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*'A man who can make staring at snow
not just interesting, but fascinating.'*

– Muriel Gray

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Diaries of a Scottish snow hunter

Iain Cameron

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Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.v-publishing.co.uk

About the Author



Author photo © Alistair Todd

Early one morning in May 1983, nine-year-old Iain Cameron looked out of the living room window and glimpsed a shining patch of brilliant white on distant Ben Lomond. This sparked a fascination with snow patches that would become a life's work. A citizen scientist, Iain has written more than twenty scientific papers for the Royal Meteorological Society's *Weather* journal; and he is the co-author of *Cool Britannia* (2010), a book examining the history of snow patches in Britain during the Little Ice Age. Iain's work has been featured in the *Guardian*, the *Independent* and the *Sunday Times*, and he is a regular contributor to the *Times* and the BBC. He has appeared on *Winterwatch* and *Countryfile* and in

numerous features on BBC Radio Scotland. He lives in Stirling and spends many weekends in the Scottish Highlands carrying out detailed fieldwork.

Praise for Iain Cameron

'A man who can making staring at snow not just interesting, but fascinating.'

– Muriel Gray

'Like some guardian of a lost folk memory, Iain Cameron wanders the Highlands in search of patches of snow that have held out stubbornly against the march of the seasons. Nestled in a remote gully, the last remnant of a forgotten ice age melts into a trickle – and then is gone. His work is done for now, but the snows will return.'

– Nicholas Hellen, *Sunday Times*

'Possibly the only writer who can pack history, geography, meteorology and adventure into tiny patches of snow.'

– Muriel Gray

THE VANISHING ICE
IAIN CAMERON

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Author photo: The author partially hidden beneath a snowdrift on Ben Nevis in July 2016. © Alistair Todd.

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*To Adam.
Though no longer with us,
his presence is enduring and ubiquitous.*

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prologue

In the belly of the beast

I emerged at last, breathless, on to the plateau. The ominous-looking wintry squall that had been chasing me up the hill arrived from the west just as I completed the last few heavy steps of a relentless climb from the col, some 1,200 feet below. As I stood upright once more and filled my lungs with the rarefied Lochaber air, the first outlying snowflakes of the squall danced down harmlessly enough. The initial flurry tends to do that: a few slivers corkscrew down from the sky and land softly on your sleeve or face, just on the leading edge of the gale that rides invariably behind them. But this is, literally, the calm before the storm. I've been in this situation more times than I can remember, and I know what's coming next.

Overnight snow already lay thick on the plateau, and the forecast promised more for the rest of the day and the next. Taking a minute to orient my internal compass and restore my breathing to something resembling normality, I reached into the side of my rucksack for one of the bottles of flavoured water I carried, only to find that there was ice floating in it. As I tipped my head back to pour the freezing mixture into my mouth, the first wave of the storm hit me – hard.

* * *

The day had started three hours earlier in the deserted glen far below. A man I trusted – a long-time snow observer – had told me that there were two old patches left over from the previous winter in one of the high corries on this hill.¹ This seemed unlikely to me, as the autumn weather had been mild – warm, even. I needed to be sure, though. I *had* to count every last relic of snow from the preceding winter before they were buried for another nine months or so. Missing even one would have felt like failure. But there was a problem: I had never been to this corrie before. It lurked on the

edge of my knowledge. An apparently tricky place to reach even in summer, it was going to be doubly so in winter conditions. But, since no one else had volunteered to venture into this neglected corner of the Highlands, I decided there was no alternative but to travel there myself.

The climb from the car park had started memorably, but not for the reasons one might hope. On the upward pull that eventually reaches on to the col, about twenty minutes after starting, I chanced across a dying red deer. He was a handsome old stag and lay about fifteen feet from the stalkers' track. His front-right leg looked badly broken and, clearly, he could not move. His big brown eyes stared at me as I neared him, and he opened his mouth, attempting a roar to scare me off but managing only a hollow, thin rasp. It was a pitiful, tragic sight to see, and I could offer him no solace. I moved off, regretfully, hoping his death would come quickly and that this sad, chance encounter wouldn't amount to a macabre omen for my trip.

About an hour and a half later, I arrived at the foot of the col, where the first impediment presented itself. The overnight snow had been heavier than forecast and my path upwards on to the plateau was unfathomable beneath the fresh falls. All around me the landscape was winter, not autumn. The late-year, lifeless vegetation poked through the snow in an apparent attempt at defiance of its surroundings. Thick and ominous cloud swirled around the higher reaches of the hills to the west, whose summits were coated white.

In the absence of any discernible path, I could do nothing else but one thing: climb. So, picking out the least hazardous and most obvious-looking route, up I went. It was steep. *Really* steep. I gained height quickly as a result, though, and luckily the path became clearer. The snow that had fallen filled the hollows where thousands of boots had trodden, and it snaked up the escarpment at a more forgiving angle – although to call it a path would have been generous. It was no better than an indistinct goat track, and goats would have thought twice about ascending it in these conditions. It became steeper the higher I got, and as I paused half-way up for breath, I turned around to see whence I'd come.

The hills that encircled me were splattered with thick snow, and any heather that didn't lie under the white blanket was a dull, lifeless mahogany brown. A dark line of approaching weather, the squall of snow, raced towards me. I reckoned I had fifteen minutes to reach the top before it caught me up and deposited its considerable payload.

But moving upwards in these conditions was not an easy endeavour. The rutted path soon vanished yet again, leaving me to judge the steep slope and where best to place my hands and feet. I cursed myself for not coming a few days previously when the weather had been better.

I made slow progress, but progress nonetheless. At length I managed to negotiate a large bluff and grasped a solid-looking boulder for purchase to heave myself up.² To be safe I tested its grip on the ground by means of a stout pull, which was just as well, for it rolled from its berth almost without resistance and disappeared down the hill to the bottom, some 1,000 feet below. My heart beat loudly as I watched it tumble, and the clatter of it smashing off a granite outcrop raced back up the hill and into my ears. In less than ten seconds, the stone had reached the point where I had stood thirty minutes earlier. I cursed myself once again.

But then, I was up. The last big step negotiated, I arrived on the plateau. I was still at least an hour from where the two old lumps of snow from the previous winter were purportedly located. Finding them would not be easy. Would they even be visible by now? If they *had* survived, would I know? The new snow might have buried them.

* * *

As I emptied that drink of icy, flavoured water into my mouth, I felt a push on my back as though I'd been hit by a car, and it propelled me forward on to my knees. I laughed a hollow chuckle to myself to try and brush it off, but this was serious. I needed to give the weather the respect it deserved. There didn't seem any point in pretending anything else. To accompany this seemingly tenfold

increase in windspeed, the flakes of snow started to fall – if fall is the right word – horizontally. I took a bearing and made for the drop-in point to the corrie on the other side of the hill where the old snow would, hopefully, be lying. But before a minute had passed, I could see less than thirty yards. Another minute later it was half that. ‘It’ll pass. It’ll pass,’ I said to myself over and over as I walked across the plateau. By this point the ground and sky had fused together into a maelstrom of choking white. I checked my bearing again and trusted in it. I had to. This weather was as bad as any I’d witnessed on the hills of Scotland.

The walk that day across the plateau, which reaches almost 4,000 feet, can best be described as a penance. The buffeting by the gale was intense, easily above storm force. It once threatened to send me airborne in its ferocity. The snow, too, could scarcely have been thicker. With visibility this bad, it would be all too easy to walk off the edge of a cliff, so I stopped every few minutes to check my location. So far, so good.

But, despite the grim conditions, I made good progress across the plateau, and quicker than I anticipated, doubtless due to the wind paddling me on. At length I saw the rim of the other side of the summit ridge and, to my relief, it now looked as though the falling snow was moderating. I took the map out once more and checked my position. By good fortune, perhaps, I had arrived just near the drop-in point of the corrie. The sky now turned from white back to grey, and the wind eased to a playful breeze as quickly as it had started.

Gazing into the abyss below was like staring into a murky cauldron that contained otherworldly ingredients. Great swirls of snow and cloud spun and danced before me. The tail end of the gale whipped eastward, ready to inflict a sting on the next range of hills in its path. For me, at least for now, the ordeal was over. I sat on the snowy grass and put crampons on my boots for grip and waited a minute to see if the snow would lessen further, which – mercifully – it did. I decided, at last, to drop in.

Very deliberately, I eased down the steep grassy slope which itself wore a substantial covering of snow. The wind that had flattened me on the summit had all but disappeared in the shelter

of the corrie. I relaxed my body. The absence of noise lent this place an altogether more serene atmosphere than just twenty yards away on the summit ridge. I breathed easier, too. The snow still fell, though, even if only in light, large flakes. It came up to my ankles and I was glad of the crampons on my feet and the ice axe in my hand, though there wasn't enough snow to anchor on if I should fall, so the axe locked into my hand as a mental crutch and very little else.

In the high places of Lochaber, visibility can be so poor, even during the middle of the day, that it is a struggle to see more than twenty yards ahead if the weather is appalling. The cloud and snow can be so thick that you must trust to navigation and instinct. It's an unsettling experience. Half of your mind – the subconscious – is telling you all the while to get out of this place; the other half – the pragmatic – wills you on to complete your task. I had come too close to the prize to let my subconscious win out.

But then, without warning, the snow started to fall thickly again, and I could hear the wind howl off the top of the cliffs above. Time was now against me. I needed to find last winter's snow if it were there and get out of the corrie before the new snow barred my exit. I had good coordinates, but in this decaying place a compass offered little in the way of help. I instead used instinct and judgment as I traversed along the foot of the cliffs that, on my right-hand side, reached up 300 feet into the vortex of wind and snow. On my left there was nothing except cloud and a steep slope that did not break for some 1,000 feet. Slipping here could not be countenanced. 'Steady, Iain,' I repeated to myself. For ten minutes I tottered across broken rock and drifting snow, hoping that at any second I'd stumble across the icy relics from a year ago. But nothing. 'They've probably gone,' I said to myself, just on the cusp of giving up. Mentally I was almost spent. 'Another few steps. Another thirty seconds.'

Just then, however, the ground changed ahead. 'What's that?' I said out loud, as though someone were with me. I took a few more steps forward. I strained my eyes and wiped my glasses. In front of me, not more now than ten yards distant, there they lay. Two big slabs of dirty white snow sat at the foot of the cliff, almost invisible

in the camouflage of their surroundings. In form they resembled large white coffins which, considering the environment I was amid, seemed grimly appropriate. 'YES!' I shouted, as though I'd discovered some long-lost, priceless treasure in one of the deep places of the world. I was ecstatic that they endured and that I had found them. They were larger than I'd expected, too, and as I crouched beside them, I knocked on their surface: hard as the rock that they sat on. Months and months of compression, melting and refreezing had cast them like concrete. Their tops were like dragon skin, scaly and scalloped – and just as tough. There was no doubt that, at about fifteen feet long each, they'd survive now. The snow that had already fallen half buried them, and the heavier snow that was due in the next day would cover them up for the season. This would be the last time I, or anyone else, would see them for many months.

But how had it come to this? The snow that lingered on this hill never used to melt. Or, at least, it hardly ever did. Travellers in previous centuries even commented on being able to see it from the valley below all-year round. 'The only snow visible from a British train station in every month of the year,' one excited journal read in the 1930s. No longer could the same thing be said. The snow was a shadow of its former self, reduced to two small lumps of ignominious irrelevance, hidden from, and of no interest to, all but the most dedicated enthusiast. This was the first year in five that any snow had endured the whole year in the corrie. Could it be a sign of things to come? Had climate change stretched its long fingers into even the smallest nooks of the highest Scottish hills?

I had no time to ponder this any further. The snow was deep, and I had to get out of this cauldron of ice and rotting rock. Fresh boulders from rockfalls lay all around, serving as a reminder that this landscape is constantly evolving and not a place to linger.

I retraced my steps back up the steep slope and on to the lip of the plateau. As I came over the edge, the blast of wind that hit my chest forced me to sink down momentarily and grab the vegetation. The snow stung my face so hard it felt like I was being sandblasted. At that point it was obvious that going back down the way I had come would be tantamount to a death wish, so I

abandoned the idea. Though the car lay that way I could not risk the descent back down to the col in such atrocious conditions. Poor decision-making on the hill can cost lives and I had no wish to call mountain rescue, nor to become another statistic. An easier route off the north side of the hill would necessitate a taxi journey back to the car, but it would be money well spent.

I descended slowly, and with every downward step I took I cared less about the weather that chased me off the hill. I was beyond pleased I had come to this place today because, had I not, the two patches would have gone unrecorded. When researchers look back in a hundred years' time, they will maybe remark that in 2007 one enthusiast noted that two small patches of snow had survived the year on this hill. This may just be a footnote in a paper they write, and they will not know the human story that lies behind the record. This is of no moment to me. What matters is the snow that was recorded, not the means.

1 A corrie is a glacial basin in the side of a hill, the Scottish Gaelic equivalent of an Alpine 'cirque'. [[Back](#)]

2 A bluff is a steep headland. [[Back](#)]

General terminology and Gaelic pronunciation

Place names in the Highlands of Scotland are overwhelmingly of Gaelic origin. This is *Scottish Gaelic* as opposed to *Irish Gaelic*. The former is pronounced as 'GAAH-lick', the latter 'GAY-lick'. It's an important distinction that native speakers can become irked at.

It is a long-held and generally established fact that Scottish Gaelic was brought to these shores via Irish settlers around AD 500.¹ The language spread eastward for the next few hundred years until it eventually became the spoken tongue for much of the country. In the twelfth century, virtually the entire population spoke it, save for parts of Lowland Scotland (including Lothian and Caithness), who spoke variants of Scots and Norse.

As is normally the case throughout history with languages in a time of social and political instability, Gaelic's dominance began to slip over the centuries. Lowland Scots, now spoken by the landed class and increasingly at the royal court, started to penetrate westward through the glens and river valleys. The drop in numbers of people speaking Gaelic accelerated after the 1745 Jacobite uprising, when it was proscribed by the British government. Children were censured in schools from speaking it up until relatively recent times, which accounted for further significant falls in numbers. (It was seen as a backward language by some.)

Records from the last 250 years paint a sobering picture. In 1755, twenty-three per cent of the Scottish population spoke Gaelic (290,000 speakers). In 2011, it was just 57,602 (1.1 per cent of the total population).² Though substantial efforts are being made to revive the language, both in cities and in the country, as a spoken, community language it is to a very significant extent restricted to the Outer Hebrides. Some parts of northern Skye and

other Inner Hebrides have small, isolated communities, but with over half the native speakers living in Glasgow, the future for the language as an everyday one is very unclear.

It is true that some of the very earliest strata of names, such as those for rivers like the Dee, Clyde or the Tay, pre-date even Gaelic and are probably thousands of years old. Most names though, especially hills, are Gaelic in origin.

Pronunciation

Like the dialects of England (Brummie, Scouse, Geordie, Yorkshire, East Anglia, etc.), Gaelic is not a homogeneous language. Though words may be written the same for places in Mull as they are for Perthshire, they often have different pronunciations. Trying to negotiate this is a minefield, and to their credit some websites make attempts.³ However, often fine institutions and well-meaning websites do make mistakes. This is no truer than in the Cairngorms, where local pronunciation is quite different to other parts of the country.

Throughout the book I have attempted to give rough translations and meanings wherever possible. The list below is more authoritative, giving the names of the main hills contained therein. The name of the hill comes first, in bold, followed by an approximate sound in Scots/English, indicated by italics. Emphasis of syllables is given in upper case. Then follows the meaning, with an explanatory note if necessary.

Aonach Beag *eunuch BAKE* – ‘little ridged hill’. The *ao* sound in Gaelic has no English equivalent. The best way of mimicking it is to try and say *oo* without rounding your lips.

Aonach Mòr *eunuch MORE* – ‘big ridged hill’.

Beinn a’ Bhuid *been-a-board* – ‘table hill’. The ‘a’ is very short, and hardly pronounced. It indicates a euphonic (for ease of pronunciation), not the article. The designation ‘Bhuid’ is incorrect. Older folk pronounce the hill, approximately, as *board*. Recently *voord* or even *voorsht* have become common.

Beinn Bhrotain *been VROHtan* – ‘hill of the mastiff’.

Ben Avon *ben AAHn* – meaning unsure. Possibly from *athfhinn* (‘very bright one’), or from *abhainn* (‘river’).

Ben Macdui *ben macDOOi* – ‘hill of Macduff’. The highest hill in the Cairngorms and the second highest in the UK.

Ben Nevis *ben NEVis* – meaning unknown. An ancient name, possibly pre-Gaelic. One interpretation is ‘hill with its head in the clouds’, though this is disputed.

Braeriach *bray REEeach* – ‘the brindled upland’. The first syllable is generally pronounced as ‘bray’, but – properly – is ‘bry’.

Cairn Gorm *karn GORom* – from *An Carn Gorm*, meaning ‘blue hill’. This is the hill that gives its name to the whole range.

Cairn Toul *karn DOWel* – ‘hill of the barn’ (from *Carn an t-Sabhail*).

Geal-Chàrn *g-YAHL charn* – ‘white hill’.

Liathach *LEE-a-huch* – ‘the grey one’.

Sgòr an Lochain Uaine *scorn lochan OOan* – ‘peak of the green tarn’ (small loch). Also known as the Angel’s Peak, a name given by Alexander Copland as a counterbalance to the nearby ‘Devil’s Point’.

Sgòr Gaoith *scor GOOee* – ‘peak of wind’.

Sgùrr na Lapaich *scoor na LAHpeech* – ‘hill of the bog’.

1 Jones, Charles (1997), *The Edinburgh History of the Scots Language*, Edinburgh University Press. [[Back](#)]

2 MacAulay, Donald (1992), *The Celtic Languages*, Cambridge University Press. [[Back](#)]

3 <https://getoutside.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/guides/the-gaelic-origins-of-place-names-in-britain/> [accessed 13 May 2021]. [[Back](#)]

Get involved

Though there are now many people who are actively involved in the study of snow patches and snow in general, there is always room for more. The uplands of the UK are huge, with many nooks and crannies where relics of winter can cling on unseen, just waiting to be discovered by a walker, climber, cyclist or caver. To that end, I encourage people who stumble across these old patches to get involved in their reporting. The best way to do this is via two specific pages for Scotland, England and Wales on Facebook:

www.facebook.com/groups/snowpatchesscotland

www.facebook.com/groups/snowpatchesengland

England and Wales)

(for

There are now several thousand people on these pages, many of whom are very knowledgeable and keen to engage with new members.

The other medium is Twitter, specifically via my own page. I can be found at @theiaincameron all year posting updates and interesting snow-related pictures. Please feel free to say hello on there if you've enjoyed this book.

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Not in any particular order, but I would like to thank the following people for helping to bring this book to print:

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Andrew Cotter – for his permission to allow me a shameless addition of a doggy epilogue.

Finally, to the late Adam Watson. Despite it being over two years since his passing, I cannot help but say to myself, 'I must send that photo to Adam,' when I see one of the Cairngorms covered in snow. His knowledge and passion remain a daily inspiration.