

ARRAN — EASTER 1962

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Arran is an oval island, twenty miles long, nine miles wide, and the coast road encircling it is about fifty-five miles. The interesting mountains occupy only about one fifth of this area, in the north-east corner, but they are unique and provide entrancing views, both on the rare days when the panorama is a geography lesson on the islands, coasts and hills of south-west Scotland, and ships can be seen in Belfast Lough, and in the less rare conditions of soft light and mist.

I first visited Arran one October afternoon when visibility was down to two miles of sunlit autumn haze, but the view from Goatfell was magical with receding layers of towered and pinnacled ridges silhouetted in the mist. The hills were deserted, except for deer, whose presence was given away by the occasional roaring of the stags.

Corrie is an ideal place to stay. The boarding houses are fifty yards from the sea, and a pre-breakfast stroll to the front gate enables one to examine the cloud on Goatfell, rising immediately behind the house, and to plan one's day accordingly.

An energetic walker is supposed to do the ridges in one day, but it involves 8,500 feet of climbing and we found about one third quite enough. For the Easter week-end a tentative programme had been drawn up to take in all the ridges; for the first afternoon, if fine, Goatfell was the objective. However, the first two arrivals considered the heavy mist to be a good excuse for a stroll up the coast road and up Glen Sannox, returning along the "shelf", the raised beach about five hundred feet above the coast behind Corrie. The serrated skyline at the head of Glen Sannox—Cir Mhor, The Peak of the Castles (Caisteal Abhail) and the Witches' Leap—was silhouetted against the grey sky and looked much higher than it was. The shelf was, as usual, thick with deer and curlew and although we were back to a five o'clock tea and a drizzling evening, we felt that the overnight journey had been justified.

The morning was bright, and we set off for North Glen Sannox, a three-mile road walk with only three vehicles to disturb the peace and the birdsong. We struck off at the burn through typical Scottish going—knee high heather and tussocky bog. There was a vestigial path hugging the bank and we soon abandoned an attempt at a short cut. The burn was a succession of deep green pools and small falls and rapids until it turned abruptly south to flow along a deeply cut gorge; this was an obvious continuation of the geological formation which had formed the Witches' Leap, the notch in the skyline directly

above. We intended to leave this ridge for a later walk, heading east, which is the better direction both scenically and for climbing. We therefore struck north to the other shoulder of the corrie, where we lunched, having a pleasant prospect down Glen Chalmadale to the ruined castle and farms of Loch Ranza, and out across the sound to the Mull of Kintyre and the Paps of Jura. Immediately below was the desolate peaty expanse of Gleann Easan Biorach and Glen Iorsa, where the watershed is formed by a small lochan from which streams flow north and south to divide the eastern ridges from the rounded western hills.

The mist had now descended, and when we reached Caisteal Abhail we used the compass to check on the slope leading to the Cir Mhor col. Here was a momentary glimpse across the glen to the boiler plate slabs of A'Chir and the massive summit of Beinn Tarsuinn, but we were not favoured again until we had traversed Cir Mhor and were part way down to the Saddle. Then the mists retreated to show the Saddle far below as well as the precipices falling away from the Goatfell ridges to Glen Sannox and Glen Rosa. It was a steady grind up the ridge to North Goatfell, where we lay on a large slab and had tea. Shortly two figures materialised out of the mist from the direction of Goatfell, which turned out to be the remainder of the meet who had arrived a day earlier than expected and were doing their first afternoon's stint. They deterred us from being late for dinner through carrying on to Goatfell, and a rapid descent was made via the Corrie Burn.

Sunday looked more promising still, so we decided to achieve our *pièce de résistance*, the A'Chir ridge, before the weather broke. After a lucky lift to Glen Rosa we set out for the S.W. to N.E. line of the ridge. The lower reaches of Glen Rosa were delightful: the wide gravelly river looped round flat turfy camp sites in a most appealing manner. From the ridge we later counted forty-two tents, but spread over the three or four miles of Glen Rosa this was not an objectionable density.

We followed the path up the Garbh Allt tributary, which descends in a series of falls, and then plodded up the massive slopes of Beinn Nuis. In spite of our funereal pace we reached an eyrie which gave us a fine view of the summit cliffs about two hours after setting off, and settled down to lunch with a splendid view across the lower intervening ridge to the slabs of Cir Mhor, which give the best climbs on Arran.

The views from Beinn Nuis and Beinn Tarsuinn were restricted by haze, and the scramble down to the Pass of the Bowmen was enlivened by patches of ice and soft snow. On the A'Chir ridge there

was no difficulty in finding the way, but there were several well marked lines of advance and for the first few hundred yards we scrambled on the slabs on the west side, which included a small cave section and ended on an exposed slab which led back to the main route. The slabs were so rough that it was easy to move around unroped and in perfect safety. After this diversion we stuck to the path until we reached a drop of about twelve feet, descended by a chimney. We glimpsed some figures ahead and heard voices exhorting others over the crux; the start of this was a thirty-foot crack to the left across a massive slab, apparently ending in mid air but actually having only an eight-foot drop to *terra firma*. Then the ridge narrowed to two overlapping blocks below which we could see daylight. A delicate step across, and we edged our way round a boulder and up to the path, which led to a fifteen-foot descent down a vertical crack to a grassy catwalk, ending up with a rock flake taken *à cheval*. The next section was formed of massive granite ledges, and then the ridge reverted to a path, leading to the slopes of Cir Mhor. It was now 5.30, and quite clear that we should not be able to do any more that day without being even later for dinner, so the rest of the ridge walk—Cir Mhor, The Castles, Witches' Leap and Suidhe Fheargas—were cut out, and we took instead the useful path that contours the west slope of Cir Mhor to lead to the col from which a well trodden staircase descends to Glen Sannox. Looking west, the lesser hills were blanketed in a thin cover of mist, the only cloud to be seen, and the various stretches of water and meandering streams in the brown expanse of Glen Iorsa shone like silverplate. There was still some sunshine in the trench of Glen Sannox, and we disturbed several groups of deer as we pressed on down the boggy path. The sea was a Mediterranean blue, and the last stretch of road was enlivened by a succession of landmarks—the Cat Stone, the church, the Co-op, the river, the pub., and fifty yards further the digs.

Monday was again fine; we had intended to finish off the job by climbing Beinna' Chliabhain, contouring below the A'Chir ridge on the west side and doing the peaks we had missed the day before. However, there was a general preference for pottering around on bicycles so we pattered over to Lochranza and down to Catacol, where we found that a south-westerly gale had sprung up. We set off along the twelve miles of coast road in the teeth of the gale and eventually completed the circuit of the northern half of the island just in time for dinner. So much for off days.

The meet disintegrated on the Tuesday. Two members had to leave on the 3.00 p.m. bus, but they managed to get up Goatfell before lunch. The other half of the meet carried on until Saturday, and enjoyed splendid weather. Their further expeditions included

North Goatfell, Cir Mhor, Caisteal Abhail, Witches' Leap and Suidhe Fheargas on the one day and Caisteal Abhail via North Glen Sannox, the A'Chir ridge, Beinn a'Chliabhain, and returning up the coast road from Brodick on the next. Brodick Castle and Holy Island were also visited, and the week ended with a deer stalk armed with cine camera and aided by a beater. Altogether it turned out to be a most pleasant and memorable holiday.

