

Pat Baird: - Extract from Edinburgh JMCS Club Circular 2000

75 years ago this year, in the autumn of 1925, the Junior Mountaineering Club of Scotland was formed under the "good offices" of several members of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. The individuals felt that there was a need for some organisation which might afford opportunities of climbing and an introduction to mountaineering technique to those to whom "the necessary companionship and advice were not available, and who were not yet qualified for membership of the existing body".

Pat Baird must have been one of those early members to experience this companionship and advice.

The picture of the very young Baird that accompanies this article is to be found in volume 1 of the club's logbook. Unfortunately it is not possible to place an exact date and year for this picture of Pat Baird (born 1912) experiencing what must be one of those mountaineering opportunities as a member of this club, no doubt under the advice of a good officer from the SMC. The likely hood is that the picture was taken in the in the last years of the 1920's or the very early 1930's.

He must have joined the JMCS while in his latter years at Edinburgh Academy where he won distinctions; amongst them one for the mid – level route round the VII class room – reputedly completed without touching the floor.

He left for Cambridge, possibly in 1930 or 1931 where he at once joined the University's Mountaineering Club.

The Club's logbook shows that P. B. Baird, along with some 40 JMCS members, 13 SMC members attended the joint Edinburgh & Glasgow Sections 1930 / 31 New Year meet at Loch Awe. Including guests a total of 59 persons attended the meet. The record does not mention any particular activity by members, however, conditions are described as "cold weather had been experienced during the last few days of 1930, the rocks, especially those in the northern corries of Cruachan, were extensively ice clad as at least one party found to its cost".

It is very likely that the majority of his early mountaineering was as a member of the JMCS or the CUMC. In the summer of 1933, together with another JMCS member, E.A.M. Wedderburn and accompanied by E.J.A. Leslie he recorded the first ascent of Mitre Ridge in Garbh Choire – Beinn A' Bhuid. On the same day two companions recorded the first ascent of Cumming – Crofton route in same corrie. The result was two very significant routes & the hardest pre-war climbs in the Cairngorms.

Having joined the SMC in 1933 he teamed up in March 1934 with E.J.A.Leslie to make another first ascent, this time the winter ascent of S.C. Gully, Stob Coire Nan Lochan on Bidean Nan Bian. Later that month, again with Wedderburn and some others he made the first winter ascent of Sron Na Lairig ridge also in Glencoe.

In 1934, possibly after graduating from Cambridge, he joined a boat based expedition to Baffin Island and N.E. Greenland. On this trip he teamed up with the famous Tom Longstaff & climbed the Devil's Thumb, a peak described as located at 74 degrees North on the Greenland coast. Later in 1934 / 35 he went to Sierra Leone where he was mining for gold. Throughout the-mid to late 30's he appeared to have travelled in the Canadian Arctic on various expeditions & surveys of the region. In February 1939 he sledged to Baffin Island across the sea ice with the Eskimo families, finally ending up at Pond Island well above the Arctic Circle in September.

The eight month long trip came to an end as he stepped ashore off the Hudson Bay Trading Company ship, onto the Canadian mainland where news of the outbreak of the Second World War awaited him. During the war he was an instructor in the Commando Mountain & Snow Warfare School based at Braemar & then while in the Canadian Rockies he was second in Command to Frank Smyth with the Lovat Scouts.

After the war he took up a series of academic posts, mostly at the McGill University in Montreal where he was Director of the Arctic Institute of North America. Between 1954 & 1959 he worked at the Geography Department of Aberdeen University. In 1956 & 1957 he was the principle person involved in

operating a weather station near the top of Ben Macdui; making along with others weekly visits to the plateau throughout the year. After Aberdeen University he returned to his previous post in Montreal.

He appears to have been able to combine his work with an obvious interest in mountaineering. Prior to his time in Aberdeen he was the leader of two Arctic Institute expeditions. The most successful of these was in 1953 when he once again travelled to Baffin Island, this time leading an expedition to the Penny Ice Cap & the mountains of the Cumberland Peninsula. Important pioneering mountaineering was done on this expedition with the most notable of the eight peaks climbed on the expedition being the first ascent of Mt Asgard (The Throne of the Gods) 6598 feet.

Described by one of those on the expedition - "Precipices 1000m high, incredibly smooth & steep guarded it on three sides culminating in a summit plateau 50m to 100m wide. On the fourth side, Asgard connects with the next peak, but even then here the arete dropped 150m almost vertically to a gap". The same account continues - "From the very first moment of the inception of the idea to climb it our feelings about it were in a perpetual state of change; possible – impossible and so on. In the state of indecision we inspected the mountain from the air and still debated whether to go or not while for hours we crossed the glacier towards it."

The expedition had the use of a Royal Canadian Airforce flying boat, a Sunderland; powered by four engines with a wing span of 35m and nearly 27m long - not a small plane. In addition to putting this plane to good use for inspecting possible routes, the expedition used the plane as a means of stocking base camp with equipment & supplies, flying to Summit Lake during the few weeks during the brief Arctic summer when the lake was free from ice. The sight of the seaplane landing at Summit Lake would have been quite impressive. Although several miles in length it is far longer than it is wide; nestling amongst peaks that form a classic U shaped valley (Refer to photographs in SMC Journal –1995 page 657 and SMC Journal – 1979 pages 428 & 429 – 1979).

The use of large sea planes would appear to have been a practice used by other expeditions during the early 50's. A British survey expedition used a Sunderland in 1952, 53 & 54 to fly in 250 tons of equipment from Young Sound on the N. E. Greenland coast to the expedition base camp at Britannia Lake – 800 miles from the Arctic Pole.

Pat Baird obviously experienced a lifetime of great mountain experiences & as one of those early members of the Edinburgh Section of the JMCS, benefited from the vision of those responsible for setting up & supported the club 75 years ago. His mountain experiences continued into the mid 1970's; a picture of him appears either in his 60's or close to it, in Doug Scott's book – Big Wall Climbs – with other members on one of Doug Scott's trips to Baffin Island. He died in Ottawa on 1st January 1984; his obituary in the journal of that year described him as "An old style explorer, a master of all trades". Under the wing of a good officer of the SMC he obviously learnt to be an all round mountaineer, however, I suspect the good officer's was unable extend his teaching to the use of a sea kayak, nor how to handle a husky dog sledge team!