

In the Cold Locker

By Brendan Hughes

On 30th December 1995, the village of Braemar on the eastern edge of the Cairngorm mountains recorded a temperature of -27.2°C. It remains the lowest ever recorded in Scotland.

‘Do you think it’s arrived yet?’

‘Dunno. Maybe. It’s pretty cold.’

It was hard to disagree. The walls of the hut glittered, sheathed in ice. It was as homely as the inside of a chest freezer.

Ice crystals danced in headtorch beams, gently falling to the ground.

‘Look, it’s snowing inside now too’.

It was unquestionably snowing outside: a water-fetching trip to the burn revealed that a savage blizzard had consumed the corrie. We wedged our rucksacks under the door to combat the drifting.

The Hutchison Memorial Hut is the highest in the Cairngorms and in 1995 lacked a fireplace. That meant in the third week of December, it was always going to be a cold doss. But this cold was far beyond expectations.

Leaving the bus at Glenmore three days previously, we had no sense of what was in store. The air was mild as we walked through the scented pines to Ryvoan bothy. Al summarised the Met Office 5-day mountain forecast, (a rare thing of ‘premium-line’ expense, but sadly of ‘burned-entrails’ reliability):

‘It says that it will be mild and a bit windy for the first two days, but after that an ‘arctic air mass’ will push in from the north’.

Arctic air mass? We scoffed. When had the 5-day forecast ever been vaguely accurate after the first day?

The mockery continued the next day as we traversed Bynack More. Certainly there was snow underfoot, the visibility poor and the elephantine flanks of wrinkled grey-granite of its Barns were coated in hoar-frost, but the air was mild, tinged with an Atlantic-damp.

Labouring under our heavy packs, we navigated down to the Fords of Avon, revelling in our solitude. Going to the mountains the week before Christmas promised a double benefit: quiet hills and escape from the mass-madness of the season. I had a deeper need too: soon I would be leaving Scotland for good, taking a train to Euston, called by opportunity and duty to an uncertain future.

The grim shelter at the Fords was masquerading as a pile of rubble and we pushed on to the Hutchy, where we planned to make our base for the next three nights. The brief December day was over before we arrived and we settled in for the long night, Al cooking on his Trangia, conjuring the cold of the Yukon from his book of Robert Service poetry. Fetching water later that evening, I noted all the small burns in the corrie had been frozen to silence.

It was markedly colder the next morning as we wandered to the summit of Beinn Chaorainn in a white-out. Returning, the hut crouched under Choire Etchachan crag and a louring sky the colour of hammered lead. There was no need to invoke Service this evening - the blizzard had arrived and we were sleeping in a cold-locker with frozen walls. The change had seemed rapid. Now all activity was carried out from our sleeping bags, merely extending a gloved hand to light the stove or stir the pot. I shivered in my bag, wearing every item of clothing I had. Doubts about the forecast were gone, 'it' had arrived, this monstrous mass from the deep north.

The following morning brought greater cold and a fiercer blizzard, but the prospect of shivering the day away inside our ice box was revolting, so we set off to climb Ben Mheadhoin. On the summit plateau my glasses froze and, eyes blinded by the furious spindrift, we turned back. Too early to face the hut, we climbed little ice-falls on boulders below the crag: movement meant warmth. As this iron day ended, even the main burn was reduced to a trickle.

'Al, this is turning into a bit of a survival situation.'

'It's OK. Could be worse'

By 7pm we were long fed, deep in our bags facing another brutally cold night. Why the hell had I brought Homer's Odyssey as my only book? Ancient feuds in the baked heat of Asia-minor did not appeal.

Suddenly stamping feet, a flash of torches, the door shoved open and in piled a rout of frozen humanity. The refugees were RAF officer-cadets who had spent all day crossing the main plateau from the ski-centre on compulsory

‘adventurous training’. Some were close to tears and all had that wild-eyed look of shock I would, in years to come, recognise so well. Considering the ferocity of our own experience up high that day, I was not surprised to hear the fear in their voices. Their instructors lurked outside in a tent.

They rapidly produced a pot-mess in a chaos of stoves. This, plus ten more bodies, defrosted the locker leaving the walls streaming with condensation. The novelty of above-zero temperatures drew us from the cocoon of our bags, shedding layers, enjoying this unexpected warmth and company. Mutual acquaintances were soon established and stories shared. Looks of shock faded and fear metamorphosed to humour. Less enjoyable was trying to sleep - the freezer now became a medieval cell, as we lay across one another in a tangled mess of knees, hips and elbows, every moment a discomfort.

Our locker-companions’ pre-dawn departure was as abrupt as their arrival: rucksacks were packed with remarkable speed and off they went, back across the plateau, back south, to orders and drill. Today was the day for our own departure to Bob Scott’s bothy at Derry Lodge, by way of Ben MacDui and Carn A’Mhaim - a long, high, way to go, but with the promise of a bothy with a fire-place at the end.

Departure was delayed whilst I hacked ice from my boots. These had frozen solid in the night and had nearly doubled in weight with accumulated layers of *verglas*. The plastic shopping bags I had been using as a vapour-barrier between my inner and outer socks had worked well the last two days, but this morning after I stuck my feet into the boots, I wasn’t to feel them for another three hours.

It was still very cold and overcast, but the blizzard had abated somewhat. As we toiled upwards, the sun made its first appearance in days, emerging between eastern horizon and a plate of solid cloud to briefly stain the snow-plastered crags of Carn Etchachan an ominous blood-red. Soon our very own ‘rosy fingered dawn’ was over and we were back in the maelstrom, pacing our steps to the summit of MacDui.

We stopped at the summit long enough to reset compasses, all too aware that as we retraced our steps we were heading directly towards the steep cliffs of Coire Sputan Dearg. We had no wish to overshoot. Then, something extraordinary. First we noticed we were no longer fighting the half-gale. Almost immediately after that blue sky could be seen directly overhead and, with the speed and sleight of a magician revealing his final illusion, we were suddenly standing in

calm, brilliant sunlight. The transition was so sudden we stopped in amazement. The sense of awe only grew as we looked around: the sky was clear to the north and east, but right behind us to the west, was a broiling curtain of purple-grey cloud - the storm which had, until moments before, enveloped us. We watched as the curtain steadily retreated, as if pushed by some invisible hand, revealing first the depths of the Lairig Ghru and then the Braeriach massif. Now we understood, *this* was the true arrival of *it*. Previously we had only been on its turbulent outer fringe, but now the arctic air was inexorably asserting itself over Scotland. Nature had revealed a grand, unforgettable, spectacle for us.

Soon the sky was clear to all points of the horizon. Despite the sun, the cold almost immediately became more intense: our faces could feel the bite of super-cooled air and by the time we had negotiated the tricky *verglassed* boulder fields on our descent beside the Tailor's Burn, it took an ice axe to smash out the 4-inch plugs of ice that had formed in our water bottles. A deep silence fell over the Cairngorms, now revealed in all their elegant form. On Carn A'Mhaim we revelled in being alive and spoke openly of the past and future.

'It will be hard, you know,'

'I know.'

As we descended from the heights, we watched a solitary golden eagle quarter the flanks of Carn Crom in a fruitless search for the flickering shadow of prey in the low December light.

The old 'new' Bob Scott's at least offered the prospect of a fire. I took a rusted bow-saw and wandered the timeless forests of Scots pine around Derry Lodge seeking suitable deadfall. The saw froze to my gloves and it was now so cold that to touch bare-metal was to be immediately frost-burned. We may have been lower and Al, with his considerable skills as a frustrated arsonist, may have coaxed a feeble fire to life, but as we sat there with our feet jammed inside the grating, it felt even colder than at Hutchy.

'Just how cold *is* it?'

'Who knows? Cold!'

It was time to be leaving, but in the morning Al wanted to stay on. I concluded he liked to suffer, but after some consideration he decided to join me on the way

out to Braemar. He ended my leisurely departure preparations by thrusting an inedible army 'Biscuit, Brown' into my hands:

'Breakfast. Eat as we run. If we are fast we can make the first bus.'

And run we did, all the way to Braemar. The Dee had frozen over and great herds of deer streamed past us along its banks through the smoking frost. By 10am we had arrived in the village, dressed in shirt-sleeves and salopettes, looking wild, feeling relieved - we had escaped the locker. Our sweat froze the instant we stopped. A Michelin-man impressionist walked by, braving his way to the paper shop over the sheets of ice that covered the pavements. He hailed another fearless neighbour:

'It was minus 22 in the night!'

So now we knew.

We just made what turned out to be the *only* bus, collapsing into its diesel-heated fug. But we were not quite free yet: at Ballater the engine was pronounced frozen and we were dumped at the side of the road. Somehow it became unfrozen and we continued on to Aberdeen.

It was now the 23rd of December and with each Deeside village and town we passed through, the Christmas crowds became larger, the lights brighter. Union Street in Aberdeen was a scene of pandemonium, presided over by a giant billboard of two grinning TV personalities selling tea. It was insane and my instinct was that Al was right. We were not escaping at all. We should go back, return to the cold heart of the Cairngorms. But our lives pull us onwards. A blizzard chased my next bus all the way to Glasgow.

Some months passed and I took that train to Euston. Some more years passed until one night I found myself sitting in a half-ruined hotel in the utterly oppressive heat of the Helmand summer. The C-130 was arriving at dawn to extract me after 6 months of isolation, heat and conflict. Outside, the explosive sounds of a never-ending tribal war punctuated the night. I wrestled with my final report - an essay on the nature of futility. The keys of the laptop were gummed with sweat, dust and the dead of a biblical plague of aphids that had invaded the hotel. All seemed broken and wrong. Could my world feel sane again? Could I escape? And I thought of that moment, nature's magic trick and

the bruised curtain. That time in the cold locker, of Ryvoan, Hutchison and the way back home.