In The Deep Midwinter: A Winter Traverse Of The Tranter Round

The Tranter Round is one of the very finest mountain days in the British Isles, Summer or Winter. I was blessed with two magnificent days that will remain with me always. The immensity of the night sky, the sharp, rocky crests, the rising and setting of the sun, the huge moon, the solitude, the pain, the precious gift of the moment, the flow of continual movement and the self reliance. Truly, these are things that can never be earned or bought: they are life’s diamonds.

14:14 December 18 2002. I leave the car in the crisp, bracing air of a fine winter’s day. It feels invigorating to stretch the legs after the drive North and a hearty midday meal. This induces a sluggishness which is steadily dissipated over the course of the long climb up Mullach nan Coirean. The ground is blissfully firm, the more usual tussocks and bog being frozen solid, and this makes for rapid progress. A fiery glow greets me as I breast the summit cairn. Glencoe is a wall of flames to the South, but the fire is quickly reduced to glowing embers in the midwinter sunset. There is no more than a sprinkling of snow on the rocky crest to Stob Ban, but all is ice bound, whilst the air is rasping. The light fades as I stumble down the frozen screes which makes for an awkward and halting descent.

4:25 pm: the last flickers of the fire have died, beginning the long night. The loneliness of the hills embraces me in the darkness. There is little moonlight on the traverse to the Devil’s Ridge. A mere dusting of snow covers the narrow crest, but a thin veneer of ice lies over the rocks, making the ‘bad step’ both awkward and time consuming. I traverse the right hand slopes on snow covered ledges. Feeling my way round in the darkness. The final slabby nose is delicate with verglas aplenty. However, the summit of Sgurr a Mhaim is soon reached thereafter, and the cloud dispels on the descent to leave the night clear, cold and brilliantly moonlit. This time I pass the bad step on the opposite side where I collect a long sling left by a previous party. I warm to the task ahead with my booty in store and settle in to a steady stride as the night unfolds. The moon is now high in the sky, irradiating its silvery beams on the twists and turns of the ridge. Only the lights of Kinlochleven and Spean Bridge provide a link to the world I have left behind. Tonight I am in a very different place; a world that only I inhabit. Shining ridges gleam high above the shadowy depths of the valley, and all above galaxies stretch across the night sky. I am overcome by a glorious sense of space in which the heavens have been opened to my eyes. At my feet snow sparkles like diamonds and only the sound of my own breathing disturbs the absolute silence. I am entranced by the awesome beauty of this ethereal landscape. Only the staccato stumbling down the frozen screes of Am Bodach, Stob Coire a Chairn and An Gearanach disturbs the perfection.

Sharp, rocky crests weave in and out, intermittently dropping steeply by way of loose stones, small bluffs and zig-zagging trails. For a while I leave the royal highway to traverse across the hillside and encounter profuse water ice. The oozing bog is quite frozen, leaving sheets of glassy ice, around and over which I hop, slide and stumble. It is not without regret that I regain the ridge and resume its wondrous traverse. Na Grugaichean and Binnean Mor follow quickly. The summit of Binnean Mor is an airy perch, a perfect cone of snow forming the fulcrum of knife edged snow ridges. I stop here awhile before descending the Alpine ridge to the North East, where the wind has shaped delicate cornices and removed all trace of humanity. However, I am tiring and stumble down the slippery rocks on the side of the ridge until I decide that I really should get the map out, having been able to navigate without its aid for the first eight Munros. This prudence is well justified, since I am required to backtrack slightly before embarking upon a standing glissade with my walking poles. These are my props for the remainder of the walk, aiding my rhythm and keeping me upright on tired legs.

I choose a poor line on Binnean Beag and feel nauseous as I stumble over the verglased boulders. On the descent my legs wobble like jelly and my spirits sag: I am engaged in a struggle and the night loses its magic. More bounding, jerking and slipping ensues on the traverse of the frozen bog to the foot of Sgurr Eilde Mor, but the stiff climb to the summit passes tolerably. At just after midnight I descend directly to Luibeilt, and despite my water having run out, I recover sufficiently to savour the
moon in its ascendancy. It is a special moment beside the ruins at Luibeilt. The moon lights the burbling river, whilst it casts a ghostly gleam in the ruined cottage and the surrounding trees. At last I can lie in the reeds, stare at the heavens and absorb my surroundings in full whilst the stove purrs. The hills are as nothing to the sky which stretches, seemingly limitless in its immensity, and dotted with innumerable stars. Occasionally, these shoot across the black horizon and disappear into oblivion. It is tempting to drift into a sound sleep, but I am soon awakened from my reverie by the cold which becomes biting and ever present. Even the tea fails to counter the chill and after forty minutes I resume my journey, now clad in winter garb of salopettes and full length jacket.

I follow the stalkers track, then cross the frozen peat hags to the relentless final slopes of Stob Ban. The wind picks up and I am glad to be moving despite the nausea of the wee hours. The summit of Stob Ban is a friendless place and the descent of the verglassed screes is slow and painstaking. I am on autopilot as I wearily mount the boulders of Stob Coire Claurigh and wade through small drifts of snow to the summit cairn. The wind chills me to the core, and I move ever onwards, lost in my private, moonlit world. The switchback ridge of the Grey Corries beckons me onward, and it proves to be a delight. The heady mix of moonlight, sharp snow crests and the universe above once more enchants me. Such is the power of the moon’s beams that I momentarily mistake ice bedecked slopes for the lights of the valley. I am almost dazzled by the brilliance of the reflections on the ice, yet the wind cuts cruelly across my path and the cold grips my weakened frame. I move on as if I can do nothing else but move in continuous motion on my journey. I choose to continue along the ridge from Stob Coire nan Laoigh, fearful of an uncontrolled glissade to the valley floor on the more direct route. I suspect that my caution is not entirely merited and rue this decision all the way along the icy rocks of the ridge. The shadows grow longer, the wind colder and my body weaker. I take no short cuts, put one foot in front of the other and repeat the process, again, again, again …

The moon is still high in the sky as the first glow appears on the horizon. The glow grows stronger and stronger until a wall of fire once more lights up Glencoe and Rannoch. The sun banishes the night as I breakfast on the col beneath Aonach Beag. Yet the wind chases me on up the cat walk, which today is ice bound and thoroughly thought provoking. I weave my way up snowy ledges and rocky walls, chipping away with my axe where required. The early sun, bone hard snow and mixed climbing is reminiscent of an Alpine dawn and is a welcome precursor to the wearisome trudging that follows. The final slope to Aonach Beag is composed of crusty snow of 15 cm depth; snow that saps energy and motivation. However, like all such slopes, it finally succumbs to sustained plodding and I am greeted by the sight of the North face of the Ben, glistening in the sunshine.

I don crampons for the final steep descent of Aonach Beag and laboriously stamp through the crusty snow to Aonach Mor. Once more the slope seems to elongate in the prevailing snow, and the minutes tick by all too slowly. I abandon hopes of a twenty four hour traverse as the crusty snow takes its toll. The hour is still early, however, as I carefully pick my way down the steep ground toward the Carn Mor Dearg col. I am glad of my crampons and poles on the icy slopes, particularly on the opposite side of the col, where water ice lies thick and hard. I find myself slightly off route and am forced to cut small handholds in the otherwise impenetrable ice which overlies the slabs. Nevertheless, the unforeseen difficulties provide a welcome diversion from the upward plodding. Approaching the summit, I see walkers for the first time since leaving the car. They are framed by the North-East Buttress of the Ben, which thrusts proudly towards me.

I had envisaged that the arete would provide a fitting climax to the expedition, but in reality it proves tiresome. The constant clambering over snow bedecked blocks is irritatingly slow and the snow is no more than a nuisance, rather than forming an elegant crest as I had hoped. My progress is haltingly slow, but somehow I manage to overtake the walkers before the final rise to the summit of the Ben. Here the snow has drifted between the large boulders and makes for an unremitting grind. At 2.10 pm. I am on the summit.

Only one or two people share the vista which opens out in all directions. This is a very familiar place for me, but not one that I hold dear. The tatty remains of the observatory intrude upon the mountain
wilderness, and the hordes ascending the tourist track desecrate the mountain with their mobile phones, litter and noisy chatter. Today they are mercifully absent, but I am shivering with cold which drives me downward after an all too brief lunch. I shuffle off to the Red Burn and gamble that there will be sufficient snow for an easy bum slide down the side of the burn. To begin with all goes well, but I am soon stranded on frozen scree. The next hour is pure purgatory. The frozen scree is so unforgiving that I am forced to keep my crampons on and to pick my way gingerly down the rubble. I bitterly regret the decision not to wander care free down the zig-zags, as I totter down the hill. Finally I reach the dependability of the path and meander down to the deep shadows of the glen. It is almost dark when I reach the car, but there is no mistaking the ice encrusted vehicle. It is encased in a thick coat of hoar frost as the moon once more emerges. It is going to be a fine night, but tonight I will savour the fine comforts of my bed.

Postscript: Easter Sunday, 20 April 2003

4.06 am. and I am back at Glen Nevis. It is pitch black as I leave the car, and the day dawns cold, clear and windy, with no snow after a relatively snowless winter. I am poorly rested after short night in the back of the car, but revel in the superb walking and running. This time I complete the round in just over sixteen hours and drive back home to arrive at 1.30 am. somewhat bleary eyed.

For the record:

18-19 December 2002 Tranter Round solo, unsupported, 38 miles, 20,300 feet of ascent, 26 hours 45 minutes

20 April 2003 Tranter Round solo, unsupported, 38 miles, 20,300 feet of ascent, 16 hours 7 minutes