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Evolution of the Scottish Mountaineering Club Climbers' Guides

When I first moved to Scotland more than 20 years ago there was no comprehensive climbing guidebook coverage. The wonderfully idiosyncratic MacInnes guides, with their own unique grading system, provided the best overview of selected climbs, whilst the SMC guidebook series was incomplete and hopelessly out of date. I quickly resorted to a do-it-yourself approach and bought as many back copies of the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* that I could find and with the help of a photocopier, scissors and paste, compiled my own mini guidebooks to the areas that most intrigued me.

The early 1980s saw a surge of activity across the Northern Highlands, and it soon became clear that just keeping up with activity there was becoming a monumental task. Other changes in the climbing scene were afoot too. E grades for rock climbs had been introduced in the late 1970s, and were slowly being introduced across Scotland, but even in the mid eighties there were still some E3 routes masquerading as VS climbs ready to trap the unwary! The biggest change however was the development of mixed climbing through the 1980s that led to a leap in winter climbing standards. Scottish Grade V could cover anything from a well-known classic such as *Zero Gully* to a modern day Grade VIII, so in the early 1990s active Scottish winter climbers started experimenting with a two-tier open-ended winter grading system. After publication of a list of provisional two-tier grades in the 1992 SMC Journal, the new grading system began to catch on, and guidebooks began to look even more out of date.

Fortunately the SMC is a club that is willing to embrace change and the Publications Sub Committee, under the strong business leadership of Graham Tiso, was determined to bring the climbing guides up to date. After publication of new guides to *The Cairngorms* and *Central and Southern Scotland* in the mid 1980s it was decided to launch a comprehensive guidebooks series that would cover all climbing across Scotland whether it be in the mountains, on outcrops or on sea cliffs. This was a bold step, because until then, only one or two SMC climbing guides had ever broken even. Fortunately the financial backing for the new series was made possible due to the runaway success of *The Munros*, an illustrated guidebook to the 3000ft peaks in Scotland. This attractively produced hardback walking guide sold in the tens of thousands, which in turn provided a healthy cash flow to launch the new climbing guidebook programme.

The first key appointment was Roger Everett as Series Editor, and many of the activists of the day such as Rab Anderson, Cubby Cuthbertson, Kev Howett

and Tom Prentice were invited to join old stalwarts such as Allen Fyffe, Ken Crocket and Andy Nisbet as guidebook authors. Soon after, I was invited to be one of the authors of the new Ben Nevis guide. Roger and I were regular climbing partners at the time, and in a matter of months we had moved from outsiders bemoaning the lack of guidebook progress, to being given the responsibility to do something about it!

Roger Everett took his role as Series Editor seriously and over a period of seven years he masterminded the writing of eleven guides to give Scotland's first-ever comprehensive guidebook coverage. Roger's input was a labour of love and evening after evening and wet weekend after wet weekend he added order and consistency to successive guidebook scripts, many of which were written from scratch. Roger was ideally suited to the role. His ability to focus on fine detail combined with his understanding of the bigger picture, coupled with an extensive knowledge and passion for Scottish mountains was all wrapped up with a dogged determination to see the task through. Roger once told me that he would only be satisfied once his bookshelf held a complete new series of guides.

Glen Coe (1992) was the first volume in the new series. 'The Publications Sub Committee was instrumental in determining the style and the look,' co-author Rab Anderson recalls. 'The active climbers on the committee were particularly involved and a working party moved things forwards. Those of us who were climbing south of the border at the time had seen Phil Gibson's excellent diagrams in *Yorkshire Limestone* (1985). We persuaded the SMC of the need to improve diagram quality and *Glen Coe* used Kev Howett's diagrams, which were seen as being some of the best around. *Glen Coe* kind of tested the water - new series, new editor, new writing team and so on. The writing team certainly had their moments with the Editor, especially me!'

Everett and Publications Manager Donald Bennet soon became a fine-tuned machine, and with the enthusiastic assistance of Niall Ritchie as Photo Editor a new volume was published every six months or so. With a clear layout, frequent diagrams and colour illustrations they were attractive books, but their major asset was that they provided full coverage of Scotland's climbs and spurred a new generation of Scottish climbers to develop and explore new areas. This led to a further explosion of activity fuelled by detailed descriptions and modern grades.

Soon after publication of *Arran, Arrochar and the Southern Highlands* in 1997, the last in the series, Everett handed over the reins as Series Editor to Brian Davison, and Tom Prentice took over from Donald Bennet as Publications Manager. Prentice's appointment was an inspired choice as he brought with him experience as a professional journalist coupled with a detailed knowledge of Scottish crags and mountains and an intense passion for climbing. His meticulous attention to detail, flair for design and a ruthless determination to see work done to a high standard and completed on time meant he was the ideal successor to fill Bennet's shoes.



Left

125. *Twilight* E1 5B, Polney Crag, Dunkeld. Climbers: Bill Wright and Ed Douglas. (Grahame Nicol)

Once again, a small working party was set up to consider the options for the next series. The underlying premise was that the SMC saw itself as the guardian of route information and would continue to publish comprehensive guidebooks covering the whole country. 'Guidebooks for climbers by climbers' was the watchword. The previous series had been criticised for its 'brick-like' handling qualities so a thinner more flexible book was required. The answer was to go for dimensions similar to a folded OS map - the size that many pockets in outdoor jackets are designed for. By using thinner paper, a smaller typeface and flexible covers the seemingly impossible trick of fitting 50% more climbs into a thinner volume was achieved.

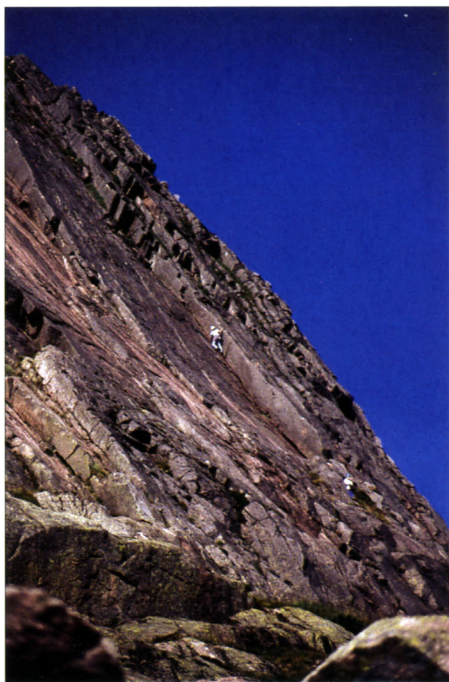
But who would buy this new series given that the current one was comprehensive and reasonably up to date? The answer was to make the guides appear very different with a complete redesign. A design house was approached for suggestions, and the result was a neat and modern looking layout that is easy to read and conveys authority. The quality of writing of the existing series was very good, but it was realised that the illustrations and diagrams needed further improvement, especially as these can sway a purchase when someone is idly thumbing a guide in a shop. Niall Ritchie and Grahame Nicoll embarked on an extensive search and review of new photographs and greater effort was put into the creation of more detailed crag diagrams. For example, Mark Hudson was contracted to re-draw the Ben Nevis diagrams, and the resulting superbly detailed artwork added a touch of class to the book.

Right

126. *The Dagger* VS 4c.

Creagan a' Choire Etchachan.

(Niall Ritchie)



The first volumes in the new series, *Glen Coe* and *Ben Nevis* published in 2001 and 2002, were enthusiastically received and with the publication of *Northeast Outcrops*, *Lowland Outcrops* and *Northern Highlands North* we are now a third of the way through the new series. New titles will include sports, bouldering and scrambling guides. The latest volume is *Scottish Rock Climbs*, a selected guide to summer routes, which represents a further development as it uses photo diagrams instead of traditional line art. It has received rave reviews and re-awakened many climbers across the UK to the breadth and quality of Scottish rock climbing. Compiling the text and collecting the crag photographs was masterminded by the ever-enthusiastic Andy Nisbet and the book was superbly produced by Tom Prentice who made a very complex production appear vibrant and clear.

‘In my opinion, SMC guides have now caught up and overtaken many of the club publishers,’ Tom told me recently. ‘This is largely thanks to the solid foundations of the last series, but also because we have embraced the digital age and are making as much as possible of modern printing and costs, desk top publishing and graphics packages. Maps aren’t hand drawn anymore. We are modern, fully digital and now fully colour. It’s a colour, digital, Internet world out there and our guides feel part of it rather than lagging a few steps behind.’

Prentice went on to highlight several other factors that are unique to SMC guides. ‘Firstly, our books are run by our own commercial company with 30 titles,’ he told me. ‘This must make us not only the largest club publisher, but also one of the largest publishers of climbing guidebooks in



Left

127. Colour photo diagram of Shelter Stone in the northern Cairngorms, typical of the clarity of the SMC's new guides. (Andy Nisbet)

the UK. One commercial legacy from Tiso is that we are all aware of the need to generate revenue to stand still, let alone create more titles. Cash cows like *The Munros* do not usually last forever.' Another key factor is that guidebook contributors get paid. 'This must focus people more on what they are doing,' Tom explained. 'The voluntary system is under increasing pressure. Yes, we still rely on volunteers, but paying contributors is another indication of a professional, commercial organisation.'

The SMC is already looking ahead and thinking through options for the next series. 'We have an eye on the future,' Prentice insists. 'We already sell from the SMC website by Paypal and we offer Internet books. We have discussed website routes, pdf guides, downloads etc. Where will guidebooks go, now that the digital world is bringing film, TV, radio and photos to our mobiles and ipods? It's all changing so fast that you and I don't know what the future will bring, but I think we'll be well placed, whatever it is.'

The greatest strength of the SMC is its continual ability to attract many of the most active climbers and mountaineers in Scotland to its ranks. As a result, the SMC as a whole has unrivalled knowledge of Scottish climbing and Scottish mountains. Throw in a committed group of authors and an experienced production team and the future of Scottish climbing guidebook production looks to be in safe hands.

Scottish Rock Climbs, published 2005, retails at £21. SMC books due for publication in 2006 include a new climbing guide *Northern Highlands Central* (£20) and a full revision of the ever-popular *The Munros* (£20).