

WATT FAMILY CONNECTIONS WITH THE CAIRNGORM CLUB

A highlight of 2022 for me – 1309 metres to be precise, or 4296 feet as it used to be – was returning to the summit of Ben Macdhui. I had been there four times previously, first in 1960 aged 8, but not since July 1970. After several years plundering Munros in the West of Scotland it was exhilarating to be re-acquainted with the massive Cairngorm plateau, pointed out in all directions by the Cairngorm Club indicator.



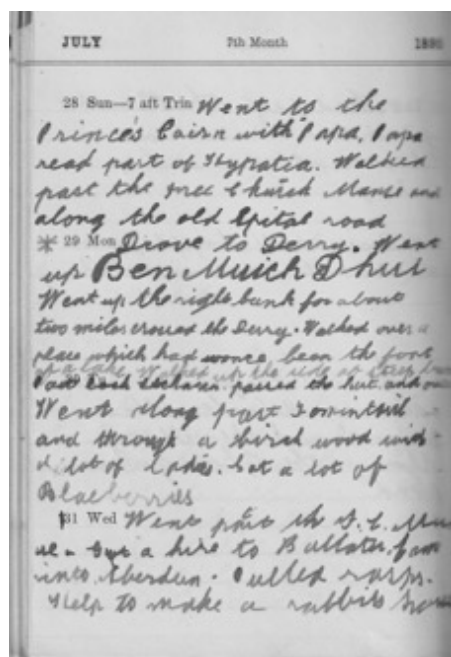
On viewing the indicator, erected by the Cairngorm Club, I wondered if any of my Aberdeen forebears had attended the unveiling ceremony on 1st August 1925. A search on-line of the Cairngorm Club Journal for 1926 established that four Watts had been there – my great uncle Edward (47), his wife Alice (44), son Murray (12) and daughter Marjorie (10).



UNVEILING THE BEN MACDHUI INDICATOR, AUGUST 1, 1925. *M. J. Robb.*

The photo shows the company of 136 on the day, surrounding the indicator and including 15 women, with knee length Mackintoshes the order of the day.

Edward Watt's first ascent of Ben Macdhui had taken place 30 years previously on 29th July 1895, aged 18, as recorded in his diary for that year. His younger brother Theodore noted the same climb in his diary.



125 years later, via a circuitous and uncertain route, Edward Watt's diary for 1895 came into the hands of Ken Thomson, Cairngorm Club Librarian, who transcribed, with notes, the following details from a Watt family holiday at Braemar.

On Monday 15 July 1895, Edward and family started a holiday at Braemar, while Papa¹ stayed on in Aberdeen for the general election. On the Monday, after a "cold and windy" drive to Braemar (presumably from the station at Ballater), Theodore, George and Edward went up Morrone, getting "a good many plants including avarns and the globe flower. Good view but very windy. Went up by the path but came down to the East past a pond". The following day, after hearing the Aberdeen results, George and Edward played tennis at the Victoria Hall – "a luxury which cost 1/-" – and then went to an election meeting, chiefly attended by visitors. "Rained all afternoon. Read 'Lothair' ... Fished in the Dee in the evening. Caught nothing. Wet feet."

On the Wednesday, "At Garrawalt Falls [in Ballochbuie] with G(George). and T(Theodore). – 10 miles – Saw a ghillie capture a salmon above Invercauld bridge ... Spoke about going to Loch Ceann-Mor after tea but on reflection that [thought?] it wd. be too far and resolved to go in the morning. Went a walk with the Ashers to the Prince's Cairn. Found blaе-berries, cran-berries, globe-flowers, etc. Came home by Tomintoul [just above Braemar] and round by the Clunie – 5 mls. Miss Asher is one of the lady students at Kings."

On Thursday 18 July, "Started with George at 6:15 on our expedition to Loch Ceann-Mor [the King's Loch, nowadays Loch Kander]. Misty all the morning. At Loch Callater 8:15; never walked over such rugged ground or saw such steep and grand mountains as in the three miles up to Loch Can-dor [sic] which is itself a magnificent sight – surrounded as it is by precipitous hills, 800 feet high which run down to the water's edge, making it impossible to walk round the loch. Home at 2:15. Mater and we three drove to Inverey where Mr and Mrs Ogilvie and family are staying. Played golf. On way up, stopped at Mar Lodge² and saw the ruins; also Falls of Corriemulzie. Saw eagle at Mar Lodge." A diary calculation shows Loch Ceann-mor and back 18 miles, Inverey 7 miles, and a total of 25 miles.

On Friday 19 July, "Heavy rain all morning", but after tea Edward and Papa walked to Corriemulzie, and "walked round by the low path. Saw a herd of deer. Visited the ruins of Mar Lodge and the eagle." On the Saturday, "After various hitches the planned expedition to Glas Maol came off, at least a start was made ... Rained hard most of the time and so we turned back at the point where the Blairgowrie road crosses the Allt Bhuaidh. Distance altogether 15 miles. We were all thoroughly soaked. I finished up with a cold bath wh. was pronounced "very dangerous". Read "The Moonstone". Fished in the Clunie. Whist: Mater and I lost 2 – 1.

On Tuesday 23 July, Edward and George started – rather late, due to morning mist and rain – in "a conveyance", and "got out at the Shan Spital, and crossed the bridge on the old road and began the ascent of the old smuggler's path to Glen Isla. The first mile is stiff. We met a shepherd on the level ground before we came to the boundary fence between Aberdeen and Forfar [shires]. We went straight on from the fence for ¼ ml. to see down into Caenlochan 1000 feet below and then turned sharply to the right and soon reached the top [i.e. Glas Maol]. We went down to the Spital road on the Cairnwell and landed at the top of the long brae wh. we foolishly descended passing the coach and meeting our carriage near the foot. We had to walk up again from below the Devil's Elbow³. Rained all the way home. Stood on three counties at once near the top of the hill. Miss Melville called in the evening. Whist lost 1-0. 6 miles."

On Wednesday 24 July, "Intended to go to Lochnagar but was deterred from employing a 'lovely' day by a slight mist. Ground Greek. Bot [Bought?] a Scotsman. Ferried the Dee in Lamont's boat en route for the Linn of Quoich. Mater with us. She returned from the Linn the same way (Papa at home with a sore foot) while we walked up till we were opposite Inverey where we forded the river with some difficulty. Delivered a note for Mrs Ogilvie who was out. The Dr. that [?] unclear] we would 'have time for a round' [of golf?] which we had. He then walked down the road with us till he met his family. Visited the eagle and Mar Lodge. G. went by the low path to Corriemulzie². Whist. Lost. ... The [electoral] tide is flowing with a vengeance. Telegram came announcing for Unionist gains in Scotland – Moray, Nairn, S. Ayr, Falkirk Burgh and Kilmarnock do. 10 miles."

On Thursday 25 July, "Started for Lochnagar at 8.50. Went by the usual route. Lunch at the well. Saw a herd of deer on the White Mounth. Owing to mist did not get higher than Cac Carn More (3768, 18 feet below the

highest top. While carefully steering our way with the compass we heard someone shouting and soon came upon two fellows (who said they were arguing wh. way they shd go) – Nicol Langland, Forfar, and George Mackay, Loc. Gvt. Board Edin. We walked back the whole way with them to Auchallater where we crossed the Clunie. We cut off a good bit by going down the face of the hill to Loch Callater. At the Priest's Well we met three of the Troups (Japan[?]). At another well, we gave what remained in our flask to our companions. Home 7.15. Dr and Mrs Ogilvie were at tea. Whist: Mater and I won – 1-0. Ben Macdhui tomorrow – start at 8. Dr O. left a letter with Papa for F.P smoothing over the affair of the Linn. Lochnagar 24 mls.

On Friday 26 July, "Mist and rain all day. Ben MuichDhui abandoned. Whist before and after tea. Mater and I lost – 4 rubbers – 1 (8 – 5 pts). Did some Greek. Today the Unionist Majority is 142 (being a net gain of 85 seats). George got a letter from Uncle Charles saying that he can have us from the 3rd – 10th Aug. Papa also had one from Rev. Robert Thomson in connexion with G's visit to Switzerland.

On Saturday 27 July, "Weather same as yesterday. Discussion as to mode of travelling from Braemar to Ballater⁴. "Words". Mater out. Whist. Melvilles at tea."

On Sunday 28 July, "At Estab. Ch. Went for letters. Papa read "Hypatia". After tea walked by short cut to road on W. bank of Cluny. Home by Morrone. 3 miles."

On Monday 29 July, "Ben Muich Dhui. Drove to Derry Lodge (Mater walked back to the Ogilvies) and ascended by the usual route. Several showers. Saw Bennachie. T. was with us. Whist in the evening. Mater and I lost 2 rubs 1 pt to 0. 18 miles".

On Tuesday 30 July, "Rested after Ben Muich Dhui. Strolled about the place watching the coaches etc. Bought a "Scotsman". Whist – Mater and I lost by one trick". And on Wednesday 31 July: "Left Braemar at 12:40 in wagonette for Aberdeen⁴. Came by 3.30 train from Ballater."



This photo from the 1896 Cairngorm Club Journal shows the summit cairn of Ben Macdhui at the time, having been first built by the Ordinance Survey in 1847.

Notes on the above diary

1. "Papa" was William Watt, Joint Proprietor and Editor of the *Aberdeen Free Press*, which is why he was involved that week in the reporting of the 1895 General Election. Conservatives were known in those days as "Unionists".

2. "Corriemulzie" was the previous name of Mar Lodge. The original building was destroyed by fire. The current Mar Lodge was built in 1895.
3. The Devil's Elbow was a steep zig zag in the Braemar to Perth Road just south of the current Glenshee Ski centre
4. Travel to Braemar was by train to Ballater and then by wagonette to Braemar. It seems likely that travel to Derry Lodge was also by coach and horse. Given that the area was more densely populated in those days, it is likely that such travel was not difficult to arrange.



William Watt of 17 Queens Road was recorded as a member of the Cairngorm Club in the 1896 Journal. His sons Edward and Theodore joined the Club in 1911.



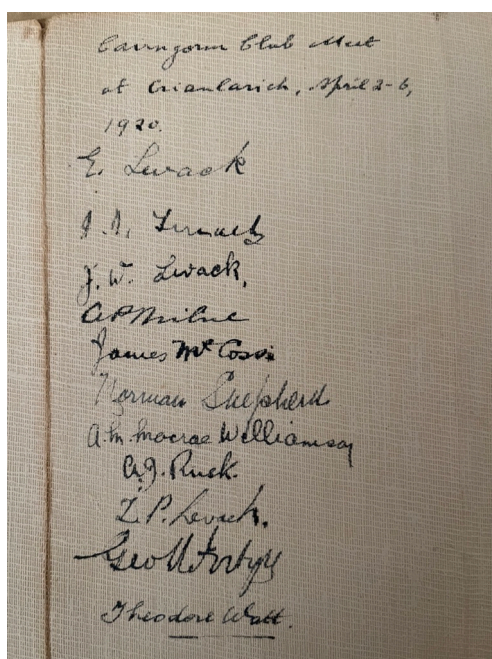
Edward and Theodore's wives, Alice and Mabel Murray pose with their mother and a friend by the Devil's Punchbowl at the Linn of Quich, on a date probably not far from their marriages in 1909 and 1911.

Edward Watt edited the Cairngorm Club Journal from 1927 to 1934. He had just retired from a career in journalism and was entering local politics as the local councillor for Rubislaw Ward. He later became City Treasurer and then Lord Provost of Aberdeen.

Theodore Watt was also a keen hillwalker and is shown here in the foreground wearing the standard gear of plus fours, tweed jacket and tie



On 3-5th April 1920 he attended the Easter meet of the Club at Crianlarich, climbing No 6 Gully on Ben Lui, the Central Gully of Cruach Ardrain, both with ropes and axes, before finishing off with Beinn Dorain and Beinn an Dothaidh. On the back of his map, he collected the signatures of others in the party including John R Levack, the Club President from 1918-24.



On 12th July 1924 Theodore accompanied his eldest son George (11), niece Marjorie (9), nephew Murray (11) and sister-in-law Alice (43) up Lochnagar, along with over 138 other members and non-members for the unveiling at the top of the new Cairngorm Club Indicator. Marjorie is shown below inspecting the indicator.



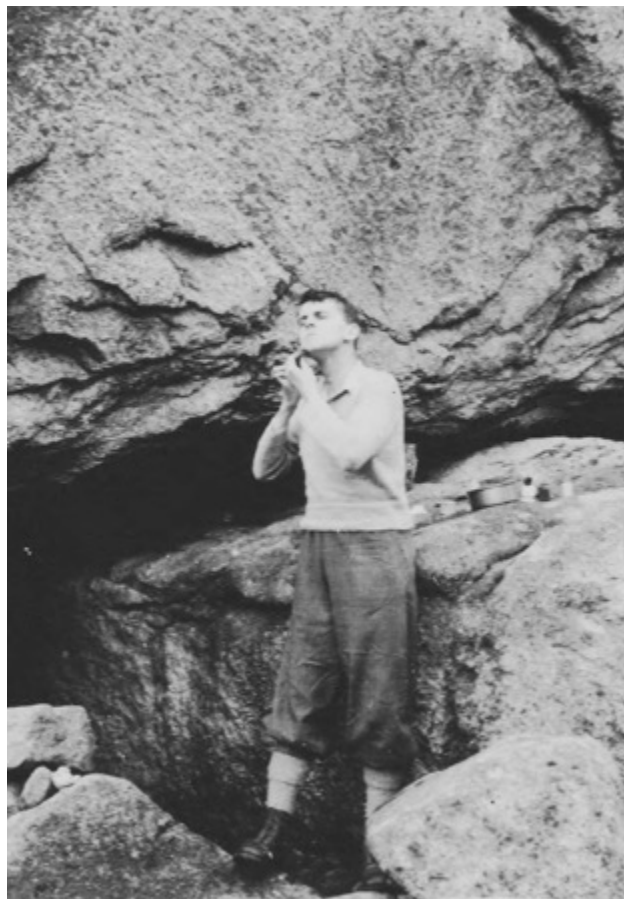
George continued hillwalking with the Aberdeen Grammar School Scouts and joined the Cairngorm Club in 1933 while a medical student at Aberdeen University. The pictures below show members of the 17th Scout group walking past Loch Etchachan, whose surface was frozen over, on their way to the Shelter Stone in March 1927.



As in the 1925 group photograph at the top of Ben Macdhui, a gabardine Mackintosh was an essential piece of kit.



George is shown shaving at the Shelter Stone on a later expedition.



George's climbing companion in his student days was Hector Gray, who wrote in the Grammar School magazine in 1941.

"A Schoolfellow's Tribute

*The Spartan borne upon his shield.
Was not more free"*

So wrote George Gordon, Lord Byron, at Missolonghi, shortly before he died there on the cause of Greek independence.

Twenty years ago there stood on the outskirts of Aberdeen the ruins of a cottage, Honeybrae House, where Byron lived in his early youth. And in the fields around this cottage a small boy played. Now this boy – Surgeon-Lieutenant George T R Watt – has also given his life for the freedom of Greece. (His ship HMS Wryneck was sunk by German bombers while evacuating troops from Greece to Crete)

George loved freedom, and for him to tramp the heather was the greatest freedom. Some of my happiest memories are of holidays spent with him among the hills. Only a few days before the outbreak of war we were lying on the braes above Loch Ewe. The sun was shining, and nothing was there to disturb our peace but the lazy drone of insects, the occasional scream of a gull fishing on the loch, or the steady lap of waters on the shore. But although our bodies were at rest that August afternoon, our minds were rarely more active. We knew that Britain was on the brink of war, and it was impossible for us not to wonder what was going to happen next.

"What is the first thing you will do when the war is over?" I asked in a cheerful attempt to bridge an awkward gap.

"Meet you here, if you like?" was the swift response. I nodded my head in complete agreement, and the tryst was made.



George Watt was killed by enemy action in 1941, aged 28.

In 1942, Hector responded to a request from George's father Theodore for reminiscences of their climbing days.

54 Rubislaw Den South,
ABERDEEN.

2nd January, 1942.

Dr. Theodore Watt, M.A.,
Culter House,
MILLTIMBER.

Dear Dr. Watt,

Your suggestion that I should narrate the adventures of some of the hill-climbing expeditions which I went with George makes me envious of the settled habits of the worthy Mr. Pepys, for I find that memory is a poor recording instrument and will not play back satisfactorily the scenes and episodes which once were full of delight. However, the following reminiscences may be of interest to you.

I have an early recollection - I could not have been more than twelve years old at the time - of meeting George and you in Ballater on your return from climbing Lochnagar. It was the occasion of the unveiling of the Cairngorm Club Indicator and it may be worth while reminding you that George was present at the ceremony. You went back to Aberdeen that evening and left George at Ballater with the Gray family. That, I think, was the first time that George stayed with us, and the occasion was marked by a truly tremendous thunderstorm. Perhaps it was during the same summer that I went to stay with the Watt family at Braemar. "Broombank", I think, was the name of the house. There was a boy called Ignatius who kept a pet jackdaw which used to perch on his shoulders. That trip to Braemar was, I think, the real beginning of my hill-climbing expeditions. I remember that you took a small party consisting of James Lindsay Duncan and his sister, Helen, George and myself, to climb An Sgarsoch and Carn Ealar. It was a perfect day and we had some glorious views of the Cairngorm massif. It must have been fairly late in August, as there were deer stalkers on the hill, and when we came down to Geldie Lodge we saw two stags that had been shot that afternoon.

You will remember that when George and I were fifteen we pushed our way on bicycles round Skye and suffered quite indescribable hardships from rough weather and rough roads. We did not climb in Skye, as we had promised our mothers not to do so, but we camped for two nights near Fort William and scaled the heights of Ben Nevis in the interval. It was perhaps five years/

years later that we paid a second visit to the Ben Nevis range and this time we did the thing in style. We camped in Glen Nevis and our first expedition was "one of the biggest days" that I have ever spent on the hills. We were late in starting, as neither of us was very good at rising in the morning, and it was almost 7 o'clock in the evening when we reached the summit of the Ben. We had, of course, conquered Aonach Beag, Aonach Mor, and Carn Mor Dearg on the way. Owing to an unfortunate arrangement which we had made with our too anxious mothers, I had to run all the way from the top of Ben Nevis to the Post Office at Fort William in order to send a telegram, which was to be the signal of our safe descent. The Post Office was closed when I got there but a kindly official let me in at the back door and the telegram was despatched. I was then faced with a six mile walk back to camp. George met me half-way, however, and I got a "lift" on the carrier of his motor bicycle. During that same visit to Glen Nevis we also climbed Sgurr a' Mhaim.

The following summer we made our unfortunate expedition to the English Lake District. We camped in Borrowdale for ten days during six of which it never ceased to rain. We managed to climb a few of the more famous peaks, however, including Scafell Pike, Great Gable, Skiddaw and Helvellyn. It was on the way home from Helvellyn that George met with an accident at Lodore Hotel and broke his leg. We probably climbed quite a number of other smaller and less well-known peaks during this holiday but I cannot remember their names. I know that I climbed the Ennerdale Pillar by myself, and got into trouble - most deservedly - for doing so. We were on an excursion over the Sty Head and Black Sail Passes and I was attempting to obtain a photograph of Sca Fell and Scafell Pike. In my endeavour to get rid of an obtrusive chunk of foreground I climbed as high as Windy Gap and then thought that I might as well carry on to the top of the Pillar. George waited patiently near the head of the Black Sail Pass in the meantime, waving an exasperated handkerchief and exercising his lungs to some purpose. I could hear and see him perfectly and I reciprocated all his signals with equal purpose, but seemingly the sound of my voice did not carry to the depths of the Black Sail Pass. George was very vexed with me and I remember his greeting when I joined him in the Pass - "What kind of a carry-on is this?" was what he said and I felt very humble. It was quite inexcusable of me to go off on my own but I did not realise that George could neither see nor hear me although his signals were so very clear to me.

Another excursion which I remember well took place nearer home. I think that George must have been staying with the Gray family at Ballater again. We went by car to Allt-na-Giubhsaich and climbed from there over Lochnagar, Tolmount, Cairn na Glasha and Glas Maol to the head of the Cairnwell Pass where/

where the convenient car picked us up.

On another occasion I set out on a solitary peak-bagging expedition and George was with me on the second, third and fourth days. On the first day I climbed the Tap o'Noth and Ben Rinnes. The next day I had three Watt brothers for companions and we climbed Sgoran Dubh. I was not in very good condition at the time and I might as well have gone climbing with a herd of deer for all that I saw of my companions who were always half a hill ahead. Needless to say I had a car on this expedition, for on the following day George and I climbed Ben Wyvis and on the day after, An Teallach. This last ascent was a triumph of navigation and fortitude. We were determined not to break our tour and we climbed in an absolute blizzard. We steered our way to the highest point on the hill with the aid of a compass, map, and aneroid. We saw nothing of the famous ridge. We were absolutely soaked to the skin when we got back and the Inn at Dundonell was able to supply only tepid water for our baths. We did some grousing that night. We parted company at Ullapool on the day after our ascent of An Teallach and I added the following peaks to my bag - Stack Polly Beinn Eighe, SgurrnanGillean, Ben Lawers, Ben More, and Arthur's Seat.

During the last holiday which George and I had together, shortly before the outbreak of war, we did not climb any mountains, but I happen to know that on the day that George met me at Garve he had been to the top of Quinag.

The list of ascents which I have given you is perhaps not very impressive from a mountaineer's point of view, but George and I must have done many other climbs together, which, though less noteworthy as regards the magnitude of the effort involved, were none the less expeditions of the happiest order. We had many a Saturday afternoon's scramble on Kerloch, Clachnaben, Mount Battock, Bennachie and the Hill of Fair. When I stand on the top of Brimmond Hill it is my boast that I have been on the summit of every hill visible on the horizon. I am quite sure that George could have made the same claim and, in fact, we did most of it together.

With all best wishes for 1942 to yourself, Mrs. Watt, and the rest of the Watt family.

I am,

Yours very sincerely,

J. Hector Gray

George's brother Alan was a founder member in 1936 of the Aberdeen Grammar School Rambling and Mountaineering Club. After war years in India, where an army nurse Helen Hughes from Derbyshire had looked after him when he had hepatitis, he courted Helen on her first trip to Scotland, including an ascent of Lochnagar via the Black Spout on 20th August 1948. The adventure proved no deterrent to romance. In 1949 they married and in 1954 both joined the Cairngorm Club.





My brother Nigel and I arrived in the early 1950s and in 1962, aged 11 and 10, our parents took us on the Cairngorm Club's 75th Anniversary expedition – an overnight traverse from the Cairngorm car park to Derry Lodge. An account of that stormy night, involving 25 male and 18 female walkers, was written up in the 1968 Club Journal. Due to inclement weather, the plan to hold a committee meeting at the Shelter Stone at midnight had to be abandoned. Our experience of that night was as follows.

CAIRNGORM NIGHTMARE

Some years ago, a local climbing club celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary and a special excursion was arranged to mark this event. It was an overnight traverse from the White Lady car park to Derry Lodge by way of the Shelter Stone. It is only about twelve miles in distance but there was an unusually wild storm blowing and conditions made the normally easy walk, hard and miserable.

We left the car park at about 8 o'clock with the rain pouring down. There was no wind at this time. The area was then in the process of being made into the ski-ing centre which it now is and the Sheiling was only a network of girders and concrete slabs. Only the uprights of the ski-lift had been constructed and we climbed Cairngorm in stages from upright to upright. The storm was heightening all the time and a wind was rising to harness the rain and lash it on to our anoraks and packs. The wind wailed and whistled. The rain pelted down and we were soaked after only an hour's walking.

The four of us sought refuge in the corrugated iron hut which today is the head of the ski-lift. We stayed there for three hours, huddling round a gas ring we had found and trying to sleep on the hard wooden boards. We left at one o'clock in the morning, roped together lest we were separated by the wind. We struggled through the dim light down Coire Raibert which was a mass of wet scree. Slithering down, we eventually reached the path around Loch Avon. In the valley the wind had dropped but the rain had lost none of its fury. We trudged round to the Shelter Stone to find that we were six hours behind the main party.

We did not wait there, for we could not force ourselves to eat, but pressed on up to Loch Etchachan to meet the head wind again. We passed over the saddle to the South of Beinn Mheadhoin, very slowly, but made up for lost time by running down to the Etchachan Hut.

We had to reach Derry Lodge by noon and after a long, long trek down the glen, we reached the Lodge with twenty minutes to spare. The bus had managed, quite remarkably, to come up to Derry and very soon we were on the short journey to Braemar. The celebration luncheon was held in the Fife Arms Hotel. The President gave a long speech and there were many toasts.

After a long night and a large meal, we were all fast asleep for the homeward journey.

TWO PRESIDENTS

Alan and Harold Watt were both Presidents of the Cairngorm Club and are shown below with six other past-Presidents at the Centenary Champagne Barbecue held at Muir of Inverey in June 1987.



Past Presidents at the Centenary Champagne Barbecue at Muir.
Back Row:- Eric Johnston; Sandy Black; Harold Watt; Alan Watt; Sheila Murray. Front Row:- Robert Bain; Ralph Gerstenberg; Leslie Hay.

Alan Watt was President from 1967-70 when he had major involvement in the legal aspects of the Club acquiring Muir Cottage at Inverey and converting it into a larger Climbing Club Hut. It was the first occasion on which the local Estate had agreed to sell one of its properties.



Harold Watt joined the Club in 1967 and was President from 1976-79. The bench outside Muir bears a plaque in his honour.



As a Past-President he attended two significant Cairngorm Club anniversaries



Four Cairngorm Club Presidents, Peter Howgate, Sheila Murray, Harold Watt and Eric Johnston, standing by the Indicator on Ben Macdhui on 1st August 1985, sixty years after its first unveiling.



On 20-23 June 1987, the Cairngorm Club Centenary Events included a mass gathering of the Club at 06.00 hours at the Dairymaid's Fields, below the Shelter Stone, next to Loch Avon, where the first idea of the Club was mooted by its six founders in 1887. Harold is seen in the centre of the picture holding a walking stick.

In Charlotte Peacock's biography of Nan Shepherd, *Into the Mountain*, Harold Watt, whose day job was Managing Director of Aberdeen University Press, is credited with persuading his neighbour, friend and colleague Nan Shepherd to publish the manuscript of her book *The Living Mountain*, after it had spent 30 years in a drawer. It was unusual at the time for the AUP to act as a publisher, suggesting that this was a personal initiative by Harold Watt, who was President of the Cairngorm Club at the time.

Graham Watt

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15th October 2023