



Rennie McOwan was an esteemed outdoorsman, journalist, writer and broadcaster who was steeped in the history, folklore and culture of his native Scotland. Through his newspaper columns, books and television programmes, he shared his knowledge and views of the great outdoors. Above all, he played a key role in persuading the authorities to make freedom to roam in Scotland a legal right.

As a young boy, his parents gave him his own personal freedom to roam the Ochil Hills around the village of Menstrie near Stirling where he was born in 1933. The hills, mountains, burns and braes became his playground, and fishing, bird watching and swimming were second nature to him and his siblings. His great grandfather Donald Ross was a legendary chief stalker on the Duke of Portland's estate in Caithness. The folk tales he would tell were handed down to the young Rennie, piquing his interest in his Gaelic heritage. His parents instilled in him the virtues not only of self-reliance but also egalitarianism. It

was as a small boy that he first encountered a recalcitrant landowner who, on denying access across his land, was met with the question "why can't we go this way?"

McOwan's love of the countryside found expression in his journalism, a career that began with the now defunct *Stirling Journal* and progressed with *The Scotsman* in Edinburgh. He became Scottish Desk Editor at the age of 23 under Sir Alistair Dunnnett. He discovered that eight of his colleagues shared a love of outdoor pursuits and so he founded The Scotsman Mountaineering Club with Dunnnett as its honorary vice-president and Sir John Hunt, of Everest fame, as its president. The group would meet once a month to tackle a wide-range of mountains. Later, they changed the name to the Ptarmigan Club of Edinburgh after the hill bird.

On one occasion, while climbing the Central Gully of Ben Lui, he had a narrow escape. While bringing up the rear at the end of the rope, he lost his balance and found himself hurtling down the mountain. Fortunately, one of his companions dug in his axe and wrapped the rope around it, bringing McOwan's fall to a sudden and welcome halt.

Over the years, he climbed all of Scotland's great peaks but his real love was walking in 'the lonely places' in northwest Scotland - 'the fey places' he would call them. As he went further afield, to the other countries of the United Kingdom, he became more aware of the differing cultural values and traditions, particularly over access, that existed in his native Scotland, knowledge that would serve him well in battles ahead.

In 1973, he joined the National Trust for Scotland as Deputy Press Secretary. He fundamentally believed the role of the Trust and its activities should be there to benefit all the people of Scotland. He co-founded the NTS Stirling Members' Group with his great friend the Rev Charles Eadie, Minister of the Church of Holyrood in Stirling. At this time, he first came across Percy Unna, a wealthy benefactor who had raised considerable sums for the Trust. Unna had drawn up "The Unna Rules", a wish list of how the mountains should be managed that included no restricted access, no new paths, no shelters and no new man-made structures.

Yet he found a reluctance by NTS officials to promulgate them. He believed this was leading to unwelcome entrepreneurial developments in the mountain regions. Long after he left the Trust as an employee, but still a member, he saw the Trust's attitude change and he was invited to write an article on Unna for the Trust.

By now, as a freelancer, McOwan could write freely on all matters of the countryside. In a letter to the Glasgow Herald in 1992 on the subject of the encroachment of modern civilisation on the Ochils, he suggested that a Friend of the Ochils Organisation be set up. The organisation is still thriving.

The issue that began to dominate his output concerned the traditional right to roam that was an ancient de facto right which was in danger of being lost by default and therefore needed codifying. The issue had arisen again because of the surge in popularity of outdoor pursuits and the increasing number of landowners from abroad not versed in Scottish traditions. It started as a lonely struggle for McOwan and other campaigners since many of the countryside organisations were wary about criticising the landowning fraternity with whom they'd forged long-standing connections. Gradually, his well-reasoned rationale, intellectual vigour and historical and cultural knowledge that he expounded in his newspaper columns and on television, helped the campaign turn the tide. His contribution to the access debate was recognised when, in 1996, at the launch of the Access Concordat, he was invited to address the Landowners Federation on behalf of all Scotland's outdoor groups. His address was described by the chair, Magnus Magnusson, as "statesman-like". Another observer commented that he "read them the riot act". In 2003, The Land Reform Act (Scotland) enshrined freedom to roam in law as long as it was done responsibly. McOwan was awarded the Outdoor Writers Guild Golden Eagle Award for access campaigning and contributions to Scottish culture and an honorary doctorate from Stirling University also for his contributions to Scottish culture.

McOwan's future writings included the outline script for The Prince of Wales's ITV *Wilderness* documentary and more than 15 books, many of them for children. They included adventures such as *Light on Dumyat*, a children's classic featuring four heroes called The Clan whom one reviewer commented "could outwit the Famous Five any day of the week". The last 10 years of his life were ones of gradual declining health due to Parkinson's disease. The stories, re-published last year by his daughter Lesley with the language updated, have proved as popular as ever. They are set in the hills and mountains in which he grew up, and in doing so, he has passed to a new generation his love and respect for the countryside that defined him.

Robert Rennie McOwan was born on 12 January 1933 and died 2 October 2018. He is survived by his wife Agnes, one daughter, three sons and five grandchildren.