain-shepherd's fresh milk and yoghurt.

Viva Cairngorms. Viva la Greina



*Bryan at Refugio Motterascio.*

Editor's note: Bryan has recently donated one of his many books, *Greina-wildes Bergland* (1st edition 1973, 2nd edition 1986) to the Club Library held in Special Collections, University of Aberdeen Library.