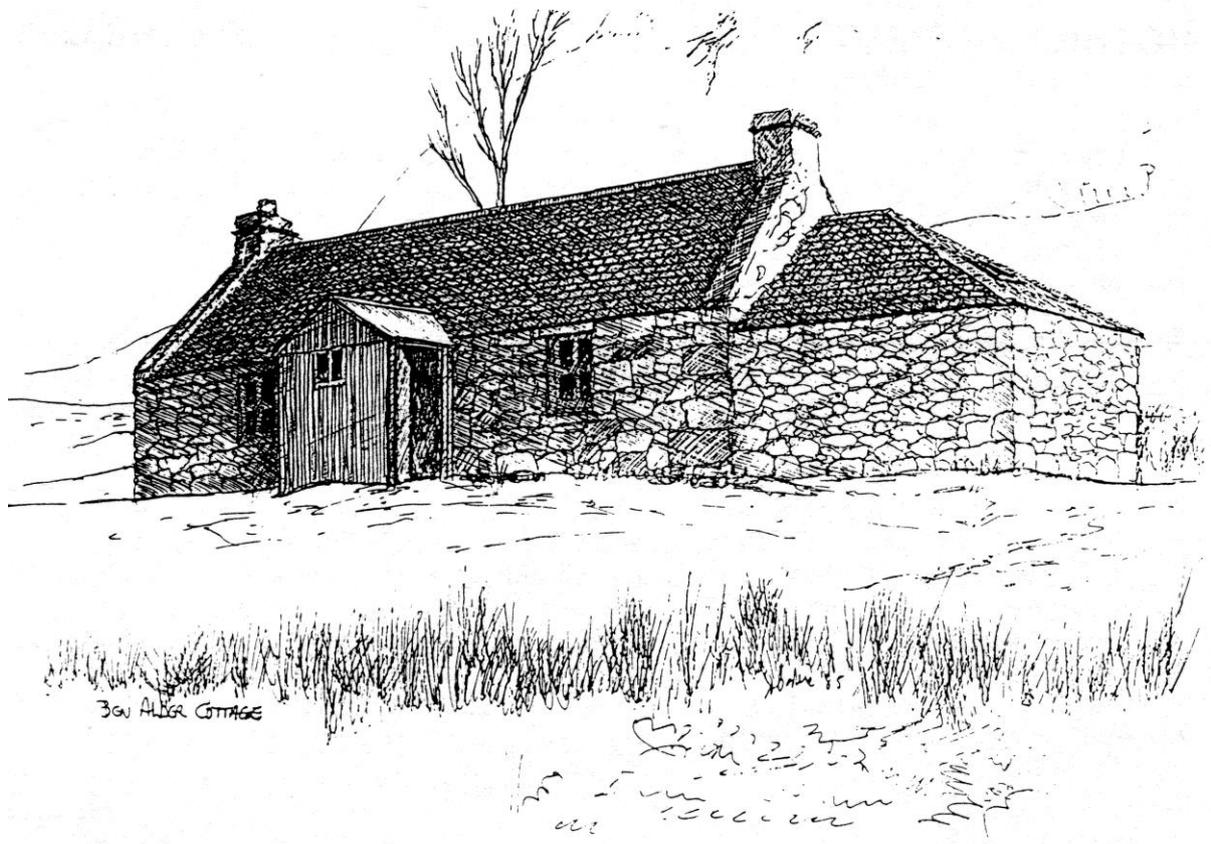


Bothies in print

In 1986, bothy project reports must have in short supply - the Journal Editor chose to include my article about bothies in books in the December Annual journal. An edited and précised copy of that article is reproduced below, the rest of the text dips into what has been published, bothy-wise, since 1986.

'Some bothies are so frequently written about that it is not hard to unearth a reference to those bothies in hill walking and similar books – obviously it is obviously the longest serving and most popular bothies that are going to be amongst those most easily 'unearthed'.

Three MBA maintained bothies, in particular, are amongst the longest serving and most popular, and thus most frequently written about. In fact the three, Ben Alder, Corrou and Shenavall have been so frequently written about that they are in a league of their own. Which one heads the league? – well, it's a guess but maybe Shenavall. A picture of Beinn Dearg (Beag or Mhor) with Shenavall in the foreground is almost obligatory when the hills of Wester Ross and Dundonell are being written about. Such a classic view appears in the *SMC Northern Highlands District Guide*, published by the Scottish Mountaineering Trust in 1974, *The Big Walks* (Diadem, 1980), Hamish Brown's *Hamish's Mountain Walk* (Gollanz, 1978), and *Scottish Mountain Climbs* by Donald Bennet (BT Batsford, 1979), not to mention MBA Journal No. 30. W H Murray's classic book *Undiscovered Scotland* originally published in 1951 and republished (as a double book with *Mountaineering in Scotland*) by Diadem in 1979, tells of the early days of usage at Shenavall when you could reasonably expect to have it to yourself, and of the last occupation in 1941. *Sunday Telegraph* reporter Ivan Rowan overnighted at Shenavall and wrote "Shenavall is one of the great bothies. You put your sleeping bag down on the bare floorboards knowing you have a dry roof, iron cooking pans with which to heat breakfast and fuel to ward off the wintry cold." The inevitable photograph of Shenavall with Beinn Dearg in the background accompanies the article. In contrast, Hamish Brown writes of Shenavall, on a visit 7 years prior to Ivan Rowell's, "I'd shifted my bed as the roof began to leak, the drops tinkling merrily into assorted pots and pans."



Blood, corpses and ghostly goings on feature regularly in tales of Ben Alder bothy, the first two usually relating to deer stalking activity, but men, stout and true, such as Professor Robin Grieve are not afraid to admit to ghostly experiences at Ben Alder. Such experiences are the subject of articles in various magazines e.g. The

Scots Magazine, November 1984, which taken with various walking articles about the bothy e.g. *Classic Walks* (Diadem, 1982), keep Ben Alder in hot pursuit of Shenavall's claim to the number one spot. *Undiscovered Scotland* contains a very early reference to the use of Ben Alder Cottage as a bothy, but strangely W. A. Smith asserts "that Ben Alder ... is now ruinous" in his book *Hill Paths in Scotland* (McNiven & Wallace, 1937). The *Classic Walks* article is accompanied by two good photographs of the bothy, while Phil Gribbon recounts his tale of "5 ways to Ben Alder Cottage" in *The Winding Trail*, (Diadem, 1981), originally an SMC Journal article.

Corrour is probably the longest serving of the bothies, available for at least 60 years as Affleck Gray told us last year. Situated in the Lairig Ghru, only once have I found it not mentioned in an article about this famous through route, and that was in *Hill Paths in Scotland*. Perhaps in 1937, Smith did not consider it politic to admit visiting the bothy. Contrast the modern day Corrour, pictured often, for example in *Hamish's Mountain Walk* with its state prior to renovation in 1950, as seen in Ben Humble's *On Scottish Hills* (Chapman & Hall, 1946). Humble wrote "Corrour was indeed a haven ... but no one had been there since January, and the whole place was very damp. The visitors' book was in a fourth edition. In less than 6 months, 170 had spent at least 1 night there." Popular even in those days.

One of the earliest references to a cottage which today we use as a bothy, is not in a walker's or climber's book but in a railway enthusiasts book. A.J. Thomas recounts in his book *The West Highland Railway* (David & Charles, 1965, republished 1984), an epic journey in 1889 across Rannoch Moor, ending at Gorton. Gorton struck me as an ordinary bothy. John Keay in *Highland Drove* (John Murray, 1984), however, thought different, writing "We left Gorton with reluctance. The bothy with its pine panelling and its little sash windows still glazed was the best we had encountered."

Opinions obviously do vary. In 1980 I stayed at Camban, it was immaculate and I rated it as a five star bothy. In *Walking Through Scotland* (David & Charles, 1981) David and Kathleen McInnes rate Camban as one star, although the full quote is needed to justify the grading. They wrote: "the youth hostel (Allt Beithe) on a relative scale for that area merits not one but two stars. One star would go to Camban 2 miles to the west, with hardly more than four walls and a roof", although they do add "It is a very snug cottage with a sleeping loft. When we passed by we found that its transient guests had left it clean and tidy" - just as I had found it, comparing it favourably with the clutter at Allt Beithe. Camban is on such an excellent and classic route, Glen Affric to Shiel Bridge that it gets quite a few mentions. Ben Humble (*On Scottish Hills* again) proves the point well before MBA days: "Names and dates scrawled all over the inside of the walls of the deserted cottage of Camban proved that hundreds of adventurers had gone through the glen and that many of them had spent a night there".

John Keay, again in *Highland Drove*, (which is another book worth reading despite the off-beat topic) writes of Camasunary on Skye: "Though small and forlorn, the bothy had a roof and windows." Camasunary, the bay of the fair shieling, both Keay and Seton Gordon agree. Keay's description is accurate "beneath this forbidding spectacle (Bla Bheinn) Camasunary nestles in pastoral serenity, an island of green between the black and tan of heather and bracken and the grey churning sea", and the bothy is so depicted in Poucher's book *Highlands of Scotland* (Constable, 1983) - the observant will note that Poucher was there before the MBA's renovation, when Camasunary had two grey slated gables facing out to sea. Seton Gordon in *Highland Summer* (Cassell & Co, 1971) writes of a much quieter, wartime, Camasunary "south of Sgurr na Stri, at Camasunary ... is one of the loneliest houses on Skye, where a shepherd once lived and where the postman (a good walker) delivered mail once a week." Seton Gordon goes on to describe how he listened with the shepherd to Winston Churchill's radio broadcast announcing to the nation that Allied Forces had retreated from the beaches at Dunkirk.

Writing of trips made in the late 40s and early 50s, Elizabeth Boyd-Orr in *Cross Country Walks in the Western Highlands* (Oliver & Boyd, 1952) describes Lairig Leacach as a bothy, but Staoineag as an unoccupied house and Meanach as a vacant cottage. I guess that Lairig Leacach was in use then as an open bothy but Staoineag and Meanach could not be used as such, or at least not without the owner's blessing. W.A. Smith writing around 1937, in the book referred to earlier, says "Coming from Nethy Bridge, you can drive the seven miles to Rebhoan (Ryvoan)", a change of name, a change in state of the road. Further east, and more recently, Robert Smith writes (*In Grampian Ways - Journeys over the Mounth* (Melvin Press, 1980) "The Gelder pass leads to the Geldershiel, the Ruigh an Bhan Righ or the Queen's Shiel, which was at one time a popular Royal picnic spot. It was in this solid stone building ... that Queen Victoria had tea with the exiled Empress Eugene of France ... the ponies on that outing were housed in the stables a few yards away but nowadays the occupants are hill walkers and climbers." In the same book, Smith writes briefly about Allt Scheicheachan with the

interest being where he notes that one J.B.Hart had written in the bothy book: "Happiness is a hot bothy" and he delivered his verdict on Allt Scheacheachan: "This is bothy is cold". The next visitor retorts: "Mr Hart ought not to look a gift bothy in the mouth". Dave Dixon, the MO at that time, gets an honourable mention, one of several MBA worthies to have appeared in print in connection with the bothies they maintain.

Almost every one of the Scottish MBA maintained bothies appears in one book or another. If it's not in a book, then in a magazine somewhere. *The Scots Magazine* reported on a workparty at Faindouran in November 1980 whilst Camban was the colour front cover subject in June 1983 and many others have appeared in the depths of its pages. Each May, a west to east coast migration occurs in Scotland. Known as the Ultimate Challenge, it is reported upon in each November's *The Great Outdoors* magazine. Who can blame the Challengers for using the bothies, especially these last three rain soaked Mays and so inevitably these bothies appear in the report usually with one photograph to provide variety from the 'backpackers in a glen/on a Munro' type of photograph. Jean's Hut demolition made more column inches of news in the climbing press than it did in ten years of existence. Peanmeanach has featured in *The Great Outdoors*, but on a different level, this bothy was also the subject of a final year College thesis that came my way.

The English bothies are a bit more elusive. Greg's Hut on Cross Fell, being on the Pennine Way is frequently featured while Top Withens has, surprisingly, appeared just one, in *Wainwright on the Pennine Way* (Michael Joseph, 1985), but that's because it is on the least photogenic side of the ruinous Top Withens farmhouse. Anonymous, too, probably are the Welsh bothies, although I admit my research for that part of the world has been pretty thin.

I could go on, the store of material is by no means exhausted, but I won't (you'll be relieved to read). My interest has led me to read and enjoy books that otherwise I might not have opened – I'll leave you to take up the pleasures of fire-side bothying.'

The world has changed a lot since 1986, and both the MBA and the world of print and book publishing have had to change to survive in that changed world. The arrival of personal computers and the internet are of course significant factors in our changed world. The laborious process of typing out the MBA's newsletters and the annual journal on a basic word processing package has been replaced by sophisticated desktop publishing with the typed word, pictures and photographs e-mailed off to the printer who can also look after postal distribution provided another piece of computing software supplies the addresses.

The focus of book publishing is different now. Big, glossy books like *Classic Walks* and its companion books, *Wild Walks* and *The Big Walks* and W.A.Poucher's venture into photo-essays *The Highlands of Scotland*, with a sprinkling of bothy photographs in each book, are a thing of the past. The high cost of printing such glossy books requires a sizeable print run for which, I guess, sufficient sales are not made in the face of increased, internet-based competition, and so publishers and authors have reverted to the era of W A Smith and Elizabeth Boyd-Ord: smaller books in smaller print runs selling to smaller, niche markets.

And the niche can be cut several ways. In the first decade of the new Millennium, Millrace, a family firm if ever there was one, published two or three books each year which not only covered a variety of off-beat topics written by authors with distinctive styles (some were of the Marmite category, 'either you love or hate them') but each book was printed on a rare and distinctive paper which was as much a feature of each book as the written content and excellent black & white, pen & ink drawings. Graham Wilson is an author whose style I enjoy but I imagine others may dislike, and his book *A Measure of Munros*, published by Millrace in 2005, includes a chapter entitled 'Bothies, bivouacs and British Rail', not that one would imagine bothies and bivouacs make good bed fellows with the now lamented British Rail. But they do - jump off a train on the West Highland Line and follow one of the many possible cross-country expeditions made viable by the presence of the bothies that we maintain, and return to civilisation (or the madness of modern-day life, depending on your point of view) by catching a train on the Highland line (Inverness to Perth) if you journey east, or the Kyle line (Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh) if you head north. Trains open up bothy trip

options. Graham starts off describing such a trip, and digresses into a discourse in praise of the MBA's work, prose that must have made pleasant reading for many of the Association's Maintenance Organisers. Gerry Dale's drawings of Ben Alder Cottage and one of Knoydart's now ruinous settlements are found amongst his many illustrations throughout Graham's book.

Several of the books referred to in my 1986 article are included in a list of useful books at the back of *A Measure of Munros* as are two other interesting books - Craig Caldwell's *Climb Every Mountain* (MacDonald & Co, 1990) and Elizabeth Allen's *Burn on the Hill* (Bidean Books, 1995). Craig's account of his epic continuous journey to climb all the Munros and Corbetts is a good read, especially if you admire tenacity, and is also known in both circles for its attempts to avoid identifying the location of some bothies by claims to have camped (but enjoyed the fire) at the location of an MBA maintained bothy - fair enough, bothy publicity was very sensitive at the time, and Craig was an active MBA member. Elizabeth Allen's book is an excellent example of niche-market publishing. The niche here is to describe the hill wanderings of a rather eccentric character, Archibald Ronnie Graham Burn, a Reverend, and the first man to climb all the Munros and Corbetts of Scotland, written on the back of the discovery of an incomplete set of Burn's diaries. It is a fascinating book, giving a rare insight to life in the Highlands as the 19th century turned into the 20th, not to mention the upper-class tendencies of the early SMC members, and of Ronnie Burn's own type - graduates without a clear view as to what they could do with their degree. It is a true niche book, only 1000 books were printed, each individually numbered. The missing diaries cover Burn's stravaiging through the Southern & Cairngorm Highlands, and so it is a selection of the bothies that we now



Camban, circa 1905 from the MBA archive

maintain in our North West Highlands & Islands and South West Highlands & Islands MBA Areas that get a mention, together with several homes which have now gone - abandoned and tumbled down, or inundated under the various hydro-electric schemes that required lochs to be damned and increased in size. A photograph of Camban circa 1905 is included amongst the selection of photographs of a long gone era.

Another minister, the Reverend A E Robertson is credited with being the first Munroist, and an account of his hill

wanderings was published by Peter Drummond and Ian Mitchell (of *Mountain Days and Bothy Nights* fame) in their excellent book *The First Munroist* (The Ernest Press, 1993), which, like *Burn on the Hill*, gives a fascinating insight into life and hill walking in the Scottish Highlands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The book again concentrates on the Western and Northern Highland areas with reference to various of the homes that we now maintain as bothies. A photograph of Ben Alder Cottage, looking more aged than it does now and the same photograph of Camban as in Elizabeth Allan's book appear in this second book on priestly perambulations.

Accounts of epic journeys have become a popular theme for hill-walking books in this new era of publishing. Dave Hewitt, who as editor of the satirical hill walking 'fanzine' *The Angry Corrie* reported on many of the bureaucratic goings on in the MBA, was the first to face the challenge of walking Scotland's watershed. Perhaps surprisingly, the watershed first heads east from its southernmost point at Peel Fell on the border before turning north - at the first of the MBA's bothies that Dave used - Over Phawhope. Gorton, Ben Alder, (the now closed) Culra, Luib Chonnal, Kinbreack, Camban, Maol Bhuidhe and Knockdamph followed, bothies on the watershed. Kearvaig also made it onto the list as his epic finished at Cape Wrath. Peter Wright in his book *Ribbon of Wildness* (Luath Press, 2010) describes a route where, north of Maol Bhuidhe, he heads for John o' Groats, and readers with time to spare can follow the on-line debate as to where the true watershed

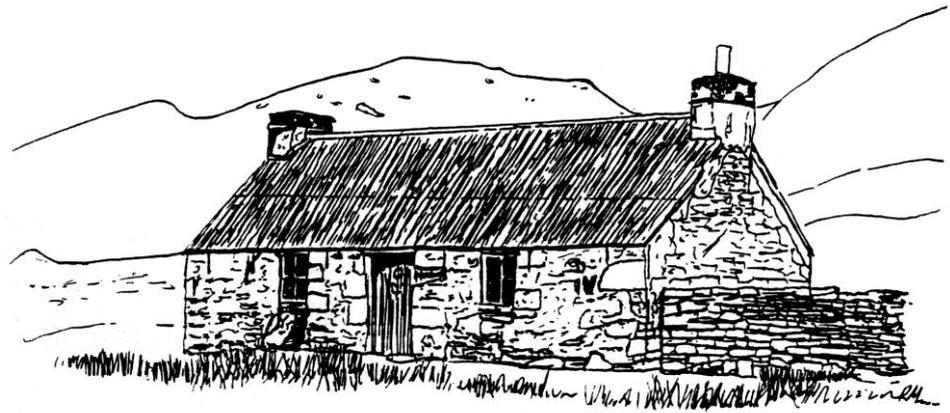
lies. In my view it can lie anywhere between these two extremities of Scotland's northern coastline. Dave Hewitt's story, *Walking the Watershed* (TACIT Press, 1994) (and now readable on the internet) is the more light-hearted account of the trek, with some concentration on the personal battles to be fought on such a long walk, especially when the weather is unseasonable and simply horrible for long spells. Peter Wright used the same bothies and his book is a more comprehensive guide with a good dose of geographical and historic detail but as he made the trek over a number of trips, he didn't face the personal battles faced by Dave Hewitt on his continuous journey, Border to Cape.

In his book *Hamish's Mountain Walk* Hamish Brown discusses the personal battles such long treks create. The story of his successful, first continuous round of the Munros was almost certainly the first book to be published on such a trip, and he spends some time discussing both the physical and mental difficulties encountered on earlier, unsuccessful attempts at a continuous round, for example by the Ripley brothers. Mike Cawthorne completed such a round in 1986. His book *Wilderness Dreams* (In Pinn Publishing 2007) devotes half its pages to the tale of this continuous round of the Munros. In acknowledging that for 5 nights "Camban's dripping roof and uneven walls gave refuge far superior to the thin nylon of my tent", Mike highlights the lift to the psyche on such a trip of a night or two in the bothies we maintain. His approach was very different to Hamish's round 12 years earlier. Mike had company, a long-time friend, Dave: a mental challenge shared is perhaps a mental challenge halved. Hamish had detailed plans, Mike and Dave a simple strategy, to lay siege to each area of Munros before moving on, the 5 nights at Camban was not an unusual ploy. And Dave had to return to Helensburgh twice a month to collect his only source of income, unemployment benefit, causing them to forsake Hamish's doctrine of self-propulsion. The Fords of Avon refuge and Corroul were the sole bothies of their trip. Nights at Sourlies, Kinbreack and Shenavall were lost to over-ambition on Loch Nevis side, a preference to stay high above Glen Kingie and stalking restrictions on the Fisherfield estate, and to contentment with the delights of camping, contentment and delights I have never felt under canvas (or thin nylon!).

13 years later,
Mike Cawthorne
undertook a
second epic trip, a
continuous, winter
round, on foot, of
the Munros above
1000M. Described
as 'arguably the
last great journey
to be undertaken
in Britain', the trip
is recounted in

Hell of a Journey,

(Mercat Press, 2000). Glenbeg (now closed), Shenavall, Camban, Kinbreack, Culra, Corroul and Meanach were the predictable bothies of this trip. Mike does sensibly tell of a debate held with a fellow hillwalker about the value and artificiality of such an epic. The now ruinous Nest of Fannich, Culra and Corroul bothies make it into the pictures section.



Meanach bothy

Mike Cawthorne's *Wilderness Dreams* is ostensibly about wilderness walking trips, his last chapter recounts a trip in the dark days of December from Forsinard to Cape Wrath, with overnights at The Croft House and Ach nan Clach bothies, and I suspect Strabeg and Kearvaig bothies - Mike is careful not to name these last two. Strange, since three chapters earlier, he writes of the efforts of a couple who, despite lacking the good health and youthfulness required, attempt to live a crofting life at Strathan bothy. Legal eviction brought this unsuccessful exploit to a close. The next chapter describes the successful 30 year occupation of Strathchailleach bothy by Sandy McRory, two strange

chapters in what is otherwise a hill-walking/trekking book. James Carron's book *Highland Hermit* (Amenta Publishing, 2010) is simply a biography of James McRory Smith, 'Sandy McRory', who lived a near hermit existence 1963 - 1994 at Strathchailleach, and presents a balanced portrayal of the MBA's involvement at this bothy from the time in early 1979 when a severe winter storm caused a partial collapse of one of the gable walls. The description of Sandy's life at Strathchailleach is an interesting comparison with the lives at the remote Highland homes described in the books on Burns and Robertson described earlier.

The MBA is of course a contributor to the fund of bothy literature. The Newsletters and Annual Journal, now supplied to members as quarterly Journals, are a significant source of bothy stories and historical information, and long may they be so, there are plenty of members with the curiosity and writing skills to make our Journals an interesting read. But are these just transient publications? - I suspect not, I guess that many members keep a library of their journals. But efforts have been made to make available the best of the writings on a more permanent basis. In 1989 and 1999 two books were published, *Tunskeen and 25 Years More* and *Sleeping Under a Simple Roof* (both privately published and now out of print) and very recently the MBA has published its 50th Anniversary book *Mountain Bothies : Celebrating 50 Years of the MBA* (see elsewhere on this web-site for purchase details). All three are a mixture of 'best of the past' and newly written work, providing a wealth of information on bothy renovation and maintenance activities and bothy history. The three publications also include a wide range of drawings and photographs. Interesting reading, well worth acquiring.

There is a lot more bothy material in print, of greater or lesser relevance and interest, as I said in 1986, I could go on, but I won't. And then there is vast amount of material on the internet. I leave you to explore that for yourself.

So, that's it. I hope you have enjoyed reading this update of my 1986 article. It has certainly made me realise how the publishing world has changed. But I still get great pleasure from the printed word.

Richard Genner, October 2015

More, Interesting Books

Title	Author	Publisher/date	My view
<i>SMC District Guides</i>	Various authors	Various editions, various dates	Current editions are factual but uninspiring, look for first and second editions for a better, historical perspective
<i>Hamish's Groats End Walk</i>	Hamish Brown	Victor Gollancz, 1981	Companion book to his <i>Mountain Walk</i> , and again informative and easy reading
<i>The First Fifty</i>	Muriel Gray	Corgis Books, 1993	Easy reading and amusing. The chapter on bothying reminds us not to take ourselves too seriously
<i>The Last One Hundred</i>	Hamish Brown	Mainstream Publishing, 1994	A response of sorts to Muriel Grey's book. An anthology of articles published elsewhere by Hamish
<i>The Bothy Brew</i>	Hamish Brown	Luath Press, 1993	A further collection of Hamish' stories
<i>A View from the Ridge</i>	Ian R Mitchell, David Brown	Luath Press, 2007	A companion book to <i>Mountain Days and Bothy Nights</i> , but has never achieved classic status.
<i>Isolation Shepherd</i>	Iain R Thompson	Bidean Books 1983, and Birlinn Limited, 2001	An informative and at times evocative account by one of the last shepherds to take up a simple, remote lifestyle (in 1956) before hydro-electric schemes altered the landscape of the Monar District.
<i>A Last Wild Place, and others in the series</i>	Mike Tomkies	Jonathan Cape, 1984	Living a simple and near hermit - like life on Loch Shiel-side, self-taught naturalist Mike writes fascinating accounts of his studies of Highland wildlife
<i>Always a Little Further</i>	Alistair Borthwick	Faber, 1939, Re-published 1983 Diadem Books	A modern day classic describing climbing and bothying long before Bernard Heath founded the MBA
<i>Miss Mckenzie couldn't see the wind</i>	David Urquhart	David Urquart Maclean, 2010	One of the few auto-biographical accounts of a childhood at a home we now use as a bothy - Shenavall. A revealing description of the hardships of the life there
<i>A Hundred Years in the Highlands</i>	Osgood MacKenzie	Edward Arnold & Co., 1921 Revised 1949, Geoffrey Bles Ltd	It's necessary to read past the slaughter of all local highland wildlife to see life from the perspective of a Highland laird