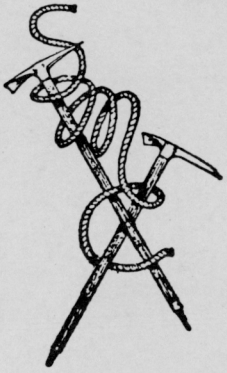
THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB JOURNAL



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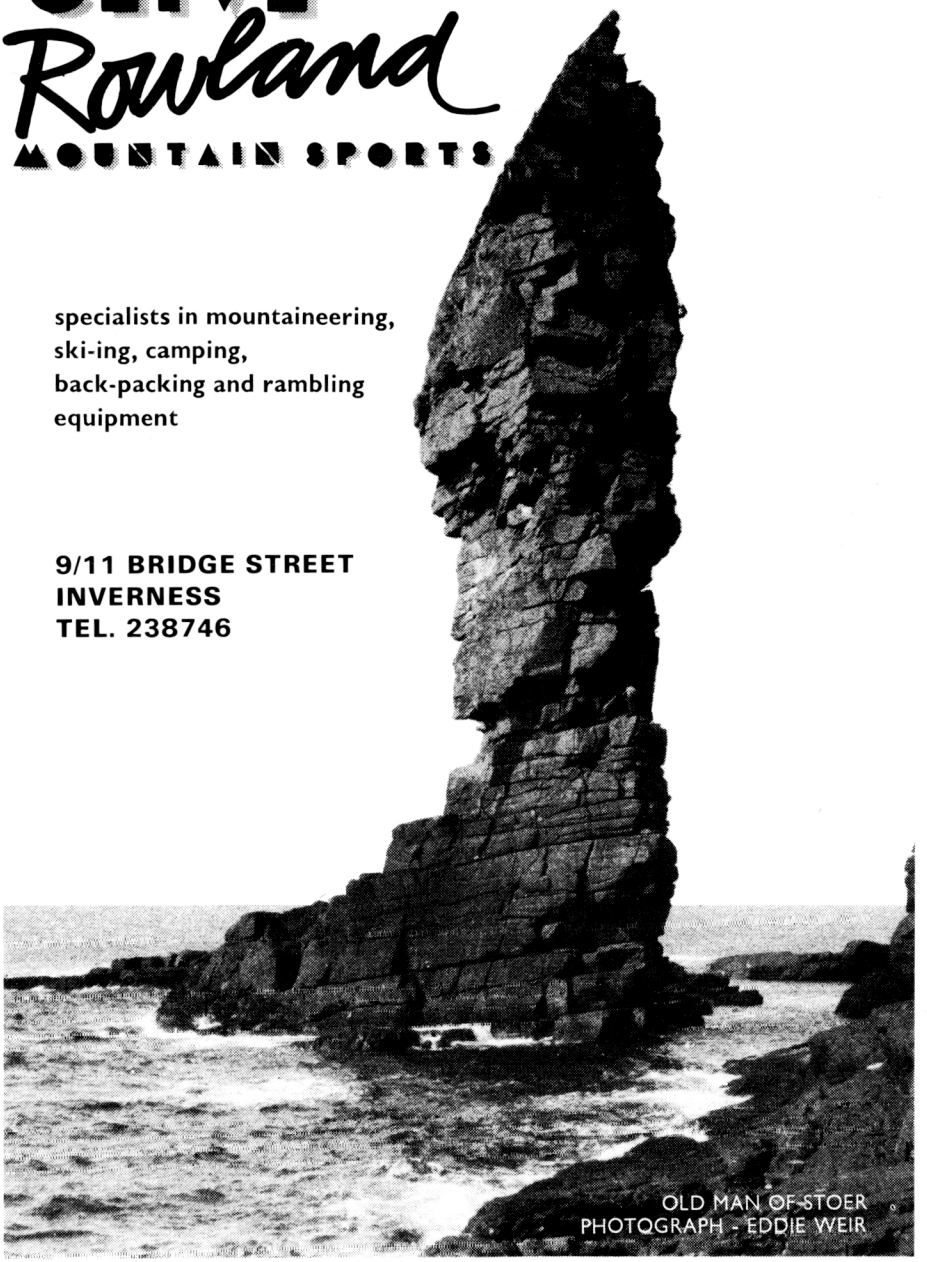

OLD MAN OF STOER
PHOTOGRAPH - EDDIE WEIR



Photo: Des Rubens

Main pitch Eas Anie

THE SCOTTISH
MOUNTAINEERING
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EARLY DAYS ON CRAIG-Y-BARNS

By Robin Campbell

SOMEWHERE in James Joyce's works it is proposed that first love is different in its effects from later love. Perhaps it is stronger, and perhaps the characteristics of the first lover, though more or less arbitrary in the beginning, become mandatory aesthetic requirements in the future. Whether this theory applies to men and women I do not know, but it may well apply to men and mountains. My first mountain love was Craig-y-Barns, that modest wooded eminence above Dunkeld, and its attraction for me is as strong now as it was in 1957 when I began to climb there at the age of 14. Moreover, when I climb there now I feel at home, as I do on no other mountain or crag, and at any time I can shut the world off and imagine myself walking in its galleries of tall larch, or perched on one of its comfortable ledges, looking over sleepy Dunkeld and the Tay to Birnam Hill and beyond.

When I first made the acquaintance of Craig-y-Barns in 1957, climbing there seemed to me only a stage in a progress towards greater things. My reading of Jim Bell's *Progress* and other autobiographies had convinced me that mountaineering was a kind of career, but I now know that it is not, and that those distant days were the best time in my life. I climbed mostly with Paul Brian, who shared the joys and miseries of school in Perth along with me. Paul lived in Birnam, a mile from the crags, and so we spent the weekends at his home. We knew little about rock-climbing at the time but climbed safely enough, guided by conservative-minded books, such as those of J.E.B. Wright, and eventually by John Proom - a Perth SMC member who, courageously and selflessly, introduced us to the Glencoe crags.

Craig-y-Barns was more or less unvisited at the time, thickly cloaked in woods and with wildlife in every pocket. The three crags were scattered about the hillside, partly hidden by screens of larch and spruce, and linked by well-made needled paths which snaked like copper ribbons through the forest. Follies in the form of caves had been constructed around every suitable boulder by a former Duke of Athole. We disturbed birds of all sorts

- a kestrel from Kestrel Crack, numerous corvids and amazing capercailzie cocks which shot out from their bracken bolt-holes with heart-stopping explosions of noise and motion. Fallow deer were sometimes encountered drifting through the larches and the bucks could be heard croaking hoarsely at each other in the autumn. The whole hillside overlooked the Tay and had once formed a forest park for Dunkeld House below, now a Hotel. The small stank below Polney Crag had served as a curling station.

Local lore acknowledged some earlier climbs by Alistair Cram and Jim Bell but no details had been preserved. To begin with we could make little of the crags; *Cherrytree Ridge* and *Noddy* on the Cave Crags, *Twisted Rib* and *Consolation Corner* on Polney Crag were all we could manage. But as we acquired some muscle and our campaign became more intensive we achieved better results. The schist provided natural lines and set us problems which were almost always soluble, given patience and persistence. The crux of *Terminal Buttress* is a typical example; once the right combination of holds was found, it succumbed readily, at Severe. But even nowadays one can see able leaders stuck there for a half-hour, seeking that subtle combination. A key moment for us occurred when Paul got up *Ivy Crack* just as night fell, our first VS! I can still recall the thrill as I watched him jam his soft 'gym shoes' - canvas shoes from Woolworths with a thin sole of black rubber - into the central steep section of the crack and, incredibly, move surely upwards into the murk. We had tried this often, but only darkness could do the trick!

By now I was caught up in an idyll. I cycled on bright Saturday mornings to Birnam, then off to the crags with Paul. His mother, Iris, supplied magnificent packed lunches. We climbed, loafed in the sun and heather, ate, climbed again, invariably on new rock. Free-wheeling back to Birnam in time for tea, we read in Iris Brian's library, sunk in flowery armchairs, before eating enormous mixed grills and departing for the double Western at the Dunkeld cinema. We were characters in an Enid Blyton rock-climbing adventure story!

While Paul and I worked our way round Polney Crag, we began to climb on Day Meets with Perth JMCS: John Proom and Ron Hockey were two members who took an interest in 'our' crags. John was a middle-aged Yorkshireman, an exciseman in the Perth whisky trade, who lived in Balhousie Street; he was a safe and steady climber and he treated us with great kindness and generosity. Ron was a freshly-graduated teacher working at Strathallan School who possessed a motorcycle, and who climbed with boldness and skill. They climbed some of our routes and then branched out on their own, to great effect, accompanied by Quintin Crichton - a young Dundee climber of great ability and considerable style; I recall being particularly impressed by his practice of climbing in a ten-gallon cowboy hat! We were stunned and mortified to hear of their doings. Hockey straightened out *Cherrytree Ridge* with a fine crack pitch and found a way (now known as *Direct Route*) up the mysterious and elusive Lovers' Leap Crag. This crag was so hard to find, being plunged in thick

trackless forest, that Paul and I had only succeeded in reaching it from above. Proom and Hockey enjoyed an exciting ascent. Hockey found himself on a vibrating flake on the second pitch and vacated it just in time to see it - several hundredweights of it - slice down through the trees around the belay, narrowly missing Proom, before thundering down through the forest below. Believing that retreat was now impossible he pressed on and got up. This is a long pitch, poorly protected and still a committing lead. Later, Hockey and Crichton explored the Lower Cave Crag and climbed a gripping hand-traverse to nowhere, having to abseil off in the dark into free space and rhododendrons!

We went looking for this line some weeks later and, after many visits ending in failure, I managed to force a way through the top overhangs by an exposed traverse of a steep slab. This route, *The Hood*, remains one of the finest on the crags, involving a rich variety of moves and severe exposure on a splendid natural line. It has a pleasing and unusual symmetry too: the lower crux is a hand-traverse going right; the upper crux is a foot-traverse going left! I count it as a rare privilege to have been the first to test the uncertainties of that final slab. Possibly the technical feat of this early period of exploration was *The Wriggle* on Polney Crag - a beautiful double crack line. Both cracks have been climbed now, but at that time we were intimidated by a holly tree which blocked the bottom of the right-hand crack and by an overhung sentry-box blocking the top of the left-hand crack. So we found a devious but satisfying line, wriggling through the bottom overhangs into the left-hand crack and crossing to finish by the right-hand. I'm sure it was years before I climbed anything on a proper crag as hard as that awkward wriggling crux.

About this time Paul found that girls were more interesting than rocks (in those days it was impossible to combine these two pleasures) and so lost the opportunity to participate in the spate of adventurous climbing which began to course through Scotland from 1956 onwards. A pity - although he eventually returned to the fray - since he had more natural ability than any of us. I also came to realise that our standard had advanced considerably. I had an evening on the crags with Proom when he tested the condition of the rope at several moves of our *Wriggle*. Later, I added a direct layback crack start to the Lovers' Leap Route and John failed to follow.

When I went to Edinburgh University in 1960 I knew a lot about Craig-y-Barns, but little enough about any other sort of climbing. I naturally wished to lure other climbers onto familiar ground. I climbed then mainly with Neil Macniven, a strong climber from Dysart who later died following an accident on the West Face of the Blaitiere. Macniven had developed an impressive repertoire of pegging skills on his local crag Dumbarton Rock (his family had just moved to Helensburgh) and so he naturally wanted to tackle the ferocious overhangs of the Upper Cave Crag. We wasted a lot of time on the line of *Rat Race*, getting almost but not quite up. Then we saw sense and worked out a number of exciting free lines further right; *Squirm*, *Coffin Corner* (although a wedged tent-peg bore witness here to an earlier

ascent, apparently by a Ferranti M.C. party), *The Crutch* (the latter route by Andy Wightman from Edinburgh), *The Cludge* on the Lower Crag and various eliminates on Polney Crag. A bitter pill was *Corpse*, sister route to *Squirm* and *Coffin Corner*. I had reached the ledge below the final move - a very sweaty lead - but had to be helped off with a top rope. I foolishly told Macniven about this and he sneaked up with Wightman and pegged the top move!

What sticks in my mind, however, from these early visits was a day spent climbing solo on Polney Crag in Macniven's company. I started off along the Girdle Traverse and then, recognising that I was in unusually good form - the effect of regular training on Salisbury Crags - I applied myself to the few remaining problems, achieving *The End, The Chute, Poison Ivy* and *The Groove* - a route first climbed (solo) by Robin Smith on a passing, cursory visit which I hadn't yet done. I can't recall a day when I have felt more confident on rock: it just seemed that I could climb anything I wanted to. All it took was time and application. Boldness hardly seemed to come into it, which those who know me will confirm was just as well! Of course, I should have rushed immediately to Ben Nevis or some other proper crag but I didn't and, sad to say, I've never again achieved such a powerful state. When young, you don't see these things as transient. 'This can't be my peak!', I thought. But it was.

Just as I will never be as I was on that day in 1961, neither will Craig-y-Barns. Technical advances have reduced the climbs described here to mere guidebook footnotes. The deer and other game have gone, dispersed by the press of climbers and the felling of much of the forest, now mature. The once-pleasant paths are beaten trails soiled by litter. Only crows remain uneasily beside the climbers and, of course, Dunkeld's cinema is closed. Worse still, had it survived, it would not be showing a double Western on Saturday evenings! So it goes.

Among the heroic pioneers of Scottish mountaineering it is surely Norman Collie who best confirms the thesis of my opening paragraph. He began climbing on Sgurr nan Gillean, inspired by the sight of Stocker and Parker tackling one of its Pinnacles. Some forty years later, after a life of exploration in the Alps, Himalayas and Rockies, he retired from his University post in London and moved to Sligachan, remaining there in the shadow of Sgurr nan Gillean until he died in 1942. Although I cannot hope to emulate Collie's deeds in the mountains, I will count it ill if I cannot begin my last days pulling aside the bedroom curtains to reveal the pale and slender buttresses of Craig-y-Barns.

Note: This piece won second prize in the M.C.S. Mountain Essay Competition in 1990. The author, due to an attack of hubris, donated the prize-money straight back. Accordingly, M.C.S. agreed that it might be published where the author wished, that is here, rather than elsewhere (or words to this effect).

AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

By Charlie Gorrie

AROUND late February 1959, I stood at 2000ft on the north side of Stob Coire Easain near Loch Treig in Lochaber, looking up at the prominent, north-facing gully which holds snow until very late in the year, and runs to the precise top of this 3658ft mountain. I had had my eye on it for quite some time realising that, given the right conditions, and with the techniques available to me, at that time, it would provide an interesting and rewarding climb. The conditions were now ideal.

I had just moved back to Scotland after a twelve year exile. During this period my climbing had been limited to endless visits, during weekends and evenings, to Harrison's Rocks, with the occasional trip to North Wales, with Ian Ogilvie and sundry other expatriates. I had also made the odd trip to Beachy Head to climb on the somewhat fragile chalk cliffs.

My techniques at that time accorded with the latest thinking in rock climbing. When I had been demobbed I had been climbing with nailed boots, Manilla hemp rope, tied round the waist with a bowline and, at the most, two slings. During my various climbing expeditions since the war, I had acquired the habit of winding a 20ft length of Italian hemp round and round my waist and tying the two ends together with a reef knot. On this waist band I would clip a war surplus carabiner. Finally I attached the climbing rope to this carabiner using a Tarbuck knot. The safety implications of this set-up were that a 20ft length of waist band would provide some sort of chance of protection because of a sudden load coming on the rope, such as would be the case if the leader were to be so inconsiderate as to fall off, the various loops whilst adjusting the tension would provide a cushioning effect. Added to this, the Tarbuck knot, being a limited slip knot, would ensure that the effect of any sudden load would be further reduced. So confident was Tarbuck in the effectiveness of this system, that he was reputed to have tested it by tying the loose end of a 40ft length of rope to a fixed point and jumping off into space... he survived!

During this period I had explored the possibilities of Beachy Head with its chalk cliffs. I used 3ft angle-iron pitons with one end sharpened to a point, the other end having a hole drilled in it to take a carabiner, the whole being driven into the face by means of a geology hammer, which I had acquired whilst at University. Another refinement added was the use of a loop of hemp rope or line twisted into a figure of eight, one leg being thrust through each loop, the crossed ropes being collected into the carabiner on my waist band, thus providing a 'sit harness' of sorts. I introduced Jimmy Bell to this type of climbing on Beachy Head, in which, the rock being somewhat insecure, he revelled.

One more item will set the scene for the climb I was now contemplating. Until the start of the war, the use of nailed boots had led me to believe that, in Scotland at least, the use of crampons was largely an unnecessary addition to the weight one had to carry in ones pack; therefore we were not carrying any. We were both wearing army surplus boots with moulded commando soles. I had done very little climbing in Scotland in the years since the war. I cannot say with certainty what the state of the art so far as snow and ice climbing was at the time. I had had four trips to the Alps during which I had used crampons for crossing glaciers only. I still had my original ice axe, which I had bought in 1932 - indeed I still have it - and this reaches exactly to my hip joint, so that it may be used as a walking stick and for glissading.

The basic reason for my being where I was stemmed from the fact that, as a stop gap, whilst I was deciding what to do with the rest of my life, I had taken a job as a temporary teacher at Bob MacKenzie's Braehead School in Buckhaven, the school at which Hamish Brown taught. The School had recently been given Inverlair Lodge, as an outdoor centre, by British Aluminium, and I was earmarked as potential head of this establishment. I was in the area to assess all the expeditionary and educational possibilities.

I was accompanied by a 14-year-old pupil named Andrew MacKenzie (no relation of Bob's), who had some experience of hill walking with the School, but had never embarked on an expedition such as we now contemplated. He was similarly equipped to myself, we had walked the seven miles from Inverlair, and we were to make a start at 11 a.m. on a superb cold day, with not a cloud in the sky. The overnight temperature had gone down to -14 degrees. Since the sun at that time of year never shone into the gully, the snow and ice were iron hard. From where we were standing the general angle to the cornice was about 40 degrees. The problem consisted of about 850ft of very steep snow, gradually steepening at the top to approximately 50 degrees... this stretch of snow was about 70ft wide at the top, continuing downwards slightly wider for 750ft or so, eventually tapering to a point at the bottom. This point was resting on what appeared to be an icefall, ending, finally, in a curtain of huge icicles. It would be necessary to bypass the bottom section by a rising traverse from the left of the gully, across the top of the curtain of icicles, on a convex slope on what, at first sight, appeared to be a mixture of rocky outcrops and scree, welded together by hard snow and ice. If this could be surmounted, it would then be simply a question of cutting zig-zag steps up very hard snow and possibly ice to the cornice.

This traverse of some 250ft, as far as I could see, would provide the crux of the climb. The first 100ft was at an angle of about 40 degrees and a slide would produce only a few scrapes and bruises, since the area below, although very steep to start with, ran out gradually in 500ft to something less lethal. From that point it appeared to steepen quite considerably to a position just below the point of snow at the bottom of the main field, below which it seemed to drop vertically for at least 100ft to unseen ground

beneath. The last 50ft, at least, would have to be tackled very gingerly, since a slip at that point would be potentially very serious, with the possibility of fatal injury.

We had literally no chance of not being benighted, but the conditions were excellent. Besides, there would be quite a substantial moon to light our way back to Inverlair, when it eventually rose above the ridge. I estimated this would happen anytime after 10 p.m. In any case we were pretty well equipped clothingwise, although modern climbers might not think so.

We roped up, and I led across the traverse. I soon realised that the danger of an uncontrolled slide was going to be even greater than I had anticipated. Patches of snow in which steps might be cut became less and less frequent, and thinner and thinner, until the whole slope became one of scree and rock bound together by black ice. I had two pitons, which had been sold to me as universal purpose, meaning that they could be used for both snow and ice as well as rock. In fact they were equally useless for either. Each had a War surplus carabiner attached. The problem was to find a reasonably secure place to drive them into. For this purpose I had a slater's hammer with the side claws ground off. I found the spike end of this tool invaluable for clearing very hard snow and ice from the rock and scree to provide somewhat sketchy balance footholds, on which I was going to have to rely for the safety of the party. This slater's hammer also provided me with the means to cut placements for my somewhat doubtful pitons. At this stage in the climb our long ice axes were a liability, and had to be passed down through the shoulder straps of our army surplus packs, so that they were out of the way of the main effort.

The traverse proceeded slowly in this manner until I could find a sufficiently secure placement for one of our pitons, making it reasonably safe for Andrew to remove the other piton and find his way along the somewhat sketchy footholds which I had managed to prepare for him. The slope at the start, as I have said, was about 40 degrees, but it soon began to increase, and, as it increased, so did the penalty for a slip. The angle may not seem excessive by modern standards, but for climbers in commando soles, with no crampons, and literally no handholds, facing the ever-increasing danger of a possibly fatal slide, it was quite enough for me.

The whole idea of Braehead School establishing an outdoor centre for the purpose of pursuing general studies in mountain country had met with a certain amount of opposition in the local Education Committee, so that, as I crept along this somewhat precarious traverse, I had visions of the headlines in the local and National press - 'Teacher leads Teenager to his Death!' But Andrew proved to be an excellent and calm second and, indeed, appeared to be enjoying himself.

Eventually I reached the snow, and dug out a bucket stance. The snow was so hard I could not drive the shaft of my axe in to provide the traditional (at that time) protection. Fortunately it held a piton. I tied myself to one of these and drove the spike of my axe in for additional security, then took the

rope in round my waist whilst Andrew joined me. It was now merely a question of interminable cutting, running out one length of rope at a time. The snow got harder and steeper the higher we got. The light was beginning to fade; the bottom of the climb became lost in the gloom, where an uncontrolled slide would take us to oblivion. Nevertheless this feeling, on subsequent reflection, was not really logical, since for us to come off at this moment would have been a result of gross negligence, the snow conditions being so good, with a complete absence of wind.

Anyone who has cut steps in extremely hard snow for 850ft with a long axe will know what a tiring process it can be. Eventually we arrived at the cornice, tunneled through, not without difficulty, and, when we stuck our heads out of the top, there, not more than 20ft away, was the very much snowed up cairn - surely the most satisfactory way to finish a long and arduous climb.

Just as we arrived at the cairn, the sun went down behind the Grey Coires to the West, with the top 400ft of the Ben just showing at the far end. In the fast dwindling light the view was stupendous. We could see all the high mountains from Ben Lawers to the Grey Coires and, although the ranges to the East were covered in a low haze, we could see the odd high summit poking its head through to catch the last of the dying sun. It was truly a magnificent sight.

Our problem now resolved itself into how we were to get down safely in the rapidly gathering gloom. We were 7 miles from Inverlair, where we were camping. I had expected to be able to glissade down to the bealach between Stob Coire Easain and Stob a'Choire Mheadhoin, and then back down to the floor of the coire, so losing 1500ft of height quite rapidly. It was not long before I found that to descend this way in a controlled manner would be quite impossible. It would be necessary for me to find an alternative route down. It dawned on my relatively thick skull, at this juncture, that perhaps crampons might have been a worthwhile addition to our equipment - even one pair! Or, at 45 years old, was I perhaps realising for the first time that I was not immortal?

The descent by the North ridge seemed the most plausible, for here the snow was not so steep and, in the growing gloom, it appeared to be less continuous lower down. We chose this route, although it appeared at first to take an enormously long time to get anywhere. When we came to an unavoidable patch of snow, and, for the first 800ft there were many, I would lower Andrew to the full extent of the rope, and he would anchor himself as best as he could, whilst I cut a minimum of steps to join him. This process was repeated again and again, until, eventually, we got down to the floor of Coire Laire.

It was after nine o'clock when we got to safe ground, and it was almost pitch black. We were exhausted, having been on our feet for 12 hours without rest. Our camp was still some 6 miles away. We decided to collect a heap of dry, dead bracken, of which there was a plentiful supply, put on all our spare clothing, including our waterproof outer gear, and crawl under

this heap and attempt to go to sleep until the moon came up. At 1 a.m we crawled out of our nest, to find the moon had already been up for a few hours. It was a delightful walk down Coire Laire back to Inverlair, where we eventually arrived about 3.30 a.m.

This expedition can scarcely be described as a character building epic. At the time it taught me one basic lesson only, that the use of crampons would have considerably reduced the time taken for the climb and descent. It did not occur to me that their use might have made the various aspects of the expedition any safer. There were no really dangerous moves apart from the traverse, where some very sketchy footholds had to be cut when over 80ft of rope had been run out. Great care had to be taken with every move since the penalty for a simple slip would have resulted in both climbers incurring serious, and possibly fatal injury. Nevertheless, until then I had come to accept this situation as normal.

With hindsight, modern equipment, such as front points in the latest light materials, an array of pitonry and ice screws, and a pair of short axes each, the actual climb would have been reduced to a couple of hours up and possibly a little less down, - always assuming we had been able to afford to buy this type of equipment in the first place. Affluence in those days was not as widespread as now. This would have reduced the expedition to a mere eight hours instead of nineteen hours. I think, in reflection, that I would have preferred it to be just the way it was...

DEADMAN'S GROOVE

By Rob Milne

IT WAS to be a day for new routing. I knew of the Cobbler, but had never visited it. Rab Anderson had an idea for a new route. As usual, I had no idea of what the climb might be, where it was, or how hard it might be. It wasn't that it was a secret; I just didn't know anything about routes on most crags. (Mine is not to reason why...)

I did know the weather forecast. Beautiful in the morning and a major storm later. This meant that my first visit to the Cobbler was superb. The long walk from sea level was rewarded by impressive views of the coire, with the sunrise complementing the clear blue skies and heavy snow cover. As we approached, I was definitely impressed by the rock faces. Winter conditions were great, snow everywhere and frozen turf. The North Face of the South Peak looked like a miniature alpine face.

Rab tried to explain the line of the proposed climb to me. I think he said it was *Deadman's Groove*, but I rarely know the name of a route until after we do it. He seemed to be talking about some impossible looking crack line up the middle of the steepest part of the face. Knowing that was ridiculous, I assumed he meant the wide groove line to the right. This was also a day for me to get back into leading, and I wanted an easy start.

I agreed to lead the first pitch. The climb started from a small bay located on a balcony 30 feet up. Rab suggested we solo up. I thought that was to be my lead. Oh well, I will pretend to lead it with no gear and at least it will get my heart going. A few minutes later I was 30 feet higher and nothing bad had happened. Perhaps I could lead this after all.

The first pitch looked like a simple, low-angled groove. I thought I should be able to lead this with no gear. Just as well, since I was very much out of practice at placing pro. How wrong I was. I instantly discovered that the seemingly low-angled pitch was dead vertical. This implied that the wall above must be overhanging. I couldn't chicken out yet, so I decided I would dig for a little while and when I couldn't get the first nut in, I would give up. Unfortunately for me, I found a good nut right away. I decided to go up the first moves, fail to find another placement and then back off.

The good turf gave me one good tool. The wall had nothing for my feet though. With a high step, I got one foot up on the turf. The other foot had to totter on a small flake for balance only. After some digging, I found another great nut. Damn, up another move then. At least the turf was immaculate. Now it was time for my left foot to be without a hold. A small groove on the wall was more than big enough for two points. A quick pull and both feet were on higher turf.

It was now too far above gear to back off, I have to get something else in. I can't win. If I don't get gear in, I can't back off. If I do get gear in, I will have to continue. At this angle I don't want to hang around for long. More digging out the snow and I find another good nut placement. I think about backing off now, but that would really be chicken, so far the pro has been great. As I move up, my right crampon half falls off. Great, this is my excuse, but I have to pull up onto the turf ledge first.

As soon as I get some gear, I will tell Rab he has to take over. Standing on a nice turf ledge I get two good nuts. I also see a very good hold for the hard traverse step. I sit down to fix my crampon and think about it. The weather and the view are nice, the hot aches have stopped, I may as well have a look. If I can't get gear before the traverse, then I will retreat.

Under the hold is another good nut. The step right looks very wild, but lots of fun. Should make a good photo as well. I always enjoy tottering on my crampon points and this looks like heaven. (i.e. no foot holds). Somehow I manage the step and I'm into good turf. I put in a nut after the traverse for Rab. I reckon he would get cross if I left him with a long swing on the hard move. He says to belay there, but I don't want to miss out on some easy front pointing up turf.

I don't get to front point often, as there is never ice on the mixed routes we do. The turf is better for placements anyway. I spot a good thread for a bombproof anchor. A couple of minutes later and I can't remember what I was worried about. Although the easy groove turned out to be grade V, it was fun in retrospect.

When Rab began leading the next pitch, he started to go left onto the steep wall, rather than right up the easy groove line. It was only then that I understood that the crack he described from below really was the route! It looked hard to me, but mine is not to reason why. The first attempt left didn't work. Sloping blocks and no tool placements. Rab moved above the belay and over my head.

He found a good hook behind a flake and leaned out onto the wall. Although the footholds sloped, there were a few more torques. The moves looked very delicate, but protected. A few more feet and he was into the main crack line. What looked to be steep from below, turned out to be overhanging, but with good blocky holds. A few feet higher though, and the trouble started.

By now it was cloudy and starting to snow. The warmth from leading the first pitch had faded and I was getting cold. Perhaps it would be a major storm any minute now, or maybe not. Rab was struggling. He had made the first part of the pitch look easy, in spite of the angle. Now he was trying to make a high step to a sloping ledge. Worse still was that a lot of digging had produced no torques and more importantly, no more pro. He would step up, dig a bit and then step down.

We had been in this situation many times before. I could recognise when things got hard. I knew the best thing I could do was to be quiet. I



The first pitch looked like a simple, low-angled groove

didn't want to contribute any negative views. The decision was his alone. He shouted down a status report - 'No gear and no placements'. I replied that this was a really nice place and that it looked impressive. (My version of 'it's your lead and I am not going to try it.') I also pointed out that the gear to there had been good. This was to make him think that he just thought he had a problem.

A few more attempts and we were still there. Rab had dug out every groove and found nothing. It was safer to retreat than risk a dangerous fall. He called down for the retreat sling. I reckon the storm was coming soon anyway. I also thought the pitch had looked impossible before we started. I dutifully tied the sling onto a loop of rope and sent it up. Rab doesn't fail often. He will try for ages before giving up. But no gear means no upward progress. And mine is not to reason why.

Rab rigs the sling, then decides to have another look. The prospect of defeat is not welcome. Somehow this time he finds a piece of gear. As he balances up onto the sloping ledge, a torque appears, then another nut placement. I decide I could climb in the storm anyway. His persistence pays off and we are moving again.

The next moves are very exposed. A ledge of turf hangs on the vertical wall. With small footholds, it is a spectacular position. The final short groove to the belay is hard, but has gear and good tool hooks. Although my spirits soar, I decide I will find an excuse not to lead the last pitch. With that decision made, I can relax and enjoy this pitch.

The climbing is very steep, but as a second I can balance on my points and not worry about my tools. This is good policy when there are not many tool placements. I am surprised at how steep the blocky holds are, from below it looked like one could stand in balance. It turns out to be overhanging. I can now see the problem of the hard step. I wish I could find what he used for tool placements.

I decide just to balance up. The wall is vertical and the foot ledge sloping, but by keeping my heels out, I can balance up. I grab a small flake with my finger gloves and stand up. A quick hook in a high crack just saves me from swinging off. I can also see the long, swinging fall into the blocks that Rab was worried about.

The rest of the pitch was fun. The turf ledge is a great position. With the cloud, it felt like miles up in space on a vertical wall. The moves above were hard, but with good tool placements the lack of footholds was not important.

As I arrived at the belay, Rab started to give me the gear for the next pitch before I could tell him that I was going to let him have the privilege. It did look like a low-angled groove. I might as well go up a few feet and then chicken out. I instantly discovered the flaw in my plan. The pitch was steep, and the pro was good.

One wall was very steep and the slab that formed the other wall was devoid of foot holds. At least the crack was wide and I could insert one foot.

With a bit of digging I found a few small flakes for my right points. It took a lot of digging of the snow to find gear in the wide crack, but it was always there.

I arrived at a very steep move. The wall pinched to a vertical chimney. A good time to retreat I thought. But I noticed a good torque crack and moved up. The tools locked into the crack and I squeezed higher. More torques, a high step and the end was in sight.

As I set up the belay anchor, I couldn't understand why I had been reluctant to lead. I was warm, the moves were well within my ability, I found good gear and I had had a good time (in retrospect). I had led two hard pitches with no problems. I decided maybe I was just lucky and should quit while I was ahead and not lead anymore.

Rab raced up the easy ground to the summit. We were met by the full force of the storm. It was also getting gloomy. In the strong wind, I discovered that he didn't know the way down. I certainly didn't. With all this wind, snow and cloud we had a problem. I belayed while he explored. Mine is not to reason why. We didn't want to justify the route name now that we had made the top. We knew we could climb in the storm for hours if need be, the real goal was not to leave any gear behind.

He soon found an abseil anchor. As dangerous as any abseil is, it looked safer than trying to downclimb. Soon we were safe and set off back to the car. On the way down, I reflected on a three star route. An amazing line, great tool placements, some super foot placements and good protection. I wondered where we would go next week. Maybe I would lead some more on the next climb.

THE SPELL OF SUILVEN

By W. Shipway

I CAN'T put a date on when I first came under the spell of Suilven. Perhaps it was in the days when the chapter in the Scottish Youth Hostel guide headed '*The North West*' seemed to describe an area as remote as Hudson's Bay. It was a land where the mountains seemed all humps and stumps with strange names to match - Stac Polly, Canisp, Quinag, Cul Mor and Cul Beag. And the monarch among them was the strangest and most remote, Suilven.

The name means the Pillar Mountain, said to be given by the Norsemen when they saw it from the sea west of Lochinver. It is from this point also that it looks most like its other name, the Sugar Loaf. But these names hardly begin to describe Suilven.

I suppose every hillwalker has his mystery tops, hills which in his imaginings present a special difficulty or challenge. As the years pass they develop an aura of invincibility, or the likeness of a resourceful adversary. Even on the day he stands at last by their summit cairns they are never quite like other hills. For me such tops are Bidean nam Bian, Liathach, A'Mhaighdean and - Suilven.

The first chance to break the spell came on a grey spring day in 1974. My wife and I were on holiday in the district and I longed for a chance to climb Suilven. But I knew I was hoping for a lot. The long walk-in across the hummocky moorland would make it a long day, and I would have to go alone - two factors which did not recommend the idea to my wife. Moreover I got no support from the weather: it remained cold, blustery, showery and unsettled. The calm days of sun and blue skies which would have made the walk a joy remained within the pages of the tourist brochure.

However, if you wait for ideal conditions you'll not get up many hills, and on the day Mary said she would like to walk up to the Falls on the River Kirkaig, I felt there was the ghost of a chance, for this is the start of the route to the mountain from the south. She would return to the car and I would climb Suilven. Yes, this was it, even if the skies were grey.

All went according to plan. We parked at Inverkirkaig and followed the track through birch and hazel by the swift flowing river. Then we saw the gorge, and the path climbing stonily up the hill alongside. Three miles from the car were the Falls, a tumbling cascade of foaming water - magnificent.

A picnic lunch and it was time for the big adventure. A fisherman came up the path, criss-crossed haversacks and rod at the trail. He was heading for the Fionn Loch like myself, and Mary, incredulous at seeing someone

prepared to risk drowning as well as death from exposure, bid me a dazed goodbye.

Above the Falls the path escapes from the glen and enters an altogether different landscape. In the foreground is the silver sheet of the Fionn Loch and behind, the hillocks and humps of the moorland with Suilven dominating the scene like a mighty ship on the stocks. Today a great tea-cosy of mist capped the hill, but it was worth a closer look, and who could tell ...

The fisherman followed the loch eastwards to look for a boat on the near shore, while I had to turn its western end to approach the mountain from the moor. There was a good path and all the route needed was steady leg work. Left and right it beckoned onwards, sometimes close to the water, sometimes inland, all the while following the north shore of the loch. Burns were crossed by slab bridges with well-built abutments: this must be a stalker's path. I'd never seen peatier burns: the very stones had a kippered look about them.

An hour passed, and I drew abreast of the mountain across the moor on the left. I could see the rearing stone cliffs of its west face - for rock-climbers only. Access for me would be by a gully mid-way along its steep south flank: yonder it was below the trailing skirt of mist. But reaching it was a long way across the moor, and the path still followed the lochside.

Suddenly there was a cairn in front, and a second to the left in the grass. This was where the path turned directly towards the mountain - and petered out. But I could see the screes at the gully bottom clearly ahead. What matter if the path were faint. Nevertheless it was rough going - boggy and wet, tussocky hummocks, dragging heather. It was a cheerless day, and the mountain mass looked more intimidating the closer one got. All at once I knew the climb was not on. The mist, the unknown terrain, the lateness of the hour and the long walk out - Why had I not known it all along. Put it down to the spell of Suilven, and remember, there are no failed climbs, only successful reconnaissances. Or such was the story I gave to Mary when I arrived back at the car...

Three years passed before I had another chance to climb Suilven. In the meantime I had tricked my way into an Edinburgh hill walking club, the Inverleith Tabbies (select of course) and suffered a gruelling novitiate in Munro-bagging at the hands of Alex and Marcus, Ronnie and George. Now I was on holiday with my 21-year-old son with the sole aim of exploring Coigach and Assynt. We drove up on a Monday to our base near Achiltibuie, stopping off to romp up Stac Polly out of sheer *joie de vivre*. If Tuesday were good... and it was. We threw our gear in the car and drove to Lochinver for some food for the climb - apples, biscuits, rolls, that would be enough - and back to Inverkirkaig to put on our kit. Boots laced, daysacs packed, we were off up the track to the Falls, and none too soon either for already it was 11.30.

How different the scene from last time. The glen was delightful in dappled sunshine, and after an hour we reached the open moorland and



Photo: Rab Anderson

Rob Milne, 1st pitch Deadman's Groove (Sesame Groove)



Photo: Colin Moody

Visiting Czech climber Petr Jandik on Trophy Crack, Skye

took the path round the Fionn Loch. In a pause to slap on some sunburn lotion two other climbers overtook us, but not much later we met them coming back - 'Run out of time'. Some one else learning the hard way. At 2 p.m. we turned at the marker cairns to face Suilven. Our route was across the rising moor to the central gully, up it to a saddle in the ridge above, and from there west along the crest to the summit.

But first we had a breather by the burn and attacked the rolls and biscuits. I was watching three deer through the glasses when - 'Hey Dad, there's only one apple left!' 'One apple - you must be joking'. 'It's your fault Dad - you didn't stay long enough in Lochinver to buy anything!' Ah the joys of family life! Here we were, not even on the hill yet and our food all but gone. What would the Tabbies say about that, could they know. What else but the spell of Suilven.

At 3.15 we had a council at the foot of the gully and decided to cache one of the daysacs, sharing the other. Craning upwards I decided that if I could reach a particular 'elbow' I would make the top. By avoiding the scree and keeping to turf and slabs we found fair footing, much more pleasant than our moorland slog. At last the angle relented and at 3.50 a fresh wind from the north blew on our faces. We were astride Suilven's ridge, the Bealach Mor.

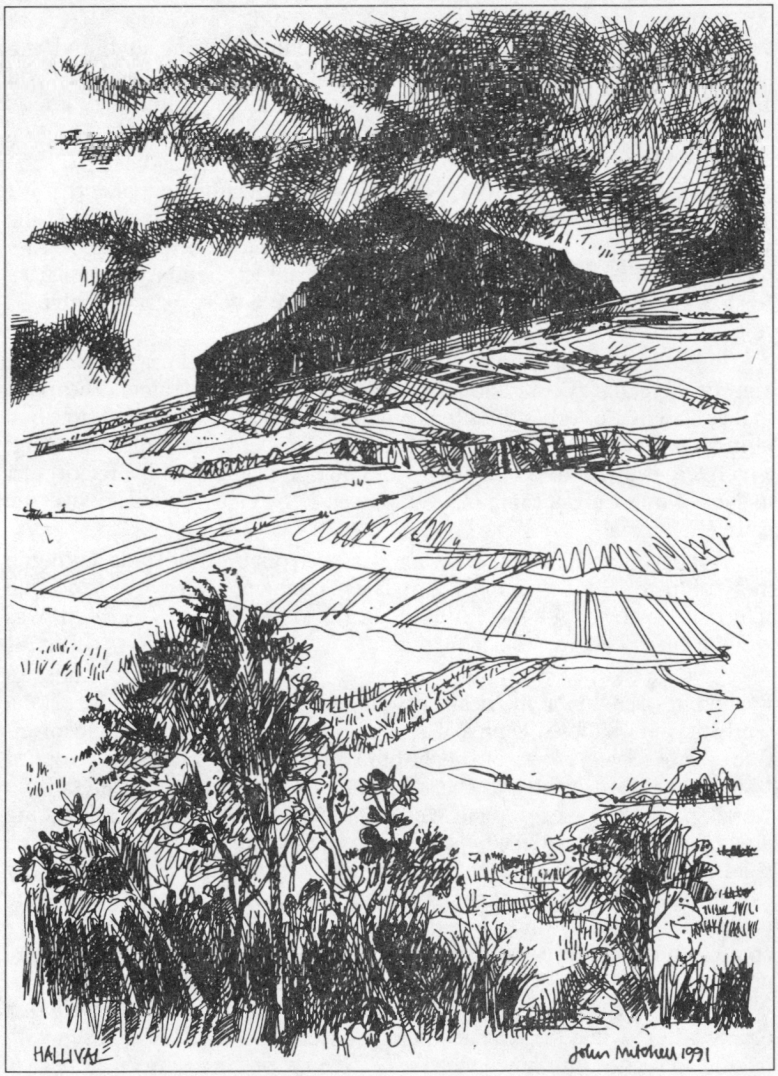
Pulling on woollies and looking round we were surprised to see a massive drystane dyke straddling the ridge like a ring on a finger. The rocks in that wall made kerb-stones look small. What heroes of ancient time had built its level courses, and for what purpose? Passing through an opening, a path led us upwards among crags and boulders, and then over short turf to the summit, Caistal Liath, 2,399ft. It was 4.15 as we flopped down at the cairn.

A marvellous land and seascape stretched out on either side, taking in the Cuillin of Skye and the Outer Isles. Lochans littered the land like scattered jewels, and the blues of sea and sky were superb. It was wonderfully peaceful; the spell again.

'Let's walk the ridge to the east top' I said to Alan. 'You go, Dad, I'm flaked out - see you at the bealach'. The mountain was narrow, for all the world like one of these pictures of a submarine taken from the conning tower. Canisp looked very close, and on the other side was the pudding shape of Cul Mor. The ridge made pleasant walking until one reached a deep cleft beyond which soared the tower of Meall Mheadonach. I could see the footholds going down into the cleft, and the twisting path going up the other side, but all of a sudden I too became aware that the day was far spent, and that there was only a half-share in an apple for at least another four hours. It was Suilven's sting in the tail, for every time I see its outline I kick myself for not having completed the full traverse of the ridge. Rejoining Alan, we picked our way down the gully, retrieved the daysac, and sprawled in the sun for half-an-hour. After that we girded ourselves for the return journey, but this is a lovely part of any climb, when the stomach unknots itself, and one 'tires the sun with talking and sends him down the sky'.

So it was with us. It was a golden evening and we strode back along the lochside in blithe spirits, reaching the car at 9.10. A brew of coffee even before taking off our boots, and then back to base where Alan wrought nobly in serving up soup and beefburgers.

Well, that's the story of one hill, one spell. But do you know a mountain in Knoydart called Ladhar Bheinn. I saw it last year from Kintail; you reach it by boat across Loch Hourn. It's mysterious, remote...



GALLOWAY - INNER SANCTUM

By Graham E. Little

MY AFFAIR with the Galloway Hills goes back a long way. Although our relationship is less passionate now than of old it's always good to see her. She has changed of course but then so have I. To be the good friend of a past lover is indeed a special privilege.

It is a short December day, a stolen day, an opportunistic day. I drive in the darkness, the castle walls looming into the headlights, the world sleeping. I take the car as far as possible. There is no point in pretending that this forest road doesn't exist. It used to be hard walking over tussocks of yellow grass along the banks of the Gala Lane, now it's hardcore, hemmed in by walls of black trees.

From the car I follow the small pool of light cast from my headtorch. In its penumbra inky black parallel lines scar the ground; underfoot the path transmits that half-frozen soggy sensation of early winter.

The trees are smaller now. Dawn reluctantly emerges from the night. Everything is grey, the smell of damp vegetation pervades the air. I ascend slightly onto the drier hillside, clear of the boggy valley, the trees falling behind me. I know Hoodens Hill is above, ahead the great sculptured bowl of The Tauchers with its gems of perfect granite. To the east, across the wide valley, the long snow flecked whaleback of the Kells range stirs memories - a stormbound night in the hollow of Carlin's Cairn, sheets of water sliced from the pools below and flung into the sky, shining waves of rusted Autumn grass mimicking the wind in her hair, the perfect neve of a Spring day long ago.

From below The Tauchers rocky rim I gaze out stunned by the great expanse of forest below, a monotone bottle green blanket broken only by long rides and roads. I turn away and play with the rough grey granite for a while.

Scrambling up the hill I gain height quickly. Plates of ice are glued to the slabby rock. My body responds to the hill's heartbeat, striding out, relishing the sting of the wind, the hardness of the ground, the wildness of it all. I have no companion yet I am not alone. To the south-east a thin horizontal band of watery blue splits the solid steel greyness of the sky. As I reach the summit cairn of Mullwharchar the sun reaches the pale band. My hill is floodlit by a golden second dawn. I sit with my back to the cairn, facing the sun, bathing in its warm glow. Below to the south-west the cold clear waters of Loch Enoch are in the shade, frozen to the toe of The Merrick. I run down the frost sparkling hillside crying to the wind, overjoyed that my memories are not a lie, that this inner sanctum is as magical as ever.

Greyness returns as I wend around ribs of granite, crunching through wreaths of crisp snow onto the shoulder of Dungeon Hill. Was it really twenty-two years ago on Dungeon's east face - body shaking with fright, throat dry with fear. That desperate move for the flake, its crashing, splintering fall to the base of the cliff, my flight to a safe ledge, fingers clawing into the heather, tears and sweat streaming down my face. And I carried on climbing! I descend a little way down the east face over rock steps, pass the time of day with a herd of patchwork-coated feral goats then head north along the ridge.

Backhill of Bush, that lone cottage to the east of the Silver Flow, is now surrounded by conifers. Memories of blazing log fires, teenage bravado and great hill days come flooding back. It was late one night in the winter of 1970 that I spent several hours removing frozen boots and socks (with the aid of an ice axe) from the feet of an exhausted hillwalker. All his toes were frostbitten and he was very fortunate not to lose them.

Traversing the east flank of Mullwharchar, red deer bark from the crags above then bound with easy strides into the upper coire. A buzzard wheels high above the ridge. I meet more goats - they are so much a part of Galloway.

I stride on into the trees, unsettled by the closeness of things after the openness of the hill.

I'm back in the car, drizzle smearing on the windscreen, the deep, dark waters of Loch Doon slipping by. Conflicting emotions of anguish and contentment struggle within me. Stolen moments, sadness, tenderness, anger, moments of vision, mountains, friends and mortality - feelings beyond words.

It is not yet mid-day. Galloway, your body is ravished yet your heart lives on. I will return again and forever.

THE THIRD QUESTION

By Peter Warburton

THE LONE walker, established in the hotel sitting room with his after-dinner coffee, will be familiar with the friendly approach of a fellow guest. 'And how many miles did you walk today?' is a usual opening inquiry. Typically, the wife then asks 'aren't you ever frightened, up there, all on your own?', but it is the third question that I take as my text - 'did you meet anybody?'

Recently I have been keeping a note. The statistical finding, based on the biased sample of West Highland holidays in May and June, is that on 60% of my excursions I encounter no one 'up there', but what never fails to surprise is the totally unexpected nature of some of the meetings on other days. As, for example, the occasion in 1986 when I would confidently have asserted that I had the Knoydart hills to myself. From Barrisdale I had made my way over Luinne Bheinn, down some distance into a mist-filled coire and up again to Meall Buidhe, from which cloud was just lifting. A simultaneous arrival at so remote a summit defies statistical probability but, there they were - two brothers approaching from the opposite direction. The circumstances are worth mention as a case of the rewards of careful planning.

The availability of a convenient supply of beer was essential to this pair's holiday enjoyment and their advance research had established that payment of a nominal membership fee would secure their admission to a drinking den in the commercial quarter of Inverie. This implausible arrangement was proving wholly satisfactory. The northern coast of the peninsula has of course been, in the specialised sense of the word, 'dry' since the regrettable closure of the inn at Skiary, a victim, not of proprietorial bigotry, but of the failure of the herring fishery, which undermined its customer base. The same fate befell the chapel at Barrisdale but, as it was a Wednesday, I felt this second deprivation less acutely.

Surprise encounters abroad sometimes have an added touch of drama. In 1964, while making slow progress up a valley, high, wide and long, in the French Pyrenees, I came upon a score or so of sleek and sophisticated horses. I ought to have realised that such expensive animals would not be unattended, but the sudden eruption of their exuberant keeper from a well hidden howff in the rocks took me by surprise. The extravagance of his greetings and his eagerness to converse became more understandable when he told me that he was there for the summer and that I was the first passer-by, in either direction, for a fortnight. The map showed two divergent exit routes over the distant headwall of the valley. As I was at the beginning of a return visit to the Pyrenees 'before they got spoiled', this

was good news, but the coarse red wine in his leather bottle was not. Fortunately, a beginner's ineptitude provided an excuse and limited my intake.

There was a more exotic meeting in 1954, when, taking advantage of an unexpected opportunity, I spent a few days in the Lebanese mountains. Setting off at a civilised hour one morning I climbed Kornet es Sauda (the 'Black Pimple'), 10,131 feet. There were no difficulties, but it was hot work. On the summit plateau, as I paused to consider Syria to my right and Turkey (maybe) somewhere ahead, all looking much of a muchness in the heat haze, a slightly disappointing day was suddenly redeemed. My arrival had awakened a goatherd and his flock. He sported a largely home made outfit featuring outerwear of animal skins, slung about with matching accessories in the form of ammunition pouches and general purpose scrips. A flute would have completed the picture, but the ancient firearm he instinctively grasped in his waking moment was doubtless more practical, given the prevalence of clan feuds and also the danger to his flock from animals.

Having come unprepared for the hills, I was modelling generously cut knee length khaki shorts, a pyjama coat (in the absence of any long sleeved shirt), a towel for head and neck covering and food in a string bag secured to my waist. Neither of us had seen the like before, but good manners overcame mirth. After greetings we got down to the serious business of the exchange of hospitality. I had hotel food in plenty; he seized a startled member of the herd, milked it into a tin can, which he stuck into a bank of snow to cool and, after further exchanges of civilities, presented with due ceremony. Shutting my eyes to the sight of numerous small objects swimming for dear life, I held my breath and swallowed. No ill effects resulted, but the descent finished off the pair of rather smart brown shoes in which I had set off.

The hotel question could be interpreted to mean 'did you meet Anybody?' I mean you hear of people meeting real toffs on the hills (on reflection, I have deleted the examples I had in mind). By stretching my terms of reference in the matter of locations, I can recall three who, in my view, merit the capital letter. Also a possible near miss.

I had a very wet time of it in 1973. The rainfall totals were probably not impressive but the permanently low cloud, the saturated ground and the remorseless drizzle ensured that, by precipitation or osmosis, I got thoroughly soaked each day. There was only one other resident guest in the hotel. He was a dark, middle aged man who wore a sombre, very hairy formal suit, such as a Greek peasant farmer might wear on feast days. It came as a rebuff to my expectations when he spoke with a London accent. Whenever I saw him he was carrying two newspapers - the unusual pairing of the Financial Times and a daily exclusively devoted to the affairs of the turf - the same two copies, growing daily grubbier, but still the object of long and careful study. Our brief encounters were almost wordless until the third day.

That evening the mystery man had discarded the jacket of his suit in favour of an unusual, collarless garment of stiff translucent plastic, with sleeves and worn zipped to the neck. Perhaps I was visibly fascinated by this striking garment, in which the wearer must surely cook, but my neighbour - we were assigned to adjacent tables in an otherwise empty dining room - chose that moment to open our first conversation. 'I find', he said, 'that I can wear a shirt for a fortnight on holiday. How about you?' This original opening quite wrong-footed me and my expression of admiration and envy was inadequate. Later he asked where I had been that day and, rather to my surprise, gave me knowledgeable detail of a more enjoyable local round. The following day I went further afield in a vain search for better weather. My fellow guest too knew the Aonachs. On my last evening this surprising man casually mentioned having completed a round of the Munros. He referred to it as a past event so that, if he recorded his name, it must be among the first hundred. I sometimes think of returning to that hotel to see whether the visitor's book reveals his identity but, on balance, I prefer to let him remain, *sui generis*: My First Munroist.

The following year I was making my way along the crest of the Grey Coires in distinctly bracing conditions: an inch of overnight snow on the ground and more falling, carried on a cooling breeze. Out of the thin mist a neat, well-organised figure approached at a smart rate. I came to a halt and, as the gap between us narrowed we exchanged a brief word, but he had merely moderated his pace and, as he accelerated away again towards Stob Coire Claurigh, the personification of purposefulness, I was left, standing in the snow, grinning at my own mild discomfiture. Five years later the identity of the man-who-did-not-stop was revealed to me when I bought the book: 'Wednesday 29 May... I passed yet another solitary Englishman who explained it was the Whit Week invasion...' Even in 1974 the name had been known to me. On the walls of a dilapidated corrugated iron bothy, eccentrically sited on the open slope of A'Chailleach in the Monadhliath, I had come across seven or eight dates and different lists of names, all headed Hamish Brown - the handiwork, no doubt, of members of his parties.

Among my own favourite stopping places was an hotel that usually housed at least a minority of hill walkers. Once, though, in the early sixties, I found myself alone there among the English motorists. One of them had taken strongly against the landlord on the grounds that holders of that office should ever be the hail-fellow-well-met, life and soul of the party, preferably with a touch of the Harry Lauders thrown in. Happily, the incumbent did not measure up to these specifications. Whenever he had a captive audience, the opinionated guest propagated his views and actively sought seconders. One day, as I left the room, he was telling the company that he believed the landlord had quite a nasty temper when roused...

The following evening the landlord made a brisk and unexpected entry into the dining room through the service door. Silence fell, soup spoons and prawn forks remained aloft as he bore down on the writer's table. What

misdemeanour had that unsociable fellow committed, what would be his fate? 'I am very sorry,' said the landlord 'but we haven't any half bottles left of the wine you ordered but, if you would care to split a bottle with us, my wife and I will finish it with our supper, in which case I would of course charge you half the bottle price, not the half bottle price.' A model landlord.

Later in my stay, the landlord having shown an informed interest in my outings, I inquired tentatively whether he ever got on to the hills himself. There was a barely perceptible pause before he replied, mildly, that, yes, he and his wife went out whenever they could, but that opportunities in the summer were few. No prizes for the answer. It was indeed Norman Tennent, then at the Kintail Lodge.

The next morning I heard his voice announcing to whoever was in the sitting room that Mr. So-and-so was going for a walk that day and had called to see whether anyone would care to join him. I was out of sight in the hall, quietly packing my rucksack preparatory to an ascent of the Saddle, diretissimo, via the Forcan ridge. Having been that way before, I knew that I should be operating at the interface of the heroic and the impossible. In such circumstances, one does not want to be encumbered with an unknown and possibly nervous novice. I sneaked out as soon as the coast was clear. All morning I felt guilty. If the success of that man's day depended on his finding an experienced companion, then I had behaved badly: we could have undertaken something less ambitious together. Later, I had second thoughts. Another gaffe? Somehow the form of words I had overheard had not suggested a lack of confidence. Could it be...?

You see, the name had not been Mr. So-and-so, but Mr. Murray. I dare say that, if it was Tennent's friend W.H. I should have been able, by a judicious blend of exhortation and practical tips, to coax him up the Forcan.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH GRAMSCI

By I.H.M. Smart

I FIRST heard the name Gramsci at Ben Alder Cottage in April 1944. My friend and I were both fourteen at the time. There was a war on. The Highlands were empty, the road narrow and bereft of traffic. We had walked from Rannoch Station on a sombre, windless afternoon. Heavy cloud darkened Ben Alder and Loch Ericht lay black and filled with shadow. We were very young and unsophisticated for fourteen as was the custom at that time, the result of living protected lives in a rigidly conventional straight-laced town and attending a school that drove us along intellectual tramlines. We walked through the ambient gloom in frank awe and apprehension, aware of our psychological vulnerability as unsupervised town dwellers in a wilderness devoid of the familiar artefacts of our urban world.

We first saw the cottage from the edge of the primeval wood. I can remember being aware of the awesome emptiness of the surrounding landscape and of a burn whispering from the back of a great cave of silence. A column of smoke rose straight from the cottage chimney. This disconcerted us. We thought it would be deserted. A keeper must be in residence. We knocked timidly at the door which had fishing rods propped up against the wall on each side. The buzz of conversation inside stopped. Eventually a man opened the door. He was large. His shirt was stretched over an ample abdomen so that diamond-shaped gaps opened up between the buttons. Through one of these his umbilicus stared at us like the eye of Polyphemus after Odysseus had stirred it around a bit.

'Aye?', he enquired without warmth.

'We... We forgot to bring a tent...We wondered if we could sleep in your outhouse?'.

'Where youse fae?', he enquired in a Glasgow accent.

'Edinburgh'

'Edinburry? Jesus Christ', he opined with unconcealed scorn, looking up to the sky so that this High Authority could join him in his displeasure.

'Away in there', he said at last, indicating the room to the right.

We entered an unfurnished room with some blankets folded on a pile of heather in one corner. We heard the Cyclopean keeper return to the other room and announce cheerfully,

'It's twa wee Edinburry shites'

The buzz of conversation next door resumed.

We lit a small fire in the grate and started to cook. Soon a visitor from next door appeared, a small dark man with a sensitive face, also very Glasgow. He looked with some interest at the two spoonfuls of reconstituted dried egg on a piece of bread and margarine that formed our main course. He questioned us about our background, what our parents did, where we went to school, why we were here and so on and on. He went away and soon came back with two large trout, gutted and headed and about a pound a piece, indicating that they were for immediate consumption.

'It must be grand being a keeper', we said.

He looked at us in disbelief. Thereafter he talked to us in the kindly tone that Glaswegians use when dealing with the mentally retarded or people with a weak grip on reality among whom, of course, are Edinburgians of the more harmless kind, such as we obviously were. We ate our fill of poached trout. The first time in our lives we had eaten a whole pound of first class protein in one go.

That evening in the other room there was conversation and laughter, also singing of songs both rousing and sad. There was a mouth-organ backing and occasional, expertly played chanter solos. It was quite a party; we weren't invited in. Late in the night some men came through, slumped out on the heather and snored loudly.

We left early the next morning, driven out by cold. Sleeping bags we had, of course, heard about but never seen; we would have considered them only fit for well-to-do cissies. We had slept on the floor wrapped in a couple of blankets discarded as no longer fit for home use. Our clothes were in a similar, sub-terminal condition. Wearing anything else would have been unthinkable; clothes were in any case strictly rationed. However, we did not feel deprived. We probably had never even heard the word used in this modern sense. We were just the same as everyone else. To be hungry and cold we regarded as normal; all our reading indicated that this was an integral part of travel on the edge of the known world.

We climbed Ben Alder in a bitter black wind which tore the clouds apart and blew them in bits across the sky, so that sunshine and shower patterned a moving landscape. At this time we were in our Central Asian phase and the grey-green snow-dappled Grampians we looked over were in our minds the wild rolling plateau lands of Tibet. We returned bubbling with success, naively prattling about the view and how it looked liked Central Asia. We carried very little intellectual baggage at the time and were able to hop around exuberently within our minds, light-footed and free. The bloom, as Tom Weir would say, was still on the grapes of adventure. The occupants of the other room were a bit bemused by all this untutored enthusiasm and invited us in. A pot of stew bubbled above an ample fire, a dismembered deer lay on a newspaper on the floor. A plate of trout shared the table with a sten gun and clips of ammunition. Another gun hung from a nail on the wall. To civilians so much naked protein in display was like an Aladdin's cave of gastronomic riches. We were told to help ourselves. They taught us to boil the venison a bit and then fry it in its own

fat. We even saw how black pudding is really made. Compared to dried egg this was a man's diet.

Gradually people drifted in from the hill or lochside until about a dozen were gathered together. Our claim to have climbed Ben Alder was confirmed as we had been seen on top and we were more or less accepted into the group in spite of our dubious background.

They were soldiers on embarkation leave and we were proud to be of their company. It was a memorable night for boys avid to escape from the tramrails. The talk was of climbs on strange mountains with strange, evocative names in parts of Scotland we hadn't even read about. Remember, in those days most mountaineering lore was transmitted orally. Its acquisition was gradual and you were only told things if you were deemed worthy, that is, if you were 'sib'. The secret corners of Scotland had yet to be sterilised by the fluorescent glare from glossy magazines, and there were no razor-sharp guide books to shave the face of the land bare of mystery.

The songs that night were strange Scots songs sung in an idiom unfamiliar to us but which our school would have described as 'unrefined'. Many were political. The cyclopean 'keeper' sang one about Spain where he had fought. We were informed that after the war there would be a Labour Government and as Labour was the party of Home Rule, Scotland would rise from the ashes of the past: a new educational system would liberate the working class from whom a new generation of engineers, teachers, doctors, lawyers, artists and writers, not to mention mountaineers, would emerge. There was a great deal of learned discussion with quotes from Marx and Lenin and many others, including John MacLean and Gramsci. I remember these two because I thought it odd to have a name like MacLean mentioned in the same breath as Lenin, and Gramsci was the sort of name an anarchist would have in a comic paper. The party went on into the small hours. There was firelight on faces, the booty of hunter and fisherman on the table, the glint of guns on the wall. This was indeed an escape from our prissy school. We seemed to be living in the mainstream of events. All over Europe partisan bands in mountain hideouts just like this were heroically fighting for a great ideal. The war, inter alia, was for the right of small nations to exist. Scotland, it appeared, was to be one of them and a refreshing new Scotland of high standards and high endeavour at that. We were converted. Glasgow, in our minds, became Stalingrad and Edinburgh akin to Vichy, as, I suppose, it remains to this day.

The next morning we climbed Ben Bheoil and spent the afternoon vainly scouring its flanks for signs of Cluny's Cave. We were also under the influence of Stevenson's 'Kidnapped'. When we got back in the evening the cottage was empty and cleared up to the satisfaction of even the most stringent of hostel wardens; the fire was set and ample wood was neatly stacked by the hearth. Since our heroes had such high standards, when our turn came to leave we could have no less.

The next time I visited the cottage was one Hogamany years later. I was with a group of fellow students. We climbed a winter gully in the great coire

of Ben Alder; we had a great meet. My mind was too full of the rich present to think much, if at all, about my former heroes. I was now part of another dispensation; their influence had faded.

Several decades later, approaching from the south we encountered a notice warning of the danger of being shot by high-velocity rifles. Then we met a Range Rover filled with nice-enough people who languidly knotted the air with tripthonged vowels. The cottage we found to be full of poor souls from the twilight zones of nether Britain. One of them was the leader of some sort of 'public' school party. He spoke with an authority from the back of his throat. He knew everything about everything but nothing at all about anything else. There was no humour here. There were no shadows in this man's world. His umbilicus would never have peered at us gallusly from between his shirt buttons. That night we slept out on Ben Alder side like Cluny MacPherson before us. Must it always end like this? Be that as may, we found ourselves closer to Scotland than if we had stayed among the cuckoos in the cottage.

What happened to the bold mountaineers of 1944 and their dreams of a native renaissance? This is where Gramsci comes in. I looked him up in a Bibliographical Dictionary after writing the draft of this story. Gramsci was a political philosopher who tried to explain to the Marxists why the established system would not in fact collapse under its internal contradictions as predicted. It must first be infiltrated, he said, by bearers of a new enlightenment until all the key positions had been occupied. He then went on to acknowledge that the system was so strong that successful infiltrators would be persuaded to string along until they eventually forgot why they were there. So this must have been what happened to the men of 1944 unless, of course, they were eliminated in the war. In either case there was never any danger of a brave native resurgence led by intellectual mountaineers.

However, they do say that Ben Alder Cottage is haunted. I'm sure it is. It is highly probable that on certain April nights the sound of aboriginal voices can be heard earnestly discussing the way forward to better things. But do not be afraid. The weight of Gramsci's chains (you may even hear them give a comforting rattle) will keep these ghosts from breaking through into the real world. You will be quite safe to go on lying snug in a warm sleeping bag on a state-of-the-art sealed-cell camping mat, dreaming short-sightedly only of tomorrow's climb. What else can you do? The more distant future will make you cooperate with it, whether you want to or not.

mountains rise

mountains rise
black against the sun,
just bullies.
block your sky
late in the day
when you're too tired to tame them, when

fumbling by,
all you wish for
is some wide green valley
lightening evening, not this dour
glen so soon
night to the eye

where you do no more
than tell again
of a white summit won;
and how, on going down,
lesser summits opposite
rose black against the sun.

G.J.F.D

RAMPANT MUNROSIS

The Scottish Disease

By W.D. Brooker

IT IS JUST over a hundred years since the 'Tables giving all the Scottish Mountains exceeding 3,000 feet in Height, by Hugh T Munro,' appeared in the *Journal* of September, 1891. This was rightly regarded as an important event and the culmination of a considerable and dedicated effort. At the outset, Munro himself 'had little idea of the enormous amount of labour and research which it would entail - a labour which, even if it had not been altogether abandoned, would have been vastly increased but for the invaluable assistance given by Colin Philip...' Even Stott, who like his editorial successors was not easily impressed, declared that it 'had occupied over three hundred hours during some five months... it forms a contribution... whose value it would be difficult to exaggerate. There is little doubt that the lists will receive the study they deserve at the hands of all who are interested in the mountains of Scotland.'

Prophetic words! And yet few would have imagined, not even the Compiler himself, that the Centenary of his work would be celebrated by a feature article in '*The Times*' (Colour Magazine, 30 March, 1991), that the word '*Munro*' was to enter the English language (*The Oxford Guide to English Usage*, p25), and that the name of Hugh Munro would become more widely known than that of any other of the founders of the Club. Munro readily admitted that the work to which he gave such commitment was incomplete. Many of the original heights given were approximate and based on aneroid readings. In 1913 he was revising the Tables and wrote 'the issue of the third edition of the revised 1-inch Ordnance Survey Map has thrown considerable extra light on the subject, and also involved a large amount of extra work; for not only has every name and height to be checked on the 1-inch, but the 1-inch and 6-inch have again to be compared to see if they agree...' etc., etc. He ended with a list of 76 tops whose precise heights remained uncertain and sought confirmation of his own readings from aneroid-bearing Members of the Club.

This will be a familiar scene to successive Masters of the Tables who have had to wrestle with the results of orogenetic frenzies by the Ordnance Survey. Even today, a hundred years on, doubts can arise. The latest 1:10000 map shows Ganu Mor on Foinaven at 914 metres. This is rounded to the nearest metre and according to the OS the true height lies between 913.8 and 915.2 (2998 and 3002.6ft), and raises the interesting question as to whether this, and not Ben Hope, is the most northerly Munro. Not that

it really matters, since Foinaven is a superb mountain and should be climbed anyway. If it is elevated, we should not be too surprised since (4) J Rooke Corbett pointed out in 1932 that the cairn did not appear to be on the highest point and suggested it deserved further investigation, while in 1920 (2) A R C Burn had mentioned that on *Heddle's Geological map of Sutherland* (1881) it was marked as 3013 and that Munro himself had been told by a local source that it was over 3000 feet. A pity he omitted it from the Tables, but perhaps his aneroid was not at its best when he was there!

It was the pioneer Compleat Munroist, (1) A E Robertson, who seems to have been the first to use the term 'Munros' (within inverted commas), for the mountains which reached 3000 feet in height. This usage seems to have continued until 1929 when J H B Bell dispensed with the inverted commas in two footnotes he added to an article about his local Lomond Hills. These notes are worth quoting here as they scurrilously caricature the two main styles of activity in the mountains. The distinction was more imagined than real of course, but it may have been more applicable in the days before Munrosis developed as an endemic disease among Scottish hillgoers.

> 'A salvationist, to the ultramontane, is a somewhat low-grade person, hardly a climber, who endeavours, by the easiest way, to reach the summit of any sort of Scottish hill which exceeds 3000 feet in height above sea level. Such a hill is called a Munro...', and, 'The ultramontane is, in the Lomond sense, a crazy and irresponsible person who climbs any nearly vertical face of rotten rock and vegetation by the most difficult way. He seldom visits the summit of a hill, and he is forbidden by his creed to remove any loose rocks or vegetation, which must be allowed to remain, in order to lure to destruction a future aspirant to ultramontane glory.'

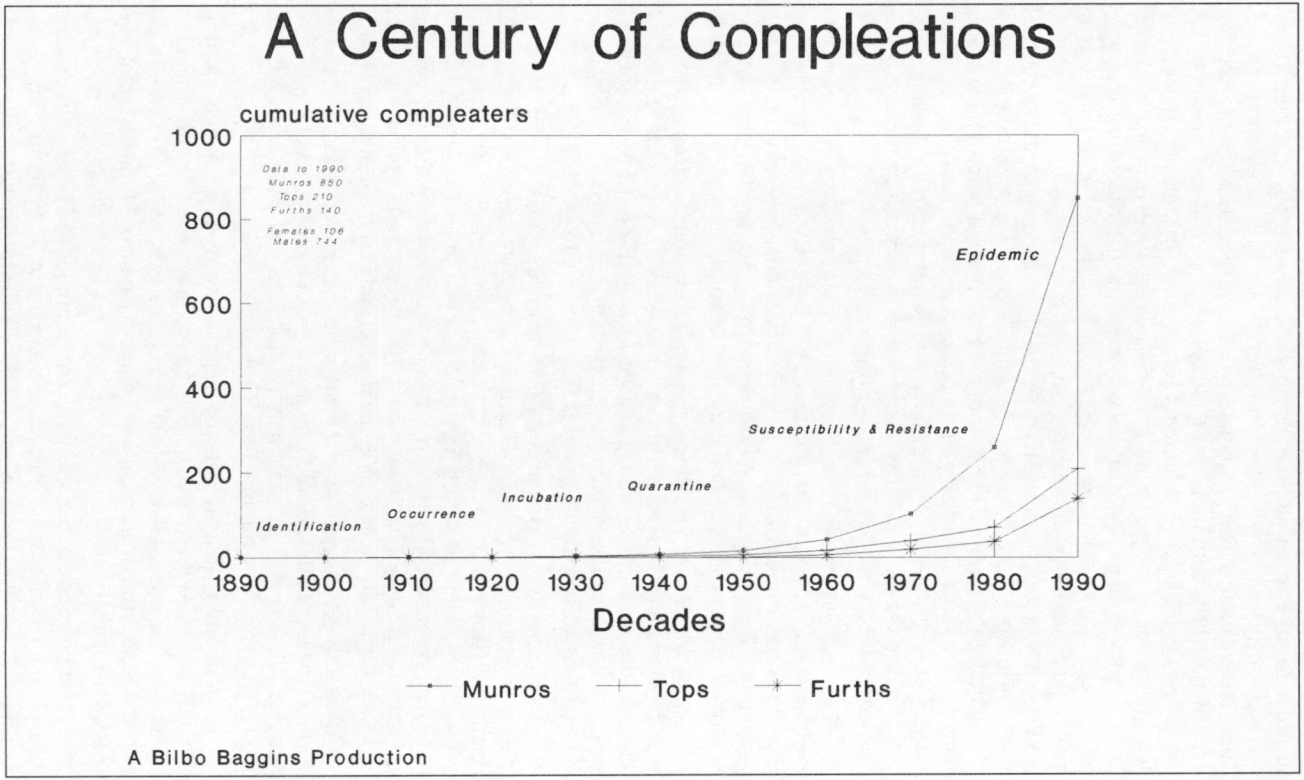
What Bell did not fully appreciate was that the oft-derided peak-bagging activities of many salvationists and even some dedicated ultramontanes were symptoms of a new ailment which was to affect large numbers of Scottish hillgoers in the years ahead **Munrosis, the Scottish Disease.** It is a weakness of the currently available means of detection that Munrosis is only identified with any certainty when the disease has run its course and the sufferer becomes a mere statistic. Even so, the rate of spread is impressive. Over fifty years were to pass before the first ten cases were recorded and it took another thirty years for them to reach 100. A glance at the accompanying graph will show that since then the rate of growth has been exponential or even explosive, with the disease having run its course in almost 850 recorded cases in the hundred years since Munro first published his work. Additionally, cases which come to light long after they are concluded suggest there must be an unknown number of undetected and hence unrecorded instances in which the condition has taken effect. It should be remembered that these figures apply to cases which are 'compleat' and there must be very many sufferers who are abroad in the Scottish hills today but who will not appear in the statistics until later.

The true nature of the affliction was probably not fully appreciated until the 1980's. '*The Scotsman*' carried a brief report by Peter McCue on 'Chronic Munrosis.- a severe form of obsessional neurosis peculiar to Scotland.' The October 1984 edition of '*Scottish Medicine*' published a much fuller description entitled 'the Scottish Disease' by Dr Iain B McIntosh, a Stirling G.P. This paper revealed such understanding of the condition that it seemed likely the writer must himself be afflicted, as can be seen from these extracts:-

> 'Unique to Scotland, this is a highly contagious affliction which affects teenagers and the not so young of both sexes. Predominant in the male, it takes an acute or chronic course and in the obsessed can threaten life and limb. An acute episode can progress to ultimate recovery in months but in its chronic state it can last a lifetime, with latent intermissions and relapses resulting in fitful bursts of over-activity and mad, compulsive behaviour...
>
> Those affected are disabled by an obsession which can interfere with social life, destroy a marriage and severely strain a marital relationship... Social effects are minimised when husband and wife suffer together and support clubs have flourished in recent years...
>
> Medical services have been expanded to meet the needs of this group and volunteers provide emergency care for those who suffer from exposure, hypothermia and trauma in pursuit of their obsession... Many of the young feed their obsession, submit themselves to intense exposure and overactivity for a year or two and win free of the condition.
>
> For a few the cycle restarts to further blight their lives, although paradoxically, with passing years, overweight and smoking lead to a compulsion-free existence as breathlessness and fatigue prevent overexposure to this bizarre activity. With advanced years this strange state burns itself out allowing the very elderly to escape from its malign influence.'

Over the last twenty years, Dr Iain Smart of the University of Dundee, in association with the writer, has carried out studies which have considerably advanced our understanding of Munrosis and successfully identified a number of variants. Some of these findings are summarised as follows:-

Incubation. The period taken by this preliminary phase varies greatly from individual to individual. There appears to be some correlation between its length and the time taken for the condition to run through its cycle. Many long term sufferers have experienced lengthy incubation, sometimes visiting a mountain for the climbing it affords and not even going to the nearby summit after the climb. At this stage such persons may totally ignore even easily accessible Munros if they lack climbing interest. Then discerning companions may notice signs of aberrant behaviour - a tendency to extend and distort a day on the hill beyond its natural length


A Century of Compleations
cumulative compleaters
1000
800
600
400
200
0
Data to 1990
Munros 850
Tops 210
Furths 140
Females 106
Males 744
Epidemic
Susceptibility & Resistance
Quarantine
Incubation
Occurrence
Identification
1890
1900
1910
1920
1930
1940
1950
1960
1970
1980
1990
Decades
Munros
Tops
Furths
A Bilbo Baggins Production

in order to take in an additional top - the possession of a map (often surreptitiously) on which some summits have been underlined in red. These are indications that incubation is over and the disease has developed, even if not fully admitted by the sufferer. It should be said here that nowadays, like bastardy, Munrosis has a much readier and more open acceptance than in the past when in many quarters it carried a social stigma. Today it may even be flaunted! As was mentioned earlier, if incubation is brief or entirely absent there is often an intense period of overactivity in which the disease may burn itself out in a few years or even in months. However it may well recur and if so, it is likely to do so again and again until age or infirmity put an end to the obsession. Recurrence may take the form of extending the compulsion to include the adjacent summits known as Tops or even those mountains Furth of Scotland which exceed 3000 feet. Some will win free at this point, sated with what is called A Grand Slam, but there are others who have been known to suffer transference to the Corbetts, which were not part of the original Tables.

Munrosis vulgaris, sometimes called *M. inadvertens* - the most common form in which the condition only takes full hold when the victim, having enjoyed normal mountain activity for years, suddenly discovers (or has it pointed out by a misguided person) that only 50, or 100, or whatever, Munros remain to be done and the full tally might as well be completed.

Secondary Munrosis is the increasingly common situation in which an already Compleat Munroist finds that a second cycle gets underway through the well-intentioned, but probably ill-advised, practice of accompanying a spouse or other close associate experiencing the first cycle of the disease. Such involvement is liable to lead to -

Polymunrosis - where the condition recurs in cycles. The best known of a growing number of documented cases of *Polymunrosis* is that of (62) Hamish M Brown who having breathed a sigh of relief in 1965 has found himself on a treadmill which has rotated seven times (so far). A further complication endured by Brown is that on at least two of these circuits he has been pursued by dogs which have succeeded in stowing away in his rucksack at critical places such as the Inaccessible Pinnacle of Sgurr Dearg.

That a shared burden is more easily borne appears to be confirmed by the fact that about 30 cases of *M. matrimonialis* have been recorded. Here compleation occurs simultaneously by husband and wife, often hand in hand. (This is getting out of hand - Ed.)

M. familiaris is rarer, but instances of entire families succumbing certainly occur. At least three have been recorded, one of which included the most extreme case of *M. juvenilis* on record, that of (493) David Kale who had gone through the complete course of a bout of Munrosis by the age of 13 years and 10 months.

At the other end of the spectrum are examples of *M. venerabilis* such as (207) Ivan Waller who was 73 and had taken 55 years to resolve his condition. A similar case was that of (646) Iain Ogilvie who having spent

no less than 66 years in thrall must surely represent the extreme case of *M. longus*. Younger sufferers not infrequently experience very intense but mercifully short episodes. Notable cases of *M. brevis* were (607) Mark Elsegood and (777) Hugh Symonds, at 66 and 67 days respectively. (383) Martin Moran at 83 days is in the same category but since these were entirely in winter the designation of *M. hibernalis* is also appropriate.

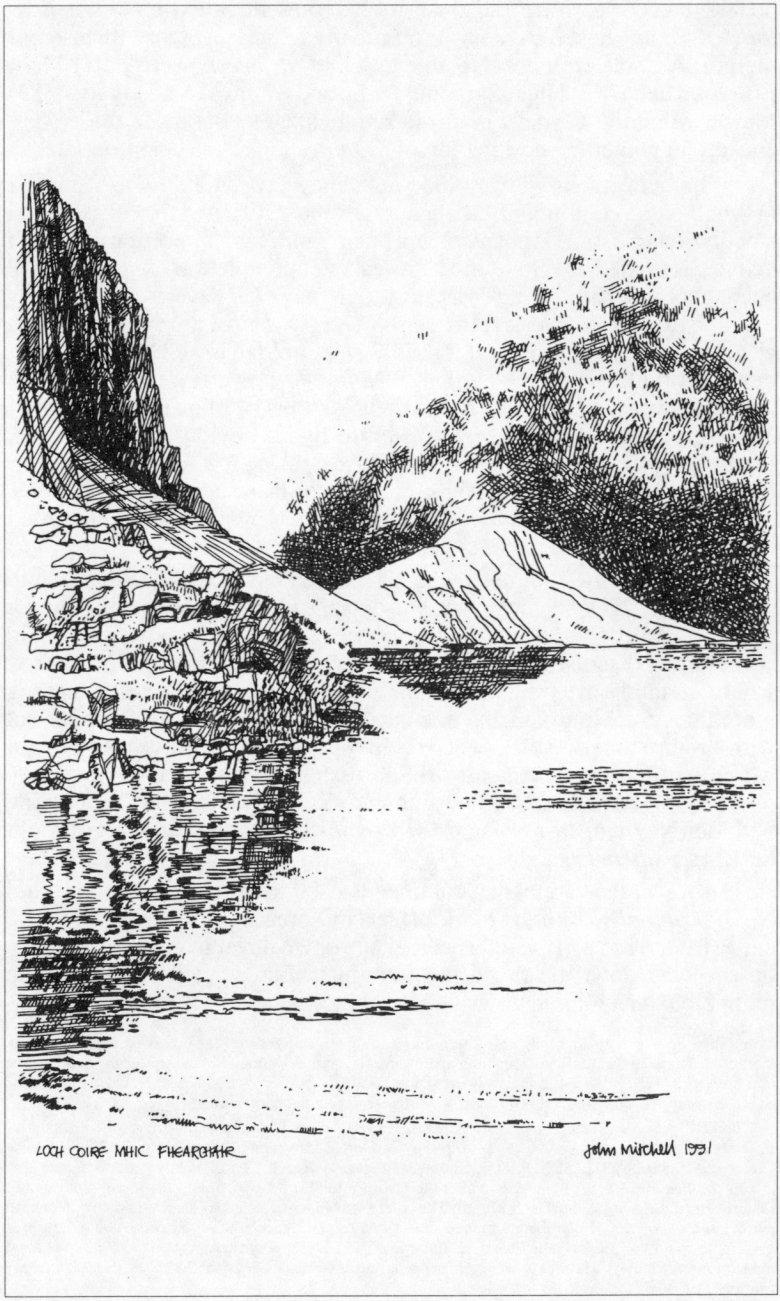
Whether persons with a solitary tendency have a liability to Munrosis or whether the condition itself encourages those afflicted to seek isolation (for obvious reasons) is not resolved, but a significant proportion of Munro activity is carried out alone and a few cases of complete *M. soloensis* have been recorded. Another rare variant which may well have gone some way to make the condition easier to bear is *M. claravistitis*, the experience of a clear view from every summit. The ingenuity of Man is well known and the motive for alleviating the burden of Munrosis powerful; thus a few like (237) Haswell Oldham have found their personal solution in the pursuit of *M. elegans* – the ascent of every Munro by an obvious sporting route, Lochnagar by *Eagle Ridge*, Beinn a' Bhuird by *Mitre Ridge*, Nevis by *Tower Ridge* and so on. Unfortunately some Munros lack such sporting features and on them ingenuity may be tested. Oldham ascended Mount Keen on ski with the aid of a parachute!

A variant which has not yet been recorded but which would appear to suit the needs of some in that it represents the ultimate in secrecy, solitude and anonymity would be *M. nocturnalis*. Other variants which would successfully disguise Munrosis and perhaps dilute its effect, although they would certainly extend its duration, are *M. yoyoensis* - never ascending more than one Munro on any one day and *M. totoyoyoensis* – similar but with a return to sea level between each Munro. Refinements in the ways in which a sufferer might respond to the obsession and thus obtain diversionary relief are *M. incrementalis* – starting with Beinn Teallach and concluding with Ben Nevis, or the reverse - *M. decrementalis*. More complicated might be *M. alphabeticus*, and so on.

However the variant that commends itself to my own ambition would be *M. terminalis* – dilution of the effects by spreading the activity over the entire lifetime so that the final heart attack or whatever it is to be takes place on the way down from the last summit. Mind you, it would require meticulous planning, but what a way to go!

Note: The Editor is tempted to add that *M. terminalis* might be arranged through his office, but will refrain, merely pointing out that those wishing their affliction to be recorded should do so through the beneficence of the author:- W.D. Brooker, 25 Deeview Road South, Cults, Aberdeen AB1 9NA. As usual in these parts, an s.a.e. complete with steam-proof stamp should guarantee an acknowledgement.

Finally, male compleaters wishing to purchase The Munroist Tie, if only to warn off the unafflicted, may obtain one from the *Keeper of the Regalia*, Dr G.M. McAndrew, Bishop's House, 4 Lansdowne Crescent, Edinburgh EH12 5EQ. Price, including postage, £6.50 each. This distinctive tie is available only to compleat Munroists. With the approval of the Court of the Lord Lyon, the design incorporates major features from the Arms of Sir Hugh Munro. The single woven motif, a red stylised heraldic eagle's head encircled by branches of laurel and oak and subscribed by the figure 3000, is displayed on a dark blue ground between two narrow pale blue diagonal lines. The tie is in polyester jacquard weave and is lined throughout. We believe a brooch or something appropriate is being designed for the ladies. (See 'Centenary Matters', p.696 this issue).


LOCH COIRE MHIC FHEARCHAIR
John Mitchell 1991

Munro Baggins

Tune: the Highland Tinker

Chorus:

Oh, my name is Munro Baggins,
baggin' Munros is my game -
at weekends and bank-holidays
you'll seldom find me hame!
For I'm sticking coloured pins
into a map upon my wa',
and, before I collect my pension,
I'm resolved to bag them a'!
bag them a' - toor-a-loo!
bag them a' - toor-a-lay!
and, before I collect my pension,
I'm resolved to bag them a'!

Well, I've driven past Stac Pollaidh
in the summer once or twice,
and they say the Cobbler's bonny,
and it might be very nice -
But the shapeless lumps and sprawling bumps
are where I have to go,
for three-thousand feet's my limit,
and I widnae go below!

Chorus

And they say that Ardnamurchan
is a place that's fine to see,
but there's no wee dots upon my map,
it's no the place for me!
So I'm ticking off *Geal Charns*,
though they all seem rather plain,
I just wish I had the time to do
Ben Lui once again.

Chorus

Noo I've never been to Harris, Lewis,
Canna, Rum or Muck,
and the only time I went to Mull,
I really came unstuck -
For I missed the homeward ferry,
and it filled my heart with woe,
spending two days on an island,
that's got only one Munro!

Chorus

But there is a thought that troubles me,
in dark hours o' the night -
it's a vision o' the future,
and it's no' a pretty sight!
What happens when I've done them a',
and life seems all in vain?
- Well, I'll pull oot a' the bloody pins,
and **bag them a' again!**

Chorus

Brendan Hamill

SACK OF POTATOES

By Grant D.K. Urquhart

IT IS a grand summery evening and I am sitting in Mr. Nicholson's drinking emporium on the Rannoch Moor quaffing some of his cool 80/- and awaiting the arrival of the Portland Porker. Though the bar is crowded I am in no way concerned that I fail to observe the presence of my old friend, for he is no longer the hard and muscular companion of my early climbing years, but a very large mountaineer indeed. It is a sad fact that the combined influences of family life, American cooking, good Oregon beer, and a certain hereditary tendency to plumpness have taken their toll. Also, he is a glutton.

In truth, Portland Porker is not the name his mother gives him at birth, but if I tell you this many of you may identify him and he may feel some resentment towards me, which is not a situation I wish to encourage. Already he may think that I bear some responsibility for the fiasco which unfolds: I will tell you how it comes about.

It is the custom of the Porker on his occasional forays to the Old Country to seek me out in order that we may recapture past glories on the rock. Of course he is too fat to climb anything steep or hard, so we usually content ourselves with an Etive Slab classic such as Spartan, or Hammer, or both. Now it so happens that I have become rather bored with these itineraries, and as I sit and quaff I am becoming very hot for another route entirely. In fact, by the time the Portland Porker rolls in, I am so hot for this route I am practically steaming.

The first thing I notice about the Porker is that he has not developed any wasting disease since I last saw him. It is lucky he has a head at one end or you would not know which way up to put him, as he is about the same height in all directions. Nonetheless I am very pleased to see him, and we have much time to make up, so we buy each other many large pints while the Porker discourses far and wide, as is his wont. We discuss many important matters, such as the health of his family, and the latest developments in probability theory, and so on and so forth, until the talk comes round to mountaineering.

It transpires that the Porker has purchased a pair of Sticky Boots, and feels that these will be particularly effective when subjected to the exceptional downward force he exerts. So he suggests a visit to the Etive Slabs and an ascent of Spartan, or Hammer, or suchlike, as is our habit. Now I explain to him that we have done these routes very many times, and that I am deeply desirous of attempting a climb called Swastika, and when he protests that this is much too difficult I assure him that there is lots of

good cheating on the hard bits, as at the time I believe this to be the case. I further insist that I will provide at least E above middle C at any time he requests same, and as his judgement is by now impaired to no little degree, he at length accedes.

The next day is again astoundingly warm and sunny, and as we are only moderately overhung we are able to commence climbing quite early in the p.m. The Porker is still muttering darkly about needless and excessive difficulty, but I lead off briskly, feigning deafness. My friend's new Sticky Boots perform admirably, and though his unconventional use of the fingernails is less than elegant, we make steady progress. I am somewhat concerned at the mysterious absence of the Friendly Jug from the Moustache, but Portland takes the overlap in his stride and sportingly refrains from penduluming from the traverse, so I can see that we are certainly in clover. So much so that, having demonstrated how many modern protection devices can be slotted into the first half of the Unprotectable Quartz Band, I offer the lead on the second part.

He regards me with some suspicion, but finally accepts my assurances and copious hardware. Imagine his surprise, therefore, on finding the pitch both delicate and runnerless. I regard my belays balefully, and speculate as to whether the rapid downward motion of the Sticky Boots will continue to exceed the potential backsliding of the Porker's ample posterior. After what are known euphemistically as a few anxious moments, however, modern rubber technology and fingernails prevail.

I am now a little unpopular, as my companion unjustly questions my motives in relinquishing the lead. We regard the crux. This manifestly unclimbable roof is fortunately well supplied with stout metal holds, and yields easily to determined cheating, followed by judicious application of E above middle C. Clearly, nothing can stop us now.

Another slab pitch leads to the finishing corner, which I confidently expect to be fully furnished from bottom to top with stout pitons. I am a little disconcerted, therefore, when the stripling youth I find belayed at its foot cheerfully informs me that his leader just spent an hour and a half freeing the pitch. When I ask why he does not pull on the pitons in the time-honoured fashion, the youth points out, with some justification, that these are too far apart and, what is more, the first is some thirty feet up the vertical corner. He then leaves me to spectate quizzically as he ascends by an unusual combination of jumping, grunting, and swinging Tarzan-like on the ropes. I am glad the Porker, who is preoccupied with the delicacies of the slab, does not observe this, as it certainly does not look like his type of climbing. (Actually he only really enjoys two types of climbing: easy slabs, and wide chimneys into which he can securely wedge his great bulk.) So I keep mum about these proceedings as he lumbers towards me, perspiring pate aglow. At length he puffs onto the stance and I nonchalantly secure him to the rock.

Unfortunately it becomes more difficult to appear nonchalant once actually climbing, as the corner is both steep and smooth, and a good deal

of exertion is required to reach the haven of the stout pitons. Clearly this will be beyond the compass of my corpulent companion, but I reason that with the aid of the taut piano wires and his well-honed thrutching technique he will surely succeed.

The upper section is easy and I am soon strapping myself to a sturdy shrub on the narrow path which runs along the top of the crag. I draw up the ropes and invite my friend, out of sight beneath, to proceed. Some minutes pass during which there is no perceptible movement from below. I do not wish to seem impatient. He must be dismantling the belay. More time passes, while there is still no apparent motion. I tug the ropes more brusquely. Nothing. As usual, impatience prevails. I inquire if there is perhaps some difficulty.

'I can't do it.'

'Pardon me? Just pull on the pitons.'

'I can't reach them.'

'How far have you got?'

'Nowhere.'

'Nowhere?'

'I can't get off the ground.'

'Well just udge up a bit, I'll take in the wires, then you take a rest.'

For several minutes I haul mightily on the ropes, veins bulging on stiffening forearms.

'How far up are you now?'

'Nowhere.'

'Nowhere?'

'Still on the deck.'

'Well, try a bit harder.'

More mighty hauling, more multiple orgasms from below.

'This is hopeless, I'm totally knackered.'

'How far have you got?'

'About three feet.'

'What are you going to do, then?'

'I don't know.' A pause. 'We'll have to go down.'

'Don't be ridiculous, I'm at the top. What's more, it's 800 feet of slabs and scary overlaps with ropes jamming all over the place. I refuse to go down.'

'So untie from the ropes and I'll go down.'

'And leave all my gear in the corner? You must be joking!'

'Then I'm stuck.'

'Just prussik up the ropes.' (Rapidly backing-up the sturdy shrub.) Silence from below. 'Well?'

'Er... I can't tie a prussik knot.'

This comes as rather a surprise, as I recall the many occasions when we stagger around glaciers together, loops tucked optimistically into our harnesses. I remind my partner of this.

'What if you had fallen into a crevasse?'

'Oh well,' he replies, 'I suppose that would have been it.'

This patently insincere expression of fatalism does nothing to improve my humour. Luckily at this juncture a lycra-clad nymphet traverses the blank slab separating the marooned Porker from her route, and patiently instructs him in prussik-tying. News of this latest absurdity cheers me greatly, but the nymphet's efforts are regrettably of no more tangible help, as his great weight far exceeds the frictional capabilities of the knot. Evidently we are at an impasse. Desperate measures are called for. I look about for inspiration and find it at once.

The crag is populous. On all sides mountaineers ascend their chosen lines. And some, as the descent path is narrow and inescapable, must eventually pass my stance. I need only sit and wait. After a few minutes a pair of muscular hard men come by. Clearly they are wise and experienced climbers, as, in response to my polite 'Excuse me, chaps', they merely grunt and rush on down. Nil desperandum, however, as many large and slow parties are nearing the top of Hammer, a few yards away. I bide my time, and accost them in my best Glaswegian, surmising, correctly, that many of them will be Sassenachs and so will immediately be intimidated into doing whatever I tell them, no matter how ludicrous.

Picture the scene, if you can, of a dozen or so assorted climbers of both sexes, strung precariously along a two-foot-wide path above an abyss, heaving like a tug of war team on a cat's cradle of ropes and prussik loops attached variously to the rock and to an alarmingly bending sapling. Predictably enough, this arrangement creates enormous friction, and the haulee rises only a couple of feet more.

I am again staring into the jaws of defeat, when a small miracle occurs. One of these southern persons produces from his harness, where it has apparently dangled unheeded since some long-past Alpine excursion, a small pulley. Eureka! It takes only another hour or so of rope and anchor rearranging, followed by more hauling and heaving, and the Porker, like some great unbeached whale, or a zeppelin freed from its moorings, begins a majestic progress skywards. A few more moments and his cherubic face hoves into view, a little pink and dishevelled, but manifestly happy to arrive. If my assistants expect a show of embarrassment or contrition, then they greatly underestimate my companion. Instead, he shamelessly proclaims that, though his ascent does involve some aid, it is by modern standards a most ethical one as it is both bolt- and chalk-free. Dumbstruck, they all scuttle off. My old buddy and I unravel the spaghetti and descend at a more leisurely pace.

Back at the Coffin Stone we eat a rather belated lunch, pack our gear, and turn for the car park. About half-way down the path we are pleasantly

surprised to come upon the Porker's ever-loving parents. They tell us that they stroll up in the hope of meeting their somewhat prodigal son, and spend a most pleasant afternoon observing the local bird and animal life with the aid of their fine binoculars. I enquire if, perchance, they also observe the many mountaineers upon the cliff. Oh yes, they reply, we have a splendid view of the proceedings. And you will not believe this, they go on, but we see the most extraordinary sight. Up near the summit of the crag, they say, a person dangles for hours on the end of a rope, and he is birling around there like a sack of potatoes. Yes, they say, birling round and round, just like a big sack of potatoes.

november weekend

these hills rise
in long slow violence, ice

their final thrust;
but they are just

practising, you're much too early
for anything serious, they've not nearly

thought about what they're going to do.
gullies - nothing like ready: you

come back when they've gathered more snow.
still, be careful as you go;

there is always the chance
of an unpremeditated avalanche

G.J.F.D

A RESCUE

By G.J.F. Dutton

'This is worse than Princes Street the day before the Festival. Or Zero Gully at Easter.'

It was. We were pushed, jostled, poked, stood on. People overtook us, some very rudely. We overtook others, more rudely still. Children and the aged dithered in front, were helped aside, were cursed at. Luggage dented us. Infants hooted and howled. We kept losing each other in the turmoil. A few fanatics even fought against us the other way, pale with exhausted hate.

We seized a rare opportunity when we were all together, and ducked to the left, under an overhang. Traffic thundered above us, turf and small stones trebled past us, the odd whispering sweetiepaper see sawed beyond us 2000 feet to the A82. Aah...Relax...Stretch...

It was the Aonach Eagach on a fine day in late summer, and we had gone there for Doctorial 'old times' sake'; for a simple scenic stroll after the Apprentice had shown us, the previous day, some of the latest things across the glen.

'We'll wait here till sunset', declared the Apprentice, 'when the pubs are open and they've all gone home.' Otherwise, he'd be up for manslaughter; simply walking on, he'd knock dozens off, either side: satisfying, but morally wrong. The Doctor's suggestion of a descent by The Chancellor ('It's a good route, for 1920') met with an expected response: equally morally wrong, and much less satisfying. One ecological expedition sufficed for one day. Anyway, all gullies would be pattern-bombed by these passing and re-passing squadrons. We would wait. It was a fine afternoon.

At least you did see people. Fascinating. We clambered up over our overhang and surveyed the procession. Occasionally friends appeared but were borne away by the current, their greetings submerged. Many parties were roped up, often only a few feet apart, lurid in astronauts' anoraks, tintinnabulating with promenade ironware; so the tanglement at times became epic. One of the helicopters droning above would have been useful in traffic control. Our detached and lofty superiority provoked, though, occasional misinterpretation. 'Are you stuck? Can we give you a hand?' called out one eager Youth Leader from the van of his bright-faced progeny. It was left to the more genial Doctor to smile him on, dismissively. Little did we know.

As the sun went down, so did most of them, and we were about to resume our nostalgic traverse when an agitated figure approached from the west, swinging and jumping through the slap-happy pinnacles.

'It's Sandy Oliphant!' cried the Doctor, 'without babies, for once, or kids of any kind. Never sampled pure undiluted mature 35-year-old Oliphant for ages.' We thought we'd recognised him earlier, chuffing among a steaming train of schoolchildren, acting as porter, guard, stoker and driver up and down the line.

He appeared in great distress. Had any fallen off? The Doctor pursed lips as Sandy panted nearer. 'Ridiculous, taking kids along a rotten ridge like this, with such exposure and no escape. Kids depend on us adults absolutely. We should be more careful. Sandy tends to overdo things.' We doubted if any single sprog would have been adept enough to push out of such a press, and fall. Probably a whole string had gone. Dreadful.

But no. Nobody had fallen. One, however, had decided to 'go home' his own way 'home' being a camp down in the glen. He was sick of the queue. To Sandy's horror this independent youth had airily waved, jumped and slid down to that horrible loose south face. Despite entreaties he would not - probably could not - climb back up. When last visible, he was squatting on the edge of a gully, giving thumbs-up to his hand-wringing conductor - who, having noticed us a little way back, had tethered the others by a firm injunction to some rock, and then bolted here for help.

No, no, he didn't want official Rescue Teams just yet. The boy was intelligent ('certainly is, getting out of this lot', remarked the Apprentice) and would surely be waiting for assistance. 'You are the only competent climbers I've seen here,' gasped Sandy, 'you could nip over and get him up - or safely down - without any fuss. I daren't risk fuss, it would upset the others, scare the parents - and we've been that careful all weekend...People talk so...' Sandy is totally without guile, and we were touched more than flattered. We bounded along behind him, towards his bereft and quivering flock.

'You know,' hissed the Doctor, 'he should have got the M.R.T. right away. Lord knows what that boy'll get up - or down to. I don't like these private arrangements to save face, where kids are concerned - they're more important than anyone's pride.'

Of course, we had no rope or pegs. Not for a walk like this (it is indeed classified - by some - as a Walk...). Only a short nylon line - for emergency. We peered down. In the dusk a small figure crouched above the network of delapidating overhanging gullies. Still there. Poor kid.

'Fine, we'll pop down and collect him. If we see a good way out, we'll take it. And signal by torch. Then you get the rest home and drive to the bottom and pick us up. Otherwise we'll have to try and climb back up this awful stuff.' Thus the Doctor.

A most unpleasant descent. The Doctor, skilled in horticultural psychology, led us through the less neurotic vegetation. My fingernails gathered *Graminaceae* and *Ericaceae*, the Apprentice no longer enjoyed what had promised to be the only interesting part of the day. 'All right, laddie, we're here!' cried the Doctor encouragingly, as he slithered down

an invisible herbaceous thread among the unstrung and highly volatile vertical debris.

'So *you're* going this way, too?' the boy called back. He was not shocked. Not alarmed. Rather, he seemed impatient. He finished what appeared to be sandwiches, rolled the paper into a ball and tossed it into horrifying black depths. Then, waving cheerily, he vanished after it into the gloom. 'Come on, then, it's easy enough below!'

'Lord, the boy's a madman!' wailed the Doctor, and literally shinned down the ghastly slope. 'He can certainly climb - downwards, anyway.'

We caught him up, at the top of another gut-rocking gully. 'I think this'll go all right', he was saying. The Doctor clutched him, none too gently. 'Careful!' exclaimed the boy, with annoyance, 'if you're going to slip, let me know first. Don't grab!'

We tried to instil some sense of guilt. 'Don't you know we've been called out to rescue you? Don't you realise your selfishness has caused the three of us to risk our lives? We should really have had the M.R.T. out by this time, to do it properly - with more people risking their lives - and all in the papers tomorrow!'

The Doctor's exhortations fell unheeded. The boy - he must have been eleven or twelve - was pointing out his choice of route to the Apprentice, who appeared to agree. It seemed possible: with the Apprentice for the rock, the Doctor for the botany, and our 50-foot nylon line for any Emergency. Preferable to returning up that wall of short-fuse shingle, all triggered to go off downhill. We signalled back with our (only) headlamp, and then laced the vociferously protesting youth into the line.

To soothe him, we explained he was now our Leader. He demanded, if so, to wear the headlamp. No, the last man needed it, and he was not going to be the last man: he was Leader. Together, we quickly developed a technique. We dangled him down stretch after stretch, until he would call up 'O.K. - you fellers can come down now, I've sorted it.' Then one by one we would slither down to him. And off he went again, raring to go. It resembled sounding the lead, as we repeatedly cast him overboard to find bottom.

And it worked very well. Too well. Until the last pitch.

This appeared, in the by-now darkness, to be a dungeon. We had lowered ourselves optimistically - and apparently irreversibly - into it. Sheer walls, left, right, and - now - up in front of us. Our feeble headlamp (it was really only for Emergency...) scraped unhappily on the wet rocks, and on the impending vegetation behind us, most of which had been swept off beneath feet, shins, backsides and shoulderblades. Damn.

'Looks like some fun, here,' remarked the boy. He offered us a Polo mint each. 'Sorry I've no more to spare: didn't reckon on company, like. We might need the rest later,' he further informed us, sucking composedly. 'Now, shine a light, Doc; just let's have a look down there...' and wriggled

off. Our expressions were fortunately blacked out. Minutes. Badger-rattlings beneath; pebbles echoing away below. Then a shout.

'Fine. Just right. Come on, I've got you...Quite safe.'

However, we proceeded cautiously. Everything was rotten, undoubtedly irreversible. The boy had been astonishingly lightfooted. Only his (the boy's) presumed innocence prevented the accustomed string of maledictions from the insecure and disapproving Apprentice.

We found ourselves in a wet pit at the bottom of the dungeon, where some 1500 feet of trickle congregated before agreeing to run out beside our feet through a large narrow slot like a letter box. Out to freedom. We knelt in the gurgles and peered. The boy took our headlamp and demonstrated a flash of easy screes down to the road beyond this otherwise seemingly impossible chockstone.

'Terrific, eh?' He was pleased at having guided us to so elegant an exit. 'O.K.? I'll go on...' And he slipped through, tied to his line, wearing the headlamp. 'Now you fellers.'

In the blinding flash-back beam, the Apprentice tried first. Then myself. Then the Doctor, that usually infinitely extensible assemblage of limbs and stratagems. Groan. Curse. Rip.

The boy was most helpful and patient. 'Try breathing *out*, it reduces your chest,' he advised the Doctor, speechless within the Tertiary.

No. We all stuck. We could not get through. And because we had no other torch, and had forgotten crowbar and Semtex, there we would stay until it was light or until someone could climb up the outside tonight and toss us a rope from the top of the chockstone. We could hardly ask our Charge to do that - now that we had successfully brought him to safety...

'Ah; and I thought you'd be able to do it. Too bad,' sympathised the lad. 'After coming down so well, all that way.' A pause. 'Do you want me to arrange a Rescue, like?'

'He is mature for his years,' gritted the embittered Doctor, with professional self-control. 'No!' he shouted, 'just tell Sandy about it. He's coming up the road. He'll know what to do. Don't make a fuss, under any circumstances. No need to disturb people at this time of night.'

The lad came back and hissed through the slot. His beam danced on our feet, wickedly.

'No, we don't want any more people risking their lives. Just selfish. And it'd be in the papers, tomorrow, like. Though the M.R.T. *would* do it properly..' He stopped. The Apprentice had partially blown a safety valve. 'O.K.' he resumed, 'I'll no rescue you, then: if you'll no rescue me - see? Fair do's, eh?'

'Fair do's' replied the Doctor, slowly. It was checkmate. 'Be careful, now,' he added feebly, as the boy whistled off and darkness became total, our line - still tied to the brat - slipping through nerveless hands. 'Let him keep it - it'll be safer, with him going down alone...' The Doctor sighed. A

private arrangement, not the M.R.T. thank heaven. For, this time, children were not *really* concerned.

Our child certainly wasn't. We heard him whooping away in sprays of scree. A most competent youth. He would be Minister of Sport yet. And at least he had given us a mint each.

Agonies of hunger, cold and wetness were nothing to the thought of the headlines and our colleagues' mirth if that urchin failed to keep his word. 'Boy Aged 11 Brings Three Experienced Climbers Down Safely.' 'Young Child Rescues His...' Lord, they would pay him thousands...

Twice the Apprentice tried, twice he fell back, accompanied by his holds. Useless in the dark. Better to walk down in shame, than be carried.

We must have dozed, for a light woke us. A voice. Sandy's, thank the Lord. Beside us.

'How did you get in here?' we asked, seeing no rope.

'Through the little keyhole up there on the left..' and Sandy pointed his beam. 'You can really only see it from outside. The boy described it to me. He left cairns to guide us, the whole way up.' So he did know of an easy way out, all the time...our respect for the creature grew even greater.

As we stumbled to the road, munching chocolate bars, Sandy and his friend, a lean sardonic schoolteacher who, it appeared later, had suffered much from pontificating mountaineers, explained that the boy had stopped their car and told them.

'Has he.. has he told anyone else?' we mumbled.

The schoolteacher whistled an unpleasant tune and kicked the odd stone.

'Don't think so. He went straight to bed.' said Sandy.

'Probably had a pint first,' scowled the Apprentice, all of an inch high.

'I didn't scold him', explained Sandy. 'From what he told me, I gathered you wouldn't have liked us to.' Gulp. 'He's a curious child,' Sandy continued, 'unexpectedly adult in so many ways. But unpredictable, quite unpredictable.' We shivered. 'I don't think I shall bring him again. He puts a great strain on everybody, you know.' We knew.

Our own great strain lasted more than a fortnight. We avoided radio bulletins and newspapers. We escaped possible journalists. Eventually we breathed. And now - now - we can even recount it; or much of it.

'A most extraordinarily well-balanced young person - in every sense,' summed up the Doctor, admiringly - also, thankfully. 'And, remarkable, isn't it - we never asked - we don't even know his name!'

The Apprentice put it more truthfully.

'Don't want to know his bloody name...'

POSTSCRIPT: But we nearly found out his name. Some Thursdays later, the *Journal* New Climbs Editor strode into the back bar of Daddy McKay's and, beard quivering, flung a piece of paper down in front of us. 'What's

all this nonsense?' he cried, 'here's a fellow done a quite unnecessary route off the Aonach Eagach, and says he led *you* down it, and *you* will vouch for it being a fine lead, a fine route, and well worth publishing...' We paled, and read. Yes, we recognised the pitches; the last one 'goes through a horizontal cleft to easy screes and the main road; the corpulent, aged or stiff avoid it by a traverse up and left...' 'Of course, I'll not publish it. The fellow has the cheek to say if I don't he'll send a much fuller version elsewhere. Good luck to him, then!'

We froze.

'Er, well, it's - er - after all quite an *interesting* way off,' mumbled the Doctor, 'unforgettable, in fact. Do be a good chap, and put it in, this once...'

It took a great deal of Glen Droolie to convince the editor, but finally we breathed again. Before he left, we glanced hurriedly at the name of the climb; but never dared - then or later in the *Journal* - to read the name of our leader.

'I see he calls it *A Gentle Squeeze...*' mused the Doctor.

'His letter says it could be called *Blackmail*, but he thinks you'd agree that *A Gentle Squeeze* would look better, if it were printed in the *Journa*l.'

When we were on our own again, we swore long and softly.

'Unexpectedly adult in so many ways,' sighed the Doctor; and drowned the whole juvenile episode in a truly mature Glen Droolie.

RAINY DAYS AND SODDEN NIGHTS

By Kevin Sutton

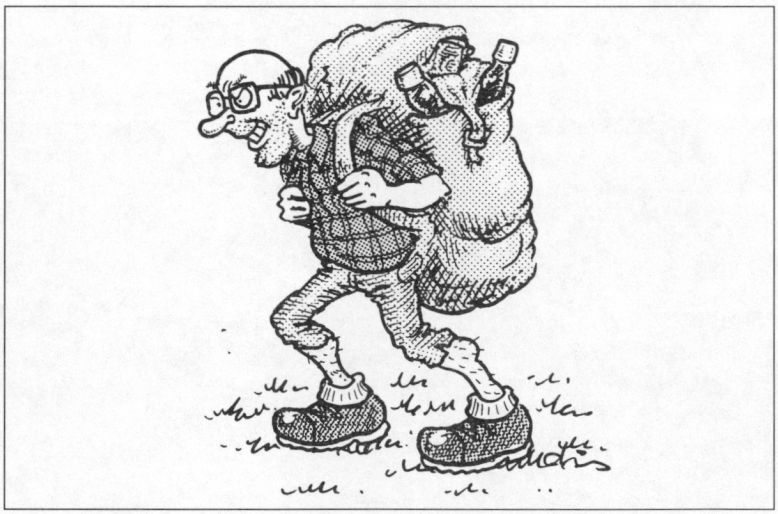
'FIT'S AIRCHIE daein' in the burn?'

'He's naw bluidy movin'; jus' sitting' there pickin' his toes.'

'That's just wunnerfu'. Why could he naw follow us?'

'We were intae oor balls - why should he follow us? It's yon muckle big pack o' his. He's gointae sit on that bluidy boulder a' night rather than take it aff and come o'er tae oor side.'

The Auld Skule stood conversing on the west bank of the Scavaig burn. In it's short existence between Loch Coruisk and the sea, the raging, spateful burn had leapt at their loins like a Rottweiler and snapped at their ankles like a Skye Terrier, causing the Auld Skule to hold hands - in a scholarly, prepubescent way. It was 10.30 p.m.; just turned dark. It had been raining hard all day. It was the start of the August monsoon - that season of floods and frightful midgeyness - a silly season, reflected the Halflins, for choosing to visit the Water Coire. Nevertheless, such was the popularity of the J.M.C.S. hut and such were the dictates of the Auld Skule (at whose invitation the Halflins were guests), that a Seaside Meet was declared for the middle of August.



None of that modern dehydrated stuff for Archie

The Halflins had crossed the ridge from Glen Brittle without getting their feet wet, whilst the Auld Skule chose to cross two rivers from Elgol. It was the former who set about rescuing Archie with a rope, and the latter who provided the illuminations.

'Look at the size of yon pack! He's mair claes in there than, than... Hauds ontae ever'thing - hunners of things he just cannae be daein' wi'oot.'

'I telt him we couldnae get the boat in so best travel light. In yer ain time, Archie; when yer ready, ken.'

Their voices were lost beneath the roar of the river. The Halflins - pilot and porter - brought Archie safely across only after volunteering to carry his precious pack the short distance to the hut. They sank to their knees under the weight of their office; with what manner of plenishings was that reluctant penitent equipped?

The Auld Skule had the keys to the hut; unlocking the four padlocks on the gas bunker outside was delegated to the Halflins. Rummaging about in the nest of giant bluebottle eggs until they found a couple of live ones, they lifted them indoors and connected up the heating and lighting. Half an hour later everyone was sitting in dry clothes, warm before the fire, watching Archie unpack his 'munitions of peace'.

A brace of Famous Grouse, a six pack of MacEwans lager, a five pound bag of Ayrshire tatties, four onions, five apples, two pounds of minced beef, two tins of tomatoes, four tins of rice pudding, six packets of smokey bacon, two packets of chocolate Hobnobs, two loaves of white sliced and a pound of stewing steak - in case of emergencies. None of that modern dehydrated stuff for Archie. Solid food was what he expected on his climbing trips. He kept his weight down by carrying so much solid food '- see those THP boys; meally faces,' he said, unloading the last vital part of his equipment - toilet rolls.

The rain had stopped and the sun was shining on Loch na Cuilce when the five occupants of the cosy Coruisk hut bestirred themselves the next day. Champing muesli on the hoof, the Halflins went outside, slapped the rhinocerous slabs at the back of the hut, and shook their heads: too wet. Too wet to climb even the junior J.M.C.S. Buttress across Coruisk, not to mention the enormous detour necessary to avoid getting their feet wet. The Auld Skule cooked a heavy breakfast and decided to Do the Dubhs. The Halflins saw half a challenge and announced that they would Do the South East Ridge of Sgurr a'Choire Mhig, right next to the Dubhs, but far less frequented and much more of a mouthful. Archie would recover his aplomb down at the hut.

The Halflins admitted to themselves that their ridge was not as good as the Dubhs, but it was a challenge all the same. They descended from the summit of Gars-Bheinn to the sea-end of the Cuillin fence, scattering a herd of twenty MacLeod hinds in Coire a'Chruidh. The cloud came down with them and a squall chased a yacht into Loch Scavaig. The wind was changing, the weather was going to blow again and Loch na Cuilce was a

notoriously fickle anchorage - no place for a yacht smaller than Britannia, reckoned the elder Halflin. He was not a sailor but had survived a previous Yacht Meet with the younger Auld Skoller; repeating the Celebrated S.M.C. Meet in Loch Hourn, doing the Munrovia of Knoydart and other nautical exploits.

The rain chased the Halflins into the hut. Archie - contrite and meticulous - had done the housework; collected barrels of water from the burn (the tap supply was out of action), swept the floor and washed the dishes. The Auld Skule marched in half an hour later.

They had just finished their dinner, Archie had thrown away the cap of his first bottle of whisky, when there was a knock on the door. The Auld Skule scowled. Two men from the English Midlands were begging a dry night in the hut. The rain was really heavy by then and the wind was gusting to gale force. The Auld Skule were carefully explaining the rules, the insurance cover, the Club, and everything, when four other cagouled figures came up behind the first two.

'How many of youse are oot there?'

'Six.'

'Awa' haim. Ye must have tents - go and pitch them o'er there on that flat groond - that's wut youse came for, isnae it? This wull be the best night of yer lives and youse wantae go an' spoil it by commin' intae oor hut? Ye wid nivver forgive us.'

The Halflins opened the shutters and the kitchen window to watch the campers pitching in the gale. In the background the Mad Burn had escaped. In three hours it had tripled in volume and was then a solid spume of water. They closed the shutters for the night and joined the others round the gas fire. The Auld Skule either dominated the only sofa or sat like a monkey on the top of the three-tiered bunks. Thin, wiry Archie sat on a straight-backed chair with his leg crossed, leaning over his whisky in a predatory way. The Halflins sat on the edge and listened, like students.

The patter was priceless, preposterous, unpredictable and unrepeatable without a line from their publishers. From tales of Malky the Alky, the Great Bus Conductress Pie Assault-Caper, through gorges of mountain punditry to the Utter Hebrides, liberally spiced with quotations of Borthwick and other shaggy dog stories; from Jacksonville to the Hornli hut, with Big Names and Big Routes, with Bonington and Booze - Archie and the Auld Skule told all about their mountain days and bothy nights, honouring an oral tradition as old as the hills.

It was around midnight when there was another knock on the door. By that time the Auld Skule was much mellower and let them in. Their tent had blown down and there were only two of them.

'Yer a'right boys, yer black, y'unnerstaund. It's those glaikit English were nae lettin' in.'

The elder Halflin smiled, familiar as he was with the peculiar racism of Auld Caledon, but the two black students from Birmingham were



How many of youse are oot there?

dumbfounded. They were on a sixth-form college trip, had walked in from Sligachan in trainers ('Ye pair souls'), following the lead of two teachers ('Naw Scottish Teachers?'). They were equipped for an overnight trip with orange juice and light-weight, freeze-dried THP (Nivver!) The Auld Skule heated a tin of creamed rice and Archie passed two drams across the table.

In the morning the two students were convinced that they had spent an evening in the company of five famous mountaineers and they went round asking for their autographs on a Colin Baxter postcard. Outside the rain was, if anything, heavier than the night before, though the wind had moderated, allowing the bad language of the Mad Burn to fill the air. The Halflins had to walk back to Glen Brittle over Bealach an Garbh-Choire, to keep their feet dry. The Auld Skule were staying on until the end of the week.

The Birmingham Six were permitted the use of the drying room to sort out their case while Archie gave them instructions about river crossings. When the Six departed they presented the Famous Five with three bottles of Highland Spring Water. The gift left them speechless for the first time in three days. But Archie would surely find a place for the bottles.

TESTAMENT OF LOST YOUTH

By Robert Bradbury

'NIGEL INGLIS Graves... Robert Olivier Blairgowrie... Brian Raymond Ian... Since this is your first such appearance... to H.M. Hostel for Youthful Offenders, Naysneachda, Inverness-shire... for a period of one week at H.M.'s pleasure. Send them down...

'Brian Raymond Icarus Apparently Normal Fallon and Robert Overtly Bombastic Baldeagle, you have once more been brought before me... You have both clearly repeatedly and unrepentently failed to learn from your previous custodial... and must be given the opportunity to contemplate the consequences of your... for a suitably long... at a place very remote from your normal... and consequently you are to be taken... and detained at H.M.'s pleasure at H.M. Bothy, Sourlies, Knoydart, where you can reflect on your actions in the dark, sombre waters of Loch Nevis for a period of...'

'Please, your 'onour, Lord Justice McCaskill, Sir, I've learnt me lesson now, 'onest guv'...'

Awake to the gripped entrails of a dream's unreal...

June, Sourlies, we two to the cell, doing porridge at His McCaskill's pleasure. The long-blunt-shock treatment, with no immediate prospect of parole. After snap - porridge - once more unto these four walls, my friend. Now is the summer of our discontent that doth follow inglorious winter.

As I reached up to stuff old tatters of Press and Journal into the teeth of a damp south westerly whistling from the dank beyond the sleeping platform, my eye caught the rusty rectangular tinlet, jammed right in just below where old stone met corrugated sheeting. Inside, folded into four, the already damp papers. Message-in-a-rusty-tin...

BIGGLES ON WHITE ALERT!

Acknowledgement: The author thanks Group Captain Sir D.B. Batten-Willis, D.S.C., for inspiration and Air Marshal The Lord Sinclair McNosh, D.S.O. for technical advice.

Author's Note: Any resemblance to recent Winter Operations is purely intentional.

After November '18s decisive party in the attic high above the maelstrom-furrowed fields of Grindingon, Captain Biggleworth soon bored of low level flying over Speyside and yearned for Operations on a higher plane...

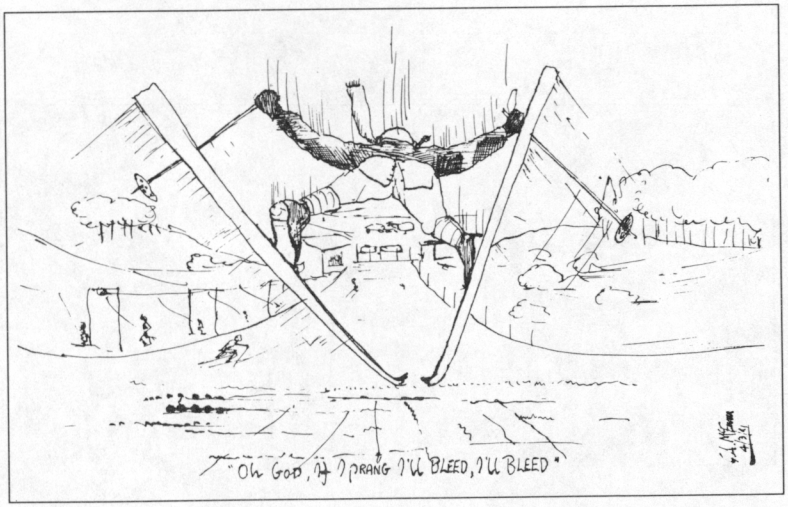
'What-ho! Perfect terrain for the planks!' Biggles nonchalantly lowered the Camel into Coire an t'Sneachda for a pre-winter recce, but was soon high again on 'twenty foot cornices, azure skies, powder snow...'

Algy, veteran of countless Cairn Storm downhill dogfights, languidly flicked through 'An Anthology of Ski-Mountaineering Operations in Scotland' by Group Captain Sir D.B. Batten-Willis. 'Splendid fellow, Sir D.B.! Editor of S.M.G. Guidebooks. Skied throughout Scotland. Records unbelievaby whizzo winter glossies. Great white wildernesses, giant bowls of coires, azure skies, powder snow...'

Ginger, keen as mustard, pored over Air Marshal The Lord Sinclair McNosh's Instruction Manual, 'To Ski is Poetry the Nordic Way'. 'Real Gent, The Lord Sinclair! Editor of 'Climber, 'illwalker and Flyin' Officer'. Skied throughout Europe. Reckons even ordinary ranks like me findin' Nordic ski-tourin' a unique wilderness experience.' Already Old Ginger, one of the few surviving walking-class war poets, due to a severe blow to the cranium had amnesiad his own piece inspired by the Training Course at the O.I.K.S. dry scree slope:

Hillhead

Grey skies, nylon snow.
Out of the gate from twelve o'clock high,
Knees gone to jelly, eyes to the sky,
From 'arf a grand up, I'm learning to fly.
Nosediving, nosediving, I'm gathering speed,
Oh God, if I prang, I'll bleed! I'll bleed!
I might even die!
Falling, I'm falling! I'm out of control!
I'm over the fence, I'm into the park.
I'm bleedin'! bleedin'!
Jallopies all round.
Grey skies, nylon snow.



Early December, from G.C.H.Q. Bracknell Met Officer McCaskill warned, 'Chaps, woolly bedsocks at the ready! Freezing Level 2,000 feet.'

'Men. WHITE ALERT!' ordered Biggles. 'Ginger, to The Ski-Store.'

Ginger reported back, 'Sir, on order, war reparations from land of the 'Un, due imminently, three pairs of:

1. Planks, Nordic type, metal-edged;'
2. Plank-poles, tolascopic type;'
3. Sea boots, 'eavy duty, Nordic type;'
4. Bindin's, Rottweiler type.'

'Rottefella type, Ginger.'

'Sorry Sir, Rotter-weiler-feller type.'

The following weekend, with deceptive ease Biggles defied the force of Old Newton to coax the Camel on to Sneachda's winter powder...

Azure Skies, Powder Snow, No Kit

Men, damned bad show
Store still blankers on Hun Kit.
Now, let's have a go,
See if we can learn, without it.
Diagonal stride, diagonal stride,
Bash, bash on, men, knees forward, poles behind.
Now, kick turn, kick turn.
Up, round, right toe to the stern.
Telemark turn, Telemark turn,
Left knee forward, right back, back a bit.
Now, sink low, feel your thigh muscles burn.
That's it! perfect, with no Kit.



Biggles lectured on avalanche avoidance

The cold spell continued. The Store phoned. 'Sir, tolascopic plank-poles and Rotter-feller-weilers arrived.' Below twenty-inch Sneachda cornices, Biggles lectured on avalanche avoidance. M.O. McCaskill predicted, 'Freezing Level 5,000 feet.' The Store phoned. 'Sir, Nordic sea-boots and planks arrived...'

With Ops imminent, Biggles demanded intense Training. In the Mess, Algy slipped on skis and sipped G and Ts over Sir D.B.'s Anthology: 'Macdui. Rating: ****/IV. A long and serious Operation. Avoid stiff drink beforehand...'

Ginger reported back on a detailed Technical Analysis of The Lord Sinclair's Kit. 'Sir, on High Level Ops over Wilderness usin' plank-poles, teloscropic type, emergency repair slieve vital. Easily made out of split metal sheet, even recycled beer can will improvise, tightened with three 'ose clamps. Mine's another can of Stella, please Captain, Sir!'

Ops very imminent...

Snowflakes over the Wilderness on the M.O.'s chart. Through the ether, Plank Hotline, 'Scotland's Top Hole Plank Information Service', echoed, 'Chief at Cairn Storm optimistic.'

'SCRAMBLE!!'

Masterfully Biggles caressed the Camel through clag onto the deserted Cairn Storm jallopy park. 'Ginger, recce Cairn Storm Mess.'

Ginger reported back, 'Sir, Artificial Ascenders non-Operational. Chief Penguin on Leave in Corfu.'



'Damned bad show! Men, strap planks to kitbags, and we'll bash up top. Plenty of powder on the plateau...' With un-telescoped poles heather planting and planktips clagwards, Biggles and Algy bashed ahead rhythmically, being passed only by two lifetime-in-the-hills Scots footsloggers 'aiming for Macdui'.

'Biggles, reckon they're S.M.G. Squadron?'

'Infantry, Algy. Not S.M.G. Squadron.'

Far below, Ginger contemplated a unique wilderness experience. 'Gawd blimey! Bashin' up'ill with sea boots, Nordic type, 'eavy duty, on me feet and cartin' two bleedin' great metal-edged Nordic planks on me back. I'm tatered...'

On locating the piebald plateau, Biggles barked firm orders. 'Men, snap sea-boots into Rottweilers and follow me in the full High Level Display...'

Circa Middle of OS Chart 36?

No skies, powder slush.
Go on man! go on man! with a free flowing glide.
Diagonal stride, diagonal stride,
Move forward, move forward, with aeronautical pride.

Get up man! Get up man!
And move, move forward, move with a fancy free glide.
Now kick, kick turn,
Skis right right up, out, out wide away from your side.

Good God man! Good God man!
Roll over! Roll over!
And for God's sake,
Get up off your side!

(Unfinished)

When all three airmen had mastered denying Old Newton with perfect synchronicity, Ginger recalled The Lord Sinclair, 'Sir, navigation, accurate type, demandin' Operation on planks.'

'All under control, Ginger. On a bearing aiming for Macdui.'

'Biggles, clag clearing!' Through binocs Algy scanned the crud-covered plateau. 'Not S.M.G. Squadron coming to town at nine o'clock to bearing.'

'Men, tail Not S.M.G. Squadron...'

Sipping double whiskies in his favourite Mess armchair with the Anthology, Biggles made Flight Plans. 'New Year's Op. The four highest Cairnstorms. Rating: *****/V. Scotland's most magnificent High Level Operation. For the Scottish Nordic Squadron Leader, a long, serious and seldom-attempted undertaking. Definitely avoid stiff drink beforehand...'

Meanwhile, in the barracks High on POT (Pre-Operational Tension), Ginger slipped on snow goggs and turned to The Lord for further Morale booming: 'On a Scottish Nordic Operation, in order to reach the powder it

is often necessary for the Officer to instruct the lower ranks... to transport their skis strapped to their... for extremely long... lower rank slang is Nordic Crucifixion...'

With the M.O.'s mercury on minus ten, the Hotline reported, 'Although currently insufficient powder at Cairn Storm, Morale High, Forecast positive, Chief optimistic.' The New Year yawned ...

Invoking aeronautical wizardry astounding to even Algy and Ginger, a sombre Biggles humped the Camel between the ice-encased summits of the four highest Cairnstorms. 'Men, boulders embedded in corrugated ice excessive, even for metal edges. Metal bases, maybe.'

Saved from Nordic bleedin' Crucifixion! thought Ginger.

Back to Base, where Biggles slipped on goggs, ordered a treble whisky, and turned to the Anthology for further solace: 'Still High from POT, but now moving rhythmically under azure skies across the deep powder of the awesome plateaux, the Squadron Leader will experience a great feeling of space ...'

The Hotline announced, 'Although currently insufficient powder, Morale still High. Cairn Storm so hard frozen Chief convinced one big dump should clinch it.'

'Men, all Leave cancelled. WHITE ALERT! for month of Jan...'

While Biggles led ski-fitness Training on Meagaidh ('Men, perfect terrain for planks'), Old McCaskill's charts recorded on Ginger's new-fangled phideo: 'Chaps, good news for snowdrops! Freezing Level 6,000 feet. Warmest Jan since Crimea.'

Biggles restless, 'Damned Green Mansion Effect!' but, 'Chief at Cairn Storm still optimistic.' Ultimatum issued:

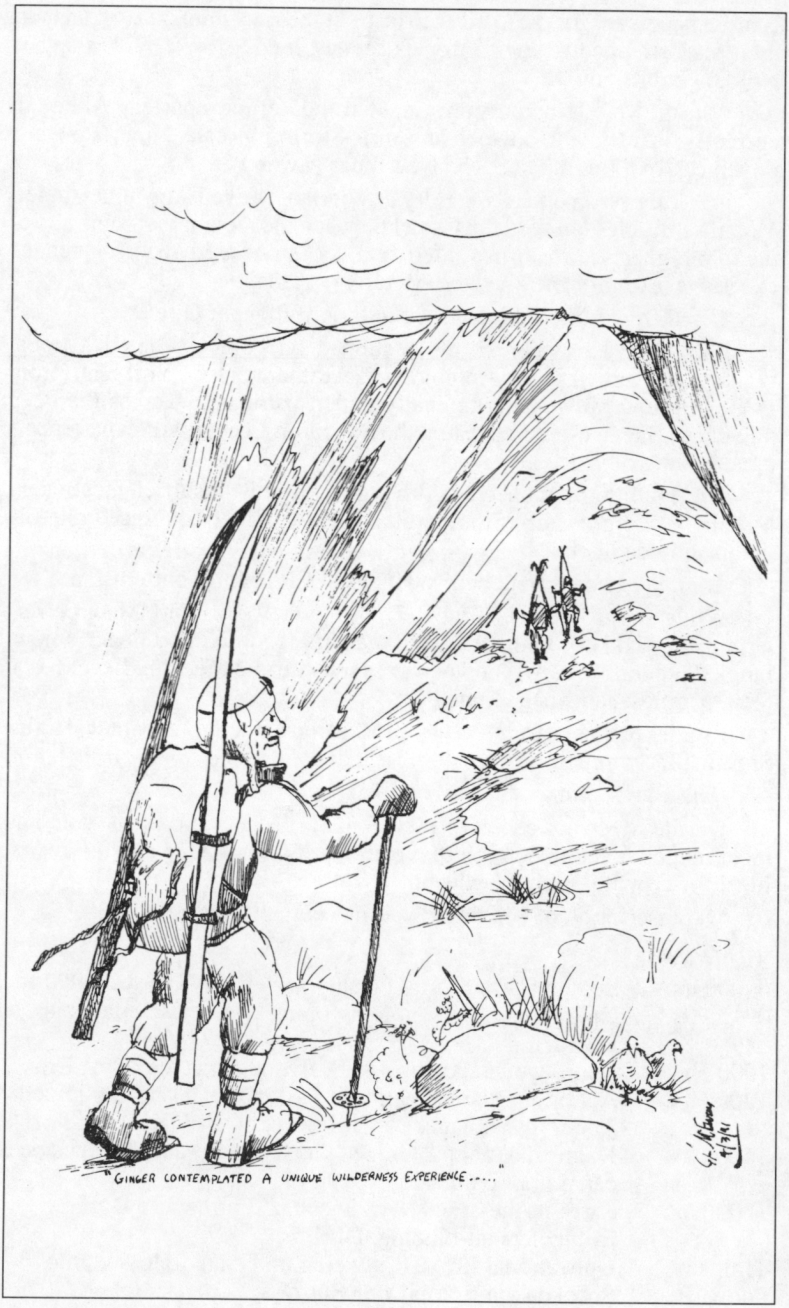
'Ops to re-commence 0900 hrs Feb. 1st.'

On the Mess noticeboard: FOR SALE - Telescopic plank-pole and metal-edged plank. One each of a pair. Hardly used. One careful owner. Ideal for growing runner beans up.

A transcription of Biggles' Type-It-Yourself Flight Record:

'01/02/19

0900 Hrs.	Soloed Cairn Storm. Freshly driven slash above 3,000 ft.
0915 Hrs.	Operational Diffs un-telescoping Hun telescrapic poles. Duff Kit.
1000 Hrs.	Hand-to-metal combat with flying jacket zip. Duff Kit.
1200 Hrs.	Act of unashamed Hun aggression. Poles and zap joined forces in sabotage. Pole folded up. DUFF KIT.
1400 Hrs.	Damned bad show Ginger's hose clamps and flattened beer can 5 hrs. south.
1500 Hrs.	Party-in-the-attic above Snechda. Further Op Duffs. Rotweilers un-binding. DIFF.
Time un-known	Opirrational Error. Rottweiler and plank released into Sneckda via Bomb Door Buttress.


"GINGER CONTEMPLATED A UNIQUE WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE....."

Ditto	Map mislaid.
Time un-	Walking the plank back to the Camel. Sea-boot leaking.
known to	V. Duff.
2059 Hrs.	
2100 Hrs.	Raised the limping Camel.'

March, 'Chaps, woolly bedsocks away! Freezing Level 7,000 ft. Warmest spring since Mafeking...'

'Men, time spent on reconnaissance is never wasted...' advised Biggles, savouring quadruple whiskies on a deck chair on the Mess lawn under a beaming March sun. 'Sgurr na Ciche. Rating *******/X. Several stiff drinks strongly recommended beforehand. Best approached by Camel from Loch Nevis. Scotland's most technically demanding Nordic... Only for Squadron Leaders who enjoy long swoops of aeronautical... Strictly for those seeking sporting...'

'Men, that's us!' exclaimed Biggles.

Bleedin 'ell! thought Ginger.

Easter Leave, the Hotline broadcast, 'Morale restored. Late powder! LIFT-OFF!' Denied Camel parking space at jallopy-infested Cairn Storm. Biggles buzzed the yo-yo downhill dogfight, cleared the burn with a delicate mess drains' fragrance, waved at lines of shin sinking civvy climbers, and defying Old McNewton with sublime skill, winged from azure skies on to Sneachda's full powder...

EASTER, 1919

Whoopee! whoopee! whizzo! spiffing!
Swooping, sweeping, planting, peeling,
Fresh blown powder booffing, biffing ...
EEeeeeeh!!... Aah?... Aaaah?...
'Mind Old McNewton, Ginger...'
'AAaaaaah!!**!*!!!... ???... OOoooooh!!...
A terrible ugliness is born.

'I say, Biggles! Two fellows brolly-hopping out of Sneachda on to the plateau. Super spiffing whizzo!'

Biggles peered through binocs, 'Aah... Full brollies, one emblazoned with full Group insignia... Take-off tow rope coiled quasi-helically round twin intersecting wing and runway ice-incisor tools... Full uniform, top brass, Group Captain with an Air Marshal...'

'MAY-DAY! MAY-DAY!' Demonstrating total technical mastery, Biggles tarmaced the ailing Camel at Drumochter, heroically avoiding plank-racked, full-beam-flashing jallopy convoys heading south at termination of yo-yo Ops.

'Men, plenty of powder in north facing corries ...'

'More bleedin' Crucifixion,' then short sashays along strips of slush, crab, crabbing along until the trig point recced. 'Men, first Munro on planks.'

Winter Ops terminated on Meall Chuaich. 'Men, unique wilderness experience,' said Biggles.

'Roll on next winter's WHITE ALERTS!' said Algy.

For Ginger that day, the weeks, the months, the winter of abortive Operations had become a vacuity beyond even poetry's redeem.

'Sir?'

'Yes, Ginger?'

'Go and see a taxidermist.'

That June, leaving Ginger still confined to barracks with spit and ski-polish, Biggles, showing total incompetence, ditched the Camel in sombre Loch Nevis and led Algy on an unplanned recce.

'Knoydart, Algy. Soon be demanding severer terrain.' At Sourlies, a lifetime in-bothies couple. 'I say!' said Biggles to the husband, 'Didn't we see you, back-end of last year, footslogging on Macdui?' On mention of Cairn Storm, the footslogger de-amnesiad:

'We assessed the powder a bit thin for skis that day.'

'You defy Old Newton yourself, Old Boy?'

'I prefer Ski-Mountaineering ...'

Biggles engaged the Old Cove in a spot of banter. 'We considered Ski-Mountaineering Kit, but concluded Nordic clobber superior for McNewton-defying.'

'We could discuss that at some length ...'

Later, whilst the not-so-Old Boy was off recing firewood, Algy, interrogated his half-section. 'You defy Old Newton yourself, Old Girl?'

'Yes, but less than my husband. He often skis with his Squadron.'

'His Squadron?'

'S.M.G. Squadron.'

'Crikey,' muttered Algy.

Next day, as the half-section was being partied-in-the-attic to her penultimate Munro ('My husband finished years ago...') in the teeth of Old McCaskill's south westerly worst, Biggles and Algy bravely defied Old McC by confining themselves to bothy in contemplation of the mystery. Who was he?

'Remind me, Biggles, what exactly is S.M.G. Squadron?'

'S.M.G. Squadron, Algy? Scottish Maintaineering Group Squadron, Scotland's most top-hole. Ranks Squadron Leader and above only.'

Locating the bothy book, Biggles detected the vital gen. 'Algy, look at this a.m.'s Record!'

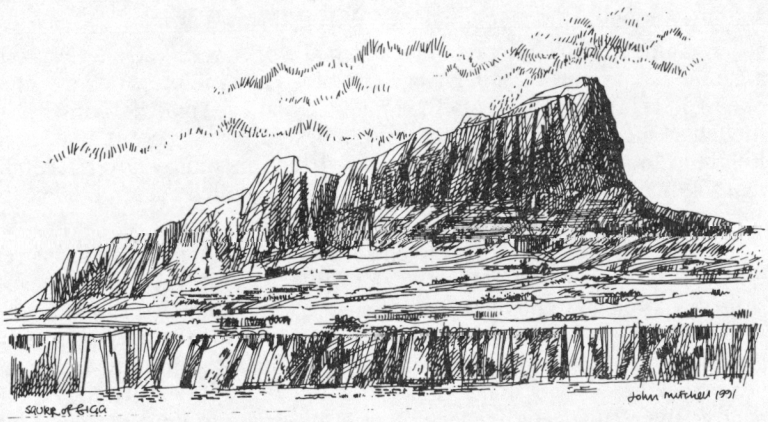
'Crikey, Biggles! Sir D.B. Batten-Willis...'

... Biggles on WHITE ALERT! The End.

'Brian, who wrote Biggles?'

'Captain Long-Johns.'

'Thanks.'



TWICE IS COINCIDENCE

Contributed by Brian S. Findlay

Editor's Note: Mr Findlay came across this incredible story as part of his work in the Claims Department of an Insurance Company. It was sent in as a letter to the Editor, but we feel that due to the unusual circumstances surrounding an otherwise minor car accident, it is worthy of a larger type. Certain details have been deleted in the copy of the claims letter to protect the innocent...

The Editor
S.M.C.J.
Glasgow

Dear Sir

I, like many other club members, was totally enthralled by the article in last year's journal regarding the amazing survival story of Leighton Johnstone. As I read I could feel the hair bristle on the back of my neck, my palms become sweaty. Why had I never before heard of this incredible episode, which by its very nature must be part of the folklore in the annals of Scottish mountaineering? Surely others must be aware of this fascinating tale. However, all enquiries I made drew a blank, no-one it seemed could throw any light on the affair.

I must admit to being very sceptical about the entire episode, and seriously doubted the authenticity of W.H. Murray's article.

Imagine therefore my feelings, when at work I received a letter from a gentleman purporting to have been involved in a motor accident with a one LEIGHTON JOHNSTONE!! Time stood still as I read the contents of the letter (a copy of which I enclose), this surely could not be the same Leighton Johnstone? He must be almost 100 years old by now? The tale that followed is as equally fascinating as the one which occurred 60 years ago on the flanks of Britain's highest mountain.

It appears that following the episode in 1931, Johnstone and his re-united wife moved north to the town of Ellon near Aberdeen, to escape from the public eye and media attention. An accountant by profession, he set up business in the town, dealing mainly with the large farming community in the area, but, despite the nearness of the Cairngorm Mountains he never again set foot in the hills, contenting himself with fishing on the nearby River Ythan. His life developed into the routine humdrum existence

experienced by all accountants. Nothing further untoward happened, nothing that is until a minor car accident happened on 12th June 1990 in the NORCO supermarket car park in Ellon.

MY CAR NO H DSO
FORD SIERRA

GEORGE ROBB
ELLON
5th September 19

RECEIVED
10 SEP 1990
CLAIMS DEPT.

Dear Sirs,

Re. my visit to your offices on wednesday 5th September 90, Regarding Accident with one of your Clients

As the accident happened three months back, and the hold up was my Insurance Co., the union.

I explained everything to a Member of your Staff, he told me to get a Copy of the Estimate, and Give as much details about the accident as possible as all the Forms, Estimate ect, went to my Insurers, and they now tell me they can not Claim on my behalf, as I have only THIRD PARTY FIRE AND THEFT.

The accident happened on the 12.6.90 in NORCO SUPPER MARKET CAR PARK, ELLON By your Client MR LEIGHTON JOHNSTONE, ELLON

(DETAILED Scratch of ACCIDENT)



AS I pulled into Parking Space, your Client was sitting in his Car, and before I got out of my Car, he started Reversing out, and hit my Rear Door with his Front Corner Bumper.

Yours faithfully

It all began on 25th April 1990, exactly 59 years to the day that Johnstone made his remarkable re-appearance to the startled Grant in the C.I.C hut. On this lovely Wednesday morning, Johnstone made his way by car to the local supermarket, intent on carrying out the weekly shopping on behalf of his wife (being an accountant he knew that she had no head for figures). Had she known then that she was not to see him again for another 2 months, things might have been different! In the moments after he drove away from the family home, an almighty blizzard developed. You may think this unusual for April, but such events are not uncommon in the area at this time of year, being known locally as the Teuchit-Storms. This particular storm was, however, much more severe than any previously experienced, and heavy snow fell all morning causing chaos throughout Aberdeenshire and blocking the A939 Cockbridge - Tomintoul road yet again.

When the storm had abated and normality was restored, Johnstone had disappeared, he had simply vanished from the face of the earth, car and all.

Searches were made of the immediate area, the River Ythan was dragged, and extensive clearing by snow ploughs and tractors (provided by his grateful clients) of the supermarket car park proved fruitless. To save his distraught wife further trauma and embarrassment the matter was hushed up by the authorities. His wife even considered moving again to Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to escape the irony of the situation.

Almost two months had elapsed when attention was again switched to the NORCO car park. Out of the blue appeared Johnstone, sitting in his car as though nothing had happened. Before anything could be done, he had started up his vehicle and reversed into the rear door of the startled Mr Robb.

Questions flashed through Johnstone's mind. Where have I been? Where's my wife's groceries? What about my NO CLAIMS BONUS?

As they say - 'We don't make a drama out of a crisis'.

ALASKAN ODDITIES

By Ian Walton

'CHILKOOT Charlie's - where we cheat the other guy and pass the savings on to you' This admirable slogan hangs above the door as the bouncer checks that you're not carrying anything too subversive, say an Uzi or some anti-oil industry literature. Chilkoot Charlie's is the most schizophrenic bar I know: it's a rustic Alaskan saloon, complete with sawdust on the floor and goldrush prospector lookalikes, in from the bush for a good time in Anchorage. But in keeping with the dual personality of this frontier city turned sprawling metropolis (some refer to it, not so kindly, as Los Anchorage), there is another unexpected side. As I enter at 2 a.m. it's still daylight outside; in the dark neon interior I'm hit by a wall of industrial strength rock and roll as the lead singer of 'France' sways precariously atop the stage railing, a strange place to find the best rock dance club on the west coast of America. And that's not even to mention the giant Country and Western floor, the 'horseshoes' games and the custom Chilkoot Charlie's beer; it makes the Clachaig on a Saturday night seem just marginally less strange.

It's almost more than I can cope with after ten days exploring the mountains and passes of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This is the strip of land near the Canadian border on the Arctic ocean; President Bush wants to sacrifice it to his oil industry friends, using Iraq as a convenient scapegoat, and the Sierra Club is equally determined to defend it as an astonishing wilderness and home to the giant caribou herds.

Getting there can be quite a pantomime. First you have to get to Anchorage and Fairbanks, which to most people are already the back of beyond, but in fact are easily accessible by scheduled jet from Europe or the rest of the United States. Then the fun begins. We flew on Audi Air amid rumours that they might go bankrupt at any minute. We had been told to show up to be weighed (passengers plus baggage) bright and early, ready for our whole group to board the elderly DC-3. After several hours of Alaska's favourite travel pastime - hanging around airstrips waiting for non-existent flights - we had talked to enough other unhappy customers to figure out that the DC-3 was a myth. But there was a chance that we could be shuttled over to the north slope on a small Piper Navaho.

All the stories about Alaskan bush pilots are true - and then some, it's like a bigger and better version of Caledonian Macbrayne folklore; everybody loves them and hates them and needs them to get to bizarre places. Everything seemed to be going fine as we wound up the Chandalar River valley. I had always laughed at tales of wartime flyers following the railway lines so as not to get lost; well, in Alaska they follow the rivers - if they can see them. We banked suddenly and shot over a pass with great

rock walls on every side. A fellow passenger began swearing loudly at the pilot to 'get the **** out of here', and instead of swooping into the Hulahula River valley on the other side of the pass we screamed up into the thick clouds. 'This is much more dangerous', confided the pilot. 'Mt. Isto is over 9,000 ft and I've no idea where it is in this muck. But he's the mayor of Kaktovik so I have to humour him.'

I was quite relieved when we emerged across the coastal plain, the native village of Kaktovik on Barter Island gleaming in a frigid sun and the rusting 'DEW Line' radars an incongruous reminder of misspent cold war millions. Gradually the second snag of the shuttle flights dawned on me. Our trusty leader was still in Fairbanks waiting for the next round. I was approached by a pilot who looked barely out of primary school. 'This was the only place in the world where I could fly all day every day', he said by way of introduction. He piloted one of the tiny Cessna 'taildraggers' which land in absurd spots on the tundra and on gravel bars in the middle of rivers; these are the legendary 'air taxis' which deliver hunters, climbers and other lunatics to their chosen spot in the wilderness. Sometimes they bring them back.

'Your landing area was under water last time I flew over. Want to go someplace else?' But we agreed to go check it out. 'There it is: that strip of peat bog beside the river. Let's see if it's firm enough to land. Wheee...' We made it. Maybe he was young, but he could land that plane in half the space it took everyone else. The rest of the group made it too. So finally we were ready to explore: ten days backpacking through the Romanzof mountains of the northern Brooks range and the giant river drainages, the Aichilik and the Kongakut.

The difficulties reminded me of my early 'Feich Trips' in Scotland - New Year backpacks with St. Andrews University Mountaineering Club where the last thing you wanted to do was leave the relative calm of a Knoydart glen for the exposed summits. We had to ford raging arctic torrents - again and again; Paul toppled over with his pack and floated off down the river, zoom lens bobbing by his side. We barely got him wrung out before it started snowing. This was August. After twenty-four hours of nonstop downpour we could no longer make the necessary river crossings. Two timber wolves howled mournfully at us from the other side of the river, 'Go back, go back'.

So we tried a different fork, winding up to a desolate pass on Bathtop Ridge. One of the early explorers clearly had a plumbing fetish. There was also a Drain Creek and a Plug Mountain. But in contrast there was a splendidly patriotic view towards the British Mountains and the Canadian border. We passed a group stalking Dall sheep, and exchanged mutual incomprehension of our activities. We staggered up interminable scree slopes with our huge packs, wobbling from boulder to boulder. We wallowed in peat bogs that would not be out of place in Jura. And of course we had the Arctic traveller's constant nightmare: the dense willow scrub clinging to the steep banks of each rushing stream.

But it was good too. There was the morning frost clinging to all those 7,000-foot summits which didn't even have a name. We could have spent weeks ridgewalking and climbing above the willow line. But we didn't. We were exploring and just soaking in the country. There's an overwhelming sense of wilderness that you just don't experience in Scotland, where you can almost always make it back to the pub by closing time. There's a vast expanse of mountains and river valleys with only you and the grizzly bears and a few million caribou. But there remains an invigorating feeling of emptiness. You could have a profound religious experience out there. Or you could just flop down and graze on the berries for a while.

And then there's the question about whether you'll make it back; perhaps the next grizzly will be the problem one, or you'll stumble in one too many river, or the crazy bush pilot will just forget to pick you up, or Audi Air will finally go bankrupt. But the clouds eventually lift down the river and the tiny Cessna bounces from rock to rock in the river bed. We wing back out to civilization - a beer in the Arctic Hotel in Kaktovik, lots of beer at Chilkoot Charlie's, and more of the clever slogans that make Alaska such an experience, 'Alaska, where men are real men, and women win the Iditarod'. 'Alaska, home of beautiful dogs and fast women', or this year's favourite on the T-shirts, 'Unless you're the lead dog, the view's always the same'.

Next I was off to south-east Alaska, to Glacier Bay and the 'Greenland experience'. If you're a rich, armchair explorer you can go on a Princess love-boat cruise and see video whales without ever leaving your stateroom. But the only real way to get there is by sea kayak. You can't easily walk because the south-east is very wet, which means impenetrable brush - much worse than up on the north slope. But you can pack your food and tent and climbing gear into an impossibly tiny space and paddle off into the rain and the navigational nightmare of the Beardslee Islands. The land in Glacier Bay is rising as the glaciers recede, which means that what you see doesn't in the slightest way match what shows on your map. And that godsend channel you're heading for probably no longer exists. But the bald eagles are unlikely to eat you anytime soon.

It's very easy to get seduced by the kayaks and spend your entire trip exploring the numerous side fjords or floating in front of the tidewater glaciers just waiting for the next huge pillar of blue ice to calve into the milky water. You can sit a quarter mile off the eight hundred foot face of the glacier and you'll never have felt so tiny. And you'll be completely out of film before you realize it.

But there are wonderful hills, mountains, and of course glaciers in Glacier Bay. Most of them were 'discovered' by that itinerant Scot, John Muir. And the kayak is the perfect way to approach them. I spent a day climbing Red Mountain which is shaped a bit like Ben Nevis - except that the tourist route is covered with dense alder. I had to crawl on my hands and knees for over an hour before emerging into an alpine flower wonderland of lupin and fireweed. The summit shoulder had a teal-blue pool with its

very own iceberg. And from the top you get a fabulous panoramic view: all the way down the bay to Icy Strait, across to the west arm glaciers of Lamplugh and Johns Hopkins and up to the 15,000-foot summit of Mt Fairweather and its satellites, and last, straight down on the braided fan of the Casement Glacier terminal moraine - mile upon mile of devastation in rock and mud.

If you're really adventurous you can arrange transportation to the outer coast and make an attempt on Mount Fairweather (surely the least appropriately named mountain in North America). But there are more accessible delights, even though there is only one trail in all of the park. Shapely Mt Wright guards the entrance to Adams Inlet and can be reached up a steep scree run direct from the beach opposite Garforth Island, with no intervening scrub. And towering above Riggs Glacier is the daunting Black Mountain with its fine alpine ridgeline and serious glacier approach. You can get a fine view of it from across Muir Inlet by scrambling up on White Thunder ridge and returning by Remnant Glacier. I was glad that someone else volunteered to pose for the photographs inside the ice caves of the beached glacier. For the most part you can explore and climb, never knowing if anyone has been there before. At the outer end of the Bay you have to cope with mature trees, dense rainforest undergrowth and bears. As you head north to the recently exposed areas of land you move into glaciers and bare rocks.

And the whole time you should feel right at home because the weather is just like Scotland. One last slogan (this one the favourite of the Bartlett Cove rangers). 'If the barometer falls, predict rain; if the barometer rises predict rain; and if the barometer is steady, then it's already raining'.

NORWAY 1958

A Journey and a Climb

By Ted Maden

This article is reproduced with minor changes from the Kings College Hospital Gazette, 38, 1959. It contains an account of an early ascent, believed to be the first British ascent, of a now famous wall, The East Wall of the Trolltind.

IN GOTHENBURG the streets were wet. It was a grey morning and there was no comfort in the noise, the bustle, the ships' sirens. Everyone was busy, everyone was going somewhere, except for me. I was feeling rather foolish. Having wandered up to Sweden through Brussels, Cologne and Copenhagen, with a morning coat under an arm and a climbing rope over a shoulder, having enjoyed a wedding (not mine) in a large, friendly Swedish country house, having overspent my money, it seemed I could do nothing but a few days' sightseeing before returning to England, rope still neatly coiled, ice axe untarnished.

'Damn it!' I said, and recklessly bought a ticket home from Bergen for ten days hence. That left seven pounds; the die was cast. 'Fortune favours the bold', said Bengt, a bright ship-building student with whom I had stayed overnight. That morning, bristling with boldness, I took the road to hitch-hike to Oslo.

Oslo Fiord was darkened by lowering thunderclouds. At Oslo railway station I spent a precious 7s. 6d. on a ticket to Eidsvoll, where, thunder far behind, stars shone above a pale blue gleam in the Northwest, while the somnolent river creaked with timber, reflecting the lights, the dark houses, a silent factory brooding under the pinebanks.

The next morning my journey continued unconventionally on the *Skiblander*, a 102-year-old paddle steamer on which, by polishing brass for two hours, I worked a seventy mile passage up the Mjose, the longest lake in Norway, to the foot of the Gudbrandsdal. Up this long valley, with it villages, its steep, forested walls, those who gave me rides told me of the German invasion of Norway in which the valley played a strategic part. Eventually I reached Lora.

Lora is just a railway station and a few farms in the open upland part of Gudbrandsdal. It was 9.30 p.m. Night was coming on, and with it the rain. Seeing a barn, I enquired of a bystander if I might sleep there. He replied, in English, that I was to ask to sleep in the neighbouring farm,

which I took to be his. I thought, if it was his, need I ask anyone else? An embarrassing misunderstanding; my subsequent discovery by the real owners precipitated acute linguistic difficulties. I was by then reclining on a straw mattress in a spare room. Luckily the English-speaking local and his wife were summoned and explained, and I was invited to breakfast the following morning.

The farmhouse was ancient, mellow, built entirely of wood, with turf on the roof. All was quiet that Sunday morning as the rain poured down from a leaden grey sky. Very occasionally a car would splatter by. Breakfast in the farm was followed by lunch with the English-speaking interpreter, who was a lawyer turned station master; apparently there is little work for the lawyers in Norway. He was a charming person, knowledgeable and kind. He talked of the German invasion, and then of a Scottish invasion three hundred years previously, in which a general, under no orders, with a thousand men, swept devastation and panic before him until at the village of Otta they were massacred by the locals, men, women and children rolling stones and hurling sticks down the hillside until only four were left. These intermarried.

Later, as I splashed through the muddy pools in the road it was hard to believe that such things had happened in these wet, grey uplands. It stopped raining. The ride came, the last ride in Romsdal.

The Romsdal is a magnificent valley. Short wooded lower slopes rise to enormous rock walls plummeting from 5,000 feet peaks. That evening they were cut off blunt by the cloud base. The valley was shut in, and an air of quiet solemnity, as of a monumental cathedral, prevailed. Something had happened to the atmosphere. Rocks, grass, trees were bathed in violet-blue; all sound was submerged in the roar of rushing water, not loud but profound. The mountains looked very unclimbable.

The following morning all this was changed. I arose early at the Andalsnes Youth Hostel by the edge of the fjord to see the sun shining on the hillsides across the water. A few wisps of mist, low on the mountain flanks, were soon dissolved by the morning warmth. Above, the sky was blue, pale, washed clear. In no time I had contacted Arne Randers Heen, a local climber of whom I had heard much.

Heen is a tailor about fifty years old, but with the air of eternal youth. He is a guide who has made many fine and difficult climbs in his homeland Romsdal peaks. He has also climbed in the Alps, and we talked of them awhile. But necessarily the inevitable arose. If he was to climb he would have to close his shop, and the money which he would thereby lose I should have to refund. This I was in no position to do. In good time a solution appeared. Another climber was prepared to pay guide's fees, while I could go as Heen's 'Kamerade', an experienced climber from the Alps.

Though these peaks present bold faces to Romsdal itself, they have much easier approaches from their reverse sides. We duly drove to a little upland side valley, remote, covered in brush, graced with a lake of

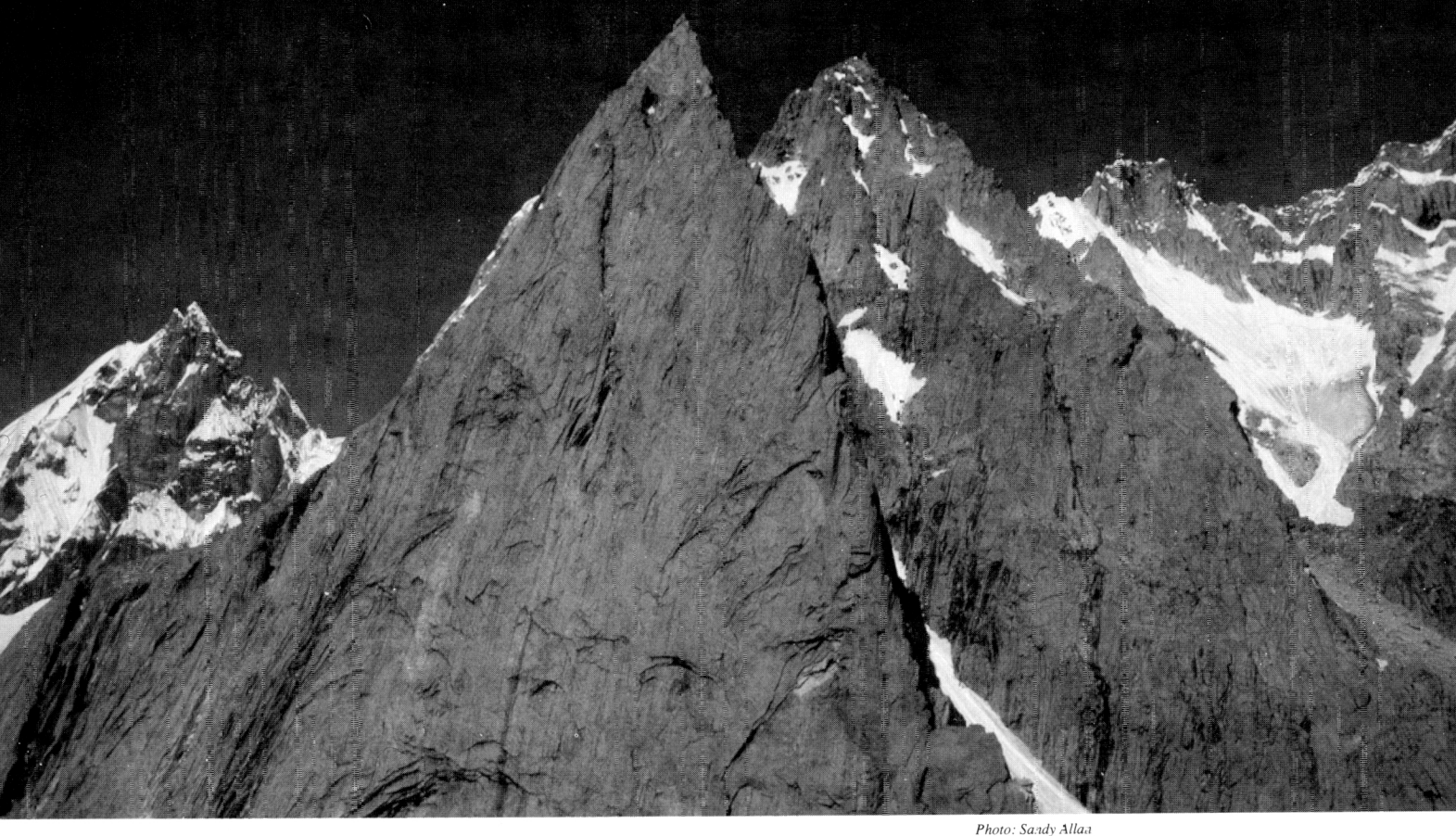


Photo: Sandy Allan

Indian Face Arete. Route takes right edge of diamond in centre of photograph, with descent directly below summit via couloir and vague central rib

extraordinary clarity. On our left rose the Vengetind, the highest peak in the area. It offered no particular difficulty - in the upper part, two thousand feet of step-kicking in snow led to a spectacular rock gangway wide enough for a bicycle, which spiralled to an easy scramble to the summit. Heen cast his eye across the countryside, told us of his resistance work, pointed out a tiny remote hut where he had hidden an escaped prisoner for several winter months in the war.

The next day I climbed the Romsdalhorn alone. The 'back route' which I followed presented little difficulty, but from the summit the view was breath-taking. 4,500 feet almost vertically beneath was the Romsdal, while across this abyss rose the sheer East Wall of the Trolltind, one of the great mountain walls of Norway. This wall is about two miles long and mostly plumb vertical for 3,000 feet or more, but below the actual summit of the mountain a very steep but somewhat broken line in the form of a recess dropped to a hanging snow-field at half height. Idly I toyed with the idea of making a route up the wall.

To my surprise I was able to obtain a close impression of the general angle and size of this face the following afternoon. A senior English climber, who had just arrived in the area, had persuaded me against my will up the endless boulder slopes which are the back door to this peak. I now knew that Heen had made the first ascent of the face in the early 1930s. The view from the summit ridge was over the steeper, unclimbable, portion of the face, and a stone tossed lightly over the edge fell 3,500 feet before touching anything. Awe-inspiring, but not encouraging. Nevertheless the idea had formed.

A rest day followed. Heen intimated the Wall to be a climb of great character but no excessive difficulty. It still awaited a British ascent. He could not afford time off, so in despondency I resigned myself to leaving it unclimbed. Late that evening, however, a young British climber arrived. He was a tough Yorkshire lad who had never climbed abroad before. His enthusiasm bristled like his whiskers and he lived off bread and salami. His name was Ian Stutt.

Now the Trolltind is no climb for an introduction to continental mountains, so it was perhaps unfair of me to talk him into it. Nevertheless, we agreed on the climb. We borrowed bicycles for the following morning, slept little, for my part nervously, and set off at 5 a.m. At 5.30 a.m we left our bicycles, to plough through the dense forest of the valley floor, and at 6 a.m we started to scramble up the diagonal line of the grass and bare rock slabs which lead to the hanging snow-field. Unroped, we made height rapidly, though we agreed that the rock slabs would be unpleasant in descent, as route finding was so awkward. The valley floor fell away, and at 8.30, 2,500 feet up, we partook of a leisurely second breakfast.

Across the valley was the Romsdalhorn, thickset and lumpy, and over a drop in the valley retaining wall we saw the subsidiary glen from which rose the Vengetind, snow-streaked, graceful. The valley floor, threaded by a triple line of road, rail and river seemed already far away. We were in a

world of our own. To left and right vertical rock soared into the sky. Only ahead was progress possible. Streaks of mist, which had shone ugly orange in the dawn, still clung menacingly to the summits, adding just that little bit more to the uncertainty of the hour. Untried companionship, unknown rock, uncompromising surroundings, silence save for the far-off roar of the river - there was tension in the air.

We scrambled up a few hundred feet, crossed a heap of grit and boulders beneath a menacing yellow scar, site of a recent rockfall, traversed below the snow-field, and roped up. Some short awkward grooves led to a steep but broken ridge rising for several hundred feet on the left flank of the snow-field. Holds were large and ledges frequent. We were able to save time by moving together. Above the snow-field we began to feel the height. There was a steep drop beneath and the valley was far away. A few hundred feet in a broken gully led to another rib, and so to steeper more difficult ground where we were forced to move singly and belay each other.

At an awkward overhang which had given me some interest in an exposed position, Ian asked me to haul the rucksack up on the rope. I began to lower a loop of rope. He struggled to work the rucksack off his back, slipped, fell; I held him without trouble on the rope. Then he untied and tied the sack to the end of the rope, not understanding why I was lowering the loop. I hauled it up. He tied on again, and came up. A few seconds of explanation on my part and he would never have untied at all.

At our lunch halt 200 feet higher Ian seemed shaken, but I was too preoccupied with my own thoughts to question why. We were high up, but about twelve hundred feet remained to be climbed. Our guidebook description amounted to a few lines, and we did not know what to expect. I think I must have been surprised at encountering so little real difficulty. It is the sort of face which, seen from a distance, makes one anticipate feeling like a fly on a church steeple, but the route, though steep, was broken, and nowhere was the exposure, that sense of a tremendous drop beneath, as much as I had expected.

We continued. Ian looked a little worried; I was tense. After 200 feet we left our long rib, which now steepened into an impressive buttress soaring to the summit ridge. To the right was a large inclined recess, walled on the left by this buttress and on the right by a vertical yellow-black wall plunging from the summit. Here, surprisingly, we encountered the hardest climbing on the face, though even this was through an error in route finding. Holds were small and outward sloping. There were no large ledges. Everything depended on balance, and the use of pitons for belays. But the exit seemed suddenly nearer, morale bounded, we were climbing well. A relatively easy looking gully appeared leading in 600 feet to the summit ridge. In this we moved together at times and as we neared the skyline tension lifted, almost physically. We climbed faster, the rocks became broken. In the middle of the afternoon we broke through, jubilant, and with dramatic suddenness to the boulders, breeze and sky of the

summit ridge, surprised and elated at finding so little difficulty on such a fine wall.

Foolishly, we lost time on a short cut to the summit so were unable to visit the actual top if we wanted to get down in time to catch a bus to Andalsnes from the nearest road.

On the descent across the miles of huge boulders Ian was slow. He looked unhappy. We caught the bus, walked back to where we had left our bicycles, stole a final glimpse at the great East face and cycled back to the Youth Hostel for an enormous dinner. Ian mentioned that when he had slipped before I had hauled his rucksack up he had already untied from the rope and only saved himself by catching the loose end. So that was why he looked so worried!

But for the grace of God, the outcome would have been very different. Was it right, I wondered, to take a beginner, however tough, up a climb of that order? I knew it was not. It is only to be condoned when absolutely nothing is left to chance, not even, as in this case, a few timely words of instruction.

Thirty years later, I realise how fortunate we were to climb the original route on this magnificent wall in near pristine state, and how lucky we were that failure to explain a sack-hauling procedure did not lead to disaster.

BRITISH LATOK EXPEDITION 1990

Indian Face Arete

By Sandy Allan

PAKISTAN'S Latok III at 6949m nestles to the West of Latok I and Latok II, 7145 and 7108 metres respectively. Our main objective was to be the North ridge of Latok II which was first attempted in 1978 by an American team consisting of some of the leading exponents of big wall climbing; Mike Kennedy, Jim Donni and Jeff Lowe. In reasonably dry conditions they reached a high point of 7000m before having to retreat because of illness and severe storms. Rab Carrington led a team from the UK in 1982 to little avail, and again in 1987 a French party made little impression on the ridge. Neither of these expeditions were able to gain the Americans' high point and both complained of heavy snow deposits which prevented efficient progress.

Our expedition, sponsored by Inspectorate OIS plc, reached base camp on the 5th June 1990, from where we could see that there was a great deal of snow on the mountain. However, at that stage optimism ruled, and we decided to begin acclimatisation for the main objective by attempting some of the other peaks in the region.

Tuesday 12th June saw Doug Scott, Simon Yates, Rick Allan and myself (Scottish Mountaineering Club) camped at 5100m on the Sim La in our North Face Himalayan Hotel, which we left at 0130 hours to make an attempt on Biacherahi peak. However after climbing unroped through a band of seracs and up and over the col we were halted by very unstable snow on the final summit ridge. This was disappointing, but we were appeased by an ascent of an adjacent snow dome which we referred to as Biacherahi Dome at 5700m.

On 15th June, Simon, Rick and his wife Alison, my sister Eunice, Richard Cowper (a Financial Times reporter) and I headed for a high camp on Hanipispur (North of Base Camp). At 0100 hours the following morning Simon, Rick, Richard and I left camp. After five hours Simon and I came to a high spot on the ridge and took in a panorama of Masherbrum, Latoks and Hushe Peaks, but above us again lay steep unstable snow, so regretfully we decided to turn back to base camp.

Between such forays we took walks up the Choktoi glacier to view Latok, and could scarcely believe that we were looking at the same mountain as that in Mike Kennedy's photographs, which had initially enticed us to this area of Pakistan. Doug and I were coming to realise that the very deep snow was not melting off fast enough to allow Rick and

myself to beat our imposed timetables - back in Aberdeen's oil world, work was beckoning.

I had had enough of snow plodding with heavy sacs and was delighted to join Doug on a superb arete of a subsidiary peak of Latok III which curved steeply into the sky behind base camp. We put together a big wall rack, a haul sac and bivi equipment, and headed off to explore the ridge. We had just intended investigating the possibilities, but on getting to the foot of it, we found ourselves on superb, clean, sunkissed rock. After four pitches with moves of up to 5c, we stashed the haul sac and rappelled down to the glacier. As we wandered round the base of the arete to check the descent route, I saw what looked like the profile of an Indian's face sculpted from the rock high on the ridge, so we named our proposed route the Indian Arete. We decided that we could either descend via the crest and rounded ridge to the South, or abseil steeply down a snow/ice couloir to the right of the route.



Our plan was to depart very early from base camp, climb all day, and abseil from the summit in darkness, to return to base camp in the early morning. How are the mighty fallen!

0900 hours on the 18th June saw Doug and I at our previous high point on the arete. We had a brew and decided to jettison the haul sac, bivi equipment and some of the rack. We retained the stove and some herb tea bags, boiled sweets and two tracker bars each.

So we were committed to climbing and climb we did. Swinging pitches of 5c, sustained 5c, the rock occasionally flaking but basically very clean. As I traversed up right on the first aid pitch and moved up another

system, I was secretly pleased to belay below a huge overhang and let Doug lead the next pitch. At first it was extremely steep until he went out of my view. He was on, I guessed, a tension traverse as he shouted slack on green and tight on red. After two hours the green rope became yellow and the red pink in my head torch light. I lowered Doug off and we began to search for a bivi.

Doug went down one more pitch and called up that his previous stance was OK, perhaps roomy enough for two. I tied off the rope and hurried down. I cut a ledge in the snow with my hammer as Doug brewed, as he was not well. Meanwhile I continued clearing a level space for Doug to lie down and for myself to sit. Our meal was tepid herb tea and a tracker bar. We had no bivi gear but did not want to abseil off. Sleep came, often and intermittently, but we remained comfortable enough in our 'Buffalo' Clothing.

The morning found us shrouded in powder snow and my lead was not that pleasant as I climbed in my walking boots to regain my belay stance, tied in and shivered myself back to warmth. Doug came and was soon back at his high point of the previous evening, punctuating the Karakorum silence with the pleasing sound of the hammer again. Three hours later I started to second the pitch, and I was impressed by Doug's climbing. He had led the pitch by leap-frogging our three blades, had two small 'Rocks' persuaded into cracks, and one poor Kingpin as his only protection. Above, I enjoyed climbing free again where we were on easier 5b, 5c ground.

We soon came to the ridge proper, with its huge, balanced blocks and snow dripping in the sunshine. We changed from our rockboots into our somewhat drier and more substantial Brasher walking boots and climbed together for a spell, but soon the ground became technical again so we pitched 5b. It was good value to be high up and near the top, although the climbing was becoming progressively bittier. As we approached the summit it was late evening and Doug spied a good bivi. I reversed a scrappy pitch, filled the rucksac with snow as Doug fixed the abseil and down we went to the bivi-site on a rock ledge. Sleep came after cold herb tea and half a tracker bar.

Chattering teeth woke me - I thought they were mine, but perhaps they were Doug's. We contemplated the final steps to the summit but began abseiling instead. We were happy and felt that we had done all the good climbing. Latter-day views of climbing right to the summit were not for us on this occasion.

Back at Base camp, Simon and Rick had returned from an abortive attempt at Bobesighir (6411m) because of unstable snow, but had enjoyed exploring the Nobandi Sobandi glacier.

Robert Schauer's movie camera whirred at us climbers as we stood between the camera and Latok II as a backdrop. Under normal circumstances we would not be found loitering among avalanche debris but it was necessary - for the out-of-condition climb.

The sound recordist's cassette batteries ran flat, and of course she asked us to repeat our conversations. Feeling like a melancholy mime mannequin at a concert party, I was unhappy with their request and gladly walked back to our camp.

The corner of a plastic tarpaulin ruffled in the breeze as Doug and I pulled away from Base camp on that late morning. Indian Face Arete reflected the orange sun, moraine boulders slid as the Choctoi glacier echoed life beneath our feet. The same old situation... we felt that we might just pass that way again!