Not Much of a Mountaineer

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The crossing to the Isle of Arran in the car ferry had been as dramatic as ever, with the shapely hills rising 874m above the sea, the great stack of Ailsa Craig visible away to the south, Paddy's Milestone they call it, where the gannets nest, and Holy Isle close inshore to Arran itself. Brodick with its white houses grows closer every minute and in no time I am riding my push-bike along the jetty on to the island. It is August, so my bed and breakfast is booked in advance, but the weather forecast is dreadful, rain all night and two lows with closely packed isobars in quick succession in the morning.

I had climbed, some of them several times, all the higher hills on the island except Beinn Tarsuinn and Beinn Nuis: these were the objective of this short visit, particularly Tarsuinn because it is one of the 221 Corbetts listed as 'lesser heights' in *Munro's Tables*. Seven years ago I finished ticking off all 517 Tops as well as the English, Welsh and Irish equivalents, and have now scored over 100 in Corbett's list. It is a good game when you have grown out of serious mountaineering and it has taken me to a lot of lovely places.

Beinn Tarsuinn can be approached in a clockwise circuit over Beinn Nuis, or widdershins over Beinn Chliabhain. These three hills enclose a corrie from the south of which a mountain stream, the Garbh Allt, flows out and swings east across the moor to run steeply down in a series of waterfalls into Glen Rosa where it joins the Rosa Burn to flow into the sea near Brodick. There is tarmac as far as the camp-site up Glen Rosa, and taken in either direction this should be an easy round even in bad weather, but for 82-year-old legs it could be rather more of an undertaking, as I was to find out.

In the morning all the rivers were in spate so I crossed the Garbh Allt by the bridge down in Glen Rosa, but to reach the moor above there are 150m of height to be gained up a steep and vague path which I found quite an effort. The path went on up the moor towards Beinn Chliabhain but I could find no signs of a track towards Beinn Nuis. The rough wet moorland did not appeal to my old legs, and it looked as if the ridge from Nuis to Tarsuinn was getting the full force of the west wind; so, hoping to find more shelter to the east, I stuck to the path towards Chliabhain. The wet and the wind, although not too bad, were not exactly helping things and, when at last I reached the summit of Beinn Chliabhain, I looked at my watch and at the threatening conditions and decided reluctantly that I had had enough. The col leading to Beinn Tarsuinn looked very close and I must indeed have been feeling pretty feeble not to have gone on at least as far as the foot of the 225m pull-up on to Tarsuinn.

Beinn Chliabhain is little more than 675m in height and to north, east and west there are hills up to 200m higher presenting a fine serrated sky-line while,

deep below, Glen Rosa runs south towards the sea. Eleven years ago, a friend had taken me up seven of the island's rock-climbs, and five of them could be seen from this grandstand perch. Chliabhain therefore had plenty to offer me and I could not help feeling a sense of relief that I was not going to land myself on the lofty ridge of Tarsuinn when there had been a gale warning for this very area. On the way down I saw a beautiful herd of deer. The weather improved later in the afternoon and it was lovely down in Glen Rosa, but I never did know what it was really like on the higher ridges. I had seen nobody on the hill all day but there were plenty of people in the glen. The bad weather returned that night and I returned home the next day with very mixed feelings.

I was at Lancing College with Gino Watkins who became a well-known arctic explorer and tragically lost his life in the sea off the E coast of Greenland. It was from him that I first heard about rock-climbing after he had been to the Lake District with my housemaster E B Gordon during the school holidays. Gino had also climbed on the Chamonix Aiguilles and had had a terrible fall in the mountains of Austria. All this made a great impression but at this stage it did not occur to me that I might become a mountaineer. We both went up to Trinity College Cambridge, where Gino's interests turned to arctic exploration; this seemed even further from my scene. After about a year I went to visit Lancing and to see E B Gordon who asked me what exercise I was taking. None, I answered, and when I reminded him that I was no use at games, he recalled that I was always climbing trees and suggested that I might take up mountain climbing, recommending a book by G D Abraham, *First Steps to Climbing*. This I bought and with the book in one hand, so to speak, and the rocks in the other, I taught myself to be a climber.

After a preliminary skirmish on the Salisbury Crags and Arthur's Seat just outside Edinburgh, my first real mountain was Schiehallion, which because of its symmetrical shape and comparative isolation had been used for measuring the mass of the earth. So enjoyable was this ascent that I went back two days later, climbed it again, walked down the far end to Loch Rannoch and back to the car over the mountain again. My next venture was with a friend to climb one of the gullies on Ben Nevis; although it was midsummer, we found to our surprise and delight that it was still full of snow and in perfect condition for kicking steps.

Meanwhile I had bought Mummery's book *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus* and had become an armchair alpinist, so that, when I got the chance of a skiing holiday at Wengen in the shadow of the Jungfrau, I furtively concealed in my luggage 60m of Beale's Alpine Line, although I had no clear idea how I was going to use it. The journey out on the continental trains and up from Lauterbrunnen on the rack railway to Wengen was a new and magic experience. The masses of snow on the trees, the crystals sparkling in the sunshine, the great cliffs and frozen waterfalls below Mürren across the valley and the snow-covered hills beyond were for me a fairyland, and when we got off the train at Wengen, there was the Jungfrau utterly detached and remote, right up in the sky with its terraces of rock and glacier and the unbelievable blue of the sky beyond. To me this great mountain wall has always remained the most exciting sight in the Alps.

To get the feel of skis I decided on a visit to Grindelwald by way of the snow-covered roads. First I had to get down to Lauterbrunnen, carrying my skis a lot of the way, then down the road to Zweilütschinen where I could slide freely as there were no cars, only horse-drawn sledges and not many of them. The tramp up the valley to Grindelwald was superb, the most memorable feature being the beautiful old timber bridges with steep wooden roofs to keep off the snow, and the mountains at the head getting nearer and nearer. At last I was there and the Wetterhorn came into full view. It was an easy run down back to Zweilütschinen and I took the train back to Wengen. I already felt part of the country.

The next day I took the train to Kleine Scheidegg and climbed to the top of the Lauberhorn. There were no lifts in those days and I really felt as though I was on a mountain, and what a breathtaking view it was. The great north wall of the Oberland was there in all its glory and seen in wonderful perspective from this lofty viewpoint, extending from the Jungfrau past the Mönch and the Eiger all the way to the Wetterhorn. Today, with lifts and hundreds of skiers, it never feels quite the same. Somehow I managed to ski down to Wengen and the following day I fell in with some English skiers who taught me how to do downhill turns. Then came the thaw, the snow avalanched all over the place, the slopes were left bare and all you could do was walk. This I did, following a path rising northward from the village and signposted 'Hunnenfluh'. After a few kilometres I came to a platform with an iron railing at the top of a great cliff, whiskered with fir trees, and opposite the village of Isenfluh across the Lauterbrunnen valley.

My friends Dennis and Ruth, with each of whom I had done one or two climbs in the Lake District, arrived that evening. The thaw had temporarily put an end to skiing, so I suggested that we might spend the next day roping down from the Hunnenfluh platform. It was New Year, a fine clear day and no wind; we made a leisurely start and it did not look far down, but here I was mistaken. All went well at first until we came to a great overhang. Getting down it was all right, but the rope jammed and we could not pull it down. Climbing as high as I could, I cut off as much of the double rope as possible but only managed to save two 10m lengths which we knotted together. By then it was beginning to get dark, the lights of Isenfluh were still far below us and as we went on and on, from tree to tree, the lights gave the illusion of going down with us. By now the full moon was up and we could see reasonably well, but it was well into the early hours before we reached the easy slopes below, which took us down to a path leading round the base of the cliffs and back up to Wengen.

I joined the Cambridge Mountaineering Club and learned a lot about climbing from Jack Longland on the rocks of Derbyshire, North Wales and the Lake District, but I never learned to stand in nailed boots on outward-sloping ledges the way he could. Easter in a tent on top of Ben Nevis with Freddy Chapman – the author of *The Jungle is Neutral* – just after he had returned from Greenland with Gino Watkins, was a great experience, and I shall never forget his joy when we saw a flight of snow buntings, birds which he had last seen in the Arctic. After two nights on the top of Scotland we ski'd down, left our skis and tent at Achintee to be collected later, and walked the same day by Sgurr a

Mhaim and Am Bodach over the Mamores, thence by the Devil's Staircase into Glencoe to bivouac on the moor above Kingshouse for a climb on the Crowberry Ridge the next day. In the morning I was woken by a crunching sound, and when I opened my eyes I saw a stag with huge antlers, chewing away a few centimetres above my head. I quickly closed my eyes again.

My real alpine climbing started when I went out to Kandersteg intending to climb some easy mountains on my own, but on the station when I arrived there were Smythe and Graham Brown whom I had met in Snowdonia, and they invited me to join them. After an ascent of the Altels from a lovely bivouac round a camp-fire to which we returned for another night after the climb, we crossed the Gemmi Pass with its fantastic descent to the south, and went on to Chamonix. From the old Couvercle hut we attempted a new route on the Courtes, but near the top we found a cairn of broken bottles. Finally we did the classic traverse of the Grépon but they both needed aid on three of the pitches, and after some major haulage operations I arrived exhausted and terrified on the summit. In terror I roped off down the Knubel Crack and scrambled via the Brèche Balfour to wait for them down at the CP gap, while they slept for three-quarters of an hour on the top. After I had gone home they went on to do the first ascent of the Route Major on the Brenva face of Mont Blanc.

The following year, 1929, I somehow became a member of a small party planning to make a January ascent of Piz Bernina. I was somewhat overawed to be in such distinguished company, for our leader was Bentley Beetham who had been on the Third Everest Expedition five years before; his friend Tim Thompson was a university rowing coach and the other member of the party, besides myself who had no claim to fame, was Basil Goodfellow whom I had met on the summit of Buachaille Etive Mor and who, 24 years later, played a leading role in launching the successful British Everest expedition of 1953. The weather was clear but very cold and I retreated with Basil from the Labyrinth, an icefall at the head of the Morteratsch glacier, to the Boval hut with a slightly frostbitten finger. The other two spent a miserable night at the Marco e Rosa hut and made a tricky descent in the morning without attempting the summit.

The next year Basil asked me and another friend to join him in the Alps in the summer. We had five most enjoyable climbs, the most impressive being the traverse of the Aletschhorn from the Oberaletsch hut and down the Hasler Rib to Konkordiaplatz. Over the years I managed to climb six 4000m peaks, one of them solo when 71 years old (Gran Paradiso, of course, with 250 other people), but the highest I ever climbed was to the Vallot hut. It was in May 1948 when France was short of everything and we were allowed to take out only £25, but a mutual friend arranged with Gaston Rébuffat that I should take out a supply of nylon climbing rope and several large tins of Cow and Gate for the newly born Rébuffat baby in exchange for an attempt to climb Mont Blanc on skis. On the way to the Grands Mulets hut we came upon the French army doing exercises on the Bossons glacier. We saw a rope of four at a bridge over a crevasse; the leader had crossed and the second was half-way across when he fell in. No1 and No3 held him while No4 had already whipped up his camera and photographed the whole procedure. Next day there was another impressive event beyond the Petit Plateau as we were climbing up towards the Col du Dôme. The whole N

face below the summit of Mont Blanc seemed to break away and a giant avalanche came down which ran right out across the Grand Plateau and we were enveloped in snow dust. At the Vallot hut Gaston decided that the wind was too strong and that we might be blown off the ridge if we tried to continue to the summit of Mont Blanc, so we skied back down.

In my old age I have had two holidays climbing in the Alps with Charles Warren and Iain Ogilvie. I have been climbing with Charles on and off since the Cambridge days. He was on the last three Everest attempts before the Second World War and was Honorary Keeper of the Club's Pictures, and all three of us are members of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. Iain, although suffering from the after-effects of a stroke and serious heart trouble, recently compleated the Munros. (The spelling is a foible of the SMC, presumably after Isaac Walton's *The Compleat Angler*.) After several nice mountains in Switzerland, we went on to Italy for the wonderfully attractive traverse of the Disgrazia by the NNE ridge, the Corda Molla, and down the broken face on the other side of the mountain to the Ponti hut. The other holiday was in the Dauphiné and the Ecrins – the most southerly of the alpine 4000m peaks – was included.

However, my last long snow climb was in Scotland on Easter Monday 1984 at the end of an SMC meet. Oliver Turnbull and I left the Glen Affric Hotel at Cannich after an early breakfast and drove to Achintee at the start of the Ben Nevis footpath. Walking up by Lochan an t-Suidhe we reached the CIC hut at lunchtime where we had food and a rest, and then set off to climb the Tower Ridge. The Observatory Gully was choked full of old avalanche snow, as indeed it had been on a solo visit 17 years before, but the snow on the ridge was perfect and we did not rope up until shortly before the Little Tower. After a climb of alpine beauty we arrived on the summit plateau at 6pm. We slept that night at Lagangarbh, the SMC hut in Glencoe, after a day in a lifetime with brilliant sunshine, lots of snow and not a breath of wind.

Note

The heading of this article is a parody on the title *Not Much of an Engineer* given to his autobiography by the late Sir Stanley Hooker, in which he described his work on aero-engine superchargers and gas turbines. It is also a paradox in as much as Stanley was brilliantly successful and his achievements have been of benefit worldwide, whereas my title . . .