

WALKING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF GEORGE BUCHANAN SMITH

MARK PEEL

When I started to research the history of Club members' involvement in World War One (WW1), I was shown an article written by George Buchanan Smith (GBS). The article was found by his parents after his death in 1915, and they gave permission for it to be published in the Club Journal, (*Club Journal*, 9, 1917, p.20). GBS completed his six day walk from Glasgow to Inverey in April 1911, when he was only 21.

I read the article hoping to better understand the man who was the Club's first fatality in WW1. Reading the article, a second time I tried to grasp just what he had achieved. I then had to get the maps out to fully appreciate the distances he was covering each day. It was at this stage that I first wondered whether I could repeat the walk. Later, when I started to plan to do the walk, in May 2018, I began to realise the enormity of the task.

I must admit that I did not walk the exact route covered by GBS and there are several reasons for this. He had a habit of walking up the railway line, no longer considered best practice! It is more difficult to find someone to row you across a loch and quiet roads have now become major traffic arteries. There is also the fact that he was a very fit young man and I am forty years older and backpack rather than using the small hotels he preferred. Snow conditions hampered him whilst eventually the intense heat got to me.

A rough outline of the route is to head north from Glasgow to Tyndrum, then east towards Killin, moving north to Schiehallion and finally north-east to Muir Cottage. The account that follows shows how my route varied from the original and relates some of the incidents that happened on the way. For me, this was the toughest Scottish backpacking trip I had ever done. When I passed through Aberdeen on my way home, I did wonder whether this would be my last such trip. However, later in 2019, I did manage a very wet, five-day trip, walking from Dalwhinnie to Fort William chasing Corbetts.

GBS left Glasgow having spent the previous evening at the Opera. I was tempted to repeat this idea but, in the end, I could not afford the time. The original route follows much of what is now the West

Highland Way (WHW) and I therefore decided to use this route as far as Beinglas farm. I travelled up by train to Glasgow and on to Milngavie. To keep the weight down I carried rarely more than two days food and ate and drank whenever the opportunity arose. After the first day this led to some strange looks and comments. My routine was to order for two and rapidly consume everything I had ordered. I therefore visited a café before finding the start of the WHW.

Keen to get going I walked the first two miles in half an hour. This was not a pace I could sustain so I then slowed down but pressed on to where I hoped to get a meal before walking on to a campsite. Although the inn was keen to advertise itself along the route it failed to say it closed at 4 pm. The campsite on my map had also closed so I walked on to one just outside Drymen. This was the dirtiest site I have stayed on in Scotland.

Leaving early in the morning, I copied GBS by buying oatcakes in Drymen but also stopped for poached eggs on toast. The 8 miles into Balmaha went quite quickly, although the track was busy. It will come as no surprise that food and drink had become a dominant factor in my thoughts. I only left Balmaha after having tea and scones for two and touching Tom Weir's statue. Now on to Rowardennan Youth Hostel but not before drinking two pints of lemonade at the Rowardennan Hotel. The Hostel was busy, but I was met by fellow Club member, Lydia Thomson and spent the evening with her party of walkers. One friend turned out to have been a pupil of my father. It made for a very convivial evening and after this, I had only myself for company.

I left the Hostel early and headed up Ben Lomond, a new Munro for me and one GBS climbed. I wondered what he would have thought of the paved path to the summit. There was a tremendous cloud inversion on the ascent. From the top I headed north-west to re-join the WHW. I soon passed a very modest establishment selling tea, cakes and bananas. I impressed the lady owner by buying two of everything. GBS walked on to Inversnaid where he spent the first night. He would have carried on, but the ferry man was too drunk to make the crossing.

I walked on to Beinglas farm which was a very different campsite to the previous one. I showered, ate, slept, rose early and leaving the tent erected climbed the Munro, Cruach Ardrain, another new one for me. Returning to the campsite I dozed after eating. Leaving at 5 pm I

walked up the A82 before taking the hydro road up Gleann nan Caorann. I was now back more closely on GBS's route but on day four rather than his day two. With hindsight I should not have taken time out for this Munro. However, I had completion in my sights and the temptation was too great.

On Saturday morning I walked to the end of the path and followed an ATV track almost to the summit of Beinn a' Chleibh and then on to Ben Lui before dropping down to Tyndrum. Not for the last time I realised that GBS was a better man than me. On his route he had climbed all four of these Munros. Tyndrum was crowded and the heat was oppressive. I ate, drank and bought a fruit cake and a selection pack of cereals, taking these out of their boxes. These cereals proved very appetising and along with the fruit cake were a great success. After a final pot of tea, I picked up the WHW again and camped near Beinn Odhar. GBS left Tyndrum on his third day and like him I climbed Beinn Odhar, Beinn Chaorach and Carn Chreag. It was a steep climb to the first summit but with an early start I kept going and did not really stop until starting to come off the third Corbett.

Here, I lay down against my rucksack, quite high and amongst rocks. I blended into the hill and was still wearing the clothes I had started in almost six days before. As I lay there, I sensed movement and slowly moved my head to see a wildcat. It must have sensed me at the same time. The head was turning away, but the rest of the body was visible, although the tail was in the heather. Shortly after completing this walk I visited the museum on Bute and there on display was an identical female wildcat with a kitten. I have told a few friends of my sighting, and whilst they have been polite, I am not sure they are as convinced as I am of what I saw.

I went on to Creag Mhor with strong winds on the summit. I then pushed on to Beinn Heasgarnich, making better time than I had hoped for. I dropped off the summit by connecting up the remaining snow patches. GBS descended by glissading and then made the long walk into Killin. I, however, found a site for my tent, where it felt I was part of an Alpine meadow.

GBS met his friend James Wordie in Killin and together they walked the next day along the road towards Ben Lawers. This would not have been a safe route for me, and I also wanted to do Meall Ghaordaidh.

Rude comments have been written about this Munro but from my route it was an excellent walk. The first person I had seen since leaving Tyndrum was on the summit. He appeared confused by the direction of my arrival and departure since neither showed any sign of a path. I then followed a convoluted route into the Larig Bhreislich. Amongst the shielings I thought about the people for whom this had been their home. Along the way I picked up a magnificent eagle's feather and was very tempted to stick it in my hat. Later, looking across to Meall nan Tarmachan I stood and watched an eagle quartering the ground. I camped close to the road, out of sight, but in a pleasant spot with water close at hand.

On GBS's fourth day he and James walked from Killin to first ascend Beinn Glas and then Ben Lawers. They were hindered by deep snow and cold winds forcing them to drop into Glen Lyon, eventually stopping in Fortingall. By now it was my eighth day and I hoped to do all seven Munros in the Ben Lawers range. It was a tough walk up to Meall a' Choire Leith but then the way seemed clear. This was until the cloud blew in on Beinn Ghlas and stayed until Meall Garbh. On the summit of Meall Greigh it felt good to have achieved seven new Munros in a day, but I still had further to go before I could stop. Dropping down towards Invervar proved tough. I wild camped on a rather dirty pitch and I think this is where I picked up two sheep ticks. I dined on cheese and my Drymen oat cakes, followed by variety-pack cereals that now seemed rather exotic.

Next morning, I set off early, partly to pass through a farmstead without causing alarm. I have had rather inquisitive conversations in this area in the past. The route headed for Carn Mairg and Meall Liath, I went between these two hills before cutting east. There were fine views of Schiehallion which GBS had climbed on his fifth day. I declined the opportunity for a second ascent partly to conserve my energy, and to save time as I had a lot more ground to cover.

I now took a fairly direct line towards Tummel Bridge. Eventually I hit the road, close to a sign reading; 'Two miles to Tummel Bridge'. The heat radiating off the road was intense, and I felt I was walking in an oven. I should have liked to find somewhere to fill my water bottle. I virtually crawled over the bridge at Tummel Bridge and sought sanctuary in the restaurant of the caravan park. Whilst I ate a large

meal, washed down by several pints of lemonade, I considered my next move. My aim had been to get close to Struan before camping but I knew that this was no longer a realistic objective. I therefore came to the decision that once I got back on the road I would hitch. The traffic would either be heading towards Blair Atholl or Pitlochry.

It was with a heavy heart that I hit the road; this was the confirmation that I was not the man GBS was. I had only gone about half a mile when a car stopped, and I was offered a lift to just outside Pitlochry. The driver was ex British Army, now working in mine clearance. We talked mountaineering books all the way. The army link made me think of GBS. When doing his walk, he had no idea that within four years he would be a Gordon Highlander and his friend James Wordie would be sailing to the Antarctic with Shackleton.

*Courage, faint heart, press forward to the hill!
The ridge looms dark? It only holds the day.
Wait for the dawn to come? O forward still,
And meet the sun half-way!*

These lines of poetry were written by GBS, inspired by his walks in Scotland. I have wondered whether he thought of these words as he led his platoon in the first charge on Loos, where he lost his life, September 25, 1915.

From Pitlochry I caught the train to Blair Atholl. I did notice that when I sat down on a bench to await the train my fellow passengers seemed keen to stand up wind of me. I was made very welcome at the campsite near the Bridge of Tilt and thoroughly enjoyed the shower. I changed into my spare clothing and ate a second meal at the restaurant. Eating two large meals in one day did not prove to be a problem.

GBS spent his last night at Struan and next day walked over Beinn Dearg and Carn an Fidhleir. In his account, he writes of walking in deep snow interspersed with steep glissades. I made an early start and walked through Glen Tilt to Muir Cottage. I had done this before so decided to give myself objectives which helped to maintain a good pace. A brief thought about climbing Carn a' Chlamain soon passed. Walking along the road to Muir and the work-weekend I wondered what home cooking might be on offer. Hazel did not disappoint and the first person I saw was Kees waving. After several cups of tea and a shower I was tempted to lie down. However, everybody seemed so busy I felt I needed to find

a job. Picking up logs and putting them in a wheelbarrow proved good therapy for my aching back.

I enjoyed the stay at Muir and probably talked more than I should have. When I passed through the portals of Aberdeen Railway Station it was an opportunity to reflect on my trip. Both GBS and I finished with a train journey. He had caught the train from Ballater to Aberdeen and I was travelling to London. Like him I had spent time in some of the best of Scotland and time with some of the best of friends. I quickly fell asleep on the train feeling rather proud that I was a member of the Cairngorm Club with its rich heritage.

Buchanan Smith, G. (1917), Glasgow To Braemar, *Cairngorm Club Journal*, Vol IX, no. 49, p.20-26.