

Obituary.

JOHN AIRD was very much a “one off” but he was also a man of many parts.

He was in his 89th year. He was born in 1923 at the family farm near the village of Closeburn in Nithsdale, Dumfries-shire. He attended primary school there and then went on to Dumfries Academy.

He worked on the farm but never really liked farm work or the cultivation of the soil, as could be seen from the state of his garden at Beechlawn! So as soon as he was eighteen, he volunteered for army service and joined the Royal Scots at Berwick-on-Tweed. He later transferred to the Royal Scots Fusiliers and landed in Normandy with the 11th Battalion three days after D Day. Towards the end of June 1944 he was badly wounded in the foot by mortar fire. He was repatriated and was eventually discharged in 1945 with a War Disability pension.

He decided to go in for law and went to Glasgow University where he graduated B.L.. During this period he became attracted to hill walking and in 1953 he came north to Inverness to be nearer the Highland hills. He joined the firm Stewart Rule & Co, in Church Street. That was when I first met him and we have been close friends ever since – almost sixty years.

John led an incredibly busy active life – quite apart from the law. He joined the Inverness Mountaineering Club and later became its first President. He also joined the Lovat Scouts Unit of the Territorial Army where he rose to the rank of Major. When the Territorial Army was restructured, he was invited to become an officer in the Queens Own Highlanders Bt of the Army Cadet Force. He retired as Colonel Commandant in 1988 and was awarded the Territorial Decoration. He had joined Ness Bank Church but due to his multifarious week-end activities, his church attendance was somewhat irregular.

Other interests included cross-country skiing, railways and railway history. He put in a lot of hard work with the Strathspey Railway Association. John loved trains and used to say he never caught a train without giving it a sporting chance of getting away without him! He was an active member for Real Ale. He took up wind surfing and scuba diving when he was about sixty – I remember him windsurfing on Loch Ness in subzero temperatures, covered in icicles.

His more cultural interests included classical music and the theatre. He became Chairman of the Friends of Eden Court Theatre and was also a regular attendee at the concerts and other cultural activities at Gordon McIntyre’s Clifton Hotel in Nairn and later at Music Nairn where he frequently fell asleep. He completed ascent of all 284 Munros (Scottish mountains over 3,000ft) and climbed extensively in the French and Austrian Alps – including the ascent of Mont Blanc and the Grossglockner.

As part of his army activities he took part ten times in the International long distance marches at Nijmegen in Holland. This involved marching 50km (about 34 miles) on each of four consecutive days. He had also been known to walk the 37 miles to Elgin to attend army meetings there – not a bad record for a man on a War Disability Pension! In connection with the pension he had to undergo periodical check-ups. When asked how far he could walk, he would reply “I don’t really know : I’ve never really tried”.

When the firm of Stewart Rule & Co was dissolved in the late 1960’s, he crossed Church Street to join Anderson Shaw & Gilbert with whom he worked till his retirement in 1988.

In later years, John became rather immobile and eventually became almost housebound. But he was well cared for by a team of care-workers. I would like to mention one of these – Cona McKenzie – who went far beyond the call of duty making his life more comfortable.

An old climbing friend, Ian Sutherland, met him last October and wrote me to say “I was aware that he was very frail but his voice was strong and his opinions were given with some force”.

Among John’s papers I came across the autobiography of a famous Scottish soldier Brigadier Frank Coutts of the KOSB. He had sent this copy to John and had inscribed on the front piece, ‘To John Aird with thanks and admiration for a gallant and distinguished career with the Fusilier Jocks and the Queen’s Own.

In case this has made you feel tired, I will conclude with a verse by John Muir the distinguished 19th century Scottish-American naturalist, which I think sums up John’s deep and abiding love of the mountains and the open air.

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings,
Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into the trees,
The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy,
While cares will drop off like autumn leaves”

John Muir