

□ Munro and his mountains



The following article by Gillian Zealand, a member of the Grampian Club, appeared in The Braemar Gathering Annual 2007 and is reproduced by kind permission of the editor.

Intriguing coincidences happen in life. Last year our son Christopher's 21st birthday fell on the same day, October 16th, as the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sir Hugh T. Munro.

"Sir who?" you may ask. Well, if you're familiar with the Scottish Highlands, you may know that mountains over 3000ft. are called the Munros. There are 284 of these, plus some 200 subsidiary 'Tops', and climbing, or bagging, them is a challenge taken up by an ever increasing number of people. It was Sir Hugh Munro, in 1891, who first identified and listed those summits and set them out in the form known ever since as 'Munro's Tables'.

The Munro Society – whose members have all completed the round and which acts as a focus for mountain experiences, information and opinions - marked Sir Hugh's special birthday by inviting all hill-goers to climb a Munro in the course of the anniversary weekend. The Society itself took up residence in a tent on the summit of Driesh (3107ft.) in Glen Clova, just south of Braemar. Driesh is one of a number of Munros in the Cairngorms National Park. It is by no means the highest (that accolade goes to Ben Macdui), but it is the Munro closest to Sir Hugh's family home at Lindertis, near the Angus town of Kirriemuir, and no doubt it was a familiar landmark during his many expeditions (for he was a great hill-wanderer) over the

rolling uplands between Angus and Deeside.

Since Munros have played quite a part in our lives too, climbing Driesh seemed a good way to round off our own family celebrations and to loosen the joints after an energetic 21st birthday ceilidh. Christopher sported his kilt for the occasion, a gesture which would surely have pleased Munro, who himself favoured the kilt and Glengarry bonnet, though I doubt if Sir Hugh ever wore a '21 today' badge in place of a kilt pin. It's unlikely, too, that the Laird of Lindertis ever packed a bottle of Cairn o' Mohr oakleaf and elderflower wine in his rucksack; I suspect he'd have preferred a hip flask and a good malt.

Nonetheless, the sparkly stuff went down well after the climb. Photographs were taken, congratulations offered (on both sides) and appropriate comments made in the Society's 'Tribute Book'. Then it was back to the Clova Hotel for a celebratory meal. The only things missing had been the view (Driesh was in surly mood and you could hardly see from the tent to the cairn, let alone the hoped-for panorama), and Sir Hugh himself. Not that the Munro family failed to be represented: two cheerful youngsters enjoying the summit celebrations turned out to be the great great grandchildren of the man himself. Other summiteers over the course of the weekend had included visitors from France, Spain, Germany and Austria, a 78-year-old veteran of the Alps and 'multi-completer' Stewart Logan, part-way through his tenth round and appropriately climbing his 3000th Munro. Munros were also being climbed elsewhere, up and down the country from Strathclyde to Sutherland. So Munro was well and truly honoured, and the Munro Society received some 400 tributes for its archive.

But who exactly was Munro? And how did his name come to be synonymous with Scotland's highest hills?

Hugh Thomas Munro was born in 1856 and educated at Crieff, Winchester and

Cambridge. After a spell in Stuttgart learning German (when he was introduced to the Alps), followed by a business course in London and a stint as a cavalryman in the Basuto War, he settled down to manage the family seat of Lindertis. From here he undertook long expeditions into the hills, often in winter when estate business was less demanding; his first recorded 3000ft peak was Ben Lawers in May 1879. Ten years later he was among the founders of the Scottish Mountaineering Club and remained among its most faithful members, rarely missing a meet, writing regularly in its Journal, and eventually becoming President, an honour of which he was immensely proud.

At this time Scottish mountaineering was very much in its infancy. Many remote areas were virtually unknown to all but stalkers, ghillies and shepherds. The S.M.C. took on something of a pioneering role, with members reporting on new routes and rock climbs, innovations in equipment and so on. In 1891, in this same spirit of enquiry, Sir Hugh Munro was asked by the editor of the Journal to list all the hills in Scotland above 3000ft.



Beinn a' Bheithir above Glencoe

The choice of Munro was no accident. He was known as a collector, and his business training had taught him the benefits of meticulous classification. He was fascinated by mountain topography and was a compulsive note-taker, particularly regarding the views from a summit. He was blessed with the stamina and tenacity required for long expeditions into the hills.

And last but not least, he flung himself with enthusiasm into everything he undertook.

While some well-known summits, such as Ben Nevis, Ben Macdhui, Ben Cruachan or Lochnagar, were clear candidates for a list of '3000-ers', it was known, or suspected, that very many others lay off the beaten track. Lists of 'principal mountains' had been made before, but these were mainly for the benefit of tourists or shooting tenants in pursuit of romantic landscapes or quality game. Munro's Tables, on the other hand, were specifically aimed at the mountaineer. They are systematic, thorough, and they have two unique features: the seventeen Sections, which are based on the natural divisions of the landscape, with mountain groupings, and points of access, very much in mind; and the distinction between 'separate mountains' – the Munros – and the 'Tops'. These are the satellites or outliers, elevations subsidiary to the main summits yet felt by Munro to be worthy of inclusion. Completing the Tops is a challenge in itself, for some lie far out on wayward ridges and some mountains have multiple Tops – Cairngorm, for instance, has nine. Bagging remote Tops can involve long diversions and some pretty devious route planning!

Munro's main tools for his task were the Ordnance Survey's one-inch and six inch to the mile maps of Scotland. These 'first edition' maps looked very different from the maps we use today and also differed from each other, not just in scale but in content. The one-inch map showed heights in contours (though only at 250ft. intervals); the six-inch map had no contours but instead gave spot heights for summits and elsewhere. These two sets of data had to be collated. Munro also conferred with fellow club members on the worthiness or otherwise of various humps and bumps, points and protuberances; one of his most informed advisors was Colin Phillip, son of the Aberdeen artist John 'Spanish' Phillip, whose knowledge of Scotland was said to be second to none. Many of these early hillwalkers carried an instrument called an

aneroid barometer - the GPS of its day. This recorded changes in air pressure and could be used to calculate height on the principle that air pressure decreases with altitude at a measurable rate. As air pressure is also affected by changes in temperature (an unavoidable accompaniment to climbing mountains) a certain amount of mathematical juggling was required to ensure an accurate reading; but it was a guide and, where the maps were vague, sometimes the only source of information.

The 'Table giving all the Scottish mountains exceeding 3000 feet in height, compiled by H.T.Munro' appeared in the S.M.C. Journal, Vol. I no. 6 in September 1891 and was duly distributed among the members. The list comprised 283 separate mountains and a total of 538 summits. According to the editor this task had taken just five months. By any standards this was a substantial achievement and the totals are impressively close to today's figures (284 Munros out of 511), even after a century of improved mapping, several revisions and continuous refinements. If the notion of revising the original Tables seems a bit like tampering with Holy Writ, there is no doubt that Sir Hugh himself regarded his 1891 list merely as a first attempt, a working draft, and that he had no intention of resting on his laurels. Over the next two and a half decades he constantly checked and modified his data, visiting summits, correcting discrepancies, conferring with fellow members and regularly updating his card index or his well-annotated copy of the Tables. He may also have been working towards a more precise definition of a Top, based on criteria such as the amount of 'drop', difficulty of ascent or individuality of form. This is a problem which has not gone away and which has taxed many since Munro.

A second version of the Tables appeared in 1921, largely incorporating Sir Hugh's own refinements and edited by J.Gall Inglis, whose family firm specialised in contour road maps. Subsequent reprints added more



Liathach

accurate measurements as these became available. Then, in the 1970s, metrication loomed: the magic figure of 3000 ft. suddenly became the less than memorable 914.4m.

Fortunately the concept of the Munros was now firmly entrenched, and suggestions (made tongue in cheek, I think) that they should be replaced with the 'Metros' - a 'premier class' of mountain comprising the 122 hills over 1000m. - were strongly resisted. Metrication, and a re-survey, did however give the impetus for what some felt was a much needed new look at the Tables. A number of unworthy Tops were removed and others promoted to full Munro status, with the result that several mountains, such as Liathach in Torridon and the massive and complex An Teallach in Wester Ross, became double Munros. This process was taken to its logical conclusion in 1997, when Tops on Buachaille Etive Mor, Beinn Eighe, Ben Lawers, the Five Sisters of Kintail and other 'ranges' were promoted and added to the canon, bringing the total number of Munros to 284. It is a measure of how deeply the concept of Munros had entered the national psyche that this event was given a half-page colour spread in *The Times*, under the headline 'Walkers have new mountains to climb'. Registered 'completers' were expected (age and infirmity allowing) to go and bag the eight new Munros as soon as possible!

In the course of revising his tables, Munro must have tramped over an ever-increasing number of summits and it is very likely he

was the first to hit upon the idea of completing his own list. At the end of his active climbing career (which was sadly curtailed by rheumatism) he wrote in the Cairngorm Club Journal of his aspirations to stand on the three summits still eluding him. These were Carn an Fhìdhleir in Glen Feshie (a particularly remote Munro between the Tarf and the Geldie), the Inaccessible Pinnacle on Skye, and Carn Cloich-mhuilinn, in Upper Deeside. The first two he had already attempted but had been driven back by atrocious weather, compounded, in the case of Carn an Fhìdhleir, by the fact that the climb took place in the middle of the night, apparently to avoid a brush with the landowner! Carn Cloich-mhuilinn overlooks the great eastward bend in the Dee as it escapes the confines of the high Cairngorms and turns towards Deeside. This is a relatively accessible hill and it is possible that Sir Hugh was keeping it till last. However, he never did complete his round, dying in 1919 of pneumonia contracted while running a troop canteen in Provence.

The challenge of completing the full round of Munros was taken up by Archibald Eneas Robertson. Robertson was a divinity student who later became minister at Rannoch as well as a driving force behind the S.M.C. and a fine mountain photographer. He had been introduced to the joys of mountaineering during a youthful holiday in Glen Coe. After various solo climbs and expeditions he joined the S.M.C. and became the first serious bagger, ticking off peaks in the course of club meets and during several long, solitary walking tours. Robertson's approach was meticulous with regard both to planning and equipment: his trusty 'hob-nailers' were hand-made in Edinburgh, his ice-axe was obtained in Chamonix and his specially-ordered German 'wettermantel' – a knee-length, tabard-like garment of double loden-cloth - could repel anything the Scottish climate cared to throw at it. Thus equipped he set off, travelling by train and bicycle and confident in finding a bed and a

bite to eat in the remote habitations of shepherds and keepers (they did indeed prove unfailingly hospitable).

Robertson's round took him ten years in total but the greater part was accomplished in three seasons of concentrated activity – a pretty impressive achievement even today. He 'completed' on the Aonach Eagach, Glen Coe, on September 28th, 1901, and celebrated with champagne and by kissing first the cairn and then his wife.

Robertson was an all-rounder who bubbled over with enthusiasm and energy. He could hardly have differed more from the second compleater (and first to do all the Munros and Tops), Ronald G. Burn. Burn was another Reverend, but he was a far more serious figure, a classical scholar with an eye for meticulous detail whose professional life was spent closeted among galley proofs at Oxford University Press. His rather earnest pedantry spilled over into his mountaineering, and he took great pains over checking heights and 'correcting' Ordnance Survey Gaelic. However, he did submit much valuable information and his achievement in completing all the Munros and Tops in 1923 has given him a rightful place in the history of Scottish mountaineering.

Others followed. J. Rooke Corbett (a Cambridge mathematician) completed the Munros and Tops in 1930 and went on to list, and to ascend, all the Scottish hills between 2500ft and 2999ft. The Corbetts, named after him, include many fine peaks and are frequently seen as the next 'challenge' after the Munros. James A. Parker added a new dimension by climbing all the 3000-ers 'furth of Scotland', that is in England, Wales and Ireland.

In 1921 the S.M.C. produced what they called their 'General Guide', a handbook of Scottish mountaineering which included chapters on geology, botany, meteorology and photography as well as technical advice. It also included the revised Munro's Tables. The General Guide proved so popular that it went through several reprints. Thus, for the

first time, Munro's Tables were made available to the public at large and a new generation of baggers emerged as a result.

The next few decades are characterised by a slow but steadily growing trickle of completions. 1947 saw the first husband/wife combination (and first lady completer); two years later William Docherty (another meticulous tabulator of lesser heights) was the first to complete the 'grand slam' of Munros, Tops and 'Furths'. The first father and son combination was in 1958, and in the same year Eric Maxwell, of our own climbing club, the Grampian Club of Dundee, took it upon himself, by a careful study of climbing club journals, to list the names of all existing Munroists. They came to nineteen, including four members of the Grampian Club itself. Until 1970, when the S.M.C. took it over, Maxwell regularly updated this list and published it in the annual Grampian Club Bulletin; among the many rounds he recorded was the first by Hamish Brown, known nowadays for his 'multi-completions' and his long mountain walks. Maxwell seems to have been a formidable figure in the Grampian Club, a stickler for accuracy and discipline and a man of high moral principles even if his sartorial standards - long shorts, ancient jersey and old felt hat - left something to be desired. His maxim, as set out in the club Bulletin, was that 'a middle course is best - never miss a good rock climb, a fine snow climb, an interesting new route, merely to gain a new Munro, but likewise, never miss a Munro or Top when it may be readily included in a walk.' Well, there's something to be said for that, though for many the challenge of the Munro is satisfying enough. Having done all the Munros, Tops and 'Furths', Maxwell went on to complete a second round of Munros and Tops, finishing on the Saddle, in Glen Shiel, at the age of 74 years.

By the time the S.M.C. took over the list, the number of completers had risen to 102. Today the Clerk of the List deals with hundreds of notifications and keeps a tally

which runs to some three and a half thousand. Besides names and dates, the Clerk records comments, observations and details of individual rounds. Since fell-runners became involved, Munro-bagging has acquired something of a competitive edge and the round has been completed in only seven weeks. The longest round, by contrast - and what's the harm in that? - is more like seventy years. (For the record, I put myself, as a slow grinder, firmly in this latter bracket. Forty-five years on from when I first climbed Schiehallion, and thirty since I joined my climbing club, completion still eludes me, though I have climbed lots of other fine hills between times!) Also recorded in the List are the achievements of multi-completers and of those undertaking continuous rounds. Chris Townsend, who did the Munros and Tops in a single trek in 1996, walked for 118 days, covered over 1700 miles and climbed the equivalent of 18 Everests! The round has been done entirely in winter - short days and grim weather counterpointed by frosty days of unsurpassed clarity and brilliance - and on (or at least with) a mountain bike. Several dogs have also completed; the most famous of these being Kitchy and Storm, Shetland collies belonging to Hamish Brown. It's even possible to have a 'corporate' completion: this was attained by the school in Fife where Hamish taught outdoor education, and the children revelled in the challenge of adding their own summits to the total.

Most Munroists, however, are not in these categories at all, but are ordinary hill-goers, perhaps members of a club, getting out for the odd day or weekend, occasionally longer when holidays permit. Some set out to do Munros from the outset but many come to Munro-bagging almost by accident, when they do a tally of mountains climbed and find they've only fifty, or whatever, left to do. Then the 'normal' hillwalker may find his attitude changing as his mind becomes fixed on the 3000ft. contour. James Parker, of the 'Furths of Scotland', spent 43 years wandering the Scottish hills before

succumbing, whereupon he embarked on a campaign, conducted with military precision, to 'mop up' 89 outstanding summits in a year. Helen Scrimgeour, one of a posse of hardy ladies in the earlier years of the Grampian Club, attributed her conversion to the day she replaced her trusty walking stick with an ice-axe and a copy of Munro's Tables:

A curious change came over my attitude to climbing. Previously it had been carefree and haphazard. What did it matter if I climbed Liathach two days running? Just to be out on the hill was all I cared about. Now I became earnest, obsessed even. I started studying guide books. They made dismal reading. Whole pages of Munros and Tops barely started! Where were all these Stob Bans and Sgurr nan Coireachans anyway?

(Helen, undaunted, completed her Munros in 1968 and became Munroist no. 86.)

In the 1990s the condition was even given a medical name, Munrosis, by a doctor writing in a Scottish medical journal (and no it wasn't, though it might have been, April 1st). This uniquely Scottish disease, it was said, could take the form of an acute or a chronic attack. An acute episode could lead to recovery within months but in its chronic state it could last for years, if not decades, and was characterised by fitful bursts of activity interspersed with periods of remission. Chronic Munrosis, it was claimed, could interfere with social life and put a severe strain on a marriage, unless, of course, the partner was similarly afflicted; fortunately support clubs abounded.

Later this medical assessment was further refined by the identification of an 'incubation' period, when the afflicted person, unaware of their condition, continued to enjoy 'normal' mountain activity, and various sub-strains of the disease such as secondary - or even poly-Munrosis.

It has to be said that for the average hill-goer, undertaking all the Munros can prove quite a challenge. Some Munros are relatively accessible (the Cairnwell, near

Glenshee Ski Centre, is just half a mile from the car park), and the chances are you've already done Ben Nevis, Ben Lomond or Schiehallion in your schooldays. Others, however, because of their height, remoteness, geographical location (how often are most of us in Sutherland or Knoydart?) or their technical difficulty, are something else entirely. The ascent of Ruadh Stac Mor, in the Fisherfield Forest in Ross-shire, can take a gruelling 14 hours. The Skye Munros, and one or two mainland ridges, require the whole panoply of ropes, slings and a couple of reassuringly sturdy rockhounds willing to haul you up the odd pinnacle and lower you safely down again. During your round you will also experience the whole gamut of Highland weather. As you squelch through peat, huddle behind some mist-shrouded cairn or fumble with numb hands to set the compass in a snowstorm - or on soft, balmy days as you fend off the midges - there will be times when you wonder why?

But there will be days when you bless Munro. Days when you find yourself in parts of this lovely land you would never otherwise see, when the rocks are warm with the sun, the dry grass crackles under your boots and a mountain burn refreshes at the end of a perfect day. Days when you watched an eagle soar, or enjoyed stupendous views over half of Scotland. By the time you have completed the Munros you will have travelled the length and breadth of the country, from Mull to Aberdeenshire, from Ben Lomond in the south to Ben Hope near Cape Wrath. You will have learned navigation skills, tested your nerve on tricky ground, and, best of all, you will have a huge sense of achievement and a host of memories that will last a lifetime.

After all that, it's not surprising that many Munroists enjoy something of a celebration on the final summit. A. E. Robertson set the trend with his Champagne on Aonach Eagach, but others since have indulged in even more extravagant gestures than that,

with pipers, fiddlers, eightsome reels, fine malts, mulled wine, fancy dress, '284' tee-shirts and golf clubs. Golf clubs? Some wag in the Grampian Club, after visiting the plateau-like summit of Ben Wyvis, once observed that it would be 'a grand place for golf'. In 1963 some stalwarts of the club, completing on Ben Wyvis, did indeed attempt to 'hole out' their final Munro. At least, that was the theory. By the time they reached the cairn they had lost 28 balls. And I suspect they were helpless with laughter.

The one person who missed out on this, of course, was Sir Hugh Munro.

In 1991, to celebrate the centenary of Munro's Tables, all known Munroists were invited to a dinner in an Edinburgh hotel. Someone had remarked that it was a pity Sir Hugh, not being 'complete', wasn't eligible to attend his own dinner.

Robin Campbell, one of the speakers, decided to do something about this. Visits to Oxfam furnished the requisite kilt and Glengarry, and with the aid of pillows, wire coat-hangers, modelling clay, old boots, latex hands from a joke shop and some hair from a barber's, Sir Hugh was resurrected and made ready for his final three ascents, cocooned in plastic bags and strapped to a rucksack frame.

The first to be tackled was Carn an Fhidhleir, where conditions were, if anything, worse than Munro's previous attempt in 1908 (though at least it wasn't the middle of the night). Conditions were slightly better, though icy, on Carn Cloich-mhuilinn. Bad weather struck again on the Inaccessible Pinnacle. Poor Munro was stuffed in a crack while his support party retreated. The following day he was collected, none the worse, and finally achieved, after 112 years, his last summit and the completion of his own Munros and Tops. As Robin Campbell observed, as a 'longest round' it was hardly likely to be beaten!

I mentioned that Sir Hugh, on the top of Driesh, was sadly absent. He wasn't far away, however, having elected to remain in

comfort at the Clova Hotel. Later he graciously received us and consented to be photographed with Christopher, the two birthday boys together. As 21st (and 150th) birthdays go, it was certainly a day to remember!



The author would like to record her grateful thanks to the Munro Society for their help in the preparation of this article.

The Disappearing Cap

It was as two young boys during WW2 that my brother and I were introduced to walking in the Peak District. Consequently, although being brought up in the heart of industrial Manchester such place names as Edale, Hayfield and Glossop became almost as well known to us as Maine Road, the home of my beloved Manchester City, and Old Trafford cricket ground, which in those days was graced by the silky skills of Cyril Washbrook and Dick Pollard.

The journey out of the city was always by train and once at your point of destination various groups hung around whilst sorting themselves out and making up their minds as to which walk they'd be going on. Although over sixty years has passed, in my mind's eye I can still envisage the various characters and how they were dressed. Ladies invariably wore a skirt, but the odd one or two had "slacks" on, above which they sported what was always referred to as a "windjammer". However it was the men