

Deep Roots: The Big Grey Man of Ben MacDui

by Wilma Heberling

The Himalaya Mts. Have the Yeti, the Cascades in the Northwest have Sasquatch and the Cairngorms have The Big Grey Man of Ben MacDui, or in Gaelic, Am Fear Liath Mor (pronounced 'M FER LEEA MORE) which means "Mysterious Being."

The Grey Man came into the general public's eye in 1891, when a well known professor, Norman Collie, was scared half out of his wits while climbing in the Cairngorms. Now Professor Collie, a down-to-earth Aberdonian, was not a man easily fooled. He was a respected scientist; a professor of organic chemistry at the University of London, and a Fellow of the Royal Society. This was no impressionable youth, but it is said that on his encountering the Big Grey Man, he ran for four or five miles, stumbling over boulders, until he reached Lothiemurcher forest.

The problem is, however, that professor Collie didn't actually *see* anything. He just heard it. He said he heard gigantic footsteps which filled him with "such a feeling of fear and dread"* that he declared that he would never again go alone to the summit of Ben MacDui. Ben MacDui is the highest peak of the Cairngorms, and the second highest peak in Scotland. Some say it is a mysterious mountain.

It is indeed a mystery, but there are some facts: Collie was an experienced mountaineer and would be familiar with natural phenomena such as the sounds the wind makes as it is funneled through rocks. What is more, the mountain ridge above the loch there was originally called Loch Na Gaire—"Loch of the outcry" because the wind moaned so much there. The pass to the south is called Bealach an Sgairne, "Rocks that make noises". Collie would surely have known all this.

But Collie is not the only person who claims to have encountered the Big Grey Man. Actual verified sightings are rare, but those who have experienced an encounter describe him as being "about ten feet tall, covered with short hair, and having very long arms and legs".* Many climbers have reported a feeling of fear and panic--even terror--while on Ben MadDui. Locals, when asked about it, are likely to respond, "We do not speak about such things."

Is there really a Scottish Sasquatch? Perhaps. One theory as to why some experience the mystery of the Cairngorms is that certain people have a greater acuity for "sensing" phenomena. This could be compared with extremely sensitive hearing, or an extraordinarily acute sense of smell, but in this case it would be a sharper awareness of the "spiritual" if you will.

Skeptics say that what is being encountered are the sounds of the winds, the optical illusions caused by the mountain mists, and the lights and shadows that play around mountain crevices. Whatever it is, the legend lives on. We do know that after Collie spoke publicly about his encounter, Dr. A.M. Kellas, a noted mountaineer who later died on Mt. Everest, contacted Collie about his own encounter. He related that after his

sighting of the Big Grey Man he beat a hasty retreat from the peak and only climbed it again when he was in the company of others.* After that, reports from other climbers started to pour in. They were no longer embarrassed to report their encounters now that two eminent scholars had done so.

Well, we are not going to solve the problem of Am Fear Liath Mor at this time, but I wouldn't advise climbing Ben MacDui alone!

Peter Densham, leader of the Cairngorms RAF Rescue Team from 1939 to 1945 wrote:

Come with me at dusk when day and night struggle upon the mountains. Feel the night wind on your faces and hear the crying amid the rocks.... Though your nerves be of steel, and your mind says it cannot be, you will be acquainted with that fear without name, that intense dread of the unknown that has pursued mankind from the very dawn of time. (excerpt from *Big Grey Man of Ben MacDui-the legend.*)

**The Big Grey Man of Ben MacDui*, by Afflec Grey, Birlinn Press, Edinburgh