The Birdman of Gars-Bheinn

RICHARD ANDERSON

The Greater Traverse of the Cuillin Ridge in Skye (the Main Ridge plus Clach Glas and Blaven) was first completed by Charleson and Forde in June 1939. 'This *tour de force* is not likely to become everyone's cup of tea' is the rider given in *Classic Rock*.[1] It seemed to make it a perfect target for Chris Stephens and myself, both middle-aged and intent on doing something challenging before descending into a totally sedentary existence.

Murray and Donaldson also made an early successful attempt, armed with their secret weapon 'Mummery's Blood', a repulsive-sounding mixture of rum and Bovril with which they fortified themselves before doing the final Clach Glas-Blaven section. Murray's account[2] makes tremendous reading, and Humble[3] also has a wealth of colourful information about early parties. One notices, when reading these accounts, that – as so often with advances in mountaineering – there was a psychological barrier to be overcome: describing the background to his attempt, Murray writes: 'The first practical difficulty was to convince my own mountaineering friends that the proposition was not an impossibility. And for three years I was unsuccessful.' It seemed right that we should be embarking on the Traverse 50 years after those great pioneers, but whether 4500m of ascent over 20km could be construed as 'an easy day for a lady' was still open to question!

It was clear that this trip would require quite a bit of planning. The end of May and beginning of June, which coincided with my half-term, seemed an obvious time to go, with near maximum daylight and minimal midge factor, but where we should base ourselves for the Traverse was less obvious. The early parties had started from Sligachan or Glen Brittle, but both of these approaches entail long trudges before or after the Traverse. The more we thought about it, the more attractive Camasunary looked as a start/finish point. The approach from there to Gars-bheinn is shorter and more interesting than the mind-numbing trog from Glen Brittle, and it lies literally at the foot of Blaven. There was also the bothy, a rather unknown quantity, but we could always camp if it proved uninhabitable.

At some stage during the preparations I decided to get my attempt sponsored, with money going to the Gurkha Welfare Trust. We would not be out to break any records (even in 1944 Menlove Edwards had done the Greater Traverse, Glen Brittle to Glen Brittle, in 24 hours, with apparently zero reconnaissance and no more food than 'the usual packet of sandwiches supplied to climbers at Glen Brittle House'[3]). The rules we set ourselves were that we would try to make a continuous traverse, with time being no object. We would carry all food, but would pre-position a water dump on the ridge. We planned

to start in the evening from Camasunary, bivouac on Gars-bheinn, at the start of the ridge, with the option of a further bivouac should we need it. It was obviously essential to be very fit and we concentrated on building up stamina. I ran in Wytham Woods, the nearest convenient bumps to North Oxford; Chris commuted on his folding Bickerton. We met, when we could, for weekends in that still empty part of Wales, west of Hay, to tramp across miles of bog discovering unknown, enchanting valleys.

Then, on 25 May 1989, we took the familiar road north, marvelling to see the Buchaille, for once clear of cloud, standing guard at the entrance of Glencoe. The weather was still brilliant when we reached the coast and took the old Kylerhea ferry over to Skye, and as we approached the start of our walk-in from the Elgol road our hearts sank at the number of parked cars. Had our careful plans to beat the weekend rush to grab places in the Camasunary bothy been dashed? But they were only day-walkers and we established ourselves, after two carries from the road, without trouble. Camasunary proved to be an excellent choice: the bothy was spacious, in good repair and right by the sea, with plenty of driftwood for a fire and nothing but rabbits and sheep for company.

Low cloud and rain woke us next morning; the weather was changing. We made a late start for the Druim Hain pass into Coruisk and, finding an outcrop at the back of Coire Riabhach, we returned to the rock. It was glorious to be climbing once again on rough gabbro. We returned to Camasunary by the coast, relieved to see that there had been no further attempts to 'smooth' the Bad Step.

We decided that Bealach na Glaic Moire would be as good a place as any to put our water dump, and so trudged round the next day, up Coir' Uisg to the col, the cloud lifting from the top of Bidein as we approached. We cached four litres of water under the S summit and then followed the Main Ridge over Bidein, reminding ourselves of the complexities of the route and trying to commit the easiest line to memory, for it is a confusing place to be in mist. We thought we could get off Bidein on to the Druim nan Ramh ridge, which would make an interesting return to Camasunary. However, there appeared to be no direct way off the centre summit without an abseil, so we moved north along the Main Ridge and dropped off into the top of Harta Corrie, only managing to regain the Druim nan Ramh ridge after an interesting exposed scramble whose outcome remained in doubt until the end.

The weather was still poor on Monday, but we had to look at the unfamiliar Clach Glas-Blaven section. The cloud held off sufficiently, allowing us a great day. The Clach Glas-Blaven Traverse is a superb expedition, never more than Moderate, but what a Moderate! The route continually weaves round difficulties; every moment one expects the way to be barred by some impossible overhang or gendarme, but always it goes, as so often in the Cuillin, by the most improbable line. As we made the long descent from Blaven back to the bothy, we felt we were now in position to have a go, but would the weather be with us?

In the morning there was the familiar cloud, with ominous snow on the tops. We retreated to the Broadford Hotel for coffee and the *Scotsman*'s

weather forecast. It was not good: 'Unstable northerly airstream, showers, snow on high ground. . .' Our window was beginning to close and the time had come for decisions: it was either tonight or Wednesday night; Thursday would be too late to allow a second attempt if the weather was bad. We chose Wednesday which would give us maximum rest, and there was a slight suggestion that the weather might marginally improve. So it was off to the fleshpots of Portree.

Wednesday dawned unpromisingly, but the cloud lifted towards midday. We ate, brewed, passed the time with a horde of rock-chipping geologists and generally got ready for our bivouac on Gars–bheinn. Ascending this hill from Coruisk was a little less straightforward than we had imagined, but eventually we gained the summit ridge by a hard-packed snow gully. It had been cold in the gully and it was a relief to emerge into the evening sunlight and look across a golden seascape that might have been Mediterranean if it weren't for the temperature. We found a bivouac-site and settled in: Chris in his custom-built Goretex bag, me in a fly-sheet and ancient Icelandic which had seen some distinguished service. Stars shone intermittently through the cloud. The croak of a solitary raven (no sound of Murray's foxes) and an orange glow far to the south (Oban?) reminded us that we were not alone on the planet. We were finally in position, everything was in place, with months of thinking, planning and training behind us . . . a confused sleep overtook me. Something was falling on my face – I hoped it was rain.

We shook ourselves awake at 3.45am, to a white and frozen dawn. The Icelandic had torn in the night and I emerged in a cloud of feathers. 'The Birdman of Gars-bheinn,' Chris remarked, but it was the only humorous thing about the situation. The scene was appalling: our dreams were buried under two inches of fresh snow, putting paid to any chance of the Traverse. It would take us hours to get to the Thearlaich-Dubh Gap, which would probably be iced up anyway – we were not into the winter game. We descended slowly, picking our way carefully over vile, wet, snow-covered scree towards the coast. We were back in the bothy by 9am, thoroughly soaked and disappointed.

The weather was even worse on Friday, not even good enough for a compensatory climb on Blaven; we slunk back to England completely defeated. I did raise about £1600 for the Gurkha Welfare Trust, many friends being generous enough to overlook the fact that snow had stopped play. Let Louis MacNeice have the last word:

> The glass is falling hour by hour, the glass will fall for ever,
> But if you break the bloody glass you won't hold up the weather.

REFERENCES

1 K Wilson, *Classic Rock*. Granada, 1978.
2 W H Murray, *Mountaineering in Scotland*. Dent, 1947.
3 B H Humble, *The Cuillin of Skye*. Robert Hale, 1952.