

I to the Hills...

Article and Photographs by Alistair Montgomery

"I to the hills will lift mine eyes

from whence doth come mine aid"... In memory of Ogie

I hadn't expected the crowd at Glasgow Airport at 5.30 a.m. when I dropped Barbara off for her flight to London on the way to Colorado. No fear of flying here, Iraq war or not. We had just spent a week in Hamilton celebrating my mother's 90th birthday. Normally, I would have flown back with her, but I had one more stop that I needed to make on my own, to visit an old friend. So when she waved goodbye under the bright yellow sign pointing to the departure lounge and disappeared down the hall, I headed back to the car and out of the bustle of the airport.

The sky lightened as I drove. Long streaks of clouds tinged with pink promised the clear day I had hoped for as I headed north over Erskine Bridge to Loch Lomond. I was bound for Arrochar to climb the "Cobbler", the mountain that had played such a large part in my life when I grew up in Glasgow, so many years ago. It's a rugged and dramatic mountain, set like an uncut gem in a crown of rolling peaks, and it has molded the lives of the many young adventurers who have scaled its cliffs and spent cold nights camped in the cradle of its crags. The mountain is officially named Ben Arthur, or Arthur's Seat, and the story is told that it holds the bones and soul of the fabled king of the Dark Ages, brought there upon his funeral barge through the mist and silent waters of Loch Long. But those who climb it call it *The Cobbler* because the peaks resemble an upturned shoe on a cobbler's last.

Yesterday Remembered

I started climbing the Cobbler almost 40 years ago when I was a student at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Friday nights after classes we would hitchhike from Balloch to Tarbert on Loch Lomondside, then hike over the peninsula to Arrochar at the head of Loch Long. There was a small farm in the village of Succoth and Farmer Parson let the “student laddies” sleep free in the loft of his barn. Parson’s Barn became a home away from home for us all and a welcome respite when we wandered back from the pub on a Saturday night after practicing our climbing skills on the retaining wall outside the Loch Long Hotel.

On long weekends we’d pack heavy Egyptian Cotton mountain tents into the valley below the peaks and camp by the gin-clear waters of *Allt a’ Bhalaabain* that drains the surrounding slopes. From the high camp we could spend longer days on the crags, two on a rope leading through on the technical climbs, building confidence and trust in each other. Or sometimes we lay in the tents all day while it poured with rain, venturing out only to obey the call of nature or to snatch a dixie of water from the burn to brew hot black tea. But on one special day we climbed anyway, through thick cloud and drizzle, to emerge in brilliant sunshine at the summit. What a spectacle that was, and how our spirits soared to be above the gray world beneath us.

The New Ascent

The sky stayed clear when I drove over from Tarbert to Arrochar. At 7 a.m. the mountain was beautiful, mirrored in the still waters of Loch Long and bathed in the pink light of dawn. Restaurants don’t open too early in Scotland, so I drove around to

Succoth to locate the trailhead across the road from Parson's Barn. It's still there, with a fresh coat of whitewash on the stone walls, but now converted into a home with a television satellite dish jutting out below the roof. After finally locating breakfast (I had to drive back to Tarbert), I set out on the trail to make the ascent once more, perhaps for the last time.

There are 3 sections to the Cobbler if you take the route from Succoth. The first part is a steep, but easy climb through the national forest to the valley below the peak. The path is broad on this section. Actually it's a four-wheel drive forestry trail although there are no recreational motorized vehicles allowed on the mountain. The ground is turf, boggy in places, and is easy on the knees. When you round the shoulder to the valley the grade flattens and there is an excellent trail to the foot of the crags. It's one of the best mountain trails I've ever hiked with huge boulders conveniently and aesthetically placed in the numerous drainage channels as stepping-stones. This is the strolling section of the mountain where you gather your strength for the final assault on the peak.

The last section starts when the path abruptly stops at a jumble of rocks that soar up to the col between the two principal peaks. It's a relatively short climb, but it's very steep and hands are as necessary as feet to avoid taking the unplanned "shortcut" down.

About a quarter of the way up I realized that while my head was back in the 1960s my body definitely was not. So I climbed in short bursts, promising myself I would re-think going on when I reached the next goal.

It became colder as I climbed. Getting tired, I squeezed behind a rock to get out of the wind and pondered the view below me. A dam and aqueduct diverting the burn north to the Loch Sloy hydroelectric system scarred the untouched valley that I remembered.

But most of all I had forgotten the utter silence, interrupted only by the wind soughing in the crags, the rare call of a crow and the single bleat of a lost sheep. What a lonely place it was. What endurance the people must have had that once toiled in these lonely glens and what strength and courage they must have brought to the new lands they settled all over the world.

The trail that had mysteriously re-appeared led up to the col between the peaks. I added a stone to the cairn there, as we always used to do. Another few hundred yards bent against the strengthening wind brought me to the south peak, where our bodies and spirits had soared above the clouds so many years ago.

I found a comfortable rock to sit on just below the toe of the shoe. The drop-off was just too much to risk the short climb to the top. I'd like to say the memories of earlier days came flooding back, but in reality they had faded too far into the past. Now there was no cajoling and laughter, only the silence and the wind. Ben Lomond stood off to the east, brown and purple to the summit, now that the winter snows had gone. In the distance, two hikers followed a narrow trail north towards *Beinn Narnain* that was catching a burst of sunlight between the scudding clouds. Perhaps they too were forging memories that they would recall some distant day far from now. I zipped up my jacket tight against my throat and thrust my hands deeper into my pockets. It was time to go down.

On the descent, I surprised a ram sunning himself on top of a great stone. I fancied it might be Arthur himself come to inspect this intruder into his domain from his rocky throne. Then again, perhaps it was just a sheep, his fleece matted and tangled from the long winter months in the mountains.

Later that evening I sat at table number 23 in the Arrochar Hotel dining room, in front of a seafood casserole and a half bottle of Muscat wine served by a French waitress.

Changed days from scroungy nights in the pub and an old sleeping bag in Parson's Barn. I could see Ben Arthur through the window, dark and brooding now that the sun had left its face. Heavy, blowing clouds settled on its shoulders and the tiny place where I had stood only a few hours ago slowly disappeared into the dusk.

On my desk where I write there are two small quartz pebbles I brought from the top, memories of a place that I loved to which I might never return.

Walking and Climbing in Scotland

From the shores of Loch Lomond to the Grampians, the Cairngorms, the Cuillins of Skye and beyond, Scotland is a recreational paradise. If you travel on foot you will feel the spring of the turf under your feet, the soft, pure air on your cheek and find peace and beauty in the solitude of the glens. I think there is no place on earth like it, and I have traveled to many places.

There are challenges for all skill levels from rambling in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park (Scotland's first) to hair-raising exposure on technical rock climbs in the Black Cuillin of Skye. The West Highland Way trail runs through some of the most magnificent scenery and historic country in Scotland from Milngavie (pronounced Mullguy) near Glasgow to Fort William at the head of the Linnie Loch. You can even get a completion certificate at towns and villages along the way, like "The Green Wellie Shop" in Tyndrum. Some companies will ship your luggage ahead for each leg so you can enjoy the hike without the drag of a backpack.

The internet is full of information on hiking in Scotland. For information on the Arrochar area, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs try:

www.duncolm.freeserve.co.uk/arrochar/alps.html

For information on the West Highland Way try:

www.west-highland-way.co.uk

Postscript

Our friend Ogie, Ian Groat, was the Chairman of the University of Strathclyde Mountaineering Club. He was killed in a freak climbing accident on the Buachaille Etive Mor in Glencoe. We laid him to rest in Eaglesham, near the mountains that he loved.



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