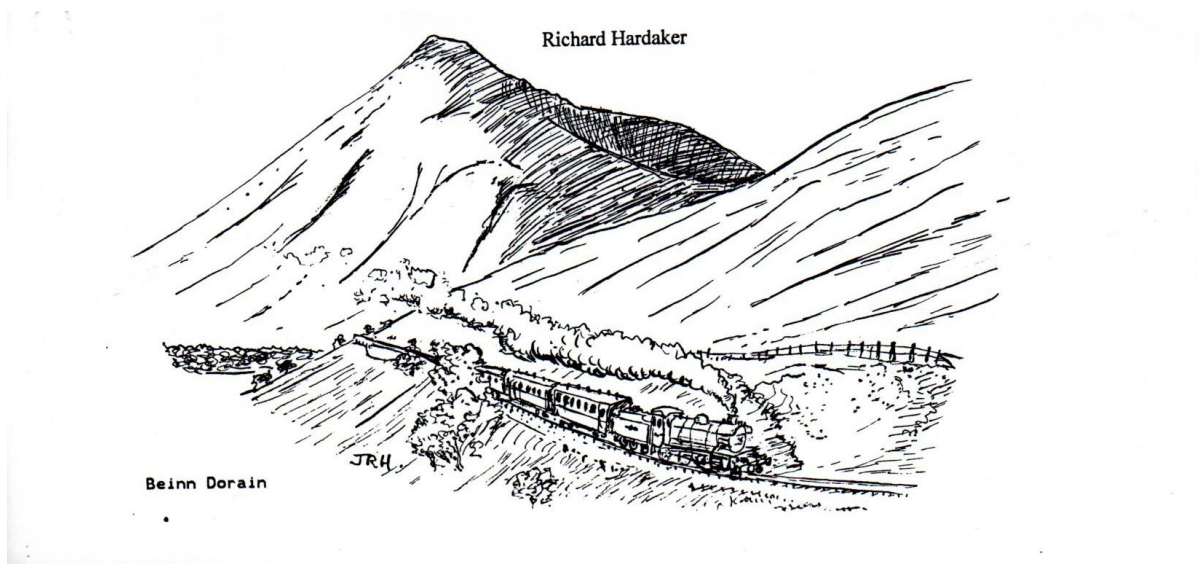


THE FINAL TICK



Munro baggers are sometimes unkindly compared with train spotters and similar anoraked tickers of lists. To this, I can only plead guilty as charged, since my first approach to a Scottish mountain was inspired in part by my interest in railways. In mitigation, I was never an obsessive platform ender in my youth, being attracted more by the majesty and poetry of the steam locomotive, sentiments which would later inform my approach to mountains.

Nowhere do railways and mountains come together more dramatically in the West Highlands, so May 1975 saw me taking a train to Bridge of Orchy, inspired by the classical conical aspect of Ben Dorain seen from the railway north of Tyndrum. I teamed up with a couple of Glasgow lads met in the hotel, and went up not Ben Dorain but neighbouring Beinn Achaladair and Beinn a'Chreachain, my first two Munros, though I did not know it at the time, not yet having heard of that eminent Victorian mountaineer, nor had any idea how he would influence my future career. I took the train onward to Mallaig, and thence to Skye, where I explored around Loch Corruisk and Glen Sligachan, but did not feel confident at that stage to venture onto the Cuillins solo. Deteriorating weather drove me back to the mainland, where I travelled up the coast to camp at Inchnadamph in Assynt, where, unbeknown to me at that time, this story would reach its conclusion.

I had moved to Carlisle, served an apprenticeship on the Lakeland fells and married Sally before I returned to the Scottish Hills. In 1978 we were tackling such classics as the Beinn Bheithir horseshoe and the five sisters of Kintail under the guidance of Walter Poucher and his 'Scottish Peaks', and finally reaching the Cuillin ridge by the easy route to Bruach na Frithe. Reading Hamish Brown's account of his 1974 long walk over all the Munros introduced me to the concept of Munro bagging and I began surreptitiously to keep a tally.

Starting a family, a change of job and a move to Penrith caused a further hiatus, and I finished 1983 with 22 Munros ascended.

In 1987, a family holiday in Glen Garry allowed me to advance the score to 35, including a splendid day on the South Glen Shiel Ridge when I picked up 7. (Those prolific days are soon

used up; you soon find 2 - 3 a day becomes the average.) This was the point where I began to entertain the conceit that I might eventually climb them all. However, the domestic authorities (Sally) decreed that I would be on bucket and spade duties on future family holidays, but I could have a week to myself each May.

The following spring the journey really began and the pattern of the following years was established; an overnight drive north after work on Friday, sleeping in the car so as to be straight up the hill early next morning. There were superb days: the Ben Starav range and a traverse of the Mamores. There were wild windy days and days of careful navigation through cloud and falling snow. There were nights in civilised camps, wild camps and bothies. The best days of all were when the car was left behind and I back packed over the hills from bothy to bothy. I undertook such a trip in 1991, using the W. Highland railway again to reach the hills around Corroul and thence to the Ben Alder range, spending nine successive days on the hill and finally walking out over the Grey Corries to Glen Nevis

and Fort William. Readjustment to ordinary life was difficult after that trip! 'The rough bounds of Knoydart' caused me some apprehension before I'd ventured there, having read of epic crossings of swollen rivers, but in the event, I was blessed with a 4 day window of fine weather to trek over Garich and Sgurr Mhorr to Kinbreck bothy, thence to Sourlies bothy via Sgurr na Ciche; Meall Bhuide, Luinne Bheinn brought me to Bannisdale, launching point for Ladhar Bheinn, after which I was even spared the long walk out, being offered a lift in the estate manager's boat back to Kinloch Hourn.

Although it turned into a largely solitary journey - of 284 Munros I set off up 250 alone, it became the sum total of people met in bothy or bunkhouse and on the hills themselves. There was the formidable Gerry Howkins at his bunkhouse at Achnasheelach with his rules and regulations - no telly,

smoking, keep those windows shut to keep out the midges! and the equally laid back regime at Nancy Smith's collection of shacks at Firsit, whose hospitality I enjoyed on my 1991 trip, just months before her untimely death. Most memorable encounter on the hill came in 1989 when Harry Blenkinsop's and my respective paths crossed one misty day on Fionn Bheinn, near Achnasheen, as both discovered a fellow aspirant Munroist from Penrith. This was the beginning of a valued friendship, and later, climbing partnership.

For, as well as honing my navigational skills and sending me mile upon mile to remote highland hills, the Munros gave me the incentive to resume climbing, in order to do the Cuillin in proper style. With the help of Ronnie Kenyon and his evening class, and the patience and forbearance of other EVMC members, I turned myself into an albeit not very intrepid rock climber. I had sufficient confidence to set off on a solo attempt on the Inaccessible Pinnacle, though on the rather drizzly morning I arrived at its foot, I was glad to accept the offer of a rope lowered by a party already on the

top. Latterly there was a deal of satisfaction in reaching Sgurr nan Gillean by the Pinnacle ridge, Sgurr Alasdair by the mauvais pas from Sgumain, and Sgurr Mhic Choinnich by Kings Chimney with Harry in support.

It was nothing if not a musical journey too, inspired not only by the West Highland Railway, but by Delius, whose 'Song of the High Hills' I count as one of my seminal mountaineering inspirations. It was orchestrated by Sibelius, the musical journey of whose seven symphonies became an allegory for the mountain journey, and latterly by Arnold Bax, much of whose symphonic output was inspired and written on the NW Coast of Scotland. The Munros remain my sole muse being the subject of my only self-penned song. And many are the dreary Scots ballads I have sung to myself to pass the time walking back along some never-ending glen at the end of a long day.

Sally's love of Irish Music took us over the water where I was able to add the Irish 3000" hills to my portfolio of Scottish, English and Welsh ones.

There came a point when I'd got over 200 Munros behind me when I began to do my reckoning in terms of mountains still to be climbed. It seemed that an elegant conclusion of the whole enterprise might be to ascend my final Munro on my 50th birthday in July 2000. A number of mishaps combined to frustrate this plan. First of all there was the 'lost car keys on the hill' nightmare which befell me on the slopes of Beinn Bhuidhe, above Loch Fyne one evening in August 1999. Mercifully this happened not too far north, and in the latter days of mobile phones so I was able to summon help from the long suffering Sally who was able to drive up that night with the spare set. The following spring I

thought I was back on target. Fine weather around the Mayday bank holiday had allowed me to finish off the Arochar Alps and other southerly hills, and later in May I began my long anticipated trip to the far north. The timer belt failed (luckily near Stirling, rather than in the wilds of Sutherland) and I had to be Relayed home. I set off again 2 days later in Sally's car with 'plan B', to mop up several far flung hills that my unsystematic approach had left to be done. This exposed the essential absurdity of Munro-bagging as I drove from Glen Lyon to Skye, where a rather scary traverse of the Sgurr a'Ghreadaidh and Sgurr a'Mhadaidh in cloud and sleet concluded my business on the Cuillins. There could have been no greater contrast with the following day's hills, arguably the two most boring Munros, Carn na Caim and A'Bhuidheanach Bheag, two dreary bumps in the moorland east of the A9 near Dalwhinnie.

But no hill is really boring (and being on any hill beats being at work) and that day was distinguished by views of golden plover and dotterel. That trip finished in Glen Nevis with the Mamores outlier, Sgurr a'Mhaim that had long eluded me, and finally Bidean nam Bian in Glen Coe, now elevated to two Munros since the 1997 revision of the tables.

I managed to celebrate my 50th birthday on a Munro, Sgurr Nan Coireachan, at the head of Glenfinnan ascended with my son John, but I was moving very slowly, suffering the after effects of a viral infection and we had to abandon the traverse to neighbouring Sgurr Thuilm for fear of being late for my own birthday party.

I began 2001 with just 6 Munros to climb, when the foot and mouth crisis began and it looked as if completion might be delayed for another whole year. As the months passed it became clear that the infection had not spread to the Highlands and the hills were gradually opened up again. By the beginning of May I was able to return to Glenfinnan for Sgurr Thuilm and nearby Gulvain, but my delayed trip to Sutherland for the grand finale later in the month remained in doubt until the last minute; I was reluctant to make the 400 mile drive unless all four remaining Munros were accessible.

Anxious daily inspection of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland website finally gave the all clear and I found myself driving through the desolate landscape far north of Inverness. Ben Klibreck proved to be the last of many Munros with no summit view, the cloud closing in just as I reached the trig point, as I was favoured with fine weather for the rest of the week. Ben Hope, the northernmost Munro I had not saved until the last - too much of a mountaineering cliché to do that - (sorry Harry!) but I duly restored to the cairn the lump of rock that Harry had taken and presented to me after his completion in 1994 to encourage me to do likewise.

The final day dawned fair but hazy, and warm enough for shorts and Tee shirt as I set out from Inchnadamph along Gleann Dubh up onto Conival before traversing along the ridge to Ben More Assynt. As I rested on the summit, a golden eagle flew across the corrie below me, by way of saluting my achievement, I fancied. I found it difficult to give away malt whisky! Of the several other walkers on the summit only one would share a celebratory tot of the Glenmorangie I'd carried up. Probably sensible, I reflected a little later, it doesn't take much alcohol to disturb your equilibrium as I teetered precariously along the narrow ridge leading to the south top. I made my way down safely however, and finding the field centre bunkhouse full of geology students, and recalling countless nights sleeping in the car, in damp tents, on cold concrete floors in bothies, in a cave, I decided I was due for a bit of pampering and booked in with the trout fishermen in the Inchnadamph Hotel.

The year I started in 1975, 3 people were recorded as having completed the Munros, bringing the total to 133. This year I will be one of hundreds joining a club whose members now number well over 2000. What was once an obscure eccentricity is now big leisure business, supported by libraries full of books and maps, videos and CD roms. For all the hype it remains a great game. Aiming to complete the 284 drives you ever onwards, through fair and indifferent weather, on a journey of 1600 miles or more, during which you'll spend over 100 days on the hill. All who have done it will have a different tale to tell, whether it's been done in less than a year or spread out through most of a lifetime.

What do you do when you have completed the Munros? In my case I answered that question the day after completion. The weather was still fine, and neither my continued celebratory indulgence in malt whisky of the night before, nor the substantial breakfast offered by the Inchnadamph Hotel stopped me from ticking off 3 Corbetts on Quinag. Whether I will pursue the Corbetts as single-mindedly as I did the Munros is doubtful. Despite the lower elevation, they are no less challenging a proposition, being more isolated and frequently in remote and trackless country. There's plenty more territory for the more selective explorer to discover in Scotland, even doing the Munros, you've barely scratched

the surface. I've all those classic VS climbs in the Lakes to do, and I've never been hot-rocking in Spain. One lifetime isn't sufficient.

However, I can disclose that I'm working on another very eclectic ticklist, one that will take you from Penrith Beacon to Yes Tor on Dartmoor and far off Galtee More in southern Ireland. Calculated to appeal to train spotting mountaineers, this list which I think I'll call 'Stephensons' consists of hills which have had railway locomotives named after them. This, you have to admit is no less logical a reason to climb a hill than its reaching an arbitrary elevation above sea level in an obsolete system of linear measurement.

Richard Hardaker