

“A Childhood at Rannoch”, Part 4

Selected articles from the Rannoch School magazines

Introduction

In Part 1 of “A Childhood at Rannoch” I wrote about Hairy Dan and what probably happened to him. Here is the earlier half of his story, discovered in the “Rannoch Record” magazine, 1965-67, page 47. The Rannoch magazines have been archived by the *Rannoch Association Trust* and are available as pdf scans from www.exrannoch.com. The photograph of Hairy Dan is from “The Rannoch Anthology, 40 years on” by Alec Cunningham and Daphne Banks, page 176. The story about Rannoch’s tramp first appeared in “The Rag” as “The Anals of Hairy Dan”, much to Dougal Greig’s horror and the Rannoch School boys’ amusement. I was informed that Dougal Greig had “The Rag” immediately recalled and pulped, which added even more to its notoriety. The interview with Hairy Dan took place in the ice house on the Dall estate. The author informed me that he “went on to a career in book publishing, with the BBC and then as a charity consultant. Perhaps this piece was the start of these various interests.”

On the off chance that I would find something, I googled “Hairy Dan Rannoch” and found a very interesting and detailed account of Hamish Brown’s memories of days with Braehead pupils at Rannoch in the 1960s called “At School in the Black Wood”. He and the children also encountered Hairy Dan, who was still in residence in the ice house at Dall.

www.hamishbrown.info/html/the_black_wood.html

Barbara Grimm-Zaluska, October 2017

The Annals of Hairy Dan

Information gathered for “The Rag” in a personal interview.

Doubtless sometime during this term Dan will be seen around this area again. Black Dan, as he is called in the tramp world is, in fact, James MacDonald, who was born into a gypsy camp on the 4th November, 1924. He followed this camp until he was 16, when he and a friend decided to try their luck on their own. But fate was cruel, for his friend was drowned while swimming in a river only a year or so later, and since this time Dan has wandered mostly on his own. He maintains that Nature is his best friend, and that she is always around. Sometimes he would join up with a small band of wandering tramps, but after a few days the members of the group would slowly drift apart.

It was in 1944, when Dan was a member of one of those bands, that a press-gang saw them in a hay-yard, and gave chase. The band scattered though, and Dan got a lift on a lorry that took him north.

Hence, Dan’s area of roaming shifted from the Borders to the West coast, between Mallaig and Argyll, but in 1952 he moved again to the area centred around Loch Rannoch, being tempted by the promise of the Great North Road.

Dan is a man of routine and planning in his wanderings. In the summer he spends a lot of time on the Great North Road (from Newtonmore to Dunkeld), sometimes getting five shillings from a driver. He gets up at 1 p.m. every day.

When asked what he thought about politics, he admitted they did not affect him, saying, “Politics come next to Elizabeth I, or is it II? Not to worry who’s in. Not Labour anyway.” (The Conservatives were in at this time.) He did say though, that Sherwood, the big, tall, grey tramp who is to be found around Tummel, was an authority on the subject.

Dan had other stories of his own to tell; of how he had once made a pair of bagpipes out of steel pipes and an old leather bag. They worked all right until one day the bag burst on a high note, and one of the pipes hit him in the face.

Dan does not often have the fortune to come by a dram but he told us of one time when he did. It was on one of the occasions he was let into a pub., and he was not only let in, but people kept buying him drinks. Feeling fine, Dan walked slowly out of the pub. He sniffed the fresh air – he claims – and “the world got darker and came nearer, then went back and started to whirl.” Dan decided that the best thing to do would be to sit down, so he made for the tarmac in front of him to avoid the wet ground. When he sat down, he did so in a foot of water, and it took him a long time to find the edge of the loch again. Only last winter, 40-year-old Dan had to be levered off the ground because he had become frozen to it.”



Hairy Dan with his bike and dog

Keith B. Smith

(N.B. This article first appeared in “The Rag” in July, 1965.)