

Table Climbing for Beginners

The MacLeod Parliament of July 2014 will be remembered for many things but not least for a week of glorious sunshine on Skye and throughout in the Hebrides... the two hundred or so clansfolk attending from the nine Clan MacLeod Societies scattered across the globe could hardly believe their luck.

The week ended with the traditional climb, by those fit or foolhardy enough, up to the summit of *Healabhal Mhor*, otherwise known as MacLeod's Table North, one of a pair of distinctive flat topped hills that rise above the village of Dunvegan where the Parliament took place. Actually *Healabhal Mhor* or the Big Table at 469 metres in height, whilst indisputably greater in overall size, is slightly lower in height than its nearby sister, *Healabhal Bheag*, the Little Table, which stands at 489 metres or around 1600 feet.

Whatever the dimensions, the Big Table is taller and steeper than it looks from the serenity of Dunvegan village, facts that soon demonstrated themselves to our MacLeod climbing party. The start of the climb was at Osdale farmhouse. From there a party of around thirty of us followed a fairly well-worn path that steepened quickly as we made our way up through the heather. After a while the party had strung out quite a bit with the head of the dog having lost the tail. The sun blazed down and water stops were frequent. Kilts were seen to rest on the hillside. The trail followed the right hand side of a fairly steep ravine through which a stream ran far below. The pathways became indistinct. You followed the person in front trusting that they were also following someone who knew where they were going...

After a long hard climb which may have been around two hours (though it could have been three) we emerged into the glorious sunlit open space of MacLeod's table top and straggled on towards the cairn in its centre where the MacLeod climbing party slowly re-assembled. A piper played. Packs were downed. Recuperative whisky was passed around and possibly other refreshment too. The grand feat was recorded for posterity in many a photograph.

We wandered around the edges of the plateau marvelling at the wonderful views all around: towards the 'Little Table' *Healabhal Bheag* and to the Cuillins in glorious profile beyond, northwards down towards Dunvegan village nestling beside the loch below, and wonderful views out towards the mountains of Harris, and the outer Hebrides, clearly visible to the West.

We reflected on the legends of the Tables. Around the turn of the 15th century, Alasdair Crotach MacLeod, our 8th Chief, at a banquet hosted by King James IV in Edinburgh was goaded by a Lowland noble that he must be impressed by the magnificence of the banqueting hall at Holyrood compared to what he must have on Skye. MacLeod immediately boasted that his hall was finer, his banqueting tables were grander and lit by starlight rather than candles. The King overheard and a wager was made. And so, when he hosted a banquet for James and his court the following year, he took his guests up onto the table top at *Healabhal Mhor* on a clear night, with clansmen lining the route with torches, and maidens dancing under the stars. The feasting lasted until dawn and it was agreed that MacLeod had won his wager.

An older legend holds that when St Columba came to the island, he was not welcomed in the customary manner nor offered a place to eat, or rest his head. And so, during one of his sermons on hospitality, there was a mighty crash and the tops of these mountains were destroyed, leaving St Columba with a table to eat at and a bed to lie on.

No stormy weather marred our day however and eventually the MacLeod party wended its weary way back down the hillside to Osdale for further refreshment and return to Dunvegan ahead of our final night of the wonderful Parliament of 2014.

Al McLeod
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