

E. Wagner the first guideless ascent of the Zmuttgrat, justly remarks, 'in all the Alps there are few overhanging walls of such enormous height, and fewer still which reveal themselves so fully to the spectator. Anyone who has seen that overhang at close quarters will not forget it as long as he lives.'³²

The continuity of the Zmuttgrat is broken, as Finch and Farrar have pointed out,³³ by the intrusion of the head of the savage couloir already mentioned, and to get round this one has to traverse out on to the slabs of the Tiefenmatten face. If the rocks are badly iced, such a traverse or more than one may be necessary lower down. It is here that in most seasons the chief difficulties have to be faced. We, however, had the great advantage of dry rocks, and were able to keep closer to the ridge than most of those whose accounts of the climb I have read. In fact we soon got back to the ridge proper, and followed it without serious check to the summit. We did not actually touch Carrel's famous Galerie, though we must of course have passed the end of it. It is a lasting regret that in the interest of the climb and the excitement of nearing the top, I failed to look out for it, and consequently have no clear picture of what is surely one of the most interesting spots in the climbing history of the Alps. The tremendous face which it crosses is however still vividly in memory.

We arrived on the Italian summit at 12.30 P.M., and spent a glorious hour there. Ambros produced from his rucksack a bottle of Bouvier which the friendly Beckwith, with his usual thoughtful kindness, had sent up as a surprise. Of the descent I need only remark that it had recently become the practice, instead of traversing out on the lower part of the east face, to follow the Zermatt ridge itself right down to the hut. This is doubtless safer, but the extra exertion of clambering over the numerous jagged little steps was to me unpleasantly tiring, so that, allowing ourselves one or two halts on the way, we did not reach Zermatt until 8 P.M. There I had the happiness to find a perfect ending to a splendid day.

[For the slides which illustrated the paper, in addition to some from my own and the Alpine Club collections, I have gratefully to thank Prof. T. Graham Brown, Prof. G. I. Finch, Capt. Side and Messrs. C. F. Bennett, S. B. Donkin, J. L. Longland and R. S. Morrish.—E.H.S.]

SKI MOUNTAINEERING IN SCOTLAND

BY H. MACROBERT

Read before the Alpine Club, March 6, 1943

I AM afraid the title of this Paper may be somewhat misleading. I have no tale to tell of adventures among the great snowbound mountains, but rather a simple story of wanderings on ski over the

³² *Zeitschrift des D.u.Ö.A.V.*, 1900, p. 184.

³³ *A.J.* 37. 226 (note 7), 233.

more placid of the Scottish hills. One of our younger members, Wedderburn, has written in his little book that ski-ing has 'added a new and most delectable pleasure to mountain going,' and the truth of this remark has been vividly impressed on me in recent years.

As one grows older the fierce joys of steep rocks and ice begin to lose their savour and one is glad 'to seek repose upon a humbler theme'—in my case ski-ing. And so now I find complete satisfaction and all the excitement I want climbing on ski over the great rolling hills of Central Scotland—hills which I confess I have rather neglected in the past. I even try to persuade myself, and not altogether unsuccessfully, that I have no regrets for the rocks of Glencoe or the peaks of the Coolin.

However, the skier in Scotland must be a climber. He has long distances to cover on foot and considerable heights to climb. He must have an intimate knowledge of the hill roads and paths which lead to the nearest snowfields, so that the heavy burden of his skis may be transferred at the earliest possible moment to his feet. He must have a good eye for country, so that in the descent he can make lightning decisions as he rushes swiftly down from the upper snows to where the rocks and the heather begin to emerge from their winter coating. If his judgment has been good he will float easily down on long snow ribbons far below the real snow line, probably on the course of some burn with the ribbon gradually petering out, but still with enough old hard *névé* bordering the racing torrent to provide—and no more—for the passage of his skis.

When Harold Raeburn first introduced me to ski-ing about 1905, the only snow considered worth ski-ing on was soft snow. Nowadays only experts can tackle soft snow. The average skier has learnt on hard snow and likes hard snow or even ice. This is where Scotland scores. Soft powder snow is rarely found there, but from January to March one can usually find wind swept or icy snow, and from March to May splendid spring snow, either hard from a cold north wind, or soft from sun or rain, but in either condition the easiest of all for the ski-runner.

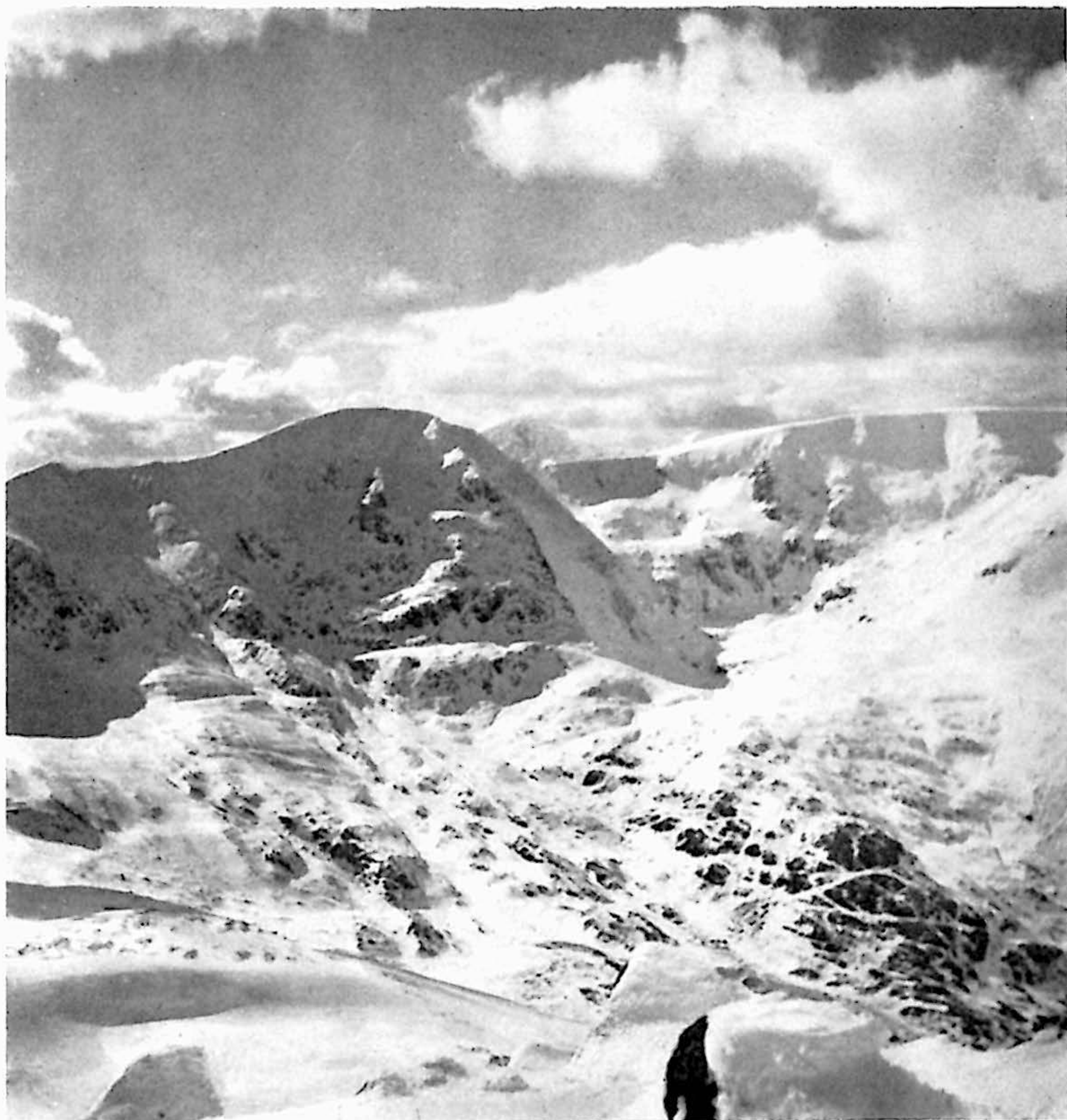
In comparing Swiss and Scottish conditions it must be remembered that in Switzerland most of the ski-ing is done below tree level from 4000 to 8000 feet, whereas in Scotland it is all above tree level, from 2000 to 4000 feet. You will find that ski-ing conditions in Switzerland higher up from say 8000 to 11,000 feet are very similar to what may be found on the ridges and higher slopes of the Scottish Bens.

When the Scottish Ski Club was revived in 1929 the new members were all Swiss trained, that is, they were 'Funicular' or 'Downhill Only' experts. However, we soon changed all that, so that now the members are great hill climbers, going out in the most appalling conditions of wind and rain and snow and mist. In fact they are inclined to be a little bit too venturesome. The avalanche danger is usually disregarded and they do not always appreciate the danger of a steep, hard frozen slope of say 500 or 600 feet. For those who do not fall,



Photo, H. MacRobert¹

TOWER RIDGE, BEN NEVIS.



Photo, N. L. Hird]

AONACH BEG AND AONACH MOR
WITH BEN NEVIS APPEARING OVER COL.

the modern ski with steel edges are, of course, a great safeguard on icy snow, but occasionally even the experts fall, and there have been several 'incidents' as we put it nowadays.

The rallying point for weekend skiers from Glasgow and Edinburgh is the Scottish Ski Club hut situated at a height of 2500 feet in the valley between Beinn Ghlas (3657) and Meall Corranaich (3530) both outliers of Ben Lawers (3984). A hill road leads up from Loch Tay and carries the skier up to 1800 feet when it is not snow-blocked.

Beinn Ghlas is a fine ski mountain. From the cairn, on a narrow snow ridge, one can run 2500 feet down to the road over all kinds of slopes. Meall Corranaich has not such good slopes but the north ridge gives the best run—finishing unfortunately in the middle of a moor. Many of the hills here have great convex slopes of 1500 to 2000 feet, for example the north-west slope of Lawers, and in icy conditions these are not too safe.

The Ski Club has always had a close association with the Scottish Mountaineering Club, and naturally it has encouraged the mountaineering aspect of ski-ing. Special expeditions involving the traverse of a mountain have been arranged and these have usually been favoured by fine weather and good snow conditions. One illustrated here was from Loch Voil in the Balquhiddar valley up the south ridge of Stob Coire an Lochain (3500). From here one can ski down the east ridge, follow the glen to the Killin-Crianlarich road near Luib; or continue north over Stobinian (3827) to Ben More (3843). The last 100 feet of Stobinian may have to be done on foot, but the 1000 feet run down the north side is excellent so long as one keeps near the cornices on the east.

Cruach Ardrain (3428) is a fine mountain, but it is really too steep for ski-ing except under very favourable conditions. The only point in its favour apart from its beauty is its proximity to a main road and Crianlarich station, an important consideration in these motorless days.

As a general rule the hills of the West Highlands are too steep and rocky for ski-ing, and moreover they carry less snow than the Central Highlands. This, however, does not apply to the Ben Nevis group, with four summits over 4000 feet. The Ben itself (4407) although famous for its wonderful rock and snow climbing, gives also a very fine ski traverse. From the S.M.C. hut (2200) the route goes up the Allt à Mhuillin to Coire Leas, out of which a steep snow climb lands one on the well known Carn Mor Dearg ridge. Another steep climb of 900 feet brings the skier out on the great summit plateau. We arrived here on a cloudless afternoon in May—bright sun, no wind, powder snow—a wonderful introduction to Ben Nevis for the non-climbers of the party! Skirting the upper cornices we had a very fast run down to the Half Way hut. Leaving our skis here we traversed round to the S.M.C. hut, meaning to repeat the run next day. That night, however, the usual happened, and the next morning it was so wet that the best we could hope for was to retrieve our skis and return to Fort William. However, by the time we reached the skis we were so rain

soaked that we decided to have a short run. In the end we found ourselves again at the summit cairn, but this time in a howling blizzard. The spring snow came out on top, however, and we had just as fast a run through the snow, rain, wind and mist, as in the ideal conditions of the previous day.

To the east of Ben Nevis lie Aonach Beag (4060) and Aonach Mor (3999), two very beautiful mountains. The former is the more shapely and has a very fine climbing route, the north-east ridge, but Aonach Mor's massive proportions and striking lines are very impressive. The ski-ing on both is good but involves long carries.

The finest ski-ing country in Scotland is, of course, to be found among the great plateaux of the Cairngorm mountains and in the districts just to the south. Approaching the Cairngorms from the south one comes by the Perth—Braemar road up Glen Shee, a most appropriate name, and over the Spital of Glenshee at a height of 2000 feet. This takes the ski-mountaineer well up among the surrounding hills which run up to 3500 feet in Glas Maol.

The following account shows what can be done in a weekend from London.

We left Euston by the 7.30 P.M. on a Friday night at the end of April. Cars met us at Perth next morning and soon we were climbing up through drizzling rain and dense mist towards Glas Maol. Crossing two subsidiary tops we arrived on the great flat plateau, but without searching for the cairn we dived over the edge and swept down through the mist in a north-westerly direction. Our London friends were so delighted—and surprised—that we had to climb up the 1700 feet and repeat the run.

On Sunday morning we left Braemar on a perfect spring day and motored to Derry Lodge. A carry of about three miles on a path of sorts brought us to the foot of the south-east ridge of Ben Macdhui at a height of 1750 feet at the Luibeg Burn. From here we climbed on ski except for a short carry over the rocks of Sron Riach right to the summit cairn (4296). On Sron Riach we lunched and sun-bathed. From the top we ran down in three swoops of 300 feet, 800 feet, and 1500 feet to the Luibeg. After dinner at Braemar we dropped our London friends at Perth to catch the night sleeper.

There are also good approaches to the Cairngorms from the north, from Aviemore, by way of Glenmore Lodge at the foot of Cairn Gorm (4084) or by Glen Einich for Braeriach (4248) or by Glen Feshie for Sgoran Dubh (3635) and Carn Ban (3443).

From Cairn Gorm one can run down 2000 feet by several routes to the north, or one can ski about four miles across to Macdhui without dropping below 3500 feet—a wonderful expedition in fine weather and a good test of compass work in bad weather.

Braeriach is the finest ski-mountain in this country, but it is not so accessible as some of the other Cairngorms. From the north one can go over all its tops, cross over to Cairn Toul (4241) and then west to Carn Ban and down to a motor road in Glen Feshie. This same route

may be taken in the opposite direction with the fine 2500 feet run off the north-west top of Braeriach (4036) down to the Lower Bothy in Glen Einich. A variation of this run may be made by turning left (west) at the 3000 feet contour and descending a magnificent gully 100 yards broad and 1200 feet in height. This gully holds snow very late in the season.

Sgoran Dubh and Carn Ban form the western boundary of the Cairngorms. They are easily reached from a hill road which runs up the right bank of the Feshie. From Sgoran Dubh one can run for three miles circling round the upper corries and finishing through the lovely pine woods bordering the road and the river. This is the only district in Scotland where I have skied below tree level.

In conclusion I would repeat that avalanches, although uncommon, are a real danger. In the early spring you may meet small windslab avalanches, and in April large wet snow avalanches, usually caused by the breaking away of cornices. And in tackling long steep icy snow slopes the mountaineer must remember that he has neither nailed boots to grip the snow nor an ice-axe to check a fall.

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(The film which followed this paper showed ski-running on Beinn Ghlas and Meal nan Tarmachan (3421) in the Ben Lawers district, and on Cairn Gorm, Carn Ban and Braeriach in the Cairngorms. It also showed first that high speed ski-ing was possible on what appeared to be a mixture of snow, heather and grass, and secondly what an important part snow ribbons play in Scottish ski-ing.)

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At the conclusion of this Paper, Mr. G. A. Seligman spoke as follows :—

Many of us have interested ourselves in encouraging ski-runners to realise the pleasures that lie in store for them in the high mountains, but I do not think that the amount of work Mr. MacRobert has done in this connexion is fully appreciated.

His method is to take a few innocent low level skiers, such as for instance some of the less enterprising members of the Scottish Ski Club, and by subtle means to inveigle them into the influence of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, after which the rest is easy. I have been led by Mr. MacRobert on more than one occasion, and there is no one I would rather follow. His knowledge of country, especially his own lovely Scottish terrain, is quite remarkable and really without him ski-ing in the Highlands becomes far more difficult ; for instance the little ribbons of snow he mentions are not marked on any map, and to find them and, to use his picturesque if somewhat ethereal phrase, ' to float down on them,' is beyond the capacity of the average man.

There are other difficulties in ski-ing in Scotland. First and foremost the weather, which varies from day to day and makes it impossible to plan a trip even a few days ahead. It was all right for the skier living in, say, Glasgow who could take a car after work one evening and arrive for dinner in the charming and comfortable little inn at Killin within easy reach next morning of the Scottish Ski Club hut on Ben Lawers, of which we have seen so many pleasant pictures this evening, but it was quite a different problem for the dweller in the south.

Then there is the lack of hut accommodation which entails a descent each night to the valley and often a long and weary trudge over snowless ground. In this way one's freedom of movement is much restricted. Recently I have

been reviewing an American book on ski touring and mountaineering which gives in precise detail the technique of self-contained camping, each member of a party being surprisingly lightly laden and yet supplied with a good many comforts. I recommend this thought to young ski-tourers and even to others travelling in the Highlands and I hope to take active steps after the war to bring the technique of camping anew to the notice of climbers in the Alps. For many of us now have a horror of the overcrowded Alpine huts and refuges.

I wish to thank Mr. MacRobert for his charming talk and for the fascinating views of the Scottish hills which he has shown us. Many, indeed most of us, have done our mountaineering in foreign lands, and I always think there is an added thrill in crossing the Highlands—the knowledge that we are on British soil. That is an additional reason why I have spent a very happy hour; and I have been thinking what a power of good a little ski-ing or climbing in Scotland would do many of us now. And, if I may be permitted one final remark, Mr. President—I never thought I should live to see the day when photographs and films of slaloms and ski races would be shown to an appreciative audience consisting of members of the Alpine Club.

SOME ALPINE RECOLLECTIONS

By R. J. G. MAYOR

Read before the Alpine Club, May 4, 1943

WHEN I received an invitation to read a paper to this Club, the first thought that came to mind was to wonder whether I could find anything to say that would deserve to be food for a meeting. New ascents, difficult adventures, explorations in unknown country, these are what make the stuff for the papers most worth listening to; and I had none of these to offer either for the Alps or for our home mountains, still less for regions farther afield. But a second thought soon followed, that this answer, while it might serve if conditions were normal, would be a poor excuse at a time like the present, when new climbs are out of the question, when the dangers and difficulties that fill our thoughts are being enacted elsewhere than in the mountains, and when the Club's active members must for the most part be too busy with other work to have leisure to compose papers. I am going then this afternoon to do what so many others have done before me, and try to put into words the feeling that has led me year after year to turn for pleasure and refreshment to the Alps. When we are in the mountains with the right climbing companion we know what that feeling is and we are sure that it is shared; when we try to express it the words are hard to find. Still, we keep on returning to the task, and we are ready to listen with sympathy and interest when we hear a friend attempting it. So I will make the attempt once more, and in looking for an answer I began to hunt in memory for some of the Alpine recollections that have stayed with me most vividly.

Memories of good climbing days presented themselves in plenty, and which was I to select? A good many of the best of them seemed to be ruled out on the ground that they have been described before.