

WITNESSING THE BIG GREY MAN ON THE SCOTTISH PEAKS: INTERPRETATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ENVIRONMENT OF THE MOUNTAIN SUMMITS*

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ABSTRACT

The Cairngorms are a mountainous area in the north-east of Scotland, with some of the highest peaks in Great Britain. The summits of these mountains are inhospitable to humans due to low temperature, intense winds, and other adverse weather conditions, but nevertheless they have been a common destination for mountaineers for more than a century. While on the summits of the Cairngorms, especially on the highest peak Ben MacDhui, some mountaineers have experienced uncanny and frightening sightings and sounds of a ghost-like human-like entity called the Big Grey Man.

How have mountaineers interpreted their alleged encounters with the Big Grey Man? What role does the environment of mountain summits have in the explanations and interpretations of these sightings? The present work addresses these questions, relying on archival materials about alleged encounters with the Big Grey Man and the author's ethnographic research and interviews.

KEYWORDS: mountaineers • mountain summits • environment • supernatural encounters • scepticism

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INTRODUCTION

The Cairngorms are a mountain range located in north-eastern Scotland, within the natural area of the Cairngorms National Park, instituted in 2003 (Dahlberg et al. 2010: 217). Some of the highest peaks in Great Britain are in the Cairngorms, such as Ben MacDhui, 1309 metres and the second highest mountain in Britain after Ben Nevis, located in the Scottish Highlands.

In the Cairngorms, summits higher than 760 metres above sea level do not host trees due to the low temperatures and intensity of the wind, as shown in environmental research on the local mountain summits conducted since the 1960s (Pears 1967; 1968; James et al. 1994; Gordon et al. 1998; Nagy et al. 2013). Further studies have focused on the fauna of the highest summits, such as the ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*) (Watson 1965: 153; Gordon et al. 1998: 338). The presence of mist and snow, mainly in winter, makes the mountain summits of the Cairngorms an inhospitable environment for humans. Nevertheless, the summits of the Cairngorms are a common destination for mountaineers (Firsoff 1965; Scroggie 1989).

Some visitors to these Scottish summits have reported seeing or hearing an eerie and anomalous presence. This phenomenon is commonly known under the Scottish Gaelic names of *Ferla M(h)ór*, *Am Fear Liath Mór*, or the English name – and translation of the previous names – (Big) Grey Man (Gray 1970: 106), which I will use in this article. The Big Grey Man has been described as a giant ghost-like human-like creature that wanders the summits of Scottish peaks, where mountaineers can see it or hear its footsteps. When perceived, the Big Grey Man elicits feelings of fear and discomfort in the human witnesses (Ironsides and Reid 2024: 74), leading them to flee from the place (Alexander 1926; Perkins 1951–1952; Tewnion 1999). The Big Grey Man has gained popularity in mountaineers' folklore since the 1925 newspaper publication of Professor Norman Collie's (1859–1942) experience (*Aberdeen Press and Journal* 1925: 5; Gray 1970: 76–82). Since Collie's experience occurred during one of his visits to Ben MacDhui, the Big Grey Man has generally been associated with this peak (Alexander 1926; Gray 1970; Currie 1972), although it has been witnessed elsewhere in the Cairngorms (Perkins 1951–1952; Chesel 1988).

According to the mountaineer and author Affleck Gray, narratives about the Big Grey Man were probably older than Collie's experience and already shared among Scottish Gaelic-speaking locals – such as his own grandfather – before 1925, although records have largely vanished (Gray 1970: 108; Porter 1998: 7). Gray (1970: 33–34) also suggested that the folklore regarding the Big Grey Man could have started two centuries before, when the Scottish poet James Hogg (1770–1835) saw a giant human-like figure when ascending a mountain in around 1791. During a radio interview, Professor Norman MacDonald (1998) also traced the Big Grey Man's origin back to Hogg's experience.

The figure of the Big Grey Man has caught the attention of many, and there have been many different interpretations and explanations for the phenomenon (Mill 1987: 97), all of which can be related to human perception and direct experience of the environment as well as mountaineers' experience of certain mental and physical conditions.

In this regard, the following questions have been addressed in the present work. How have mountaineers interpreted encounters with the Big Grey Man in the past, and

today, based both on their direct experience and their indirect knowledge of the phenomenon? What role does the environment of the Cairngorms – especially Ben MacDhui, but also the other mountain summits – have in the encounters with and interpretations of the Big Grey Man?

RESEARCH METHODS AND MATERIALS

The research methods are various, combining ethnographic fieldwork, online archival materials and academic literature. The reason for the diverse research methods stems from the need to approach the topic of the Big Grey Man both historically and ethnographically. Ethnography indeed enlightens our understanding of the current relationship between the locals and the environment of the Cairngorms. At the same time, references to the history of encounters with the Big Grey Man in ethnographic interviews and conversations provided context to the current interpretations and significance of the entity, with further help from archival and academic sources.

I arranged ethnographic fieldwork in the city of Aberdeen and in the Cairngorms from September to December 2022 when I was a visiting doctoral student at the University of Aberdeen. Fieldwork consisted of visits to the Cairngorms, private conversations, observations and ethnographic interviews with locals. The interviews were conducted in English, recorded and transcribed, and became a crucial primary source. Excerpts from three interviews have been included in the article, specifically with the geologist and mountaineer Iain Young, the mountain guide and mountain rescue worker George Charles, and the mountaineer and retired university professor Ken Thomson. The interviewees were chosen due to their expertise in mountaineering and proximity to people and contexts where the Big Grey Man has been seen, heard, or discussed. The interviewees offered insights into the current interpretations of the Big Grey Man and the link to the environment of the Cairngorms. Contact with the interviewees was provided by scholars from the Anthropology department at the University of Aberdeen and members of the Cairngorm Club, a mountaineering association from the north-east of Scotland. Specifically, Thomson was contacted and interviewed due to his role as the secretary of the Cairngorm Club.

I approached the Cairngorm Club in Aberdeen since Norman Collie, former member and president, was the most renowned witness of the Big Grey Man. The support and help of the Club were fundamental in the provision of online archive materials. In fact, the Cairngorm Club's website hosts a free public archive of their bulletin the *Cairngorm Club Journal* dating back to its first issue in 1893, including four articles that present accounts of Big Grey Man encounters.

I consulted further public archive materials on the Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches website (see Currie 1972; MacDonald 1998), which hosts recordings of interviews, conversations, and songs in English and Scottish Gaelic, with a particular emphasis on Scottish folklore. As expected, the topic of the Big Grey Man has been covered in a few recorded interviews.

The following sections offer historical context on the Big Grey Man, drawing on articles published in the *Cairngorm Club Journal* between 1926 and 1999, and an analysis of ethnographic data collected in 2022.

This article draws on both academic and non-academic sources. The academic literature consulted primarily includes cultural research on supernatural and paranormal phenomena, with particular attention to the role of the environment in such experiences. Relevant studies (mainly focused on Western contexts, including Scotland) offer theoretical insights into the ghost-like character of the Big Grey Man, its geographic setting, and the environmental conditions associated with reported encounters.

Dagnall et al. 2020 illustrated the role of environmental factors in experiences of ghosts in haunted houses. However, the authors did not reduce the experiences to mere environmental stimulation. In fact, research data and the literature consulted were not abundant (*ibid.*: 1), nor did they show consistency or correspondence between the environmental cues of haunted houses and the specific experiences of the witnesses (*ibid.*: 9–10). The authors associated their partly inconclusive data and results with academic stigma and a lack of research on topics such as ghosts, the paranormal, and supernatural phenomena, and wished for further studies on these themes (*ibid.*).

Several studies have nevertheless offered insightful contributions on supernatural and paranormal phenomena in the West, including ghost sightings (Bader et al. 2010; Eaton 2018; Waskul 2018). These authors collected data from different research fields. Despite the diversity of these phenomena the authors agreed on the spread and persistence of supernatural and paranormal belief. With regards to ghosts, the authors generally paid attention to haunted houses and buildings where mediums and others detected the presence of ghosts through sense perception, ritual and investigation.

Rachel Ironside (2018) focused on dark tourism, drawing a connection between haunted places and ghost encounters. In a 2024 article, co-authored with Peter Reid, Ironside expanded this perspective to include the Big Grey Man as part of local folklore and the relationship between this phenomenon and the environment of the Cairngorms. The article centred on rural placemaking in Scotland, which is the result of physical engagement with rural places and narratives shared through digital platforms. Accordingly, the article strictly connected the environment to places and landscape populated by entities – such as the Big Grey Man – that are part and parcel of these geographies, as also observed by Jack Hunter (2024).

A further relevant theme relates to belief and disbelief in the paranormal (see McClenon 1995; Goldstein 2007; Roper 2018). James McClenon (1995) discussed supernatural healing and its empirical basis, regardless of the lack of scientific enquiry into the supernatural domain. Similarly to Dagnall et al. 2020, McClenon argued that the supernatural is often disbelieved and hence left unstudied, thus requiring further academic investigation. Diane Goldstein (2007) expressed a similar concern, observing that supernatural experiences are often contrasted with scientific rationalism and thus received with scepticism. At the same time, Goldstein argued against the disappearance of supernatural beliefs and narratives, when challenged by rational and scientific ideas. Jonathan Roper (2018) treated disbelief and scepticism in a different way: instead of considering scepticism as an external element to supernatural folklore, Roper focused on sceptical narratives as part and parcel of the same folkloric context which includes supernatural and paranormal beliefs. In this regard, comments by sceptical informants

in the present work can be considered relevant contributions to the folklore associated with the Big Grey Man.

Mountaineering is a third relevant theme. Several books have been written by British mountaineers who were engaged in hiking in mountain environments both in Scotland and abroad. These books are not academic works and are rather addressed to the wider public. Scottish mountaineers Valdemar Axel Firsoff (1965) and Sydney Scroggie (1989) recalled hiking in the Cairngorms, offering detailed descriptions of their respective mountaineering exploits. Scroggie recounted his unique perceptual experience and attachment with the environment of the Cairngorms as a blind man. The mountaineer Robert Macfarlane (2003) explored the human fascination with mountains and climbing, discussing the effect that mountain environments have on the perceptual and imaginative faculties of mountaineers. For this reason, Macfarlane referred to pareidolic phenomena and optical illusions such as the Spectre of the Brocken¹ (ibid.: 217), also mentioned during ethnographic fieldwork (FM: 2022b) and by Gray (1970: 33–42).

Gray connected the theme of mountaineering in the Cairngorms to the encounter experiences of the Big Grey Man. His approach was comparative and geographically broad, as he did not limit his discussion to a historical overview of the Big Grey Man and similar folkloric phenomena within Scotland. Gray rather extended his analysis, comparing the Big Grey Man to different perceptual and cultural phenomena, including the Spectre of the Brocken (ibid.: 33–42), the Buddhist concept of Bodhisattva (ibid.: 43–45) and visitors from space (ibid.: 68–75). In the conclusion to the book, Gray (ibid.: 106–123) provided a sceptical interpretation of the Big Grey Man, arguing that the Big Grey Man is not a real entity and that its perception should rather be seen as the effect of the peculiar mountain environment in the Cairngorms on the perception of mountaineers. In this regard, Gray highlighted the role of the environment in the perception of paranormal and supernatural phenomena, similarly to Macfarlane 2003; Bader et al. 2010; Eaton 2018; Ironside 2018; Waskul 2018; Dagnall et al. 2020 and Ironside and Reid 2024.

WITNESSES TO THE BIG GREY MAN: EXAMPLES FROM THE CAIRNGORM CLUB

At the end of 1925 the members of the Cairngorm Club decided to gather with Honorary President Collie for the last Club dinner of the year (Alexander 1926: 214). Collie was a professor of organic chemistry at University College London, with a solid reputation as both a scientist and a mountaineer (Baly 1943). On that occasion, Collie reported to the fellow members of the Club his witnessing of an “eerie” and “uncanny” presence on the highest Cairngorm peak, Ben MacDhui. That issue of the *Cairngorm Club Journal* reported Collie’s experience:²

when climbing alone on Ben Macdhui... [Collie] was returning from the Cairn in a mist when he began to think he heard some other thing than merely the noise of his own footsteps in the snow. For every few steps he took he heard a big crunch, and then another crunch, as if someone was walking after him, but taking steps three or four times the length of his own. He said to himself, ‘This is all nonsense’.

He listened and heard it again but could see nothing in the mist. As he walked on and the eerie “crunch, crunch” sounded behind him, he was seized with the most tremendous terror. Why, he did not know, for he did not mind being alone on the hills. But the uncanny something which he sensed caused fear to seize him by the throat. He took to his heels and ran, staggering blindly among the boulders, for four or five miles nearly down to Rothiemurchus Forest. That was an experience which made him feel that on no account would he ever venture back to the top of Ben Macdhui alone. (Alexander 1926: 214–215)

Collie was not the only mountaineer who had experienced an anomalous presence on the summit of Ben MacDhui. In fact, Collie himself had referred to a similar experience of the Scottish scientist and mountaineer Alexander Mitchell Kellas (1868–1921), who could see a “ten feet high” (ibid.: 214) human-like figure at midnight in June on the summit of Ben MacDhui. Kellas then recounted his sighting to Collie, about 12 years after Collie’s experience (ibid.).

The *Cairngorm Club Journal* reported Collie’s personal experience after it had been published in a Scottish newspaper (*Aberdeen Press and Journal* 1925: 5), receiving multiple responses through letters to the paper (Gray 1970: 76–82). Some letters suggested that Collie had a nervous breakdown on the summit of Ben MacDhui, whereas others shared similar encounter experiences of spectres and ghosts in misty mountainous areas in Scotland and abroad (ibid.). At the same time, Collie did not mention sightings of ghosts or the Big Grey Man in his account. Only in later publications (Baly 1943; Gray 1970; Mill 1987) were Collie’s experiences linked to the Big Grey Man, due to the similarities with Kellas’ and other mountaineers’ accounts that mentioned the Big Grey Man. Collie’s story and encounter remained popular and were recalled in the following decades, directly and indirectly. Eerie and strange experiences on mountain summits were linked to the encounter with the Big Grey Man by some mountaineers, within and outside the Cairngorm Club.

Sydney Scroggie was not a member of the Club but could recall a relevant experience. In his book *The Cairngorms: Scene and Unseen*, Scroggie (1989: 32–36) mentioned the figure of the Big Grey Man, associating it with his encounter of a soldier in the Cairngorms during the Second World War, before he lost his sight. Due to the soldier’s old-fashioned clothes and his isolation in the mist, Scroggie remembered this encounter as unusual and confusing, similarly to other Big Grey Man encounters.

Club member L. B. Perkins witnessed the Big Grey Man on a different summit, Ben Dubh, located next to Loch Lomond in the Scottish Highlands. Perkins (1951–1952: 257–258) recounted his experience in detail:

[Once I reached the top of Ben Dubh] I sat for a time and relaxed. I may have dozed off, but suddenly sat erect. Was I alone? I didn’t feel alone. Surely someone, something, was watching, studying me, from behind one of the cairns.... I jumped up and did a gyratory run round, in and out of the cairns. Nobody was there. I sat down again, still feeling watched.

The Grey Man! The thought came to my mind and a flood of recollections of metaphysical studies poured into my conscious thought.... Yet there was something – some nervous tension, something passing the thought to my brain that there was a better place for me than the summit of Ben Dubh.

I reached for my *familiar*, the only term I had for the complete and ingenious instrument with which all mountaineers provide themselves, a device indicating every variable factor concerning natural conditions, and with many more functions as well. "Check everything," said my mind, and I started. Temperature normal; wind direction and force normal; relative humidity normal; light value – a little low for the clear sky and sunshine I was enjoying, but so was the temperature, possibly my eyes had got over-acclimatised; magnetic field normal, as were total radiation from sun, colour of sky, ionisation – wait, ionisation was high. High indeed, it was visibly rising. I checked the temperature again. It was lower than before. Switching to humidity I found it rising; that was consistent with temperature drop. Light value was dropping, but sun's radiation the same. Ionisation was rising still and fairly rapidly, and a visible drop in temperature became apparent. I began to feel cold. The Grey Man or no, there was something inexplicable; and as I worked the instrument I felt fear, for I could feel darkness and cold creeping over me. Darkness and cold. No heat in the sun now and little light.

And then a sound came, a footfall, and I jumped up and fled. And as I did so, I thought I was followed, but had no time to look around and ran till I was exhausted and in bright sunlight again.

Perkins' experience cannot be considered a sighting, since his perception of the Big Grey Man was not visual. Perkins instead felt "some nervous tension" indicating the presence of a figure beside him, as did Collie. Accordingly, Perkins registered the feelings that the alleged presence of the Big Grey Man had elicited (suddenly colder) and surrounding environment (darker, more humid, more ionised). Like Collie, Perkins recounted his experience as uncanny, unpleasant, scary, and – to use his word – "inexplicable", leading him to flee from the summit as Collie did when he witnessed the Big Grey Man.

Another account of an encounter with the Big Grey Man was published in the *Cairngorm Club Journal* in 1988. The passage is part of the proceedings of the Club Annual Dinner 1987, when the discourse before the toast given by the Club member Tom Weir was transcribed and included in the *Journal* by Club member Anthony Chessel. On that occasion, Weir recounted the experience of Alexander "Sandy" Tewnion to the other participants at the dinner, including Tewnion himself:

[Collie's] story has chilled the blood of many ... ever since. Not only have they heard the crunch of the approaching feet and the noise of somebody trying to get into their bothy,³ but one man was so sure that that man was coming to him, and it was a grey man he reckoned he was seeing, and he's in this audience tonight and his name is Sandy Tewnion. Sandy was home on leave from the army and he'd taken his revolver with him. The story he tells is that it was in case he was hungry and he might shoot a ptarmigan. Anyway, here he was in Coire Etchachan when this shape actually came towards him; out came the gun and he fired three bullets into it and he didn't even stop to see if he'd made a kill. (Chessel 1988: 63)

Tewnion did not record any of the creature's physical features other than its "shape", presumably like that which Collie had witnessed. After shooting, Tewnion did not take time to observe the creature, which suggests how frightening the experience was. How-

ever, Tewnion “reckoned he was seeing” a Big Grey Man, as he might have associated his sighting with Collie’s experience and his subsequent sense of fear and discomfort.

Rather than Ben MacDhui, Tewnion witnessed the Big Grey Man on a different peak, specifically Coire Etchachan. Both peaks are in the Cairngorms and about four kilometres apart, which might lead to similar environmental and weather conditions on the summits and hence increase the chances of seeing or hearing the Big Grey Man.

Tewnion’s experience was neither told nor explored widely in the reported discourse due to the brevity of the encounter. However, Tewnion himself decided to report his sighting a decade later, in 1999.

Above the wind I heard a different sound, just like a loud footstep. It was followed by another ... then another ... separated by quite appreciable intervals, perhaps a couple of seconds. “It’s Ferla Mor!” was my instant reaction. No time was given to analyse and reject this idea. Through the eddying mist a strange shape loomed menacingly towards me, receded then came charging straight at me. Without stopping to think I whipped out my revolver and sent three rounds rapidly into the wraith. Crack! Crack! Crack! When the shape came on I turned and hared at break-neck speed down the path to Glen Derry. (Tewnion 1999: 345)

Tewnion’s personal experience narrative added a few more details than Weir’s third-person account, focusing on the threatening feeling elicited by the Big Grey Man and the sudden reaction of shooting the figure and fleeing. Tewnion also gave a more precise time frame for his encounter, dating it to October 1943.

He also recounted three other personal experiences of mountaineering in the Cairngorms that were in some way related to the Big Grey Man. The first episode happened in September 1939 when mountaineering with a friend around the Corrour Bothy, a mountain shelter in Aberdeenshire, when a column of smoke from a camping area was mistaken for the Big Grey Man (*ibid.*: 344). Two episodes reported after Tewnion’s encounter with the Big Grey Man refer to his camping experiences at high altitude in the Cairngorms in 1957 and 1972. In July 1957, Tewnion was on the summit of Ben MacDhui when he heard a whistle that he initially associated with the presence of the Big Grey Man before realising it was coming from Colonel Pat Baird, an Arctic explorer who was studying the formation of snow (*ibid.*: 346). Tewnion confused Baird with the Big Grey Man not just due to poor visibility in the rain and mist that day, but also due to Baird’s tall height. In summer 1972, during one of his camping Sundays, Tewnion met three mountaineers who had admitted having seen Tewnion earlier that day and mistaken him for the Big Grey Man, once more due to the misty, rainy weather (*ibid.*: 346–347).

These experiences reveal common patterns. Although encounters cannot always be described as ‘sightings’, when it is seen, the Big Grey Man appears to be taller than the average human, perhaps about ten feet, and with a human shape. The details of the figure are nevertheless vague due to the mist that usually surrounds it. When not seen, the Big Grey Man is perceived through sound. The figure makes noises, such as those described as “crunches” by Collie; or sounds that elicit a general feeling of eeriness, unpleasantness, discomfort, or fear. The presence of the Big Grey Man can also be revealed by sudden changes in the environment or the body of the witness, as happened to Perkins. Footprints in the snow and footsteps can also be seen and heard in the

vicinity of the figure, hence showing its presence. Snow, mist and rain are in fact common weather elements that favour an encounter with the Big Grey Man, which usually appears when visibility is scarce. Once a person witnesses the figure, the reaction can be sudden and aggressive, as happened to Tewnion; or, more frequently, the encounter leads the witness to flee abruptly and descend from where the Big Grey Man has been seen or heard.

These commonalities need further discussion in order to understand where they fit into the larger context of ghost folklore. The visual vagueness, acoustic disturbance and fearful presence of the Big Grey Man closely resemble features of ghosts that appear in indoor environments, such as haunted houses (Dagnall et al. 2020) and public buildings (Waskul 2018), as well as ghosts that haunt urban areas (Ironside 2018). Moreover, after the publication of Collie's story (*Aberdeen Press and Journal* 1925: 5), several readers of the newspaper article also related Collie's experience to ghosts and spectres in the mountains (Gray 1970: 76–82), as mentioned above. Therefore, the common patterns in witnessing the Big Grey Man could be contextualised in the larger milieu of ghost folklore, in Scotland as well as more generally in the Western world (Bader et al. 2010; Eaton 2018). At the same time, these commonalities negate neither the subjectivity and individuality of each witness' visual or auditory experience, nor any interpretation of the encountered phenomena, sometimes recalled with uncertainty ("The Grey Man or no" in Perkins 1951–1952: 258), sometimes immediately associated with the entity ("It's Ferla Mor!" was my instant reaction" in Tewnion 1999: 345).

Witnesses are not the only ones who have provided interpretations of the Big Grey Man. The next section includes additional interpretations, often marked by scepticism and disbelief.

SCEPTICISM AND NATURAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BIG GREY MAN

After Collie's experience and his disclosure to the members of the Cairngorm Club in 1925, the figure of the Big Grey Man gained popularity within the community of mountaineers in Scotland. At the same time, the existence of the figure remained doubted, even among some of the witnesses, such as Tewnion. When recounting his own encounter, Tewnion (1999: 345; emphasis added) questioned the reality of the figure.

Often too I have been asked "Was it *really* Ferla Mor that you saw?" At the moment of shooting I had no doubt, but certainty lasted only for the few moments of panic. Down in Glen Derry when the cold light of reason reasserted itself, several possible explanations presented for consideration. The most probable is that the sound of footsteps was caused either by a falling rock dislodged by wandering deer, or by some freakish effect of wind in the rocks; while the ghostly spectre was indeed a wraith, but of cloud and all too easily transformed by a too suggestive imagination into Ferla Mor. Alternatively, the figure could have been a deer or even a man, magnified by the mist into a peculiar, menacing giant. Such a ghastly possibility did occur to me down in Glen Deny, and I suffered some uneasy moments contemplating the consequences of possible murder; but the absence of shouts or cries of distress seemed proof enough that no human other than myself was involved.

Nowadays I am more than ever convinced that all of the Ferla Mor phenomena arise from natural causes and can be explained quite *rationally* when studied closely.

Tewnion wondered if the Big Grey Man was an existing being that he thought he had seen. Tewnion thus not only tried to provide rational explanations for his own encounter but also suggested the possibility of finding equally rational explanations for “all of the Ferla Mor phenomena”. Tewnion’s account was hence a ‘sceptical tale’ (Roper 2018: 231–232) about the Big Grey Man that suggested the creature does not exist.

Lack of belief in the Big Grey Man’s existence is also embraced by most members of the Cairngorm Club today, as well as other Scottish mountaineers. I met and interviewed some of them during fieldwork when I was becoming acquainted with the Cairngorms and the eastern coast of Scotland. In November 2022 I visited the Forvie National Natural Reserve, located on the Aberdeenshire coast, with some members of the Cairngorm Club. We took a walk in the reserve only stopping by the ruins of a mediaeval church to have lunch. Here I was able to ask some of the Club members about the Big Grey Man and ask if they had ever witnessed the figure or believed in its existence. The consensus among the members was scepticism towards the existence of the Big Grey Man, whose sightings were explained as natural phenomena, in a similar way to Tewnion. (FM: 2022b)

My sceptical informants – and Big Grey Man sceptics in general – interpret encounters with the Big Grey Man as depending on natural causes such as harsh weather conditions and hallucinations, regardless of the supernatural features of the entity (Scroggie 1989: 32). In this sense, sceptics rely on the Western scientific dichotomy between *supernatural* and *natural*, which is worth addressing.

In the framework of Western science, nature and natural constitute the realm of empirically investigable phenomena, whereas so-called supernatural phenomena are those whose existence is not certain and thus left unstudied (McClenon 1995: 108). Social sciences have also had a role in shaping the Western concept of the supernatural as a pre-modern and irrational form of thought, likely to disappear in the future and equally likely to be rejected by more educated people today (Goldstein 2007: 66–67). Nevertheless, more recent studies have revealed that beliefs in specific supernatural or paranormal phenomena are widely shared among most Westerners and Americans specifically (Bader et al. 2010: 129). At the same time, people holding a specific belief can be dismissive or sceptical towards other beliefs (ibid.: 130), suggesting that a rigid dichotomy between rational educated sceptics and irrational uneducated believers in the supernatural does not exist.

In the Scottish context, sceptics like my informants are not necessarily dismissive of any supernatural phenomenon. They are rather sceptical towards the existence of the Big Grey Man, interpreting this as a fully natural phenomenon, although easy to be mistaken for something external to the realm of nature and hence hard to explain. For instance, one of the members of the Club suggested a specific explanation for the Big Grey Man experiences, specifically the optical illusion known as the Spectre of the Brocken (FM: 2022b), which might be perceived on mountains in situations of poor visibility, although very rarely.

Gray (1970: 33–42) also dedicated an entire chapter to the Spectre of the Brocken, comparing sightings of the Spectre and the Big Grey Man. However, Gray did not reach

any conclusion regarding the identity of the two phenomena and even suggested that the Big Grey Man witnessed by Collie and Kellas was not likely to be a Spectre of the Brocken due to the rarity of the optical illusion even in less explored areas of the Scottish Highlands (ibid.: 55). Furthermore, Collie's description of his own experience did not imply a sighting of the Big Grey Man, which discourages – at least in his and other cases of non-visual encounters – an explanation involving the Spectre of the Brocken.⁴ Further rational and non-supernatural explanations of the Big Grey Man were given by members of the Cairngorm Club. I met the secretary of the Club, retired professor and expert mountaineer Thomson, on several occasions. During the interview with him (FM: 2022d) I asked about his interpretation of Collie's encounter with the Big Grey Man.

Well, of course this happened more than one hundred years ago... I don't know Collie ... but I imagine he was rather tired and maybe lost, and he was an experienced mountaineer. So, it should not have happened that way, but I suppose if you're tired and cold.... Maybe he had a very fertile imagination and so was rather concerned about hearing something or thought he would hear something.

Personally, I don't believe there was anything there physically or... yeah, but obviously he felt there was. I mean, it could have been that he was playing a trick on his friends [the audience at the Cairngorm Club in 1925], but I don't [believe that]. My impression is that because he was not that kind of person, so probably he was not just making up the story. He probably did feel something. And so, he told his friends about it.

Thomson considers it likely that Collie's experience was the product of his own imagination, distorted and amplified due to his own fatigue, the cold, and isolation in the wild. Thomson suggested that Collie's loneliness "had something to do with it", referring to hearing the Big Grey Man, since Collie "had nobody to ask, so nobody to check, so no corroboration or denial. So maybe you were more likely to believe your own feelings if you're by yourself than if you can ask somebody else 'did you hear something?'" (FM: 2022d)

Thomson rejected any explanation for the Big Grey Man that could imply physical objects external to the witness' body and perception, while not discarding the reality of the perception itself. In other words, Thomson was convinced that Collie had felt something on the summit and recounted that as a true experience, although the experience was not actually caused by an existing human-like creature. His sceptical attitude emerged later when I asked him about his general interpretation of the Big Grey Man. Thomson's answer implied that to some extent Collie inspired subsequent witnesses, as his experience suggested to people on the Cairngorm summits that "they might feel like this" (FM: 2022d), i.e., they might be prone to witness the Big Grey Man. Collie's story and its popularity allowed the spread of rumours about the Big Grey Man and influenced the perception of other mountaineers after him.

Some degree of disbelief also emerged in an archived interview that Professor Tadaaki Miyake has conducted with Scottish woman Nancy Currie (1972). Currie mentioned that she had never seen the Big Grey Man and framed the figure within the domain of folk narrative, defining encounters as folktales and legends. She also said she did not know "how it started", claiming that the Big Grey Man was the element of a story, rather than an existing entity.

Following up on the sceptical interpretations, the interview with Iain Young (FM: 2022c), a geologist and mountaineer living in the Scottish town of Aboyne, in Aberdeenshire, is noteworthy because Young focused on the “heightened sense of perception” and “awareness” of mountaineers and how this could lead them to interpret any “unusual experience” on Cairngorm summits as a manifestation of the Big Grey Man. Young’s so-called “rational explanation” rejects the possibility of the Big Grey Man’s existence:

I’m more than sceptical. I don’t believe in that there is an actual monster or, you know, Grey Man. But I do believe that because of this heightened sense of perception that your mind will amplify things that you experience, and you will then believe – or you will remember things in a in a different way than you would in a normal environment....

If you are on Ben MacDhui in bad weather in particular, you know, people now have heard of the Big Grey Man. So, if they do have some unusual experience brought upon ... brought on them by this heightened sense of awareness, they are nowadays more likely perhaps to put it down to the Big Grey Man.... I think there’s a rational explanation for all these things.

The figure of the Big Grey Man is also well known among people whose job is based in the Cairngorms. One of them, whom I met during fieldwork, is the mountain guide and mountain rescue worker George Charles (FM: 2022a), who is from England but has settled in Scotland. As a mountain rescuer, Charles is familiar with the situations of distress, anxiety and helplessness that people experience when they get lost in the mountains. Collie may have experienced a feeling of loss on the summit of Ben MacDhui, which led him to see the Big Grey Man, as suggested by Thomson (FM: 2022d).

About the Grey Man, I’m ... I don’t know. I’m not convinced. I’ve never seen or felt a presence like that in my time on the hills. Certainly, being out higher, particularly when you are by yourself, is very taxing mentally in poor conditions. I mean, there’s always a part of your brain that’s just saying: “you don’t want to be here”. You shouldn’t be here. And you kind of have to. You don’t need to fight against that. You need to listen to that, because that’s part of where that will keep you alive at times. But you need to rationally process it.... You can’t really be by yourself higher in poor conditions without a certain amount of panic and it should be a manageable level of panic, especially with more experience. But it’s definitely there. There’s definitely a physical ... you know, physical internal processes in your body ... that you know that you’re aware of, which I could see could affect people in different ways, in different circumstances. (FM: 2022a)

Compared to Thomson and Young, Charles paid more attention to the feeling of loneliness and “panic” in the mountains and how this feeling must be managed by anyone who decides to visit that environment. Although Charles assumed that such feelings could lead to the perception of the Big Grey Man, he had not met anyone who saw or heard the figure. He also described previous accounts as a well-known story, usually devoid of credibility among Scottish mountaineers.

The classic story is the one of Norman Collie who shot his revolver into the mist and ran off the hill....⁵ I’ve been aware of that for a long time, probably before I

moved to the area, because I tend to be quite a lot [passionate] about Scottish hills. And so that's just a well-known story. Beyond that, it's not something anyone I've spoken to personally talked about seriously or may have experienced. I don't think it's part of the kind of living culture in that way.

If you spoke to any local, certainly any hill-going local, it wouldn't be the first time they've heard of the Big Grey Man. People know that that the story exists, but it's understood as a *mythical* thing rather than a *real* thing. (FM: 2022a; emphasis added.)

The last phrase is particularly significant. Following up on Charles' words, the locals conceive the figure of the Big Grey Man as fictitious and mythical, as outside of the domain of reality. Moreover, the usage of the term 'real' is reminiscent of the adverb 'really' used by Tewnion (1999: 345) when he wondered if he "really" saw the Big Grey Man on the summit of Coire Etchachan in 1943 or if it was an illusion. Tewnion opted for a sceptical interpretation, hence considering the Big Grey Man as non-real, as did Charles (FM: 2022a). In other words, to be sceptical of the existence of the Big Grey Man means to exclude it from reality, which is the domain of phenomena that can be known and understood through rational explanation. The rational/real-mythical dichotomy resembles the one between natural and supernatural, with sceptics prone to accept interpretations and explanations that fall within the frame of the real, rational and natural.

Considering the proposed naturality of the phenomena related to the Big Grey Man, a further connection can be drawn between the entity and the natural environment where it has been seen or heard. Connections between human perception and entities populating the environment have been explored both from a broader and comparative geographical perspective (Hunter 2024) to the narrower context of Scotland and the Big Grey Man, where "tales of ancestral spirits, of monsters, of giants (like the Big Grey Man of Ben Macdui) have somehow played a part in shaping the natural environment" (Ironside and Reid 2024: 75). The folklore about the Big Grey Man has been integrated into the locals' active engagement and experience of the mountains as an environment. This integration has made the image of the Big Grey Man part of the natural environment, regardless of belief or disbelief in the existence of the entity.

CONCLUSION

The article has provided new insights into the Big Grey Man, a figure believed to roam the mountain summits of the Cairngorms in Scotland. It has elucidated the role of the local mountain summits in the witnessing experiences of the entity and explored the perceptual engagements and current interpretations of phenomena related to the Big Grey Man in the Cairngorms.

The topic of the Big Grey Man has been underexplored and there is not much literature dedicated to this matter, with a few notable exceptions (Gray 1970 and, to some extent, Ironside and Reid 2024). The descriptions of the Big Grey Man and encounters with it can be situated in the larger context of Western ghost folklore. Previous studies have highlighted the environmental dimension of ghost folklore (for example, Dagnall

et al. 2020), since the presence of ghosts and supernatural phenomena is connected to specificities of the environments where such presences have been experienced.

Similarly, the Big Grey Man has been contextualised in the outdoor environment where it resides and has been witnessed. In fact, the environment of the mountain summits is a necessary condition for encounters with the Big Grey Man and subsequent narratives about the figure (Porter 1998: 7). In the Cairngorms, poor visibility, snow, rain, mist, cold, and isolation affect the physical condition of mountaineers, eliciting an altered psychological, emotional and perceptual state that facilitates encounters with the Big Grey Man. Considering the influence of the natural environment on witnesses, contemporary interviewees discarded the existence of the Big Grey Man (as did Gray 1970). Despite their scepticism, the interviewees embraced the idea that previous sightings of the Big Grey Man were real experiences to mountaineers, rather than made-up stories or jokes; they offered rational explanations, rejecting potential paranormal and supernatural causes. Young (FM: 2022c) argued that the increased bodily, mental, and environmental awareness of mountaineers altered their perception, which itself was already influenced by previous stories. Thomson (FM: 2022d) observed how the increased awareness of the mountaineers makes them more imaginative than usual, hence relegating the Big Grey Man to an imaginary and non-real domain. Charles (FM: 2022a) highlighted the non-reality of the Big Grey Man, describing it as a mythical creature and a part of the supernatural folklore of the Scottish hills. The sceptical interpretations and explanations provided by interviewees in the field are also part of the folklore regarding the Big Grey Man (see Roper 2018) in that scepticism is part of the discussion of and interest in the figure among Scottish mountaineers.

However, not all the mountaineers have shared the same sceptical attitude than recent interviewees. Direct witnesses of the Big Grey Man such as Collie, Kellas, or Perkins were prone to interpret their experience in terms of uncertainty and discomfort, rather than expressing belief or disbelief in the existence of the Big Grey Man. The peculiar experience of previous Scottish mountaineers, above all Collie, was discussed during the interviews. When talking about Collie hearing the Big Grey Man, Thomson (FM: 2022d) said that “it should not have happened that way”, referring to Collie’s expertise in the mountains. The Big Grey Man has in fact appeared – through sight or sound – only to expert mountaineers who have significant knowledge of environmental phenomena. It is hard to imagine that such knowledgeable people would easily be surprised, and that if they did experience this it must have been for them remarkable.

The experiences of early witnesses are reliable enough not to be discarded as made-up stories or hoaxes. Interviewees rather reinterpreted those experiences with a sceptical and rational attitude. However, the non-sceptical approaches of early witnesses did not exclude the role of the environment and its perceived alterations. There is an undoubted connection between the Big Grey Man, the environment where it is witnessed, and the physical and psychological conditions of the witnesses in that environment. Research on the environment of the Cairngorms, and the way people engage with it, can help us to approach this unusual phenomenon and understand its local interpretations and explanations.

NOTES

1 The phenomenon takes its name from the Brocken, a mountain in central Germany. Macfarlane (2003: 217) described the Spectre of the Brocken as

a trick of the light which occurs on bright days, when the observer is standing between the sun and a bank of mist or cloud. The observer's shadow is cast on to the mist, and the sun is refracted by the water suspended in the air to produce halos of colour around the shadow.

2 The same passage has been reported in the first person in Gray 1970: 3, in Mill 1987: 96–97, and – slightly rephrased – in an obituary dedicated to Collie after his death (Baly 1943: 347–348).

3 The typical Scottish mountain and hill shelter used by hikers in this area.

4 There are of course more possible explanations involving optical illusions or pareidolia. Stewart Guthrie (1993: 5) has argued that humans have the innate tendency to attribute human appearance and qualities to non-human objects in the environment, which makes us take precautions against potential threats and increases our chances of survival. The sightings of the Big Grey Man can hence be explained as the propensity to perceive environmental elements as anthropomorphic. However, Guthrie's claim should not be taken as definitive proof that phenomena such as the Big Grey Man are all explainable as pareidolic, especially considering that the Big Grey Man is not mentioned in his book.

5 Charles confused Collie's and Tewnion's experiences, since the shooting episode happened to Tewnion.

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Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches online repository:

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FM = Fieldwork materials are in my personal archive, as the author of the article. I am thankful to my interviewees for sharing their knowledge with me and for giving their consent to be recorded and quoted in the article. I thank them for their willingness not to remain anonymous.

FM: 2022a – Interview with George Charles (mountain guide and rescuer) in Braemar, November 15, 2022.

FM: 2022b – Conversation with members of the Cairngorm Club in the Forvie National Natural Reserve, November 24, 2022.

FM: 2022c – Interview with Iain Young (geologist and mountaineer) in Aboyne, December 5, 2022.

FM: 2022d – Interview with Ken Thomson (retired professor and mountaineer) in Aberdeen, December 7, 2022.

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