

## The Cruachan Classic – A Cautionary Tale

Relatively few long-distance extravaganzas are really worthy of the term 'classic', but the journey from the edges of Ben Cruachan to the bulky mass of the Blackmount is one such outing. The germ of the idea had been a few years in gestation and was further fertilized in the previous February when I'd backpacked from the Blackmount to Cruachan with my son, Ben. With full winter conditions and a forecast of better weather for the Southern Highlands, I thought that it was about time that the seed sprouted. On this occasion I was very glad to have the company of fellow Fellrunner's Forumite, Bill (aka Baggins), who determined that he'd accompany me on Ben Cruachan despite suffering from a debilitating cold.

We set forth from the visitor centre by the Falls of Cruachan at 1.45pm, full of stodge from the good people of the Real Food Cafe. Unsurprisingly, vigorous exercise straight after pie, chips and Xmas cake is not to be recommended, especially facing in to a stiff headwind. Almost immediately above the reservoir, we hit the neve and donned crampons which I would remove only once on the remainder of the journey. Bill was clearly struggling with his cold but I took the opportunity to take a few pictures and to face away from the stinging spindrift which streamed from the ridges. The wind had whipped up dream cornices on the ridge out to the Taynuilt peak which I duly bagged whilst Bill waited near the top of Cruachan. I was already feeling somewhat battered and the journey had only just begun.

Still, the ridge to Stob Diamh provided excellent sport with a couple of climbing moves and a powerful sunset as the next line of snow showers moved in – a black mass of cloud moving inevitably closer. We entered the greyness, the hill now just a vague blur seen through half-shut eyes. The summit was hardly a place for a picnic but mindful of the long night ahead and Bill's imminent departure I feasted on sandwiches and more Xmas cake, washed down with a small flask of tea. I don't think that Bill was sorry to retreat to the car, whilst I set off in to the deepening gloom, very much aware of the approaching darkness and my isolation. Still, Sron an Isean forms a fine white cone from which the Northern face plunges to the Lairg Noe, my route of descent. In the gloom and blowing snow I find it hard to identify the ridge and veer off to the right where I'm forced to face inwards and front-point sideways like a crab. After a minute of this, I see that I've actually descended the cornice slope and have to re-ascend the ridge which proves easy enough to descend once found. Indeed on descending beneath the cloud, the moon starts to make its presence felt, obviating the need for a torch until I enter thicker cloud on the Eunaich ridge. Descending from the fine summit, I'm forced to face inwards once more as I fail to take the best line in the dark, but thereafter it's plain sailing along the broad, undulating ridge, punctuated only by memories of a rather cold camp with Ben at the end of a specially arduous day. The chief reason for such ardour lay below – an energy sapping morass of tussocks that we had termed 'man-eating'. Re-acquaintance with the fearsome islands of grass that sucked at timorous legs was all that I had anticipated and my respect for Ben's tenacity grew as I cursed my way across the sinking-sand like ground to the river. Hard enough for a seasoned hill-goer, but hardly normal fare for a six year old.

The descent had almost taken me down to sea level so mercifully, the river was unfrozen and I could replenish my scarce liquid supplies, albeit with rather icy water. Thus fortified, I took the diretissima up the steep heathery spur that leads to the upper shoulder of Aighenan. All too briefly, the moonlight cut through the clouds, lighting up the snow-bedecked slopes with a mystical sheen, but my reverie was cut short as the mist descended once more, the wind whipped up the snow and yet more snow fell. The broad, craggy ridge leading downward proved difficult to locate in the dark and snowstorm, so that once more I had to weave in and out of little buttresses, sometimes facing inwards and down-climbing on my frontpoints. My Kahtoola crampons struggled to find purchase in the copious powder snow overlying hard neve, making for a strenuous descent on taut calf muscles. Going down was proving just as taxing as going up! Expanses of bullet-proof neve provided welcome relief from the energy-sapping wades in between. It was difficult to identify one from the other in the mist, dark and snow, so all too frequently I found myself flailing in the drifts, desperately seeking firmer ground. The promise of a dry, clear night had faded to the reality of wind, snow and darkness – a long night was in prospect.

Very much alone, wrapped in a thin cocoon against the elements, my world is a blur of rushing snow flakes, illuminated by a small pool of light that reveals black and white amongst a vast blackness beyond. Buffeted by the gusty wind, I take care on the pinnacles that lead toward Ben Starav, then take equal precautions on navigating out to the true summit and back as footsteps are quickly filled by the driving snow. At least the

cold and wind keep me fully awake and I'm now reconciled to a testing night, focussing on the way ahead. I'm half way through the night now, so its simply a matter of taking each section at a time, not thinking too far ahead and avoiding navigational blunders in the relentless snow and wind – or at least it would have been were it not for one chance event and that event shapes the whole journey. The one moment I'm in control, comfortable with my situation and methodically trundling along, and then the next I'm in trouble deep. A simple loss of a bit of paper is not much in itself but it throws my mechanical progress in to complete disarray. Fumbling with mitts I extract my computer generated map from my pocket, then to my abject horror, I see it whipped away by the gale, vanishing in to the void. I make a vain chase but it is utterly hopeless – by now it will be half way down the hill and I have given my spare to Bill. The gravity of the situation is not lost on me. It is 2.45 in the morning, its snowing, its very dark and I have over 20 miles to go on relatively unfamiliar mountains with the nearest civilisation hours away.

I do the only thing I can do. I try to recall the map in my memory and use my compass to follow my best recollection of the map. This is largely successful on the descent of Glas Beinn Mor to the col, although once more I stray off the ridge proper and end up down-climbing more steep neve overlain by sliding powder. I adopt a crab-like motion to get back on the ridge, my only thought to avoid having any sort of accident. If I do, I might be stuck for a very long time. After all, there's no mobile reception, and where are the mountain rescue going to start looking? They'll have 40 miles to explore. That'll keep them busy. So I endeavour not to set them this particular challenge and actually descend out of the cloud at the col. Now what? The safest option would be to follow the stream down to the moor, but I know that to be a long, boggy and probably fraught way, with all the problems of communicating with Bill, so I take the second option – to carry on. Trusting in my map visualisation, I set off up Albannaich where I re-enter the mist and the wind picks up. At first all goes well. I mount the initial rise, take a bearing over the next plateau and then climb up the steepening slope toward the summit. I want to go East now, but I can't – there's a cliff in the way and the only option seems to be South or North. South will take me back down near where I've come from and north is better. The trouble is, I don't know *exactly* where I am, and I have no map to confirm my position. I try following the ridge right and then left, but its hopeless. Neither goes the way I think I want to go and I don't have the confidence to follow either for very long. I go round in a circle a couple of times and opt for the Northern route. It seems to go in roughly the right direction and I spot a ramp going back left which corresponds with my recollection of the route, so heartened by this I descend the ramp. It's soon clear, however, that this isn't the right ramp. The ground becomes increasingly steep and I end up having to down-climb some distinctly awkward ground that probably verges on grade II and my crampons struggle on the neve overlain by copious amounts of powder. My calves are burning with all the frontpointing and I really, really don't want an accident. Who on earth would look for me here? I'm even off-route now, so those poor chaps in the Mountain rescue will have more than the 40 miles to contend with – no, I'm on my own now. Eventually, however, I traverse in to a gully and plunge down knee deep snow that skitters down the hill. Down, down, down it goes. I must have descended more than the 300 metres to the col, and I am plainly nowhere near the col. In fact I'm nowhere near anywhere that I remotely recognise. Descending out of the mist, its clear that I've just come down a rather forbidding looking cliff and I'm approaching a gorge with an equally unfamiliar wall of snow and rock on the other side. The compass proves inconclusive. I have to face it – I'm well and truly lost. Not a little bit, not just temporarily confused – I'm completely up snowy gully without an ice axe – metaphorically speaking. At least I've descended far enough to reach unfrozen water, so I fill up for what proves to be the last time – there is no more water on the whole route. Down or up – that's the only decision I have to make. Waving the compass around I choose up, convincing myself that the col must be at the top of the gorge. It doesn't look quite right, but its not far off what I would have expected if I'd descended too far to the East. Down in the gorge, the snow is deep and soft, so its a matter of hauling one foot after the other, not thinking too far ahead. The top of the gorge rears up ahead and I choose a ramp to the left, which presents more difficulties traversing highly awkward ground that requires a spot of handhold cutting with my axe at one point. This leads to the windswept col where I bear to the right up what I think to be the intermediate hill before Meall nan eun. From here my memory of the map is somewhat unclear. I know I want to go roughly North east, but beyond that, I'm not sure. So I follow the ridge line North East until I become confused by the lie of the land. I go up a bump. I come down it. I go up another rise. Then I come down it. I try descending further until out of the mist I spot a forest. A forest? Where can that be? The answer is only too plain. That is Glen Etive and I'm nowhere near the intended col. There's only one thing today and that's to retrace my steps to the windswept col. As I do so, the mist lifts a fraction and the first light of day dawns and with it the full realisation of where I am dawns on me. I'm looking up at Albannaich and I need to go back up the South ridge to its summit. Four hours on, I'm back on the summit,

probably only a few minutes from where I was previously. But at least I know where I am, the cloud has lifted and its stopped snowing. Hurrah – or should I say a half hurrah, because the wind has picked up further and the spindrift is now streaming in a huge plume from the summit of the mountain. I'm actually being knocked to the ground by the force of the wind as I stagger along the summit ridge, strafed by a curtain of windblown ice. I might know where I am, but I don't really want to be here!

The summit is a maelstrom through which I lurch from one gust to the next until I reach the relative calm of the leftward trending ridge that I had previously sort out. This one is much more friendly – an easy walk down to the col which I finally reach after my many attempts. After the trials of the night and the continued battering, I'm starting to feel weak, but the icy blasts are a sure cure for any tendency to drift off in to the land of Nod. Visibility is now much better, so I can weave a rather better path around the drifted snow, although the wind doesn't relent much and actually increases in force on the rise up to Meall nan Eun. The plateau is a wild place where I struggle to make any headway in the worst of the gusts. Every now and then progress is brought to a complete halt by a particularly fierce gust and I can do not more than stare through the spindrift that starts to mesmerise me. Ironically the sun is shining but it singularly fails to convey any warmth as a constant barrage of spindrift drives across the plateau. I begin to get somewhat disheartened at the effort required on this easy angled slope which eases back beguilingly, promising the summit at every rise but leading to serial disappointments. For the first time I'm reduced to crawling over patches of snow that just won't take my weight. The snow is just too deep, the crust too fragile and I'm shot. It's not dignified, but at least I get a temporary respite and I don't have to stumble in the gale. From the summit, I can see a truly amazing sight: a column of spindrift is whirling on the moor below in the fashion of a tornado, confirming the wildness of the morning. The Northerly continues to rip across the plateau on the return, but at least I'm going downhill and on reaching the ridge down to the next col, the wind eases a little. This is little travelled country, as few walkers combine the separate mountain masses of Stob Ghabhar and the Starav group, and the slabby slopes of Meall nan Eun form an awkward barrier on descent. Once more I elect to downclimb, facing inwards on the hard neve, as I don't fancy a slip and my crampons are very blunt, with little traction on steep slopes. This places renewed pressure on my calves, which scream out their indignation.

At the col I take the opportunity to curl up beside a boulder. I replenish some of my lost energy and don my down jacket to counter the cold which has crept in to my very bones. The steep haul to the next ridge is a mixture of good neve interspersed by frustrating patches of knee deep soft snow which draws out the ascent which is only overcome by a slow, rhythmic heaving of weary legs. At the top I'm greeted by a fierce blast from the North. This barely eases all the way along the three mile ridge to Stob Ghabhar and at the next top it reaches sixty miles per hour in the gusts which is enough to knock me over. I stagger along, sometimes on pristine neve, more often on soft snow or breakable crust, all the time whipped by the wind and lashed by the omnipresent spindrift that streams across the ridge. I resort to crawling on another two occasions, lying prostrate in the snow at the end of the crawling. I'm getting nearer my limits and more importantly, I've had enough. This is torture. I resolve to wander down from Stob Ghabhar near where I was due to meet Bill at 7am. Its now approaching 12 noon, but I reckon he would get fed up of waiting at a cold and windy col and might retrace my route to meet me. Several times I spy people only to realise that they are no more than rocks. No-one has ventured this far, so I have to continue my vigil alone.

Then, nearing Stob Ghabhar, the second turning point of this adventure occurs and this time for the better. Quite suddenly the wind eases, the clouds vanish, the spindrift ceases and the sun burns brightly out of a clear sky. Released from the torment of the storm, I relish the immensity of the landscape. All round is a sea of white from the mountain tops down to the valley floor, the sun illuminating some of the finest mountains in Britain – the Buachaille, Bidean, Cruachan, Clachlet, Ben Nevis, Ben More on Mull, Ben Lui – and all clothed in a thick mantle of snow that transforms the mountains from objects of grandeur to things of purity. With no-one to disturb the truly awesome panorama, I just look around and stare. It is a rare moment of being - a thin place where the space between God and man reduces. These moments can't be reproduced. They just happen, but you can carry them with you. On this occasion I rue the lack of camera to record one of the very best afternoons I've been privileged to witness, so the memories will have to suffice.

I look out for Bill on the descent to the col with Stob Coire odhar but see no-one. The descent of Stob Ghabhar's own Aonach Eagach is fantastic, with rolling cornices drooping over the sharp edge on either side. I have to take care in the buffeting wind, such is the narrowness of the ridge, then its downhill all the way to

Inveroran. Except that it isn't. Having missed the spur down to the col, I re-ascend to the top of the spur where I change my mind. I reason that the day is exceptional, Bill has probably given up on me and is more likely to be at the Kingshouse than Inveroran, and I feel re-juvenated. Hoping that Bill won't alert the mountain rescue I re-cross the Aonach Eagach and re-ascend to the top of Stob Ghabhar. It's a joy to traverse the crest once more and in the relative calm, the shuffle off Stob Ghabhar is a delight with no-one to break the perfection of the afternoon. Even the steep slog up the initial slope to Clachlet passes with relative ease, although my raging thirst is taking a hold. One and a half litres in 24 hours is just not enough, but I knew that: it's just that I have no option with all available water frozen. I spot Bill on the horizon, followed by three others, then realise that it's a figment of my imagination. There they are again lower down! But no – the rocks don't move.

I feel a growing sense of excitement as I approach Clachlet, realising that I am about to complete a real classic on one of the finest winter days I could have hoped for, and on the summit, I meet my first (and only) person. He sounds Polish and like all mountaineering Poles that I know, he is as hard as nails, preparing to camp near the top. Bizarrely he has a very old fashioned Polaroid camera and a very modern mobile, but takes a print with his Polaroid and promises to email me the image. I leave my new found friend and chase the last rays of sun up Meall a Bhuiridh which is bathed in a golden light. Then it's down the pistes to the Ski Centre, as a magnificent sunset lights up Ben Nevis with a delicate pink hue. I even manage a desultory jog down the road to Kingshouse, reached just as nightfall descends. Nervously I look around and yes – the car is there – but Bill is not! After futile enquiries at the bar, I have no option but to wait outside the car as I have no money, having given this to Bill, but its not long before he strides up to me and my long day is over. A classic traverse is born.