JOHN JACKSON

Skye - Sixty Years Ago

In the late 1930s my brother Ron bought a motorbike and sidecar for £5. It was an old side-valve Ariel, which never went very fast but slogged away all day, without any trouble. We called it the 'Iron Lung' and it was really, because it transported us to the fresh clean air of the moorlands and hills. Ron quickly learned to drive and after a few sorties to Ilkley, Almscliffe and the Lake District, we planned to have two weeks in Scotland and the Isle of Skye.

I remember my feelings of excitement and anticipation as we sped northwards across the border for the first time, knowing we were on the road to the Isles. We threaded our way through Glasgow, took the twisting road by Loch Lomond, climbed over Rannoch Moor and then swept into Glen Coe. Evening clouds drifted slowly down the valley and swirled among the deep gullies of Aonach Eagach. Away to the left, the rocky bastion of Crowberry Ridge loomed through the mists that twisted and curled over the faces, ribs and clefts of Buachaille Etive Mór. It seemed appropriate for our first visit to the Glen of Weeping.

At Arisaig the next day we arrived at the western seaboard, looked across to the misty Hebrides and saw our first Scottish black-faced sheep. Further along the road we reached Mallaig where the herring fleet had returned the night before. All the boats were tied up at the jetty and the fishermen were mending their nets, tough, kindly and soft-spoken men. They took us over the sea, to Skye.

It took a long day riding past Beinn na Caillich and round the shores of Loch Ainort to Sligachan where we caught sight of the jagged dark line of peaks, the Cuillin. Out came the guidebook, revealing the magic of the Cuillin names, Sgurr nan Gillean, the peak of the young men, the axe-shaped tooth of Am Basteir, its name obscure but often supposed to mean 'the executioner'. Beyond we could see Bruach na Frithe, the brae of the deer forest, and the start of Bidein Druim nan Ramh, the peak of the ridge of oars.

From Sligachan we sped round by Carbost then bounced along the dusty, boulder-strewn track into Glen Brittle. There ahead was Sgurr an Fheadain, the peak of the water pipe, the serrations of the many peaks of the foxes, Sgurr a'Mhadaidh and the noble Sgurr a'Ghreadaidh, the peak of the mighty winds. These strong names made a permanent impression on my mind, perhaps even more because of the wet and windy days that followed. It also helped that later we made friends with two Gaelic speakers who carefully trained us in the meaning and pronunciation of the names.

At the end of the day we stayed at a little white-washed cottage then owned by Mr and Mrs Chisholm. It was the post office with the unforgettable number of Glen Brittle 1. The waters of Loch Brittle came right up to the little cottage garden which grew crops of peas, beans and potatoes and because of the seaweed being used for fertiliser smelled strongly of the sea. That evening was a fitting end to an exciting day as the sun sank down into the western sea and its ruddy glow lit the massive gabbro walls of Sron na Ciche and the rock ridge of Sgurr Dearg, the red peak against a soft blue sky. Unfortunately this was the last distant view we had of the ridge. For the next ten days the misty island lived up to its name. Despite the weather they were a memorable ten days as is often the way in mountains when difficult conditions extend achievements and experiences.

After the short fierce gritstone ascents at Widdop, Almscliff and Ilkley, and then the longer routes in Cumbria, Sron na Ciche seemed a good progression. We climbed the gully, face and direct of the Cioch, the rough rock smoothing our finger ends until they were almost too sore to grip, the crystalline gabbro biting deep into the soft iron of our climber nails. Heavy rain swelled the hemp rope, its weight a hindrance as the wind curled it away from us, across the water-washed rock face. Up into the clouds we went, towards the Crack of Doom and climbs on Cioch Upper Buttress.

It was on the Upper Buttress that Ron and I saw our first rope slings and a strange, artificial contraption a small team of Welsh climbers called a karabiner. We were surprised that such aids and safety devices should be used in a sport that we felt depended mainly on personal skill, judgement of difficulties and conditions, and assessment of one's own ability. Years later I trained people in the use of all this equipment but always felt unease carrying chocks, wires, slings and karabiners. Without them we climbed the hardest routes in Britain before the war and we had a great time doing them, sometimes in rubbers, often in nails, occasionally solo but generally the two of us together. With the two of us linked by a Beale's red three-stranded hemp rope there seemed to be no problems in the whole wide world other than getting up the next stretch of intriguing and alluring rock.

You can go through almost the whole gamut of mountaineering experience in Scotland, and on the Skye ridge they come together. We practised moving alpine style over Sgurr Alasdair, onto the Thearlaich Dubh Gap and then traversed Sgurr Mhic Choinnich via King's Chimney and onto An Stac. As we climbed the Inaccessible Pinnacle the mist swept about us, the sun shone weakly. Wind from the deep depths of Coruisk whipped between the rock teeth, making a cleaving sound, like that of a swooping falcon, and then when the sunlight strengthened a Brocken Spectre appeared. My own shadow seemed huge within the circular rainbow – the glory! White light from the sun split into the spectrum as it shone through the spherical droplets of mist and then projected onto the screen of the cloud beneath. Such moments are never forgotten.

As we neared the top of the Pinnacle the mist thinned out, the sunlight was strong enough to disperse the clouds and when it cleared the next group of peaks was revealed to us. The barren-looking ridge, fractured and shattered by fierce freeze-thaw action over a million years, is surprisingly dry, and it's worth seeking out the hidden springs. They also offer a welcome display of colour as alpines stretch towards the sun from these rare sources of moisture.

Of course, there is much more to Skye than the Black Cuillin. There is, for example, much fine walking on the softer, rounded granite hills of the Red Cuillin. And then there are the strange volcanic ash formations of The Storr and the Quirang, the softer rocks eroded into strange pillars and rock windows and steep gullies, looking across the Sound of Raasay to Rona where the seals breed each summer. And beyond Rona, the pre-Cambrian sandstone of the Torridon hills.

Once at the Quirang I saw a golden eagle circling above the vertical rock walls and sky-reaching pinnacles of 'The Prison'. This is a strange, hidden place where Skye crofters hid their sheep and cattle when rustlers arrived from over the sea. The livestock were driven up the narrow gullies to reach areas of flat grassy grazing land surrounded by crumbling walls of rock. Their defence was easy – the only way in or out was by the gullies. Once the raiders had gone, the crofters returned to the thatched roofs of their shielings and their runrigs, the strips of lands running down to the sea.

Always in the Western Isles you come back to that unique balance of sea and mountain. Once, camping with my wife Eileen and our two sons at Achiltibuie, north-west of Ullapool, I visited the mountaineer and explorer Tom Longstaff. Few have done as much to travel, explore and climb as he did in different parts of the world. Together, with a few drams of Glenlivet as a lubricant, and maps to stimulate the memory, we discussed countries and mountains far afield. Before dark I asked, 'Why did you retire to this spot?'

He took me to the window. There I looked out across the loch to the Summer Isles, then beyond to the rugged mountainous coastline stretching south and west as far as the serrated peaks of the Cuillin of Skye. The sea was on fire from the setting sun and the toothed gabbro of the ridge was etched against the golden clouds.

'I have travelled far and wide,' he said, 'climbed in most mountain areas of the world, but this is the finest panorama of the mountains and the sea I have ever seen. This is where I want to end my days.'

I've been back to Skye many times since those early days and often camped on the green stretch of *machair* by the shores of Loch Brittle. There the Atlantic Ocean rolls right up to the tent doorway and you look across to the islands of Rum, Eigg and Canna. Once, two of us camped behind Mary Campbell's cottage, which at the time was a favourite grazing ground for her long-horned Highland cattle. Early in the morning we were away up onto the Cuillin ridge via Choir' a' Ghrunnda.

Weather signs were not good and by noon we were in the middle of a classic Skye deluge. Rock walls and slabs, gullies and cirques became a vast watershed made up of hundreds of foaming, rushing streams and waterfalls. Thoroughly drenched and cold, we made our way back down to the camp thinking of warmth, shelter and steaming mugs of tea. To our horror we found that the long-horned cattle had ripped the tent apart, trampled over our food and eaten our only packet of tea. Worst indignity of all, they had left 'visiting cards' over the rest of our equipment.

Early starts became the norm for us. We would climb up to the ridge and be on top as the early morning sun slanted into the curving, glaciated basins. Sparkling lochans winked back from the sombre deep-lying hollows and the frost-shattered scree would begin to shift in the sunshine, sending a clattering of stones down that would echo from the shadowy rock walls.

The mountains offered us a silence that was yet not quite a silence, for these sounds filtered quietly into our consciousness. These, along with the satisfaction of knowing that we would share yet another exhilarating day on the ridges of Skye, ensured that we would 'live life to the full, blend dream with the deed, and drink deep of the draught'. For me, in the 1930s, the Brontë moors, Lakeland and then Skye, and our 'iron lung', were the motivation for a lifelong connection with the high hills.