

SEVEN WATTS AND FOUR GENERATIONS IN THE CAIRNGORM CLUB

GRAHAM WATT

A highlight of 2022 for me was returning to the summit of Ben Macdhui. I had been there four times before, firstly in 1960 aged 8, but not since July 1970. After several years plundering Munros in the West of Scotland it was exhilarating to be re-acquainted with the massive Cairngorm plateau, pointed out in all directions by the Cairngorm Club indicator.

On viewing the indicator, I wondered if any of my Aberdeen forebears had attended the unveiling ceremony on 1st August 1925. A search on-line of the Cairngorm Club Journal for 1926 established that four Watts had been there – my great uncle Edward (47), his wife Alice (44), son Murray (12) and daughter Marjorie (10)(see below).



Unveiling the Ben Macdhui Indicator, August 1, 1925

The photo shows the company of 136 that day, surrounding the indicator and including 15 women, with knee length gabardine Mackintoshes the order of the day. CC Photo Archive

William, Edward and Theodore Watt

Edward Watt had climbed Ben Macdhui at least once before, on 29 July 1895, as recorded in his diary. Over a century later, via a circuitous and unexplained route, Edward's diary for 1895 came into the hands of Ken Thomson, Cairngorm Club librarian, who transcribed, with notes (in brackets), the following details of a Watt family holiday at Braemar, involving Edward's father William Watt (48), his fourth wife Agnes (49) and sons Edward (17), George (16) and Theodore (11). Their travel was by train, coach, carriage and foot.

A Climbing Holiday at Braemar – 128 years ago.

From Edward Watt's Diary for 1895, transcribed by Ken Thomson

Monday 15 July 1895: Started a holiday at Braemar, while Papa (Joint Editor of the Aberdeen Free Press) stayed on in Aberdeen for the general election. On the Monday, after a "cold and windy" drive to Braemar from the station at Ballater, Theodore, George and Edward went up Morrone, getting a good many plants including avens and the globe flower. Good view but very windy. Went up by the path but came down to the east past a pond.

Wednesday 17 July: At Garrawalt Falls (in Ballochbuie) with George and Theodore – 10 miles – Saw a ghillie capture a salmon above Invercauld bridge. Came round by the Clunie – 5 mls.

Thursday 18 July: Started with George at 6:15 on our expedition to Loch Ceann-Mor (the King's Loch, nowadays Loch Kander). Misty all the morning. At Loch Callater 8:15; never walked over such rugged ground or saw such steep and grand mountains as in the three miles up to the Loch which is itself a magnificent sight – surrounded as it is by precipitous hills, 800 feet high which run down to the water's edge, making it impossible to walk round the loch. Home at 2:15.

Friday 19 July: Heavy rain all morning, but after tea walked with Papa to Corriemulzie (3 miles west of Braemar) round by the low path. Saw a herd of deer. Visited the ruins of Mar Lodge and the Eagle.

Saturday 20 July: After various hitches the planned expedition to Glas Maol came off, at least a start was made ... Rained hard most of the time and so we turned back at the point where the Blairgowrie road crosses the Allt Bhuididh. Distance 15 miles. We were all thoroughly soaked. I finished up with a cold bath which was pronounced "very dangerous". Fished in the Clunie.

Tuesday 23 July: Edward and George started – rather late, due to morning mist and rain – in "a conveyance", and "got out at the Shan Spital, and crossed the bridge on the old road and began the ascent of the old smuggler's path to Glen Isla. The first mile is stiff. We met a shepherd on the level ground before we came to the boundary fence between Aberdeenshire and Forfarshire. We went straight on from the fence for $\frac{1}{4}$ ml. to see down into Caenlochan 1000 feet below and then turned sharply to the right and soon reached the top of Glas Maol. We went down to the Spital road on the Cairnwell and landed at the top of the long brae which we foolishly descended passing the coach and meeting our carriage near the foot. We had to walk up again from below the Devil's Elbow (see below). Rained all the way home. Stood on three counties at once near the top of the hill.



The Devil's Elbow, before the road was straightened in the late 1960s.

Photo provided by courtesy of the Mount Blair Community Archive

Wednesday 24 July: Intended to go to Lochnagar but was deterred by a slight mist. Ferried the River Dee in Lamont's boat en route for the Linn of Quoich. We walked up till we were opposite Inverey where we forded the river with some difficulty. Visited the Eagle and Mar Lodge.

Thursday 25 July: Started for Lochnagar at 8.50. Went by the usual route. Lunch at the well. Saw a herd of deer on the White Mounth. Owing to mist did not get higher than Cac Carn Mor (3768, 18 feet below the highest top). While carefully steering our way with the compass we heard someone shouting and soon came upon two fellows (who said they were arguing which way they should go). We walked back the whole way with them to Auchallater where we crossed the Clunie. We cut off a good bit by going down the face of the hill to Loch Callater. Home 7.15. Ben Macdui tomorrow – start at 8.

Friday 26 and Saturday 27 July: Mist and rain both days. Ben Muich Dhui abandoned.

Monday 29 July: Ben Muich Dhui. Drove to Derry Lodge and ascended by the usual route. Several showers. Saw Bennachie. Theodore was with us. 18 miles.

Wednesday 31 July: Left Braemar at 12:40 in waggonette for Aberdeen. Came by 3.30 train from Ballater.

William Watt, Joint Proprietor and Editor of the *Aberdeen Free Press*, lived at 17 Queens Road (now part of Albyn School for Girls) and was recorded as a member of the Cairngorm Club in the 1896 Journal. His sons Edward and Theodore joined the Club in 1911.



Left: Edward and Theodore's wives, Alice and Mabel Murray pose with their mother and a friend by the Devil's Punchbowl at the Linn of Quoich on a date probably not far from their marriages in 1909 and 1911. Alice Watt was present at the unveiling of both the Lochnagar and Ben Macdhui Indicators; Right: The present author, Graham Watt (Mabel Murray's grandson) re-created the picture over 100 years later. CC Photo Archive

Edward Watt edited the Cairngorm Club Journal from 1927 to 1934. He was a Lt Colonel in the Gordon Highlanders during World War I, had just retired from a career in journalism and was entering local politics as the local councillor for Rubislaw Ward. He later became City Treasurer and then Lord Provost of Aberdeen, officiating at the formal opening of the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary at Foresterhill in 1936.

His younger brother Theodore Watt (see below) was also a keen hillwalker and is shown below in the foreground wearing the standard gear of plus fours, tweed jacket and tie .



Theodore Watt in the foreground with his son George Watt 3rd from the left

Dressed this way, on 3-5 April 1920 he attended the Easter meet of the Cairngorm Club at Crianlarich, climbing No 6 Gully on Ben Lui, the Central Gully

of Cruach Ardrain, both with ropes and axes, before finishing off with Beinn Dorain and Beinn an Dothaidh on the final day.

On 12 July 1924 Theodore accompanied his eldest son George (11), niece Marjorie (9), nephew Murray (11) and sister-in-law Alice (43) up Lochnagar, along with over 138 other members and non-members for the unveiling at the top of the new Cairngorm Club Indicator (see below). Marjorie is shown below inspecting the indicator.



Unveiling of the Cairngorm Club Indicator on Lochnagar, 12 July 1924 CC Photo Archive
George Watt

George (named after his Uncle George, as mentioned in the diary extract above, who had died in Darjeeling in 1908) continued hillwalking with the Aberdeen Grammar School Scouts and joined the Cairngorm Club in 1933 while a medical student at Aberdeen University. The picture shows members of the 17th Scout group walking past Loch Etchachan, whose surface was frozen over, on their way to the Shelter (see following page).



Scout group walking past Loch Etchachan



As in the 1925 group photograph at the top of Ben Macdhui, a gabardine Mackintosh was an essential piece of kit).



George Watt shaving at the Shelter Stone

After the unveiling of the Indicator on Lochnagar in 1924, and the “truly tremendous thunderstorm” which followed, George stayed in Ballater with the Gray family while the other Watts returned to Aberdeen. It was the beginning of a long friendship and hillwalking partnership with Hector Gray (later, an Aberdeen solicitor with Gray and Kellas).

Hector wrote,

During that summer, in 1924, I went to stay with the Watt family at Braemar. There was a boy there called Ignatius who kept a pet jackdaw which used to perch on his shoulders. That trip was the real beginning of my hill-climbing

expeditions. Theodore led a small party of six to climb An Sgarsoch and Carn Ealar. It was a perfect day, and we had some glorious views of the Cairngorm massif. It must have been fairly late in August as there were deer stalkers on the hill and when we came down to Geldie Lodge we saw two stags that had been shot that afternoon.

When George and I were fifteen, in 1928, we pushed our way on bicycles round Skye and suffered quite indescribable hardships from the rough weather and rough roads. We did not climb in Skye as we had promised our mothers not to do so, but we camped for two nights near Fort William and scaled the heights of Ben Nevis in the interval.

It was perhaps five years later that we paid a second visit to the Ben Nevis and this time we did the thing in style. We camped in Glen Nevis and our first expedition was “one of the biggest days” that I have ever spent on the hills. We were late in starting as neither of us were very good at rising in the morning, and it was almost 7 o’clock in the evening when we reached the summit of the Ben. We had, of course, conquered Aonach Beag, Aonach Mor and Carn Mor Dearg on the way.

Owing to an unfortunate arrangement which we had made with our too anxious mothers, I had to run all the way from the top of Ben Nevis to the Post Office in Fort William in order to send a telegram, which was to be the signal of our safe descent. The Post Office was closed when I got there but a kindly official let me in at the back door and the telegram was despatched. I was then faced with a six mile walk back to camp. George met me half-way, however, and I got a "lift" on the carrier of his motor bicycle. During the same visit to Glen Nevis, we also climbed Sgurr a'Mhaim.

On another occasion I had three Watt brothers for companions, and we climbed Sgoran Dubh. I might as well have gone climbing with a herd of deer for all that I saw of my companions who were always half a hill ahead.

Needless to say, I had a car on this expedition, for on the following day George and I climbed Ben Wyvis and on the day after, An Teallach. This last ascent was a triumph of navigation and fortitude. We were determined not to break our tour and we climbed in an absolute blizzard. We steered our way to the highest point on the hill with the aid of a compass, map and aneroid. We saw nothing of the ridge. We were absolutely soaked to the skin when we got back to the Inn at Dundonnell.

During the last holiday which George and I had together, shortly before the outbreak of war we did not climb any mountains, but I happen to know that on the day that George met me at Garve he had been to the top of Quinag.

We had many a Saturday afternoon's scramble on Kerloch, Clachnaben, Mount Battock, Bennachie and the Hill of Fare. When I stand on the top of the Brimmond Hill it is my proud boast that I have been on the summit of every hill visible on the horizon. I am sure George could have made the same claim and, in fact, we did most of it together.

Letter from Hector Gray to Theodore Watt, George Watt's father, 1941

In 1941 Hector wrote the following in the Aberdeen Grammar School magazine,

George loved freedom, and for him to tramp the heather was the greatest freedom. Some of my happiest memories are of holidays spent with him among the hills. Only a few days before the outbreak of war we were lying on the braes above Loch Ewe. The sun was shining, and nothing was there to disturb our peace but the lazy drone of insects, the occasional scream of a gull fishing on the loch, or the steady lap of waters on the shore. But although our bodies were at rest that August afternoon, our minds were rarely more active. We knew that Britain was on the brink of war, and it was impossible for us not to wonder

what was going to happen next. "What is the first thing you will do when the war is over?" I asked in a cheerful attempt to bridge an awkward gap. "Meet you here, if you like?" was the swift response. I nodded my head in complete agreement, and the tryst was made.



When war broke out George joined the navy as a Surgeon-Lieutenant, serving in the Eastern Mediterranean out of Port Alexandria in Egypt (see left). While evacuating troops from Greece, his ship HMS *Wryneck* was sunk off Crete by German bombers. An eyewitness recorded that George could have known nothing of the bomb which killed him and many others. He was 28.

Alan Watt

George's brother Alan was a founder member in 1936 of the Aberdeen Grammar School Rambling and Mountaineering Club. He spent his war years in India, where an army nurse, Helen Hughes from Derbyshire, looked after him when he was hospitalised with hepatitis. Back in the UK after the war, his idea of courting Helen on her first trip to Scotland was to take her up the Black Spout of Lochnagar (see below).



Helen Hughes, soon to be Helen Watt, climbing the Black Spout on Lochnagar on Friday 20th August 1948, three days into her first visit to Scotland, which probably explains the cardigan and slacks.

The adventure proved no deterrent to romance. In 1949 they married and in 1954 both joined the Cairngorm Club.

My brother Nigel and I soon arrived and in 1962, aged 11 and 10, our parents took us on the Cairngorm Club's 75th Anniversary expedition – an overnight traverse from the Cairngorm car park to Derry Lodge. An account of that stormy night, involving 25 male and 18 female walkers, was written up in the 1968 Club Journal. Our account was slightly different.

Cairngorm Nightmare

We left the car park at about 8 o'clock with the rain pouring down. There was no wind at this time. The area was then in the process of being made into the skiing centre which it now is and the Sheiling was only a network of girders and concrete slabs. Only the uprights of the ski-lift had been constructed and we climbed Cairngorm in stages from upright to upright. The storm was heightening all the time, and a wind was rising to harness the rain and lash it on to our anoraks and packs. The wind wailed and whistled. The rain pelted down, and we were soaked after only an hour's walking.

The four of us sought refuge in the corrugated iron hut which today is the head of the ski-lift. We stayed there for three hours, huddling round a gas ring we had found and trying to sleep on the hard wooden boards. We left at one o'clock in the morning, roped together lest we were separated by the wind. We struggled through the dim light down Coire Raibert which was a mass of wet scree. Slithering down, we eventually reached the path around Loch Avon. In the valley the wind had dropped but the rain had lost none of its fury. We trudged round to the Shelter Stone to find that we were six hours behind the main party.

We did not wait there, for we could not force ourselves to eat, but pressed on up to Loch Etchachan to meet the head wind again. We passed very slowly over the saddle to the South of Beinn Mheadhoin but made up for lost time by running down to the Etchachan Hut.

We had to reach Derry Lodge by noon and after a long, long trek down the glen, we reached the Lodge with twenty minutes to spare. The bus had managed, quite remarkably, to come up to Derry and very soon we were on the short journey to Braemar. The celebration luncheon was held in the Fife Arms Hotel. The President gave a long speech and there were many toasts. After a long night and a large meal, we were all fast asleep on the homeward journey. From Mor Bheinn, Aberdeen Grammar School Hillwalking Club Magazine, 1967

Two Presidents

Alan and his brother Harold Watt were both Presidents of the Cairngorm Club and are shown (see following page) at the Centenary Champagne Barbecue held at Muir of Inverey on 21 June 1987.



Past Presidents at Muir Cottage in June 1987, celebrating 100 years of the Cairngorm Club.

Back Row: - Eric Johnston, Sandy Black, Harold Watt, Alan Watt, Sheila Murray.

Front Row: - Robert Bain, Ralph Gerstenberg, Leslie Hay

Alan Watt was President from 1967-70 when he had major involvement in the Club acquiring Muir Cottage at Inverey. It was the first occasion on which the local Estate had agreed to sell one of its properties.

Harold Watt

Harold Watt joined the Club in 1967 and was President from 1976-79. He donated the bench outside Muir which bears a plaque in his memory.



As a Past-President he attended two significant Cairngorm Club anniversaries. On 1 August 1985, he joined three other Cairngorm Club Past-Presidents, (see left)

Peter Howgate, Sheila Murray, and Eric Johnston, standing by the Indicator on Ben Macdui, sixty years after its first unveiling On 20-23 June 1987, the Cairngorm Club Centenary Events included a mass gathering of the Club at 6:00am at the Dairymaid's Fields, below the Shelter Stone, next to Loch Avon, where the idea of the Club was first mooted by its six founders in 1887. Harold is seen in the centre of the picture holding a walking stick.



Members of the Cairngorm Club at the Dairymaid's Fields, below the Shelter Stone 100 years after the founding of the Club

In Charlotte Peacock's biography of Nan Shepherd, *Into the Mountain*, (see Book Reviews in this issue) Harold Watt, whose day job was Managing Director of Aberdeen University Press (AUP), is credited with persuading his neighbour, friend and colleague Nan Shepherd to publish the manuscript of her book *The Living Mountain*, after it had spent 30 years in a drawer. It was unusual at the time for the AUP to act as a publisher, suggesting that this was a personal initiative by Harold Watt, who was President of the Cairngorm Club at the time.

The 4th generation

My own memories are somewhat scattered : climbing Carn a'Mhaim, my first Munro, at age 6, my father having got the keys to the Derry Gate from Bob Scott, the gamekeeper, so we could drive up to Derry Lodge; family holidays at Muir of Inverey when it was little more than a stone cottage; swimming in the Dee at the back; playing on the rocks; long carefree summer days on the hills; biking deep into the Cairngorms, long before mountain bikes were thought of; clambering across the old footbridge to the pub at Mar Lodge on starry winter nights; seeing Bob Scott resplendent in his best deerstalker, tweed jacket and plus fours at the Braemar gathering, as purple as the heather; descending the trapdoor to Bill Marshall's underground shop in George Street, Aberdeen, to

buy climbing boots with my own money; chance encounters on hill paths with blind Syd Scroggie, tramping along with his tin leg; all-nighters with the Grammar School Hillwalking Club; climbing all the Cairngorms twice before leaving school.

Returning after 50 years, so much had changed. The Canadian bridge across the Dee to the lumberjack camp, just up from Muir, is long gone; the plantation across the road from Muir is new; a paying car park at the Linn of Dee; a toilet at Corrour Bothy; the hills much busier with lots of single walkers, and women; mountain clothing a big industry; guidebooks abound; electronic aids to navigation; better paths, some with engineered steps, stairways to heaven (something about which, as a very young climber, I could only dream); eight Cairngorm Munros had been demoted; the Angel's Peak became unfinished business.

Two thoughts remain. First, how ephemeral and forgettable are personal experiences and memories; second, what endures, unchanging, are the hills themselves. Standing on the summit cairn of Ben Macdui was probably as sensational for me as it was for my grandfather 127 years previously. The call of high places is as strong as ever. In 2022 I was very glad to re-join the Cairngorm Club – for old time's sake.



The Author Graeme Watt standing on the Summit of Ben Macdui 21/08/2022
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