

From *The Scotsman*, 4 March 2013

Obituary: Dr Donald Bennet OBE, lecturer, mountaineer and writer

Born: 6 November, 1928, in London. Died: 7 February, 2013, in Glasgow, aged 84

Donald Bennet devoted a large part of his life to mountaineering and to assiduous service to the mountaineering community, particularly as an author and editor of guidebooks, and most notably as the editor of the Scottish Mountaineering Club's highly successful and effective guide to the Munros.

Professionally, Donald taught engineering at Strathclyde University, retiring in 1987 as Reader in the Department of Thermodynamics. His specialism in nuclear engineering found expression in his book *Elements of Nuclear Power*. First published in 1971, it rapidly became a standard text and went through three editions.

But mountains and mountaineering were the shaping force of Donald's life. Brought up in Edinburgh, as a schoolboy at Melville College he was already exploring the Border fells and then the Highland hills in strenuous tours by bike and youth hostel. He started climbing while a student of engineering at Heriot-Watt College and quickly amassed a formidable record of Scottish climbs.

In 1951, his first visit to the Alps yielded a choice selection of serious classic peaks. Even his National Service in the Royal Air Force from 1952 to 1955 was turned to good account: an RAF Mountaineering Association expedition to the Himalaya gave him the opportunity to make half-a-dozen first ascents of peaks of up to 21,000ft in Kulu and Lahoul.

Back in civilian life, Donald took up an instructor post at the Outward Bound school at Eskdale in the Lake District, at that time under the illustrious leadership of Eric Shipton – though it turned out that running an outdoor centre was not Shipton's *métier*. This was where Donald met his wife Anne; when he resumed his teaching career at Strathclyde University, they set up what became their life-long home in Bearsden. Their two sons, John and Allan, both became almost willy-nilly keen outdoorsmen themselves, one a climber, one a cyclist.

Into the 1990s, Donald's climbing and skiing ranged across the world. Besides the Himalayas, he climbed in Greenland, the Rockies, Peru, the Alps, the Pyrenees and Tatras, and Kenya. He has the first ascents of about a dozen peaks to his credit. Ropemates attest to his compact strength, his dogged determination, his organising ability, and his sheer competence and efficiency as a mountaineer.

A matching passion was photography, to which Donald brought a sensitive vision and intense application. His collection of photo-essays, *Scottish Mountain Climbs* of 1980, is imbued with deep feeling for the hills.

But the energy Donald devoted to climbing was more than matched by his extraordinary record of service to the outdoors community over more than 40 years. From the mid-1950s onwards, he served the Scottish Mountaineering Club in a range of roles, most notably in the demanding post of honorary secretary for 12 years. In 1969-70, he was one of the prime movers in the formation of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland, to give a stronger voice to mountaineering concerns and to mountain conservation; later he served for five years as treasurer of the council.

In 1982, Donald served two terms on the Countryside Commission for Scotland, a quietly stalwart advocate for recreation and access interests. Access became a major concern over 20 years; he was closely involved in the National Access Forum and its work on the Access Concordat, which in turn did much to foster the climate in which our current, very positive access rights could be formulated.

On the same theme, Donald served as a director of the Scottish Rights Of Way Society from 1989 to 1993, and as its chair until 2000. The society has a good claim to be the world's oldest-established national recreation interest group; indeed, during Donald's term as chair it celebrated its 150th anniversary.

Driven on by Donald's energy and insight, the society acquired an office and a professional staff team, undertook a campaign of signposting of rights of way across Scotland (not a few of which signs Donald planted himself); and upgraded and computerised its inventory of Scottish paths. Donald also edited two revisions of the society's guidebook, *The Hill Tracks of Scotland*, in a more appealing modern format.

Perhaps the high point of Donald's efforts was in the writing and production of a wide range of mountain guidebooks. He had first ventured into writing guides as far back as the early 1970s, with a guide to the Staunings Alps that stemmed from his pioneering explorations in Greenland, and which confirmed his exceptional aptitude for mountain topography.

He then took on the writing of new editions of the Scottish Mountaineering Club's regional hill-walking guides to the Southern, Western, and Northern Highlands. His enthusiastic and authoritative text and his outstanding photographs in these guides were the product of assiduous fieldwork, carried through in the face of every variety of Highland weather.

Building on those books, in the mid-1980s, Donald played a central role as editor and contributor in the preparation and publication of the very successful SMC guides to the Munros, and later to the Corbetts. These books, selling scores of thousands of copies in successive editions, have been a major force in the upsurge of participation in hill-walking of the past three decades.

From 1987 onwards, after retiring from Strathclyde, Donald became production manager for Scottish Mountaineering Trust publications, responsible for a wide range of guides, histories and conservation books.

Again, he demonstrated his apparently limitless capacity for sustained hard work and painstaking attention to detail. Indeed, although he was working at home, Anne claimed she saw even less of him than when he had been employed at the university.

Donald's labours helped to generate hundreds of thousands of pounds for the charitable Scottish Mountaineering Trust; inevitably, Donald had been closely involved in setting up the SMT, too. The trust disburses those funds by way of grants, many of them to promote mountain conservation through land purchase and mountain path repair.

In well-deserved recognition of all these efforts, Donald was made OBE in 2001 an honorary member of the SMC, and honorary president of the Rights of Way Society.

In June 2001, all this heroic energy and commitment was brought to an abrupt and tragic halt when Donald suffered a massively disabling stroke. It fell to Anne to keep the light in his life through more than a decade of unflagging care and resilient cheerfulness.

That sad coda may mean that for many walkers and climbers in Scotland, Donald Bennet has become no more than a remote respected name; but all of us who enjoy the hills are greatly in his debt. His was a life of strenuous enjoyment of mountains, and of selfless service to mountains and mountaineers.