



The Call of the Mountains

by Max Landsberg

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“This book quickly drew me in. These journeys are precisely depicted through the author’s perceptive eye for detail and his obvious passion for the outdoors.”

STEVE FALLON, mountain guide and record-holder for completing all the Munros 15 times

“Scotland has inspired legions of explorers and adventurers; this book will show you why. A wonderful journey through landscape, culture and obsession.”

MYLES FARNBANK, Director of Training, Wilderness Scotland

Sample interview with Trekker and Writer Max Landsberg, author of *The Call of the Mountains*. © Max Landsberg

Mountains change us more than we change them
Scotland’s mountains may not be the highest in the world, but they are certainly amongst the most awe-inspiring and enchanting. This book is a lyrical testament to the power of those mountains to offer simple enjoyment or a deeper journey of transformation. It also introduces you to secretive glens, accessible adventure, and an insight into obsession.

Q. So, Max, what’s the Tweet-sized summary of the book?

Scotland: her hills, my adventures, and how they can all be yours too!

Q. OK, and the one-minute version?

I’ve tried to offer a vivid and evocative account of what it is like to adventure on foot across Scotland – in

the hope that more people will be lured away from their smartphones and into at least a little bit of wilderness. So that people can reap the benefits of simple walks there, or more challenging expeditions.

Scotland’s mountains may not be the highest in the world, but they are certainly amongst the most awe-inspiring and enchanting. On these mountains, and in the glens between the bens are places where you can find simple enjoyment of nature – or a canvas on which to sketch and then live some big adventures.

I’ve tried to bring to life how an ordinary person can have extraordinary experiences (t)here.

Q. So, is this a guide book?

In a sense yes, it is a guidebook.

It is a guide to making adventure a part of your life, to getting a breath of fresh air, ... and also more

practically, to seeing where the best views are to be had.

It is not a guidebook in the conventional sense: I'd recommend Cicerone's guidebooks or Cameron McNeish's "The Munros" for that; and it's not a tale of "bagging" all the summits in one go: read Chris Townsend or Hamish Brown for that.

The Call of the Mountains is more a transmission of The Call that I experienced to walk in and among those hills, in the hope that it will inspire others to adventure and explore.

And because the geology, flora, fauna, and history of the Highlands are all so fascinating, I've included a few "boxed lunches" on these topics. So the book is a sort of companion as well as a guide to having an adventure. It also has 15 photos in glorious sunshine, 1 in full winter conditions, and several of my own sketches.

Q. So what exactly are the Munros?

The Munros are Scotland's highest mountains. The ones that are 3,000 feet or more in height. They are called Munros after Sir Hugh Munro who mapped them all.

Back in 1890, the maps of Scotland were still woefully imprecise, and the measured heights of its mountains wildly inaccurate. The Swiss Alps have all been climbed. Mont Blanc had been conquered a century earlier. The height of Mount Everest had been known for 50 years. The Suez Canal had been open for two decades.

But as the 20th century dawned, estimates of the number of Scottish mountains exceeding 3,000 feet in height range from 31 in the distinguished Baddeley's Guide, to 236 in *The Highland Sportsman and Tourist*.

The Scottish Mountaineering Club, of which Sir Hugh was a co-founder, decided to change all that. And Sir Hugh set off – often at night – to check and improve on the Ordnance Survey's estimates of the mountains' heights, lugging his barometer to the summits.

We currently have 282 Munros, though occasionally some hills get promoted or demoted, as their heights are measured more accurately!

But I should stress that this book is not just about getting to the tops of these hills; it is about the bigger experience of the adventure and expedition involved.

Q. You've trekked thousands of miles across many of the world's great mountain ranges, yet you say Scotland is still the best. Why is that?

I've pondered this a lot as I have trekked those thousands of miles, and I think there are three reasons: access, history, and variety.

First: There are few other countries – at least in Europe – where you are allowed to cross someone's land to get to a mountain or glen, and there to camp overnight provided you act in a reasonable way. The Access code means you can plan a real adventure in Scotland rather than having to follow a way-marked route and be constrained and scheduled to sleep in a hotel en route.

Second: History – a land once home to the Gaels and their kings, yet where now it is only their spirits and the stag that roam free. Who can fail to be moved by the rich history that includes trial and wicked retribution, as we move through and over the folds of the mountains?

And third and for me the most important: Variety. Scotland's rocks are not just some of the oldest on the planet, but also some of the most varied. This means that within a few days we can walk from the towering pinnacles of Skye, to the high rolling plateau of the Cairngorms; from the bonnie braes of Ben Lomond to the daunting cliffs of Glencoe; from the rocky battlements that encircle Loch Arkaig, to the gentle folds of Ben Lawers as it spills down to Loch Tay. And its not just about the mountains. Where else can you walk for say five hours and tread moor, ridge, summit, alongside tinkling burn, around shimmering loch, towards sparkling sea, and there view the skerries and the purple islands beyond? That's what I call variety!

So far only Norway comes close in my mind – and that is just a broken-off part of Scotland anyway!

Q. Why did you write this book?

Two reasons, one personal and one public.

As I was completing my round of the Munros, my father was suffering from Alzheimer's. I could see how memories fade. So I started writing this book trying to make the descriptions so vivid that it would give me a chance of remembering my times on the hills if and when my memory also fades.

But I also wrote this book to encourage everyone to get out into Scotland's mountainscape. The trigger was my return from trekking to Everest Base Camp. I gave a talk at a local junior school about it. I was astounded by how excited the children were. Everyone seems to love a mountain. Yet increasingly we are stuck with our heads in our so-called smartphones. I wanted to write a book that would lure people into the countryside, with the Munros as a challenging yet accessible embodiment of that goal.

Q. So... where can I see the best views?

The best views are when it's sunny! No, seriously, Scotland's hills are much sunnier than people think. With a bit of planning, I had clear views from just over 2/3 of the summits.

"What's the best view" does depend a bit on personal preference. Some people prefer a kind of classical beauty like a picture postcard; some prefer an intriguing view with a winding path leading off into the distant foothills; some prefer scenes of Terror and Awe. The book looks briefly into the history of our fascination with landscapes.

But my favourites would have to include: A' Mhaighdean and An Teallach near Ullapool, the Loch Coruisk area on Skye, Ben Hope in the far north, and the view south from Ben Macdui ...

Q. ... and where can I get the best experiences?

Yes, I have tried to point out in the book that the best experiences are not necessarily the best view, nor even the 'bagging' of a summit.

I think my peak experience was on one of Kintail's Seven Sisters. It was as I was approaching the top of a mountain called Sgurr Fhuaran. That was in the middle of a vast eight-Munro day. I had been moving very fast and was becoming exhausted, but by using a technique I mention in the book – one I had discovered from the porters in the Himalaya – I found that the mountain actually started to 'lift me up'. This is what other writers have called a 'flow' experience. I was completely in tune with everything internal and external to me. It took no effort at all to go uphill. The Chinese Daoists call this *wu wei*: effortless action. It is a very spiritual experience.

But then there are other peak experiences too: the warm pub with a whisky dispensed "the Highland way"; or sharing a picnic with old or new friends in your Munro party...

Q. Do you need to be super-fit to climb all the Munros?

Well firstly, I doubt anyone starts off with the plan to climb *all* 282 Munros. Most people start with a local hill or one that is accessible to their holiday plans. It might not even be a Munro!

Then they have a great time so they climb a few more. Each of these outings needs to be undertaken with care, since the weather can change from perfect to treacherous in a space of just five minutes. But most of these walks can be planned for someone of reasonable fitness to complete them in a day.

Of course, once you become hooked, the Gluttony takes over. At some stage you are not just satisfied with one Munro, you want to bag seven or eight in a day. Yes, at that stage you do need to be fit. Otherwise you'll have an accident.

But it's all in the planning, and the top of a Munro is accessible to virtually anyone.

Q. Is this really climbing – do you need ropes?

There's one Munro you would definitely want a rope for: the so-called Inaccessible Pinnacle. And depending on your route and the season, there are a

few more where a rope and the help of a climbing friend or guide would be useful.

So some of this does need a rope. The more challenging parts are where you need to do so-called scrambling. That is what most people would call “climbing but without a rope”. But for most of the Munros, there are ways to avoid such scrambles.

Q. So there are 282 Munros – why climb them all?

As I said, I can't imagine anyone starts their first round of the Munros intending to climb them all. You just get drawn into it. They seduce you. And its quite some seduction because you probably have to burn half a million calories or more to climb them all! That's thousands of Snickers bars and many cheese-and-jam sandwiches!

But its like any other interest that becomes a passion. You get intrigued by the mountains and their variety; you get interested in the geology and the history; you pick up a bit of Gaelic here and the familiar hit of fresh air there. And suddenly you're hooked.

I climbed only 3 Munros in my first year, then 8 the next, then 20, then 40, then suddenly I was at 100, then 140 ... *Hmm half-way* I thought. But it was only really when I got to 200 that I started to think of finishing them off.

The main value of Sir Hugh Munro's list struck me when I stood on top of one of the Five sisters of Kintail (!). As you look around there are just so many mountains that you just wouldn't know where to start. At least the list gives you a starting point...

Q. You say this book is also about a passion and an obsession: tell me more?

To get a good flavour of this, you really do have to read the book.

In a nutshell though, and with the benefit of hindsight and reflection, I found that I had gone through five phases. And I hope these may help others as they reflect on and invest in other passions and interests they may have.

These five phases are 1. Getting hooked, 2. Bagging, 3. Trophies, 4. Flow, and 5. Wider Horizons.

The book tracks through each of these phases, and explains them in a bit of detail. For example I now see clearly that my “Point of no Return” (as they say in the films) was when I had driven 600 miles to Scotland, realised I had left my boots and jacket at home, and since it was a Bank Holiday and I was anyway miles from any shops and I didn't want to wear boots that had not been broken in ... I drove straight back to London, and then all the way back to Scotland the next day... That was when my friends started to worry about my obsession!

Q. What is your view of wind-mills?

I prefer not to view them at all!

And each one will probably will never put out the amount of energy that it takes to make and maintain one!

Q. What about Scottish Independence?

“The head says one thing and the heart says another,” that was the answer I got when I asked a Scottish friend of mine that same question. And I tend to agree.

I am a passionate supporter of Scotland: I was born (t)here, half of my fore-fathers were Scottish, and most of them suffered badly during the Highland Clearances. Scotland's national identity is vital. Independence of spirit is crucial. And complete autonomy is seductive.

Yet complete autonomy is a figment of the would-be imagination, and impossible in practice. I cannot help feeling that Independence from Great Britain would be a step backwards.

At a time when everyone in the world is becoming more connected, do we really want to separate off as the 117th smallest population in the world? And of course there have been many prime ministers of GB who were Scots – that's the direction I would prefer...

So “The head says one thing and the heart says another!”

Author Bio – Max Landsberg

(outline only: more details available in the media kit)



MAX LANDSBERG is a keen mountaineer, one of the UK’s more persistent and wide-ranging hikers, and has a particular passion for Scotland, and for bringing mountainscapes to life for other people.

He visited the summit of Scotland's second highest mountain before he was born (his mother was pregnant at the time), and shortly afterwards he became a native of Aberdeen.

He has trekked in the Himalaya, Rockies, Andes, and Alps. In 2013 for example, with a 15kg backpack, he covered the 1,000 kilometres and 50,000 metres of *vertical* ascent required to complete the ‘Furth Munros’ of England and Wales, Scotland’s Cape Wrath Trail, Corsica’s GR20, and Switzerland’s Alpine Pass Route.

Forthcoming plans include establishing a new hiking trail across Scotland, circumnavigating the Mediterranean’s largest islands by sea kayak, and trekking Alaska’s eight National Parks. He is a member of the Outdoor Writers’ and Photographers’ Guild and believes strongly in the value of education: serving for seven years as a Governor of the University of Roehampton.

His earlier books (on coaching, motivation and leadership) have become classics in their field and have remained in print for more than 15 years.