

Scotland's Sasquatch

Professor J. Norman Collie was a highly respected scientist and mountaineer. In 1896 he was appointed Professor of Organic Chemistry at University College London and amongst his other achievements he was responsible for the first ever medical X-ray photograph. He was also a Fellow of the Royal Society. In the climbing world he pioneered many climbs on the Isle of Skye and in the Alps, and, in 1895, he was part of the first ever attempt on an 8000m peak in the Himalayas, Nanga Parbat. He later went on to make 21 first ascents in the Canadian Rockies. He is remembered in the names of *Mount Collie* in Canada and *Sgurr Thormaoid* ("Norman's Peak") on Skye.

So when, in late 1925, the still eminent and active Professor Collie stood up to give a speech to the 27th Annual General Meeting of the Cairngorm Club in Aberdeen, he was a man whose words carried a great deal of weight with his audience; which added all the more to the impact of part of what he had to say, about an experience he had while alone on the summit of Ben MacDhui in the Cairngorms, 34 years earlier in 1891:

"I was returning from the cairn on the summit in a mist when I began to think I heard something else than merely the noise of my own footsteps. For every few steps I took I heard a crunch, and then another crunch as if someone was walking after me but taking steps three or four times the length of my own. I said to myself, 'This is all nonsense'. I listened and heard it again, but could see nothing in the mist. As I walked on and the eerie crunch, crunch, sounded behind me, I was seized with terror and took to my heels, staggering blindly among the boulders for four or five miles nearly down to Rothiemurchus Forest. Whatever you make of it, I do not know, but there is something very queer about the top of Ben MacDhui and I will not go back there again by myself I know."

Professor Collie's comments caused a sensation and attracted a great deal of press coverage. Suddenly other respectable and responsible climbers and hill walkers started to acknowledge that they, too, had had similar experiences on Ben MacDhui but had not broadcast them before for fear of ridicule.

Alastair Borthwick's superb 1939 book about climbing in Scotland, *"Always a Little Further"* relates the accounts of two climbers he knew who had experienced what by then was becoming known as *Am Fear Liath Mòr*, or Ferlas Mor, or the Big Grey Man of Ben MacDhui, because of its appearance when briefly glimpsed by a few of those who encountered it.

The first was alone, heading over MacDhui for Corrour on a night when the snow had a hard, crisp crust through which his boots broke at every step. He reached the summit and it was while he was descending the slopes which fall towards the Larig that he heard footsteps behind him, footsteps not in the rhythm of his own, but occurring only once for every three steps he took.

"I felt a queer crinkly feeling in the back of my neck," he told me, "but I said to myself, 'This is silly, there must be a reason for it.' So I stopped, and the footsteps stopped, and I sat down and tried to reason it out. I could see nothing. There was a moon about somewhere, but the mist was fairly thick. The only thing I could make of it was that when my boots broke through the snow-crust they made some sort of echo. But then every step should have echoed, and not just this regular one-in-three. I was scared stiff. I got up, and walked on, trying hard not to look behind me. I got down all right - the footsteps stopped a thousand feet above the Larig - and I didn't run. But if anything had so much as said 'Boo!' behind me, I'd have been down to Corrour like a streak of lightning!"

The second man's experience was roughly similar. He was on MacDhui, and alone. He heard footsteps. He was climbing in daylight, in summer; but so dense was the mist that he was working by compass, and visibility was almost as poor as it would have been at night. The footsteps he heard were made by something or someone trudging up the fine screes which decorate the upper parts of the mountain, a thing not extraordinary in itself, though the steps were only a few yards behind him, but

exceedingly odd when the mist suddenly cleared and he could see no living thing on the mountain, at that point devoid of cover of any kind.

"Did the steps follow yours exactly?" I asked him. "No," he said. "That was the funny thing. They didn't. They were regular all right; but the queer thing was that they seemed to come once for every two and a half steps I took." He thought it queerer still when I told him the other man's story. You see, he was long-legged and six feet tall, and the first man was only five-feet-seven.

Once I was out with a search-party on MacDhui; and on the way down after an unsuccessful day I asked some of the gamekeepers and stalkers who were with us what they thought of it all. They worked on MacDhui, so they should know. Had they seen Ferlas Mor? Did he exist, or was it just a silly story? They looked at me for a few seconds, and then one said: "We do not talk about that."

So, there you have it: Scotland's answer to the Yeti and the Sasquatch. The stories continue to emerge, and the theories about what lays behind them continue to multiply. Rationalists have tried to explain the rare sightings of Am Fear Liath Mòr by pointing to Brocken Spectres, a phenomenon occasionally seen in mountains where a hugely magnified climber's shadow is cast on a lower level of cloud through a particular combination of atmospheric conditions. But that does nothing at all to explain the three accounts related above. Some commentators have tried to suggest some sort of mystical link between the Grey Man and ley lines, while others believe there are real ten-foot-tall creatures covered in grey fur living somewhere on Ben MacDhui: and have produced occasional photographs of footprints to help support their theory.

As with all such stories, you can take your pick as to which explanation best pleases you. But some explanation is needed, because there is little room for doubt that reliable and sensible people really have quite separately had very similar and very odd experiences on the top of Ben MacDhui.