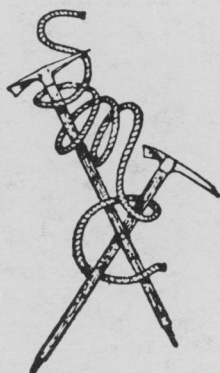


THE
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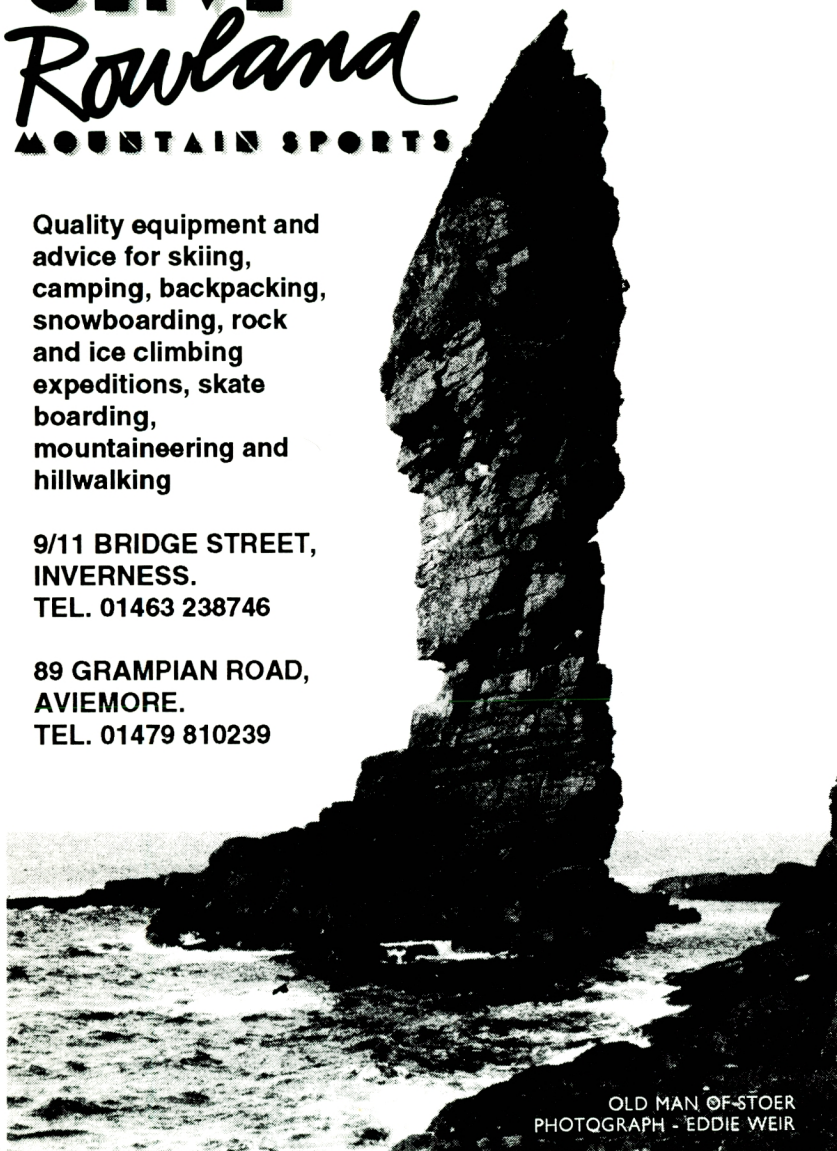
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OLD MAN OF STORR
PHOTOGRAPH - EDDIE WEIR



Summit Meeting: Camera call on the top of Ben Nevis for those who attended the Christmas 1978 Meet at the CIC Hut. Back: Gordon McKenzie, Neil Quinn, Gerry Peet, Colin Stead, Doug Lang, Stuart Smith, Chris Gilmore, Andrew Walker and Dave Dawson. Front: Ken Crocket, Ian Fulton and Bob Richardson. *Photo Ken Crocket.*

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A SIGN OF THE TIMES

By Mike Jacob

OCCASIONALLY, I feel the strength of memories and the necessity to try and turn them into words. So, I've come to write this. The memories, like the boulders at the edge of the river, are softened and cloaked by the delicate green mosses and lichens of time and are jumbled up in no particular order – they are of wet heather and glistening rock and mist swirling on the steep, craggy hillside opposite and the tinkling, gurgling of the water at my feet. That is how it should be, for the place of which I write was created in no ordered way by the forces of Nature, by glacier and river and wind and ice, into one of those magical cradles that, I suppose, we all recognise, have, somewhere.

Now, the irony; that perfect place, created by random events, was subjected to the arranging forces of machinery, the stultifying design of man, and was thus destroyed, reduced by the unfeeling to inanimate objects for the unseeing. It had been the sort of place for the scattering of ashes in the wind, for the freeing of the spirit in such a place would have been entirely appropriate.

I can close my eyes, even as I sit in a warm room distanced in all dimensions from events, and see it all and the image is so strong that I can sense the smells, hear the wind, feel the cold and hunch my shoulders against the billowing cloud of sleet sweeping relentlessly down the glen on a biting easterly. I found the place by accident and was drawn back time after time. It wasn't far to walk but it might have been miles for, once there, it was a place of solitude.

I first went to Torridon as one of a group of inexperienced students and knew little of the realities of Winter's harsh wee traps, but, for all that, we had the power of youth. The southern flanks of Liathach seemed to overhang Glen Cottage so we scratched around the western end and, in

an impossible wind, got as far as Mullach an Rathain but could manage no further. I had no crampons in those penniless and novice days. It was this occasion, and another day in the Mamores when we skarted around on hard névé getting nowhere whilst spiked demigods skipped round the summits, that induced me to spend my book grant on a pair of crampons from Rodney Street. I remember, now, why we tried from the west - it was because the wind was screaming in from that direction, so, of course, we had our backs to it. When we got to the cairn and clawed our way over the icy stones, I looked out behind me. The clouds parted and, like a sledge-hammer blow in the chest, I saw for the first time a pattern of sea-lochs and islands and distant peaks and not the blue sparkle of summer but the hard steel blue-grey of North Atlantic convoys.

*But pleasures are like poppies spread –
You seize the flow’r, its bloom is shed;
Or like the snow falls in the river –
A moment white – then melts forever.*

Robert Burns.

The clouds raced in and the vision was gone but, in that instant, I had glimpsed Tir na n-Og.

I went back. Went to rock-climb the Northern Pinnacles and abseiled off ice-glazed rocks in a blizzard, whooping and sliding the tension away as we stumbled down. We got lost in the mist in Coire Liath Mhor looking for the ‘easy’ way and half-heartedly attempted a cleft drooling with ice before retreating over avalanching slabs. Retreat again after the first two pitches of a then unclimbed Central Buttress on Beinn Eighe in deep powder; thankfully, our start had been too late in the day, perhaps a subconscious ploy. These events did not count as failures for they were full of laughter. The winter traverse of Liathach, when it finally came, was worth the waiting years. The cold, the adrenalin pumping at the sight of the Patagonian-like Fasarinen and, near the end, out of the upwelling clouds, floated two, three golden eagles a wing’s span away.

One summer, while Glasgow basked in a heatwave, I fulfilled a long-held dream and sailed a boat into Loch Torridon and anchored behind the island at Shieldaig. The rain and midges didn’t matter for once; we had a cosy cabin warmed by a driftwood fire, good music, food and wine.

October was a regular visiting time. There was a wood-panelled room, another cosy fire, and a library of old books. Winter’s chill was in the air and it always seemed to rain. The bracken was turning brown and there were few people about. Just to walk around the glens, with the mist down, although not giving the warm thrill of touching summer rock or the pressure of a winter’s climb, seemed to reflect the season. Matching this

autumnal atmosphere I discovered the technique of standing still. You stand there and gradually become part of the landscape and you see things that you would otherwise miss, like otters and reflections and fleeting hues of colour. This standing business is only incidental, by the way, for it's part of fly-fishing for those small sea-trout called finnock or herling.

*A long, long time ago.
And yet if you are often on a hill
and know the places in the rocks and trees
where fairies and wise folk still love to play,
a moment comes when all the world grows still
and seems to wait for something, and the day
forgets that you are there.*

Geoffrey Winthrop Young.

That is how I discovered the Abhainn Thrail.

In spate, and especially high up between rock walls, the river is a roaring, spraying, foaming torrent of quite spectacular power. Even the feeder ditches that drain the heathery moor can be difficult to cross. When the water level started to fall, with much stealth, I would creep around the big, mossy boulders and search the back-eddies and glides with a couple of flashy wet-flies. I was captivated by the place and, resting the rod in the bog myrtle, became part of it.

Occasionally, if the conditions were right, I would take some of those pink-fleshed silver fish home for supper. One afternoon, as the hail drummed the back of my hood, there was an almighty pull on the line and a huge commotion in the water. I almost fell in. Line raced off the reel and then I saw a great shape leap out of the water - a salmon! It landed back with a shimmering splash and the line went slack. Try as I might, I could not get it to take one of the flies again. In keeping with the place, however, and in the fading light, we were both free to go. I never saw anyone else there.

Then, one year, I went back again. Something had happened. There was a sign near the road - 'Private Fishing' - and a car park. The little sheep path had been bulldozed into a Land-Rover track and, with increasing dismay, I discovered that the wildness had gone. Huge machines had piled those boulders, white bellies up, like so many bloated carcasses, at the side of the river which now resembled, in places, a canal imported from the English midlands. It had been done to 'improve' the fishing where such a thing is judged by numbers caught and entered in the hotel catch-book.

Angry and saddened, I later found some comfort in the wood-panelled room, in the words of William Henry Davies, to the same old question, echoed by Iain Smart* - Must it always end like this?

*No time to see, in broad daylight
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.*

When I originally wrote this, I wasn't sure how I wanted it to end, so it remained filed away, unfinished. I had been going to sound off about the destruction of wild places, afforestation and the like, but it was out of place. Then, last October, I went back, after a gap of several years. It was raining in Galloway, raining in Inverness and raining in Torridon. The hills were streaked with blazes of white fury as water cascaded down. A friend and I made the walk.

The feet of many sheep had rolled rocks down the eroding slopes onto the car-park and the river, thundering in swollen rage, would have none of artificial constraints and was returning to its old course.

Not there yet but it's fighting back and, to help, I threw the Private Fishing sign in the river and watched as the water spat it joyfully in the air and swept it towards the sea.

*An encounter with Gramsci. SM CJ No. 182. pp. 593 - 596, 1991.

FULFILMENT

Here, where the evening deer
Come down to drink,
I quietly wait for kindly fate
To help me think
Of some eternal magic.

No need. It happens,
For long legged bards
Dip into vocabularies
Of clear and rippling waters,
Then fill the early night
With odes and sonnets of peace.

Once rested,
They bound for another horizon
To antler a poem on the page
Of gently gathering dusk

George Philip.

CRACKERS

By Andy Nisbet

'CLIMB an overhanging crack with crackers,' said my new guidebook. What's a cracker? said me, the beginner rock-climber, and how do I climb it without even knowing what one is? But it was still irritating although Ventricle had the awesome grade of VS, and I would never be trying it. A week later at the end of a Glenmore Lodge beginners' course, there was still a weekend before work, so Alfie and I dragged half our fellow course members up to Coire an Lochain and Western Route. Now it was 'still technically Severe' despite 'employing combined tactics', and we didn't employ any, partly because we didn't know how. And Ventricle was only a grade harder; but what was a cracker?

Twelve years later I still didn't know what a cracker was, but I knew the winter Coire an Lochain had an awful lot of corners and not many routes, though Ventricle was last on the list. Colin and I had just climbed Auricle in an hour-and-a-half, so it was only lunchtime. 'How about Ventricle?' he said. 'You're crackers,' said me, and went home for tea.

Colin and I had arranged to climb together that winter (on the dole) and had been training through the autumn; we even climbed Insect Groove on the Aberdeen coast very quietly and without a single crampon scratch. Three weeks later it was Tough-guy, but December's short days and Lochnagar's deep powder soon brought darkness and we missed out the last pitch. Christmas brought Brian up for a few days and Colin away for a couple. Somewhat unaware of the competitive spirit, since I would always try equally to pass the crux on to either of them, I was naive not to realise that repeating Tough-guy with Brian on Boxing Day, in order to complete the summer route, was like lighting the touchpaper. I had arranged to climb with Colin the next day and as I struggled to find a line through the overhangs, having refused to concede to the dark for a second time, I struggled to find a solution involving Brian.

I solved it after the overhangs by a late evening phone call to Sandy. Returning to Aberdeen at midnight and leaving for Coire an Lochain at 4am left my resistance weakened against the unstoppable force towards Ventricle. But I would second anything, I said. It was a bitterly cold day so while we stopped for a brew in Jean's Hut, Colin warmed up by doing one-arm pull-ups with his winter sack on. This feat of strength, however, failed to intimidate Brian from joining us on Ventricle. The same could not be said for the three-hour wait at the bottom in wind and spindrift while Colin led the first pitch, so Brian somewhat sniffily said they might as well do that Auricle thing, even if it was only Grade IV.

In the meantime, I had been belaying Colin. The cliff was extremely

wintry, deeply frosted and verglassed underneath; whether in or out of condition I'm not sure, but certainly unfriendly. The initial crack was brutal but Colin disposed of it by relentless power, then a traverse along a ledge and another hard wall to a niche. Through the wind I tried to suggest that the summer route was on the right but the overhanging groove had been keyed in. A peg was placed at head-height and the power switched on. Three one-arm pull-ups till the thin mantelshelf at the top spat him down to a thump on the ledge and a bounce into steep ground below. Despite my anxiety, firstly, that he might have hurt himself and, secondly, that the route wouldn't go, the aggression above merely increased and the groove succumbed with three one-arm pull-ups and an extra grunt. So now the frozen object at ground level had to climb.

The first wall was very tiring torquing up a wide and verglassed crack, then removing the last runner and a reach out right for good turf. Then the realisation that the body would be dangling down a blank overhanging wall and a lock-off would be required to reach for the next ledge. Possibly ability, and certainly willpower, was lacking, and the next runner was 10ft off to the right. So I retreated to the crack, where a failed attempt to regain strength forced a direct try. But the wall above bulged too much. A strangled brain hung on for ages trying to find a solution before, certainly in terms of energy supplies, gravity made the question irrelevant and I swung out into space inelegantly back behind the start. Now the brain received a little more warm blood and insisted on the only solution as starting up a groove away to the left (now Ventriloquist) and traversing to the top of the wall. The solution worked despite the loss of nervous energy due to the runner being 40ft sideways and the ground 20ft below. Now warmed up, I reached the groove. There were no placements and no footholds. I would have said impossible except I'd just seen it done, twice! I would have given up except for the irresistible force from above. My feet didn't touch the rock either and I landed below an even bigger and sillier groove. There was no worry about agreeing to carry on; the outcome was obvious and I didn't need to worry about seconding it.

Wrong again. Soon Colin was somewhere out behind my head and I was huddled at the bottom of the groove to escape from the wind. I couldn't see much; my neck doesn't bend that far. The groove was packed with snow but it fell out into mid air as I tried to make myself as small as possible to escape the weather and reality. Eventually, the axes were clipped and a high Friend and long sling allowed an escape to be made. Slow progress continued as the weather deteriorated and the spindrift started to penetrate even the back of my groove. The awful moment was approaching when I'd be expected to defy mid air. To my amazement, I found I could back-and-foot the groove, nearly as much outwards as upwards, until I could reach the sling and swarm over the top.

The bewilderment helped me up the next groove into twilight and, as the light faded, my determination surfaced from the depths. I'd climbed the overhanging groove; I still couldn't believe it was possible, but I was here. Admittedly, below a plumb-vertical smooth-walled corner plastered with snow and in the dark, but I had made it! And I certainly wasn't going to climb these grooves again on a future attempt. So no way were we abbing off. This bravado was fortunately reinforced by a perfect axe crack which miraculously appeared out of the deep frost, only waning 6ft below the top when holds and strength disappeared simultaneously. A weird thread allowed axes to be clipped and holds uncovered, before recovering enough strength to reach on to the powdery ledge above, crossing fingers for the 50/50 chance that the placements were good and the feet would hold. Which they did.

We were now on a huge ledge below a big wall and wide crack, looking even bigger and wider in the blizzard now on the go. But no way was I climbing those grooves again, so it was, hopefully, out right as the only possibility. And there was a chimney full of blocks and powder. 'I should put in a runner, but I'm too tired to dig for one,' I rationalised. So I was on the top, in the middle of the night, and the grooves were history. When the new grading system appeared; I suggested 9 for the bottom groove. On reflection, I should have said 10. And Colin wanted to grade the route IV because it was short!

I would never have to go back to those grooves. With only one snag; Brian wouldn't forget! Thirteen years later he still hadn't forgotten, and I had run out of other suggestions. I really didn't want to relive the nightmare but I'd been persuading him for 10 years to go somewhere else. And now I couldn't. It wasn't even very snowy, but that was no good either. So here we were, sacks dumped to look and see if there was enough snow on it. At first it looked a bit odd, ledges piled up with snow but vertical walls have no ledges, so a bit bare. But the grooves were full of ice, not very thick but well smeared, and even the walls below the ledges were smeared. You had to be at the right angle to see the light reflected off the ice, or you had to start to climb, when it became immediately obvious. So we did both.

The initial crack was again mean and icy; your lead, Brian. So he just reached over the ledge from the extra metre of snow in the gully and pulled up on the hard *névé*. Thirteen years' of fear was over in 30 seconds; how silly. Conditions were great; how often in the Cairngorms do you get snow-ice on the ledges? Soon Brian reached the dreaded groove. He poked his head in out of curiosity. 'Impossible,' he said, and turned his attention to the obvious crack of the summer route; so deeply covered with frost before that Colin hadn't seen it. But it wasn't that simple; the crack was good but the footholds were rounded breaks, and when the crack ran out, the footholds were still rounded breaks. At least there was some ice for

placements but when that broke you were off, or at least Brian was. But it was sensible, so when he got up second time round, so did I. And the overhanging groove above, well I knew the trick. But could I free it? The memories were still too strong, and Brian was fired up. So he bridged it, and later I back-and-footed it, and both went free. But it's still an amazing groove. Now Brian hates losing his momentum, and that's what belaying does, so he just kept going and freed it all. The top corner was initially very icy, front pointing even, and no runners, so quite scary. We'd already climbed the wide crack on a winter ascent of Daddy Longlegs, and fortunately, the final pitch of Daddy Longlegs was bare of winter, so I could volunteer to lead the last pitch again. And we were up by lunchtime. I'm not telling you what he suggested for the afternoon; it might all start over again.

THE PRESIDENT'S MEAT

By Colin Stead

IT WAS up to CIC again for the meet, on the sole good weekend weather forecast this stormy winter. The morning did dawn clear, blue and windless, but our exit was as dilatory as ever, so that the hill was swarming with folk as we puffed up Observatory Gully, looking for inspiration. There was much loose snow in places. Bob Carchrie was well ensconced on Observatory Buttress as we contemplated the buttress opposite, on the flank of Tower Ridge. It looked steep and was hanging with green ice in its upper section. We'd give it a go.

Starting a wee way up the gully, it looked like a system of ledges led out right to the edge with a line of grooves and the icefall. I offered to do the first pitch and with no demur from himself, I set off. It was reasonable climbing to the target ledge which was blocked some way along by a large flake. It seemed to have a flimsy top which I was convinced was loose. Passing the flake seemed problematical, and after a few tries, I lassooed its top with Doug's long sling for a runner and tried again. No matter how I tried, I ended in a layback position quite unable to get any placements to pull out right. I did not fancy the ascent of the flake itself, but it seemed the only way. The crack on its left had a good placement and with its aid, I got a foot on a high, right rock hold. Another heave and I seized the top of the flake, clutched it to me and swung right – no thoughts now about it being loose as I landed on a higher ledge.

There was a horizontal ledge going right with a holdless and steep wall above. However, there were some footholds below and an incipient crack at the junction of the ledge and wall, so I pretended to torque my picks in the crack and shuffled right. After 5m, I got frightened and tapped in the tip of a Leeper for some mental assistance and moved right again to a hold below a bulge, above which easier ground led to a steep wall. I was now close to the edge up which we hoped to find a way.

The problem was simple and common. There were good placements above the bulge and smooth bare rock below on which no crampon purchase could be got. I heaved and dangled from those placements *ad nauseam* to no avail. I wondered about outflanking the bulge on the right – out of the frying pan . . . An invisible English voice below shouted: 'That looks incredible – does that route have a name?' I guess it must have looked good in profile. Doug's answer was inaudible and I returned to my contemplation. A couple of neurons got together. There was a dribble of ice high up on the right edge of the bulge that was a few centimetres thick, so I cut a foothold, leaned out on my picks and just managed to get a crampon point on and pulled. The crampon point scythed through and I dangled again. More sculpturing of the ice, same result. This went on for quite a while before a crampon point caught and I was over, wondering why it had taken so long.

Easier ground led to a corner where I expected the sanctuary of a belay, but my excavations were fruitless and I had to descend a bit and go up and left to a ledge where I eventually found a nut placement and some equanimity. Taking in the rope was a problem as I had taken a zigzag line and the yellow rope seemed to be jamming. I couldn't hear what Doug was saying, but everyone else on the mountain apparently could and it was not complimentary. Eventually, my partner appeared. 'You must be mad,' was all he said as he stormed past into the corner and out of sight. He was obviously so angry that there was to be no argument about leading the next pitch.

I settled down and watched the icicles dripping and the clouds swirl in as the un-forecast mank came in. Now began the most incredible sound show. There were grunts and groans and gasps as if he was having the orgasm to end all orgasms, all interspersed with 'I'm coming off', or, 'I think I can make it', and hammering noises and lumps of ice coming down. This invisible show was somewhat alarming as I hung on to the rope and kept telling myself I had a good belay. The rope edged out slowly and after about 15m paused again. Then some hammering and an announcement that he could bring me up to his peg belay. This was worrying, but being brought up on the writings of Marshall, I remembered the account of Gardyloo Buttress and pointed out that there was 30m of rope left and reinforced the point by asking if he would abseil from it. That shut him up and some slight progress resumed. A long time later, the rope trickled out and there was a euphoric shout as he gained the icefall and ran the rope out.

When I reached the orgasmic corner, I was amazed at the difference in its appearance. All the ice had peeled off from its left wall leaving a bare, wet, wall of rock. A poor placement on the right and a little rock wrinkle allowed a step up and a good left placement above. Trouble was, Doug had got a drive-in part way into the corner and it was not for unscrewing. I gyrated on my wrinkle, hanging on my left hand as I cut the wretched thing

out. A lurch on to another tiny hold and I could regain ice in a groove. I don't remember much about the next bit until I landed on my knees on the proposed belay ledge. The peg came out easily.

The route then led right round a bulge to the icefall. The light was going, the visibility not helped by the mist which was coming and going. The ice of the bulge had also largely peeled off, being of that very brittle nature like toughened glass. As I flailed about, it suddenly came to me that there would be nowhere for my picks unless I stopped. The problem was to get my body round the bulge to reach the good ice so tantalisingly close on the right. I shuffled my feet a bit right while my body leaned left. The only placement on the bulge was to rest the pick of my right axe on the broken edge of a bit of ice, a couple of centimetres thick at waist height. I shuffled my gut carefully a little right, now left pick to join the right and lean a little. Look for a right placement – oh shit, there isn't one! Lean the pick again on another broken edge, shuffle a little more, change hands and the right tool reaches the good ice and it's easy to Doug's belay in the gloom.

We discussed the rest of the route, pack it in or continue up the east face of the Little Tower as originally intended – carry on. I raced up the easing ice to the ledge of East Wall route and hunted in the powder for a belay or a runner – nothing. I moved right until a voice round the corner belonging to a very late party on Tower Ridge showed I was too far right. That's one way to avoid the queues, start at dusk! I moved back left, abandoning my search for protection and went up a left-sloping groove. A call from below about rope. I see a possible belay 5m above, but I can't reach it, so I carry on and guess we must be moving together and then I find a belay. Doug passes and climbs into a dead end and has to climb down from a high runner and traverse right to gain the top of the Little Tower. I decline to go for the runner and have to untie one rope and then we are at the top. He accuses me of being bad tempered. I plead tiredness.

Should we go up or down? Down would be many abseils and we are hardly likely to find all the gear in place as we did last year. Up it is and then along the Eastern Traverse. As we descended by torchlight, we could see the late party silhouetted across the Gap. We are bothered about the snow, but I had seen parties coming down from the top of Tower Scoop while on the first belay, so we thought it would be OK and so it proved.

We were knackered when we reached the hut and as we sat unwinding and steaming in the extension, that prince of hut custodians brought us home-made soup. The prospect of fillet steak and wine was appealing, but tragedy had struck. Doug had left his steak in Godfroy's refrigerator (i.e. the gap between the window and the shutter) and it seemed that some fox (*Canis vulpis*) or perhaps *Homo sapiens vulpis* had made off with it. John Peden had seen a fox on the Friday night and there were plenty of the other variety around. Steam was coming out of the President's ears. A tantrum was imminent. I thrust some wine into his near teetotal hand and a promise of half my steak alleviated a very serious situation and so the day ended.

A DAY ON THE HILL

By Rob Milne

IN THE corner of my eye, I caught something unusual and glanced up. 'Graeme!' I shouted, 'what are you doing?' He seemed to have turned almost face out from the wall, 60ft above me, and appeared to be moon-walking on a vertical, blank wall, one ice axe in a snowy crack. He shouted down something like: 'This is what James Bond would do here.' In spite of the difficulty of climbing, he was obviously relaxed. Babbling like a happy baby, he turned back towards the wall, 10 points on each crampon showing, gingerly stretched up and slotted his axe pick in the narrow crack. The section of wall he was climbing looked impossible from my belay in the Left Branch of Y Gully. He had just ascended the obvious, but irregular crack line just left of the arête left of Grumbling Grooves high in Coire an Lochain. He was heading left across the blank wall to a thinner crack that led to a belay ledge. From below, the just-off vertical slab looked smooth and hostile. We had debated whether he would be able to change cracks before the right one got too wide to climb. We needn't have stressed ourselves, the wall had several one-inch wide flat ledges and the crack held the pick of the axe tighter than a frightened climber ever could. Although the climbing was strenuous, Graeme Ettle was prancing about like a ballet dancer.

I turned back to the climbers who had just soloed up the gully to below me and said: 'See, I told you it would be impressive!' Moments before, when Graeme was still in the wide crack, they had arrived, curious to see what was going down (or up). 'Wow! That looks wild' one of them prompted. With a smile, I replied: 'Hang about, he's going to cross the blank bit next.' They still hadn't believed me when Graeme probed gently with his tool, found a perfect slot and started to pretend he was James Bond.

They must have thought we were either cheeky or nuts! We were only fulfilling our primary purpose for the day, to have fun. As a by-product, we intended to explore this section of the wall. The previous summer, Graeme had noticed the wide crack and shallow chimney combination from the top of Ewen's Buttress. Using binoculars he confirmed that there was enough turf and little ledges to get from a wide flared crack to the plateau. Not only was the line stunning, but it was one of the only white mixed routes among the buttresses that were as black as our attitude to the poor winter weather so far.

Hanging straight-armed and leaning back from the wall, Graeme slotted a Friend and a stopper in the crack. On steep mixed routes, I normally take as much weight on my feet as possible. But Graeme had developed a new

style. Such was the confidence in his strength and tool placements, that he would almost hang by one arm to place gear. 'Brilliant crack.' 'Excellent rock,' he called down. 'Superb,' he shouted as he locked off his left tool below his shoulder and reached high for a bit of turf. He leaned out again and walked his front points up the less than inch-wide ripples that ran across the wall. Twack, his left tool locked on to the turfy ledge. 'I'll just get some more gear before I pull on to the belay ledge,' he calmly sang out.

It was hard to believe that the pitch not only looked very hard, but also was close to a technical grade of 7. Graeme had danced up it with more grace than he shows on a disco floor. This was partly because the thin sections of crack seemed to be made for axe picks, while the intervening wide sections of the crack seemed made for protection. But the real reason was that we were having fun with our mates. To our right, two friends were ascending Grumbling Grooves. Graeme was trying to race the leader to see who could get to the next belay first. The couple doing the Left Branch of Y Gully were friendly enough, and the guy leading was feeling chuffed as he worked his way up. I could detect the trepidation in his voice when he started the pitch. But as he did each technical section and found more gear his calls back down to Stella increased with confidence. I had asked him once not to make sudden noisy movements, since I couldn't tell if that was him above me or whether Graeme was starting to fall. He understood the tone in my voice and laughed back.

Earlier in the morning, we were so engaged in conversation with three other friends that we had hardly noticed the walk in. As we wandered through wee tufts of heather sticking out of the light layer of snow, we laughed at how some climbers were so sad and desperate that they did mixed routes when they weren't in winter nick. The desperation had come from a few consecutive dreadful winters. We were all keen to get routes done, but in Scotland only ethical ascents should count. It was hard not to have a healthy respect for the rough crags protected by the fierce winter weather. That respect has to extend to climbing. We agreed that style was more important than a tick. Patience was vital.

As we picked our way through the boulder field, our focus turned to speculation about the possible impact if some of the top level, and very strong, rock climbers took up mixed climbing seriously. Almost all of the climbers currently climbing at the leading edge of mixed routes only lead E3 or E4. 'Luckily,' I said, 'they seem to get cold and miserable and head back to the warm indoor walls.' Stork, an E5+ climber currently checking out mixed climbing, countered that his ultra strong fingers didn't really help. 'Mixed climbing is a sport for mountaineers,' he declared. Although it is an interesting thought that could lead to a major advance in mixed standards, we couldn't take it seriously. We slagged each other off, good rock climbers and experienced mixed climbers alike. About the time we

were trying to decide whether we were heroes for enduring the miseries of mixed climbing or fools for not heading for sun-drenched rock climbing in Spain, we arrived at the kitting-up boulder.

The short-term need to find a route in winter nick stopped our speculation about the long-term future. The snow girdling the coire was dotted with climbers. With the first blue-skied weekend in weeks; it seemed everyone was out to get a route. We chatted with each group of climbers we passed. Some we knew, some we didn't. We wished each party well, helping one group to find the start of their chosen route, lamenting with another pair how someone had climbed the out-of-condition bare rock of Fallout Corner the day before. Mixed climbing is usually a solitary activity, but these social days are nice.

'I'm safe,' Graeme shouted down.

My turn. I was looking forward to the pitch and keen to get started. Perhaps this is why my crampon slipped from the first placement and noisily skittered down the rock. 'Hey, don't damage the rock', Graeme shouted down with a smirk. 'I know, I know,' I replied, referring to the long debate about crampons marking the rock. At least this line wasn't even a summer rock route.

Although the main crack was on the right, Graeme had put some small wires in a thin crack in the middle of the wall and then tip-toed across on a small ledge. He had even made it look easy. Balanced on my front points, it looked a long way across! I fiddled with my tools for a few minutes, trying to work out the sequence. I finally hooked my right tool about chest level, and using it alone, I stepped out on to a two-inch ledge. Twisting the shaft slightly to hold myself against the wall, I slotted the left tool in above the first. I faced almost sideways and moved my toes backwards as far along the ledge as I could. Trusting my left tool, I leaned way right and slotted the pick in the other crack. It was a wide spread, but the picks were so secure, it was like holding fixed slings.

Placing my front points over a small flake to stop me from barn-dooring, I released my left tool, pulled up and hooked it high in the crack. 'Yeehaw,' I shouted, 'great Placements!' 'Piece of piss,' Graeme encouraged. I was feeling strong and confident, so I hung by one arm with my front points on tiny ledges to remove the protection. Soon I felt strangely unstable. My right foot was going like a sewing machine. After many years of winter climbing, I thought my calves would never get tired. Now my cockiness had caught up with me. I hooked a tool on a small square ledge and turned my foot. It still took half-a-minute for my calf to settle down.

Upward I hooked. Balancing on a tiny ledge and with a rope from above, I just placed my axe on a square ledge and pulled. 'Cheat,' Graeme shouted, 'I never get to do that when I am leading.' I didn't bother to tell him that

although it was working, I didn't feel very secure. Not wanting to embarrass myself by falling off, I worked harder for a good next placement and took extra care in placing my feet.

As I worked the next Friend out of its hole, I was puzzled to hear Graeme shout: 'Well done, that looked good.' I realised he was talking to the lad leading the Left Branch of Y Gully straight across from us. It was only his second season and in these lean conditions it wasn't easy. 'Yes,' the lad shouted, feeling really chuffed at the top of a tricky step. 'Do you think that is harder than normal?' he asked Graeme. 'Definitely,' he responded encouragingly. Although the lad was climbing several grades below us, his personal achievement was probably bigger and we were happy to share in the resulting excitement.

Moving up on to the next ledge, I put a hand up to stroke one of my oldest and rarest pieces of gear. 'Cheat,' Graeme shouted again. 'This is only the second time I have seen this bong used in the 25 years I have owned it. I wanted to see how solid it was,' I partly lied. In the wide crack, Graeme had placed both a big Friend and my seldom-used antique bong. I had bought it when I was a mere child, just learning to climb (pegs were still in use in those days). It was nice to see such an old relic in use. Having satisfied myself that it was solid and that I was solidly on the small ledge, I leaned against the wall, almost in balance and whacked it out. It was solid!

Once I had removed the bong, huge Friend and a solid peg, reluctantly I had to leave the security of the small ledge and my foot wedged in the wide crack. On the one hand, I thought the moves ahead looked worryingly hard. On the other hand, this was wonderful climbing. Solid pick hooks, small foot ledges, unknown terrain; finding elegant climbing moves on a stage of fine red granite. I was keen to see what it would be like - the Risk versus Reward ratio had the potential to be very high. At first, I couldn't even see the thin crack. I leaned left and put my front points on another one-inch wide ledge. Gently shifting my weight on to my precariously perched points, I could finally see the crack. Slip. In went the pick of my axe. 'Awesome, dude!' I exclaimed to Graeme. Before I had even thought about it, I was turned sideways and adjusting my feet, just as Graeme had earlier. With a solid tool placement, it was easy to rearrange my body position while holding with only one arm. I slotted the other axe higher in the crack and delicately moved my front points on to higher ledges. Making the moves was like doing a pleasant dance routine, elegant, delicate, a bit of finesse. All the best aspects of mixed climbing.

The way I had set my feet, I couldn't reach high enough for the turf as had Graeme. Feeling cocky, I just placed the tip of the pick on a small ledge and held my hand very still. One wiggle and I would be off. But what the hell, it was fun to push it a bit. A short step to another thin seam and I could

reach the turf. A couple more quick and exact placements and I was already pulling the last nut before the belay ledge. After shivering on the belay for an hour, it was nice to be warm again. Imagine my surprise to be actually sweating. Although the moves had been secure, they were strenuous. Oh well, it should keep me warm for longer at the belay, I thought, as I grabbed the edge of a flake with my left hand and laybacked on to the 10-inch-wide belay ledge.

Once clipped to the belay, I started effusing about how great the pitch had been. 'The first hooks were great – the lean to the right crack was really far – my foot kept sewing machining – the bong was cool – the move into the thin crack was really fun.' But Graeme's mood was very sombre. While I had been climbing, he had been looking at the next pitch. And it didn't look easy. He chatted bravely as he re-racked the gear, but his concern regarding the next pitch was almost oppressive. Between the lines, I could hear him thinking: 'This looks great. I want to do this. The flared crack looks awkward. If there isn't gear in that icy crack, I'm in trouble. The last section of the headwall looks like vertical ice, but no gear.' Although his gloves were wet, I was sure his palms were sweaty. But Graeme knew that this type of exploration was a primary reason he climbed. A bit of fear of the unknown added excitement. He had also been climbing like a machine lately. Fear and concern led to focus and up he went.

The climbing wasn't hard, but icy. The ice was a mixed blessing. In the back of the flared crack was perfect *névé*, ideal for the axes. But the ice also covered the thin crack that Graeme depended on for gear. With one foot in the *névé* and the points of the other on a small nick in the rock, he spent ages chopping the ice from the crack, looking for a placement. The climbing was now very different. The cracks on the first pitch were full of soft snow and easily cleaned. Now a layer of ice covered everything. Fun technical climbing had been replaced by serious considered movements. 'That one's not too bad,' he reported from 10ft up. 'That's pretty shite,' was the summary from 25ft up. 'These aren't very good' was the summary of 15 minutes of chopping and fiddling about. At this stage, I couldn't watch any more. Not because I was worried, but because the constant snow-clearing and chopping resulting in a sustained bombardment of my position. I put the sack back on and leaned as far out of the line of fire as the anchors would let me. I could hear Stella climbing across the branch of Y gully, but could only rarely sneak a peek at what she was doing. We were all in our own little worlds, dreading what would come next, but sure happiness was less than an hour away.

When I did get a break from the bombardment, I started to glance up quickly and estimate how far Graeme would go if he fell. He was now working up the vertical headwall, clearing six inches of foamy snow from

the ice. He had passed the point where he would stop above me. If all the bad nuts ripped, he would now stop far enough below me that I would have trouble seeing the shock in his eyes. As I kept my head down I tried to determine if I would have enough rope to lower him to the gully. I wasn't really serious about these perverse thoughts. Both of us were confident in his ability to find good placements and keep a level head. However, the jokes and shouting had stopped; the climbing took full concentration.

Occasionally, I could see helmeted heads on the plateau. At one point, Graeme was shouting 'Hello' to our friends. They shouted encouragement back. As if he was on a stage, a crowd was gathering to watch the show. The line looked impressive and steep, if not crazy. Graeme realised the implications of an audience. If he fell, he might get hurt, but he would definitely get really embarrassed. He later told me that he felt secure all the way, but didn't want to look a fool in front of so many friends. I was just glad he was careful, whatever the reason.

As he neared the top, I could hear him talking again. Some friends had come over to wait for him on top. The bombardment stopped, the rope made a sudden short jump and I heard a shout. Bracing for a fall, I heard a happy 'Yo.' He was there and dancing a wee jig in front of his mates. We were up and home free.

He chatted excitedly with them as I cleared the anchors. Winter climbing is often solitary and cold, but on a few rare times each year the weather is good and you can share the fun with your mates. And now it was all fun again. The risk and fear had passed. The exploration was done. It was just a small matter of me seconding the pitch.

After all of Graeme's chopping, the climbing was easy. I kept shouting up that he was a wimp for whimpering and taking so long, as I just hooked my picks in the placements he had chopped out. The risk had been eliminated and I could enjoy the delicate placements. Seconding can be wonderful at times.

As we walked down, we chatted constantly and reminisced about the climb. 'Remember the move up into the crack? - What did you do where it got wide? - Wasn't the bong neat? - The névé in the flared crack was good, wasn't it? - What was all this stuff about James Bond? - The guy on Left Branch did pretty well . . .' We babbled for an hour like young children coming out of the circus for the first time. Such had been the excitement during the climb that between us, we could still visualise almost every move and remember what we felt. Fond memories of the hill start with good climbs and good mates. We had had a superb day. But of course it was superb - it was a day on the hill.

(The first ascent of Stage Fright VI,7, Coire an Lochain, Cairngorms.)





IN THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING

By Adam Kassyk

THE mountains slept. An uneasy calm lay on the land, as if an unseen power had withdrawn for a few moments, and silence prevailed. Thin, high clouds drained the watery moon of its light, which cast pale shadows in the snow. Two figures surveyed such a scene at one in the morning at Aberarder, and settled down to some sleep. We walked into Coire Ardair early that morning, our spirits buoyed by energy and optimism, as the dawn light touched the hillside with colour and warmth. The day was calm and clear, the snow seemed good, and we felt well prepared for whatever trials the mountain gods might hold in store for us. The vast amphitheatre of Creag Meagaidh was still and quiet, and ours were the only footprints in the snow. The mountain was heavily snowbound, and my partner, Keith Anderson, readily agreed that we should try 1959 Face Route on Pinnacle Buttress. The first obstacle proved to be simply getting established on the face. A full 60m of climbing on snow the consistency of cold porridge and ice like crusted sugar gained the sanctuary of a firm snow slope, and what turned out to be the promised land above. At one point we were both climbing together with only one runner interrupting the otherwise untrammelled downward sweep of the rope, and thus we both endured and passed the first trial. The promised land was indeed paradise gained, with good snow, and dizzying balconies, ramps and grooves, leading ever outwards above endless volumes of clean blue space. The early tension of the climb was replaced with a satisfying rhythm of positive movement.

Farther on, due to a lack of stances and a desire to press on, we both moved together with one or two runners on the rope. I was completing the passage of a steep icy groove, in the lead, when I was struck by a sudden and powerful gust of wind. I tensed immediately, arching like a coiled spring to place the maximum weight on the spikes of my feet and hands. The pressure plucked and pulled at my resisting body, then subsided in parallel with my own anxiety at this unwelcome difficulty and danger. As soon as the coast was clear, I hastened upwards to find a safe anchor, but cautiously, keeping a lookout for a further attack from our unseen enemy. I had now gained open snowfields, separated by short walls and steps, and I felt fully exposed to the potential violence of the wind. The day had been calm earlier, and we were both mentally unprepared for the unpleasant task of fighting the wind as well as the difficulties of the climb.

I tied myself to a little rocky outcrop, an island of hopeful security in a sea of open, unprotected snow fields, and glanced searchingly at the

mountainside, the sky and the distant horizon. The wind tugged at me a little, but for a while seemed content just to threaten. Then I heard, and felt, a sound. It swelled from a whisper to a thundering volume, like a jet engine going into reverse thrust from close by, surging with superhuman force across the gothic walls above, and I shuddered deeper into my jacket and my skin crawled with fear until the wind spent its power and drew away into the rocks to replenish its violence. We had been sounded a warning, the terms of combat had been changed. We were now firmly on the defensive, committed to fighting a superior force which had declared its aggression in uncompromising terms. Our isolation and vulnerability was emphasised when I saw two tiny figures crossing the corrie slopes far, far below, two mortal comrades sharing this arena, and the only other signs of human life we saw in the entire day.

We drew close to the upper fortress. From a deep chasm in the soaring walls of this gothic Gormenghast fell a cascade of ice - the second trial. An unusually serious atmosphere had now settled on our enterprise, as we fought to dodge and duck against the attacks of the storm, to find security for the rope, and to gain precious upward progress. The minutes ticked past and turned into hours. I found myself in the lead, on vertical ice, nerves and muscles stretched, but at last reassured and secured by the grip of steel and knotted cord. At this point our adversary, finding me thus exposed, released another hurricane blast to try to tear me from the wall of ice and hurl me into the void. My body felt like a spring being stretched to the point of breaking, as I tensed into a quivering arc and channelled all my energy into my feet and my hands to increase the grip of steel claws against the force of the wind. The tension reached a climax, hung in the balance for a moment, then drained as I too breathed out and relaxed. A few more moves and the trial was over.

I cowered in a shallow recess in the wall of the gully, looking out and down as Keith climbed up, the snow slope forming a brief foreground to the acres of space beyond. I felt dwarfed, frightened, and an increasing need to hide from the elemental forces which ruled in this mountain kingdom. A small flame of optimism flickered, because surely we were over the greatest difficulty now, but the increasing seriousness of the situation seemed to tip the balance against us still. Keith emerged from the depths, and continued up the gully. I sensed the light draining away from the colossal grey walls of the Pinnacle, still some 500ft above us. The sense of scale was overwhelming. My eyes were drawn up the length of the rope, unsecured by any belays, to where Keith was struggling to fix a peg. A gust of wind sucked at the rope, and pulled it like a bowstring into a taut curve impossibly far out from the rock face, forcibly drawing my line of sight to the awesome space surrounding us. A large block tumbled

slowly past, the remains of Keith's attempts to secure the rope to a peg, and my stomach churned as the rock shot out over the icefall below in a practical reminder of our exposure.

The climbing was easier now, but the intensity and violence of the wind increased to compensate. Now even the simple act of climbing was a great struggle. Increasing amounts of strength and time were required to fight the aerial demon and merely remain attached to the mountain. Upward progress was only snatched during moments of respite. Battle was now engaged in earnest; what had been mere warning shots below, or an occasional ambush in a moment of weakness, was now all-out war. Trial by combat, and the stakes were steadily increasing. The slack rope billowed out into space above me as a constant reminder of the limits of our own adhesion to the solid earth. Above another ice pitch, where Keith had dislodged the loose block, we weighed the need for speed against the need for security. The light was failing, and there was a great temptation to hurry, but I truly feared the storm. One pitch farther on, as Keith climbed, I found I was constantly being blown off my feet onto the belay. It was impossible to manage the rope, and stay standing at the same time – both hands were needed to maintain an upright position against the battering of the storm. The wind was inexorably picking away at our defences, reducing our basic capacity to climb, to protect ourselves, to do anything. Then the evil demon twisted the slack into a huge and contorted tangle. This knot was bewitched and given a capricious mind of its own, and it danced wildly around me, mocking my presumption. I realised I had no hope of untangling it. I tried to dismantle my belay, and realised with a sense of shocked surprise that it would be impossible to take off my gloves, and the simple act of removing a peg was also quite beyond me. My horizon of activity had suddenly reduced to the simple act of hanging on, and the virtual inability to do anything else. The storm blasts of the wind were now succeeding each other so rapidly that the impact was almost continuous. My thoughts narrowed to a focus on one single necessity – if we don't get out of here quickly, we won't get out of here at all.

I abandoned the peg and set off like a crab emerging from its hole into open water surrounded by predators, following the frenzied rope which performed a manic dance in front of me. There was no way of communicating with Keith, nearly a full rope length above me in the gathering gloom. Progress was a matter of hanging on to the axes for dear life until the vicious assault slackened then gaining a few feet and as secure a position as possible before the next onslaught. With each attack all reserves of energy and determination were summoned to the defences as the holocaust pulled, plucked, pummelled, tore, battered and smashed at

our punily resisting bodies. Then the violence would subside and gasping for breath we would recover our energies briefly in preparation for the next assault. The clock was ticking and human reserves could not indefinitely match this superhuman force.

At this point the tumbling dice of chance intervened in the grossly unequal struggle. The upper gully of our climb cut the edge of the broad snowfield at the top of Easy Gully. And the storm was blowing from the east. These two strokes of fortune tipped the scales just sufficiently in our favour - descent without the need to exit on to the plateau, and the impact of the wind was blowing us up the mountain, rather than off it. Unfortunately, Keith did not know about the first of these factors, and was continuing to climb upwards, onto rather steep and precarious ground. This presented something of a dilemma. Tugging hard on the rope would merely assist the wind in dislodging him, while tugging gently would not be noticed. Tentatively, with the rope at full stretch, I started to climb sideways, praying that he would get the message quickly. So it was that two tiny figures, joined yet separated by a tightly stretched, crazily-knotted umbilical cord, started the long and arduous traverse across the snowfield. As each blast of the wind struck, we paused with arms and legs splayed in a position of maximum stability, pressed flat against the snow, and clung on grimly. I could see Keith high above me, making a descending traverse on unpleasantly steep terrain, a small, spidery shape at the other end of the rope, totally isolated from me. Progress was painfully, desperately slow, and we were acutely aware of the huge drop below the snowfield, gnawing hungrily at our heels, in league with the wind to profit from our demise.

We inched our way across the snowfield, like two flies trying to escape from a gigantic spider's web. With every glance across at the Post Face, our objective seemed no nearer, and the mental tension was as great as the physical effort. At last the traverse started descending slightly and the odds swung a little farther in our favour. The shallow recess of Easy Gully seemed like a breakwater against the fury of the elements, and we gained its meagre shelter with profound relief. The speed of our descent improved from intermittent crawling to continuous progress. Below the Post Face, though the wind was still strong enough to knock us over, we could stand upright for the first time in hours. We made straight for the cave under the boulder by the lochan. I have never experienced such an intensity of relief and relaxation as when I stretched out full length on the floor of the cave, resting every muscle, joint and tendon, and wrapped in a secure mental blanket of peace and tranquillity. The third trial was over – and not one I would wish to undergo again.

We were very tempted to stop there, in our tiny oasis of shelter from this wild world of wind, snow and mayhem, hidden from the enemy who withers human strength and drains the spirit. But we knew that the more insidious threats of cold and hunger were also waiting, and our immediate relief would be replaced by a long, slow, shivering discomfort. Maybe that would have been the better option, because as we emerged into the storm once again we found that our trials were not yet over.

Staggering through deep drifts over the boulders, now facing directly into the full blast of a vicious easterly blizzard, we were seduced by the easier going of flat ground, until twice I fell through the snow into the lochan. A curious weightless sensation, then the creeping chill of icy fingers round my knees, followed by a cursing, frightened struggle to escape. I was well aware of the potential seriousness of the situation, and the increasing threat of hypothermia.

The enemy, cheated once of his prey, now marshalled his forces in a sustained offensive to prevent our escape. It was impossible to face into the stinging snow particles borne like missiles on the teeth of the storm, and the effort of making progress against the constant onslaught of the easterly wind drained our strength still further. The path was completely obliterated, and we stumbled across rough ground and snow drifts with wearied resignation. A compass bearing was necessary to find the way in the whiteout, and I counted paces, as much for concrete evidence of the progress we were making, as for navigational advantage. Thus two hunched figures battled on, leaning into the vicious blasts of the wind, along ground that obstinately refused to turn downhill. The mental strain, of coping with the knowledge that this struggle would go on for at least another hour, seemed as great as the actual physical effort. The stumbling, lurching, leaden-booted paces slowly ticked past, adding up to hundreds of metres, then to kilometres, and then we reached the first trees at the bend in the glen, and felt a pronounced release of tension with the knowledge that our escape was assured.

The ordeal was still not over when we reached the car. The long miles to the A9 and over Drumochter served to drain every last drop of nervous energy and concentration, staring with aching eyes and numb brain at a uniform grey landscape through a vortex of swirling white shapes dancing towards the windscreen, crawling at a painfully slow 5 or 10 miles an hour and trying to keep the car on the road and avoid falling into a coma at the same time. All for the promise of a warm bed and blissful sleep at the end of the journey. The things we do to go climbing.

THE HORSE AND THE BULL

By Bob Duncan

THE summer of 1976 was glorious all over Britain so, with impeccable planning, we went to the Alps, a filthy nomadic existence, chased from mountain range to mountain range by huge electrical storms. On the Torre Venezia, the Rosengartenspitze, various Sella Towers, the Cengalo and others whose names I have forgotten, our activities, usually as we approached the summit, were illuminated by brilliant blue-white flashes, accompanied by deafening, echoing crashes and bangs as the air was torn apart feet from us, or so it seemed. Particularly galling was the fact that only I of the party seemed to appreciate the danger posed by this dramatic backdrop, yet despite squatting in the approved manner whenever we stopped on exposed ridges or summits, guess who had the closest shave? The others floated around like they were at a summer fête, ooohing, and aaahing, prodding buzzing ironware and remarking on my rapidity of movement, especially in descent. It got to the stage that, heading for the Cima della Madonna, I hurled myself off a via ferrata rather than face another certain encounter with the flame-grill.

Then, in late summer, we returned to a scorched Britain, sunshine and – joy – no storms. We worked our way up north through *Hard Rock*, ending up on the Ben. Ian, having heard how good Torro was, in his contrary way went for King Kong with John, but Keith and I were happy to take the obvious option. While we had heard that each of Torro's pitches had been climbed without aid, we didn't know of anyone who had actually done a completely free ascent, so we were very pleased with ourselves when we managed it without a great deal of trouble. (Hubris got its just desserts the day after, on The Bat, but that's another story.) Over the years afterwards I remembered the immaculate rock and the airy positions, while the growing reputation of the route for quality reassured me I wasn't being misled by the rosy tint of retrospection. While often speaking of repeating it, typically, I never quite got round to it.

Then 1996 arrived. Despite a promising enough start, my big ideas for the year had foundered on the rocks of shoulder injury, the breakers of employment demands and, most deadly of all, the shifting sandbars of a congenital chronic indolence. My regular partner, Graeme Johnson, was having no better a time of it, although to be fair he had more excuse. Nature has been unkind to Graeme in its distribution of physical gifts, especially when it comes to climbing. Suffice to say that many have remarked on his resemblance to Mr Ed, 'The Talking Horse' (and not only when they see him climb).

I had said to Johnson often enough that he should do Torro. Now, on a glorious July morning we were headed for the Ben and, since I wasn't in

shape to try those routes I still had ambitions for (ever the optimist), it seemed like the perfect opportunity. Graeme agreed that I could lead the pitches I had seconded before, so it would be sort of new to me, and anyway how much would I remember after 20 years? We parked the car and set off across the golf course under a cloudless sky.

The walk up was easier than I expected, perhaps because I'm more familiar with it in winter, in the dark and under a huge pack. Also, for once I was concentrating on my walking technique, deliberately keeping as long a stride as was comfortable and resisting the urge to increase my pace, while making polished and expert use of my Telescopic Walking Pole (for some reason, a source of amusement and indeed embarrassment to my partner). In this way I gradually wore down a pair who had set off in front of me at the dam, obviously all-out to stay ahead, but who were clearly unfamiliar with advanced walking skills. They scuttled off to the side under the pretext of going for a drink.

I never read specialist walking magazines, but I imagine pages devoted to skills and techniques, the walker's equivalent of the jam, crimp, pinch and slap. 'Next week – the three-quarter semi-stride and when to use it.' That's the way things are going. Every pastime is developing its own jargon, literature and specialist accoutrements, even when, basically, there's nothing to it. Darts, for example. What the hell can you say about darts? Something to keep you occupied in the pub when you've run out of conversation (in Johnson's case, about one point five seconds, about as long as it takes him to say: 'Mine's a pint'), but Peter Purves left Blue Peter to become an expert on the subject – now there's a challenge – and what is more, I've seen whole shops dedicated to darts. (OK, one, and it went belly-up in a couple of months, so maybe there is hope after all.) But I digress.

I reached the CIC without stopping and headed back right and up across the slope towards the base of Carn Dearg, pausing at a burn for a drink. Here I waited until Johnson had stopped and just taken off his pack, before casually throwing on my own and striding away again, as you do.

As I approached the foot of the cliff I could see lots of pale, semi-naked bodies milling about at the base of Centurion and anxiously watched to see if any headed towards Torro, but none did and I dropped my sack on the top of a large boulder directly below the first pitch, before going for a short walk.

Carn Dearg is constructed in such a way which, to the climber, makes it almost an erotic experience to gaze on its overlapping slabs, overhung walls and swooping, knife-cut grooves, to touch the compact, finely textured roughness of the beautiful grey andesite. Today the rock was almost white in the glare of the sun and hot to the touch, any moistness confined to the shadows. Grooves and walls leapt skywards. I hopped among the boulders in a delight of anticipation.

The group below Centurion, meanwhile, was busily engaged in the production of white noise. Bodies were dotted around the lower parts of Centurion and King Kong, while others half-queued for their turn to climb. Overseeing the events, or at least dominating them vocally, was a familiar figure, the shrinking violet otherwise known as the CIC custodian. While possessing a presence as dominating as the previous incumbents, the new custodian is (at least for the present) rather less terrifying, the embittering experience of the post not yet having exerted a noticeable effect, although it is surely only a matter of time.

I was surprised to see him there. Not known for his fondness for rock-climbing, he normally sticks to parachuting, golf and suchlike during the summer months. Closer inspection makes the reason for this clear. Adding all his digits together results in barely enough to pick your nose with, the result of extensive winter climbing epics. I began to suspect why so many were gathered with him, suspicions confirmed when I asked his intentions. 'King Kong,' he said, while I tried not to look surprised. Later in the year I examined the CIC route book, reading the laconic entry: 'King Kong. R. Clothier and Guest.' Anyone seeking an explanation for the complicated rope manoeuvres and sea-shanties which (allegedly) punctuated the ascent will be none the wiser for reading these economical few words.

Johnson, meanwhile, had arrived, all teeth and sweat. His sunglasses and sun hat with neck protector gave him an uncanny resemblance to a beach donkey.

After an interminable delay while various creams and lotions were applied, sandwiches eaten, bodily functions indulged and every other excuse for not actually climbing exhausted, I was allowed to set off up the first pitch. A crack led to a groove which steepened up for a few feet, before leaning back to a bit off the vertical. I vaguely remembered finding it quite strenuous, and so was pleased when I was able to hang extravagantly off the steepest part and comfortably place a runner. The moves kept coming at a reasonable, but interesting standard, until I found myself standing on a little pinnacle looking up at a few feet of rather more demanding climbing. Just before I launched out, I spotted a huge flake to the right which led back into the groove above where it eased back a bit. The groove was one of my lasting memories of the route, clean-cut and immaculate. At its top I belayed and brought up Johnson.

He led off, a bit hesitantly I thought, but I bit my tongue. I would save the encouragement for when it was needed. Eventually, he arrived at the top of a little groove where I knew he would be at the right edge of a slab, across which he had to make a descending traverse. He fiddled around, down, up, down. Up.

'Ye just go down across the slab, with yer feet at the lip,' I called helpfully.

No reply. 'Huh,' I thought, 'miserable git.' Then he disappeared from view, one of the ropes dropping and forming a dramatic arc in space below

the slab, its upper end indicating progress as my partner made his way across. Climbing continued in fits and starts. Meanwhile, I had been joined by the first of a party of three Englishmen, who brought his mates up climbing together Alpine-style, a few feet apart. I started to get more twitchy about our rate of progress.

When it was my turn it was harder than I recalled getting to the edge of the slab, but there, right where I wanted it, was a lovely big peg with an eye big enough to thread a backrope through. The slab was dramatic but easy enough and at its far end I made a rising traverse over the void to Johnson, uncomfortably squatting in a little eyrie. 'Eh, Ah think the belay's up a wee bit, but Ah wasn't sure . . . so Ah stopped here,' he said, apologetically.

Sure enough, a couple of moves up and I landed in a spacious alcove between overhangs. I directed a withering stare back at the crestfallen Johnson. The route continued out up and right, and so did I – or at least tried to. Descending after not finding the holds I was certain must be lurking not far away, I very nearly came off. Giving thanks to the tremendous position (it having prevented anyone witnessing my close shave), I went up again and this time nearly lost a hand as it fell into a huge jug. The route continued out right, on a slab sandwiched between overhangs, directly above the lower pitches and in a brilliant position. I had entirely forgotten this pitch from before and could only think I must have been worried about leading the overhang above. I was really enjoying myself, and continued up to a little stance on the traverse line of The Bullroar.

Johnson joined me in reasonable time, although now and again he would pause for no apparent reason. 'Just up there,' or 'Aye, that's the line,' or 'Ah went left at that point,' I would say, by way of encouragement, but he said nothing in reply. When he reached me he looked up at the overlap above, the crux of the route, then silently started taking gear off my belt.

'It's not nearly as bad as it looks,' I said. 'Ah can't remember the details but Ah do remember finding it quite straightforward.'

Johnson grunted but looked strangely un reassured and kept removing all the spare gear at my waist.

I had also been watching the progress of a pair on The Bullroar. The leader was now approaching us across the slab, his last runner a long way behind him. He didn't seem exactly uncomfortable, but had a minor case of that rather sloppy footwork I always find disturbing. You know, throw your foot out, maybe pedal a bit until it sticks, but keep it moving on the hold, in a strange, spastic sort of way as you transfer your weight, concentrating all the while on looking anywhere except where to put your feet. 'They'll look after themselves' is the unspoken assumption. Advanced cases of this condition can be observed regularly at indoor climbing walls. Sufferers are invariably incredibly enthusiastic and incredibly useless. (I am told I display similar tendencies myself under stress.)

As Johnson prepared to leave, the team following us piled up on the slab below. Meanwhile, the man on The Bullroar reached across and got his

hands on the holds below my belay ledge, and I relaxed. He had looked vaguely uncomfortable and I was very aware of the enormous pendulum he would take if he came off. 'Ye can get a runner in here,' I said, indicating the crack behind me, but he ignored me and fiddled something into a lower crack. As he pulled his rope up to clip the runner his right foot, which he had carelessly thrown sideways onto a little nubbin and forgotten about, reminded him of its existence as it shot off its hold. For one glorious, thrilling moment I thought he was going to follow it and describe a monster arc in between the overhangs, preferably head- first, but he was just too low for me to give him a discreet little shove with my foot and, unfortunately, his remaining point and a half of contact proved just enough. After clipping into his runner with some urgency he headed away, continuing his traverse, feet still flailing. The rest of us pulled faces. Finally, Johnson started off up, not at all cheered by the close shave he had just witnessed, (but then I've always thought he lacked the killer instinct).

After he left I was joined at the stance by the guy who had led the first pitch. We waited as Johnson slowly inched the rope out, pausing frequently to look up at the overhang, before apparently remembering why he was there and making another move, or maybe taking just another look at the overhang.

Despite my calm and agreeable nature, I could feel the irritation level rising. Here we were, two Scots on a Scottish route, climbing more slowly than three Englishmen. Johnson had climbed harder stuff than this with his hands tied behind his back. What was the problem?

'Where does it go here?' The tenor of his voice told me that, incredibly, Johnson thought he might be off route. The overlap meanwhile, firmly remained directly above him, neon signs flashing 'This way.'

'Just up there a wee bit, then on to the upper slab to the overlap, Ah dunno, just follow the holds.' This advice strangely didn't seem to help much and he moved up hesitantly, taking what seemed like an age. From time to time I would offer encouragement. 'Whut's the problem, ye're on the easy bit', 'Ah think ye'll find that hold's big enough to bivouac on', 'Ah was hoping ti get off this while Ah still had some teeth,' and other words carefully considered to nourish a positive mental attitude in my hesitant partner, but to depressingly little effect. Finally, he reached the overhang. Here an extended session of moving up and down, fiddling in runners, fiddling out runners, then fiddling them in again, resulted in a skirt of quickdraws dangling from the overhang. I could see it droop perceptibly under the weight of ironmongery. Then, before you could say: 'Well, that took ye a bloody age, ye useless sack o' bones,' he was up and clipping into a 0 RP, the only thing he had left. I climbed up in a high dudgeon, slowly relaxing as the enjoyment of the position and the feeling of movement helped me back into a better mood, ostentatiously casual for the benefit of any onlookers.

The next couple of pitches climbed deteriorating ground to a belay below the upper crux on Centurion. Someone carrying an enormous sack was completely failing to make any progress on this – despite liberal assistance from the rope – to his leader above. I wondered how long he had been on the route. The sack was big enough to carry food and equipment for a week, and at the current rate of progress might just see him to the top. I wondered if he was military. The gear and the build reminded me of something from Bravo Two Zero. I wisely resisted the temptation to hurl abuse. Eventually, with an extra hard pull from the rope he got to a hold big enough for even him to heave up on, and the pitch was free for me to set off. It was a return to interesting climbing and led to a belay on the upper slab where Torro headed back left.

By this time Johnson, the crux long behind him, was climbing at a rate significantly faster than mould growth and before I knew it he was setting off on the last pitch. He stepped off the lower end of a tapering slab into a steep groove just out of my line of vision, lit the blue touchpaper and reappeared seconds later at the top of the crag. I remembered being pleased getting to the top of this all those years ago, slightly cramped, but recalled nothing of the climbing. In the event it was a steep corner-groove and I chose a horizontal layback, declining the option of bridging holds to the right. Then I was on the ledge beside Johnson and it was all over. A brilliant route, every bit as good as I remembered it.

As I passed the CIC hut on the way down I turned and looked back up into Coire na Ciste. The slopes around the hut were dappled where long fingers of shadow ran down from the crenellations of the Castle and Castle Ridge as the summer sun dipped to the north-west behind the mountain, with the hut itself bathed in the late afternoon light. For once, the foreground view caught my eye rather than the huge cliffs which normally dominated the scene from this point, the lighting lending a texture to the slopes I had never seen before and, I pondered ruefully, at my current levels of activity might well never see again. And on this cheery thought I turned my face to the north and set off down after the stumbling, ungainly and sun-reddened figure of Johnson.

Much later, a few days after an intemperate outburst at what I considered another display of depressing incompetence from Johnson (given I knew of what he was capable), this time on a wintry Cobbler, my name apparently came up in a carload bound for Alien Rock, during a heated rant on the unpleasantness of climbing with certain people. My informant revelled in telling me how Johnson, his homely face disfigured by bulging blood vessels, spluttered his denunciation messily through tombstone teeth. 'See that miserable, torn-faced, ignorant wee rat Duncan, he thinks ye're just there to hold his ropes – he never lets ye enjoy yerself, it's all go, go, go. Ah kept stopping to savour the climbing on Torro and all Ah got was an earful of abuse. Bastard!'

UNDISCOVERED SCOTLAND

By John Mackenzie

I SUSPECT it all depends where you live; if for instance, you are stuck in North Rona then new routes are an essential if you still desire to rock climb. However, if living in the megalopolises of the Midlands then, unless you are an E6 leader, any new route has to be an unusual occasion. Fortunately, Scotland, particularly the North-west, has still untapped sources of hidden enjoyment, spirited away in unlikely or remote areas that mainly tempt the cogniscenti or the local.

It is a fact that climbers are either sheep or goats; you are either an inveterate guide book ticker of graded lists (where an easy E3 has more kudos than a hard E2), or you are drawn to the unknown where anything is possible; a classic route or a classic disappointment being but end poles of the likely spectrum.

It is still (just) possible to find not merely new routes but sizeable new crags. Of course, the modern concept of a 'crag' has been considerably reduced in size since the early pioneers found the Triple Buttress of Beinn Eighe virgin, but that has to be expected. Inland, the opportunities are perhaps fewer than on the sandstone sea cliffs in the far north, but that too is not exactly unexpected. With all the little bumps of rock scattered around northern Scotland, sometimes they can form into surprisingly big crags that might have been known about, even talked about openly, but never actually investigated.

Bob, the keenest 63-year-old still to be found in these parts, summed it all up. 'Never, ever, dismiss a crag from a distance.'

Go hillwalking, potter around on those dampish days, search funny little nooks and crannies and be insatiably curious; walk up to that "little" crag and find out its true scale. If you find something in excess of 150ft., then jump for joy, for that is quite a reasonable find by today's standards. Study maps – which are actually pretty inaccurate at the scale we need – look at geological notes, get a "feel" for the surrounding countryside and, almost certainly, there will be something worth climbing.

So much for the preliminaries; this is not a boring old "how-to" article but a pleasing reminiscence of recent finds. As I said, Bob is keen and since he and Fay are also hillwalkers then it is not unknown for the phone to ring at about 10pm on a Sunday evening. To give a somewhat shortened and sanitised version of such a discovery the little conversation below is not too far out bar the expletives.

Bob. 'I think I have discovered a new crag, you will go absolutely ape when you see it, your eyes will be out on stalks, you'll be frothing at the mouth and God, you should see the lines, and . . .'

Me. 'Oh, aye, well where is it then and does it look climbable?'

Bob. '... it is, seriously, bloody amazing; huge great crack lines and corners, at least 200ft. high on average and really steep Torridonian sandstone. It makes Stone Valley (another new crag) seem really piddly.'

Me. 'It's not *that* crag is it – you know the one you can see from the opposite side of the bay, the one which Kev and Graham have talked about?'

Bob. 'It is – I went down as far as I could and it really grows from that amazing slab-and-groove sequence to vertical walls of perfect-looking clean sandstone, not the grotty stuff you often find high up in the hills.'

Me. 'When can we go, the forecast for this week looks good – warm and reasonably dry. But how about the walk-in, it's *miles*?'

Bob. 'I have made inquiries, we have a boat for this Wednesday.'

Me. 'Stuff the office, I'll delegate ...'

Now, that's keen! To cut the misery short, the crag in question is the one "everyone" has talked about opposite the bay from Ardmair, the vertical edge that can be seen but reveals practically nothing. The approach is either by boat or by an hour and a half's walk from the friendly environs of Blughasary, the estate which welcomes visitors with such signs as No Parking, Stalking in progress, Private – Keep Out. This is all augmented by barbed wire, padlocked gates and miles of fence. Fortunately, not at all typical of the usual West Highland estate. For a first defence in reaching this crag, it's a pretty effective one.

The next line of defence is the old posties' track which follows the crest of the coastal cliffs below Ben More Coigeach towards Polbain. It is not exactly easy to follow and requires a certain faith in what is beyond. For all that, it is pleasant enough in dry weather with a great outlook to the west and south. Conversely, the "easy" sea approach depends on how well you know someone with a boat and if you know where to land, which was far from obvious on our first of many sorties.

Dreadnaught.

The aluminium-hulled, flattish-bottomed, ex-assault vessel heads straight across the bay in about 10 minutes. The vertical edge, of indeterminate size from the far shore, now grows. Small dots can be seen as fully grown Scots pines clinging to perilous ledges. The cliff rears in vertical format out of the sea and turns a corner to the left. We chug on a bit more and then that intriguing edge shows why Bob was frothing and foaming.

The vertical edge reveals a long red wall stretching gradually uphill, seamed with corners and cracks and an overhanging gully complete with chockstone

Me. 'Jings, are you sure it's virgin?'

Bob. (Manically pointing with insane gleam in eye). ‘Yup, and it looks so clean that we’ll do everything “on sight”.’

Me. That’s the line (a superb shallow corner arcing up the wall to the left of the vertical edge, ending in an impending wall). Let’s go for that.’

We landed that time, and indeed every subsequent time, at a tiny inlet with a small waterfall foaming down its left side. We leapt ashore on to a boulder then scrambled up the bed of the stream to find knee-high heather running up steeply to the crag. We executed a vertiginous traverse above the lower cliffs to reach the base of our chosen line, the heather dropping alarmingly to the edge which simply keeled over out of sight to the waves below.

From here the stature of the cliff was more apparent and our proposed line began to the left of a curious flange, to reveal three short, clean walls leading to the base of the long and seemingly wet corner. The overhanging wall above looked blankish and I think we must have been a trifle optimistic to assume that “on sight, every time” would be possible. The three short walls, though looking harder, were no more than 4b on perfect clean sandstone. A fine stance bottomed the corner, which initially looked merely steep as compared to gently overhanging with two major bulges.

The right-angled corner gave a wonderful pitch of “classical stemming”; starting up a rather off-putting vertical section of pale whitish yellow sandstone which was more akin to that of Harrison’s Rocks. Fortunately, this soon reverted back to the simply splendid solid stuff above. It was sufficiently awkward over the bulges, but also a reasonably protected feature that, at least for most routes, made blank sections more perceived than real. However, it was wet, but the rock’s perfect friction negated this to the point of a mild inconvenience. It had a hardish exit, if I remember correctly, and the stance was perched below a grim-looking overhang of the yellow sandstone with the sea directly below.

Pitch three was the crux, the overhang being harder, bigger and more reachy for rounded holds than either of us liked. It led beyond the overhang to a gangway that in turn took us up a crack which sported both holds and protection where neither should have existed according to the usual laws of Torridonian sandstone. This feature ended at a cave which could have made a superb stance, but instead easier climbing led out right to where a belay could be taken with a view of what was above.

Invariably, caves in this crag are made out of a brown sandstone with innumerable frets and filigrees of fragile stone that form interstices between the frets. Such rock we called “chocolate”, for reasons that should be obvious. Above was a fine little corner that led, without difficulty, to the top of the crag. Thus was born *Dreadnaught*, a worthy

E3 5c that despite a rather brutish crux gave nothing but elegance for its entire 250ft.

A second route that day climbed an equally fine corner system near the top left end of the crag, again with a fierce-looking overhang that barred all possible exits. Expecting a fight, the beautifully neat traverse under and to its right belied logical appearances, while the exit up an overhanging crack was the crux at HVS 5a. Again, well-protected and much, much easier than we initially thought. It had given 130ft of splendid quality and though we called it *Buccaneer*, a suitably nautical yet piratical name, it was, in fact, the second ascent of the route Graham Little and Kev Howett climbed in 1995 and named *The Great Escape* – a name totally appropriate for the moves under and around the top overhangs.

We had, it subsequently turned out, been fortunate. Terrible midges had driven off the intrepid duo of Kevin and Graham, thus denying them the opportunity of spying the true size and extent of the crag. This information naturally came at a much later date when we tried to piece together any early history of the crag, not an easy job and still possibly incomplete. Unless routes are written up, they will get lost within the seas of myth that surround such areas.

Keelhaul.

The longest route on the crag was obviously a sea-level ascent straight up the right wall of the crag's seeming "edge". Abandoned by the boat at low tide in our little bay, we descended right and down to the beach boulders, climbed a steep but easy chimney, traversed a grass ledge and descended back to sea level. Crawling through an amazing slot or tunnel cut right through the rock, pushing gear ahead of us, we then crossed an overhung and impending bay of some size, the base, in fact, of the corner of *Dreadnaught* 100ft. above. Another little sea-level traverse on small holds took us to the tiny wave-washed platform at the foot of where we wanted to be. Convoluted it might be, but even this approach was fully in keeping with the ambience of the cliff.

Climbing up honeycombed rock to a cave then moving up right to an exposed edge, resulted in a lonely pitch that seemed miles from any contact. It finished up three typically rounded mantels, quite unprotected in this case, but no more than 4c. An impressive stance on crumbly rock below a narrow chimney bordered an overhanging red and yellow wall of no great soundness, or at least so it looked to us. I think the true scale and atmosphere of the place was at last sinking in. We felt as much explorers as climbers and wisely took the tight chimney rather than a tempting, but bald-looking wall to its right. A very long wandering pitch of around 140ft. led us up shorter corners on increasingly good rock and in a less

intimidating position. All this ended below the finest part of this seaward face, sound sandstone, whistle-clean and a choice of tempting groove and corner lines.

The central line, a deep corner groove, was chosen, and two excellent pitches resulted on rock that never went above 4c, was full in the sun and well protected; indeed what more could we possibly have wanted on a day like this? After all, it does not have to be E something-or-other to be thoroughly enjoyable. So, despite wanderings lower down, the top pitches made up for what had turned out to be a 400ft. route at an easier grade than we were anticipating.

Apart from the nasty overhang on *Dreadnaught*, nothing had been quite what it had appeared, the rock flattered and cajoled the climber, we had been seduced and now were quite laid back regarding future difficulties. This happy state of affairs did not last. The ascent of the overhanging cracks left of *Dreadnaught* which resulted in two fine pitches was not without incident.

Expecting (despite the obviously overhanging rock) the cracks to be more reasonable than they appeared we chose a line midway between the start of *Dreadnaught* and the overhanging groove to the right of the gully. Since this groove had again given two surprising pitches of 4c, contrary to what could have been in store, there was every confidence that the cracks to the right again would be a fine morning's route to be followed by something more leisurely in the afternoon. The first pitch, overhanging at its start, was tricky but good, taking in the best climbing at 5b, initially pulling on colossal jugs to a thin landing on a sloping shelf, followed by a traverse right to some interesting thin cracks that provided some 5b climbing to the halfway ledge.

As we shuffled left along the ledge, the straight crack-line above suddenly seemed a rather different ball game. In fact, the crack more than made up for our cavalier attitude. It was sharply overhanging, wide, rounded at the edges, had no rests and gear could only be placed in position from a "barn-door" style layback. The 'Och it will be all right' dismissal of lower down was now a classic sandstone nightmare of desperate laybacks, barn-doors into space and wilting everything. How on earth do you grade something like that? Fortunately, the remainder of the pitch was merely vertical and full of wonderful holds that led out right to the edge of all things; all the position you could want without the difficulty.

A rather nasty but easier (E2 5c) crack was the splendid corner line to the left of the overhanging gully. This gave three pitches of very varied contrast in style and rock. At least it looked hard and off-width in places, so optically we were now more prepared. Armed with colossal nuts, huge

hexes that hung around one's neck like so many albatrosses, and a double rack of large Friends, it was, forsooth, difficult to leave the ground.

An initial, scrappy pitch led up a short, wet chimney then heather-bashed to the foot of the main corner. This began with a very free right-angled vertical section on the pale yellow rock that in this case enhanced the climbing rather than detracted from it. Wide 5a bridging, with protection from one of the "albatross" nuts, took us to a free slab stance below the depressingly overhanging off-width crack above. At least it was a corner, so it should provide more purchase than a blank wall. Armed with the massive nuts and Friends that flailed like a thresher on high octane, all the stories you ever heard about wild bridging, arm bars, knee-and-foot jams suddenly came true. The huge nuts simply rolled down the back of the sandy crack until they caught on a hidden protuberance of unseen quality while the Friends became enemies and if it wasn't for a hidden nub for a foot I think we would still be there now. As it was, the emergence onto a fine flat stance was akin to that of a cork from a bottle, with a pair of grovelling climbers licking their various wounds.

The crack above had now deepened into a fine chimney, almost cavernous in appearance. Easy at first, it provided a little resistance near the end where exposed and not brilliantly-protected climbing *à cheval* up the edge led to a final wall which in turn gave a pleasing and delicate slab to finish. In all, it was about 230ft. of climbing that varied from utter graunch to fancy footwork with, most importantly, the rock being not so powdery as first feared. Certainly, memories of the well-named *Keelhaul* will linger.

Pure Gold.

Other routes came and went but we had avoided a fierce-looking wall that lay to the right of the corners where we had climbed our supposed *Buccaneer* and its companions. A heather rake led to this wall and, once there, it was the classic proof that nothing should be dismissed until noses are rubbed up to it. Between 100ft. and 140ft. high it was bounded on the right by a fierce flanged crack that warned of more terrible struggles and upside-down moves, but turned out to be a hardish VS. Turning the wall to its left, its appearance could not be more enticing – solid red rock of immaculate quality and devoid of vegetation, tiptoed into sinuous curves and half-hidden suggestions of a promise of holds. It was difficult to gauge grades when so little information was released, only upward progress would tell.

Perhaps appropriately, the first foray took the wall up its centre. At 80° it was less steep than most of the climbing farther right, but the rough, rounded rock would require a more subtle approach. In the story so far I have deliberately avoided mentioning who led what and when, as it was,

in truth, a joint effort. However, this was different in that it was very much a leader's route, one long pitch up into the blankness with absolutely nothing except faith in what had gone before.

Bob, fired up if a trifle nervous, launched over a starting bulge and committed himself to what lay above. I don't really know who was feeling the more apprehensive. Had we at last bitten off more than we could chew? His progress, despite my forebodings, was steady. He began to rave about the quality and the hidden edges that, to me, simply did not exist.

After some time, he topped out, obviously more than happy and eager for me to appreciate what was evidently something rather special. The result was a truly superb EI, just about 5b and following a hidden series of agreeable surprises; holds that were invisible from just below turned out to be good and the position, friction and sheer quality of the climbing could not be bettered on the crag, despite it being only one pitch long. Definitely one of those surprising pitches that, in effect, sum up all that rock climbing should be about, a touchstone in more ways than one.

Though somewhat poorer in quality, the nearby black streak that poured down the sandstone to the right of Bob's *Pure Gold* was too good to miss. This was my turn at the imponderable face and, as if to reassure, the moves up the initial overhang were exceptionally well endowed with holds. Naturally, it could not last. The holds and protection ran out more or less simultaneously and I was faced with a series of 5c moves at the point farthest from rather marginal protection 15ft. below. The rock, of course, was flawlessly perfect, the friction good, but what holds existed formed exiguous scoops of a horribly-sloping nature and the climbing, if it was going to be done at all, was best done quickly. Which it was, somewhat heart in mouth, but oh! what rock, sun, position, flaky failure or fall would be entirely my own fault but as it was, the executed sequence went smoothly and arrived at holds and protection in abundance, as if the crag had merely held its breath for a while before resuming its normal indulgence. Easier climbing lay above, still good, but the memories are of those halting, serious, positions where a fall was unthinkable.

The impending corner well to the right of this "immaculate" wall "went" too, despite teasing us with visions of overhangs and rounded cracks. *Hit and Run* gave two pitches of relative ease at EI, cutting through the blank walls on either side. The start had been reached by an exposed traverse across heather shelves that led to a nicely-positioned eyrie below the corner with a sizeable drop below. The slightly overhanging corner, complete with the usual bulges, provided a crux that gave wide strenuous bridging, a hoot of an overhang at the top and an exposed stance. This was followed by a ridiculously easy traverse right above this roof, a section that from below looked overhanging and blank, but led to huge pocket

holds and so to the top. Though perhaps it epitomised the climbing here, it was the day we did it that was memorable. Faultless blue skies, no wind, a late October day with sun angling down huge shafts that illuminated Isle Martin and then the Outer Isles as the day wore on.

Climbing is not about tick lists really, or grades, though it can be of endless amusement to compare someone else's opinion of a route with one's own. To me, it's about places like this and the afterglow of memories, sometimes good and sometimes bad. Of course, we could have ended up with a cliff of the "usual" sandstone, tons of vertical rubbish swathed in clinging vegetation and not something more akin to gritstone at its best. In fact I had looked at the pinnacle and walls a mile back along the coast towards Blughasary, but was repulsed by the sight of crumbling crannies, tottering spires and maroon-coloured walls of disintegrating tot, as the Camus Mor cliffs so easily could have been, but were, thank God, not.

We went to other places too, exploration up on Breabag with moveable handholds of quartzite, lonely, remote and far from humankind, to the almost roadside at Stone Valley with Blyth, Graeme and Ian, filling in the gaps which turned out to be wider than had been previously thought. Later on, as the weather turned cold and the days short, we re-appraised the walls left of the road beyond the cliffs of Ardmail and found the excellent *Steel Spider* on Morning Crag, a nice complement to the routes on the nearby Evening Wall, strenuously overhanging but revealing hidden surprises, all pleasant, *en route*. But it was Camus Mor that really inspired, a hidden gem that, like so much in this area, needed a hands-on approach which repaid the effort of discovering it a hundredfold. As if any advice were needed, if in doubt, just go and look; you have nothing to lose but your prejudices.

Apologia

While in no way wishing to deny any, or all of the nefarious deeds described in the above article, I do, however, wish to plead NOT GUILTY to the literary effluvia flowing from his pen. It is his and his alone.

From the article members will picture me as some sort of crumbly on speed. 'Manically pointing with insane gleam in eye.' I was brought up to believe that it was rude to point. The gleam – sun on the specs! I have never used the word Yup. I am not a cowboy. As to the frothing at the mouth, this is more likely to be a case of senile dribble.

In defence of the article, I would like to say that John has rather understated the many hours of pure pleasure that the Camus Mor cliffs gave us. That we could have all this, to ourselves, in this day and age is just a wonder. Perhaps a reward for the frustrations of being faithful enough to seek our climbing in Scotland. May I wish you all that I wish myself – warm sun, dry rock, and a gentle breeze.

Bob Brown.

EDGE OF EMOTION

By Colwyn Jones

@%&!...(expletive deleted.) There was a white sling above me. Someone had climbed the route before. But why leave a sling at the top of the first pitch except to abseil? I made the last moves to the stance and smiled as I looked closer. It was bleached white where exposed, but deep in the rock it was green. We had used it to retreat back down on to the snow six months earlier. Perhaps the sun does shine in Scotland after all!

Knowing UV light and nylon don't mix, I threaded a new sling, clipped them both and shouted: 'Safe.' My long-suffering second answered that she was cold and didn't really want to climb. To be honest, I could see why. The wind was picking up and the watery sun shining through the trees when we had awoken was long gone. The first pitch was a series of tenuous, sloping grooves which, despite my attentions with an ice axe, were still rather vegetated. She had calmly watched my slow progress to the foot of the wall then the explosion of activity after the two solid nut placements were found. The struggle to stand upright on the sloping footholds, followed by the ignominious retreat to turn the bulging wall on the left. That had been six months ago and I was impressed by the density of crampon scratches I now found. Today I had rested pathetically on a tight rope determined to get over the bulge, before submitting to the final humiliation of pulling up on the gear.

I knew her comment was born of long, cold waiting, more rhetoric than protest. I took the ropes in and shouted that she could safely turn the wall on the left protected by the yellow rope. Experience had taught me compromise and while hanging like a baby in a spacewalker I had unclipped the yellow rope allowing her to follow along the Grade 4/5 mixed pitch we had torqued and struggled up earlier in the year. As always she climbed gracefully, easily and fluently and was warmer, if no happier, on the stance.

Yo-yoing down to collect the gear, I still couldn't get over the bulge without pulling on gear. 'What do you expect with that big sack on,' was the curt response to my confession of failure. But it was no rebuke, she had carefully, and thoughtfully, handed me the excuse I would need later when explaining the use of 'points of aid', to the lads.

We had been here before. Last time we had abseiled back down Crampoff Corner, a Grade 3 winter climb, but now the beautiful edge soared away above us. This was why I had returned. Six months earlier, unable to summon enough courage to continue my *à cheval* progress 20ft above my last runner, I had retreated. Now I relished the exposure, pulling on the edge and smearing on the slab. The moss was dry and easily brushed off. There was also plenty of gear now, but it had to be arranged so one rope protected a slide down the slab, the other a fall over the edge into Crampoff Corner. I had reached my last high point where the edge suddenly rears up. By standing on a slot where I'd placed a big hex, which might stop me going over the edge, I reached up, looking for rugosities on the slab to my left. Above, the moss was thick and overgrown where I'd unsuccessfully tried to get an

ice-axe pick to stick in it. Finally, I unearthed some knobblies on the slab and standing on one, straightened up and was able to reach over the worst of the moss. 'Leave it for the next guy,' I thought.

From here the edge was exposed and perfect. The protection was good and I moved confidently up to a roomy, sheltered stance with a convenient spike belay, where the skulls, bones and feathers of small birds showed peregrine falcons had been there before me.

Ann climbed steadily up the edge and after some hesitation passed the steepening and was soon pulling her gloves back on next to me. She still hadn't forgiven me for making her climb in the cold, but didn't try to extinguish the twinkle in my eye.

The next short pitch followed the edge to easy ground and that was that, a fine route I thought. We moved up and were stopped by another slab. I moved left to bridge into a corner, which was perhaps the fifth pitch of Turfinator (Grade 2) we had climbed a year earlier. From there you just bridged up as far as you could. Stopping to excavate a nut placement or push a Friend into the slots which appeared in the side of the corner. An easy pitch but in keeping with the route.

At the block belay at the top I had spied another slab off to the left. This would be the final pitch of what was turning into a classic. From the foot of the slab I started up a left trending, thin groove to a shallow, vertical crack. After a few moves I became increasingly aware that the nut placement I had just excavated was now at least 10m below me. I made another thin and tenuous move up the increasingly vegetated crack. It was here I stopped and started wishing there was a peg. If this had been the Alps there would be a lovely solid peg nearby. I also knew if I found one then ours would not be a first ascent, but suddenly, I didn't care.

It was then that my watchful second pointed out a small edge on my right which I hadn't seen. I could undercling it and quickly stuffed a No. 2 Friend into the gap. Above, there was a six-inch-wide ramp going right but that was still two tricky moves above me. I checked the Friend and noted that the under cling moved slightly. I got a nut in higher up the crack but it was just as poor. Nothing else for it so I just continued up and after a couple of fraught moves was on the ramp. Halfway up the ramp, and by now 20m above my last decent bit of gear, I found the crack I had been praying for. A Friend slipped in, followed by a big wire just for good measure. The slab seemed to gently exhale, relax and sit back a few degrees. At the top of the ramp it was left again to a small, vertical overlap and after pulling a few holds off, but placing some reasonable gear, I mantled onto the summit plateau howling in wild delight. The wind blasted over the top of the slab and after finding a couple of unsatisfactory nut placements, I quickly brought my second up.

She was smiling now!

(Edge of Emotion, Ann's Buttress, Coire nan Gall, Carn Liath. 165m, HVS 5a (2 points of aid). First Ascent 28/9/97, C. Jones, A. MacDonald)

WHILE ROME BURNED

By Andrew Fraser

HOPES, aspirations, dreams. All of us have a tick list, climbers perhaps more than most. I would bet that your average climber's hit list probably includes a fair share of recognised 'classic' routes, well-kent faces whose invitations stare from the climbing glossies. No doubt it will also include a bit of peer pressure, routes to steal a march on, or merely keep up with the pack. After all, a well chosen route can, with the right amount of ingenuity and subterfuge, inflict enough psychological damage to keep your reputation intact for that little bit longer, à la Patey. So far it's all nice and logical.

On the other hand, there are parts of some tick lists which deny easy categorisation, sane or otherwise. Raeburn's Gully on Dumyat in the Ochils for example, a foul, vegetated, conglomerate but otherwise irresistible chimney¹. One of my own secret (till now) peccadilloes has been Beta Route on the Orion Face in summer. The mere thought of installing a fishing garden gnome in the middle of this Big Bad Ben obscurity fills me with unaccountable glee. The only things that have stopped me have been the weight of the gnome and the fact that no one would join me.

The reason that these routes stick out like sore thumbs is that they probably reveal the character of the climber. On the one hand, you have the likes of Don Whillans whose uncompromising and direct routes reflected his personality, a veritable Clint Eastwood of spaghetti climbing. At the opposite end of the spectrum are 'obscure ways traced by even more obscure men'². Beta Route with the gnome would obviously fall into that category. In fact, I have a nagging doubt that most of my new routes would fall into that category. Not by any fault of the routes of course, but by deviousness or fatal obscurity of the character producing them.

All this goes some way to explain why the Nose of Sgurr an Fhìdhleir in Coigach was in pole position on the grid for nearly 15 years. An early picture in Poucher's *Scottish Peaks* initially inspired, as did the chance encounter one misty day on Queensberry with an old chap who had been involved in one of the early debacles on the route (they got halfway up then unroped, each climber wandering about on those decomposing grass terraces in search of an escape, each managing eventually to get down safely – the thought doesn't bear thinking about). Later, a first visit to Coigach and the sight of that shark's fin of the Nose, incongruous even among the weirdos of Coigach and Assynt, was enough to hook me. Add to that the facts that I knew of no-one who had done the route, that its grade was uncertain (old Scottish V.S.), and that the route description included the following glittering lures:

'The climax to a series of attempts spread over the last century, and a milestone in the development of climbing in the North-west Highlands.'

'The difficulties are prolonged and serious. Dry conditions are recommended though a cross-wind on the exposed upper section could be intimidating,³ or:—

'The first 500ft. consists of a cluster of sandstone slabs interspersed by grass and black moss-filled grooves. Above that for another 1000ft. rears a stone Leviathan, broad at the base and gradually tapering and steepening to a great prow, overhanging at the top. A *Titanic*; it is like looking at the massive bow of a ship advancing on you as you row frantically out of the way.'⁴

The years passed by and for a number of reasons my date with the Great White Whale remained distant. It wasn't that I avoided Coigach, quite the contrary in fact. The Achnahaird campsite and the Fuaran bar became regular haunts. Stac Pollaidh was plundered for a number of new routes, obscure or devious. The Reiff sea-cliffs were discovered by us (though the Journal a few months later revealed that every man and his dog had already climbed there).

No, the reason was Dickson. I could forgive the Fuaran epics which he dragged me into, even the 1p.m. barbecued breakfasts when alpine starts had been promised (resulting in most of our routes on the Stac being climbed in near darkness). He was a master at disparaging the best laid Fhìdhleir plans, and of scaring likely candidates. Hard men were subjected to his bar room tales of vertical grass, Patagonian winds, the sunbathing potential of Reiff and other ploys. By the time he had finished the route had a large sign on it, beloved of ancient cartographers 'Here Be Dragons'. Worse, he had a repertoire of (admittedly true) tales about my exploits on turf, loose rock, etc. My sanity in proposing such a deadly heap of choss was obviously in question. And so it went on, for years.

Enter Kevin and Ann, relative initiates to the climbing game. A September weekend at Achnahaird, two days on Stac Pollaidh, the Fhìdhleir still soaking after a summer of rain. Hardly even worth Dickson's while to flex his bar room skills on the Fhìdhleir. He thought that I had forgotten, but obsessions aren't like that. Ask Captain Ahab (or the whale for that matter).

And so a glorious third day; Kevin and myself heading for Cul Beag, while Ann and Mephistopheles went to Reiff. A short day, though I toyed with the idea of taking the corporate dinner with us, just in case they got back earlier and got too peckish. Still, female company demands a certain amount of decorum and surely Ann would stop him from eating the lot. Dinner stayed in the tent.

Cul Beag's crags didn't really look up to much, and it would be an awful hassle to turn the car on that single track road. It would also be a shame to

waste such a day on something minor. With such twisted logic the choice was obvious, a wee look at the Fhìdhleir. After all, if time was short or if it was wet we could surely find something on the rubbish tip of Beinn an Eoin.

There is a quote that the only thing worse than not achieving your life's ambition is to achieve it. Underneath the Nose, eating a late lunch, that maxim seemed unlikely to apply. The Nose was much steeper than I had imagined. It was also somewhat wet, although the wettest part, a waterfall corner high on the face, was obviously off route. In short, it had all the attraction of a long starved Jabberwocky, drooling at the prospect of dinner. Nor did the time, now 3 o'clock, lend much encouragement.

On the other hand, I finally had a willing accomplice. It might be another 15 years till I had another, particularly if Dickson got his hands on them. Anyway, the nature of such obsessions is that they are oblivious to rational arguments and logic. They draw you, like water to a sponge (not a bad analogy as it turned out), Captain Ahab to the Fiddler.

The route, for those unfamiliar with it, goes up some miles of grooves to arrive at the Pale Slabs. These lead, with increasing difficulty, to the final nose. Above that, the rock gives up any pretence and the turf takes over, fortunately at an easier angle.

After 15 years I had expected to be disappointed. Not a bit of it. As a counter argument to Dickson I had always argued that as the lower pitches had been climbed in the primeval twilight of climbing history, then they must be piss-easy. A perfectly sound argument – when drunk! Fat chance, the rock was wet, the grass greasy and the climbing surprisingly engrossing. Pitch after 4b pitch followed one another up the grooves to arrive on the tilted grass beneath the first slab. With no belay in sight I continued up the steepening grass, decomposing steps of wet, slimy, unprotected mud. I reflected that it was perfect terrain for hobnailers and Norfolk jackets, not to mention the odd few pints of 'Mummery's Blood'.

Having effectively bypassed the first Pale Slab, it was time for the second one, climbed from the 'Hansom', a luxurious ledge and the perfect spot for a bivi if ever I saw one. Number Two slab provided 4c moves on soaking wet sandstone, not one of my specialities. Unusually, I got up, to land on another fine ledge beneath the crux, 5a slab.

All this had taken some time, entirely due to the inclement conditions and nothing whatsoever with the fact that my climbing has been referred to as 'The Abominable Slowman'. However, even Kevin was beginning to doubt my sanity and was indicating the need for speed in the face of approaching darkness. Fortunately, I had a trump card in knowing that there would be a full moon to shine directly onto the face, and with not a cloud in the sky, moonlight was a certainty.

The crux slab was strangely dry. Above, I remembered John Mackenzie's article where they had been led too far right into the Homeric epic of the Tower Finish. So I went leftwards, some lovely climbing on fine, sound rock, the sort of stuff that flatters your climbing abilities. Given the state of my climbing abilities that meant that it couldn't possibly be the real 5a finish and I was off route. My peregrinations had also led me over the steepest part of the face, making for an unattractive abseil option in the now near complete darkness ⁵. I belayed in a wet corner, a miniature Niagara bearing an uncanny resemblance to the off route corner that we had viewed from the start. Kevin followed, somehow getting up the 5a slab in the dark, no questions asked about his means.

A waterfall presented an unattractive option in which to await the rapidly rising moon, so I set off up the corner. In the pitch dark I felt the crack widths and estimated Friends accordingly. These provided for healthy aid till the crack ran out.

A few moves leftwards, then blind groping eventually found turf and the sanctuary of a sloping grass ledge. As I brought up Kevin the moon rose and bathed the face in a superb, climbing-friendly light.

In the moonlight I could see three alternatives. To the right was the easiest angle, up slabs with invisible protection. To the left was an overhanging crack which could probably be aided. Above was an indeterminate line, worth closer inspection. All was in control.

Ten minutes later Kevin was on the ledge and the moon had completely disappeared under a wall of cloud. Darkness. A classic Fhithleir joke! I tried of course. I got 15ft. up the middle line before it became obvious that we could see nothing and that I had no idea what ropes were clipped to what, or even whether I was belayed. The risk factor had become unacceptable and I retreated to await any reappearance of the moon.

The grass ledge was sloping and wet, but spectacularly scenic. Beneath, the crag heeled over 800ft. of space, Lochan Tuath perfectly framed by the precipices of Beinn an Eoin. In 20 years of climbing there are certain views or places which stand out, idylls to be enjoyed when faced with some particularly tedious bit of the office day. This was certainly one of those occasions. Mind you, we did have eight hours of moonless night in which to enjoy it (and they say that you can't have enough of a good thing!)

A sense of farce prevailed. Kevin was Sylvester Stallone in the just released *Cliffhanger*, regaling me for two hours with its unfeasible and unbelievable plot. I reflected that it was only slightly less improbable than a bivi in a whale. As bivis go it wasn't that uncomfortable. The cold was at the just shivering level which prohibits any sleep (Kevin's version of this was that he couldn't get any sleep for my snoring).

Kevin was, of course, somewhat concerned that Ann would not know his

fate. I was also concerned – my reputation depended on Dickson adhering to the unwritten rule that the rescue should not be called out till the next morning (or alternatively that he would give them Simon Steer's name rather than mine). I reflected that it would have been a bad idea to have taken their dinner with us.

They were also concerned, but Dickson, on seeing the car parked at the Fhìdhleir lay-by and surmising the late hour, had concluded that, like Pinocchio and Geppetto, we had been swallowed by the great whale. If only he had warned Kevin about (a) the Fiddler and (b) me.

Six a.m. and a murky dawn. Cold, creaking joints and their owner try to psych-up to the uncertain desperates lying above. Last night's 15ft. is climbed to reveal a grass stairway, cleaving easily through steep ground for 25ft. to exit through an arch. Above, only easy scrambling remained. An even bigger Fhìdhleir joke! A bit like the whale giving Captain Ahab his leg back and saying: 'Have a nice day.'

Seven a.m. on top of the hill and things seem just as surreal, clanking about in rock boots and hardware while Achiltibuie slumbers. Beneath, we rendezvous with Dickson, rescue team still asleep and reputation intact. He was right of course, the route was everything that he had claimed, even in his most drunken excesses. But, so was I, it had fully lived up to expectations. And as for Kevin, well he enjoyed the experience so much that one year to the day he and Ann got benighted on the Romsdalthorn (he claims accidentally – it was raining at the time).

My one regret; if we had started the Phantom Fiddler (1000ft. Scottish V.S.) at eight a.m. that morning – now that would have made a tale!

References and Notes:

1. The current Editor resisted this 'route' with consummate ease.
2. An untraceable quote, too savage for a Patey and thus probably a Campbellism.
3. *SMC District Guide to the Northern Highlands*. Tom Strang. 1975.
4. *A Short Walk With Cemni-Kaze*. John Mackenzie. *SMCJ* 1980, pp. 26-32.
5. It appears that we unwittingly followed the line taken by Patey and Taylor on the second ascent in 1964. See *SMCJ* 1970, page 297.

SCOTTISH HILL-NAMES – THE ENGLISH CONNECTION

By Peter Drummond

HAVERS. Surely no? Norse and Irish connections (*SMCJs* 1996, 1997), aye . . . but the auld enemy? Actually, yah.

Most hill-names in the south-east of Scotland, from the Tay to the Tweed estuaries, have names that are Scots: this language was initially known as Inglis, for the simple reason that it was brought into the area by Anglian settlers from what is now England, from the 7th century on. It is a cousin rather than a son of what we now call English, since both Scots and English are descendants of the old dialects of Anglo-Saxon. The Angles coming into Scotland spoke the Northumbrian dialect, one branch of what became Old English, and that's why there are hill-words found both north and south of the Border, with a common linguistic ancestry – in the Anglo-Saxons' early English.

More than 200 years ago a local book on Tweeddale¹ noted some of these hill-words or elements – though not very elegantly, thus:

'Hills are variously named according to their magnitude: as Law, Pen, Kipp, Coom, Dod, Craig, Fell, Top, Drum, Tor, Watch, Rig, Edge, Know, Knock, Mount, Kaim, Bank, Hope, Head, Cleugh-head, Gare, Scarf, Height, Shank, Brae, Kneis, Muir, Green, etc.'

Almost 30 elements made up his list, including one or two errors (a hope is a valley, a green is not a hill), but omitting significant names like Cairn or Pike, and Seat or Side. He was probably wrong too in ascribing the difference to magnitude – shape may be equally significant. However, most Englishmen of his day, living 40 miles south and well beyond the national border would have recognised most of these words: but for fellow-Scotsmen living a similar distance north-west in the Gaelic fringes, they would have been a foreign tongue. Many of these words have English roots, as we will see. But first there is a problem of the biggest 'tree' in the 'wood' that he describes, so to speak: Armstrong has missed out the biggest English contribution to hill-names, in Tweeddale and elsewhere – the word, Hill itself.

Consider for a moment the words Hill and Mountain, widely used, often interchangeably. It is generally accepted that a mountain is higher than a hill, and for instance, the SMC Tables class Munros and Corbetts as mountains while Donalds are defined as hills. None of the Munros are Hills, and only 2% of the Corbetts (and, for instance, Corryhabbie Hill used to be called Cathadh – snowdrift before anglicisation), and 5% of the Grahams are Hills.

¹ Capt. M. J. Armstrong. Parish of Innerleithen, 1775.

But height is not the main distinction. Both Mountain and Hill can be used in the plural form to name an upland range – the Cairngorm Mountains or the Pentland Hills for instance. But whereas Hill is often the surname of an *individual* Hill – Black Hill, for example – Mountain never is so used in Scotland, and indeed very rarely is in the English-speaking world – with the intriguing exception being Ireland of the Gaeltacht.² (The Mount element in names like Mount Keen is an corruption or anglicisation of the Gaelic monadh.) And the reason for this is essentially linguistic, for while ‘mountain’ is a latecomer into English from French (where it is also a group word rarely applied to individual hill-names³), ‘hill’ is one of the oldest English words, deep-rooted in the language, and available to name heights with when that process took place. ‘Hill’ was used in written works from c.1000 AD, while ‘Mountain’ first appeared in c.1200 AD.

English is a Germanic language, and is believed to originate from immigrants from the Frisian area of the Netherlands. The Oxford English Dictionary data on the origin of the word ‘hill’ reads: ‘Old English hyll = Old Frisian hel, Lower German hull, Middle Dutch hille, hil, hul . . . from the Indo-European base [-word] also of Latin coilis’.

A formidable pedigree there for hill as a founder-member of the language, and not surprising it was used from early on in place-names across southern and eastern England, and swept strongly into south-east Scotland with English speakers from the 7th century on. But it seems it did not shake off its origins as a relatively low hill, and it will be clear from map study that the hills called Hill are not the highest even in the south-east. For instance, in the Donald’s Tables⁴ of southern hills, although 23% of them are surnamed Hill, the highest is 13th in the old list (11th in the new).

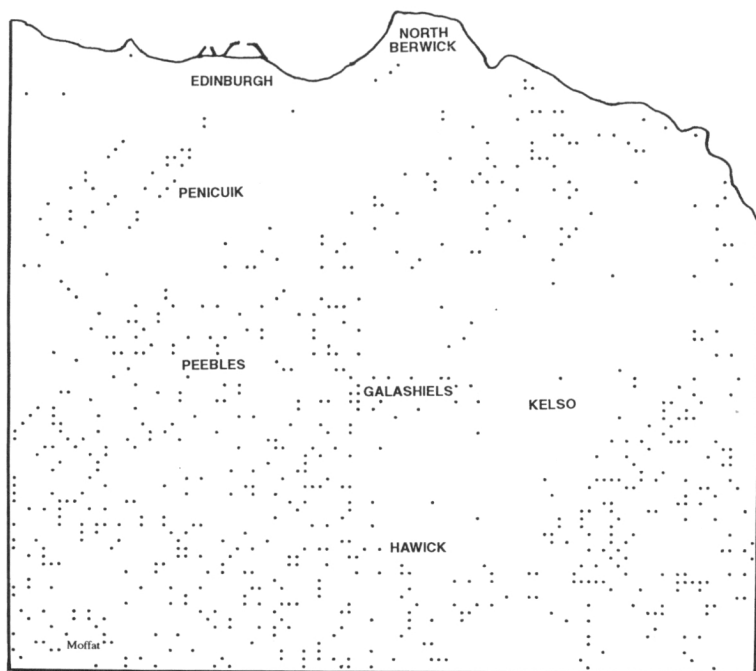
Now it might be objected that Hill, in spite of its pedigree, had forced itself on older Gaelic names and produced a bastard or mongrel set. Examples of this can be found: the fate of Cathadh now Corryhabbie Hill mentioned above; King’s Seat Hill in the Ochils, formerly Inner Cairn⁵ or Pyket Stane in the Borders, now Pykestone Hill^{1 – op cit}; and several examples of a hill-hill tautology where Hill is tacked onto a pre-existing Gaelic or Scots hill-name element to produce, for example, Binn Hill or Dod Hill. Also in this class of ersatz hill-names are the ubiquitous Hill of X names found in north-east Scotland and Shetland (e.g. – Hill of Fare or Hill of Cat): they are almost certainly full or partial translations of older Gaelic names (e.g. Meall na Faire or Cnoc a’Chait), or in the case of

² There are 92 mountains – e.g., Brandon Mountain – among Ireland’s 453 Marilyns, as listed In TACit Press *The Hewitts and Marilyns of Ireland*, E. Clements 1997.

³ Although the word means mountain, and is used in the plural to denote high ranges such as the Alps, as an Individual name montagne is often used in France for small hills – e.g. La Montagne, near Auxerre, 227m – especially in Brittany.

⁴ Either the New Donalds in TACit’s *The Grahams and New Donalds*, or In the SMC’s *Munro’s Tables, and other tables of lower hills*.

⁵ Angus Watson. *The Ochils: Place-names, History, Traditions*, 1997.



A distribution of hills containing the name-element Hill, in an area of south-east Scotland.

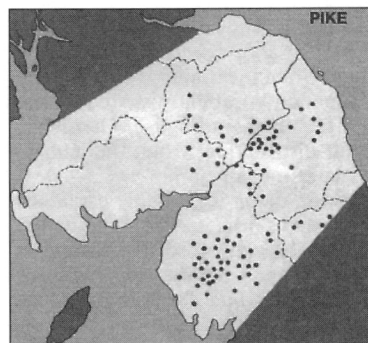
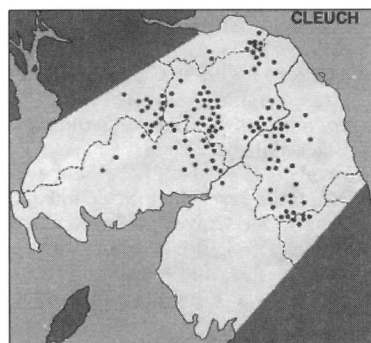
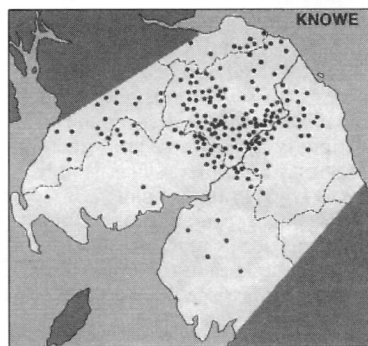
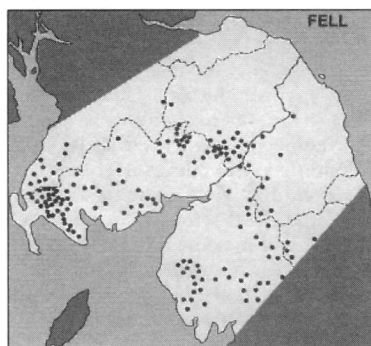
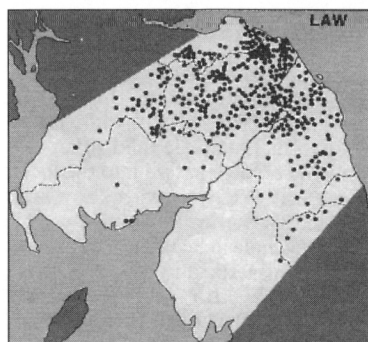
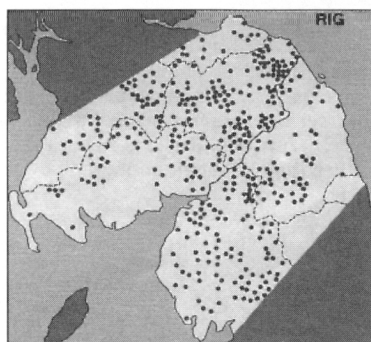
Shetland, marks of the influence of incoming Scots speakers ⁶. But in the south-east heartland of Scots this Hill of X type is rare, and very few names there are in the tautological category either. Some figures: I counted all hills named on the 1:50000 OS maps in an area of south-east Scotland of 10,000 sq km ⁷. There are 1787 hills named (not including farm names), of which 43% are surnamed Hill, and only 30 or so of these 775 Hills could be considered clear tautologies (such as Cairn Hill). (See map 1.)

So Hill must be considered a vibrant hill-name element, of impeccable old English ancestry, used in its own right to refer to relatively lower eminences: it is no coincidence that, being near the valleys, many of them are named after farms, or hopes, or the like. And although it is indeed found in the high heartlands of the Scottish Border hills, it is more common round the fringes and in the foothills of higher ground.

⁶ Professor W. F. H. Nicolaisen *Scottish Place-Names* 1976. He examines names like Burn of X, Water of X, Bridge of X, to come to his conclusions: Hill of X as in the same mould. See pp 57-64 in his book.

⁷ OS grid area NT, stretching from the Lothians to Moffat and the Merse, on OS sheets 66, 67, 73, 74, 79, 80 and parts of 72, 75, 78 and 81.

Topographical terms of Southern Scotland.



————— Scottish/English Border.
 Region or County Border

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But the one great irony for this quintessentially English word is that it is almost totally absent from the highest ground in England, the Lakeland Fells: in the new FRCC guide, listing the highest 244 fells⁸, only two are surnamed Hill (the celebrated Loadpot Hill and Wether Hill) and they are well down the height league table. This underlines the importance of the linguistic factor, for Lakeland is a bastion of Norse names. But for the word Hill, used by English-speakers worldwide as the standard term for high ground, it is clearly a prophet without honour in its own hilly heartland.

Having taken to the Hills for a while, let us return to the other elements identified by our 18th century writer. Virtually all of them are found on both sides of the Border⁹ (See map 2). Some of them come from the Norse connection, in particular Fell (from Norse fjell¹⁰ which flowered in the English Lakes and possibly, simultaneously, in Galloway: Dod, Edge and Rig may also have come from this source. Some have Celtic roots like Pen, Cairn and Craig (appearing as Crag south of the Border), from the Britons who were replaced in south Scotland by the Gaels – these elements are widespread in upland Wales, where the Britons took final refuge. But two at least have fairly deep Anglo-Saxon roots – Law and Knowe¹¹.

Law springs from an Old English word Maw, meaning a tumulus (burial mound) in southern England, or a hill farther north, the transition of meaning taking place on its northward march somewhere in the north Midlands: in Northumberland, many hills called Law are small and rounded, resembling tumuli¹². The same pattern can be found north of the Border in the Merse, the gently rolling lowland along the lower Tweed: no hills are high enough here to be named on the map, but instead there are dozens of farmhouses built on top of the gentle swellings, and whose names end in -law, obviously taking on the earlier hill-name. But both south and north of the Border, the name was then applied to higher, wilder hills – respectively. For instance, Bolt's Law at 540m near Conssett, and

⁶ Professor W. F. H. Nicolaisen *Scottish Place-Names* 1976. He examines names like Burn of X, Water of X, Bridge of X, to come to his conclusions: Hill of X as in the same mould. See pp 57-64 in his book.

⁷ OS grid area NT, stretching from the Lothians to Moffat and the Merse, on OS sheets 66, 67, 73, 74, 79, 80 and parts of 72, 75, 78 and 81.

⁸ J. Parker and T. Pickles *The Lakeland Fells*, FRCC. Ernest Press 1996.

⁹ *Scottish Geographical Magazine* Vol. 106 (1990), pp 108-112 – I. M. Matley *Topographic terms of Southern Scotland: their distribution and significance*.

¹⁰ *SMCJ* Vol. 36 (1996) pp 50-53, *Scottish Hill-Names – the Scandinavian Connection*, Peter Drummond.

¹¹ Other Scots hill-names are dealt with in more detail in chapter 7 (Kips and Laws) of *Scottish Hill and Mountain Names*, Peter Drummond, SMT 1992.

¹² Margaret Gelling, *Place-names in the Landscape*, 1984.

oor ain Broad Law at 840m, second-highest Donald. It has gone on to be one of the great success stories, in Scotland spreading to the Sidlaws, the Ochils, the Renfrew Heights, far beyond its Borders heartland. In the 10,000 sq km sample referred to previously, it is second only to Hill with 303 specimens (17%), and showing strongly in the Moorfoots and Lammermuirs.

What does Law signify? Two 19th century writers had little doubt: the 1808 *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* describes a law as ‘a rounded hill, generally of a somewhat conical shape and conspicuous among others’. While James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd, described them 20 years later as ‘the common green dumpling-looking hills’¹³ Perhaps he knew of the hill called Pudding Law near Yetholm. Agreement on shape in these two definitions, certainly, but there are Laws which break the rules, so to speak. Broad Law – originally called Broad Law of Hairstane – has a plateau top which Armstrong says ‘might admit of a circuit horse-race of two miles without the smallest inequality of surface’. The many Laws in the Moorfoot-Lammermuir area are in keeping with the gentle swelling profiles of land there. Traprain Law, that volcanic plug injected into East Lothian fields, is precipitous rather than ‘green and grassy’, while The Law seen from Tillicoultry is perfectly conical but not rounded. Law, it would seem, is a hill-element big enough to be used for a variety of hill-shapes and -sizes, somewhat like Beinn is able to do in the Highlands.

Finally a look at the Knowes. Another element with a fine Old English pedigree from knoll (earlier cnoll) – first appearing in written work in c.880 AD – from Germanic cnol meaning a knob or hillock, it is easy to imagine how the soft ending ‘ll’ dropped off in common usage. In the Scottish Borders it took root and developed into a more sizeable hill, just as Law and Hill have done, but not quite so successfully. In numerical terms, Knowes make up 8% of the sample area, making it fourth commonest after Hill, Law and Rig: in height term, there is only one Donald (SMC Tables), albeit a high one, Fifescar Knowe. In early English, knoll was initially used for rounded summits rather than whole hills. If you look at an OS map you will notice that most knowes are subsidiary tops, or ends of spurs above a valley, rather than separate peaks – like Peter Pan, they have never quite grown up.

¹³ Both quoted in the *Scottish National Dictionary* under the entry for Law.

BIG GREY MAN – THE EVIDENCE

By Jack Hastie

THE appearance of the 3rd edition of Affleck Gray's book, *Big Grey Man of Ben Macdhui*, in 1994 and the publication of Rennie McOwen's *Magic Mountains* in 1996 make it opportune to review the evidence for the haunting of Ben Macdhui.

The legend first captured the headlines with a dramatic announcement on November 28, 1925 by Norman Collie, Professor of Organic Chemistry at University College London.

Collie was a scientist, a Fellow of the Royal Society and a past president of the Alpine Club; a pioneering mountaineer of his time, with experience in the Himalayas, Alps and Rockies. At the Annual Dinner of the Cairngorm Club that year he announced for the first time in public that, more than 35 years earlier, he had had a terrifying experience while climbing alone on Ben Macdhui in mist and snow.

He was coming down from the cairn when he began to think he heard sounds other than merely the noise of his own footsteps in the snow. For every few steps he took he heard a big crunch, and then another crunch as if someone was walking after him but taking steps three or four times the length of his own.

The Professor was seized with a blind terror and rushed down the mountain for several miles into the safety of Rothiemurchus Forest.

About 12 years later, Collie said, he told his story to Dr A. M. Kellas, lecturer in Chemistry at Middlesex Hospital Medical School and a veteran Himalayan explorer who subsequently died during a reconnaissance of Everest in 1921. Kellas told Collie that he too had had a weird experience on top of the mountain around midnight. He had seen a giant figure which had been invisible to his brother, who was also present, come up out of the Lairig Ghru and wander round the summit cairn. What had surprised him most was the size of the figure which he estimated at about 10ft. tall.

Collie's story is reported in the *Press and Journal*, Aberdeen of November 30, 1925, and the *Cairngorm Club Journal* of July, 1926. These reports are identical and appear to be verbatim transcripts of what Collie said at the time. Other versions exist.

Shortly after Collie's death in 1942, E. C. C. Baly, in *Obituaries of Fellows of the Royal Society*, quoted him as stating that he heard the footsteps as he was approaching the summit cairn. He stopped and retraced his steps, expecting to meet another climber but encountered no-one. When he started for the summit again the steps followed him again till he reached

the cairn. Here he stopped, but the steps continued, coming nearer and nearer until they came right up to him. At this point Collie fled. Baly was a former student and assistant of Collie at University College and climbed with him in the Lofoten Islands in 1904. His account gives every impression of being a verbatim report of what Collie actually told him. However, it is not what Collie said at the Cairngorm Club dinner in 1925. There is no record of when the Baly version originated, but it was not published till 1945 and appears to be a late elaboration.

The mountaineering historian Ronald W. Clark repeats Baly's account in *Mountaineering in Britain* (1957) and in *Scotland's Magazine* of November 1961. In the latter he claimed that Collie had told his story much earlier at the turn of the century in New Zealand, that it was published there and that that was how Kellas came to hear of it.

Clark is certainly wrong about this; it contradicts what Collie himself said and it is known that he did not visit New Zealand till the 1930s. Another misconception is that he saw something. This arises from a phrase used by Seton Gordon in 1948: after mentioning the legend of the big grey figure he writes: 'Collie encountered this spectre.' The context, however, makes it clear that he did not imply that Collie actually saw anything.

A letter written by W. G. Robertson to the *Press and Journal* in December 1925, and citing as its authority Kellas's brother, gives a different version of the Kellas experience. In this, both brothers saw the figure coming towards them from the summit cairn in the late afternoon. Like Collie they experienced intense fear and, under the impression that the figure was following them, fled to lower ground.

Collie and Kellas were both extremely strong witnesses, being not only experienced climbers but academics of distinction. On the other hand, both events were made public only long after they had taken place; Kellas's experience dates from around 1900, Collie's from the late 1880s. Kellas, and his brother, were both dead when their stories were published. Moreover, it is clear from Baly's account that Collie subsequently embellished his tale.

It has been suggested that Collie made his story up because he had been asked, at short notice, to address the Cairngorm Club dinner. McOwen states that Collie had 'a mild reputation as a prankster'. However, Gray gives an entirely different impression of the man as 'of extreme reticence', 'sardonic and dry as dust, he did not suffer fools gladly' and 'utterly sincere', and it seems a long shot to suggest that the inspiration for his tale was the requirement that he make an after-dinner speech. According both to Baly and to his recent biographer, Christine Mill, he was something of a mystic, who believed, among other things, in the Loch Ness Monster.

The revelations of the experiences of Collie and Kellas, popularised the

legend. Their accounts became a magnet which attracted reports of unusual experiences from all over the central and western Cairngorms.

There is, however, some evidence that even before Collie's speech, tales of something unusual on the top of Ben Macdhuì were in circulation.

An article in the *Cairngorm Club Journal* of 1921 refers to a rumour that a giant spectral figure had been seen at various times during the previous five years walking about on the tops of the mountains. More significantly, the article states that the figure had a name - Ferlie Mor. This is an Anglicisation of the Gaelic 'Fear Liath Mor' - Big Grey Man - and the use of Gaelic implies that the legend goes back to the time when that language, then extinct in the area, was still spoken. George Duncan, an Edinburgh lawyer, had an unusual experience in 1914 in Glen Lui, to the south of Macdhuì. He saw a tall figure, who reminded him of the Devil, surrounded by smoke on the hillside.

Duncan's experience was reported by a companion in 1916 and is the only concrete instance of a phenomenon recorded before 1925. Not only is it different in detail from later reports, but it did not take place on Ben Macdhuì but on the lower slopes of an obscure hill called Meall an Lundain on the opposite side of Glen Derry.

Seton Gordon, writing in 1948, carries the story further back. He reports in *Highways and Byways of the Central Highlands* that the late Marquis of Ailsa had heard tales of the Big Grey Man on Speyside at the close of the 19th century.

John Hill Burton, in *The Cairngorm Mountains* (1854) mentions a legend of a giant shadowy figure called the Fahm and in 1813, in a poem *Glen Avin*, James Hogg also mentions the Fahm, although he has it appearing on Cairn Gorm, not Ben Macdhuì.

It was presumably to this figure that the Gaelic name Fear Liath Mor, Big Grey Man, was given although the Gaelic phrase is not recorded before this century. The origin of the legend seems to be the phenomenon known as the Brocken Spectre, first reported from the Harz Mountains in Germany in 1780. This is nothing more sinister than the gigantic shadow of a climber thrown by the sun on to a bank of mist, and a sighting was reported on Macdhuì by Sir Thomas Lauder in the *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal* in 1831.

A less well known tradition is of a monster called the Fahm. This was a giant mole the size of a large dog which secreted a substance which made the grass on Ben Macdhuì poisonous to horses. This legend is mentioned by Dr George Keith in *A General View of Aberdeenshire* (1811) and again in a poem written in 1847, after which it seems to have been forgotten.

The source of this story is an entry in the first *Statistical Account of*

Scotland for the parish of Kirkmichael, in Banffshire, which includes Loch Avon and the northern approaches to Macdhuì. The account was written by the Rev. John Grant and dates from the 1790s.

Grant writes: 'It is asserted by the country people that there is a small quadruped which they call *famh*. In summer mornings it issues from its lurking places emitting a kind of glutinous matter fatal to horses if they happen to eat the grass upon which it has been deposited.

'It is somewhat larger than a mole, of a brownish colour, with a large head disproportionate to the body. From this deformed appearance and its noxious quality the word seems to have been transformed to denote a monster, a cruel mischievous person who, in the Gaelic language is usually called *famh-fhear*.'

In modern Gaelic *famh* means a mole and *fanhair* a giant and the legend of the large headed poisonous monster may have arisen from a misunderstanding by Grant of the meaning of the Gaelic words.

Presumably, it was from the *Statistical Account* that Hogg got the term *fahm*, a word which does not exist in Gaelic.

This story and reports of the Brocken Spectre apparently became confused because Hogg and Burton both mention the *Fahm* when referring to the giant, grey figure.

The post-Collie material dates mainly from the 1940s; nothing of significance quoted by Gray is later than 1948. The evidence is difficult to analyse because it is so diverse. It ranges in space from Coylumbridge and Glen Einich to the head of Loch Avon, in content from giant figures through footsteps, voices, bells and music to vague sensations of a 'presence', and in emotional association from the diabolical to the saintly.

The core experience, however, is of a giant figure and/or footsteps accompanied by a sense of terror on or near the summit of Ben Macdhuì. No report should be admitted as evidence in support of this unless:

1. A natural explanation can be ruled out.
2. A phenomenon of an obviously different nature is not being described.
3. The encounter took place on or near Ben Macdhuì.

For example, the reports of the sounds of music, voices or bells are almost certainly attributable to the effects of wind, water or rockfall. The present author has heard a sustained musical note when sleeping under the Shelter Stone on a windy night, and more than once the sound of girls' laughing voices when approaching a waterfall.

In 1972 an ornithologist who had left a tape recorder running near the summit to record bird song, was surprised, on playing the tape, to hear the sound of a cough. No approaching footsteps were recorded and the tape recorder had been in full view of the observer all the time. But then ravens

and ptarmigan don't make audible footsteps, though they do make other eerie noises, and ptarmigan are very difficult to see against a background of boulders.

Some of the reported occurrences clearly refer to something entirely different from the core experience. Sir Hugh Rankine recalled that while in the Lairig Ghru with his wife in 1948 he had met a robed, oriental gentleman who addressed him in Sanskrit. Being a Buddhist Sir Hugh immediately recognised him as a Bodhisattva - a kind of saint - and replied in Urdu. Heavenly music played about them for about 10 minutes and then the saint vanished. If Sir Hugh really did enjoy such an experience he had an encounter of a quite different nature from Collie or Kellas and his experience can throw no light on theirs.

Joan Grant, a professional writer of historical fantasy who was convinced of her own psychic powers, had a panic attack while walking in Rothiemurchus in 1928. She fled in terror from something she could not see but which she sensed to be four-legged and whose hooves she could hear. At the time she was seven miles away from the mountain near Coylumbridge and her experience was certainly not the same as those of Collie or Kellas.

Tom Crowley heard footsteps and saw a grey figure in the early 1920s but he did not report it till long after the event; in any case he was on the western slopes of Braeriach at the time. The point is that it is not legitimate to cite any kind of unusual experience anywhere between Speyside and Deeside as evidence of the Big Grey Man.

Otherwise why not include the Bodach Lamh Dheirg, a giant figure in Highland dress whose hand drips blood and who haunts Glenmore east of Loch Morlich, about the same distance from the summit of Ben Macdhuil as Duncan's experience in Glen Lui, or the ghostly washerwoman of Loch Alvie - only two miles beyond where Joan Grant had her panic attack - whose appearance means death to the beholder and who is closer in spirit to the Collie/Kellas experience than Rankine's Bodhisattva?

The quality of the core evidence cited by Gray is pretty shaky. Alexander Tewnton thought he heard footsteps and saw a giant figure in the mist when he was retreating from the summit into Coire Etchachan in 1943 but he subsequently came to believe that it had all been a trick of the mist.

Syd Scroggie, then a soldier on a training course in mountain warfare, was sitting by the Shelter Stone one evening in 1942 when he saw a tall figure cross the burns that flow into Loch Avon and disappear into the night. Scroggie followed the figure but found no footprints; shouted but heard no reply. He thinks to this day that he may have seen the Big Grey Man, but admits that it could have been a Norwegian soldier in training or a German agent.

Peter Densham, an aeroplane rescue worker, while alone on the hill in

mist in 1945, was impelled by the sound of crunching footsteps to run in blind panic almost over the top of Lurcher's Crag into the Lairig Ghru. On another occasion when accompanied by his climbing companion, Richard Frere, they carried on an enjoyable conversation with an invisible third party. Strangely, when questioned later about this event, Frere could not recall it.

Frere did, however, tell of another friend who, on a brilliant moonlit night saw an enormous brown figure, 20ft. tall, 'swaggering' downhill from the summit. When the moon cast the creature's shadow on him he felt 'like a hunted animal'. Unfortunately, Frere did not feel able to reveal his friend's identity.

Gray repeats stories told by Alastair Borthwick and Wendy Wood of footsteps following a climber in snow on open ground. In both cases the climber was followed by giant crunching footsteps like those which followed Collie, and both experienced a similar fear. Gray himself quotes two possible explanations of this. A Mr Usher tells of an instance when on the summit of Macdhuì he heard footsteps which turned out to be those of ski mountaineers in Coire Etchachan, two miles away and about 1500ft. below. Usher makes the point that in certain places and under certain conditions sounds can travel surprising distances.

Dr Adam Watson, of Aberdeen University's Institute of Ecology, suggests that under certain snow conditions a walker's footsteps will cause cracking in the snow under his feet and that the noise of this will follow his own footsteps but will not be in time with them. Collie's experience, as he described it in 1925, but not in Baly's account, can possibly be explained in this way.

That of Kellas's, in the version in which he alone saw the giant figure cannot be explained in terms of the Brocken Spectre since it is said to have occurred at midnight.

The Robertson version, in which two observers saw only one figure has been cited as proof that what they saw cannot have been their shadow on the mist.

This argument is invalid. When two or more people see the Brocken Spectre each sees only his own shadow, unless they are standing less than 10 yards apart. Sir Thomas Lauder quotes an example of this when in 1831 a party of three descending Ben Macdhuì, about 50 yards apart, each saw his own shadow on the mist although those of the other two were invisible to him. When they came together and stood as close as possible each could see all three shadows, his own distinctly and those of the other two faintly. The effect has been frequently observed since. The reason is that a partially transparent volume of mist does not behave reflectively like an opaque surface such as a wall, and that two observers apparently looking at the

same spot will actually see light reflected from different surfaces. It is therefore possible that Kellas and his brother each saw his own shadow without realising that they were not observing identical phenomena.

Since the late 1940s reports of the Grey Man have dried up. There has been nothing more sinister than that cough on the summit of the mountain. Today the ascent of Ben Macdhui is a trade route. Instructors at the Scottish Sports Council centre at Glenmore Lodge routinely take trainee mountain leaders up it in all weathers and nothing untoward has been encountered for the last 40 years. Syd Scroggie says the Big Grey Man ‘seems to have gone into recession’.

However, there are still persistent reports of the sound of footsteps on the lower slopes of the mountain which cannot be explained in the way suggested by Watson.

According to Gray, in 1940 MacDonald Robertson heard footsteps crunching around outside while lying under the Shelter Stone. Catherine Allan heard something similar when lying in a sleeping bag near the head of Loch Avon.

McOwen quotes three cases when similar noises were heard by David Trainer in Corrour Bothy in the mid 1970s; Brian Cullimore in the Hutchison Hut in Coire Etchachan in 1986, and Tom Gilchrist in the Sinclair Memorial Hut.

In none of the five cases were those who heard the steps moving about at the time and in four they were in an enclosed shelter and heard them outside.

Borthwick tells a story of another friend who heard footsteps following him across not snow, but scree.

Usher’s explanation might possibly account for this experience but the other five all happened at night when it was unlikely that other climbers would be on the move.

In the face of so many diverse reports and in the context that similar tales are told of mountains outside the Cairngorms, such as An Teallach, Sgurr Dearg (in the Cuillins), Mayar, Schiehallion and Ben Ime, perhaps all that can be said is that some people have felt, or for some reason have wanted it to be believed they had felt either a sense of evil or of good in the mountains. Some accounts are emotionally neutral, Syd Scroggie’s for example. Collie and Kellas set the fashion for evil and terror and this was followed by Crowley, Grant and Wood.

Rankine encountered the sublime. Densham and Frere told both kinds of tale – but then their stories are the most professionally told of the lot!

FAILURE

By Donald M. Orr

BLUSTERY, snow-laden winds in early March allowed him to forego the dubious pleasures of the North and spend a casual Sunday alone on the Renfrewshire-Ayrshire border. Not on the ragged, heathery tops of the West Renfrew Heights but over on the high, sad moorland country that sweeps eastwards to Strathaven, the Aven Water and the long valley of the Clyde. Edged on the west by the trench of the Barrhead Gap, the area undulates below the 1000ft. contour and is pocked extensively by dams and small lochs that held the dull colour of the sky and caught and reflected its occasional brilliance.

He skirted through the meagre dusting of powder snow by the crags he had often used as a summer starter. Rediscovering, in the light evenings, the tendon twanging limits of chalked fingers and the less-than-adhesive properties of rubber on whinstone. Beyond the old quarry the upland fields dipped and rose under a thicker blanket towards the rounded, forested hill that was his target. Silently, pondering his way up the slope, he paused periodically to draw a deeper breath and take in a familiar view.

He stood on the grassy summit gazing north to the white escarpments of the Kilpatrick and Campsie Hills. Snow clouds smothered the humped top of Dumgoyne as his eyes scanned some unseen distance. Failure now haunted him where before it had driven him on.

He had found it easy to establish a reputation as a mountaineer. All it seemed to amount to was a collection of tops, ticked summits, underlined routes and a large pile of trashed gear.

What had fired him was essentially failure. What they had raved about together were the disasters, wash outs, epic retreats, because, he realised eventually, that was when he felt really tested. When they were off route on a strange crag, a few degrees out in the cloudy fastness of some unfrequented wilderness, or when the ice suddenly went rotten in a slushy spring gully, he felt the zest and burn within him of increased vulnerability that doubled the intensity of the experience and promoted the telling of the tale to saga status.

He focused again, briefly watching the light change in the grey distance, before he faded back into his internal dialogue. It struck him that success had only confirmed his abilities while the failures had stretched the limits, taken him out of himself and allowed a re-assessment of what his potential might be.

He started to move downhill under a lowering sky. It had, however, been easy to walk away from the successes: the effects of failure remained for a long time and the varieties could be as intricate as some of the routes he had followed. As he ducked under the branch of a larch tree that overhung the path his eyes connected with the frosted whinstone flakes that surfaced the trail. Their whitened forms resembled limestone fragments and triggered an initial wave of dizziness to lap inside his head. He gulped at the cold air but none seemed to enter his lungs and he sagged slowly on to the snow and leant wearily against the base of the larch. He recognised in his shifted perspective that the colour of the stones intensified an aura of menace still lingering in his memory.

No amount of training could have primed him for the sensations that he would experience. The Red Cross instructors had been thorough but they had not told him how he would taste the Austrian's last cigarette as he tried to force his frightened breath inside another man. Nor could they tell him of the smell of perfume that rose up from 'the casualty', left by his wife as she kissed and kissed him, desperately trying to force love and life back into her husband before he slipped away forever. In the delirious, dizzying pressure of reality, anxious sweat dripped from his face on to the older man's, splashing and deepening the darkening skin as he worked, panting in the humidity, trying to drive his breath past a stranger's purple lips. In a frantic spiral of desperation he tried to ignore the actualities before him for the promised joy of imagined recovery.

Mouth to mouth with a strange, overweight man, he never heard the helicopter, only a clatter of white stones as a paramedic and two nurses ran down the path. He was on the point of collapsing himself when they took over. Watching the medic give an adrenaline injection, and the nurses continue trying to revive their countryman, he sat on the path exhausted and bleeding and regarding in a dazed, apologetic manner the couple comforting the dead man's wife.

He was not sure how long they had been working on him but at some point, perhaps when he saw the bluish stain creep out across his chest, he realised the Austrian was dead and that there was no chance of reviving him. The medical team stopped their efforts and started to straighten out the body. The weeping woman was led away and a group that had materialised from a nearby hut assisted with the corpse. He remained sitting by the path stunned, disturbed and empty. Drained by the physical effort involved and shocked by the sudden turn of events that had turned his part in the drama into a very ill-defined role. The doctor turned and spoke quietly and politely in German which was lost on him. The nurses smiled and shrugged which said it all.

Later that night in the hut he was aware of the eyes watching him as he

sat alone at the rough table awaiting his evening meal. He saw wonder and awe, recognised fear in those around him and once or twice glimpsed that look of envy on a face that saw status in one who had touched the dead.

He found himself picking at his food, listening to the guttural blur of German surrounding him, at once glad yet anxious that he did not speak their language. The need to forget was being tormented by the desire to explain what he had done, how he had tried. He was now beyond his emotional margin, off route on a testing wall of unknown and unconsidered mental stress. He ordered a whisky, and another. By his third he felt he could have summarised to someone that it felt like a long, long runout with no protection. He wondered if they were watching him drinking, adding it up themselves and coming to some smug conclusion. He rose abruptly and left the dining room and went up to the small chamber under the eaves where he was sure no one else would wish to share the facilities.

A blackness tinged with green and pain was his only awareness. The blackness was pain and existed all around him. He could not understand the pain, could compute no reason for the greenish blackness. The pain made him move his head and his eyes opened. Slowly, these simple events and sights started the mechanism that tripped consciousness into being. Through his shattered senses the strange moss-covered rocks and the saplings around him only heightened his discomfort and uncertainty. The pain, now localised in his face, eased, and he propped himself up on his arms. The moss had been scraped off the rocks beneath him and bright red blood stains had soaked into the soft lichens making dark whorls within minute worlds, a miniature landscape drenched in blood. His temperature rose suddenly and dramatically, sending beads of sweat out across his forehead. Little trickles gathered in his hair as he continued staring at the ground wondering where and why?

‘Okay, I’m okay,’ he said quietly to himself in reassuring tones.

He pushed himself upright into a seated position and groaned as he lent his still-rucsacked back against a boulder. Running his tongue along his top lip he found a rounded hole on the inside where his bottom teeth had gone through. His hand found cuts on his chin and on the bridge of his nose but apart from these a blow to his left knee and some skinned knuckles were the only injuries he had sustained.

Looking up plunged his mind once more into swirling disorder as he failed to see the path or any other feature he recognised. He remembered navigating off the Wasen Spitz in low cloud and coming out of a drizzling mist to join the old track by the side of the Spullersee. He had followed a small path into a scented birch wood that cloaked the lower slopes of the mountain and remembered bending under a larch branch and feeling giddy.

This strange, moss-covered, boulder-strewn little valley filled with ash

saplings was totally unknown to him. A sensation of fear penetrated the disorientation that filled his mind as he sat regaining his strength and composure. Struggling to his feet he tottered forward supporting himself with the branches. Yesterday's images trickled, then burst into his mind.

'I'm sorry! Oh Jesus, I'm sorry.' He closed his eyes and slid down the tree to his knees. Grief and fear, shock and dejection took their toll and he knelt moaning and crying, trying to atone with his tears and his misery. Eventually, at some point, he rose and stumbled off following the slope downward. Later, he was not aware that his feet had found the path and the sight of the evening lights of Klosterle a little way below him registered only vaguely on his mind.

It had been decided that a short holiday would be a good idea and he had agreed to all the gentle, clichéd argument knowing that his nerves were in rather a ragged state. Unable to concentrate, sleeping badly, seeing his family and friends through a confusion of guilt, he still somehow bore the weight of responsibility for other lives in another country.

Amy drove the long road down the length of Argyll to Kintyre while he sat softly beside her recognising in her unaccustomed role his weakness and convalescence.

While he had never visited this part of the country before he regarded it listlessly as if the landscape were simply being viewed on a screen. He felt no interest or attachment to the land. He was not moving with it, only passing through it.

Turning off the main road on to the estate track plunged them into a new set of sensations. The estate was densely wooded and flooded with the noise of wind in the trees and the rush of tumbling water from the peat-stained torrent that drained the valley. They drove slowly over the wooden bridges, crept through tunnels in the forest and spied the house across a rough, uncut meadow of lilac grasses. The building occupied a raised site above a bend in the river and backed into a bank of impenetrable vegetation that swept down the east side of the narrow glen. He took to the house immediately and from its main window the prospect of the steep, wooded slopes across the stream filled him with a sense of security that eased his mind and instilled a calmness for the first time in weeks.

The next morning was still and damp. Heavy overnight rains had washed the air and freshened his attitude. The seemingly vertical forest across the now raging river was still draped in mist and low cloud, creating the washed effect of a Chinese landscape painting. Into this oriental water colour he walked and explored, with growing enthusiasm, for the rest of the day.

In the evening he took the children down to the beach. While they played along the shoreline he built a fire, farther back, on the grey pebbles that

flanked the bay. Gently coaxing up the flames and their comforting warmth he was caught suddenly in a soft sadness that swept over him like the smoke from the embers. He could find no echoed childhood memory or cross reference from recent events that might have been triggered by the fire and quietly relaxed into the mood, calmly watching the sticks glow and flare through tear-filled eyes. Clearing himself and coughing away the emotion he looked out over the still, grey reach of the sound to the great, whale-backed mass of Arran. At this distance the mountains appeared rounded, the peaks a faint detail and the famous airy ridges a mere suggestion of tone and line that reminded him of McCulloch's brushwork. He stared at the view recalling the walks and climbs he had enjoyed there and the incidents that had filled the days. Through the last of his snuffles he realised that nothing was wrong. In fact, everything, for the moment, was quite all right.

The weather throughout May had slowly improved to near perfection and he had gradually built up his confidence revisiting many of the local crags with old friends.

Successive weekends in Glen Coe and Ardgour and the prospect of a break with the family in the Lake District had primed him to the point of quiet enthusiasm. As he walked down from his office towards Central Station on a June evening he was delighted with the thought of having just secured a house on Colonsay for the summer, a venture the family had decided on and he endorsed. He acknowledged that a dull shadow still lingered from the past but the potential of the gloomy reverie was broken as he met some colleagues under the portico of the station and the conversation turned to business and Saturday's sporting fixtures as they headed for their suburban trains.

She was quite happy, for once, to see him thinking about rock climbing. They had talked over the event many times, reasoning out his feelings of inadequacy and incompetence and she now felt that it was a process of time before he rationalised his emotions and dissolved the feeling of total failure that he equated with the notion of no return, no second chance. Lying in the sun she looked out over the top of her book, past the children playing on the low tide sands, to where he was perched, bouldering on the rounded scoop of a sea cliff. She was aware that climbing demanded all his concentration and that in the precision of his next move there was no room for distraction. A good therapy for the big lump. Her eyes followed him as he moved on to a prow of sandstone and she considered how like dancing his movements were as his fingers took the weight and feet skipped out across pebble pocked conglomerate to weathered holds above a rash of barnacles.

Around the seaward edge of the arête came the tang of verdant obstacles and he wondered whether to traverse above the weed and kelp or follow the

crackline in the wall overhead. A score of oystercatchers flighted a path over the summer tidefall, trilling their way across the beach and down the golden hoop of the bay fringed, below him, by the smoothed dross of stone that made a kind of rounded sea scree. He paused on a good hold to watch them pass and shake out the fatigue from his arm and chalky fingers then moved round the arête and into a hidden niche at the foot of an open corner. Squatting in the sheltered sunshine he viewed the dull smudge of the Ross of Mull nestling out on the western rim. He had not visited Iona for many years but the persistent and enduring nature of the site, its capacity to absorb the worst from history and offer a continuing solidity to the present, seemed to mesh with the recent conversations he had had with Amy. The distant island became personalised in his thoughts. They were both burdened with the weight of history and hindsight but he was not sure if their durability was despite or because of it.

The little squadron flew again between him and Amy sitting reading. He was aware she was watching him with that head-to-one-side aspect that always intimated she was thinking seriously. He thought of the balance of their lives together – still together after so many years. An image fixed in his mind of her on the trip to Coigach they had made before they were married. He remembered that specific day when the ragged ridge of Suilven lay like a blade against the wind, slashing cloud remnants apart that were combing over the serrations of Stac Pollaidh. Somewhere there he had found and grasped the handhold in her heart.

A soft sadness blew over the sea to envelope him, enhancing his sense of the immensity of the landscape, his small span within it and the finite nature of its range. He could feel for them all, sense the thrills and shocks that composed the rhythms of athletes out on the dun expanses of thin holds, the charged panoramas of the striders of alpine snow ridges, the eternal peace shrouding the smashed and shattered, locked in the blue tombs of frozen, tumbled rivers, and the cathedral quiet for those resting at life's last belay. Their life lines were route lines which mirrored the arêtes and edges of the ranges which contracted and echoed in the scores and scars that cramponed boots had gifted or nails donated in the rain, before they all ascended to the stars, and took to the hills again.

He glanced again towards Iona, grinning to himself.

AGAG'S GROOVE

By Hamish Brown

CUTTING the rope was simply an improbable ploy of the fiction hacks. The forensic boys would be on to that one at once. 'Climb when you're ready,' he yelled down to his invisible partner on January Jigsaw. 'Climbing,' came the billowy response, as Betty began to pick her way up the neat holds. Rannoch Wall would make anyone want to climb. She just wished she'd got Allan to take her years ago. She liked it when Norrie was there too. He was so much more gentle than her husband. But she'd have to be careful - ca canny - in case Allan thought there was anything going between them. Which there wasn't, 'mair's the pity', she muttered as she lifted a runner off a pink porphyry spike. 'Keep your mind on whit you're daein,' she told herself.

Allan and Norrie were partners in a garden ornament business. 'Selling garden gnomes' as Betty taunted him on their last screaming match. 'And whit's wrang wi' garden gnomes?' Allan had responded. 'Oh, naethin. It's jist you become mair an mair like them: Dopey, Sleepy, Grumpy.'

'Shut up then, Snow White,' he'd yelled and stomped out to slam the door and set the plates on the dresser quivering.

His anger was the worse because he knew she was hitting too damn close to the mark. They were overdrawn and in trouble and he'd no desire for Betty to discover that or, more importantly, her stuck-up father who was so correct and proper in everything; like ensuring Allan had taken out a good life policy before they married. (Betty, of course, was already covered, had been since birth.) 'Don't want my little lily left in the lurch, what?', he'd admonished in that smug voice of his.

The last straw had come with the patio Allan and Norrie had agreed to do for the colonel. At the last moment he'd wriggled out from his commitment and they'd been left with the materials, some of which were already looking tatty or rusting. They'd threatened the colonel for breach of contract but he pointed out there was no contract, he'd signed nothing and they'd get nothing, except a big bill for the costs. The bugger was probably right too. They gave up on that one. They were pretty well giving up full stop.

The odd Sundays when they could escape claustrophobic Helensburgh and head for the Coe were treasured respites from the pressures of failure. Allan and Norrie had come together through climbing and it had seemed a good idea, three years ago, to set up their own business. '70% of households in Scotland have gardens which are actually looked after,' he'd quoted. 'Man, there's the market.'

Somehow it didn't quite work. People who'd sink 25 quid for a fancy conifer or a weeping cherry grudged parting with even a tenner for some

concrete eye-catcher. 'No taste, folks,' Norrie complained. Allan thought it was probably the opposite. Too many effing people had better taste than to want garden rubbish. Betty's father had creased himself when he'd set eyes on the first Seven Dwarfs set they'd stocked. He did not like his father-in-law; nor his daughter if it came to that.

He'd first suggested she came along on a climbing trip with the gloating hope of scaring the shit out of her but she'd taken to it. Liked it! And she was such a cocksure little bitch she never even noticed how she rubbed Allan's nose in it with her new enthusiasm. Betty's beloved father had - naturally - raised hell about her climbing. It was far too dangerous. Allan's efforts at explaining that Betty always had a rope on and couldn't fall, not seriously, never got through. 'You might fall,' he'd remonstrate. Allan thought: 'The way things are goin I'm mair like tae jump.'

'What's that you're muttering?'

'Nethin. Nethin. It's quite safe . . .'

But explaining that the old man was more at risk every time he stepped into his Rover had not gone down well. He tried again. 'If I'm leading I've got protection on. Besides, Norrie's usually seconding.'

'Well, he's probably more reliable.'

'Thanks.'

He kept very quiet about the fact that on a few recent occasions Betty had led routes. Norrie had had a job keeping a straight face while Allan and Betty argued over that. 'Your old man'll kill me!'

'Only if I kill masel,' she countered. 'And who's going to tell? You? Norrie?'

She reckoned she could lead January Jigsaw, or Agag's Groove. Rannoch Wall's exposure was exhilarating rather than scary. It was that verticality that first put the idea of mischief into Allan's head. If she peeled it would be easy to cut through the taut nylon. You could say a sharp edge cut it - except the experts could tell it was a knife cut. There must be some way though. Alas, Allan's preoccupation led to another row on the drive home, which started with Betty's shot across his bows: 'Right talkative tonight aren't we?', and only eased off when they ate their chip suppers in the lay-by before home. Actually laying hand on money enough to save their business as well as being rid of Betty seemed a really brilliant idea. But how?

Then, bit by bit, it came to him. Just a straight slip would do. At the top of the climb. There would be no evidence with that. Or would there? Betty's father could well be suspicious and if there was any probing, sufficient motive would be discovered. Men had murdered for a lot less. Maybe he could do something to the car next time she took it off by herself, her next 'Keep Fit' night? But that's all movie stuff too. He hadn't a clue how to go about it, never mind the time needed. The climbing accident

would be best. Maybe encourage her to solo something and con her about the grade. Hope she'd fall. He'd not even be present - no suspicions then. She was too turned on for that though, she knew just how well she did climb and she'd want to read the description anyway. Oh shit! There had to be a way. If only he could fix it so he wasn't there. Nobody would make any dangerous background checking then.

The answer came to him in the owl hours of night. He'd get Norrie to do it. Take her up something. Agag's would do. Promise it was to study the line carefully so she could lead it the following weekend - except there wouldn't be one. When she unroped at the top it would only take a wee shove. People were often careless at the top of a climb. Accidents had happened like that before and never any alarm bells ringing. Great!

Except Norrie's eyebrows vanished into his fringe at the very idea. Sure, he knew they weren't exactly a happy family but that's no reason to actually kill the wife. And by proxy. Use him! 'You think I'm effin mad?'

'No, just about tae gang bankrupt,' Allan sneered. 'Wi the insurance money we're aff the hook. Betty's nethin tae me.'

'Well, I like her.'

'Merry her then!'

They argued blue murder every moment they had in private. Norrie simply wasn't the type to do such a thing but neither was he the type to relish the prospect of bankruptcy. A direct threat from the bank had him sick and sweaty with fear. He couldn't even despair at the thought that there was no way out. There was. He looked at the letter in his hands as they sat at the table in the corner of a shed in the yard that served as office and, without lifting the tired eyes, he squeezed out the words Allan longed for: 'I'll dae it'.

'Good lad,' Allan yelled, and came round to thump him on the back. He turned away without looking and nearly knocked over the figure of a winged Mercury that they'd been forced to bring inside. A prim lady of known determination had sworn next time when she came to collect her concrete bunnies, she was going to drape a towel round the statue to hide its immodesty. With luck, Allan thought, the old witch would never collect her bunnies. Once they'd got the insurance money they'd be away, at least he would be.

'Onythin just tae be shot o' this lot,' Norrie sighed.

'Exactly,' Allan giggled, to earn a glare, 'But I'll be killin twa burds wi the ane stane: the failed business and the failed wife, baith the gither'. It was a pity they couldn't do Betty's father as well but then, they'd have no call to see the old man ever again once the proprieties had been attended to.

With the ploy determined Allan even became quite pleasant to his wife which simply drew the response: 'It's no like you. You're efter summit ah bet.' Allan just stopped himself from crowing, 'Hoo much dae you bet?'

He knew and inwardly purred like a cat watching a dinner party and sure of a saucer of cream at the end.

They carried off the play quite effectively. The plan was that three of them would do Agag's together, then the following Sunday Betty could lead Norrie up it, that way placating the old man who objected to husband and wife ropes, even though they had no kids or dependants. But the second weekend would never be.

Allan, as planned, carefully 'forgot' his rock boots so dropped the others off at Jacksonville while he rushed on up to the Fort to rent another pair from Nevisport. He'd be back to join them after Agag's. Betty was quite happy with this and Norrie, licking his lips, nodded agreement.

He, poor lad, tried not to think what he was going to do as they wended up to the Buachaille through the heather. In some ways he was lucky being so feckless. He couldn't think deeply. It was as if the worn path through the cloying heather was a track on which he was set like a controlled toy train. It was all so routine and familiar. They hardly even talked as they put on their rock boots and harnesses and checked all the clobber. Norrie led off - surprising himself at his calm, but it was the set gracefulness of long practice. He was so programmed that he just shut out what he must do at the top of the climb.

He sat on the big ledge to bring Betty up. Norrie could feel the red rock warm on his back. His feet hung out over space. There was a solitary blaeberry on the ledge and he popped it into his mouth. 'Climb when you're ready.'

'Climbing.'

He watched her picking her way up, hands moving gently, fondling the rock, then gripping while she arched out and up on to the next foothold. She climbed steadily and well. Betty wasn't a bad soul really. It was just Allan riled her so. Ach, life had got everything the wrong way round he felt. And to escape its toils and coils he was going to commit murder. They'd never used the word in going over the details. It was 'an accident' always. But the doing of it was his responsibility even if Allan often reminded him they would both be equal beneficiaries.

'It wouldna bother me,' Allan had boasted. Norrie thought: 'No, it wouldn't; you're a richt bastard.'

The pitches were climbed steadily. The very routine of climbing is one of its comforts. You get lost in it and everyday cares drop away beyond the horizon. Norrie reached the top, pulled in some slack and went straight to the belay. He'd done Agag's three times before and didn't forget moves or such details. It was the finest V. Diff in Scotland. Classic.

'Climb when you're ready.'

'Climbing.' Came Betty's echo.

Norrie grimly muttered 'Falling' to himself and then switched off the

nasty near future to concentrate on taking in the rope. Betty let her eyes sweep over the Moor, with the threads of roads laid on its sequined serge and the cocked hat of Schiehallion away in the east, then turned to the kindly rock. Aye, she could lead this no bother. She went up the last pitch and pulled over the top onto Crowberry Ridge.

As she did so, Norrie stood up, throwing the colourful coils of rope off his legs and began undoing the belay. Betty unclipped the rope from her harness and began untying the knot. She turned, as one always does, to look down the sheer 300ft route just climbed. It was Norrie's moment.

'Betty.' She turned her head to see his outstretched arm. 'Would you like a sweetie?' There were two or three in his palm and she chose a mint. This was all part of their routine too. 'Ta.'

They sat in silence (but for a plane high overhead and the occasional rattle of a mint on teeth) and Betty thought happily ahead to the next weekend. Apart from bloody Allan, life was pretty good. Norrie was thinking of Allan too, imagining him coming back from the Fort, the intended hours' late, not to find flashing lights and the bustle of police and mountain rescue but an irate wife and a silent partner sitting at the car park. They would be ruined. And so what? He just couldn't do it.

He reached out a tentative hand and laid it briefly on Betty's shoulder so she turned to look at him. He gave her a smile that held a hundred secrets in it. Betty smiled back. She put out her tongue with the mint on it like a little girl might have done. They laughed.

Allan, having seen them set off, had gunned the car along the straight to Alltnafeidh and on for the Coe, his voice roaring out a song. They were saved! What a sucker Norrie was, being persuaded like that. Allan just hoped he could be the person who broke the news to the old man: the shock would be as good as sticking a knife in him. The bastard had even set this up with all his talk a few years back about having adequate life insurance. Well, the insurance would certainly save some lives, and the detestable business.

It did too, though he never knew how - not in the way he'd planned.

He swept round the bend at the Study just as a dithery old couple pulled in to see the falls. This distracted him so that he momentarily took his eyes off the road and was slow in reacting to a bulky, long HGV grinding up the glen. All he could do was swerve. The barrier bounced him back and he was exhaling a Whew! when the tail of the lorry smashed in the corner of the windscreen and removed half his head in a single stroke.

Betty's father was more smug than ever when the insurance cheque came through. And his little lily blossomed. Maybe it was as well however, that a year later, he did not see her solo Agag's Groove while her fiáncé, Norrie, looked on. While they were climbing on the Buachaille he was hoeing the rose bed he'd planted round the statue of the winged Mercury which Norrie had sold to him.

TWO'S COMPANY

By P. J. Biggar

ALLAN was poking the potatoes, and I was relaxing by the fire, when a figure burst into the room. The candle flames guttered wildly and snow-flakes eddied into the corners.

'Jesus what a fright.'

'Sorry. Didn't mean to startle you-like.' The figure was male, tall. The rucksack and ropes he carried were plastered with snow. He still had his head torch on, and all I could see of his face were gleaming white teeth. He lowered his sack and sank on to the rough wooden bench.

'God, were we glad to see that light.'

'We?'

'Christ, I was forgetting.' He stood up and hurried outside. Allan and I exchanged glances,

'Just our luck, eh?'

'You don't get peace for long, Mick, not bloody anywhere.'

'Not nowadays.'

Presently, the young man returned with another snow-covered figure, a woman. He helped her off with her sack.

'Anyone else out there?' Allan's voice came from the window. 'No, there's just us two.'

'Good, then I'll bring the candle to the fire.' Allan resumed his seat. I sat on the bench by the table, leaving the chair by the fire vacant. The woman sat down hesitantly.

'Weren't you sitting here?'

'That's okay, I'm cooking.'

'Thanks.' Her damp clothing started to steam. She leant forward, pale with exhaustion, shivering, stretching out her hands to the fire. Presently, she unzipped her fashionable, purple, fleece jacket and shook out her long hair; it was red, but what shade I couldn't tell in the poor light.

'You've had a rough walk.'

'It was dreadful.' She covered her face with her hands, and for a moment I thought she was going to give way to tears.

'Would you two like some tea? The water's just boiled.' Allan's gruff tones jerked her back. 'Have you got mugs?' The young man fumbled in the packs.

She sniffed the steam from her bright yellow mug. 'This isn't just tea is it?'

'Aye, well, *you* were lucky, you looked all in.' Allan chuckled grimly, amused at his own meanness. I picked up my flask and gestured to the young man.

'That's okay, mate, I've got some in the bag. I'll get it later.'

'Where did you walk from?'

'The far end of the loch, it's a bloody long way.'

'Best part of eight miles.'

'It wouldn't have been so bad in the daylight, but we'd a long drive first.'

Her accent was much farther south. 'We came from London.'

'You're not a Londoner though?' Allan looked at the young man.

'No mate, Birkenhead originally-like, but I work in London now.'

'We couldn't get off work until late Friday,' the woman explained. 'Even with getting up at four we didn't make Edinburgh until this afternoon.'

'You must be keen.' Allan's tone was poised between admiration and irony. 'Oh we are mate, dead keen, aren't we Val?'

'Oh sure.' Her tone was different. Perhaps she was just exhausted. She was staring moodily into the fire. I let my eyes rest on her face for a few moments. Surely, she was much older than him? He was mid-20s at most. She had a lithe figure to go with her good looks, but I'd have said 35 and she might have been more. The young man didn't seem to notice the way she spoke.

'Down home y'know, I read books all the time 'bout the climbing up here, Glencoe, Nevis, the 'Gorms and that. It's really frustrating-like not bein' able to get up here very often. You get all the gear, and you know just what you want to go for, and then you don't get the time off work. And then sometimes, when you do get here, there's no snow to be seen an' you could tear your hair out, honest. They say it's Global Warming, but all I know is it's bloody infuriating.' We knew what he meant; we'd been young too. 'Anyway,' he said, half apologetically, 'what've you guys been doing?'

'We did the Ridge today,' Allan told him.

'Never. Great. That's top of our list isn't it Val?'

'So you say.'

'Aye well, we were only too pleased to get back down. The wind got up this afternoon and it was very tricky finding the way off. It's a long route, You need good conditions. 'We were lucky.'

'Yeah the Ridge. There's a picture in that book by old Whatsisname, remember Val? The sun all glinting on the snow. And you can see the pinnacles reflected in the water . . .'

'It wasn't anything like that today . . .'

'And there's this bloke dressed in red just getting to the top, You can see the rope trailing back over the snow . . .'

' . . .and it'll be worse now with all this fresh snow,' I added.

'The sun's just settin' behind the hills and everything's glowing-like. Yeah, the Ridge, it'll be great . . . Sorry guys, I got a bit carried away there, what were you saying?'

'Oh nothing,' said Allan, 'forget it. How's that meat doing, Mick? These tatties have been ready for a while.'

Last thing before turning in, Allan and I were outside in the shelter of the gable. The wind had dropped a little and it was no longer snowing, but no stars were visible.

Allan rinsed his mouth and spat. 'She's old enough to be his mother.'

'Isn't that a bit harsh? She is a good bit older I'll grant you . . .'

'A toy boy.'

'Aye, but she's fond of him.'

'She's doubtless fond of a bit of him.'

'You're too cynical.'

'I know. I'm getting old. But just our luck, eh? A pair of half-wits from the South! It just ruins the atmosphere.'

'They're a bit worrying, aren't they?'

'Are they?'

'You know perfectly well you tried to warn him off the Ridge.'

'A waste of breath.'

'She was listening.'

'What's the use of that?'

Deep in the night I was still awake. I don't sleep well before climbing. I don't sleep well the night after a long route either. Allan says he's the same. But I try not to let it bother me. I just lie there quietly and rest, and maybe I'll drop off at last for a couple of hours.

'Billy.' I heard Val's urgent whisper 'Billy, are you awake?'

Yeah, just. What's the matter?'

'Billy, I'm not sure about this Ridge thing.'

'Ah you'll be fine, love, you'll see.'

'No, but Billy I'm serious. I feel exhausted as it is.'

'You'll be all right girl, trust me!'

'You know I trust you.'

'Well then?'

'Couldn't you *hear*? They were trying to warn us.'

'Ah, they're gettin' a bit old and cautious like.'

'They're experienced.'

'Look! Just trust me will yer? You'll be okay.'

'For God's sake stop saying that.' There was silence for a few moments. I think she might have been crying. I heard a rustle as if he had put his arm round her.

'There are times,' I heard her hiss, 'when I wish I'd never answered that bloody ad.' He chuckled softly and no more was said.

So that was how this unlikely relationship had come about. The papers were full of them. Drowsily, I wondered what his ad. had said . . .

Young man GSOH into mountain-
eering and pubs seeks mature wo-
man for fun times and maybe more . . . ?

And why had she answered it? Divorced? Deserted? Looking for something different? Perhaps in the beginning she hadn't wanted much: a bit of company, some fun, but after a while liking set in, and after that . . .

An alarm woke me while it was still dark. I heard her groan. Billy shot out of his bag and made for the door. I couldn't hear any wind. In a few seconds he was back.

'C'mon Val girl. It's a great day. There's no wind and the sun's just gettin' up.' She groaned again and rolled over. A match spurted and I heard him fumbling with their stove; the gas canister was low and he cursed impatiently.

Allan's estimate of the weather was more cautious. 'It's not so bad now, right enough. The wind's away and there's a gleam of sun, but there's a big bank of cloud out to the West.'

When I'd finished the mug of tea he brought me, I got out reluctantly and went to sniff the air myself. Even as I watched, the cloud was moving in and strangling the faint rays of sunlight. A herd of deer moved slowly across the hillside, leaving deep tracks. I looked up at the snow-laden branches of the old rowan tree by the door; tiny drops of water were starting to form and trickle down the grey bark, leaving black trails. I turned back towards the smell of frying bacon.

Billy was hurrying about, making preparations. In between humming snatches of song, he laughed uproariously at his own jokes. Val sat at the table, trying to force down a plate of some cold, modern cereal. She looked even older in the morning light, but there was a kind of defiance in her expression. I took to her. Allan was quietly attending to the frying pan.

I got some porridge, refilled my mug and sat down.

'How do you feel this morning?'

'Not too bad thanks.' She smiled bravely. 'I was really exhausted when we got here last night.'

'You looked very tired. Did you get some sleep?'

'Yes, I got off eventually. I hope we didn't disturb you? We talked for a while.'

'Oh that's okay, I never sleep well after climbing.'

'I'm sorry.'

Billy was zipping expensive gaiters around new-looking plastic boots. 'You 'bout ready Val?'

'Give me a moment, love, I haven't finished my tea.'

'Are you heading for the Ridge, then?' Allan's voice came from the window.

'Oh yeah.'

'The weather doesn't look too promising to me.'

'It's a lot better than yesterday.'

'There's a lot of cloud coming in.'

'And the temperature's rising,' I put in. 'With all this fresh snow, you could have problems.' He wasn't really listening. I looked across at Val. She was pale but resigned. Perhaps she thought the weather would break before they got on to the climb, or that she could talk him out of it when she got him on her own. She pushed the remains of the cereal away and finished her tea. I made one last effort.

'Allan and I were thinking of having a short day on the lower crag,' I said. 'The ice should still be thick there, and the routes don't have much snow above them.' Val knew what I was trying to do, and she smiled. Our eyes met. Billy was already outside; we could hear him stamping impatiently.

'It's all right,' she said. 'I'd better humour him.' She spoke as if he was a wayward child. The door banged shut and the sound of the Primus was suddenly loud.

'We tried,' I said. 'Pointless, wasn't it?'

The lower crag, which wasn't so far from the bothy, gave us a good, short day's entertainment. Water was starting to run behind the ice, but we found a pleasant chimney system with a safe, rocky finish. As we stowed the gear at the top, the wind was starting to rise again. We hadn't seen the sun since early morning.

'What d'you think? Will they have pushed it?'

'He's daft enough.'

'She's got some sense.'

'Aye,' said Allan, 'but the worst mistake she ever made was answering that advert.'

'You heard them too?'

'Couldn't help it.'

All the way back, the wind was rising. Cloud obliterated the tops. As we crossed the last burn it began to rain. Surely, the others would have abandoned their climb early in the day as conditions worsened? But when the cottage came in sight there was no smoke from the chimney. The place was empty and exactly as we'd left it. I made tea while Allan lit the fire.

After supper the waiting began in earnest. We put a candle in the window; there was nothing more we could do. Outside, the south-westerly was rising to a gale. Wet snow slid from the roof, making us startle uneasily. Allan immersed himself in *Pride and Prejudice*. I skimmed through the log book. We had taken nine hours on the Ridge; the longest time I could find recently, was 11, and that had been a party of four. Val

and Billy had now been out for 13 hours. Several times we thought we heard cries and went outside, but each time, when we extinguished our lights, the darkness was unbroken. On the last occasion it was nearly midnight,

‘What’s the plan then?’ Allan’s tone was fatalistic. ‘It’s pointless going up there now.’

‘Of course.’

‘First light, one of us should go out for help and the other up to the corrie, I suppose?’

Pausing as I toiled up the long slope in the early morning chill, I looked back, Far beyond the loch I could see a tiny, black figure nearing the top of a rise, Allan had gone by torchlight, well before dawn; he was going well. The wind had dropped again in the early hours and the sky had cleared.

‘Stupid! Stupid!’ Silence threw the words back. If only they’d been content to wait for a day and a night. Here was a perfect day for climbing. Sharp frost had turned the melting snow to crisp snow-ice; even the lower snowfields bore my weight.

Sweat soaking my back, I hurried on, though in truth I didn’t know why I was hurrying. Billy and Val had now been out for more than 25 hours. It came to me how easily I used their names. They were almost complete strangers. We had exchanged a few hundred words and overheard a conversation in the night. We had made assumptions about them. They would have discussed us too. Little currents of warmth and cold had been created:

‘He’s a toy-boy . . .’

‘See that Allan, what a grumpy old sod . . .’

‘Mick’s nice.’

‘He fancies you.’

‘Don’t be silly . . .’

The ground grew steeper below the lip of the corrie where the half-iced burn flowed down the rocks. I paused to put on crampons.

As the Ridge came into view, I got Allan’s binoculars out and scanned every foot. Nothing. Any steps would have been removed by the high wind and thaw. I paid particular attention to the long, hanging funnel which led through steep rocks to the final slopes. To gain this you had to come out on the flank of the Ridge. I’d been very relieved to get it behind me two days before. Below, slabs fell in unbroken waves to a short wall rising from the scree. With masses of fresh snow lying in the funnel, and yesterday’s thaw, it was an obvious place for trouble. Sure enough, there were dirty brown marks on the slabs, and beyond the frozen lochan I thought I could see the tell-tale features of an avalanche cone.

And I was right. Piled high on the steep screes and craglets above the lochan, the snout rose in a darker, lumpy mass, merging with the purer white of the surrounding slopes. I clambered forlornly upwards over the debris. There was almost no chance of anyone being alive in this, but what else could I do? I needed to find something, an axe, a helmet, a glove . . .

I don't know how long I stumbled and lurched forwards and backwards, prodding and poking, perhaps an hour, maybe longer. I couldn't find a thing. At length I felt so weary that I sank down on a large lump of debris and sat with my head between my hands and my eyes closed.

Why? They were only taking innocent recreation. They weren't high on drugs. They hadn't robbed a train. The question, of course, was foolish. I knew that perfectly well. Providence was not a net for fools to fall into when they took bad decisions. They'd had a choice. Nobody compelled them to attempt the Ridge. Hadn't we tried all we knew to dissuade them? What had happened to them was entirely a result of their being where they should never have been at the time. Today it would have been safe, yesterday it wasn't. They were warned, they went, they suffered the consequences. It was rough on the woman, though. She seemed a gentle person; I'd liked her. She'd been looking for something and she'd found him. Having found him, she didn't want to lose him. Her choice was not so freely made.

'A bit too harsh . . .' I muttered aloud and opened my eyes. I must have been gazing vacantly at them for several seconds before I realised what I was seeing, a few fine red hairs lifting in the cold breeze not a yard from my feet.

'Oh God!' Frantic, gentle, scrapings uncover her face, white but unmarked except for a ragged cut on the chin. No helmet. Torn off? Face is cold, no sign of life. Fingers on neck, is that a pulse? Imagination! Feel! Feel! Wishful thinking. No. It's there. It's ever so faint. Her chest is constricted. If only I can free it she might breathe better. Breathe. Idiot. Check her airways. Fingers crudely probe her mouth. No clots, no mess. Her tongue is where it should be, and it's warm, warm.

I chip at the block of compacted snow pressing on Val's chest. It won't come. Her arms are pinned back under the surface. Something else is constricting her. Then a chunk comes free and I see what: the ropes, running taught from her harness which has ridden up, they go deep into the heart of the avalanche. Cut. Cut. Bag. Knife. I slice them off. He doesn't need them now.

Fingers on neck again. Where's that pulse? Still there? Just? But is she breathing? Her lips are going blue. Christ. I've never done this before, only read about it. I take a deep, shuddering breath – is it 14 times a minute? I clamp my lips on hers and pinch her nose shut, then blow ever so gently. Her chest rises. I look at my watch . . .

AN EDWARDIAN SCRAMBLER

By Peter Warburton

THIS is written in appreciation of Arthur L. Bagley who was active on British hills from the 1890s to the 1920s and was the author of *Walks and Scrambles in the Highlands* (1914); *Holiday Scrambles in North Wales* (1920); *Holiday Rambles in the English Lake District* (1925).

To describe him as unjustifiably neglected is tempting, but it raises the question of personal judgment. 'Little known' is neutral and uncontentious: his books, only the third of which ran to a second edition (1936) have long been out of print. Although the format of mostly short chapters devoted to single expeditions should commend him to anthologists, he seems to have escaped their notice. His works are not even listed in other writers' bibliographies partly, perhaps, because many of them did not consider him a suitable role model.

If the name is familiar to a few, it will probably be because he turns up, unexpectedly, yet entirely appropriately, as Rev. A. R. G. Burn's correspondent and adviser (*Burn on the Hill*, by Elizabeth Allan, Bidean Books, 1995). Mrs Allan quotes letters from Bagley which Burn had kept between the pages of his surviving diaries of the period 1915-27. There does not appear to have ever been any thought of their joining forces on the hill – Bagley, though a strong walker, would not have been able to match the remarkably fast pace maintained by Burn (1887-1972), who was about 30 years his junior. In the Lake District volume, Burn is the Scottish mountaineering friend who spent a week at Wasdale Head without climbing Scafell Pike and then compounded the offence by conceding that it was quite a good hill and that there were 'several in Scotland inferior to it'. Bagley too, was very much his own man. Not once does he mention either Sir Hugh or Munros, evidently quite untouched by Burn's consuming ambitions on that subject. Again, although he admired E. A. Baker (1869-1941), the friend he first met by chance on Cairn Toul, his own comments on the powers of Highland proprietors and their misuse are mild and good humoured compared with Baker's views which, even when formally phrased for publication, were pretty fierce by the standards of the day. Baker appears, anonymously, as 'No. 5', the energetic leader of the party in Bagley's idiosyncratic account of an Easter weekend on Snowdon and the Glyders. Thirteen years later Baker published his version, in which the unnamed Bagley appears as 'the malingerer' (Chapter VIII of *The British Highlands with Rope and Rucksack*, Witherby, 1933, reprint EP, 1973).

Ben Cruachan was Bagley's first mountain, with the single exception of Snowdon, where he had been some years earlier on a very bad day and 'had then come to the conclusion that the game was not worth the candle'.

Starting from Taynuilt, he took the 8.42a.m. train to Loch Awe station and traversed the main ridge, coming down to the road at Bridge of Awe through a wilderness of boulders followed by a terrible time floundering in bog. It was the only day in a fortnight's holiday on which there was no rain and while he was sitting on the western summit it had been clear enough for him to see a man had appeared on the eastern peak: 'I waved my stick at him and drank his health in my last remaining drop of whisky.' He was back at his hotel at 6p.m. What he described as his conversion to the elect was complete and from then the hills absorbed all his leisure time, first as a hillwalker, later as a solo climber to Moderate and Difficult standard. The date was Monday, September 21, year irritatingly unstated. Reference to a perpetual calendar leaves 1891 as possible, but 1896 as the more likely. In an aside in the Lakes volume he lets slip the fact that he was nearly 40 years old at the time.

Bagley's books contain neither prefaces nor introductions and the texts are very sparing of autobiographical material. He was usually alone on the hill but on one outing to Cader Idris his companion of the day took the photograph that appears in the Welsh volume. It shows a solid middle-aged figure of medium height, slightly overfilling a Norfolk jacket. He was a businessman from the English Midlands, an archetypal bachelor living in lodgings. He had a fortnight's holiday a year, nearly always taken in Scotland in May-June or September-October. Christmas, Easter, Whitsuntide and many short weekends were spent in North Wales or the Lakes. So much, and little more emerges.

Some of the Scottish chapters had first appeared in the *Cairngorm Club Journal*, the *Climbers' Club Journal* and *The Field*, and this degree of fame must have been helpful in finding a publisher. Skeffington & Sons accepted the Highland volume but 1914 was hardly an auspicious launch year and it was far from being a best seller. Bagley commented ruefully on the slowness of sales in a letter to Burn, Skeffington still had copies on hand when they published the Welsh volume in 1920 and in an effort to clear their remaining stock (price 3s 6d, postage 4d) they were moved to quote the *Western Morning News*: 'A more readable record among the mountains, valleys and lochs of Scotland has probably never been published.'

One of the fascinations of the books for present day readers is the then-and-now aspect, the contrasts between the things that have changed over the past 100 years and those which have remained the same. Keepers fall into the second category. Bagley's route to Slioch was a clockwise circuit leaving the Loch Maree shore path about a mile beyond the mouth of Glen Bianasdale and finishing down that glen. Near the beginning of the ascent, at the keeper's cottage of Smiorsair, he was spotted and intercepted. 'I gave him my card and after a few minutes' chat proceeded on my way, my life having been spared this time.' Smiorsair holds no such threat today. Miss Pochin Mould passed that way in 1947 or 48. 'Beside the sparkling cascade

is a little house built in warm red Torridon sandstone. But the house is roofless, and no-one but the half-wild goats, who peer at you over the rocks inhabit the ruins of Smiorsair.’ (*Roads from the Isles* by D. D. C. Pochin Mould, Oliver & Boyd, 1950). The presentation of the card is a nice touch. It is amusing (well, slightly) to speculate on what effect it might have had on encounters 70 or 80 years later – how, for example, would that purple tweeded blackguard, with matching complexion and vocabulary who tried to order the writer off Beinn a’ Bhuid, have reacted, or the politely suspicious Glen Feshie keeper who interpreted the carrying of binoculars as evidence of criminal intent?

Bagley expresses mild indignation after an encounter in Glen Torridon. He had been caught in a heavy storm on Liathach and was tramping back along the road to Kinlochewe, soaked to the skin, when, ‘I was stopped by a keeper who asked whether I had been on the hills, and upon my admitting the soft impeachment, demanded my name and address. Surely, it is coming it a little strong when a peaceful pedestrian is stopped on the King’s highway by the myrmidons of Scottish landlordism’.

Kinlochewe was one of Bagley’s favourite haunts. He climbed the usual hills but also reports a low-level outing to Glen Tulacha which few will have undertaken. ‘The glorified tea-kettle which does duty as lake steamer on Loch Maree’ was not due to call at Letterewe, but the captain readily agreed to land Bagley, the only passenger. While he was trying to decide whether the path ran through the garden or the barn, the housekeeper emerged. However, all went well. The laird was not in residence and she was glad to talk, at length, to anybody. ‘She said the path through the barn was the right one: it seemed a curious idea to put a barn on a public path, but it is the sort of thing they do up here’. The path down Glen Tulacha marked on the map was absent on the ground and the whole way down the glen to Loch Fada was, and no doubt still is, unremitting bog. Hopes of firmer going along the shore of Loch Fada proved illusory and there was further disappointment when he reached Claonadh, a mile along the loch, where one suspects that he had entertained hopes of refreshment. ‘I found only four bare walls, and not much even of them, of what had once been a cottage. A grassy patch, a tiny oasis in the boggy desert around was the only sign that human life had existed here’. It is a long march from Claonadh via the Heights of Kinlochewe to the hotel and the weather had been poor all day, but Bagley describes it as a most delightful walk.

The glorified tea-kettle was the *SS Mabel* (tonnage 30, horsepower 35), the smallest boat in David MacBrayne’s fleet. It had been put on Loch Maree in about 1882 to offer travellers an alternative to the coach for part of the journey between the railway at Achnasheen and the coast at Poolewe or Gairloch but the emphasis soon shifted and the service – June-September only – was advertised as one stage of an all-day round trip from Gairloch to Kinlochewe by coach and steamer. By the early 1920s the

steamer service only attracts passing mention as a thing of the past. There appears to have been a concerted effort in the 1870s and 1880s to develop the tourist potential of the district. Sir Kenneth Mackenzie of Flowerdale had the Gairloch Hotel built in 1872-73 (more than 60 beds can be made up; bathing machines etc. etc.) and extensions were soon put in hand (1894 – accommodation for nearly 200 sleepers; billiard room; English service is held in the drawing room during the season etc.) Sir Kenneth was also responsible for the building of the Loch Maree Hotel in the early 1870s. Queen Victoria's patronage in 1877 has remained a selling point. At Gairloch a golf links was later added to the attractions and there was even one at Kinlochewe which has not survived.

All these developments would have passed Bagley by. In his Scottish writing he restricted himself to the matter in hand, being the route and the circumstances of the climb or the walk. There is an occasional ill-informed aside on the meaning of place-names but nothing whatever of the usual stock in trade of clan warfare, supernatural events or the pipes. He had neither camera nor, best of all, dog. There is a doctorate to be collected on *The Dog as Literary Padding* with particular reference to authors' failure to realise that the silent majority find their pets a bore.

It seems wholly unreasonable today, but climbers of the period – Munro, Robertson and Burn among others – assumed that they could rely on the provision of meals and often overnight accommodation by keepers and shepherds in the smallest and most remote of cottages. Bagley was in this respect far less guilty than most of his contemporaries. He responded gratefully to the hospitality and persisted long enough to prevail upon his hosts to accept some payment. The account of a June walk from the Glen Affric Hotel to the Glen Shiel Inn illustrates the kindness and unsolicited hospitality a stranger might receive. As he reached Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin, Bagley was overtaken by a keeper on a bicycle who offered to carry his rucksack as far as Affric Lodge, where it was not handed over until he had been given lunch. At Alltbeithe, now a Youth Hostel, but occupied by keepers until the 1930s, he was given 'a copious tea in a very comfortable room'. In heavy rain he passed Camban (then the highest occupied house in Ross-shire, described as derelict as early as 1932, but renovated as an open bothy by the MBA as a memorial to Philip Tranter (1939-66).) At Glenlicht Cottage (now in use as a club hut) he was invited in for a rest and given tea and eggs. He reached the road at 10.30p.m. and 'from there it was plain sailing for about two-and-a-half miles to the Shiel Inn'. He adds his regret that 'this old fashioned hotel has lately been suppressed'. It was shut down by the proprietor in 1907 and extended to make a shooting lodge: Baker is more vehement on the subject.

After two days confined by atrocious weather to the Inn, he continued to Kyle Rhea. There were language difficulties at the inn on the mainland side and his tea there was expensive, so he crossed the ferry to see what the inn

on the Skye side was like. The verdict was no better and he walked on to Broadford – another hard day. Both these inns too are long closed.

Bagley's usual walking clothes were a Norfolk suit i.e. jacket, waistcoat and breeches worn over a flannel shirt. He also used puttees and in the Cader Idris photo is wearing a nondescript hat. This ensemble would be as weatherproof as the garb the average hill walker was wearing until, say, 1950. In other words he got very wet quite often, and expected to. Items variously described as a thin Mackintosh cape, a Burberry cape and an Inverness cape were found to be a net disadvantage on the hill but were sometimes worn on the road. The appearance of a heavily-laden traveller apparently walking for pleasure could surprise older people in remoter parts and he was once taken for a pedlar by an old lady who, whatever he said, replied that she had no money to buy anything from him. On day outings he took sandwiches in his pocket but nothing to drink except a little whisky. The lack of a Thermos or water bottle led to hardship in dry country but he ruled them out of consideration to avoid having to carry a rucksack. He dutifully carried a compass, but found little use for it. First Aid equipment consisted of a tin of zinc ointment and space was always found for maps.

Camping or sleeping rough were evidently not regarded as possibilities, but accommodation rarely provided problems. It was only on Skye that difficulties arose. Neither Sligachan nor Elgol were satisfactory bases for the southern Cuillin and, like so many since, he failed, during his first few visits, to find a bed in Glen Brittle. The novel solution he devised was to book accommodation on the island of Soay. There was one sailing a week from Oban that stood off the island in the small hours of Wednesday, but since this did not suit his itinerary he arranged for his Soay host to pick him up one evening from the Skye coast opposite the island. Bagley left Broadford on foot at 9.30a.m., reaching Camasunary at 2.30p.m. He had brought no food in the expectation, based on previous experience, of getting a meal there. Indeed, it has been his intention to book a night's accommodation for the return journey so that he could use the farm as a starting point for Blaven. Unfortunately, he met with a cool reception: they were no longer catering for tourists. It required all his powers of persuasion to coax a way past the front door 'on the distinct understanding that I was to have my lunch and then clear out'. Bagley sounds uncharacteristically peevish and the reader instinctively sides with the woman of the house, only to be disarmed by his subsequent troubles with a lost puttee, missing stepping stones at both river crossings, an arduous shoreline circuit of Loch na Cuilce and a trackless route across the shoulder of Gars-bheinn. It was not until 8.30p.m., an hour after the appointed time, that he arrived at the approximate rendezvous. Throughout the account the reader has the feeling that Soay is going to be a poor substitute for Glen Brittle, and so it turned out.

The transition from Victorian walker to Edwardian scrambler began at the deep end. The account of his first expedition on Skye is a splendid example of how not to make a first approach to the Cuillin, a fact of which he became keenly aware as the morning progressed.

The typically precise opening sentence: 'On Monday morning I left the hotel at 8.50 for Sgurr nan Gilleann via the Pinnacles.' The climb is described as nothing more than rough walking until the top of the third pinnacle. 'Then I did rather wonder whether I should ever leave it alive... Retreat was not to be thought of, yet I could not see how I was to descend... As a matter of rock climbing... I had not even got nails in my boots for I was then so ignorant of the very ABC of rock-climbing, that I did not know that nails were necessary... The orthodox route is on the left, but I did not know that then and when I went to the left I did not like the look of it at all.' So he descends to the right, easily enough at first until faced with a situation vividly familiar to generations of us incompetents. 'The difficulty was that I could not see the lower part of the gully, or even if it had a lower part at all; also, and particularly, that though it was easy enough to drop down the smooth holdless rock into the gully it would apparently be impossible to climb up again in case I could not proceed down the gully... it was madness to descend any place which I could not reascend if necessary. Yet what was I to do? ... I sat there for 10 minutes debating the question, then suddenly let myself go and the thing was done. Fortunately, the gully descended with sweet reasonableness to the col between the pinnacles.' There were no further alarms and he reached the summit at 2.20p.m. ('which of course is a preposterous time from Sligachan, even for a novice') and returned via the West Ridge, the Bhasteir corrie and 'across the moor to the fleshpots of Sligachan'.

Bagley, like any other visitor from the distant south was anxious not to waste any part of his fortnight's holiday. He was knowledgeable about timetables, maps and accommodation possibilities, booked some of his beds in advance, knew what he wanted to do each year and had fall back plans to make the best of bad weather. In short, he was well organised, yet in the Pinnacles adventure he appears remarkably ill-informed and naive for someone in his mid-40s. Part of the reason was the scarcity of published material on anything beyond the popular routes on popular hills as described in such places as the mountain section of Baddeley's guides. Bagley, at the time something of a loner, shows no awareness of the early editions of the *SMCJ*. In the Pinnacles chapter he writes: 'The beneficent stream of mountain literature which of late has gushed forth from Keswick and elsewhere had not then begun to flow and I had not understood what lay before me.'

After that first visit Skye became an essential part of each annual holiday. Welsh weekends were used to improve his rockwork. Self taught on Tryfan

would sum it up. He was soon disregarding the Easies in favour of Moderates and selected Difficults and had become proficient enough at these levels to introduce a young nephew to Welsh climbing. The later Skye episodes reflect increasing confidence. Clach Glas – Blaven from Elgol provided some awkward moments: 'To tell the truth it, (Clach Glas) is hardly a suitable place for a solitary climber' and the 11 hours it took on an autumn day meant an unwelcome after-dark return. The Basteir Tooth on the other hand presented few problems. Having, on earlier visits, eliminated the chimney routes on the Coire a' Bhasteir side and Naismith's as all beyond his ability, he appears to have sailed up Collie's route: 'It was rather a longer climb than I had expected, but there was no real difficulty and on the way I found a few bilberries which made a most welcome extra plat to the otherwise dry lunch which I consumed in solitary state on top of the Tooth.'

From the Tooth to Bhasteir summit gave more cause for thought at the crux but: 'I picked out the least offensive route and in two or three minutes, after a strenuous heave and struggle was sprawling on top of the wall.'

By the time he tackles the Cioch he is aware of the several feasible variations on Collie's original route, the one he used, and acknowledges the help of Ashley P. Abraham's *Rock Climbing in Skye* (Longmans, 1907). Nevertheless, he came close to disaster when one foot jammed in the crack. 'I tried to wriggle it out, but could not move it. I could not see the boot, nor get down to it with a hand and for a few awful moments I thought that I was chained to that abominable slab for the remainder of my life, which in the circumstances would not be unduly prolonged.' An attempt to reach down with a knife to cut the lace and release the foot fails but, 'after some few minutes' struggling and wriggling I managed to extricate the boot and a fine object lesson against solitary climbing was lost.' He finished with an experimental ascent of the East Gully. From Sron na Ciche summit he 'sauntered slowly homewards, taking it very easily and stopping to rest occasionally.'

Bagley's one notable recorded failure in the Highlands was the Inaccessible Pinnacle, which he had particularly wanted to climb. On what must have been at least his sixth visit to Skye and so probably about his 25th hill day there, he was on Sgurr Dearg for the first time. It was a day of very strong wind from which the West Ridge of the Inaccessible Pinnacle would have offered some protection, but the prospect of the first 15 or 20 feet of that climb 'quite choked me off' and, the wind having risen to gale force, he reluctantly gave up any thought of an ascent by the easier East Ridge. Instead, he continued along the main ridge to Sgurr na Banachdich. This change of plan is the origin of one of the most telling sentences in the book. On Banachdich summit he finds two men. 'I think this is the only time that I have ever met a human being on the Coolins.'

WHO WAS GARRICK OF GARRICK'S SHELF?

By Fraser Gold

GARRICK'S SHELF on the north side of Crowberry Ridge is a name which seems to have stuck, and originates from an article by J. Allan Garrick in the 1924 *Journal*, Vol. 17 pp 1-10, describing his climb there in May 1923 with D. Biggart, although the route had earlier been climbed by Wilding and Piggot. He and Biggart had pioneered a route on the south buttress of Creag Tharsuinn, Arrochar, in April 1921 which gave 300ft. of continuous climbing. (*SMC Journal* Vol 16 p 90 and Vol 17 pp 190-193).¹ These references appear to be virtually Garrick's only public utterances in print, yet he was widely and highly talented.

Born in Sunderland in 1894, his family background was in shipping, and his own training was in engineering. He joined the Fell and Rock Climbing Club in 1915, and remained a member until 1939, attending many meets with the club in the years following the Great War. In 1920 he was appointed to the Royal Technical College (now University of Strathclyde), and retired from there in 1960 as Senior Lecturer in the Department of Heat Engineering, being in charge of the drawing section.

Glasgow-based, he joined the SMC at the same time, attending New Year meets at Killin and Blair Atholl, and getting out into the Scottish hills with friends or alone. He had been introduced to the SMC by J. W. T. H. Fleming, who took him as guest to the New Year Meet at Loch Awe in 1919. (*SMCJ*, No. 15, p272). His strongest contacts were with his original club, however, and it was with G. R. Speaker and C. F. Holland, eminent members of that club, that he visited the Alps in August 1922. They climbed together in the Dolomites, but he ended up being involved in a guided climb on the Matterhorn. His climbing diary describes how he had lost a boot descending a rock chimney two days before his intended return to Britain and he was sight-seeing in Zermatt when a young British lady invited him to join her. This necessitated buying a new pair of boots in the morning and setting off in the warm sun. The guides treated Garrick as a novice, which he resented, and he regarded some of the route-finding as bizarre. He later discovered that the guides were not local and did not know the mountain well.

In 1923 and 1924 he was again climbing in the Alps, now including Mont Blanc and the Chamonix Aiguilles in his experience. He retained his membership of the French Alpine Club until 1939. In 1926 he married Isabelle Michell, also a climber, and they often spent two months in the pre-war summers climbing in various places in Scotland, and then turned their attention to Norway, the Lofotens and points north, visiting Lyngen in 1939.

¹ Garrick and Biggart had been climbing together in the Lake District before Garrick moved to Glasgow, but how the initial contact was made is not known.

Garrick possessed the SMC 1921 volume which had the revised Munro's Tables, and kept a record of the summits and tops which he and his wife had completed, updating this to 1944. In these days of 'Munro bagging' to find that by the end of his life he had done less than 70 seems incredible, but he never had a car, and had his favourite areas to which he kept returning (Arran, Glencoe, Torridon, Achallader, Kintail). In any case, even the SMC 1921 publication seemed to assume that climbing in Scotland was mainly training for the Alps. His climb on Crowberry Ridge was, in fact, a training outing to build up fitness for a four week spell in the Alps.

A climbing diary in two volumes has survived, covering the period 1915 to 1922, with a gap for war service. This and the two SMC articles reveal an enthusiastic climber, who may have sated himself on long summer holidays, but used days on the mountains to the full. On FRCC meets, he would do several climbs in the morning, then several more with different climbers later on, and then add some solo climbs before the day was done. He seemed to manage to stay on for days after the official meets as well. Short in stature, he often describes himself having to improvise for lack of reach. Technically, he observed how boots or 'rubbers' were appropriate for various conditions or types of rock. In February 1921 he was climbing the NE face of Stobinian alone and had to cut steps for 500 feet (no crampons then!). His article 'Eating Between Meals' (SMCJ 1925, Vol. 17, p.190ff) gives a sense of the pure enjoyment he found in impromptu exploration of hills and crags in between his longer planned expeditions. During his Alpine holiday in 1922, he was involved in a mountain rescue, and commented that despite the potential seriousness of the situation, he could not help but dwell on the beauties of the sunrise. The outcome was happy, indeed hilarious, and is beautifully described.

Knowledge of Norway, and his photographic record of climbs amongst the fjords, made him useful to Naval Intelligence during the second world war, and he was released from the College to work in Oxford² alongside Norwegians, providing detailed topographical information, maps and models for various operations. Later he was interpreting angled air photographs at the time of the V2 rocket discoveries, and working on map formats prior to D Day. He submitted an extensive report on the interpretation of low angled, oblique perspective air photographs, but clearly there was more to investigate, and he returned to the subject post war, using initially his own photographs of the Trossachs to test his hypotheses. Over the years, he extended his study more theoretically to include atmospheric refraction and other factors, but never submitted his Ph.D. thesis. All his calculations had to be done without benefit of computers, and he was never satisfied with the results.

During and after the war, he and his wife had mountain holidays in Scotland, sometimes setting off late in winter and coming down in the

² In the Inter Services Topographical Department (ISTD).

moonlight, or just blundering on in the dark. We might not advise this now, but he really knew his mountains, mapping them mentally and adding his own details to OS. tracings. Post war, they once climbed An Teallach twice in as many days, combining routes described by Wilding in *The Rucksack Club Journal* of 1923,³ which Garrick had kept in his own library. The journeys made partly explain the huge gaps in the Munro list. For example, their preferred route to the Kintail hills was by train to Mallaig, steamer to Kyle, bus to Dornie, then Totaig ferry to Letterfearn. With long walks, Ben Attow end to end, the Five Sisters and the Saddle were accessible, but the remoter Affric hills and the South Cluanie ridge less so. There seems to have been no inclination to claim Munros anyway, as the Glenfinnan-Ardgour-Ardnamurchan triangle attracted frequent visits. Acharacle was reached by train to Glenfinnan, then boat down Loch Shiel, alongside sheep, horses and other cargo. The same service gave them access to Roisbheinn and the other hills now normally reached by road from the north. On visits in the 1960s they watched the road from Lochailort to Acharacle being built. Glencoe likewise was normally reached by train to Ballachulish. Postwar the hill walks became increasingly of geological or botanical interest. Garrick was a great rock gardener, and made his own composts from stone brought down from the hills.

Pre-war, Garrick had given a lecture in Glasgow which greatly interested Dougie Scott, who subsequently visited the Garricks with Bill Murray. In April 1940 he gave a lecture to 154 SYHA members in Cathcart. He was also invited to give a lecture to the newly formed Glasgow University Mountaineering Club by its first secretary Bill Crombie, and advised Crombie on rope work and on climbing in the Lake District in the summer of 1941. Post war, Garrick gave a lecture to the JMCS in the Saltire Club, Glasgow (January 1946), and to the Grampian Club in Dundee on his Norwegian expeditions (November 1952). There were no further public lectures.

Between 1952 and 1958 the Garricks revisited Lyngen each year except 1954, and he was in touch with members of the Showell Styles expedition of 1952, a Newcastle University expedition, and with Dougie Scott and Tom Weir either side of their Norwegian explorations. The 1952 visit was planned as an expedition, with Eric Maxwell, a climber from Dundee, also involved. This was the last time Garrick described himself as being roped up for climbs. The main purpose of these visits was topographical survey, using his photographs and sextant observations to fill in gaps or correct details in existing maps. In this he was helped by Kare Landmark, keeper of the geological collections at Tromsø museum, who provided him with German air photographs from 1941, poor as they were with cloud cover, and a lack of contrast in the snow-covered landscape. He sent reports and

³ John Wilding *Misty Days on An Teallach*.

⁴ W. H. Murray, *Undiscovered Scotland* p109.

rock samples to Tromso after his visits. In the late 1930s, Garrick had climbed with Bill Murray,⁴ and Bill regularly visited the Garricks prior to his call-up and posting overseas. They shared the same tastes in music as well as mountains. The friendship was renewed at the end of the war when Bill was released from POW camp, and they met up in Oxford and later in Milngavie. Garrick was a much older man than Murray, and declined invitations to go climbing again. In a more general way, Garrick was a very private man, and this outline of his life would have been impossible to reconstruct without the early climbing diaries, various photograph albums, and pocket diaries which he kept from 1940 to 1982.

References:

SMCJ articles and other references as noted in the text.

Tarn Crag Buttress in *FRCC Journal* No. 15, Vol. V, 1921.

Short note claiming first ascent, Garrick's authorship identified only by initials.

Some notes on the Flora of the Lyngen Peninsula, North Norway in the *Scottish Rock Garden Club Journal*, April, 1958 pp 16-21.

A beautifully written article identified only the initials A. G.

Thanks are due to Douglas Scott, Bill Crombie and Anne Murray for information and help, and to Jim Ingram for giving me access to personal papers.

J. A. Garrick's Climbing Diaries 1915-1922, photograph albums of 1935 and 1936, annotated copy of second edition of *Munro's Tables* published as part of the *SMC General Guide* Vol. 1, Section A 1921, pp 109-144 with the revised *Munro's Tables* and other papers are now deposited together in the SMC Archive in the National Library of Scotland.

Alan Garrick died in 1996 just short of his 102nd birthday.

INHERITANCE

The aging patina of iron,
darkened into years.
He rubbed oil on the shaft
and put it away in cloths.
When I unwrapped it
the slow aroma of activity,
the walk in and wonder,
coired the attic.
I grasped the haft,
wielded its cleaving edge,
turned and parried
its preserved length.
I twirl you in mind again.
Your timeless smile,
your polished strength,
rope burnished, reliable.

Donald Orr.

EXPEDITION TO THE DARK ISLAND – GREENLAND 1997

By I. H. M. Smart

John Hay organised, at very short notice, a two-man boat journey into the inner recesses of Scoresby Sound (East Greenland about latitude 70°N) in the autumn of last year when the Arctic tundras were a-glow with browns, reds and yellows. Our destination was the Dark Island which lies towards the western end of this mighty fjord system. We picked this distant isle as our destination partly because of its scenic position in the middle of a confluence of terminal fjords but mostly because of the romantic connotations of its name.

Neither of us had been there. It just looked good topographically. We knew not whether it was darkly sinister or darkly romantic. We had no specific plans, except to get there and reach its 500m summit. The whole trip was romantic and none the worse for that. We seized an opportunity to make a bold journey and the Goddess of Fortune favoured us. The Dark Island lay about 300km (a ba' hair off 200 miles) from the airstrip at Constable Point where we landed. The round trip with diversions for ice and accessing a fuel dump was roughly the same distance as circumnavigating Harris and Lewis from Oban - with Oban as the last inhabited place. No mean journey even in the less windy seas of Scoresby Sound.

I had been halfway there in the Seventies as a boy with Douglas Scott, Charles Eccles and his son, Chris. We didn't get farther than the Bear Islands that time because during the air drop the parachute to which our outboard engine was attached didn't open properly. After that experience our antiquated, now slightly bent 'British Seagull' could only push us along at one knot. Like that it took a long time to pass an iceberg. This time we had a good inflatable with a 40hp motor. We were lightly laden and could get up on the plane and travel at 20 knots. We were living in more prosperous time. We even wore survival suits which were impervious to the cold. A subjective account of the trip now follows. It is not to be read as a tale of derring-do but as a lovesong to life and the bittersweet danger of being alive.

Greenland, the Grey. 'Here is your anchor,' said Sigi, handing John and myself one of those folding galvanised iron contraptions. He shook my hand looked me in the eye and said: 'Be careful.' This ceremony happened on August 25, 1997 on the bleak airstrip at Constable Point. Greenland was at its most uninviting. It was overcast and grey and a bitter wind blew from the north. Two Swedes who had had the boat before us looked dour and chastened. 'It was a tough trip,' they said, as they climbed thankfully aboard the returning aircraft. We learned that the 1997 summer had been

bad in East Greenland with overcast skies and a lot of rain. The sullen ice had lain against the shore around the Scoresby Sound settlement all summer and had restricted movement even for small boats. The visitor accommodation at the airstrip was full and the chief of the station said: 'You would be better to camp so that you can make sure that all your equipment is in working order.' He gave a knowing look and waved a hand towards a dismal windswept expanse of tundra. This is what I like about Greenland - you are expected to handle problems yourself. After a bleak supper we went to look at the boat we had hired. A 4m zodiac lay on a deserted sandy beach about a mile away beside a grey sea with grey horses galloping southwards on the cold grey wind. Sand had blown inside the hull gritting all the equipment. The propeller had a blade missing. We fitted a new one but clumsily lost the only split pin. Finding a replacement was an exercise in problem solving. We walked back to our tent against a bone-chilling wind. I was depressed at the prospect of two dreich weeks stuck among the grey ice floes; John never gets depressed.

Arctic Riviera. The next day Greenland smiled; the sun shone from a cloudless sky and the sea was calm. Then came the most difficult part of the expedition - getting the unloaded, but still heavy, boat down the soft sand into the water. After reloading the rest was down-hill. We left at two in the afternoon and planed over the mirror-smooth, reflection-filled sea, slalomed through 20 miles of ice floes and, as soon as we could, made straight for the Bear Islands, a direct 40-mile crossing of the inner Sound through a city of shining icebergs. A hundred miles from our starting point at the time of the midnight shadows we entered the narrow cleft between the steep sides of the two most southerly of the Bear Islands. We suddenly lost the photo-multiplying effect of the reflections from the open sea and entered the shadows. In this awesome spot we ran out of petrol. In the gloom and silence that suddenly surrounded us we had to refill our tanks from the reserve drums we carried in the hold.

A Gift From the Past. I had been to the north end of the archipelago a quarter of a century before and was suffering from confused memories. The boat, however, seemed to know where to go and guided us to a dimly remembered beach 10 miles away at the northern tip of the right-hand island. We disembarked in the increasing light of the new day. I was fairly sure this was the place where we had left a food dump 20-odd years ago when I was a boy. I walked to where it might still be and there it was, intact and undisturbed. This was just as well. John had done an impeccable job in organising the expedition, except for the food. Out in the field John does not eat very much unless he can actually shoot it. This time he had forgotten to multiply the slender basic rations by two. The antecedent Swedes had left some dried meat in the boat but even with that we would have been on scant rations. There didn't seem to be much to shoot either. The vintage bully beef, sardines, biscuits and chocolate from the old dump saved us

from hardship. There was, of course, plenty of whisky; in this department John is more than competent.

The Bear Islands. The islands lie in the angle between the ramparts of Milne and Ren Land. There are about a dozen, each one different: some are rolling boiler plates of bedrock cradling picturesque lochans, others are sharp fins of vertical strata with serrated edges, some are round, others are long and thin, some are mere skerries; one runs a curious wiggly course for 10 miles or so, a branching thread bearing different types of mountain. The rock varies from good to dreadful. Dougie Scott and I had climbed the highest fin (2100ft, with some Diff. and V. Diff. pitches) 20 years ago on a memorable day of silence and colour. The islands are separated by narrow channels opening into bays and secret places; architecturally interesting icebergs drift around the waterways grounding from time to time and then journeying on. Our arrival coincided with the first flush of autumn colour when the leaves of the six-inch-high birch and willow were beginning to glow in the sunlight.

La dolce vita. We cruised the archipelago for some days on an aesthetic high, exploring each island and climbing to the top of the less precipitous summits. We had time to choose pleasing campsites with memorable views and to revel in extended lunch hours on honey-coloured promontories or ambience-prone isles. I remember with gratitude an afternoon of contemplation spent on an intricate islet of jumbled ice-worn rock patterned with multicoloured lichens and rich autumnal leaves. A further item of aesthetic excellence at this time was the waning yellow moon; as each bright day ended it would lean for a while against the dark blue northern mountains before sinking behind them, leaving us in the brief transparent darkness that at this time of year precedes a new sunrise.

Corridor of Power. We eventually continued our journey westwards into the steep-sided Island Fjord leading to the distant Dark Island. This mighty cleft is 40 miles long and four miles across. The sides are formed by buttresses rising straight from the sea to icecaps 6000ft high. The fjord is a major wind funnel channelling strong katabatic winds from the inland ice and dissipating their energy from its mouth. Biggish glaciers breaking through the ramparts on each side contribute their own katabatic crosswinds which generate periodic stretches of extra turbulence. At its west end the fjord is split by a large eponymous central island with 3000ft cliffs. Here, we reasoned, there must surely be converging orographic winds from each side making a spectacular turbulence where they met. It could be a nasty place. The buttresses that face the fjord, by the way, are formed of igneous rock - excellent stuff - polished by ice and done in light shades of ochre and honey. There are also pinnacles and blades of rock separated from the main escarpment. There is some excellent climbing here but few landing places and fewer harbours.

Alea jacta est. We approached on a smooth sea but were turned back by the white horses galloping from the fjord mouth. We dithered for a day in a calm corner of a nearby island, watching for the moment the horses would return to stable, wondering how the dice (or the icebergs) would roll. The weather turned a bit gloomy. Then John got hold of the tiller and committed us to a counter-gallop against the enemy cavalry. He is not known as the 'Kami Kaze Kid of Loch Mullardoch' for nothing. We crept across the fjord, nipping from the lee of one iceberg to another. When he was sure it was too late to turn back he slowed the engine and said: 'It should be a joint decision whether to go on or not.' We went on, even though the objective signs were that things would surely get worse.

Land of the Great Silence. Anyway, the theoretically violent katabatic cross winds did not amount to much. After entering the north branch of the fjord the wind gradually died and we emerged into an inland sea of flat calm, silence and golden evening light. Willow down floated on the smooth black water filled with the reflections of mountains and sky. The cliffs gave way to milder hills cradling broad valleys of richly autumnal musk ox pastures. We entered Rype Fjord and camped on a platform carpeted with the russet and gold of dwarf birch and willow with a panoramic view towards a wide glacier descending from the inland ice. The next day we climbed the mountain overlooking the entrance to Rype Fjord taking our separate ways through the bronze and yellow of the autumn landscape, meeting musk oxen and, on one occasion, each other. We separated rapidly. The finer aesthetics of a place can only be fully appreciated when alone. That evening John returned with a white hare he had shot. I have a picture of him skinning it. A lawyer splitting a hare is in his element.

The Dark Island. On the morrow we made for the Dark Island through two sets of icebergs: the real ones and their exact reflections in the still waters of the sea. The island was roughly round in shape and a couple of miles in diameter - small enough to be intimate and large enough to be mysterious and have many secret corners. We climbed its highest peak, about 1600ft, through mats of chocolate green cassiope, yellow willow, darkly crimson blueberry and dwarf birch. The colours of the latter ranged through yellow gold, orange, bronze and various shades of deepening red, a *tour de force* in this part of the electromagnetic spectrum. Let me try to describe the view from the rocky summit. To the east lay the ice-capped cliffs and glaciers of Milne Land, to the north the big island that had bisected our line of approach, to the south and west open water and beyond that the spacious russet valleys and broad glaciers descending from the inland ice itself. All of this rugged grandeur was reflected meticulously in the mirror of the sea. There were, of course, icebergs, the sea was filled with them. Then there was the silence.

The Heart of Lightness. The following day we spent exploring the island's sunny southern coastline wandering slowly from one richly-embroidered bay to the next and finally crossing through the interior. Here on the summit of a pass we encountered a lochan surrounded by autumnal cloth of gold. The reflections in its polished surface were sharp and exact. It was difficult to determine where the shoreline was, where the boundary between reality and reflection lay. The reflections of the mountains of Milne Land were, in fact, crisper, richer in colour and much more convincing than the reality they portrayed. I have photographs to back up this statement. I am sure there is some deep metaphysical point to be made here if I could only think of it.

Stretching a Point. One morning we loaded the boat and were ready to depart. At this point we both wandered off in different directions vanishing into the ambient colour and silence. Subjectively at least, it is possible to stop time and expand the transient present into a long moment of detent when the mind can be undividedly part of everything. We knew that when this moment of departure ended we would be cast out of the garden; we would lose grace and return to the world of good and evil, that is to the world of thermodynamics and the dreaded increase in entropy. In the end we pushed off with decision and seamanly competence. We might be romantics but we were also cautious, practical men; otherwise we would not have got to where we were. It is not easy being romantic; in my experience it has always involved a lot of hard work. Nevertheless, to prolong the moment of grace we stretched space-time a bit more by circumnavigating the island amid the clarity of its confusing reflections.

Leaving the Island. In the end, in spite of our ability for time-stretching, we had to turn westwards through the icebergs of Snow Sound and back through the now glassy calms of the once turbulent Island Fjord. On the way John found a tiny harbour on the north side from where a system of terraces, each richly loaded with autumn colour, led up the steep rock of a beetling buttress. From the top of this narrow zigzag on the frowning cliff we scanned the vastness of the landscape and felt fearful and bold, intimidated and elated, in fact, the full chromatic scale of opposites in this part of the emotional spectrum; then we had a lunch of vintage sardines, obsolete brands of chocolate and biscuits a quarter of a century old, still scented with cinnamon.

Hubris and Humility. By now we were getting used to being intimidated and could apply more and more brain to the aesthetics of our situation while retaining enough parallel processing to anticipate any dangerous configurations that might start to form around us. It was, it must be said, imprudent for only two men and one boat to be wandering around in such unforgiving territory beyond the edge of world. Minor acts of carelessness, failures to foresee, failures to react quickly enough particularly when you are tired,

can result in a variety of terminal scenarios or, worse still, one in which you might have to face the humiliation of being rescued. Our main vulnerability was lack of physical strength. We had not the brute force and stamina to unload the boat each evening and pull it up on the shore a safe distance from the sea. If it had been washed up on the rocks by a wave dissipating the energy from a capsizing iceberg or a big berg undergoing catastrophic sundering we would have had trouble man-handling it back in. The problems of a forced landing on a stormy lee shore or changing a failed motor in a rough sea did not bear thinking about. None of this happened but you can't be lucky for ever. If you use up too many of your good statistics, only the dud ones are left and that makes you superstitiously prudent.

Evensong in the Islands. We escaped from the confines of Island Fjord and reached one of our old camps on the Bear Islands. From here we beheld two colourful sunsets: the real one and its immaculate reflection in the mirror of the sea, the one separated from the other by a jagged band of black land. We wandered around reverentially in the stained glass light of the roofless cathedral that surrounded us, aware that this was one of these moments of numinous tranquillity far removed from ordinary experience. There are doubtless boringly prosaic neuro-physiological reasons for these states of mind but for all that they are best regarded as rare gifts from whomsoever She is who actually runs the universe.

An Islet in the Storm. The next day complex cloud layers covered the sky and striped the cliff faces. We crossed the 10 miles of icebergs and open water to the South Cape on an immaculately calm overcast evening specialising in shades of translucent greys and blues, from silver to black. We found a little island with traces of palaeoeskimo stoneworks to camp on. Here we were storm bound for a day or two by a fierce, cold wind. During this period the sunlight returned but it was as hard and cold as the wind.

Brief Encounter. Then, proceeding eastwards in a change to sombre weather we met a German sailing ship, looking for somewhere to get frozen in for the winter; the crew were surprised to see a small boat emerge in a gloomy evening from beyond the greyness marking the edge of the world. The yacht was a rebuilt Esbjerg cutter. They knew about the similar *Ada Frandsen* (one of the boats on our Centennial Yacht Meet). The *Dagmar Aaen* and its picturesquely romantic young skipper had spent the last seven winters in the Arctic. They had been through the NW passage to the Bering Sea and the NE passage as far as Cape Chelyuskin - seven winters locked in ice. We were invited aboard for coffee and a chat about things Arctic in the yellow lamplight of the warm saloon.

Into the Gloom and the Gloaming. We proceeded eastwards into a grim evening and a rising headwind. In the end we got stuck in the pack ice in the first real darkness - the equinox was only a couple of weeks away. We

had difficulty getting back to land because of the extreme shallowness of the sea along the flat, featureless Jameson Land coast. The boat kept grounding in a foot of water while still hundreds of yards from shore. The pack ice and grounded bergs at least protected us from the onshore wind. Otherwise we would have had to travel among the waves in deeper water four to five miles off this dangerous lee shore. We eventually found a landing and camped a couple of hundred yards inland on the first firm tundra beyond the shifting sands, sleeping intermittently, checking the boat every hour to make sure it did not get blown ashore or get hit by a piece of moving ice.

A Grey Dawn Breaking. Later, as we set off in the small hours of the morning, an immense land- and seascape, intimidating and austere, emerged from the darkness. On the rising tide we escaped from the trap by dint of luck and resourcefulness and loosening floes by bashing the edges with the heavy anchor. (The Goddess may be implacable but she sometimes rewards you if you act intelligently and do not despair). Our escape, however, was mostly due to a change in the wind direction; it started to blow from the west. The 40 miles of pack ice between us and journey's end began to loosen and move out to sea. We reached the settlement of Scoresby Sound after a final day of surfing on the backs of the waves, following the loosening ice floes as we all galloped eastwards in intermittent sunshine.

Alas, Everything Comes to an End. That evening, after 16 days of higher education in the wilderness we were in a warm house dining off Arctic char, smoked seal, mattuk and fresh bread while watching the sun set in splendour from our dining-room window. We also noted that the ice had returned, closing the route we had come by. We had been lucky to arrive at the beginning of the only long, good weather window of the entire summer. The journey had required no more of us than basic competence. We could easily have been more severely tested. When I showed my snapshots and told our story to my old friend of 50 years, Professor Slesser, doyen of Arctic travel, he observed with experienced accuracy: 'Never try to do that journey again.'

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

By Malcolm Smith

This article first appeared in the 1996 Etchachan Club Journal but deserves a wider audience. (Editor).

OF THE names for climbs, like those for the nags that divest you of your hard-earned cash, there is no end. Imagination has no bounds nowadays and a good thing too. Gone are the days when we were restricted to the purely descriptive, and autocratic guide-book editors would take exception to a name and have the authors change it e.g., the insipid Pioneer Route for the inspiring Grandes Jorasses and (tee-hee) Janus Left Face for Hackingbush's Horror. But flights of imagination can lead to difficulties for the uninitiated numbskulls like myself. We long to know the workings of the authorial mind. We go to the dictionary where, very occasionally, all is revealed. However, the Chebecs, Slartibartfasts, Katsalanas and Wachachas leave us scratching our polls, wondering and conjecturing.

One would like to think we are correct in inferring that Dougie and Brian's *Sous Les Toits* identifies them as classic French cinema buffs (*Sous Les Toits De Paris*) and that their *Iron In The Soul* proclaims their interest in the works of Sartre and his philosophy. One would also presume, hopefully, that *White Mischief* is a play on the title of a favourite author's novel (Waugh). The use of 'hopefully' is important; better by far to have fooled around with *Black Mischief* than have Lochnagar saddled for all time with a 'WM' derived from the steamy, though not so hot TV play of many years back. But conjecture over apparently less convoluted reasons for a name can often lead one astray. For myself, I thought long over *The Mousetrap*. Surely, I guessed, it was the case that, on the day, the climb seemed to go on and on as did the never-ending run of the play. In the event, according to Derek, an actual mouse was involved - a field mouse accidentally killed on the way to the climb. This is a more prosaic, but more endearing explanation in the end; for it now stands in my mind as a mighty epitaph exhibiting a Burnsian sympathy for a very small fellow creature.

Conjecture, too, can lead to egg on the face, especially when it is cited in print. Adam Watson commenting on Firsoff's *The Cairngorms on Foot and Ski* in his general guide, announced that Egyptian Fantasy was a hit by its authors at Firsoff's use of the term 'Egyptian rocks' for the rock structures in the corrie. Given the fly-high nature of Firsoff's prose Adam may be excused. The name, in fact, was the outcome of the climb being done approaching midnight after a non-stop pad from the Derry Gate. So surreal were the circumstances: a glorious summer night, the hour, the Sphinx obelisk appearing, disappearing and re-appearing again and again through veils of thin mist, the snow at its foot, it was almost inevitable for a jazz buff

like myself to call it after the strange title of a favourite 78 by Bechet and Red Allen. None of my companions demurred. They knew a good name when they heard one. Kenny and I did, however, go to Firsoff's use of Corrie of the She-Devil (where did he get that from?) for another climb.

Firsoff's book could not be called a good one, but it was different. It reminds me pleasantly of a lugubrious aside from Kenny in a state of shatterment at the Black Bridge after another long snowy march from Braeriach. 'If a ivver write a book on the hills it's ga'an tae be ca'ad the Cairngorms on Foot and Knee.'

Although unlikely for most of you, jazz also features in the name of one of the best known climbs – Squareface. The face is squarish and this might lead one to think the name was at one and the same time factual and a play on 'Scarface', but the clincher was *Squareface* another well-loved 78 classic on which, with a superb backing including Berigan, a self-disgusted Wingy Manone intones this drunken soliloquy to a gin bottle: 'Old squareface, old double-chin, what you hangin' round for leaving me to sorrow and sighs?', and ends, 'better bring in those pink elephants, squareface you got me again'.

It's a pity I missed out on it after naming it, but I did just arrive in time to record its vanquishing on film.

Davie Duncan and Tom Patey used jazz titles for climbs, but only at the coast. Davie with *Groovin' High* and Tom, not a jazzer but a Waller fan, *Alligator Crawl*. Tom once admitted to me that he was a martyr to Raynaud's Syndrome or Disease, an arterial affliction that leaves the extremities blanched and painful in cold weather. Considering his delight in winter climbing this was a surprise to me, but I failed to pursue the topic. He could not have known the whole of Waller's oeuvre else he would surely have called one of his winter climbs, *Numb Fumbling*. I'll hand that one on for a small fee.

Excepting the feeble *Back Bay* from Artie Shaw's *Back Bay Shuffle* (an area of Boston) and the more recent *Sax Appeal*, a title used more than once by high-powered tenorists (though here I jalousé that the main interest of the author(s) lay in the punned word) there is little else influenced by jazz in the Cairngorms terminology. The recent *Blue Serge* gives pause, however. This is the title of an Ellington piece of the 1940s composed by his son, Mercer. Whether its authors are jazz aficionados, bobbies, or were simply hard-pressed at the time to raise cash for proper climbing gear is not known. Off-hand, I can think of a few classic pieces whose titles could be used - Gillespie's *Dizzy Atmosphere*, Basie's *Doggin' Around*, Ellington's *Echoes of the Jungle* (somewhere near Djibangi if there's still room), Willie the Lion's *Fingerbuster* and Coltrane's *Giant Steps*. Feel free to use them if you wish. It would give me pleasure if you do.

Harking back to Tom; he was fearless in most things, but there was in him a dread of snakes and a revulsion towards the more inimical invertebrates. He refused to bivvie anywhere in the Slugain after being told it was a great place for adders (it still is). His *Boa*, *Python*, *The Serpent* and *Scorpion*

testify to his phobia. If only he had been a Holmesian he would surely have latched on to *The Speckled Band* for one of his traverses. It's an old route name, but, perhaps, too good a one to languish in foreign parts.

Objection, though, might be taken towards a deliberate plagiaristic implantation because of the resulting confusion, but surely not for climbs hundreds of miles apart. Duplication, however, has already happened on our very own doorstep in corries separated by a few miles only. Yes, a second Salamander darted from the flames in 1973 to confound us with the original of 1971 on the hellish crag. It is being merely academic here to say that confusion might have been avoided if Dougie had called his climb Hellbender. By doing so, he would have held to his original conception and shown compliance with the familial names of the cliff. For besides meaning a monumental binge, Hellbender is the common name of an American species of the genus *Salamandra*. But this is waffle. The other beastie is the intruder and is rightly banished to the cold depths of the Flume for its temerity.

One could go on to discuss the generic, follow-on names on cliffs. I won't, for without injections of humour, laxity of thought and, eventually, boredom can take over from what may have been original flashes of wit. Coire Etchachan exemplifies this. From a dagger piercing a virgin bit of rock, its surrounding cliff ends up as a mere vehicle for a catalogue of cutting blades. Hell's Lum crag, however, is redeemed by touches of playful fancy and its scope for devilry.

But even here, how long will you be able to stomach an increase in the Auld Mahouns, Auld Clouties, the Devil's Disciples and the Devil-May-Cares?

Humour, unless hidden and only to be appreciated by those in the authors' immediate circle, is strangely absent from our cliffs. For me the palm must go to Big De'il, succinct and no need for pondering. I'm sure the climb itself is much better than the disparagement implicit in the slang phrase would suggest. The Clean Sweep runs it close, but here I sense the tiny prick of the Smith needle. In The Pink and Tickled Pink have their merit for routes on ruddy rocks. And don't forget dour Lochnagar with its fine Pateyan sally of Shylock's Chimney. Nothing hidden here if you've brushed up your Shakespeare, just a patent warning that the climb will go all out for its pound of flesh. I also like Sinclair's Last Stand, but how to treat it? With its play on Custer, is it humorous? With its use of a name of one who is no longer with us it must have a serious content. I would prefer to think of it as a lasting memorial to the folly of a flawed ideal. Beware the enthusiasms of the powerful.

So there is no accounting for tastes, especially in humour. Remember a fearful Des O'Connor going on stage at the Glasgow Empire with his best gags and fainting at the first signs of restiveness in that theatre's notorious audience. That to me is funny in itself. It calls for an illustrative yarn. At one time there was no name for a forlorn moderate on Beinn a' Bhuid, so I took the chance of calling it M and B Buttress for the guide. This was outwardly eponymous avoiding anything that might arouse the wrath of the authors.

But Gordon Mathieson and Ian Brooker were about to qualify as doctors and would henceforth spend much of their working days doling out M and B tablets which contained a series of sulphonamides – at that time before the general use of true antibiotics the universal cure for ‘coughs, colds and scabbit holes’. I thought this invention cute, perhaps, nothing more. But Tom Patey when he heard it almost ‘filed’ himself in his glee. Perhaps the thought of his own eventual entry into that field was the reason. As his pianistic hero had it: ‘One never knows, do one.’

And so to one that unfortunately/fortunately failed to materialise. Just before I departed the field in 1960, Freddy and Sticker told me that they had been eyeing-up what is probably now Vulcan near Tiara for a winter climb. And what do you think they were going to call it?. Yes, all together now – Tiara **Boom de ay**. Perhaps not in accord with such an austere place, but a corker, nevertheless.

Eponymity in naming has been ostracised and has now, apparently, disappeared altogether. The last I find in our area is Jewell-Kammer Route on Beinn a’ Bhuid done in 1974. Perhaps it was an un-named climb and others used the personal names for convenience. No fear, no favour will be shown in this piece. I’ll brave the fire and go over the top with what follows. Before Jewell-Kammer there was the Sand-Pyper of 1961, a good name gone awry. Why was the eponym used so prominently so destroying the subtlety, even grace of the Sandpiper? It puzzles me. OK Derek – Victoria Park at dawn with seconds and peashooters.

It was inevitable in the wacky times we live in that sex should pop its head up in the corries. So far, with one exception, in its milder forms – Cruising, Topless, The Hoarmaster, Hooker’s Corner (no castigations, please, over Hooker’s Joy named after Joseph Hooker, botanist) The Deviant, Deep Throat, Hot Lips, all but one from that hotbed, Glenmore. We await The Groper. But the nadir, Streakers Root, chided even by a modern team of guide-book editors, is home-grown.

Fie, fie Rob. Why forsake the palatable pun of Route for the blatant crudity, thus offending a majority?

Which leads to the best and worst, the worst first: Nig and Nog, inevitably, Yakaboo, so bad it’s almost good, Puke and Boke in that too, too Sic-making corner. Boke is a southern regurgitation, the equivalent of our ‘cowk’ and quite unknown to me until the perusal of the ghastly Morag The Toerag in the *Weekend Scotsman* (good though for the dog, Hairy Hector, viewing the ‘ongans’ with a perpetual puzzled air, the while ‘sookin’ on his tin of mince cola). One that may be thought humorous is Nocando Crack. By running the words together to have us pronounce it as the Speyside hamlet is clever, not funny. I see it as a rather inglorious way of saving the author from an outright showing-up of a hapless second man’s failure to follow him. And the man can be readily identified. Why choose such a name in the first place? There may be no precedent. I can’t think of one.

Now for what you might have been waiting for – Hackingbush’s Horror. Terrible for many reasons. I can’t remember being singled out for the name.

Every man in a very close coterie received the moniker. It was sprayed around in times of mild frustration or annoyance: 'Hey, Hackenbush, fit are ye deein' up there?'. 'C'mon Hackenbush get oot o' that scratcher o' yours.' It stemmed from a collective enthusiasm for things Marxian, in particular, Dr. 'Either he's dead or my watch has stopped' Hackenbush. No, no, no, for God's sake, not Hackingbush. Just ponder the decorum shown before it and since in the corrie's names. Spootin' Dootin' was besmirched, and Groucho keeps birling in his grave. So there, 'Approx 4 pegs for aid' indeed.

One must remember then that the climbs you make on a glorious mountain are, in effect, permanent reminders of you as individuals and their names, in many instances, of your personalities. So beware the likes of the Verbal Diarrhoeas. Best to leave their kind to the coast and quarries where few of the squeamish will be upset.

But good, exemplary names abound in the Cairngorms. I'll parade the best, my best from a very personal viewpoint. You will, of course, disagree with me entirely.

Shadow Couloir, not a climb but a great name from the past, held me long before I even thought of climbing. For five years, sandwiched between tin plates for protection at the bottom of a much-travelled kitbag, lay Henry Alexander's *Cairngorms* providing solace and dreams.

How could I fail to appreciate that name of Symmers and Ewen. It introduced an alpine term for gully that fell sweetly on the ears. I used it in the guide as often as was thought decent, most importantly for The Great Couloir on Braeriach without any thought of belittling The Couloir on Cairngorm. The authors of the coldly atmospheric Moonshadow must like it also. Savage Slit, an oldie, is yet modern in its forthrightness. Scorpion with its sting-in-the-tail is perfect for its ascent in winter (False Scorpion may puzzle as it was climbed before the real thing. The answer is that it was unnamed at the time of its ascent and was only dubbed so, much, much later),

Hellfire Corner is a child of mine. I missed out on it though while working 12-hour days on the Lubreoch Dam at Loch Lyon trying to recover some respect from penury induced by too heavy a commitment to that guide - reward, one copy, all of 18 bob's worth, and nary a review from its publishers. The past is, indeed, a strange country - but I'll let that flee stick tae the wa'. The name is a fine one for the cliff, I'm sure, but a terrible one in history, commemorating as it does a small area of an infamous battleground of the 1914-18 war.

The French Connection is a good film, the connotation is apt and so the name is a fitting memorial to two fine climbers. Falkenhorst, an ultra tough-sounding name, I like because of a once keen interest in the collective psyche of the German general staff in the last war. Senility has progressed so much I can't remember now whether he was a goodie or baddie. A fine climb too.

Desolation Crack, with the noun used in preference to the adjective, is evocative and steers me to Kerouac's *Desolation Angels*. This, for a mountaineer, contains some of his most sympathetic writing. It stems from a long, solitary spell he did as a forest fire-watcher in a look-out hut high in

the mountains of Washington State. You can overlook the faults in a man who can be so overcome by the grandeur of his surroundings that he shouts in exultation to the trees an impromptu: 'Hozomeen, Hozomeen, finest mountain I ever seen.'

The cuneiform buttress of the Mitre Ridge is an imposing rock feature. In 1983 its face was truly The Empty Quarter, that is until Dougie and Greg forged a way through it like a couple of agile Doughtrys. The climb is a great one, and for the first exploratory occasion Arabia Deserta provided an apt, dignified name. This aptness will sadly diminish, however, if or when others are tempted to follow new ways.

Getting on to my top flight now. Darwin, father of the evolutionary theory of natural selection, and his supporters, Wallace, Bates and Huxley, T. H. are among my all-time heroes, so I cannot but appreciate the Ascent of Man, the Naked Ape, on his Perilous Journey upwards and onwards accompanied by all the animals, his fellow strivers, in the great struggle.

It might have come out of the *Rover* or *Wizard*, but does anyone really know? Has anyone ever asked? Pax, John, Djibangi is one of the great names. About 40 years ago I wrote: 'For besides being euphonious it conjures up for me the apple and orange matinees of my childhood to see such films as *Trader Horn* and *Africa Speaks*.' Good God - 40 years ago and reminiscing of childhood. It's enough to put years on a body.

I'm sure that the use of the definite article in a name gives that climb a certain cachet, whether deserved or not. There are many examples for and against in the Cairngorms. The Blue Max, a decoration, requires it. Without it the name would be meaningless or, at best, would indicate that Maxie had been very cold, indeed, at worst been garrotted by the rope. For me, brought up as a schoolboy to relish the tales in *Air Stories* of the Boelcks and Guynemers, of Spads and Halberstadts, Max Immelmann, he of the eponymous 'turn', was the early German ace to capture the imagination. So this is my second favourite.

And so to the *Pour Le Merite*. This has to be Diedre Of The Sorrows. Here with the pass of a magician a classic Irish play has been turned into a superb name for an epic. Sing its praises. There's real naming for you.

As an annex and antidote to those black sheep of Hell's Lum Crag left-hand corner I must bring back to life The White Ewe by B. Robertson and party sacrificed in that place 35 years ago through a bad editorial oversight. I trust this route will come to the notice of the present editors (see an SMCJ of the very late 1950s). I can't tell now if this was B. W. R. on a very early foray. If it was, he should treat this acknowledgment as my apology and also a thank you for The Blue Max.

N.B. Excluding points of the compass and other positional names three more doubles have turned up to keep the reptilian critters company – Solstice, Trunk Line and Vortex.



THE INACCESSIBLE PINNACLE

JOHN MITCHELL