

A WINTER'S WALK

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Having been lucky enough to spend over a year in Scotland in the Royal Air Force I was naturally able to visit many of the lesser known areas in the Highlands. To select just one of these places to describe here was not an easy task, but the Cairngorms were the nearest group of mountains to my station and were consequently covered fairly thoroughly. Coming from the east the drive over the Cairn o'Mounth road, snow permitting, and up Deeside to Braemar was always a worthwhile part of a trip and the distance not too far to be laborious. From Braemar the pretty road up through Inverey to Linn of Dee brings one to the start of the good track which runs up to Derry Lodge. When clear of snow and outside the shooting season one can obtain a key to the gate and drive up this to the Lodge, and this is often worth the 2s. 6d. involved as it saves 3 miles of walking at either end of the day. With the long distances that have to be covered in the Cairngorms to traverse almost any of the tops this is very worthwhile and gives one more time and scope on the hills themselves.

On the December day which I am about to describe snow lay deeply on the mountains and was drifted to varying depths in the valley which is itself at over 1,000 feet. As a result the car could be taken no further than the start of the track to Derry Lodge and under a blue sky, plentifully decorated with racing snow clouds, I set out on foot. There were only a few drifts over the track and my progress was therefore easy and enjoyable, first by the Lui Water, then along by the thick fir wood till the wooden bridge over the river is crossed. Beyond this the track wends its way through the heather till the firs surrounding Derry Lodge are reached.

Beyond the Lodge are only hill tracks, although that which continues round into the Dee valley and over the Lairig Ghru is well trodden out. Following this, I soon crossed the Derry Burn issuing from the long stretch of Glen Derry through the firs and could see the great bare slopes sweeping up to Carn Crom above, an outlier on the Derry Cairngorm ridge. Keeping to the track by the river, I passed the keeper's cottage at Luibeg and made my way amongst the scattered remnants of trees and rough heather with drifts of snow, glittering in the occasional sun, to add brightness to the winter's sombre tones.

Reaching the footbridge over the Luibeg Burn I was able to pause a minute and look up Glen Luibeg to where the Sron Riach ridge swept steadily up to the mass of Ben Macdhui. Carn a'Mhaim,

a fine outlying peak of the same mountain, now towered ahead and the track rose and ran on easy ground around the base of its steep slopes. Topping the watershed separating Glen Luibeg from the Dee valley the path levelled off and before long I was able to see the fine snow-covered form of the Devil's Point with the very high ridge running out beyond to Cairn Toul. To the south of the Devil's Point and separated from it by the deep, lonely Glen Geusachan rises another lesser known mass of hills, fronted by Beinn Bhrotain. It was this group that I intended to explore on this occasion.

It was not long before I left the track and cut down to the Dee through snow suspended in heather. The river was of course unbridged and at this time no means of crossing dryshod showed itself. The prospect was uncomfortable with snow on either bank and ice actually in the process of forming in eddies of the water. Determination was the only approach however and removing my boots in the snow I waded through the icy water at a broad, and so shallow, point. The river bed was of fairly reasonable boulders and the waters swirled not much higher than my knees, but by the time I was halfway across the cold had started to bite in. Pushing on as fast as possible and steadying myself with my axe I soon gained the far bank and a period of leaping up and down barefoot in the snow soon replaced the ache in my legs by a warm glow.

Getting stockings and boots on once more was pleasant and shortly I pressed on to where the steep slope of snow-covered heather and rock rose ahead. The ascent of this was hard work but grand fun. The ground was slabby and steep enough to require careful route selection and the soft snow made care essential on certain passages, but I gained height steadily and at last the slope eased off and I came on to a good rounded ridge in what was now a gale of wind. Easy going at a gentle gradient then took me onwards for some way over a minor top till the broad summit of Beinn Bhrotain at 3,795 feet was reached.

The outlook from this point was impressive, with cloud shadows racing over the hills and showers of wind-blown powder snow blurring their outlines and often causing me to cower before their onslaught. To the north, across the dark hollow of Glen Geusachan, a great expanse of snow swept down from the Braeriach Plateau and Cairntoul and up to the headland of the Devil's Point. Beyond, over the hidden Lairig Ghru, rose the great mound of Ben Macdhui with the narrow ridge sweeping down and up to Carn a'Mhaim. On the lower ground, to the east, from where I had come, heather and

trees darkened the snowscape and in the distance were further mountains of the Eastern Grampians, dominated by the Queen's Mountain, Lochnagar.

Bad weather was in the offing and the conditions did not encourage lingering. I therefore took a compass bearing on the col to the west and set a good pace down the rough slopes towards it. Cloud engulfed me before this col and by the time it was reached a full blizzard was howling about me with snow plastering my clothes. Time was also getting on with dusk only an hour away and I held a brief mental council whether to press on or not. Having decided to do so I made my way directly up steep slopes of snow-covered rock from the col and before very long got on to the broad plateau of Monadh Mor. The summit of this is merely a slightly higher point on the plateau, a mile from the col, and in the prevailing conditions was difficult to locate. However, after some uncertainty of not knowing whether I was proceeding up or down hill, the cairn was found, to my relief.

At 3,651 feet now, and in a blizzard, I was not tempted to stop and immediately turned about to retrace my steps to the col. This brought me face to face with the elements and the way back was a fight, on a compass course, crouched and staggering sideways to keep my face from being plastered by the snow. Luckily the storm eased before long and I soon dropped once more to the col.

Shelter in the valley was now my aim and I escaped by a rough traverse down the side of the broad ridge thrown out to the south from Beinn Bhrotain. This was a long slog but I was pleased to get under the clearing clouds and to see the bleak moors stretching darkly, compared to the higher snows, away to the south. In time I came round on to the broad expanse of moorland that spreads out below and set my course down and across this for the small rocky peak of Carn Cloich-mhuilinn which overlooks the Dee. Reaching this after some while a short scramble up snow, rocks and heather brought me to the attractive summit, 3,087 feet high, and in the semi-dark.

A short halt by the cairn out of the wind was enjoyed, but with complete darkness very near I soon scrambled down steep rocks and set a course down long rough slopes to where the Dee carved a black gash in the snowy heather. A path follows the river downstream but this was on the further bank and the small amount of light available showed all the rocks of the river to be thickly coated with ice. To cross was therefore out of the question and a long struggle ensued

down the bank till much later I very thankfully came to White Bridge and joined the Glen Tilt—Linn of Dee track. With all difficulties now behind me I enjoyed a bite to eat and a smoke out of the wind there and was able to enjoy the wild night.

The track was now of motorable size and presented few snags even in the dark. Drifts did impede progress for a while but further on they became infrequent and the last few miles of the day were passed peacefully with an easy stride, thus bringing me at last back once more to the Linn of Dee and my car. A fine day was thus ended and I was well tired and contented as I drove back through Braemar and down Deeside.

