

A Bobby on Ben Macdhui

by Isobel Bannerman

When I read in the Cairngorm Club Mailing that the Club were looking for contributions to help fund the cost of the replacement Ben Macdhui indicator, it dawned on me that it would be a nice gesture for Dad, John Duff, in his twilight years, to contribute once more to a project in his beloved Cairngorms – they were so much a part of his active life.

Ben Macdhui, 'Mountain of the Son of Duff', highest peak in the Cairngorms, featured in the title of his book "A Bobby on Ben Macdhui" published 24 years ago. And not least so close to the scene of the most tragic mountain rescue call out of Dad's career, when in November 1971, five Edinburgh schoolchildren and an assistant leader died during an emergency bivouac at Feith Buidhe on the Macdhui plateau – caught out by a severe and early winter storm. (Ed: see *Malcolm Duckworth's article on the Cairngorm Disaster elsewhere in this issue*).

A wee bit of background – Dad joined the Scottish North-Eastern Counties Constabulary (SNECC) in 1956. In 1959 he became involved with Mountain Rescue when he was selected (one of twelve) for the SNECC mountain rescue team – Britain's first official police mountain rescue team – conceived by Chief Constable Hunter and Superintendent Ingram.



1960 – John Duff in Torridon – SNECC Police MR Team's first weekend training with RAF Kinloss.

As a relatively young policeman, Dad was moved from Peterhead to Braemar in December 1964, and with the move became leader of the Braemar Police Mountain Rescue Team. He experienced a baptism of fire, or rather snow and ice, beginning with a call out just days after his arrival in the village to an avalanche on Beinn a'Bhuird. Three men were buried in the avalanche; a fourth had escaped to raise the alarm. A search party was organised and one body was found fairly quickly, but no signs of the other two. After the Tilley lamps and torch batteries had all but expired, the searchers left in the early hours, returning at first light. Miraculously, after being buried for 22 hours, Bob Burnett was found alive. Sadly, the other victim didn't make it.

This incident, along with several other serious call outs and rescues over the winter of 1964/65, encouraged the formation of the Braemar Mountain Rescue Association. The founders of the BMRA were seven: a clergyman, banker, Nature Conservancy warden, grocer, electrician, bus driver, and bobby (Dad). Dad was team leader until 1976, and withdrew from the BMRA in 1992 after 28 years of involvement. At 92 years of age, he is now the sole remaining founding member of the BMRA.



Mid sixties – MR Training at the Pass of Bal'ater. Unknown person in stretcher, John Duff below stretcher.

After the formation of the BMRA, there followed many years of hard work and fundraising, including the erection of the Goring Hut and the radio mast on Morrone at 2,819 feet; installation of telephones at Derry Lodge and Spittal of Muick; and eventually the addition of a Snowtrac and land rover – not to mention team training days and acquisition of equipment and clothing for the men (there were no women in the Braemar team in those days). Dad still has his original police-issue navy woollen balaclava with SNECC insignia and original Cairngorm Club badge. I feel sure that he would – excuse the pun – be quite lost today, with the range of equipment, vehicles and navigational devices now available. Not to mention the high-tech clothing and footwear.

I remember playing my part in the fundraising efforts too, along with many other local children, participating in the Highland Dancing displays on the Ballater Church Green on Sunday afternoons – with our teacher Bobby Watson often looking on.

As children we were very used to Dad not being around – he was either on duty, out on a rescue or on some sort of training session. We never worried about him, as we didn't really understand what he was doing (at least I didn't). However, I feel certain that mum had many sleepless nights over those years. I did grow up thinking however, that most people who went to the hills either never came back, or had to be rescued. Fortunately, I now know better and have joined the ranks of Munro 'baggers' (successfully completing in 2024) – not something that Dad would necessarily commend, however.

I have been looking through old copies of Cairngorm Club Journals these past few days, whilst putting this article together. Dad has a full collection of bound copies – going back to the first, somewhat ragged, volume of 1896. Said volume was previously owned by William C. Welsh and subsequently owned by Hugh D. Welsh – both signatures appearing on the cover sheet. It is with great interest that I have read some of the articles in these journals and admired the various beautiful fold-out 'Horizons from Ben Muich Dhui' by Alex Copland. I also understand that Hugh Welsh was President of the Club between 1938 and 1946. The mention of his name makes me smile as I recall when he used to come to Braemar in the sixties when I was a child. He often dropped in to see Dad around tea-time and my memory is that Hugh always wore the kilt and carried a wooden walking stick. I used to be bathed in the kitchen sink,

(not unusual for that era, I'm told...) and Hugh would 'threaten' to get in the sink with me – absolutely terrifying to my four-year-old self!

During the sixties and seventies, Dad wrote many articles for the Journal (mostly on statistics, safety, and mountain accidents). I browsed through those with interest too. One of his consistent mantras was that over-ambition was one of the main causes of walkers and climbers getting into difficulties in the mountains. He sticks to those words today, and I pay heed.

In 1967 Dad won a Winston Churchill Fellowship, allowing him to go to the US for six months to study Mountain Rescue. In 1973 he was awarded the BEM for services to Mountain Rescue, and in 1980 was made an Officer of the Order of St. John. So, his hard work and service did not go unnoticed.

Dad's summary of those years?

"In over three decades of involvement with police and mountain rescue, there were moments of intense sadness, counterbalanced, thank goodness, by moments of enormous gratification. There was also a lot of camaraderie, practical jokes, hilarity and the odd row. Above it all, however, there has always been a feeling of privilege at being able to live and work so closely with the quiet, understated folk of the rural North-East. There are no finer folks".

And I second that. Despite his fading memory, Dad still remembers and is very proud to continue to be a member of the Cairngorm Club. Here's to the next 100 years of the Ben Macdhui indicator!



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