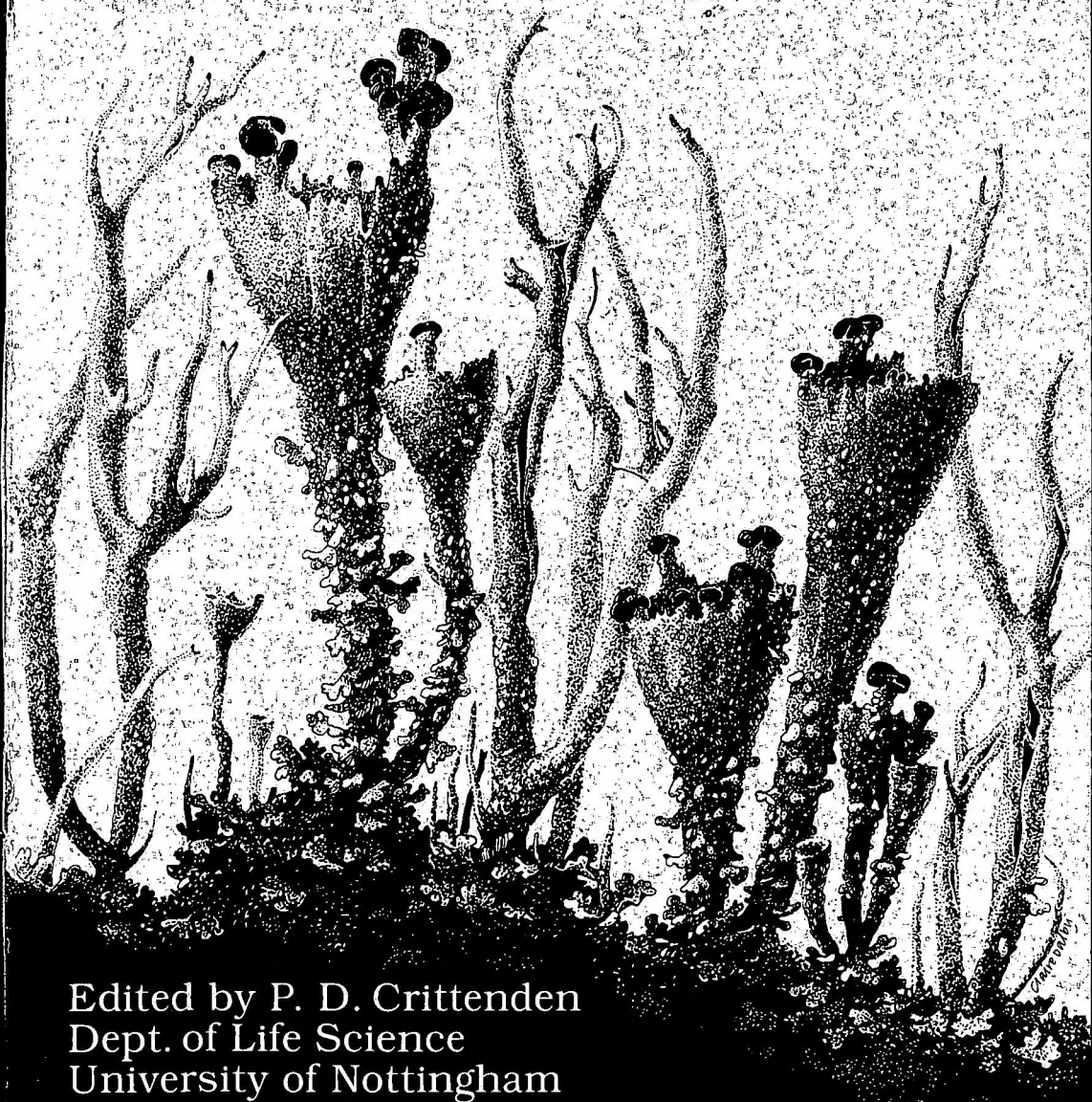


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COUNTRY DIARY: INCHNADAMPH, NORTH-WEST HIGHLANDS

Setting off into low cloud and driving rain to search for a remote lochan that may, or may not, contain a rare lichen, is not much incentive when the alternative is to hog the fire in one of Scotland's best hotels. However, the weather front that was to bring these conditions was still 3 hours away so we headed up the stalkers' path into the hills. Soon we were fording streams and tussling with peat hags as the short, well-drained, turf of the Durness limestone gave way to Cambrian quartzite bog. The day's objective was to refind *Aspicilia melanaspis*, the first and only British record of which had been made by Peter James and Dougal Swinscow in 1958. I knew the name of the tiny lochan where it had been found but the grid reference was for an adjacent square and there was reputedly limestone in the catchment which was not the case with the lochan that was our goal. A phone call to London requesting more information had been met with an answer phone message. It might have been prudent to delay setting out, but for sometime this 'lost lichen' had been shining like a lamp in my mind drawing me northwards.

Eventually we breasted a rise and in front of us lay a pool of brown peaty water. It was still in the grip of winter and surrounded by snow patches, it looked like a thousand other waterbodies in the Highlands - hardly worth a second glance. The only stones projecting from the water were at the outflow. I knelt to examine these, each was completely covered with a thick crust of the *Aspicilia* (Fig 1). This beautiful, silvery-grey species is so strongly lobate that it has recently been transferred to a new genus *Lobothallia*. As I triumphantly raised my face from near water level it was hit by a blast of icy rain, the sky grew dark, and I realised my world had been reduced to a few feet by thick cloud. Waves started to break over the rocks; it was as if the Gods of the mountain were angry that their secret had been discovered. The next twenty minutes were desperate as, in the gathering storm, I wrote notes with frozen fingers, back turned to the wind, and hopelessly tried to observe lichens through five layers of water, one on the specimen, others on both sides of my hand-lens and spectacles. The *Aspicilia* was growing in a semi-inundated zone with *Dermatocarpon luridum*, local eutrophication was indicated by the presence of *Phyiscia caesia*, though whether this was associated with red deer, sheep or birds was not clear.

A cursory inspection of the rest of the lochan, and others in the vicinity, failed to find any more of the lichen but by now white horses were breaking on the shore and conditions were becoming impossible. The objective

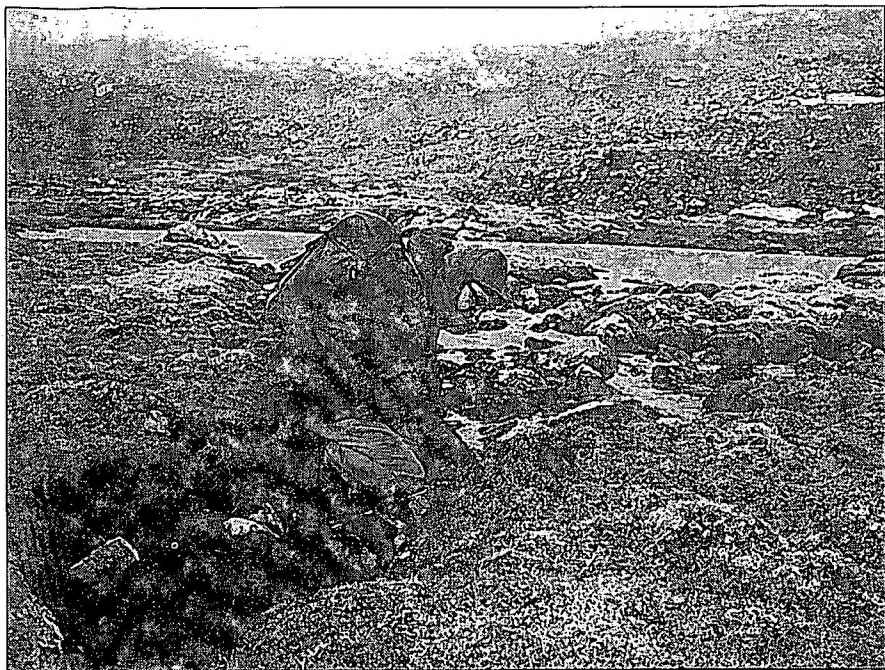


Fig. 1. The sole UK habitat of *Aspicilia melanaspis*.

achieved, we started the return journey, but far from being at peace, my mind was active with a question that would not go away "What had drawn that pair to such a remote and seemingly unpromising spot 37 years ago?" I was determined to find out.

Oliver Gilbert

Oliver's timely note brings back happy memories of the wonderful pioneering days in lichen study and collecting in the late fifties and early sixties when the richness of the British flora, especially in west Scotland was being revealed. The reason for Dougal and myself straying so far from the beaten track was that we were young and much fired with enthusiasm and that our then current interest was in those lichens associated with the interface between calcareous and acid rocks, especially interrelated streams and edges of lochans; fortunately, as well remembered, the weather was blissfully fine and we both complained of sunburn. Incidentally, the packet containing our prize was accidentally knocked into the breakfast frying pan in the kitchen of the Inchnadamph Hotel where our specimens had been put to dry above the stove. The cook was most apologetic but no harm ensued.

Peter James