

MOUNTAINS AND ME

By Sheila McKay

I thought it might be an interesting read about my early days on the hills. Strangely enough it was HF Glasgow which got me 'mountaineering'! I had met a bloke in Airdrie (where I was brought up though I was born in Bath so unfortunately I'm not Scottish) who found that I enjoyed walking and took me to Glasgow and introduced me to the Holiday Fellowship as it was known then There was a monthly bus into the hills. That was the start of my love for the mountains. It was the time of hob-nailed boots, ex-army jackets and rucksacks and apart from the monthly bus trip we travelled by public train or bus, mainly to Arrochar and the Cobbler to start with. I didn't like my job and getting away on Sundays was a great treat.

My early life was very different from that of present HF people, I lived through World War 2 as a child and teenager, I was the eldest of five and had to leave school just approaching 15, much to my dismay. I was happy there and doing well. I went to night school to take commercial subjects as I had been on an academic course. I took French too. I remember our French teacher - quite a character, small and roly-poly, probably much younger than she appeared to us. All our teachers were elderly, there were no sports, we had the big black bloomers for PE. I played netball with the Girl Guides, no camping tho' we did go hiking and had campfires. I became a Brown Owl for twelve years or more when I was 18.

Glasgow HF members were getting elderly as was the case when I first joined HF Edinburgh until Caroline came along inviting all and sundry to join in our mountaineering. It is thanks to her it is now such a flourishing club.

Younger people who came along to the monthly bus joined together and we went off to the hills, hostelling camping, climbing mountains and joining clubs - SOC (The Ski and Outdoor Club) and Glenmore Mountaineering Club were two. Three of us became good friends, Edna, a teacher, Eleanor, a lab technician and me a simple office worker. At that time, we got as far as Arrochar and Crianlarich by bus and train, we often had to run quite a distance to catch the last train home. Edna eventually got a car so went further afield also when there was bus/van/car transport in the clubs - I remember in the Cairngorm parking area Ian Brown driving a minibus, skidding around on icy snowy ground scaring the wits out of us but he had only been showing off his driving skills.

Once transport was available, we did a little skiing. I wore my climbing boots which kept coming apart from the old skis I had. In later years I did a couple of ski courses, which I enjoyed, great to have proper boots and skis (hired). By this time, I loved winter hillwalking on snow and ice (we had so much in those days) and didn't want to have a bad fall skiing. We started on the lower slopes of Meall a Buiridh, We skied at the Killin visitor area (there was often snow there – not like today), in the Cairngorms too, also at Glendoll but only once walking up Jock's Road with skis to the plateau where conditions were good for skiing. We had many days, weekends and holidays in the mountains. We also often had very wet weather (as you would expect in the west) but there was sunshine too and a lot of snow. As clothing at that time wasn't waterproof, we always had a change of clothing with us, Goretex came along later but I only recently got out of the habit of taking a

change of clothing in wet weather. At the time I wrote a diary of many of our expeditions and reading them now I'm a bit amazed at what we did do – but we were young! We began at the Cobbler, and I thoroughly enjoyed scrambling and rock climbing there and on The Buchaille. I think I have done all the rocky ridges except the Cuillins but the Aonach Eagach many times, once sleeping in the open and climbing up from clachaig at 3am hoping to see the sun rise, it was a bit misty and the actual sunrise was hidden behind more mountains. But it was still colourful.

Before mountains took over, Sundays was going to church and then a country walk wearing a hat which I hated – still do and seldom even in the winter wear one. I was a Sunday School teacher. Now I wanted my Sundays free for something else. I had found being on top of mountains a great spiritual experience. One could commune with God there. The great evangelist Billy Graham came to Glasgow. I went to the meeting and the atmosphere was so intense when he asked people to come forward to live with Christ. Would I or would I not? It was a very emotional experience, I didn't and was now able to devote Sundays to my different spiritual experience.

So there followed many great years on the mountains but the time came when the three of us took different routes, Eleanor went to Rhodesia to marry her future husband who had been one our mates but was now a teacher there, Edna I think married a bit later. I had always wanted to work abroad – wasn't interested in just a holiday. I had to go somewhere all expenses were paid as I had little money. Eventually I joined the Foreign Office, had a few months in London then was sent to Paraguay. Though you couldn't choose where you would like to go you could intimate the part of the world so I said South America as it had mountains – well, they sent me to Paraguay which must be the flattest country in S.A. Had to take up horse riding instead. It was what was called a hardship post so had a six-week break after the first year. I spent a week staying with Embassy staff in Montevideo and in Rio. The latter was so different from Paraguay, a lot of social life, including a cocktail party on an Antarctic ship but the Embassy staff there were unhappy because the Embassy was moving to the wilds of Amazonia. The Paraguayan Embassy was very small – the highlight there was when Sadler's Wells Ballet came; we had a cocktail party for them, and I realised that all these male ballet dancers were just ordinary young men.

Had two weeks in Peru, I could speak Spanish by that time. I was having a lesson when word came through of John Kennedy's death. I went by train to the sierras (Yungay) and was able to communicate with the lovely friendly Indian people. I passed a school where the children were outside drinking milk – in bottles just like we did. They took me to where we looked down on a valley with enormous boulders. There had been an earthquake in the early 1900s and all the village people had been killed. In later years I heard there had been another earthquake in the area and the villages had again been decimated. Also went to Machu Picchu by train and bus from Cusco. Was absolutely fascinated and was so happy there booked a night at the hotel and climbed the small Machu Picchu very early the next morning. Another year in Paraguay, a month or two in London and then a year in Romania – I loved the country (and its mountains) but it was sad not being able to have any communication with the people. I was happy to come back to Scotland as I had always known I would, but marriage and family kept me away from the mountains for some time.

HF Edinburgh Mountains again. My initiation into HF Edinburgh was when the three of us, Edna, Eleanor and I were having a reunion after many many years apart. Edna was a botanist and we were on Ben Vrackie on the cliffs looking for cowslips or she was when I dropped a remark that a group lunching at the loch looked like a HF group and it was. A few people coming down stopped to talk as hillwalkers do. To my amazement it was HF people from Edinburgh. We chatted and when they

learned that I had had a mountain past I was made very welcome. They were keen to do Munros but the main body was not so that was how I became a member and life changed again for me. I knew little about Munros and wasn't particularly interested in doing them as long as I could get onto the mountains which I loved. I had had so much bad weather in Skye in the past I thought the Skye ones would never be completed. But they were in all sorts of weather and conditions. My last Munro was Bla bhein (Blaven). It rained all day but six of us managed to empty a champagne bottle on the top before hastening down as quickly as we could. It was sad not seeing the views and I had hoped to return in better weather but never did. Had the usual celebratory dinner in Broadford where others joined us.

Now a few of the many sorties we made into the hills:

As a change from the Cobbler at Arrochar, two of us climbed halfway up Ben Brack put our tent up then back down again to collect wood for a fire; good weather and next day had a scrambly walk to the top and over the hills

Sept. weekend - Cairngorms my third visit this year, three females arriving at 1 am pitched camp at Glenmore. A lovely evening. We started up the ski road to Cairngorm the next morning, fine at first then rain torrented down - sheltered in Jean's Hut. We had full packs intending to spend the night at the Shelter Stone so left them on the Fiacaill ridge while went on to Cairngorm. There two men didn't trust our capabilities and gave long and careful instructions and demonstrations with map and compass how to get to the Shelter Stone. It was misty and it was unusual in those days to see females alone on the hills. Anyway, made the tricky descent to Loch Avon and the Shelter Stone. Five males already there made room for us. Next day weather better and clambered back up to the plateau and did Macdhuil, Derry Cairngorm and Mheadhoin, back to the Shelter Stone (big blocks of rock and stones making a small cavity). Next day cloudy and wet A'Choinneach and Bynack More again in mist, then back to Glenmore by Strath Nethy and Green Lochan.

A May weekend - Edna and I camping in the Mamores arriving in heavy rain and wind on the Friday night but managed to get tent up - dried off next morning - did the horseshoe ridge with more snow coming down. Sunday - Devil's Ridge, Sgurr a Mhaim and Stob Ban. Monday wet again, packed up, had our lunch under a bridge (a good shelter stop still) gradually drying off, bus home at 4.

Glen Tilt - Braemar to Blair Atholl, only 32 miles! Train to Perth, hitch to Braemar, lift to Pool of Dee. With heavy packs. At Bynack Lodge, met two very nice friendly young men, Borstal housemaster and assistant Governor. Warned us we would pass the Borstal boys camp down the glen, which we did, a likeable lot, chatted. could have been anyone's brothers. A very enjoyable walk, staying in three huts on the way, one with newspaper articles pinned all over the walls many of them about hills and climbing. A beautiful glen.

A wonderful Easter weekend in Glen Affric by car. We asked at the Lodge if we could camp and were shown a spot at the Loch. There was a most beautiful sunset as we walked round the loch, it was on fire, the next morning the sunrise was spectacular. There was lots of snow - can't remember if it was at road level but the mountains were enshrouded in it. One of these magic days on the hills, frozen snow near the tops but were well prepared with our ice axes, bought when we went to the Austrian Alps for a wonderful week, walking from mountain hut to mountain hut buying ice axes and hiring a Guide to take us up the Zuckerhutl. In Glen Affric we did the round of the four Munros and another one the next day.

Skye & Wester Ross Train 5.45 – fascinating journey. Arrived at Mallaig, then Ferry to Armadale, eventually buses to Broadford and Sligachan, no transport to Glenbrittle, 3 started to walk over the hills to get there – it was dark and wet not for us. We heard there was a bus at Glenbrittle so someone phoned and it came over and delivered us. Sunday woke up to rain so back to sleep till 9, breakfast and jobs, then up to Coire Laggan, 1800' disappointed at not seeing tops, back, changed, good meal. Gale, hostel in poor condition and rain leaked into dorms and common room. Had hoped to do Ben Dearg but rain again had a good walk to the headland with good views. Next day weather a bit better but tops still in cloud, went by boat to Loch Coruisk stopping first at Loch Scavaig, so beautiful, wonderful views of the islands and even the Cuillins from the boat back. What a change, weather couldn't have been better but next day not good again, giving up on the Cuillins we walked over the pass to Sligachan, then buses to Portree and Staffin – a lovely bay. Weather fine when we walked to the Quirang and spent a few hours exploring it.

Next day lorry lifts and buses to Kyleakin and ferry over to Kyle. Had a swim (gorgeous day) and then train to Strone Ferry and a lovely campsite in the bay. Next day, walked to Loch Carron, bus to Shieldaig and ferry over to Inveralligin (where the hostel was in those days) very wet and hostel full, but warden let us sleep on the floor. Beautiful morning, climbed Liathach, hard going but worth it, did the ridge, the peaks, and the Fasarinen pinnacles. 6 Mile walk back to the hostel. Meal then found a camp site as hostel still full. Wonderful day but fairly exhausted. My favourite hill for some time, until it was surpassed by Bidean. Next day good weather bussed to Gairloch – walked on a bit, found fine campsite pitched tent, cooked usual 4 course meal and then a voice – couldn't camp there! So had to walk another few miles and came to a hostel. Walked some miles to Poolewe the next day, camped and visited Inverewe Gardens. Bus to Kinlochewe and found good campsite – then long walk to climb Coire Mhic Ferachair? Such spectacular cliffs and such beautiful green water. Long way back to our camp at Kinlochewe but lucky got a lift part way.

Next day Slioch, a beautiful morning, started out in shorts and top. Rain later and got soaked- quite a tiring hill. Got back to tent, opened up – met with swarms of midges- never seen anything like it. Hastily sprayed them, closed tent door went to get water and when we opened up again were met with a carpet of midges – not nice but we quickly brushed them out, then went into the tent, had some eats and got dressed in drindl skirts and blouses (the fashion of the time) as were going to go to a dance in the village hall. Went up to the hall and stood outside getting the courage to go in, then someone came along and took us in. It was a great night, lots of whisky and fun - about 10.30 we managed to leave quietly, we didn't want anyone to follow us back. But a very eventful day and a great night. Next day bus to Achnashellach, train to Inverness then Aviemore and the hostel. Another dance next door so another great night. Woke early sun streaming in walked around Loch Eilean. Train home. Rather a wet holiday, miles of walking and bussing but a lot of fun!

New Year We usually went into the hills at New Year. This time four of us went by train to Spean Bridge and brought in the New Year in a barn there Next day moved more into the hills and found a larger barn, parked Jungle's tent in there as sleeping quarters. Cold and wet outside, we lit a fire. We walked to the hills but decisively not. Next day better – snow had fallen we went up Aonach Mhor. Two of us not having crampons had to cut and kick steps down the steeper slopes. Usually someone with crampons would cut steps for me (I couldn't afford them but many years later with HF Edinburgh I did get them but were seldom needed!) Next day we had to cross the river by a rather precarious half submerged footbridge, then 3 miles on road to get bus to Fort William and a College bus home.

Good walks at Kintail, Glencoe, Glenlyon

Glendoll Weekend - started as a Glen Isla skiing weekend but not enough snow so went to Glen Doll instead. Not relishing the big climb up Jock's road to the plateau carrying skis we decided just to go on the hills. Started off followed by rain and snow but still managed to do two Munros (didn't know much about them then) and a top.

Inverchorochan Cottage - Ben Bhuidh - Kurt Austria very impressed with our hills. Dossed in cottage

A Week camping in Rum. We had to get permission to go there. It was quite an experience with a lot of research going on. We camped at Kilmory, walked to Harris where the Bullough's mausoleum is, to Loch Scresort and Kinloch House where we were allowed to see a bit of it And of course loved the Rum mountains – the little Cuillins – made interesting scrambles, the little ponies still doing some heavy work and deer of course. Some of you will have been to Rum with HF.

Staoineag Bus to Kinlocheven. October weekend. Started on path uphill and found what seemed a good place to spend the night. Was but in the morning were wakened by someone trying to get the door open. We sat up hurriedly a bit horrified, but a young man begged our pardon. How nice. We started talking! He was an athlete and had done his 10 miles and had stopped for a rest for his dog. A daily routine. We continued on the path past the Lodge and eventually arrived at the Staoineag cottage – rather dilapidated but rooms habitable. Next day weather not so good, so no mountains and took a faint track to Loch Ossian and back by Corroul railway station, a farmer with a tractor gave us a lift, a frightenly bumpy ride. Next day started off for Glencoe, long barely visible path to Blackwater Reservoir and Glencoe – changed in Cameron's Barn, long wait for bus back.

We didn't always climb!! Four of us in car with camping gear, supplies, etc. in the car drove to Scrabster unloaded and caught the ferry to Stromness put up camp there, hired bikes and spent a week cycling round Orkney seeing all the sights, over causeway, eating well and having a good time. And for a change with little rain.

Would like to say that most of us in those days went onto the mountains for love not to count Munros.

The Achaladair rhyme

'Twas a beautiful starry frosty night,
And the full moon shed a brilliant light.
On Achaladair farm and the nine of us
As we pitched our tents, with many a "cuss"!

Next day at ten, we left the camp,
Edna, Sheila and I we tramped
On up the hill, across the snow.
Into the mist on the ridge did go.

On and on, all day we went,
And then decided a quick descent
Would take us to the railway line
And get us back to our tents in time.

So down and down, from the mist raced we,
With quite a speed and in great glee
Till a voice nearby said "ain't that fine!
Someone's pinched the railway line!"
We looked and looked and saw no sign
Of the darned elusive railway line.

We guessed 'twas in the left-hand glen
We'd just to go right "round the ben",
It took us longer than we thought
Before regaining our camping spot.

And there we'd but a sketchy meal,
Before we repaired to our dormobile,
And then, to nicely finish the show.
The blessed van refused to go.

Twas mended at last, to cheers of glory!
On that happy note, here ends my story.

E.J.W.

