

In the Wilderness

By PJ Biggar

In the early evening I left the old van at Fain Bridge, shouldered my pack and set off up the rough heathery slopes past the mobile phone relay station with its comical hat of turf; its little generator was purring away. Soon the sound was lost in the stiff east breeze and the only sounds were an occasional squelch as my foot found a bog hole, or a scrape as one of my sticks struck rock. May evening sunlight, no deer, no birds, no people, no path; only a choice of ways between tiny lochans on a broad moor.

Down by the bothy the light was fading. There were two young lads with a big black Labrador. They were just finishing their meal in the back room, so I got my stuff unpacked in the adjoining front room. I was tired and needed tea. I didn't really want to talk but I had a few words with the lads - young southern professionals, they came up for a trip every year. One did most of the talking for them. They had climbed Ruadh Stac Mor and A'Mhaighdean that day and wanted to do the other four hills tomorrow. "What are you going to do?" asked the talkative one.

"Oh, I'll see what the weather's like and go for a walk."

"Go for a walk!" The concept seemed foreign, plainly one needed to have *Big Plans* in this area. I got the primus going and offered them coffee water. After they went to bed I sat by candlelight in the bare room drinking my second mug of tea, then I tiptoed out to the burn to brush my teeth. Deer were grazing almost up to the walls of the cottage. Stars were appearing and the sky had a settled look.

Sleep was fitful on the hard wooden boards. Then all at once light was flooding through the velux window and I was wide awake. I hadn't known which way I wanted to go, but circumstances had helped me make the choice: the lads were going to Beinn a'Chlaidheimh, good, then I'd go where they had been yesterday. You don't come to a wilderness to seek out company. However, they set off just ahead of me, and, almost together, we crossed the flats and forded the river. Then I waved goodbye to them as I set off on the excellent path up Gleann na Muice. They had the strange idea that it was better to aim for the col between B.a'Chlaidheimh and Sgurr Ban rather than climb the former's steep north ridge. I had tried, gently, to dissuade them from this the night before, but they had taken no notice. Now I could see them floundering in elephant heather on the trackless side of the river. I almost shouted to them. I felt sorry for the dog.

I felt excited, strong, fresh, almost young again. The valley was still in shade. I paused briefly at a stream. The cold water and the beauty of the pool had a calming effect and my body slowed down; everything became more rhythmical: legs, breathing, deep thumping of the heart; I moved on into the sunlight in the right hand fork of the valley. I climbed steadily to the point where I could see Loch Beinn Dearg, then steeply up the zig-zags of Clach na Frithealaidh to a broad expanse of moorland cut by peat hags and dotted with lochans. I sat by the burn to eat some bread and cheese, drink water and consider my route.

Only keepers, stalkers and shepherds get to know little pieces of the wilderness. I had climbed all the mountains I could see, but I knew I didn't know any of them; because I knew this, I knew more than some. The young lads, floundering up to their dreadful col with the panting dog, hadn't listened to me, but I had listened to them, in fact I'd even asked them which way they'd gone to Ruadh Stac Mor and the talkative one had shown me on the map. Their way was excellent: the lads had done me a favour. The wind struck me on the summit, but the sunlight was strong and I felt I was really making progress. Wanting to get out of the wind, I hurried down a short way and took shelter among the rocks to eat and drink a little more.

On the descent I got out my sticks to save my knees. Now, with a following wind, they fairly propelled me up the slopes of A'Mhaighdean, a faint path leading me through pale, winter burnt

turf, round little outcrops of grey gneiss which contrasted with the red rubble of the Ruadh Stac, into old snow patches and out again and on and on to the mystical heart of Fisherfield where I stood gazing down into the deep coire encircling Fuar Loch Mor and beyond that to the cliffs of Carnmore and the distant expanse of the Fionn Loch leading the eye into the western horizon. There too were the great cliffs of Beinn Lair and nestling in the depths between me and them, the fairy ridge of Beinn Tharsuinn Chaol on which I have never set foot.

My little walk was taking me round in a gentle horseshoe. Now, I turned my back to the west and set foot on country I had not been on before. For sure I had climbed all these hills in the past, but singly, or in pairs and from different directions, now I was experiencing the links in the chain, trying to put the whole thing together. I became conscious of the length of the eastern half of the circuit and averted my eyes.

The initial descent from A'Mhaighdean was delightfully soft under foot and at an easy angle but the part to the col between A'Mhaighdean and Beinn Tarsuinn could be awkward in cloud as the ridge is discontinuous and there are crags to the left guarding the Pools of The Pigs from which Gleann na Muice takes its name. Today it was easy and I was soon sitting at my ease on a heathery bank. At 525 metres this was the low point of my day, coming after a long descent and with the prospect of a long climb ahead. It was the low point physically, but not spiritually - I felt good, but I was hungry. I rummaged in my bag for food. Today I had a treat - a sort of spicy, sticky, iced tea-cake spread with butter. I had a secret weapon too - *Auld Broon's Magic Powder* - it must be magic because he's still putting up E-grade rock climbs all over the north west and he's over seventy! I lay back in the heather contented and hopeful. No men, no animals, no birds, almost no sounds, just the breeze on the grass and the warming sunlight, almost no thoughts, consciousness purged by steady physical effort and the presence of extreme beauty in which to lose oneself, to experience the weakening of the barrier between the self and the world, to feel at one, and not at odds, with all there is: however little one might understand it.

But one can't stay long in any place or in any state of mind. I took up my sticks and followed animal tracks through the heather and past peat hags where the deer had been rolling. Magic powder, sticks and trickery, I needed them all to get me up that slope. Sticks clicked, feet found rhythm again, the wind found me too and I took off my sweat soaked hat and let it riffle my thinning hair.

A pair of Ptarmigan crept away as I descended Beinn Tarsuinn. Both birds were still half white and I caught the splash of crimson above the male bird's eye. They were most anxious to lead me away from their nest and I was most anxious to be led. Only when we had gone quite a way did they fly round in a semi-circle, their whiteness standing out against the dark hollow of the coire below. I hoped I had not betrayed them to an eagle and hurried on.

From the slopes of Beinn Tarsuinn I had seen something I remembered: the merciful little path which traverses the north-west slopes of Meall Garbh, an awkward lump on the ridge; bypassing it saves effort.

The lads were sitting by the cairn on Mullach Coir Mhic Fearchair; they looked tired; the dog, stretched out full length amongst the rocks, looked exhausted. The talkative one looked at me quizzically:

"So you are going all the way, then?"

I smiled.

"It's beginning to look like that."

Before they set off, wearily, for Beinn Tarsuinn, I was able to tell them about the little path round Meall Garbh, repaying their tip about the route to A'Mhaighdean. Again I felt sorry for their dog.

The descent from the Mullach was steep and rocky but not too bad. The ascent of Sgurr Ban was all right so long as one kept well to the left and I did, but the descent was a curse. I chose the seemingly easier way to the right but this way lies through over half a mile of wobbling quartzite blocks guaranteed to destroy a fresh walker's rhythm. Passing the remarkable stone igloo which has been constructed near the foot of this nightmarish slope, I felt the most enormous relief when I came to the two little lochans on the gentle bealach below Beinn a'Chlaidheimh and I sank down on the short grass to rest and eat the last of my sticky tea-cake. Here too, I got out my mobile 'phone and managed to contact my wife, just to tell her I was about to go up my last hill. I could picture Angie scurrying about in the kitchen trying to get dinner ready, the contrast with the peace and tranquillity of my situation could hardly have been greater - except that we were both tired. I felt slightly lonely after I switched the 'phone off, but physical weariness blunts most emotions and I lay back in the short grass with my tea-cake and a last dose of magic powder.

The evening sun was warm as I climbed slowly over the triple tops of Beinn a'Chlaidheimh. Below me Strath na Sealga was bathed in light while deep Gleann na Muice to my left was in shadow. The descent was all that was left. Sticks scarted from rocks, feet slipped on muddy patches, holes gaped under tangled stems. My light trousers became spattered with mud, but ever so slowly the valley floor rose to meet me.

The heat was at its worst as I neared the bottom and a few early midges sensed my sweaty presence and made me hurry down. That slope went on for too long, but at last I was on level ground and making my way over the shaggy moorland towards the stunted Alder trees by the river. The big, white, water worn stones were standing proud of the clear water. On the far bank Wood Anemone and Primroses had escaped the sheep's attention. Then I was walking up through the meadows where brightly coloured tents had sprung up like huge exotic flowers to where Shenavall gave promise of tea and coolness. It was about half-past-six.

That was the end of the walk, but not of the experience. I took off my sweaty shirt and vest and put them on the low dyke round the rowan tree. I put my boots to dry in the sunlight, and went deliciously barefoot in the short, dry, cool grass. I staggered to the stream and got water. I got the primus on and sat by it in the cool, aromatic room. How good not to have to talk, just to be able to sit and let the mind go blank while my toes wriggled on the dusty floor. How lucky to have a chair to sit on and a wall to rest my back against.

Some two hours after I got back to Shenavall I saw the lads and the black dog coming up through the meadows. The dog looked quite recovered by his dip in the stream and was pulling the talkative one along. I had water boiling for them. The big dog, remembering how tired he really was, flumped down and went to sleep. They had finished by traversing Beinn Tarsuinn and then walking back down the length of Gleann na Muice: a thirteen hour day and they weren't finished yet: they were intent on packing up and walking to the road! Maybe, if they hurried, they'd get a meal in Ullapool! The talkative one wasn't so talkative any more; the quiet one smiled and said he must 'stay focussed'. They fed the dog, packed up and headed for the door. As an afterthought the talkative one said: "What's on the cards for tomorrow?"

"Oh, just a wee stroll back to the road."

He grinned ruefully:

"A wee stroll like today, eh?"

The sun was turning the muddy path to dust as I trudged back over the moor. I had a last drink from a deep pool over which busy spiders had strung their webs. Coming over the last rise I heard a car. The van was just where I had left it and Destitution Road stretched hard and black in front of us, but oh, how rich I felt!