

The W.H. Murray Literary Prize 1999

Welcome to the Club

By David Hughes

I must tell you about this dream I had the other night. No, don't turn to the next page because, as you know, my dreams are legendary. You've not heard me talk about them before? Strange, I thought most people had. Anyway the amazing thing is not just how weird my dreams are but how much I can remember about them the day afterwards. And the fantastic thing is that when I'm asleep I know I am dreaming. Weird or what? Like, as if I'm watching all these bizarre events unfolding and I can just switch off and wake up any time I want to.

Sometimes though, I get really scary nightmares. Not often; I think I can count them on one hand. I distinctly remember this nightmare I had at a campsite at Roybridge. Funnily enough it was just after I'd completed my 100th Munro. The tent was collapsing in from above. Something heavy was suffocating me, slowly but steadily squeezing the life out of me. I desperately tried to move but every muscle in my body felt as heavy as lead. I opened my mouth to cry out, but my voice sounded so weak and muted. I started to panic. This is just a dream, I thought; it's time to wake up. But try as I might I just couldn't escape, and I was beginning to think that I wasn't asleep. This was reality!

Then the next thing I remember was lying in my sleeping bag with the sun streaming in through the flysheet. It was daylight, I could breathe and I could move my limbs. A wave of relief passed through my body. Boy, that was one hell of a scary nightmare.

Anyway, going back to this dream I had the other night. You know that I've just finished the Munros, don't you? You don't? I thought you knew. I thought everybody knew. Tolmount at the head of Glen Callater, near Braemar. Yeah, that was my last one. Funny you should mention that because this was what the dream was about - my last Munro.

So there I was suddenly at this sort of 'compleaters gathering' where Munroists get together and swear in another person to their fold. That was me. And what I had to do, I had to get up on this stage to a sort of lectern with a microphone, a bit like a school prize night, and talk to this audience about my last Munro.

In fact I'm sure it was the stage of my old secondary school, because there was a long line of us waiting to go on stage. Just like you were going on there to receive a prize of some sort. Except in this dream you didn't get anything but you had to talk to an audience about something. The bloke before me was on about driving along the M74 or something. And I thought, what a wally. Surely if you're going to talk about your experiences of Munro bagging you could think of better things to talk about than the journey up to the Highlands. I knew that I could do better than that, so I decided to talk about doing my last Munro. I don't know why I chose to do that; it just seemed sort of natural.

Anyway when it was my turn to go on stage I was suddenly out in the open air with this absolutely massive audience. You just can't imagine how many people were there. All you could see were people, nothing else, just people. And no matter how far they were away from me I could make out their faces. I just thought that the people there would be fellow 'compleaters', but I'm sure I recognised more famous climbers. You know, their faces were kind of familiar, but I couldn't put names to them.

Guests. That's what I worked out that they must be. Guests. That sounds about right. If something stranger than strange comes up in a dream I always find a reason for it, and the plot moves on. So that's what I concluded. Guests. Obvious really. But what about that girl I knew from junior school, what was she doing there, and why her? How strange! ...I know, she probably did the Munros when she grew up. Obvious really.

Do you dream like that? I mean like have some sort of logical framework as if on a higher level your brain is trying to make sense of a series of unconnected past events. You don't? Well I said my dreams were legendary. The thing is that this one just got weirder.

'Ladies and gentlemen, unaccustomed as I am to public speaking', I started. OK, so who's the wally now, I bet you're saying. But with so many people out there I suddenly felt very nervous and awkward.

'I've decided to tell you about my last Munro', I continued, receiving in return encouraging smiles from millions of faces. 'It was a snowy Easter at Braemar. I just had Tom Buidhe and Tolmount to do to finish the Munros. The weather wasn't particularly good, but once I was there I had to finish them off. So the next day I set off to do a round of Glen Callater - Carn an Tuirc, Cairn of Claise, Tom Buidhe and finish on Tolmount.

'The day started slowly. I'd been staying at the Cairngorm Club hut at Inverey with my local mountaineering club, and everyone else was heading off back home because of work commitments. I decided to stay on for a couple of days - the perks of being a "rich sod", as some people in the club endearingly referred to me, and not having to work for a living.'

There was a faint ripple of laughter from my audience. I'd got their attention, they were listening. At least my story was going to be more exciting than driving along the M74. I began to grow in confidence as I continued.

'Anyway there I was sat in my car at the foot of Glen Callater alongside the A93. Snow showers were rattling through at regular intervals, borne on by a strong northerly wind, a situation that had persisted throughout the Easter weekend. One minute your eyes were screwed up against the blinding sunshine reflecting off the white landscape, next minute black clouds unleashed more snow with the icy wind forever sending spindrift whistling across the mountain tops. I was pretending to read the map, check out the route sort of thing but my mind was in a quandary'.

'The dilemma of a solo walk in such dodgy conditions', suggested someone from my audience. A female face, a concerned face, so familiar but who was it?

'Exactly!' I replied, pleased both with the fact that at least some of them were listening and that there was an empathy with my predicament; other mountaineers also faced similar indecisions and misgivings. I was beginning to feel a warmth and a camaraderie towards these people. After all we shared something in common, we'd all done the Munros.

'I was driven by the desire to finish the Munros', I continued, 'but wanted very much to do it safely. You can guess what happened. The sun came out, the winter wonderland of pristine beauty beckoned and ambition won hands down. Boots and gaiters were donned, crampons and ice axe strapped to the rucksack and I was off, beating a way up the snow covered track to Lochallater Lodge'.

Again the warning signals. I wasn't liking this dream. I mean, it wasn't a nightmare or anything as bad as that, but something was wrong and I couldn't put my finger on it. Something to do with the reality of the situation. Do you know what I mean? Like when you dream lots of past experiences and memories are interwoven into a bizarre set of events. But this was too real. OK, so me addressing an audience of millions of faces was strange, but my story of me doing my last Munro was exactly how it happened. Why was my dream just concentrating on one thing? There seemed to be no explanation so I just continued.

'The weather was kind at first. There was a heavy shower as I approached Loch Callater but it was quickly over and the world soon reappeared. Carn an Tuirc remained clear all the way to the top, but its broad north-easterly ridge lay open to the biting cold northerly wind. I reached the snow-choked summit cairn in good time and paused for a bite to eat. Then on to Carn of Claise with easy walking on hard, compact snow. I felt elated, privileged to be there. What's more, the weather continued to be kind, and I seemed to be enjoying a window of good weather with no threat of showers in the immediate vicinity. However the wind was just so cold, but I figured that if I kept moving then things would be all right. I was looking forward to the celebratory pint in the pub in a few hours time, and inwardly laughed at myself for being so indecisive at the start of the walk.

'Tom Buidhe came and went with ease, and there to the north was it. Tolmount. My last Munro. Just a short descent to a frozen burn and then less than 100 metres of reascent to the summit. Half an hour away, if that, and yet it was the culmination of 20 years of roaming the Scottish highlands in wind, rain, sun and snow. Thousands of miles of walking, thousands of feet of climbing'.

I paused to let the recounting of the elation at my impending triumph permeate my audience.

'But the day had a sting in its tail. Yes, you've guessed it, the good weather broke. Black clouds were gathering and had enveloped the Lochnagar plateau by the time I'd reached Tom Buidhe. So out came the compass. North-west down to the gap between the two peaks. Half a kilometre, that's 5 x 62 of my double paces. Then north up a broad ridge with just under one kilometre to the top. No problem'.

I wondered if my audience would understand this detail. I know you do, because you're a hill-walker like me. Perhaps not as good a navigator as me. OK, I know that sounds a bit cocky, but I know I'm pretty good at it. Sort of learnt by default really.

You see, when I started hill-walking I went on the hills in all sorts of weather - mainly bad weather I seem to recall. I remember this time when I'd just joined the mountaineering club and was on a meet in the Cairngorms. On one day we were on the plateau between Cairn Gorm and Ben Macdui in thick mist. At the time I was the least experienced of the party in terms of Scottish hills, but I seemed to be the only one who knew how to use a map, compass, paces and timings. We got off the hill that day without much problem, but what surprised me was that the others regarded me as some sort of Mr. Wonderful. On the other hand I was surprised at how inept they were at navigation.

But I digress. Getting a bit bigheaded you might say. Anyway what I didn't tell the audience was how rusty I'd got at navigating. You see nowadays if it's poor weather I don't go out. Virtually all the hills I do now I have views from, and the compass stays in the bottom of the sack.

So this is how my dream and my story to the Munroist club continued.

'The descent to the dip between the peaks was fairly straightforward, but the snow and low cloud had already encased me. Fortunately I was out of the main force of the wind, but even in this relative shelter the snow was still swirling about me. The rising ridge to Tolmount was only sensed at first but the compass bearing was right and I soon found myself plodding uphill, head down, hood up trying to shield my face and eyes against the increasing wind and the stinging spindrift.

'As the slope flattened out the spindrift became unbearable. The northerly wind, funneled by the narrow defile of Glen Callater, was being blocked at its southern end by the bulk of Tolmount. So it had no choice but to accelerate upwards and over the top. I was now feeling its full force. Unable to stand straight or look forward, I was staggering blind into the teeth of an almighty gale. I stumbled over a hidden boulder, the wind flipped me over and dumped me flat on the snow.

'I was rapidly becoming exhausted. The wind shrieked over me whilst hailstones, snow and spindrift covered me in a ghostly translucent shroud. Part of my mind began to think rationally. How far was I away from the summit? I'd stopped counting paces as I started climbing, thinking that I couldn't possibly miss the summit. But this, this was a real white out. Visibility was nil. The only sense of direction was that of the wind. What should I do? I fought back a wave of panic by telling myself that these showers were short-lived. Only a few days before I'd been in a similar situation on the slopes of Carn na Drochaide. Then I'd just sat it out and ten minutes later there'd been blue sky. So that's what I did here

This was no dream, this was a nightmare like the one I had in my tent at Roybridge. I couldn't move, but this time the elements were conspiring against me to keep me there on the snow. OK, time to wake up, I thought, but I couldn't and the nightmare continued.

'The storm didn't last ten minutes', I continued to tell my audience. 'I don't know how long it lasted but I seemed to be losing the will to get up and do anything. I felt unbelievably cold and tired. All I wanted to do was sleep, just wait for a couple of hours until it got dark so that I could fall into the oblivion of a really deep, long sleep at the end of an exhausting day. And the next day I'd wake up tired but peacefully happy that everything had returned to normal.

My voice trailed away. The audience was still there. I was still dreaming.

I realised that somehow I was stuck. Time had stopped. Suddenly there was no future.

Almost there, but I would never reach the top of my last Munro. Was this the reality?

Not that I'd done the Munros, but that somehow I hadn't done them?

'I never got to the top, did I?' I enquired of my audience. 'I haven't finished the Munros. Why haven't I finished the Munros? What happened?'

I started to panic. I was frozen to the spot. Let this nightmare finish. LET ME WAKE UP NOW, PLEASE!

The audience was still there, now holding my hand. Millions and millions and millions of people holding my hand. The wave of panic subsided, the nightmare melted away, the dream vanished, but there was no waking up.

'Welcome to the club', said the previous speaker. 'It no longer matters that you didn't complete the Munros, does it? Now you know why I was talking about the M74 - me, fatal car accident, you, hypothermia. As you see it's important that everyone talks about their final hours of life. Helps them to come to terms with death. Now let's listen to the next speaker'.

I smiled and took my place alongside my dead friends.