

Up the Airy Mountain

by George Gall

Seven men, a laddie, and eleven dogs in a short wheelbase Landrover, heading up to the old Devil's Elbow. It's early morning, June 1955 and I am in transition between seafaring and shepherding. Six of us, and all the dogs, decanted about where the ski complex is now. We were about to gather the sheep for the Old Spittal, the man and the laddie went back to prepare the fank and give a kep when the sheep arrived.

Being rather new to this job and my dog Trig only eleven months old, I was positioned between two experienced men as we strung out along the hill tops. "Juist ca them furrit" I was told "Nae need for lang outruns, the rest o' us will dae that". So forwards and downwards it was, sheep being brought in from all sides to be urged ahead by men and dogs. I suppose it must have taken nearly four hours to get all the sheep into the fank.

Gathering Dalmunzie was different in that we walked out along the narrow gauge railway track that used to be there before heading upwards. But the procedure for getting the sheep to the fank was just the same. In those days neighbours helped neighbours, working to a rota which had been devised many years in the past, each farm had its turn gathering and clipping.

Going to the hill in summertime was pleasant, gatherings meant starting early, long walks, looking for sheep and directing dogs. This to be followed by hard work of clipping or dipping or whatever the purpose of the gathering had been. After the sheep had been shorn there were fewer visits to the hill, until, that is when the tups were put out in mid-November, necessitating daily rounds. Snow could be expected from then on, heavy snow meant looking to see that no yowes had been covered, with possible digging out required. Sometimes hay had to be put out and the sheep brought to it, possibly having to make paths through the snow for them, always a worry when the yowes were heavily pregnant. Then, of course, lambing.

Stanhope, near Tweedsmuir, was somewhat different, my house, for instance was seven hundred feet above sea level. My house in Glenshee had been at thirteen hundred feet. Going to the hill was explained to me by the head shepherd, "A' thing is hefted here, ye'll gang oot in the mornin up the Birkside Knowe tae whaur ye can see the tap, pit yer dug oot tae bring aucht doon that's abin ye, then ca a'thing doon tae the bottom of the glen. Ye'll dae the same wi a' the ither hefts, richt roon tae the Dun Law. Gin ye get there ye'll maybe see me on the Dollar Law, my hirsel comes up agin yours there." All this told me as we walked up the glen, he pointing out where each heft ran and their imaginary boundaries of here a wee burn, there a fold in the ground. So he described the twelve mile walk to be done in the fore day. "Then in the efternoon ye'll juist walk up the glen like we are daen the noo and pit yer dug oot tae hunt them back up the hill, aye in their ain hefts." Another eight miles, but without going high. All this to make the yowes and lambs use all the grazing area and to check for troubles such as maggots strike and coupies, ie a sheep on its back and unable to rise.

There were three of us shepherds, there was no neighbouring as had been done in Glenshee, but the hefting system made gatherings fairly easy, the three of us did it. Summer gatherings meant starting before daylight, walking up the glen while the stars could still be seen. Daylight on the top of the Dollar Law might reveal a glorious view of the Eildons and possibly the Cheviot. On occasion, although it was broad daylight, some of the glens might be full of mist, not the Stanhope glen of course, or we would not have set out. St. Mary's Loch could be seen too from some places. Gathering days were very busy, but on ordinary days one could spend a few minutes just looking at the scenery, sometimes one might meet another shepherd where the two farms marched and spend time blethering.

Dogs were very important they did so much work. I used to take one dog in the morning and another in the afternoon, then swap them about the next day, thus the dogs learned all the different jobs to be done, and when it came to gathering they all knew the ground well and where

sheep might make a bid for freedom. It is a very satisfying feeling to have a dog at hand holding a group of sheep for you with another several hundred yards away bringing in stragglers, then setting off with a couple of hundred yowes to meet up with a colleague with another group, and the third colleague with the rest, the younger dogs trying to outdo each other in driving the flock forward.

It must have been 1960 when I took on a lambing on the Cleish Hills not far from Kinross. When up on the highest ground it was obvious that this was the waist of Scotland with the Bass Rock in view to the east, and to the west, beyond the Wallace Monument, Ben Lomond and the Cobbler, beyond that the peaks of Arran. There is a wee loch, Loch Glow, on the territory I covered, whilst walking there I noticed a number of holes filled with blaeberry, grass and heather, the usual vegetation of such an area, very odd, I thought. Asking the retired shepherd whose hirsel I was working on about this, he answered "Those are bomb craters."

"Bomb craters?"

"Aye, Loch Glow is juist ten miles frae Rosyth, dae ye see yon bit o' flat grun?" pointing to a place quite near the house, "There wis an anti aircraft gun there, and anither yonder" pointing again, "And searchlights there and there", indicating where all these had been sited. "This wis a decoy, when the Germans cam ower tae bomb Rosyth a' thae guns and searchlights went into action, the guns that really defended Rosyth didn't open up until the last moment." Judging by what I saw the decoy must have been effective, if Rosyth had received those bombs it would have been hard hit.

Two or three years later a lambing on the Lammermuirs provided a much closer view of the Bass Rock, and much of the Firth of Forth, right over to the East and West Lomond, those unmistakable hills of Fife. But, of course, shepherding is not about looking at views although these can be enjoyed in the bygoing. Once when one of my daughters, who was a member of her high school's hill walking club accompanied me on a gathering she remarked "You don't just go make for the top, this is not like how the school party goes!"

"Quite right, we have to look at where the yowes might be, usually meaning that zig zags are required."

One of the best views I have seen was from the top of the Black Craig, otherwise known as Cairnsmore of Dee. In my teens I had been on several of the Galloway hills, including the Black Craig, but this time I was home on leave between ships. From up there the Mull of Kintyre was clearly visible to the North West, to the West, beyond the Mull of Galloway, Northern Ireland, in the South West the Isle of Man, to the South East the hills of Cumberland, but to the South, could those be the hills of Wales? Back in the house, having consulted maps and my Norrie's Nautical Tables used regularly for navigational purposes, yes, it must have been the Welsh hills.

Never having bagged a Munro, never having carried an ice axe but only a crook – one of the shepherd's tools – I am not a mountaineer, but I have the greatest respect for high ground; of Scotland or elsewhere.