

THE ALPINE JOURNAL

VOL. LIV

NOVEMBER 1944

NO. 269

SKYE

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Read before the Alpine Club, June 6, 1944

IN the summer of 1886 a young scientist went to Skye for the fishing. As the weather was fine and there was no water in the Sligachan river he wandered up into Coire a' Bhasteir, where he saw two mountaineers climbing on the face of one of the pinnacles of Sgurr nan Gillean.¹ 'Hundreds of feet above me,' he says, 'on what appeared to me to be rocks as steep as the walls of a house, they moved slowly backwards and forwards, but always getting higher till they finally reached the summit.' He was so fascinated by this spectacle that he telegraphed for an Alpine rope, and when it had arrived he and his brother attempted to climb Sgurr nan Gillean. After two failures he consulted John Mackenzie and at the third attempt he reached the summit by the tourists' route.

This was the beginning of Norman Collie's mountaineering career, and of his lifelong association with John Mackenzie and the mountains of Skye. No one has known and loved Skye better than Collie; and to those of us who only knew him in his later years he seemed as essential and as imperishable a feature of Sligachan as the view of Sgurr nan Gillean from the bridge. Collie was a great photographer and the Club now possesses many hundreds of his photographs. It is my purpose tonight to provide a running commentary, while you are shown a few of his lantern slides of Skye. Most of these were taken nearly fifty years ago: when you have seen them, I think you will agree that they are remarkable and that many of them bear comparison with the photographs in the brilliant mountain picture books, which are such an attractive feature of the bookshops of today and of the hall table outside.

The map of Skye is for me the most exciting map in the world, with its fantastic coast line, its outlandish Norse names—Trotternish, Vaternish, Talisker, Snizort—and its contour lines hugging the coast till in the Coolin, in the words of Montague, they 'begin to sing together, like the Biblical stars.' In the last few weeks, with that wonderful half-inch coloured relief sheet of the Ordnance Survey spread out on the floor, I have visited the island again and again.

Now the great advantage of expeditions on the map is that one is not confined by any limits of time or space. In these recent weeks I have

¹ *A. J.* 32. 164.

watched the long ships of the Vikings creeping up the western fjords ; I have seen the great armada of King Haco of Norway sailing down the Inner Sound to disaster at Largs ; I have stood by while Macleods massacred Macdonalds and Macdonalds massacred Macleods ; I have crossed the Minch in an open boat with Flora Macdonald and her gawky Betty Burke ; I have seen the immigration ships standing by in the little land-locked harbour of Portree ; I have heard the piping of the Mackrimmons ; I have explored a fairyland of rocks, pinnacles and caves ; I have looked across to the Outer Isles from the thousand-foot cliff of Dunvegan Head ; I have watched the eagle and the red deer, the seal and the basking shark ; I have smelt the peat smoke and tasted the sea trout fresh from the Sligachan River. But above all, I have felt the firm rough gabbro of the Coolin ; I have climbed upon their faces and their ridges, in sun and in rain, and from their summits I have looked down into the black waters of Coruisk and out to an enchanted world of mountain, sea and island.

But I am not really like this. It is the inescapable effect of Skye on the visitor. It is probably only the native, who has got to make a living from the island, who is proof against the romanticism of the 'Misty Isle.'

To see Skye through tinted glasses has been the heritage of every visitor since Walter Scott, beholding Loch Corriskin for the first time, found it 'as exquisite a savage scene as Loch Katrine is a scene of romantic beauty,' a scene which he immortalised in 'The Lord of the Isles,' where Robert the Bruce and Ronald of the Isles make the first recorded bivouac by the shores of the lake.

The sudden change of attitude towards the highlands and islands, from fear and revulsion to romantic admiration, which followed the suppression of the clans after the '45, is one of the most remarkable revolutions in civilised taste. I cannot do better than quote what was said on the subject a hundred years ago by Macaulay in that magnificently prejudiced passage in his *History of England*, which begins :

'It is not easy for a modern Englishman, who can pass in a day from his club in St. James's Street to his shooting box among the Grampians, and who finds in his shooting box all the comforts and luxuries of his club, to believe that, in the time of his grandfathers, St. James's Street had as little connection with the Grampians as with the Andes.'

He describes how the crags and the glens, the woods and the waters, were the same that now swarm every autumn with admiring gazers and sketchers. But :

'A traveller must be freed from all apprehension of being murdered or starved before he can be charmed by the bold outlines and rich tints of the hills . . .'

'The change in the feeling with which the Lowlanders regarded the Highland scenery was closely connected with a change not less remarkable in the feeling with which they regarded the Highland race.'

' Soon the vulgar imagination was so completely occupied by plaids, targets and claymores that, by most Englishmen, Scotchman and Highlander were regarded as synonymous words. Few people seemed to be aware that, at no remote period, a Macdonald or a Macgregor in his tartan was to a citizen of Edinburgh or Glasgow what an Indian hunter in his war paint is to an inhabitant of Philadelphia or Boston. Artists and actors represented Bruce and Douglas in striped petticoats. They might as well have represented Washington brandishing a tomahawk, and girt with a string of scalps. At length this fashion reached a point beyond which it was not easy to proceed. The last British King who held a court in Holyrood thought that he could not give a more striking proof of his respect for the usages that had prevailed in Scotland before the Union than by disguising himself in what, before the Union, was considered by nine Scotchmen out of ten as the dress of a thief.'

Macpherson's *Ossian*, that landmark of romanticism, with its mythical references to Cuchullin and Skye, came out in 1760-63. This was about the time that travel in the Highlands was beginning to become reasonably safe for the Anglo-Saxon. But to the average traveller mountains were still unlovely and useless obstacles. Pennant visiting Skye in 1772 found the Coolin 'a savage series of rude mountains,' and Blaven affected him with astonishment. Dr. Johnson in his famous visit the following year seems hardly to have noticed the Coolin, which were to him and his contemporaries only monstrous protuberances. It is true he did write to Mrs. Thrale, 'Here are mountains I would once have climbed,' but it is difficult to believe that he really thought he could ever have climbed the Coolin. At any rate, though he stayed at Talisker, and during his visit must have seen those views of the Coolin which today leave us breathless at their beauty, there is not a single reference to them in his *Journey to the Western Isles*. Boswell did just notice 'the Cuillin, a prodigious range of mountains capped with rocky pinnacles in a strange variety of shapes'—an excellent description, but the hills were clearly only objects of interest and not of beauty.

But once the revolution had started it was rapid and complete. Johnson, with his indifference to the beauties of Highland scenery and his scorn for Macpherson's gross imposition, soon gave place to Wordsworth and Scott. It is a short step from 'The Lord of the Isles' to Balmoral, Landseer, 'Over the Sea to Skye,' 'The Road to the Isles' and the tartan covered boxes of shortbread in the shop windows of Princes Street.

The romantic past dominates the scene in the Highlands in a way that it never does in England or Wales. It is possible to cross Honister or the Pass of Llanberis with thoughts only of the present grandeur of the scene or the wetness of the weather, but it is impossible to pass through Glencoe or Killicrankie without thoughts of the bloody deeds with which they are associated. The Scot has a peculiar genius for investing past deeds of robbery and bloodshed with a romantic beauty.

It is the same genius which has given us the Border Ballads ; and it is significant that all the best ballads come from the Scottish side of the Border.

This may all seem a far cry from the Coolin and rock climbing ; but it is not—or, at any rate, is not for me—as any climbing holiday in Skye is set against a background of romanticism which has become as important a part of the charm of the island as the atmosphere or the quality of the rocks.

I was extremely lucky to be introduced to Skye by Shadbolt and McLaren. Alastair McLaren, a proper Celt, who wore the kilt, had the Gaelic, and played the pipes, established the romantic background. Both my companions, with their intimate knowledge of the Coolin, passed on to me an acquaintance with the district from the outset ; and in their contact with the great days I felt that they gave me a link with the historical past of climbing in Skye.

With this slender excuse I am now going to make a brief survey of this history.

The peaks of the Coolin remained unclimbed longer than any others in the British Isles. The earliest mountaineering expedition was in 1836, when J. D. Forbes made the first ascent of Sgurr nan Gillean, in company with Duncan Macintyre, an active forester in the service of Lord Macdonald, who had already made repeated attempts on the summit. They went up by what has now become the tourists' route. Forbes, true to the scientific tradition of the early mountaineers, was studying glacial action, and his results were published in his *Geology of the Cuchullin Hills*, in which he was the first climber to observe that the extreme roughness of the rocks on Sgurr nan Gillean rendered the ascent safe, when, with any other formation, it might have been considerably perilous. Finding no reliable map, he produced the first tolerably accurate map of the district.

It is interesting that this, the first ascent of what was at the time considered the highest point in Skye, was made eighteen years after Dorothy Wordsworth, having picnicked on Esk Hause, went on to climb Scafell Pike, which had already become an 'Easy Day for a Lady.'

Forbes climbed none other of the Coolin peaks except Bruach na Frithe, which he went up, again with Macintyre, in 1845 ; but he made a complete circuit of the Black Coolin and crossed and recrossed the ridge in several places.

Nothing more seems to have happened till 1859, when C. R. Weld climbed Sgurr na Stri, the little outrider of the Coolin which is such a prominent feature of the view from Elgol. Describing the climb in his 'Two Months in the Highlands,' he drew the attention of his brother members of the Alpine Club to a peak 'laid down by enterprising Captain Wood on the Admiralty Chart as being 2312 feet high and *inaccessible*. Surely,' he wrote, 'some bold member of the Club will scale this Skye peak ere long, and tell us that it was but a stroll before breakfast.' It was twenty-one years before the Pilkingtons did climb the Inaccessible Pinnacle. But before this the invasion of Skye by bold members of the Club had begun.

Since the publication of *Mountain Craft*, it has become usual to divide the development of climbing in the British Isles into periods—the Easy Way, or the walking epoch; the Gully and Chimney, or the human chock stone epoch; the Ridge and Arête, or the epoch of grip and pull; and the Slab and Wall, or the epoch of balance climbing. The Easy Way period in Skye I should like to call the Alpine Club period. It was the period following the winning of the great Alpine peaks, when the classical mountaineers turned occasionally to British hills; and in Skye in particular, such men as Clinton Dent, Willink and the Pilkingtons were able to find climbing of a type which reminded them of the ridges to which they were accustomed in the Alps. In Skye there were still virgin peaks to be won; and the illusion of exploration was fostered by ‘a magnificent and complicated system of mistakes on the Ordnance Map, unequalled in the British Isles.’

But the giant of this epoch was not a hero of the Alps, but a native Skyeman, Sheriff Alexander Nicholson. He made very early ascents of many of the principal summits. In 1865, the Matterhorn year, he climbed Sgurr nan Gillean from Lota Corrie. And in 1873 and 1874 he made the first ascents of Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr Dubh, descending the Coruisk face of Sgurr Dubh at night with a plaid for a rope. He recorded his enthusiasm for Skye in verses and in articles in *Good Words*, extracts from which colour the pages of every subsequent work on the Coolin. His attitude to rock climbing is nicely summed up in his comment on the Inaccessible Pinnacle. He thought that ‘with rope and irons it *might* be possible to get to the top, but,’ he added, ‘it would be a useless achievement.’ Nicholson is now established as the Grand Old Man of the Coolin; and it is appropriate that the highest peak should bear his name. In the same year, 1873, as he made his ascent of Sgurr Alasdair, by what can only be described as an explorer’s route—up Banachdich, over Dearg, right down into Coire Lagan and up, presumably, by the great stone shoot—H. G. Willink made a mountaineer’s route up Blaven.

In April 1880, W. W. Naismith, the father of the Scottish Mountaineering Club, climbed alone the north peak of Bidein Druim nan Ramh.

Charles and Lawrence Pilkington, in a few short visits to Skye, made between them a remarkable series of first ascents²: the Inaccessible Pinnacle and the peak at the head of Coire Lagan, now known as Sgurr Thearlaich after Charles, in 1880; the highest peak of Bidein in 1883; and in 1887 the peak next Thearlaich which they called Mhic Coinnich after John Mackenzie, Sgurr Sgumain by the north buttress and Clach Glas.

Meanwhile, Stocker and Parker had also been exploring new routes. In 1886 they did the fine climb on the face of the fourth pinnacle of Sgurr nan Gillean, which had been watched with such fascination by Collie, and they got up the Inaccessible Pinnacle by the short steep end. Collie’s photograph of a lady in a veil and an ankle-length

² *A. J.* 13. 433 *sqq.*



Photo, P. Bicknell]

CLACH GLAS FROM NORTH.

skirt poised confidently on the difficult step of this climb is a happy comment on the name of the Pinnacle.

By 1888 all the summits in the Coolin had been climbed, but there were still many sections along the main ridge which had not been traversed. In that year Collie, mostly with John Mackenzie, explored the ridge from end to end.³ In 1889 he climbed the Bhasteir Tooth for the first time, from Lota Corrie, and with King crossed the Thearlaich-Dubh gap. By this time the impetus which Mummery's early climbs in the Alps had given to mountaineering was having its effect on rock climbing in the British Isles. In 1892-1895 Collie, Mummery and their companions were making mountaineering history in the Alps and Himalaya; and it was not till 1896 that Collie returned to Skye, to start climbing the great untouched rock faces. The difference between the climbs of the Pilkingtons and those of Collie on the faces is comparable with the difference between the climbs of Whymper and of Mummery. The ascent of the Coruisk face of Ghreadaidh is typical of the sort of climb in which Collie delighted: nearly 3000 feet of continuous climbing on steep rock, leading from the foot to the summit of the mountain. It will never be known just how much Collie and John Mackenzie did climb in the Coolin. They explored every corner, but left no records. I believe his reticence nearly broke the hearts of the compilers of the Skye Guide.

Collie's exploration of the main ridge was really completed by Naismith's climb on the Bhasteir Tooth and King's Chimney on Sgurr Mhic Coinnich, both done in 1898. These were the last two links in the chain, which leads continuously along the watershed from Gars Bheinn to Sgurr nan Gillean.

It was in 1899 that Collie, after climbing Alasdair with Bruce and his Gurkha, Harkabir Thapa, and being delayed by a crag-bound sheep, saw the huge face of rock on Sgumain lit by the evening sun and noticed the great shadow cast across the middle of the face. Collie's slide of the photograph⁴ which he took on that occasion bears the inscription: 'The shadow of the Cioch on face of Sgurr Sgumain. Photo taken in 1899, Sep. with Bruce. It was this shadow that told me there was a fine pinnacle on the face of rock. N. Collie.' But it was not till 1906, after various expeditions in the Rockies and Lofoten Islands, that he was able to follow up his discovery, by making a route on to the Cioch, and by beginning the exploration of the great face of Sron na Ciche. His route to the Cioch shows just the same ingenuity as his route to the summit of the Dent du Requin.

The discovery of the Cioch is a landmark in the history of climbing in Skye. It is the boundary stone marking the end of the age of the easy way and the beginning of the age of the difficult way, with the complete change in attitude which that implies. The transition was, of course, gradual. But owing to the nature of the Skye rocks the transitional styles of the gully and the ridge were much less clearly defined than they were in the Lake District. Gullies are comparatively scarce

³ *A. J.* 32. 163 sqq. ⁴ *A. J.* 26, facing 28.

in Skye, and the climbers of the Gully epoch tended to keep to the obvious routes on ridge and face. But in 1896 there had been titanic wrestlings in the Water Pipe. If ever there was a sight to whet the appetites of that generation it must have been the 1300-foot cleft that splits Sgurr na Fheadain from top to bottom, and which, when it is not obscured by mist, is seen so clearly by every traveller to Glen Brittle. This was the generation to which Collie belonged, and it is with chimneys, cracks and gullies that one is apt to associate the names of that group of climbers—the Mummery Crack, Slingsby's Chimney, Collie's Step. Whether that much criticised step was fashioned by the hand of god or by the hand of man, its creation has always seemed to me to be amply justified. It makes Moss Ghyll a fine consistent climb, which can be climbed with safety and enjoyment under almost any conditions. Without the step there would be one movement so delicate as to make the climb impossible for most parties on what is now a 'Moss Ghyll Day.'

Once the splendid climbing face of Sron na Ciche, a wall of rock almost two-thirds of a mile long and about 1000 feet high, within an easy march of Glen Brittle, had been found, new enterprise in Skye, as in England and Wales, was directed towards working out climbs of increasing difficulty, into which a new element of artificiality was introduced. To the rock climber of today it seems strange that for years the early climbers, intent on routes which led to the summits, passed by the finest climbing face in Skye without thinking it worth exploring.

1906 and 1907 were the years of the first onslaught on the new precipice, led by Collie, followed by Ashley Abraham. In 1906, Shadbolt and McLaren, in Skye for the first time and looking for King's cave, burrowed their subterranean way to the top of the Bhasteir Tooth. The series of fine climbs, which Abraham and his companions did in 1907, provided the copy for his *Rock Climbing in Skye*, which was published the following year. The publicity which this book gave the Coolin, combined with the rapid improvement in the technique of rock climbing and the discovery of the new cliff, all contributed to a period of new activity, which was still flourishing in 1914.

Jones and Thomson, Shadbolt and McLaren, Steeple and Barlow were prominent amongst those who were doing new routes. Archer Thomson in the *ALPINE JOURNAL*⁵ of 1912 described the rare delight of climbing for a week in Skye entirely on virgin rock. It was a great week, and there was a great day when Thomson and Jones on one rope and Shadbolt and McLaren on another, made parallel routes up the face of the Castles from Harta Corrie. These climbs, like the Cioch Buttress, also done for the first time that week, are routes of the old type, obvious lines of ascent up a great face of rock. But the influence of the idea of multiplicity of routes can be detected in the parallel climbs on the Castles. The previous generation would have climbed four on a rope.

⁵ *A. J.* 26. 17 sqq.

From 1912 onwards Steeple and Barlow, climbing with various parties, covered the rocks with new climbs, even more numerous than those they did in Wales. Their crescendo of first ascents culminated in the publication of the S.M.C. *Guide to the Island of Skye* in 1923, to which they contributed the rock climbing sections. The general editing was done by our Vice-President MacRobert. This excellent guide, far from stimulating new endeavour, seems to have had a paralysing effect, for since 1923 very little new ground has been broken. In Skye there has been no parallel to the burst of activity in the Lake District and Wales in the late twenties. No Clogwyn d'ur Arddu has been conquered. I must sorrowfully admit that my own particular generation has contributed less in Skye than any other since climbing began. In spite of the Glen Brittle air service, Skye has remained too remote for the week end climber, and most of the climbs lie far from roads and shelter. The guide, with its detailed description of the ridge and its delightful introductory chapters, has tended to focus interest on the ridge and on all that the whole island has to offer other than rock climbing. To most of us, on the rare occasions when we get to Skye, the attractions of the magnificent ridge and face expeditions of the old days are so great that we are tempted to neglect rock climbing of a more specialised type.

David Cox, in the most interesting paper⁶ which he recently read to the Club on 'Rock Climbing in North Wales,' said that 'the British climbs cannot, of course, offer more than a faint imitation of some of the attractions of the Alps; the combined pleasure of snow, rock and ice; the attainment of a peak by climbing; the collective movement of a rope going smoothly; the rapid gaining of height on a ridge or face, or the being at a height for hours continuously on a summit ridge.' Skye, I maintain, can offer more than a faint imitation of all these joys except the first: the combined pleasure of snow, rock and ice.

Let me illustrate my contention with a typical Skye expedition which I made with my brother Claud at Collie's instigation. We left a car at Kirkibost on Loch Slapin and reached the head of Coruisk after a splendid walk over Strathaird to Loch Scavaig and round the head of the loch by the 'bad step' under Sgurr na Stri. We then climbed the face of Ghreadaidh, which blocks the valley, attaining our peak by nearly 3000 feet of continuous climbing, enjoying for long periods the collective movement of a rope going smoothly and the rapid gaining of height on the face. From the top of Ghreadaidh we followed the main ridge over the four peaks of Mhadaidh, being continuously at a height on a summit ridge. It is these very elements which give expeditions in the Coolin their particular charm.

And it is the quality of the Skye gabbro that make these continuous rock expeditions possible. The wonderful firmness and roughness of the gabbro are set in sharp contrast with the treacherous rottenness of the basalt dykes. Nowadays we associate climbing in Skye with moving on supremely sound rock comparable with the granite of

⁶ *A. J.* 53. 115 *sqq.*

Chamonix. But this was not so for the early climbers. The descriptions of the Pilkingtons' first ascent of the Inaccessible Pinnacle are set to an accompaniment of thunderous rock falls from the ridge. The loose rocks have now been mostly removed from the more frequented climbs, but there are still hazards of this sort even on the most thoroughly worn and polished routes. I remember sitting eating lunch below the Cioch slab when a boulder, a block-buster about the size of the Post Office at Glen Brittle, landed within a few feet of us and shattered, pitting the face of rock behind us. It had appeared out of the mist and we never discovered whence it came nor whose were the voices that we heard above us. The early climbers, following the lines of least resistance, tended to follow the basalt, and so became familiar with it in all its primeval rottenness. The modern climber on slab and face, keeping more exclusively to the gabbro, acquires a self-confidence which may lead him to treat the basalt with insufficient care and respect. This confidence may also lead to disaster, when the climber moves to other districts and climbs on surfaces of a more normal texture. This is a danger which has been indelibly imprinted on my mind by a memorial which I once saw on a pleasant grassy cow alp in the Karwendel. The inscription ran something like this :

' This stone marks the spot where ADOLPH SCHMIDT and HERMANN MUELLER, having made the first ascent of the super severe Teufelswand, met their end by slipping on the wet grass.'

But there is little fear of slipping on the wet grass in the Coolin, as a striking characteristic of the rock is the lack of vegetation which it supports. When it begins to rain, absorbent vegetation is so sparse that water pours off the rocks with amazing rapidity. Once, when I was on the Harta Corrie face of the Castles, a sudden storm broke after some hours of sunshine. Within a few minutes a solid sheet of water, like the smooth surface of a weir, was pouring down the gabbro slabs, so warm that, as it flowed down our sleeves and out at the bottom of our trousers it was pleasantly hot compared with the coldness of the falling rain. On the other hand, in a similar sudden shower on an August day, when the rocks had been shrouded for some time in a cold mist, I have been completely defeated in an attempt to get up the easiest route to the Cioch by the icy waterfall descending the rocks.

It is a curious paradox that two of the greatest pioneers of rock climbing in the notoriously wet island of Skye were driven to the rocks by lack of water. Charles Pilkington as well as Collie first began to explore the Coolin because it was too dry to fish. It seems equally paradoxical that in the Coolin, unlike other British hills, thirst can be a serious problem to the mountaineer. More than one party has failed to complete a long expedition on the watershed ridges through failure to carry enough to drink. One of Collie's photographs suggests that the great men did not make this mistake : it shows John Mackenzie and a handsome mountaineer in knickerbockers and a Norfolk jacket hauling an enormous barrel up a considerable rock climb.



Photo, J. N. Collier

MACLEOD'S MAIDENS.

I keep on emphasising that what I like about the Coolin is the long continuous expeditions on which one can live again in the bad old days of the easy way. Dearly as I love the rocks of England and Wales, it has never pleased me, when I gratefully grasp a 'Thank God' hold, to be told that I must not use it because it is on the next climb. Now of all the continuous expeditions in Skye, the innumerable combinations of face and ridge, the most obvious and the most attractive of all is the traverse of the main ridge. One has only to see the jagged blue line of the Coolin from the mainland, set over the round shoulders of the Red Hills, to wish to make one's way along that narrow ridge. I have mentioned that by 1898 the whole of the main watershed ridge of the Coolin had been traversed in sections, but until 1911 it was generally considered that it would be impossible to do it in a day. Collie had spent eighteen hours or more traversing, or I should say exploring, the section from Mhadaidh to the Thearlaich-Dubh gap. But in June 1911, Shadbolt and McLaren proved their belief that it would be possible, by making the complete traverse from Glen Brittle to Sligachan, as an ordinary mountaineering expedition, in under seventeen hours door to door.

In 1934 my brother and I made this expedition in the reverse direction. We treated it as an ordinary climbing day, except for a rather early start and a little more food than a packet of sandwiches in our rucksacks. It was a poor day with mist and wet rocks most of the way. So we were not tempted to linger on the way, but we did not go particularly fast. I should say we were a good average party, fairly fit, doing the ridge under average conditions. It took us exactly fourteen hours from Sligachan to Glen Brittle, three hours less than the original traverse. Allowing for shorter halts and the fact that I was already familiar with the whole of the route, this probably represents a difference of about one and a half to two hours. These hours indicate the change that has taken place in the ridge in twenty years of its life. By this I do not suggest that it has undergone any cataclysmic change, like that controversial change in the ridge of the Ecrins. Like all expeditions, it became far easier the moment it had once been done. The south face of the Täschhorn seems to be the one exception which proves this rule. The ridge has been so scratched and so minutely described that instead of being a problem to find the route it is now a problem to lose it. Nail scratches on all our climbs have done more to destroy the illusion of exploration than any other factor—though in England and Wales many of the climbs have passed through the phase when visible scratches make them easier, to the next phase, when the brilliant polish on the rocks is gradually making them unclimbable. It is a consoling thought that, at any rate in one way, the arterial routes that lead to nowhere are gradually becoming more difficult again.

There is one section of the Coolin ridge expedition which becomes no easier; and that is a terrible bit of moor, which lies between Gars Bheinn and Glen Brittle. Scottish moors are generally a nightmare, but there is a hollow somewhere below Sgumain, filled with a fantastic

jungle of heather, birch and rowan, boulders and peat, which I have never succeeded in circumnavigating. With Dr. Johnson, I have always felt that 'a walk upon ploughed fields in England is a dance upon carpets compared with the toilsome drudgery of wandering in Skye.'

But for all the scratches the ridge remains the finest mountaineering expedition in the British Isles. Or perhaps it is only the best but one; for it has one sad disadvantage for the real hero. Its completeness is spoilt by those two awkward outposts of the Black Coolin, isolated amongst the Red Coolin, Blaven and Clach Glas. Blaven is perversely just over 3000 feet high, so that for a gatherer of Munros a traverse of the main ridge leaves one still to pluck.

In June 1939, Charleson and Forde started from a camp at the foot of Gars Bheinn, traversed the whole of the main ridge to Sgurr na h'Uamha, with snow and ice part of the way; and after a meal and a rest at a camp in Harta Corrie, went up Clach Glas and Blaven and came back to their tent in Harta Corrie, the whole expedition taking five minutes less than 24 hours. Three months later Murray and Donaldson, setting out from Glen Brittle, sustained by vita-glucose and revived with draughts of navy rum and Bovril, repeated the feat with half an hour to spare.

So history once more repeats itself, and the finest expedition in the British Isles, already only a preliminary to an ascent of Blaven and Clach Glas, is fast becoming an 'Easy Day for a Lady.'

CLIMBS WITH MEDICAL AND WEATHER COMPLICATIONS

By C. F. FOTHERGILL

Read before the Alpine Club, April 1, 1944

AFTER the very learned and classical paper we had read to us at our last meeting by Mr. Arnold Lunn, not to mention the brilliant one previously given by our then retiring President, Mr. Winthrop Young, I feel very diffident indeed about reading my paper this evening, and I only agreed to do so because so many are away on account of the war and, in consequence, I knew there must be a dearth of material. My paper will be a very simple one, merely telling of some of my personal experiences, which I trust may prove of interest.

The earliest climb I can remember, dates back to when I was five years old. On that occasion, my father led me up a steep dry water-course, holding me by the hand and teaching me where to place the tips of my toes. For the descent my father decided to carry me on his shoulders. He had a long alpenstock and this snapped in two when we