



3. *The SMC Meet at Loch Awe, New Year 1897*

## ASCENT OF BEN NEVIS BY THE N.E. BUTTRESS Vol. III (1895) by W. Brown

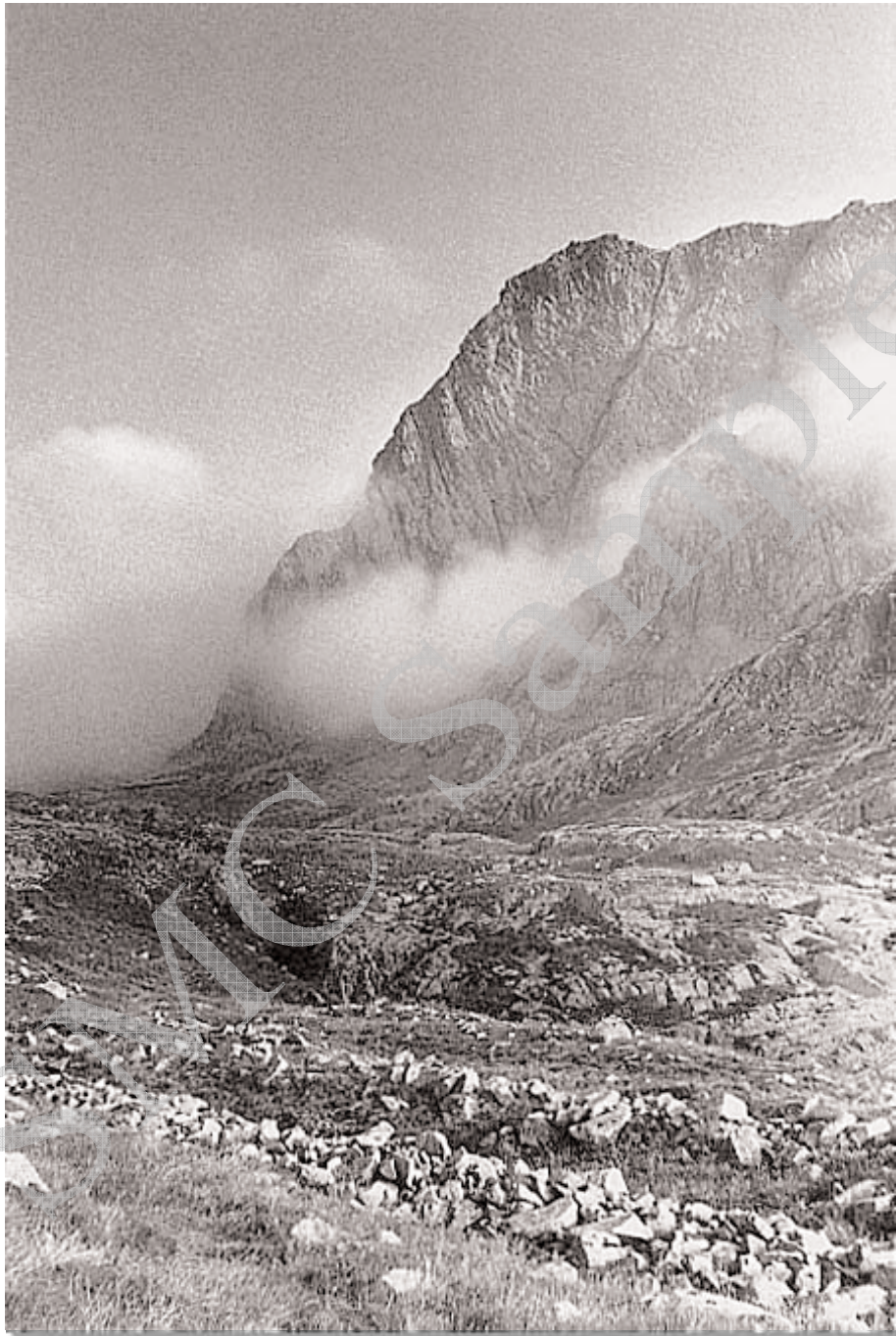
This well illustrates the kind of marathon climbing weekend that had to be undertaken by the early pioneers before the days of easy road travel.

The mountaineer who makes his way up the Allt a' Mhuilinn, under the stern north precipices of Ben Nevis, sees before him, high up at the head of the valley, a steep black ridge jutting out against the sky, which seems grander and more precipitous than any of its neighbours. This is the N.E. Buttress, the finest object on the mountain, and one of the last to engage the attention of the climber.

It was the last Easter Meet that brought this ridge into fame. From being an unnamed and unhonoured incident upon the cliff-face, it became an object of ambition to a large circle of climbers, the chief topic of the smoke-room at nights, and the focus of many critical glances during the day. It would also have been climbed had the ice upon the rocks not forbade the attempt; but though spared at Easter, it stood marked in the intentions of several parties, of which Tough and I formed one.

We had reconnoitred it from Carn Mor Dearg, and had come to the conclusion that in spite of its formidable appearance in profile, and the presence of a sheer cliff one-third of the way up, it was less inaccessible than it was reputed to be. This, however, was more of a pious opinion than a reliable conclusion, for the ridge was enormously steep, and undoubted difficulties beset the path of the climber. Once on the ridge proper, however, above the bottom buttress, it seemed likely that the rest would go.

And there the matter rested till the Queen's birthday arrived, the date of our projected expedition. The day seemed auspicious. It would be a graceful compliment to the Sovereign



*6. The North-east Buttress of Ben Nevis at the head of the Allt a'Mhuilinn*

to open up a new slice of her dominions, and peradventure the heart of the West Highland Railway might be softened to a cheap fare. These thoughts were very stimulating while they lasted, but they `fled full soon'. Cheap fares are only for Glasgow men. When we came to make our arrangements, that zest which is said to consist in triumphing over obstacles was vouchsafed to us in most bountiful measure. It was either Tough or the West Highland Railway that refused to fit in — the point is still in dispute. But at any rate, owing to our utter inability to find a suitable train, it soon became manifest that if the ridge was to be climbed by us it must be done as the American ship-captain did St Peter's. That historical personage, as we all know, reached Rome in the morning, drove straight to St Peter's Piazza, went to the top of the dome, and returned by the first train after lunch to his vessel at the Civita Vecchia. His example is not usually commended for its strict conformance to the canons of mountaineering, but Tough and I had reached a frame of mind when, like good temper at 3 a.m., the canons had ceased to be binding. So we drew up the following original programme, which, as the more candid of its joint authors remarked, would have been utterly repulsive as applied to anything but the N.E. Buttress. It was arranged that we should travel to Kingussie by the night express on Friday, 24th May, bicycle thence to Fort-William, climb our mountain on arrival, and return by the same route, reaching town on Sunday evening. There was a certain gloomy satisfaction that we were doing something quite out of the common, which deepened in gloom as our arrangements waxed in originality. But I am anticipating.

Very grey and miserable was Kingussie when we reached it at 3.50 a.m. on Sunday morning. Rain was falling dismally, and a dense white mist hung low down on the sodden hillsides. Underwheel the roads were a fell compound of mud and newly-laid metal, over which eight miles an hour was superlative progress. Under beetling Creag Dhu, past Clunie, past lone Laggan Bridge, and I may skip forward to the point when, after one or two hours' weary pedalling, we were crossing the watershed of Scotland. Here the sun was making a feeble demonstration, but its rays passed almost unnoticed in the moral gloom which now fell upon the expedition.

It came about in this way. We had just topped a stiff brae, when a sudden report, resembling the simultaneous opening of six bottles of `Bouvier', was followed by Tough's despairing cry, "Your tyre's punctured." It was too true, and, what was still more exasperating, nothing would mend it. To this day my Norfolk tells of the cementing abilities of a sticky confection, which Tough produced from his rucksack, and of the lavishness with which we applied it. Very sorrowfully, after an hour's abortive tinkering, I pushed my now useless machine to the Loch Laggan Hotel (three miles), whither Tough had already preceded me, and where we expected to find a horse and trap to carry us on to Fort-William. Vain expectation! The zoological resources of Loch Laggan Hotel are rich in midges, but include nothing distantly resembling a horse; so we had to face a walk of thirteen miles to Inverlair, under a sun which was now something more than genial. I believe I could make literary capital out of that walk — out of the glory of the sunshine, as it fell upon the blue sparkling loch, the fluttering birch trees, and the gaunt grey corries of Creag Meaghaidh, — but our whole souls were fixed, not upon these splendid sights, but on an ingenious contrivance we had hit upon for saving time and muscle. Tough mounted the remaining bicycle, with a pyramid of ropes, axes, and rucksacks piled up on his shoulders, while his fellow traveller half-walked, half-trotted alongside. In this order, with an occasional change of parts, when the pedestrian became (or said that he was) exhausted, we straggled to Inverlair, and completed the rest of the journey comfortably by train.

The day was close and sultry when, after a hurried lunch at the Alexandra, we left Fort William at 1.12, and swinging past Bridge of Nevis and Claggan farm, breasted the steep grass slopes of Carn Dearg — those grass slopes of painful memory. The extraordinary