A Century of Mountaineering in Scotland

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(*Plates* 84–86)

It is always curious to read as history what one has experienced oneself.
Max Beloff

Although there had been ephemeral precursors, it was in 1889 that the first mountaineering clubs in Scotland held their inaugural meetings: the Cairngorm Club in Aberdeen on 9 January and the Scottish Mountaineering Club in Glasgow on 11 February. They are thus the oldest clubs in Britain, apart from the Alpine Club itself.

They began differently, with the Cairngorm Club actually being founded on 22 June 1887 by six friends who were passing the night at the Shelter Stone of Loch Avon, in order to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria with fireworks on the summit of Ben Macdui. They resolved to form 'a Cairngorm Club' and 18 months later the new club was formally constituted. The SMC, on the other hand, owed its origin to a letter in the *Glasgow Herald* from W W Naismith, suggesting a Scottish Alpine Club. This led to further letters and a public meeting at which 'The Scottish Mountaineering Club' was constituted.

As the origins of these clubs differed, so did their character. The Cairngorm Club was focused on Aberdeen and the Cairngorms, with the emphasis on hill-walking activity often involving large-scale club excursions. Although there were no ladies initially, it has always been open to both sexes. Today, with over 400 members, it is the largest of the 100 or so clubs in the Mountaineering Council of Scotland. The SMC was founded in Glasgow, but nearly half of its membership came from other parts of the country and its role has been more of a national club. It was exclusively male and still resists occasional attempts to make it mixed. The Ladies' Scottish Climbing Club was founded in 1908 and continues to flourish alongside its brother organization. In its original tally of 94, the SMC included no fewer than 17 members of the AC and from the outset it was involved in a wide range of mountaineering activities. Slightly smaller than the Cairngorm Club, it is not particularly large in today's terms but still plays a prominent part in Scottish mountaineering affairs and is the principal source of information and record, with about 25 titles currently published through the Scottish Mountaineering Trust. Both clubs were to produce journals which continue to this day, the *SMC Journal* appearing annually and the *CC Journal* with rather less frequency. In their pages is to be found a large part of the history of mountaineering in Scotland during the last 100 years.

Of course Scottish mountaineering began long before 1889. Occasional

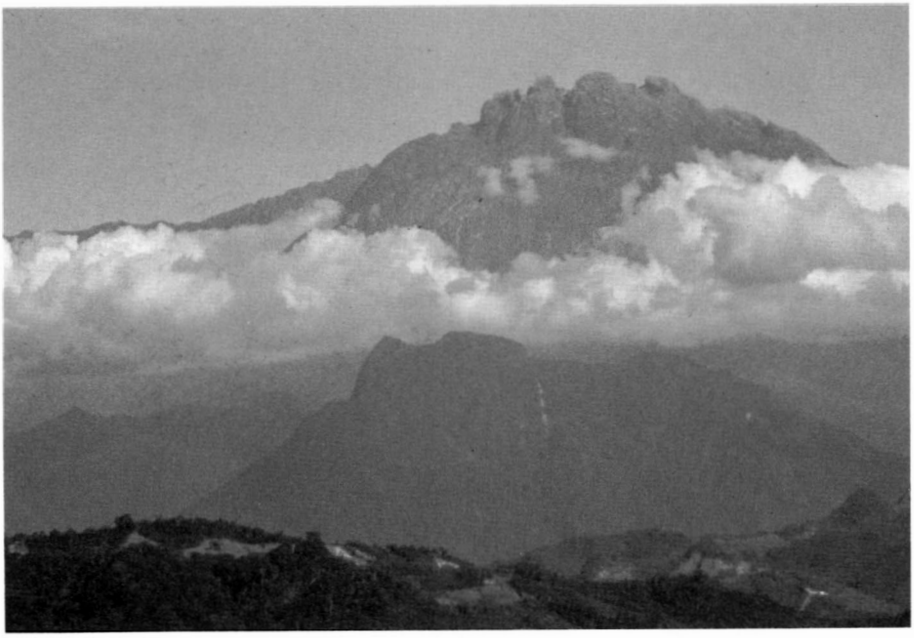
ascents are on record from the late 16th century, and by the end of the 18th notable peaks like Ben Nevis and Ben Lomond were on the itinerary of the adventurous traveller doing the Scottish version of the Grand Tour. The 19th century saw increasing changes in attitudes to the Highlands. The Romantic concept of mountain scenery was fostered by Scott and the Lake Poets, fauna, flora and geology were being studied and the mountains mapped by ordnance surveyors, who performed some prodigious hill-walking feats in the course of their duties. The development of sporting estates – fashionably encouraged by the Royal interest in upper Deeside – saw an entrenchment of landowning rights with attempts to limit access by the closure of some traditional routes which had been used by drovers and others. One incident in 1847, when a party of botanists from Edinburgh University was confronted by the Duke of Athole and his ghillies, has come down through history as 'The Battle of Glen Tilt'. However, the real conflicts took place in the law courts where this and other similar disputes were resolved, usually in favour of the public's right of way. Present-day hill-walkers and climbers owe a great deal of the 'freedom to roam' we enjoy today in the Scottish hills to the efforts of these stravaigers of the 19th century, and to organizations like the Scottish Rights of Way Society which defended their interests. The case of 'Jock's Road' in Glen Doll even reached the House of Lords. The early membership of the SMC and the Cairngorm Club included several protagonists of these rights and the latter elected as its first president James Bryce, MP for South Aberdeen, later Viscount Bryce, who waged a long parliamentary campaign for free access to mountains for recreation. His efforts were partly successful, but his farsighted proposals for national parks were never realized.

Anyway, by 1889 the scene had been set, the Highlands had been mapped and investigated – yet little was known about their mountaineering potential. It was not until the 1860s that the rival claims of Ben Nevis and Ben Macdhui for primacy in height had been resolved. No one knew how many mountains there actually were, or how many were major peaks with summits over 3000ft. The Highlands were probably less well known and certainly much less documented than the Alps.

An exception was Skye, where the jagged peaks and narrow rocky ridges of the Cuillin had largely repulsed the early tourists, scientists and surveyors. They had, however, attracted mountaineers. In the 1870s and 1880s the summits were all reached, some by AC members like the Pilkingtons who climbed the Inaccessible Pinnacle of Sgurr Dearg in 1880. In the alpine manner, Skye even had its own professional mountain guide, the famous John McKenzie after whom Sgurr Mhic Choinnich, the last Scottish Munro to be climbed (by Charles Pilkington in 1887), is named. The last phase of this primary exploration of the Cuillin was completed by SMC members in the 1890s.

The special character of the Cuillin has given them a mountaineering history different from other parts of Scotland. English climbers have played a more prominent part in their climbing exploration than elsewhere. To do justice to their story is beyond the reach of this short article, which must give more attention to the mainland.

It is convenient, if simplistic, to divide Scottish mountaineering history



83. Mount Kinabalu in the morning. (p 185)

84. Tom Patey and Jerry Smith on the first winter ascent of Parallel Buttress, Lochnagar, March 1956. (Note the nailed boots, the short axe, the home-made ironmongery – and the clothing!) (p 190)

into four roughly equal parts: the first phase up to 1914, 1915–1939, 1940–1965, and the modern period. In a brief account of this kind it is only possible to present a summary, and I shall avoid listing over-many climbs and climbers which, although important in themselves, may make for tedious reading to readers unfamiliar with the Scottish mountaineering scene. Instead I shall try to emphasize those aspects which are distinctive to mountaineering in Scotland.

The Golden Age

This is an appropriate label for the first phase, when nearly every excursion was an exploration and merited a record in the *SMC Journal*. Some of them covered impressive distances through the hills on foot. The first complete traverses were made of inspiring summit ridges like the Aonach Eagach, An Teallach and Liathach, as well as ascents by flanking spurs like the Ciochs of Applecross, the NE ridge of Aonach Beag and the Northern Pinnacles of Liathach, which gave more challenging approaches.

However, cataloguing the mountains by height and general character was the primary task. Its chief agent was Munro whose 'Tables giving all the Scottish Mountains exceeding 3000ft in Height' were published in the *SMC Journal* in 1891. Munro identified 283 separate mountains with 538 tops and, although his original list has been slightly modified in later editions, the word 'Munro' has entered the language. In this way Sir Hugh T Munro is today the best-known of all the SMC pioneers, although as a mountaineer he was overshadowed by some of his contemporaries. In early SMC parlance, Munro was a 'Salvationist'. There was no derogatory implication in this term which was used as a convenience, along with 'Ultramontane', to indicate preferred activities. Circumstances usually make most Scottish mountaineers a bit of both.

The outstanding Ultramontane was Harold Raeburn, a highly talented mountaineer with a remarkable bent for exploration. He climbed extensively in Norway, the Alps and the Caucasus, but is mainly noted for his ubiquitous discoveries on Scottish crags, from the Shetland sea-cliffs to the volcanic scarp of Arthur's Seat. 'Raeburn's' gullies and buttresses abound, some even appearing on today's Ordnance Survey maps. Although Raeburn was a masterly rock-climber, it was in the winter arena that he made his most important contribution. By the early 1900s the ascent of ridges, buttresses and gullies in snow and ice conditions was becoming the cornerstone of Scottish mountaineering. What had begun as alpine training had become a mainstream mountaineering objective, and what may have been lacking in the height of the peaks was compensated for by limited daylight and the nature of Scottish winter weather.

The climbs themselves might well involve 1000ft or more of difficult ground and require a level of commitment fully satisfying to those engaged on them. Raeburn's ascent of Green Gully on Ben Nevis in 1906, and Crowberry Gully on Buachaille Etive Mor in 1909, both involved steep ice of over 75° and technical difficulty which was as high as anything done elsewhere.

1914–1939

The First World War created a hiatus in the progress of Scottish mountaineering, not only during hostilities but through the decade which followed when climbing society – small enough to begin with – had been depleted by the loss of some of its main activists and may have seen little merit in pushing the frontier in a succession of snow-poor winters. Anyway, it was not until the 1930s that the standards set by Raeburn and his contemporaries were regained. In 1929 the Charles Inglis Clark Memorial Hut was completed and led to a major wave of exploration on Ben Nevis. This was mainly rock-climbing, but its principal activists, G G Macphee and J H B Bell, were also involved in ascents which heralded a renaissance in winter climbing. By the late 1930s a group of young Glasgow climbers which included Bill Mackenzie and Bill Murray was extending the winter frontier by ice climbs like Garrick's Shelf on the Crowberry Ridge, and firmly established this type of climbing as a Scottish speciality. It was climbing which demanded one-handed axework and this in turn led to the use of short axes, usually by modifying ordinary long ones.

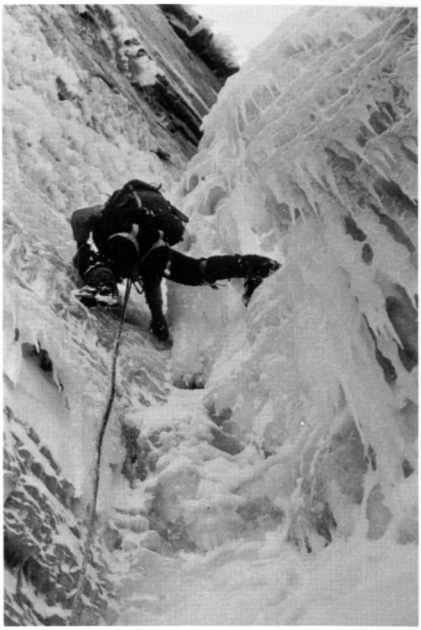
There had been some fundamental changes in the social make-up of the climbing world in Scotland, just as there were elsewhere. The growing availability of motor vehicles and leisure (sometimes enforced) brought the mountains within reach of many young people from the cities. The result was a big increase in climbing and the birth of new local clubs. Alastair Borthwick's well-known book, *Always a Little Further*, gives a splendid yet amusing account of the atmosphere of this outdoor world of the 1930s. It is a book of colourful characters, of tramps and tinkers, for this was a world of hitch-hiking, tents and caves, not of hotels, tweeds and railway stations like the pre-1914 era.

1940–1965

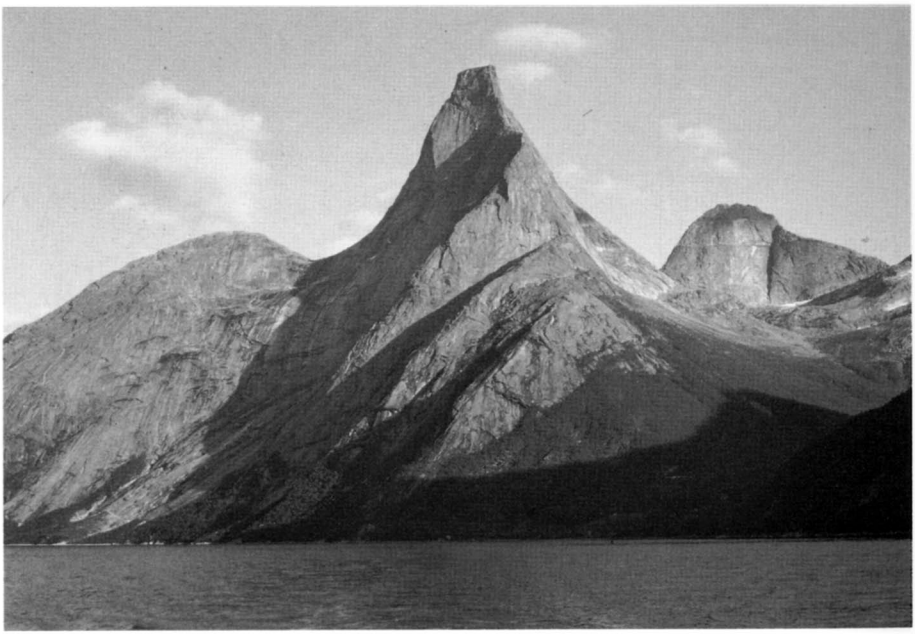
The Second World War restricted mountaineering to a much lesser extent than the First, and in its aftermath the flood of ex-WD clothing and equipment encouraged growth and continued social change in the Scottish climbing world just as elsewhere in Britain. In Scotland, where W H Murray's *Mountaineering in Scotland* had inspired a post-war generation, an important development was the climbing exploration – largely by Aberdeen climbers – of Cairngorm granite which had earlier been generally regarded as unsuited to rock-climbing. All over the Highlands other major climbing grounds were developed during the 1950s, among them the Torridonian sandstones of the north-west, the quartzites of Foinaven, the gneiss of Carnmore and the granite slabs of Etive. Rock-climbing techniques and standards generally lagged a little behind those south of the Border, except perhaps in Glencoe where some outstanding routes were established by Glasgow climbers, particularly members of the Creag Dhu Club. Among these climbs was John Cunningham's Carnivore, which still retains Extreme grading.

However, it was the winter developments which were the most significant. Aberdeen climbers had continued to use nailed boots in preference to vibram soles in order to cope with the algae-clad Lochnagar granite which

85. An early SMC party in the Centre Gully of Ben Lui. (p 190)



86. First winter ascent of Harrison's Direct on Ben Nevis, February 1976. Climber: Chris Gilmore. (p 190)



87. Stetind. (p 197)

becomes slippery when wet. They applied themselves to the winter buttresses, so that this type of mixed winter climbing to which tricounis were well suited became a major feature of the Scottish scene. A by-product was the establishment of the numerical Scottish winter grading still used today in preference to the adjectival rock-climbing system. Tom Patey was the outstanding member of the Aberdeen school, and he was to remain in the forefront of Scottish mountaineering until his death in 1970. Many of these Cairngorm mixed climbs have retained their standard and some, like Eagle Ridge, Mitre Ridge and Sticil Face, have become classic winter routes.

In the late 1950s vibram soles replaced nails even in the Cairngorms and this meant that crampons, which had long been resisted by the Aberdonians, were now essential for winter climbing. An impressive example of their use on Lochnagar granite was given on the first winter ascent of Parallel Gully B, a VS route in summer, by the Edinburgh pair of Jimmy Marshall and Graham Tiso in 1958. Marshall was to prove one of the finest all-round climbers in Scottish history, and his winter achievements on Ben Nevis together with Robin Smith represented the peak of what was possible in ice-climbing by means of single axe step-cutting supplemented by pitons. Among their fine winter first ascents on Nevis were Minus Two Gully, Gardyloo Buttress and the Orion Face direct. Robin Smith was one of a group of Edinburgh climbers who made some remarkable rock climbs on both rock and ice in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These included Shibboleth, the classic Extreme on Buachaille Etive More and the Needle on the Shelterstone Crag.

The Modern Period

By the mid-1960s rock-climbing had seen the adoption of specialized footwear and the development of protection. As elsewhere, these were to contribute to the rising technical standards which today have transformed this sector of mountaineering into a very different activity from that practised by earlier generations. The number of new routes being recorded is greater than ever, but they are necessarily harder and are increasingly located on smaller crags, quarries and sea-cliffs. This is no different from other parts of Britain, and other developments such as indoor climbing-walls and the use of training to improve standards are also present in Scotland.

In snow- and ice-climbing the technical changes began modestly with better crampons, ice screws as an improvement over ice pitons in providing anchorage, and the tentative use of ice daggers to assist the short ice-axe. In retrospect it seems incredible that it took so long to make the obvious discovery that the traction from an ice-axe pick would be enhanced if the pick is dropped enough. Yvon Chouinard and Hamish MacInnes appear to have reached this conclusion independently on opposite sides of the Atlantic. After Chouinard visited Scotland in 1970 the new ice tools were launched, curved pick hammers and axes by the former and the dropped pick Terrordactyls by the latter. In 1971 Cunningham and his Glenmore Lodge colleague Bill March demonstrated the potential of the new methods by ascending the Ben Nevis test-piece of Point Five Gully in less than three hours. This had taken 29 hours of siege tactics on its

first ascent in 1959, and even Marshall and Smith who repeated it in good style in 1960 had taken seven hours. In 1973 it was soloed by Ian Nicolson along with Zero Gully in a combined time of three hours! By the mid-1970s front-pointing with two axes was in wide use and 'pick and stick' had transformed Scottish winter climbing. The technique is now used all over the world, with refinements such as the replaceable banana-shaped pick as the current front-runner.

Today Scottish ice-climbing is a popular sport and the winter corries where only 20 years ago solitude was almost guaranteed are now crowded with climbers, not only from all over Britain but occasionally from Europe and even North America. Many of the classic ice gullies have been downgraded and a Grade VI has been added for the harder climbs (with tentative extension beyond this). The ice frontier is now on ice-falls and icicles where vertical and even overhanging ice occurs. A notable practitioner in the 1980s is Mick Fowler, who has achieved many fine first ascents on weekend visits from a base in London.

At this point we may well ask what remains that is still distinctive about mountaineering in Scotland. There are two particular features which lie at opposite ends of the mountaineering spectrum.

The first is the cult of Munroing. Huge numbers who go hill-walking and who in other countries would just be hiking in the hills are bent on reaching 'the tapmaist elevation' of their peak and eventually on ascending all 277 Munros. Although A E Robertson, the first Munroist,[1] finished his round in 1901, it took another 50 years for the number to reach 20. There are now over 600, and they are increasing by more than 50 every year. Whether one approves or not, 'Munrosis – the Scottish disease' – is a fact.

The second is mixed climbing involving rock-climbs under winter conditions. This is suited not only to the classic ridges and buttresses where thick deposits of hoar crystals may be an embellishment, but also to places where moisture and vegetation may impair rock-climbing in summer but enhance it in winter. In these conditions the Lochnagar buttresses, the great Torridonian walls of the North-West and even the mica-schist of the Fannaichs come into their own, providing not only conventional snow and ice but pick and stick in frozen turf, delicate work on ice-smeared slabs and the wedging of axe heads in cracks known as 'torquing'. Outstanding Scottish climbers like Andrew Nisbet who served an apprenticeship in general mountaineering, and Dave (Cubby) Cuthbertson who began as an accomplished pure rock-climber before developing his ice-climbing, have different backgrounds. It is significant that today both seem to seek their ultimate challenge in mixed routes of the highest standard. New stars like Graeme (The Brat) Livingston are enjoying the same experience, as did Tom Patey on the Winter Traverse of the Cuillin ridge and even W W Naismith on the NE Buttress of Nevis in 1896. It is a dream that has been shared by many; above all else it is the most distinctive and special feature of Scottish mountaineering.

REFERENCES

1 AER completed all the 283 separate mountains on the original list but almost certainly did not do the Inaccessible Pinnacle of Sgurr Dearg which was then listed only as a Top.