

SGURR THUILM

By Hamish Brown

I MET BONNIE Prince Charlie on top of Sgurr Thuilm. He blinked at my appearance and fingered my Gore-tex jacket with interest. I only let him do so as I – then – thought he was some weirdo who might react violently to any hint of aggression on my part. After all, he was an unprepossessing sight and, in the afternoon's westerly breeze, didn't smell so good either.

In my pocket I had a tube of Smarties which I'd saved for the summit (my 239th Munro) so I offered them. A grubby hand was held out and the gaudy sweets were studied carefully. When I popped some into my mouth there was a gasp. Two or three other disreputable characters had come up unnoticed and they grabbed the tube from me. Both ends popped out so Smarties scattered over the schisty rocks and they were all down, snatching and popping the sweets into their mouths. What a lot of savages I thought. They must have escaped from some loony bin. When another ragged character in a dirty kilt came peching up, dropped on his knee before the young one, and said, 'News, your Highness,' I began to wonder just who was going bonkers.

'Macmillan of Glen Pean has managed to get away and will be up betimes to take you northwards: doon tae Glen Pean and over Carn Mór.'

'Corbett?' I commented, almost without knowing I'd spoken.

'Corbett?' several voices asked suspiciously.

'Aye, him that listed all the hills over 2500ft. J. Rooke Corbett.'

'A Sassenach?'

'Aye, but you can't hold that against him. He spent all the time possible up in the Highlands. Must have known them as well as anybody – A.E. Robertson, Munro and the rest.'

'Sound like a lot of spies to me,' a shaggy lad sneered.

'Or maybe they'd be useful guides. Are you in touch?'

'Well, yes, but only a photocopy of this area. Section 10. I'm not lugging the two books about all the time. Look.'

I produced my photocopies. They went from hand to hand. I suspect one or two had learning difficulties as they held the damned things upside down. The young lad who seemed in charge could read. He said what sounded like 'Merde' which, I suppose, might have been Gaelic.

'Did you steal these?' he asked.

'No I copied them. The Late Shop has a 5p copier.'

'And you'll guide us?'

My mouth fell open. 'What! Over Carn Mór?'

'Yes.'

'But I've done it. I want Sgurr nan Coireachan now,' and I nodded

west. 'I don't want to drag all the way up from Strathan again just for a Munro I can do today.'

There was a bit of muttering in which the name Munro came up once or twice. Someone mentioned a Colonel Munro. 'Effing Munro's regiment.... Cut the Frasers to pieces on Drumossie Moor.' I quickly interjected to point out this was the list of Sir Hugh Munro, Bart. of Lindertis in Angus, a most pacific gentleman only interested in finding his way up all the Highland hills. It was a bit of a speech.

'He spends all his time climbing mountains? Like this one?' The young one sounded incredulous.

'Aye.'

'What for?'

'Fun – I suppose.'

'Fun!' he grimaced. 'The man's mad.'

There were times I rather thought the same about Munro-bagging – but I wasn't going to admit that to this lot of scruffs. I launched into a somewhat long-winded defence of Munros, Corbetts et al., how it gave one good exercise, got one away from life's ordinary pressures, taught self-reliance and gave an unrivalled knowledge of the Highlands.

There were some nods at the last anyway.

'Useful,' the young one smiled. 'My knowledge is growing by the day. This Sgurr Thuilm is a Munro then?'

'Yes.'

'And the next?'

He looked west. 'Sgurr nan Coireachan? Aye it's a Munro.'

Suddenly the young man smiled, which improved his looks somewhat. He suggested. 'Couldn't we walk – and talk – along to it then? Instead of skulking up here all day?'

There was an outcry at this. Movement was too easily seen. They might appear against the skyline. The cordon ran right along Glen Pean to Loch Morar. They'd made arrangements with Macmillan. And much more of the same.

The young man sighed.

'Your pressures may be at home, mine, alas, are always with me. Can I keep these delineations?' He held up my photocopies of Section 10.

I was about to ask for them but I recalled a situation in Primary 3 when the big boys got our football and I asked for it back. This lot might deliver more than a bloody nose. So I took my leave.

'See you.'

'You going along there?' someone demanded.

'Why not? It's not the stalking season.'

'What if he's seen?' the man asked their leader.

He smiled and just waved me away. Condescending sod. As I left I heard the word 'decoy' whispered.

It's a right in-and-out, up-and-down ridge, but I got the second Munro for the day. In peace.

It was in the bothy that night I really began to think about this encounter. Just what had happened. Nobody was busy filming John Prebble or D.K. Broster. Those yobbos were authentically dirty (and smelly) and, besides, I'd been there at tea-break time and nobody had knocked off for a helicopter ride or for refreshment. It was all a bit strange, and it became even stranger as my imagination worked on it over the months, and years, following.

I didn't ever mention my encounter to the boys. Nor the wife. Especially not the wife. She made snide enough comments when I began to read lots of books about the Forty-Five and sat, headphones on, over several nights, listening to the Talking Book of Nigel Tranter's *Prince in Hiding*, the story of his wanderings after Culloden. It was awful, read by an Englishman who could pronounce nothing correctly (Benbecula became Ben Beculiar) but one thing did become clear from my researches eventually. Bonnie Prince Charlie had been on top of Sgurr Thuilm. Several books give details of his route. That made things all very peculiar indeed.

The years passed. The Corbetts were added to my Munros round and plans laid for going Furth of Scotland. I'd almost forgotten Sgurr Thuilm or I tried to convince myself I had. I was heading home early one Sunday (the weather a complete wash-out) and turned off at Perth to get milk and bread at Tesco. I saw there was a car boot sale next door so I had a nosey round it. I usually pick up a few books if nothing else.

I found a cheap copy of one of John Buchan's short story collections, one I'd had from the library and had been fascinated to find in it an account of Dr Johnson having an encounter with the dispirited and debauched Bonnie Prince when they were both wandering on the continent. Then I found a real treasure. It cost me all of 50p, being a hardback. It was Alexander Kirkwood's *True Records of the Rising of 1745 in sundry original documents by persons concerned therein, containing...* containing another twenty lines of just what there was: letters, reports, autobiographical accounts, all in packed small print, for 680 pages. And no index.

I went back into Tesco for a coffee and flicked through my find, reading a bit here, a bit there, till arrested by the name Dr Samuel Johnson leaping out from another wordy section title. This told of his wanderings in France and Switzerland in 1776. I wonder if Buchan used this text as his source? The setting was the same: an inn at Thiers.

The ponderous doctor had made his guess at who the wino next door was and was rather sad. Ever since his wanderings with Boswell round the Highlands and Islands he'd had a sneaking softness for the sorry Jacobite saga. His own unchancy health and ungainly body was no joy

but to see the prince who had once set the heather afire reduced to such a state was dismal.

Being who he was however he set his table near the wall and noted down the snatches of talk that came through the thin partition that separated their rooms. (Bugging becomes history it seems as Kirkwood duly included the sage's notes.) Some of the talk did not make much sense, for which the meticulous doctor apologised ('methinks his erratic articulation at times arose from the distress of ancient remembrances') but there was one bit had me gasp. Listen.

'P.C.: I once delighted in physical exertion.

'COMPANION [too soft to note]: ...march to Derby, your Highness.

'P.C.: That was but strolling, sir. It was in the hills I found my best days. *Moi fois!* But I was like a deer on the hill. [pause] Never like it since. [pause] My only regret is that I climbed but one Munro in that time.

'COMPANION: And what might that be?

'P.C. [with some vigour]: Sgurr Thuilm, sir, Sgurr Thuilm.'