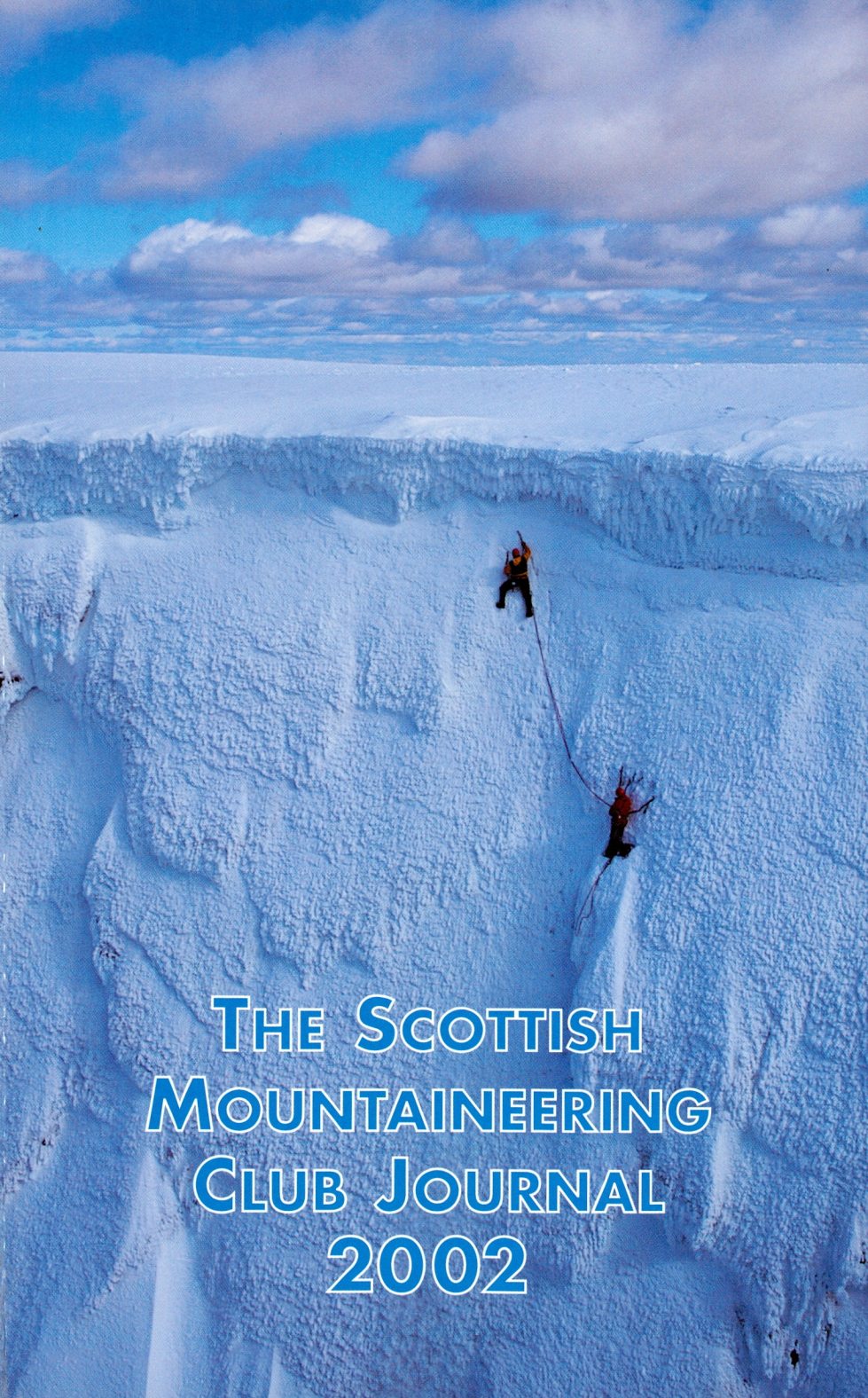

The Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal 2002

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Front cover: 'Shot in the Dark' (IV 4), Indicator Wall, Ben Nevis. Climbers Brian Davison and Dave Wilkinson. Photo: Dave Cuthbertson/Cubby Images.

Back cover: Duncan Chessell climbing through seracs at sunrise on Mount Graham, Southern Alps, New Zealand. Photo: David Ritchie.

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SMITH'S ROUTES – A SHORT HISTORY

By John Inglis

CLUB member John Inglis was killed in a fall from near the top of the Tough-Brown Traverse, Lochnagar on February 19, 1994. His obituary in the 1995 Journal includes the fact that he "was in the midst of preparing an article on Robin Smith when he died". Eight years on, and on the 40th anniversary of Robin's own death in the Pamirs, that article now sees the light of day. I am indebted to Jimmy Cruikshank, a contemporary and climbing partner of Robin Smith, and also his biographer, for the work he has done on the manuscript. (Ed.)

THE enduring appeal of Robin Smith's brief brilliant career owes much to his legacy of fine Scottish first ascents, in both summer and winter. Any ambitious modern climber who may know nothing of the man, his articles, or escapades, just cannot avoid the striking quality of his many fine climbs. Stated simply, most major Scottish climbing grounds explored during the late 1950s boast a 'Robin Smith Route', usually following a compelling, often inescapable, central feature, and frequently giving the best climb on the cliff.

The most famous rock climbs, such as Shibboleth (E2 5c), Yo-Yo (E1 5b), The Bat (E2 5a) and The Needle (E1 5a) all fit this description, and were recognised as classics the moment they were recorded. All four were included in the climbing anthology *Hard Rock,* with Smith responsible for almost a third of the Scottish climbs in this highly influential book. Paul Nunn and Martin Boysen, both fine English climbers, accord the climbs (and Robin) considerable praise in their accounts of The Bat and Shibboleth. Robin would have appreciated this since, despite a joyfully professed disdain for English climbs and climbers, his respect for ability scorned nationality and he greatly admired the legendary 'climbing plumbers' from Manchester, Joe Brown and Don Whillans.

Smith's best winter climbs are of a different order. In common with the rock climbs they are hard, clean (well-defined), lines, but they are unlikely

Robin Smith at Gunpowder Green, Glen Coe. Photo: Jimmy Marshall.

to be repeated in the manner in which they were originally climbed. The huge technical advances in winter climbing equipment have made the sport faster, safer, and far less strenuous than in the days when overcoming a steep ice pitch might involve hours of agonising step-cutting with a single straight-pick axe, and primitive ice piton protection. Despite impressive advances in winter standards, lines like Orion Face Direct (Grade V) and Smith's Route, Gardyloo Buttress (IV), both climbed with Jimmy Marshall in February 1960, were so far ahead of their time that they still remain two of the most sought-after hard winter routes on Ben Nevis.

A recurring feature of Smith's routes is that of 'the line', pure and logical, the ideal of the serious mountaineer. Committed climbers of all standards habitually (obsessively) trace all possible easy, hard, finest, most direct lines up any large steep obstacle. Preferably, this will be a mountain or rock face, although quarries, viaducts, and even ornate public monuments can substitute. A good natural line on a cliff taking an obvious corner, arête, or steep slab may compensate to a surprising degree for vegetatious pitches, poor protection and loose rock. These natural features are usually the most aesthetically appealing way to the top, and while standards may improve sufficiently for a particular crag to be scaled from any direction, the best climbs will tend to be the most obvious, regardless of difficulty. A balance must be struck here, since the leading climbers of each generation tend to outdo the efforts of the previous elite. Lines previously thought unjustifiable, or simply impossible, succumb to higher technical standards, improved equipment, and a diminishing sense of awe at overhanging holdless rock walls or (in winter) impending verglassed grooves. Successive waves of experts prowl the same arenas for ever harder challenges, with an ever dwindling range of options. In a sense, Robin Smith was lucky that his technical ability, intense drive, and eye for a natural line matured when they did. He was presented with, and gleefully accepted, repeated opportunities to carve out his personality with dazzling climbs on Scotland's steepest, bleakest cliffs. There were other Scots climbers at the time like John Cunningham, John McLean, and Jimmy Marshall capable of performing at Smith's standards, though few were as hungry for the direct intimidating line he so often chose. Frequently, they had their own ideas for exploration anyway. But the spur of real or imagined competition, apparent even in his earliest accounts and articles, drove Robin Smith particularly hard and must have played a part in the leap he took into new standards of climbing. His best rock routes were often quickly repeated by his immediate peers, followed by long intervals while the rest of the climbing world caught up. In winter the margin was much wider and there were virtually no takers for the Smith and Marshall Nevis routes for more than a decade.

At this stage, it may be worth considering the major changes that have taken place in climbing in the 30 years since his death. Firstly, equipment, and the associated concept of protection, have improved beyond recognition. Smith was wearing the tight-fitting rubber-soled PAs by 1958, soon after they appeared over the Channel from France. This footwear permitted a dramatic leap in technical standards, by allowing the exploitation of tiny ripples on rock as friction footholds. [Even so, according to Jimmy Marshall in 1994, Smith "regularly wore much-battered, lightweight walking boots even on some of his most significant new routes".] Today, high-friction sticky rubber boots are impregnated with resins which allow purchase on steep rock totally devoid of holds. Specialist footwear now exists for smearing, edging, limestone, gritstone, and competition climbing, always with the added allure of the season's chosen colours.

The science of rock-climbing protection has advanced substantially. Running belays in the 1950s consisted mainly of short lengths of rope or nylon threaded around rock spikes and chockstones as they were encountered on the pitch. Pitons were sparingly used for belays, even on new ground, and always with a definite reluctance – at least in the mountains. A rapid gear evolution has occurred in the last few decades, with abundant protection now provided by sophisticated wired-wedges of all shapes and sizes, and intricately engineered alloy camming devices – Friends – which adjust to fit any available crack or slot in the rock face. Ropes, karabiners and slings are all now stronger, lighter and better designed. Sit-harnesses and safety helmets have removed much of the bite from the twin hazards of falling off and of rock-fall.

As previously mentioned, winter climbing has also seen a fundamental change since Smith's day, with the advent of the dropped pick ice-tool, and the universal adoption of front-pointing technique on steep ice. Almost at a stroke this dispensed with the prodigious effort required to hack holds out of ice, allowing the exploration of longer steeper pitches than was previously possible. (It is a measure of Smith's and Marshall's achievements that their harder winter routes will remain out of reach for many modern climbers.) Improvements in clothing – lightweight waterproof 'breathable' fabric, plastic-shelled boots, and in protection – high-tech titanium ice-screws, have further cushioned winter climbing for the masses

A standardised open-ended technical grading system has been developed for rock climbing, and very recently for winter climbing, whereby the gymnastic demands of individual pitches on a climb can be precisely defined by a numerical grade, currently 4a to 7c, with the overall ferocity, or otherwise, of a route conveyed by a single adjectival grade – Difficult to Extremely Severe 9 or E9). This is very different from the situation in

the 1950s and 1960s when the highest Scottish grade, Very Severe (VS), covered everything from present-day VS (now considered entirely straightforward) to horrors now belatedly graded at E3. Climbers tackling VS routes then were dependent upon the climb's word-of-mouth reputation, what they could see of it from the foot of the cliff, and from the identity of the first ascent team.

The cumulative effect of the changes outlined above has been to alter profoundly the rock-climbing experience for the ordinary climber today. Setting off up a climb armed with precise details of the barriers ahead, and with modern gear, is far less of a leap into the unknown than the equivalent trip in Smith's era. Perhaps to compensate for this, average climbing standards have rocketed, not because of increased ability but because to maintain the thrill of climbing, the boundaries must be pushed out, safety margins squeezed. Today's best climbers, gymnasium-honed, perform feats that Smith could barely have imagined, but with far less risk (the gear again) than he faced as he set off up the crux pitch of Shibboleth for the first time. Many of the routes mentioned here will remain among the finest in the country, but the real Smith legacy to Scottish climbing, the daring, brimming talent, the joyful acceptance of challenge, and the wild delight in steep places is a finer one still.

* * *

SMITH served a traditional, although rapid, rock climber's apprenticeship beginning in late 1954 with an initiation on Salisbury Crags and, shortly afterwards, at the climber's altar – Buachaille Etive Mor in Glencoe. His early efforts were overseen by Archie Hendry, a schoolmaster and a past president of the SMC and responsible for several new routes in the previous decades. Within two years, Smith had climbed most of the easier routes, and several harder ones, on the Buachaille and on the Cobbler in Arrochar, with productive visits to Skye, Ben Nevis and the Lake District. These trips were made during school holidays with Jimmy Cruickshank, although Smith also joined the Edinburgh section of the JMCS. During the winters he climbed a few easy snow gullies, but found these disconcerting compared to equivalent summer climbs. This was perhaps due to a combination of inexperience and deficient winter equipment, but there is no doubt that almost from the beginning he was aware of his natural ease on rock, while his confidence on snow and ice developed more slowly.

By the summer of 1956 he had acquired the confidence and experience to tackle VS climbs, at that time the hardest grade, and was beginning to exceed the capabilities of his regular climbing partners. This was to lead to exciting manoeuvres on occasion. In September 1956 he persuaded an inexperienced JMCS party to join him in an attempt on The Crack (HVS 5a), an infrequently attempted Nevis climb with a sinister reputation. The

ensuing drama saw Smith stranded alone on the cliff, above the crux, attempting in vain to solo an overhanging chimney in the dark and almost failing to regain the sloping ledge below. After a chilly night, the dawn light revealed an escape route to easier ground just in time to avoid ignominious rescue. This instructive experience was to be related as *Twenty-four Hours,* Smith's first published article and an original, vivid piece of writing for an 18-year-old.

His first new routes were short technical test pieces on Salisbury Crags and other outcrops in the Queen's Park, where his rock technique was developed and sharpened. These steep striking cliffs dominate the city skyline, and despite a prohibition on climbing there for more than 70 years, have attracted successive generations of Edinburgh climbers [legalised for members of climbing clubs in 1994]. Harold Raeburn, one of the city's earliest climbing heroes, pioneered several short routes in the park at the turn of the century, several of which are still climbed. The rock, a rough basalt, can be loose in places, but gives good climbing over a wide range of difficulty. The Great Quarry boasts what was probably Scotland's hardest rock climb of its time, the steep, technical, and unprotected groove of Steeplejack's Staircase (now E2 5b), first led by Derek Haworth shortly after the Second World War. Smith was to make the third ascent (after Jimmy Marshall) by late 1957, as well as adding several new climbs and variations to climbs around the park. Few of these receive regular traffic, being difficult and dangerous, and with the ever-present risk of arrest by the Park Police. Names like Vertical Sand, Hell's Wall and Scuttle (all HVS grades) convey some of the flavour, if not the fear factor, of these early creations.

His first recorded mountain routes began to appear in early 1957 with Blockhead on Garbh Bheinn and Glueless Groove on the Cobbler, both now graded E1 5b. From the beginning, Smith produced routes of a high technical standard, often with little secure protection. A divergence of attitudes starts to become apparent here, as the Smith description of Blockhead, "a fine steep climb, with several small running belays", contrasts somewhat in tone with the consensus "a difficult and serious climb" in the SMC guide. In fact, Smith had been dreaming of this line for a year, first spotting (and attempting!) it during the Easter holiday in April 1956 with Jimmy Cruickshank. On his next visit to Garbh Bheinn, with EUMC novice member Victor Burton, he was already much more experienced, and the route duly conquered. Less is known about Glueless Groove (E1 5b), with no second recorded even though the climb has three pitches. It is likely that the second failed to complete the top crux pitch ("A good route, the higher the harder:" R.S.) up a steep, quartz-spattered wall. During the same Cobbler trip it is significant that Smith did two difficult existing climbs on the same face as Glueless, presumably

reconnoitring the testing finish of his own route. On the University Arran meet in May, he soloed the Rosetta Stone, "a fine little mouthful to follow the South Ridge". This 30ft. HVS boulder problem had first been top-roped 63 years previously, but apparently never led before.

The summer of 1957 saw several noteworthy developments in Smith's rock-climbing. An EUMC trip to Wales resulted in the completion of more than 20 classic routes in a week, with "a rich haul in pitons, slings and karabiners...garnered". More importantly, virtually all of the then hardest VS routes on the Buachaille were hammered in May and June, in a campaign which was to yield significant returns the following year. In July, Smith travelled to the Alps for the first time with Jim Clarkson, secretary of the Edinburgh JMCS. The weather was poor that summer, but Smith completed several classics both with Clarkson and other climbers he encountered. One of these was Gunn Clark who was to partner Smith on the first British ascent of the Walker Spur two years later. Robin rounded off a good first Alpine season with a solo ascent of the NNE ridge of Aiguille de l'M.

A September trip to Skye with the University club produced two first ascents, both VS, on Sgurr nan Eag. Chasm Left Edge and Ladders ("very good pitches doubtfully connected") were noteworthy for being the first routes on this face, and for the fact that, despite three long pitches, no second was recorded for the ascent of Ladders. The final climbing flourish of the year came in Glencoe with a first winter ascent of The Long Chimney on Cuneiform Buttress, Buachaille Etive Mor in December 1957. Robin climbed with Derek Leaver, a fine mountaineer from the Edinburgh JMCS, who was to make significant later ascents with both Smith and Jimmy Marshall. On the same day as Long Chimney was climbed, Marshall, Donald Mill and George Ritchie were on the same cliff recording Cuneiform Buttress, Ordinary Route, also a Grade IV.

By now Robin had become EUMC secretary and was climbing almost every weekend. Despite apparently effortless progress in philosophy, mountains had become an obsession, and much of his time in Edinburgh was spent plotting the summer's ploys. He had become widely known in Scottish climbing circles, and from this point onwards was increasingly mentioned in the accounts and articles of others. He was also developing his own writing style, producing a string of memorable, intricately crafted pieces around his major routes and adventures. More than any other source, these articles epitomise the atmosphere of the time and are worth reading in their entirety.

Activities in 1958 began with several very hard winter ascents including Crowberry Ridge Direct IV/V and ("most of") Eagle Ridge (V) on Lochnagar. The apprehension felt on the earlier winter climbs had obviously been exorcised, although he had not yet reached the standards

of the remarkable Jimmy Marshall who poached the first winter ascent of Parallel B Gully (V) from under Aberdonian noses as Smith toiled up and down Eagle Ridge. The rock climbing year began with a second trip to Wales, where Smith made an early lead of Joe Brown's Cenotaph Corner (E1 5c), perhaps the most famous hard rock climb in Britain. This was completed at a leisurely pace, Smith claiming that he didn't want to "embarrass the natives". In common with Joe Brown, Smith was never renowned for his speed of climbing. Slow steady climbing on difficult rock often indicates great ability, combining the stamina and poise required to rest in strenuous positions with a fierce controlled drive to decipher and execute hard moves overhead. A meet in the Lake District in May resulted in on-sight first ascents of Chartreuse (E1 5a) and Leverage (E1 5a) on Scafell's fierce East Buttress. Both climbs are now graded Extreme, reflecting the paucity of protection rather than technical severity. The current Scafell guide mentions "a superb day's work by one of Britain's best climbers". Derek Leaver seconded Chartreuse but, oddly, was not mentioned in the original description of Leverage; once again the crux pitch may have been unseconded or rope assisted.

Back in Scotland, and pausing only for a new route on Edinburgh Castle Rock during Students' Charities' Week, Smith settled down for a concentrated spell of exploration in Glencoe. He had already settled on his major summer project – a central line up the awesomely steep and intimidating Slime Wall on the Buachaille. This cliff had received increasing attention in the preceding two years, most notably from Pat Walsh, a prominent member of the Glasgow-based Creagh Dhu. Walsh had put up no less than five routes here in the summer of 1956, and despite the addition of the elegant Link Pitch by Marshall the following year, there was a widely held Glaswegian view that the Slime Wall was Creagh Dhu property. Smith had repeated some of the Walsh routes in summer 1957, and now conceived of a grand scheme to register his arrival at the forefront of Scottish climbing (in time for the forthcoming Glencoe guidebook), and simultaneously to restore Edinburgh prestige in a friendly inter-city rivalry. While the rock dried out, and between preliminary sorties to monitor the state of the weeping crux groove, various other new lines in the vicinity were snapped up.

Much of this climbing was done with Andrew Fraser, a fellow student who had seconded the Edinburgh Castle Closet Climb (HS). Together they recorded two more Buachaille first ascents with Dwindle Wall (HVS) and the strenuous July Crack (HVS), which the pair had mistaken for the much easier August Crack! There was time for a trip down the glen to the North Face of Aonach Dubh and the route that was to become Yo-Yo (E1 5b). Smith and David Hughes, also EUMC, forced the first section. Halfway up a monolithic corner fault it was with delight, "some trophy",

that Smith recovered Don Whillans's peg hammer from below the climb, tangible evidence of success where the master had retreated. But better was to come...

The following day, Smith and Andrew Fraser breached the Slime Wall with the first three pitches, and crux, of 'the big line'. Shibboleth (E2 5c) is considered by many to be Robin Smith's finest piece of work, taking a great central groove up through desperately sustained, steep, almost featureless rock. The pair then escaped up the easier finish (still VS) of Revelation, returning the next day to add the finishing pitches, after an approach avoiding the crux groove. The following weekend was set aside for the first all-in-a-day ascent, including a new and difficult fourth pitch to give a completely independent line. This was almost achieved as planned, although it was to be the events surrounding the climb that made banner headlines in the *Daily Record* two days later. This front-page scoop featured the dramatic all-night rescue of Fraser, who had fallen, exhausted, while leading the penultimate 'easy' pitch (still 5a), breaking his leg. The accident played its part in the notoriety that Shibboleth quickly acquired, while Smith's heroics during the rescue only underlined the fact that he had charged into the front rank of British rock climbing in less than four years.

The 1958 Alpine season saw Robin completing two hard routes with two well-known English climbers. With Trevor Jones, he made what was only the second complete ascent of the Voie Britannique on the Aiguille de Blaitiere West Face. This had first been climbed by Joe Brown and Don Whillans in 1954, and was one of the routes which had heralded a resurgence of the best British climbers to top post-war European standards. Teaming up with Joe 'Mortimer' Smith, Robin then climbed the West Face of the Petit Dru, finding it "more magnificent and serious", despite a "vast excess of pegs". Morty Smith played a central role in the saga of the legendary Rock and Ice Club (the dominant force in 1950s' English rock climbing), and had the impressive reputation of being physically stronger than either Brown or Whillans.

The remainder of Robin's year was without recorded climbing incident. In August, John Cunningham and Mick Noon had produced Carnivore (E2 5c), a futuristic wall climb on the Buachaille, to maintain a high Creagh Dhu profile in the area. The following month, Jimmy Marshall and Derek Leaver climbed Trapeze (E1 5a), a striking corner line on E Buttress, Aonach Dubh to complete a golden summer of Glencoe exploration. Also in September Smith submitted his SMC application, proposed by Archie Hendry and seconded by Jimmy Marshall. He was duly admitted in October along with Derek Leaver, Ronnie Marshall, and the Aberdonians Ronnie Sellars and Graeme Nicol.

Smith immediately exercised his right to use of the CIC Hut below the cliffs of Ben Nevis on a visit with Dick Holt, an EUMC member. On New

Year's Day, 1959 they recorded Tower Face of the Comb (now Grade V), and soon afterwards Orion Face (V), described as "a great route" in a current guide. The latter climb was the first in winter to directly tackle the huge west face of North East Buttress, the highest continuous cliff in Britain, and one shortly to receive further attention from Smith. A second winter contingent including Jimmy Marshall and Dougal Haston chose to spend the New Year in Glencoe, at the Lagangarbh hut. No climbing was done here until the third of January, although it is not clear whether this was due to adverse weather conditions or the comforts of nearby Kingshouse Hotel. Marshall had already acquired the reputation he retains today as one of Scotland's best winter climbers, perhaps only rivalled at that time by the great Tom Patey. In the following few weeks, Marshall was to add the superb Smith's Gully (Grade V) and 1959 Face Route (IV) to Creag Meaghaidh, and Minus Two Gully (V) and Hadrian's Wall (IV) to his list of fine winter routes on Ben Nevis. Smith spent the early summer in Glencoe adding the finishing touches to Yo-Yo with David Hughes, and a 'true finish' to Shibboleth, up an impressive overhanging crack, with John McLean of the Creagh Dhu. This characteristic tendency to edit and improve was a hallmark of Smith's attitude to his climbing, and he clearly valued the long-term aesthetic impact of his best lines as well as the transient pleasure of their execution. "A conscious and disciplined artist in all things essential" was Geoff Dutton's considered judgement in the 1962 SMCJ. He found time to prospect a new project on the Great Buttress of Carn Dearg, Ben Nevis, where he had spotted a steep corner between the Brown/Whillans/Downes classics Sassenach (E1 5a) and Centurion (HVS 5a). These fine English lines on a superb Scottish cliff were seen as an affront to national pride, almost an international version of the Edinburgh/Glasgow Slime Wall rivalry from the year before. In the company of Dick Holt a devious but determined approach pitch was established, with a rightwards traverse from Centurion weaving across an impressive sweep of undercut and overhanging slabs. Bad weather intervened, and it was time for the Alps again.

Two days after arriving in Chamonix, Robin and Gunn Clark scored a notable success as the first British climbers to overcome the 4000ft. Walker Spur on the North Face of the Grand Jorasses. Equalled in fame only by the North Face of the Eiger, it was at the time considered one of the hardest classic Alpine routes and is perhaps still the finest. A day behind Smith and Clark, a party comprising Chris Bonington, Don Whillans, Hamish MacInnes, Les Brown and John Streetly repeated the climb, under the impression that they would be the first to achieve this coup. The discovery of jammed rope slings (peculiar to British climbers) and Smartie packets *en route* aroused the suspicions of MacInnes, confirmed by the appearance of the dishevelled but exultant Smith and Clark as the second party came

off the mountain. For Robin, several weeks of 'misadventures' (no big routes) followed, with three hard climbs in the Dolomites, one a Grade 6 solo, right at the end of the trip. Sweeping straight back to Ben Nevis, The Bat was completed with Dougal Haston, "the only climber I could find", filling in for Dick Holt who had exam re-sits. If Shibboleth is Smith's greatest rock climb, then *The Bat and the Wicked,* which related the tortuous development of this latest triumph in the 1960 SMCJ may well be his most accomplished written piece. It captures Smith, Haston and the whole spirit of late 1950s climbing as nothing before it; a rip-roaring rock epic, with cultural and philosophical asides. To appreciate Robin Smith's rich talent, his intellect, his tenacity, and his sardonic glee in life, it has to be read. Countless articles in club journals have been modelled on it ever since, and in 1979 the mountaineering film-maker Jim Curran was inspired to film the story using real climbers and the original location.

Back to dry fact. In September John McLean enlisted Smith's help for the final assembly of The Long Wait (E2 5b) on the Etive Slabs. The route had been gradually pieced together by McLean in the company of Cunningham, Noon and Whillans, and now Smith led the completed pitches leaving the finish to McLean; presumably in a neat reversal of the Shibboleth True Finish climb earlier in the year.

The winter arrived, and Smith teamed up with Jimmy Marshall for a week on Ben Nevis in February 1960. What followed was to be the most written about and analysed goldrush in Scottish winter climbing. Conditions were superb, both men at their physical and psychological peak, and well aware that they were creating history. The CIC logbook entry is a model of dry, crafted wit; laconic in the route descriptions, and detailing their mid-week marathon winter hike and pub crawl in a few crisp phrases. Both Smith and Marshall wrote articles on the climbs for the following year's SMC, and these too have become part of the legend. Ken Crocket devotes almost a chapter, *The Pinnacle,* to the events of this period in his definitive history of climbing on Ben Nevis, and it seems superfluous to discuss them in detail here. A welter of routes, The Great Chimney (Grade IV), Minus Three Gully (IV), the superb Smith's Route (Gardyloo Buttress) (IV), and Observatory Buttress (Ordinary Route) (V), all new and all hard, were climbed on consecutive days. There followed the second ascent of Point Five Gully (V), a seven-hour romp achieved in far better style than the original, multi-bolted, five-day siege conducted by Ian Clough the previous winter. A well-earned rest day was next for Smith and Marshall, featuring a marathon 20-mile hill walk, pub crawl, arrest ("21.15 Police Station: Interrogation, Confession, Humiliation, Dismissal") and return to the hut by midnight. The final two days saw a return to exploration with Piggot's Route (The Comb) (V), and the gem of the week, Orion Face Direct (V), "one of the finest winter lines in

Scotland". This climb more than any other by Smith and Marshall captured the spirit of the week, and the imagination of Scottish climbers for decades. Orion Direct ventures through similar terrain to Smith and Holt's Orion Face, and may be no harder, but more than any other winter route of the time it was Alpine in both scale and conception. Marshall was to be married a month later, and as befitted what might have been his last big new route, he got most of the good (hardest) leading to do. Smith was later to complain in print that this had happened all week.

Towards the end of March Dougal Haston and Andy Wightman (both EUMC) made a half-hearted attempt at only the second ascent of Zero Gully (V), to be joined by Smith at the CIC hut late that evening. Starting at 2pm next day the three returned to the assault, Smith leading, using Haston's axe and a rope 'borrowed' from the hut. Haston's choice of *Nightshift in Zero* to title his later account of the climb seems almost understated; they did not reach the hut again till dawn. The CIC logbook entry for 23.3.60 merely reads "Zero Gully, quite hard conditions, n hours, D. Haston, R. Smith, A. Wightman".

By this stage, Robin was confidently climbing new lines on any cliff he visited. April saw the fall of the impressive Thunder Rib (HVS 5a) on Sgurr a'Mhadaidh in Skye, a much-eyed but persistently virgin 1000 ft. of loose rock. On Carnmore Crag in Wester Ross, he produced Gob (HVS 5a) with Haston, another of the five Smith routes in the *Hard Rock* anthology ("Gob' is good Gaelic...beak of a bird", but the more abrasive Haston edge is becoming apparent). It was the adventure of climbing, not new routes, that was important though. The Lagangarbh log for April mentions an ascent of Raven's Gully on the Buachaille: "Snow, boulders, etc., very wet" by a Smith-led EUMC party comprising Howard Andrew, John Lever, Jim Rorke, and a mended Andrew Fraser. With James 'Big Elly' Moriarty, two less spectacular Glencoe routes Yo-Yo (continued) and Dan (E1) on the Upper Etive Slabs were made in May, and with John Hawkshaw (EUMC), a last rock climb on Ben Nevis, Central Route (HVS 5a) on Minus Two Buttress.

The summer was enlivened by the Russian visit, a group of Soviet climbers (and assumed political theorists) invited over by the SMC and Alpine Club to further international relations. As a leading Scots climber, Robin was selected to entertain the harder Russian climbers, and also commissioned to report upon events for the SMCJ. *A Week on the Hills* is a short, complex, scathing masterpiece, poking fun at several establishment figures, although altogether free of malice. Together with George Ritchie, there was time after the day's guiding duties to make a first ascent of Marshall's Wall (E1 5b) in the Lost Valley, an ahead-of-its-time steep wall climb earlier 'investigated' by Jimmy Marshall. The name neatly repaid the ironic debt of Smith's Gully, climbed the previous winter by Marshall and Tiso, after a rare Smith defeat.

That summer, the weather in the Alps was poor, with a first British ascent of the Fiescherhorn Norpfeiler by Smith and Brian Wakefield (EUMC) the only real achievement, featuring "unpremeditated bivouacs before, during, and after". Smith joined Haston for a sojourn under the North Face of the Eiger, then, frustrated by conditions, moved on to Chamonix where desultory attempts on the unclimbed South-east Face of the Fou in the company of Joe Brown and Dennis Gray were rained off.

The next Smith encounter with the aristocracy of English rock climbing occurred only a month later at Lagangarbh in Glencoe. Allan Austin, who was up for a week's climbing with the equally talented Eric 'Matey' Metcalf, later wryly described the incident in *A Guided Tour.* Smith and Moriarty persuaded the English pair that Clachaig Gully (Severe) was a good wet weather climb, and proceeded to steer them up a series of increasingly sheer waterfalls ("regrettable misdirections by Mr Smith"). Robin would derive some good-humoured pleasure from his victims' discomfiture; Austin, an outstanding 1960s Lake District climber, had produced (with Metcalf) the superb slab climb Astra (E2 5b) on Pavey Ark in Langdale earlier in the year, and both were fair game for a sandbagging.

The winters which began the 1960s were remarkable for their lack of exploratory climbing in Scotland, due mainly to indifferent conditions, but also perhaps a hangover from the momentous events of February and March 1960 – Vanishing Gully (V) by Graham Tiso and Ronnie Marshall being a fine exception. Only one Smith route is recorded for the winter of 1961, a comparative stroll, in the company of Dougal Haston, up the gentle summer line of Jubilee Climb (II), on the Central Trident Buttress, Ben Nevis. Similarly, just one new route emerged from the pre-Alps summer on a trip to Garbh Bheinn, scene of Robin's first big route Blockhead. The Peeler (HVS 5b) was climbed with Elly Moriarty, who had become a regular summer partner since before the Russian visit. The main event of the early summer belonged to Jimmy Marshall who found an unlikely rising traverse across the steep front of Carn Dearg Buttress, featuring a crux descent move on the fourth pitch. Climbed with Jimmy Stenhouse, The Bullroar (HVS 5a) may be Marshall's best of many Nevis rock climbs, and it remains highly regarded today. Two weeks later, Smith and Moriarty conducted their own more whimsical tour of the buttress, climbing a hybrid of The Bat and Centurion incorporating most of the hard pitches from each.

Smith, Haston and two other EUMC members, Sheila Samuelson and Rosemary Brindle, drove out to the Alps where they "abortively and disjointedly assaulted the North Face and Hornli Ridge of the Matterhorn". Moving on to the Dolomites, Smith and Haston made an agonising first Scottish ascent of the Swiss Direttissima on the North Face of the Cima

Ovest de Lavaredo. This wall is largely overhanging, with the occasional monster roof, and both climbers found the almost uninterrupted aid climbing arduous and brutally abrasive to fingers and knuckles. Their "cunning plan" to ferry supplies from the support party at the foot of the climb went hilariously wrong, due to navigational mishap, horrendous rope snarl, and sheer exhaustion. Smith's bitterly funny version of events in *Snakes and Ladders* was his last published article, *Nocturnal* (1960-61 EUMC Journal – *Nocturnal)*, and has to be read to be believed.

It is difficult to avoid viewing the remainder of 1961 in the light of the following year, and what appears now as a last rush to record new routes across the whole country was presumably just Robin Smith operating at normal intensity after a frustrating summer. By August, his recovery from the Cima Ovest ordeal was sufficient to pioneer yet another Glencoe classic, The Big Top (E1 5a), with Jimmy Gardner on Aonach Dubh's West Face. The route is bold rather than unduly technical, and fatal leader falls have occurred on the poorly protected top pitch; the current SMC guide describes it as one of the 10 best climbs in the area.

Trips to Hell's Lum Crag in the Cairngorms – The Clean Sweep (VS 4a), the best route on the cliff, and Coire Mhic Fearchair of Bheinn Eighe – Boggle (E1 5b), which set an entirely new standard for rock climbing in Torridon) stand out from the autumn's list of new climbs. The Clean Sweep probably receives more ascents than any other Smith mountain route, due to its good protection, and comparative lack of severity as much as its undoubted quality. Although originally graded Severe by Smith and Tiso, it is now considered to be a full-weight Very Severe (4a).

A Lakes expedition to Gimmer Crag in Langdale with Moriarty resulted in two climbs, neither of which have survived to the present guidebook. Gee-Gee, a slightly contrived line "to the right of 'F'-route…blinkers were worn to conceal escape routes" is unmourned, but Variant to Variant to Kipling's Groove was a steep bold wall pitch which was later incorporated into Allan Austin's classic assembly Gimmer String (E1 5b). Revenge for a soaking perhaps.

There are few recorded details of Smith's activities in his last winter season, although the CIC logbook records a solo ascent of Tower Ridge on Ben Nevis in November. He was editor of the EUMC *Nocturnal* that year (a nod to the benightments that had become routine where he and Haston were concerned) and produced a notably literary issue, including two of his own articles, and Haston's *Nightshift in Zero.* In January 1962, he visited Chamonix, becoming an early British exponent of winter alpinism. This was a very recent development in the early 1960s, although later to be pursued with great success by Dougal Haston. Smith's mountaineering ambitions were certainly turning towards the greater ranges by this time, with the accessibility of the Alps a key factor in his choice of London as the venue for intended Ph.D. studies.

Things go quiet again until the EUMC 'Easter Parade' at Lagangarbh in Glencoe. By now a rowdy, hard-climbing splinter group had emerged from the EUMC, featuring Haston, Neil Macniven, Wightman, and a young Robin Campbell, with Ronnie Marshall and Elly Moriarty as SMC support. Smith missed that chaotic April weekend which featured such interesting in-hut activities as 'The Sitting-Room Traverse'; Lagangarbh was left in some disarray, after the Parade "had gone through it like a bomb". (Entry in the Lagangarbh log by the next hut occupiers). However, the group also did a considerable amount of high standard climbing including the often-attempted North Face Girdle of Aonach Dubh (E2 5b) by Campbell, Haston, Macniven, and Smith. This 1000-foot *tour-de-force,* later described in Campbell's SMCJ article *The Ugly Sister* ended in darkness, but despite their exertions, Smith and Macniven found the energy to assault Cunningham's Carnivore the next day.

On June 8, 1962, Robin Smith recorded his last new route in Scotland. The Needle (E1 5a) on the Shelter Stone Crag in the Cairngorms directly attacks the "manifestly impossible...great vertical bastion" mentioned in the 1961 guidebook, tracing a sustained line through the lower slabs and walls to thread the (easier!) overhanging chimney-crack on the final pitch. Before the arrival of Smith and Davie Agnew, ventures onto the Shelter Stone face had been few, and unsuccessful. The closest approach had been Citadel (VS, 1958), some way off to the left. Presumably, some reconnaissance had been carried out the previous September, when The Clean Sweep was climbed just across the corrie. Today, The Needle remains one of the Northern Cairngorms' most popular Extreme climbs and, as Smith's final contribution to Scottish rock climbing, is a fitting monument to the brilliance of his route-finding abilities and climbing technique. He left for the Pamirs three weeks later.

CLIMBING IN THE COLD

By Mick Fowler

THE appeal of Scottish winter climbing is not something readily understood by the average person. I have to admit that I too struggled to come to terms with it. Perhaps though, that is one of the attractions. Successes that are won too easily are inevitably those that are the least rewarding.

My first attempts to savour the pleasures were back in the mid-1970s. At that time I was based in London, pennies were tight and I depended on the cheapest possible reliable form of transport – in those days an Austin Mini-van. I got through 13 in all before moving on to other vehicles. By buying them second-hand from small businesses, running up perhaps 25,000 miles on weekend climbing trips and then selling them six months later as a 'private' owner, I usually broke even or made a small profit. There were two engine sizes, 850cc and 1000cc. The 1000cc engines were much better but somehow I tended to end up with 850cc ones. Either way, the drive to Scotland seemed to be a long way, although we were spurred on by stories we had been told about glorious, crisp, clear days and fantastic climbing.

The usual form was to keep the driver awake through the night by quizzes based on climbing guidebooks. For some reason this has left me with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Crew/Harris 1970 guidebook to Tremadoc. Why this should be so, when so many more hours were spent testing each other on the Scottish guides, I do not know – but if anyone is interested I can still, to this day, reel off the graded list of Tremadoc extremes in the 1970 guide. (Best steer clear of me at parties, when too much alcohol tends to prompt recitals whether asked for or not!)

My regular climbing partners in those early days were Mike Morrison and John Stevenson, both south Londoners who, like me, had an urge to escape the smoke whenever possible. One of my earliest Scottish memories is of arriving in Glencoe intent on spending a week front-pointing up crisply frozen classics. The rain poured incessantly and the water by the Clachaig Inn was ankle deep. In the then harshly cold confines of the public bar (up to then the only place I had ever worn my down jacket), we were just in time to hear the well known guide Terry Taylor say how good Zero Gully on Ben Nevis had been the day before. We were gutted. Were we too late? Had we missed the 'conditions'? "What do you think about tomorrow?" we inquired naively. "Only one way to find out," came the calm and practical reply.

But we hadn't learned the game by then. We equated wind and rain in Glencoe to wind and rain on the Ben, (bad mistake this!) and spent a

whole week drinking in the Clachaig and splashing our way up wet snow slopes. I remember John being particularly excited when he was able to find a section of ice substantial enough to get four or five consecutive placements in. Looking back, Ben Nevis was probably in excellent condition or, as Gordon Smith – a keen activist of the time – once entered into the CIC Hut log book: "Ground conditions excellent, air conditions disgusting."

I liked that comment; to me it summed up the unique flavour of Scottish winter climbing.

One week in particular sticks in my mind as the turning point in my attitude to the Scottish winter. In 1978 there had been magnificent conditions in North Wales, and Mike Morrison and I had spent a superb week ticking off unclimbed, or rarely repeated, ice streaks throughout Snowdonia. It wasn't that we were particularly talented, it was simply that, after a series of lean years, winter climbing was nowhere near as popular as it is today. We couldn't help but conclude that, if Snowdonia plums like the 300ft. Craig Rhaeddr waterfalls in the Llanberis Pass were unclimbed, then the scope for adventurous action in Scotland must be unlimited. So in 1979, Victor Saunders and I got together to take advantage of two unfilled places, booked by the Croydon Mountaineering Club, in the CIC Hut on Ben Nevis.

It was the first time that I remember climbing with Victor. True to form, he had introduced some uncertainty into the proceedings by arranging that we would give a lift to a friend of his. I never did work out quite who this chap was, but on the drive up it became clear that, while we had decided to climb in Glencoe on the Saturday, this chap wanted to be dropped off in Fort-William, 30 miles or so farther on. For some reason I refused to let anyone else drive, with the result that, by the time the trusty mini-van had rumbled its way from London up to Fort-William and back to Glencoe, I was falling asleep badly and not feeling at my perkiest. I can still vividly recall hallucinating and swerving sharply to avoid imaginary (well I think they were!) animals on the road. In contrast, the Saunders body had snoozed gently all the way up and was nauseatingly enthusiastic. Somehow we struggled up Raven's Direct before returning to Fort-William and taking up our places at the hut late that night.

Times had moved on in the years since our early week splashing about in Glencoe, and I had made a couple more attempts to get into winter climbing on the Ben. Success had been very limited. Once, Mike Morrison and I camped about an hour short of the hut. We managed to climb Zero Gully, but my main memory is of our much-prized tent freezing to the ground and the bottom parting company with the rest when we tried to prise it away.

On another occasion, Phil Thomas and I tried to camp outside the hut

Mick Fowler on the first ascent of 'Ice Bomb' (Fowler Grade V/VI) Coire Ghranda, Beinn Dearg. Photo: Dave Wilkinson.





itself. Arriving in the dark, we discovered that we had somehow forgotten the poles, and so tried to use the fabric to construct a bivouac of sorts against the wall of the hut. It was a foul night, and at about 9pm a very refined sounding gentleman ventured out to complain that, firstly, we were breaking rules by using the hut wall as a shelter, and secondly, we were irresponsible in not treating the Highland weather with the respect it deserved. The tone of his voice was such that we felt inclined to take up semi-permanent residence. But as the night progressed, the cold seeped in and discomfort grew, to the extent that a foray down to Fort-William to pick up the poles was deemed in order. Come the morning, there was much unhappiness when our plans to be the first away were thwarted by he who had upset us the previous night stepping briskly from the cosy interior and striding purposefully up ahead of us.

But I digress. This time I was inside the hut for the first time. It all seemed so unethically easy. The Ben was there on our doorstep, and Victor was his usual, irrepressible self with a long tick list of routes to do. Success on new winter routes in Wales had led me to view the Ben differently than on previous visits and I couldn't help but notice a thin ice streak dribbling down the right hand side of Carn Dearg buttress. The classic routes attracted us more to begin with, but by late in the week we decided to give it a go and managed Shield Direct, our first new winter line in Scotland. I remember clearly feeling that, if obvious ice streaks were unclimbed on popular crags like the Ben, then the possibilities elsewhere in the Highlands must be immense. I also remember the route being heralded as the first Scottish Grade VI. Victor and I had graded it V, and never did quite understand how it came to be rated VI before anyone had repeated it. Not to worry; it was good for the ego!

By the end of the week the Fowler body was knackered. It was tough going to climb big routes every day, even from the luxury of the CIC Hut. Also, the hut was only convenient for the Ben, and looked like being a one-off experience anyway. A different approach was clearly necessary if we were to make any impact on the more remote crags up in the North West.

For some years, a group of us from London spent a week or so roaming Scotland at Christmas and New Year. The weather was invariably poor, and most of the time was spent checking out various (very fine) drinking spots in the North West. But, in between the sheets of rain, we did manage to explore some of the areas that we were interested in. Applecross, Torridon, Achnashellach – all names that I had heard of, read about and longed to visit. And all of them appeared to have unclimbed ice streaks adorning rarely visited corries. We managed a few routes, things like Sheet Whitening in Applecross, on these early ventures, but they tended to be one-offs from the road or outings from damp bivouacs under boulders. It

Jamie Andrew back in winter action, climbing 'Left Twin' (Grade III) Aonach Mor. Photo: Chris Pasteur.

wasn't until we had pinpointed venues and weekend trips started in earnest that we really got to grips with the almost unlimited severity on offer in the North West.

Partly, I suppose, it was better roads that allowed the introduction of the weekly dash from London – but it was also a matter of learning from experience. I have never been the world's best walker (many would put it stronger than that), and experience was beginning to show that more than a couple of consecutive days on the Scottish hills led to increasing lethargy and unproductive time away from the desk. Weekends were much better. Even I could keep going for two days with five at the sedentary office desk in between. In driving terms, 650 miles had to be looked at as just over 150 each. Then it somehow all seemed a bit more manageable.

Fellow weekenders were not difficult to come across. I have always thought that one of the best things about London is that, whatever perverse urge one has for the weekend, like-minded characters always seem to materialize. In climbing terms this meant that there was always a full car, whether the venue was chalk cliffs on the south coast or ice streaks in the north of Scotland.

In the 1980s and early 1990s there were some real characters on the scene. Strange nicknames came their way: Phil 'Lobby' Butler (after being memorably buried alive by an avalanche of lobster pots); Jon 'Carless' Lincoln after his reluctance to buy a car; Chris 'One Pint' Watts after an infamous Chinese drinking occasion; Dave 'Willie' Wills named after I don't know what; and Phil 'Ode' Thornhill named for reasons I won't go into. And there were others too – Simon Fenwick, Danuska Rycerz, Peta Watts, Henry Todd...wild and interesting characters; the list was long and easily drawn upon.

A full pool of willing activists meant regular visits – 11 weekends in a row being my personal record – and an ability to keep abreast of the conditions. If it was pretty good in, say, Applecross one weekend, close monitoring of the temperature reports during the week meant that we had a very good idea of what things were likely to be like in, say, Skye the following weekend. Of course, the more we climbed, the more objectives we spotted. The list of 'possibilities' grew distressingly long, so long that I am glad to say that many still remain today.

The North West became a firm favourite, its relative remoteness and lack of people being particular attractions. It is interesting to note the increasing popularity of this area over the last 20 years. When I first started venturing this way in the late 1970s, a strong group of people wanted not to record climbs and keep the place a wilderness area. The guidebooks that did exist were hopelessly out of date, and it is fair to say that I cannot recall ever meeting another climber on the hills in winter. It was fantastic. By the mid to late 1980s we would meet the odd enthusiast, but these

were virtually always people we knew. The 1990s saw a sea change, with glossy guidebooks sporting photos of instantly attractive climbs, the number of activists increased sharply and, shock horror, we began to come across other climbing parties that we didn't know.

But the North West is a long way from the centres of population, and competition for the plethora of new lines was limited. Andy Nisbet, as ever, was in action on a broad front, as were people like Rab Anderson and Martin Moran. Martin in particular tended to have a similar eye for a line to me. On at least two occasions we ended up competing for the same route.

Once we were a bit uncertain about the conditions, and so I telephoned him on a Friday night before leaving London. We chatted for a bit, confirmed that it sounded worth going, and headed up to Achnashellach, just a few miles from his home in Lochcarron. Parking by the station at 5am or so, we set off immediately (experience having shown that trying to catch a quick snooze in the car is a bad idea) and, even at my pace, managed to arrive at Fuar Tholl's main cliff by 8am or so. This is an excellent, rarely-visited venue, which streaks up well in the right conditions. I remembered that when climbing the central streak, Tholl Gate, (in the conditions an outrageous lead by the normally reserved Phil Butler) there was another streak adorning the wall to the right. This was what we were heading for. Amazingly, Martin was too. Out of all the unclimbed lines throughout the North West, we had somehow chosen to head for the same objective on the same day.

They followed us up one pitch behind. Even I felt a bit guilty – after all it was Martin who had been good enough to admit that conditions were pretty good. Without his advice we might easily have gone elsewhere.

A similar situation, though not quite so close, arose on Skye. Here, Deep Gash Gully, on Sgurr a'Mhadaidh was, for those in the know, an obvious winter challenge. Frankly, I was not completely 'in the know', but I was very aware of the guidebook description which referred to the summer climb as being deeply cut, normally damp, greasy and, at HVS, challenging.

From previous jaunts in the area, particularly Waterpipe Gully where Doug Scott beat Victor and myself to the first winter ascent by one day, I was vaguely aware that there was a gully of sorts up there, but I had no real idea about how good it might be. Jon Lincoln and I just about managed it in time to spend a relaxing evening in the Sligachan lounge – a special Skye attraction complete with roasting log fire and snoozing *in situ* Labrador. We didn't get round to recording it for a few weeks, in which time Martin had repeated the climb, thinking he was doing the first winter ascent – sorry Martin.

In line with the increasing popularity we had noticed elsewhere, other

climbers were visible (in the distance admittedly) when we finished Deep Gash Gully in 1991. Even so the sight of an unattended car parked after dark on the Glenbrittle road was so unusual as to be brought to the attention of the police.

Other areas too produced their fair share of memorable action. Applecross became a favourite, and I well remember doing Gully-of-the-Gods on Bheinn Bhan with the classic East End character Simon Fenwick. This, we knew, had been attempted way back, around 1960, by the intrepid duo of Chris Bonington and Tom Patey. We had sniffed around at the base during one of our Christmas/New Year forays, and so knew it to be an intimidating parallel-sided wet gully, which might ice up well.

At our walking speed it was near on five hours to get to the foot of the crag, but it was worth it. We were rewarded with orgasmic conditions. Ice smeared the sides of the weeping fault line and it was one of those 'now or never' days.

Simon announced that he felt ill. He looked distinctly pale. Clearly, he wasn't joking. But turning back now, when faced with such perfect conditions, was out of the question. We must have made an unusual first ascent team. At one point Simon stopped seconding and I spent some time pulling as hard as I've ever pulled, only to discover that he had clipped into a peg to be sick. But regular blasts of wind-whipped snow in the face were clearly what the doctor ordered – or perhaps good Scottish winter days are a tonic in themselves. Either way, the Fenwick body was clearly in better condition at the top than it had been at the bottom. Probably a first.

Andy Nisbet has long been one of the most prolific and respected activists on the Scottish winter scene. I first remember meeting him on the North Face of the Eiger way back in 1980, but it was some time later, at the roadside below Creag Meaghaidh, that I first recall coming across him in his native environment.

Victor Saunders and I had just completed a rather faltering drive from London. What, with a miraculously disconnecting distributor cap and spells of challengingly slippery roads, we eventually arrived just in time to see a torch click on in a small roadside tent. A head poked out and the unmistakable outline of the Nisbet beard glistened in the moonlight. We regarded each other blearily, and spoke only enough to confirm that both teams were heading for the Pinnacle area. I didn't really need to know any more. I had already driven literally thousands of miles in an effort to nab the first full ascent of an obvious direct winter line based on the semi-sieged line of 'The Fly'. The chances that Andy would be he heading for the same line were distinctly high.

But the Nisbet body was bound to be a speedy walker. Victor looked distressed but knew that, with me present, we would inevitably lose any

walking race. In any event, by the time we were ready to leave the Nisbet team was surging forth. I tried ineffectually to run after Victor – but it was clearly hopeless. The snow underfoot was crisp and frozen; there was one slim possibility that sprang to mind – the river bed. The end result was a first (and probably a last) in Fowler walking history. Victor and I crunched crisply along the smooth snow of the river bed while the Nisbet team followed the longer route along the path. We arrived perhaps five minutes before them, and stepped briskly on to the perfect ice streaks of Fly Direct.

All those miles of driving had been worthwhile; the conditions were the best I had ever seen on Creag Meaghaidh. White ice drooled down the lower slabs and choked the 600ft. corner line which formed the meat of the route. We twanged our way upwards while Andy contented himself with yet another Nisbet first, The Midge, just to our right. It was one of those rare days when everything goes exactly according to plan. Lying in the sun on top of Creag Meaghaidh was a moment to be savoured. Victor was bouncing uncontrollably as he does when excited.

So, on the Sunday, we found ourselves in Glencoe peering up at a hanging ice streak up and to the left of the well known column of Elliott's Downfall. Our approach had been interestingly unconventional, and at one point involved overcoming a particularly steep rock wall by clambering up a handy, if fragile, tree. It wasn't until we were roping up beneath the line that Victor realized that he had left his axes behind.

"You lead and slide yours down the rope." He suggested. And so I set off on disturbingly steep and brittle ice, clipping in just one of our two ropes.

The pitch was insecure and unnerving, to the extent that I felt increasingly uncomfortable with this arrangement. Eventually, I pulled on to a ledge and belayed. Looking up, it was clear that we were above the main difficulties, and without a further thought I clipped both axes into the free rope and let them zoom off out of sight. The pitch was vertical for some distance, and the axes descended most efficiently. Regrettably, I was unable to see Victor's strenuous efforts to run away from a couple of kilos of sharpened steel homing in on him. Being tied onto the other end of the rope there was no escape and after fruitless exertions he bore the full force of two axes from 50m. A muffled cry reached me, and it was a not very pleased Mr Saunders who arrived at the stance some time later. As he led off, I made very sure that the Fowler body was protected by an early runner in both ropes.

To me these recollections sum up a lot about Scottish winter climbing. Conditions are fickle, early starts wearing and success comes only to those that persevere. But the memories bite deeply, the friendships are warm and the pleasures long lasting. These are the important things. I remain hooked.

THE CROW

By Nic Bullivant

THE crow. It must have been the crow. I woke involuntarily, sweating, despite the cold. It was pitch dark in the snow hole. Why had I decided to bother snow holing? It was one of those rare windless winter nights. A tent would have been so much more comfortable. Holes are a terrible trouble to dig, too. Tents are heavier, though. Ah, well, can never be sure. My mind went back to Hogmanay in the tent. Up all night trying to hold it up. That was some blow! What was I doing backpacking in January? Time I grew up. There was a warm bed back home. And a lovely girl. And four kids. (Four! I ask you!) I wondered which of them was getting up in the middle of the night and padding in to our bedroom to snuggle under the duvet.

Huh. Here in this filthy black hole I couldn't even be bothered to light the night light. Strange about the crow. It had really got under my skin. It was like the old black hen I was supposed to have put down before I came away. Black. Covered in black feathers. With a beady eye that looks at you in that knowing way. It knows you have got murderous intentions. It knows you have got food for it. If it unnerves you enough from your murderous intentions, you will give it food. I gave it food. I certainly didn't deliberately feed the crow. It just appeared. I had only just sat down and opened my rucksack and there it was on the snow, 10ft. away. I had some tea from my flask and some biscuits. I packed everything up and carried on. I had only just stood up when it was in there, pecking up the crumbs.

It was a brilliant period of weather. The sort of time when you say hang it all and go off irresponsibly breaking your own trail. There was lots to look at. The valley mist was just superb. Isolated hills were rising out of it. It was too low to produce Brocken Spectres, but I didn't mind. I walked right round into the next coire, and stopped at the foot of the crags. A couple of guys were having a tough time on one of the routes. The leader was doing a good job, though, and made it up to the stance. The second followed. I took off my sack again, and got out my camera. The light cloud round the summit was gathering again, and I missed the shot. I looked up from putting away my camera and there it was again. The crow. I'm sure it was the same bird. It just waited till I'd finished and packed up, then it flew in to where I had been standing, hardly waiting for me to vacate my footprints. Up the back of the coire is a big snow slope leading to the plateau above.

The cloud cleared again in front of me. I went slowly, trying to reduce the perspiration. I was well ready for refuelling at the top and sat to have

another bite to eat. Out came the food. Drat that crow! It was still following me. It flew over me and something light floated down and landed nearby. Black feathers. It's moulting, I thought. It turned and fixed a beady eye on me. The sun caught its black feathers. Gleaming black, iridescent, slightly blueish. No sign of moulting. It watched me eat – very closely.

I'm not usually mean. I'll throw crusts to the gulls on the beach or to the ducks at the pond, when we go with the children. But somehow, I didn't want to encourage the crow. It seemed to have adopted me, and I didn't want it around. In any case, hadn't we all read warnings about feeding alien scavengers who then turn their attention to the native birdlife, stealing eggs and taking chicks. Not that there'd be any eggs or chicks around in this snow, but the principle's the same.

The light mist drifted back, making the navigation across the plateau more interesting. I didn't see the bird again all day, so why was it waking me up in the snow hole? What if it was trying to tell me something? What was that about the black feather? Did it know I was going to kill the old black hen and trying to make me feel bad about it? What else was I supposed to be doing that I've not got round to?

Jen's birthday! I forgot her birthday! Hang on. No – I didn't forget her birthday. We went out for a meal. Hah! Panic attacks! I remember having them for months after I appeared in the school play. It was always the same. I hadn't remembered my lines. I had let everyone else down. I hadn't kept up the pretence that we were Shakespearean actors with talent and knew what we were doing.

Damn! The alarm. It can't be, already, oh! It is. You get no idea of the time in the pitch black. Well, what's the hurry? I'll just sneak a few more minutes in my pit. Make up for all the hours tossing and turning worrying about that dratted bird. Funny how it's always easier to fall asleep after the alarm's gone. Should set it to go off at midnight...

No, must get up. Hell, is that the time? I must have nodded off again. What a midden this is. Can't wait to get out. Out at last. What the...? I reckon something got it in the night and blew it to pieces. Good. Saved me the job. I trudge off, leaving my snow hole empty behind. Someone else might have the pleasure of finding it, enlarging it and using it for the night. I am on an upward trajectory. On, up, out of the cloud sea, right on to Ben MacDhui's generous summit. It is not as early as it might have been if I hadn't been skulking so long. There are several people at the summit – and a crow.

It can't have been yesterday's crow. That one fell to pieces hanging around my snow hole. The day is going to be a short one. Early lunch, I think. What the hell's that bird doing? It's hopping around with something small and round in its beak, but drops it when it sees me looking and flies off a little way. I go over to see what the small round thing is. Eeargh! It's

an eye, a bird's eye. Cannibals! I knew crows pick out eyes, but this is a bit too gory for comfort. The eye looks at me, unblinking, reproachfully. It's the bird I didn't feed yesterday. The bird I didn't put out of its misery yesterday. The family I left behind to indulge myself. The guilt comes rolling in like the cold clammy hand of reproach and the mist bank from the plateau, now moving across the summit, cutting out the sun.

It's suddenly bitterly cold in the cloud. I've become careless in my lack of attention. I had already been cooling down, but now I'm chittering. Three more layers of clothes to put on. Much better, again, fortified against the outside world.

It gets warmer again on the descent, but the mist stays thick. It's quite a tricky job, concentrating on the navigation in the whiteout. At last the slope begins to dip downwards. I'm coming to the end of my high. At a big block overlooking an invisible abyss, I stop for a last time. I haven't seen anyone since I left the summit, and there are no footprints near this rock, but the soft snow seems patterned by pockmarks over a wide area.

There it is again. The crow. All right! You black-cassocked gloom merchant. I've had my panic attack and you've managed to make me feel really guilty about going off for my own pleasure. You should be working for the church. Get lost. Go on.

Why is it taking no notice? Of course, I can't tell whether it's the same one. It's had no way of following me here in the whiteout. What's it up to now? It's beaking about in the pockmarks in the snow. What's it finding? Food?

I tell you, I didn't stay to find out. I fleetingly saw what it pulled out of one of those pock marks, I thought at first it was a worm - a thin strip of pink meat, before it disappeared into that bird's beak. I ran. I have only run off a mountain once before, in the face of an approaching thunderstorm, and I tell you, I ran as fast this time as for any approaching bolt of lightning. I was down the hill, into the car and back home in an hour. The family was surprised to see me home so soon, but they were all fine.

"Thanks for doing the hen before you left," Jen was saying "but you might have buried it, the other hens have been going mad, there's been a terrible pile of crows round its corpse. Look. They've completely picked it clean."

THE NORTHERN PINNACLES OF LIATHACH AND THE KINLOCHEWE MEETS OF 1899 AND 1900

By Robin N. Campbell

THE possibility of a route to Mullach an Rathain by way of the series of pinnacles between it and its northern outlier Meall Dearg was first noted by Lionel Hinxman in 1891.[1] Then William Douglas traversed Liathach with William W. King in April 1893 and observed that "we were charmed with the view of the unclimbed ridge of Meall Dearg...with its seven pinnacles'.[2] Douglas returned to investigate on June 11, 1894, accompanied by Hinxman and John Rennie and guided by William Macdonald, head keeper at Torridon House where the party had stayed on the previous night. Macdonald's orders were simply to direct the party to the start of the Pinnacles, but he was "delighted at being asked to join the expedition". The party reached the ridge at the lowest col from the north side and proceeded roped to the summit. Douglas remarked that "were it not for the unstable condition of the whole structure, the climb would have been a very simple affair". Keeper Macdonald put it rather differently: "For all the world like climbing over an old tooth-comb, and a —— old tooth-comb at that." (Expletive not recorded).[3]

In the ensuing years, members showed little interest in the Torridon hills until the Kinlochewe Easter Meets of 1899 and 1900. They were occupied in tidying up after Collie in Glencoe, Ben Nevis and Skye. Unsurprisingly, it was Collie again who delivered the reminder with an obscurely-reported ascent/descent of the Central Buttress of Coire Mhic Fhearchair in 1898 or earlier.[4] It had also became apparent to Hugh Munro and others that the mountains between Loch Maree and An Teallach were very poorly mapped. So the Club was not short of reasons to visit Kinlochewe.

The 1899 Meet was attended by 14 members and visited by uniformly bad weather. The recorder, Hinxman, noted that the evenings were "enlivened by Rennie at the piano and the sweet tones of [Munro's] flute". The photographers consoled themselves with staging graceful group photographs, two of which have survived.[5] Some climbing was managed by the rope of Harry Lawson, William Ling and George Glover – a route on the east end of Liathach from Coire Dubh Mor and a gully on Sail Mhor, and by Glover, William Inglis Clark and an unidentified other – the Waterfall Climb on Beinn a' Mhuinidh.[6] The Club, in much the same company, immediately returned to Kinlochewe at Easter 1900, where they found weather even worse than the previous year. The Meet, which was reported by Sandy Mackay in a deplorably sketchy and facetious manner,

"lasted from Thursday evening to Tuesday morning (April 12 to 17), Munro forming a fringe at either end. (He was found in his slippers and left in bed)".[7] Although little detail is provided, Mackay allowed that those attending were President Maylard, Hinxman, Rennie, Wm. Naismith, Douglas, Munro, Harold Raeburn, Lawson, Ling, James Parker, Mackenzie, Gall Inglis, Herbert Boyd, Squance, Mackay and Cookson (Guest).[8] Much of the party of 16 left on Monday morning, but those seven or eight who remained enjoyed a magnificent day on Liathach. "A party of six" made what we would now call the first winter ascent of the Northern Pinnacles, then traversed Liathach eastwards to Glen Torridon, returning in the very late evening to Kinlochewe. Only five took part in the actual ascent of the Pinnacles, one of the party making his way independently to Mullach an Rathain and rejoining the five on the summit. Mackay mentions in his Meet report that "Mackenzie performed excellent service by scouting around the hither end of the mountain, sighting the enemy, himself unseen", while "Inglis made splendid practice as a snapshooter", but he fails to specify the five who ascended the Pinnacles. In the following number of the Journal, Mackay contributed a short article – albeit in the same cryptic undergraduate style – which gave some more detail.[9] The successful party consisted of two ropes: Naismith and Mackay led the way, and the second rope was led by Raeburn.

But who were the other two climbers? Mackay does not say. However, Munro is a candidate, since he was evidently still around on the Monday, and his "being left in bed" on Tuesday implies activity on the previous day. And 50 years later Ling, reminiscing about Club Meets, recalled his attendance at Kinlochewe and "a fine climb over the Northern Pinnacles of Liathach in icy conditions, a party of six, from which we got back to Kinlochewe at 10.50 p.m."[10] So Raeburn's rope consisted of Ling and one other, possibly Munro. The photograph facing page 33 seems to provide confirmation of this suggestion. It shows the five concerned perched on a snowslope on what may very well be Mullach an Rathain. It was was found in a box of negative glass plates belonging to James Gall Inglis and passed to me for safe keeping by his son, Robin, in the 1970s.[11] We know from Mackay that Inglis was on the mountain taking photographs: indeed, one of them illustrates Mackay's article. And we know that a photograph was taken of the successful party. After the successful ascent, "presently, all foregathered for a photograph in marching disorder". However, Mackay fails to make clear whether Inglis (who must have taken the summit photograph) was the sixth member of the Pinnacles party or whether we have an eighth climber to identify on Liathach that day.

So it is certain that the first winter ascent party contained Naismith, Mackay, Raeburn and Ling, and extremely probable that the fifth member was Munro. I say 'extremely probable' since there is no doubt that the

photograph was taken by Inglis and that it was taken at the 1900 Kinlochewe Meet: the coincidences of clothing, personal appearance (age) and personnel exclude other possibilities. These five and Inglis might have been together on Friday, on the Black Men or on Slioch. This is rather unlikely, since Mackay reports: "Through the day party after party (so my recollection goes) kept arriving at the Hotel." But on Saturday Lawson and Ling went to Coire Mhic Fhearchair, and on Sunday Lawson, Ling and Munro went to A'Mhaighdean.

The preceding paragraph (complete with its errors of reasoning, soon to be revealed) appeared in a draft of this note which I sent to Bob Aitken. Bob suggested consulting Ling's diaries, held by the Alpine Club Library – documents not known to me. I did this with the help of Archivist Susan Scott and discovered the following entry for Monday, April 16, 1900: "Ben Leagach. With H. T. Munro, W. W. Naismith, H. Raeburn, J. G. Inglis, A. M. Mackay & H. G. S. Lawson (Lawson was dropped off before lunch to go walking, and Munro went his own way after part of the initial climb. The two ropes then consisted of (i) Naismith & Mackay; (ii) Raeburn, Inglis and Ling. Later in the day, when rejoined by Munro, the ropes were (i) Raeburn, Munro, Mackay; (ii) Ling, Inglis, Naismith)." So the mysterious fifth member of the climbing party was Inglis, whom I had foolishly excluded from consideration except as photographer, and the sixth "independent member" was Munro. However, my inferences regarding the splendid historical photograph are strongly supported.[12] I can now stop worrying about the missing rope: it is around photographer Inglis's neck!

NOTES:

[1] *Beinn Eighe and the Torridon Hills,* SMCJ, 1891, I, 187-94.

[2] *Leagach, Torridon,* SMCJ, 1893, II, 320. Douglas's count of seven pinnacles included Meall Dearg and Mullach an Rathain, but Meall Dearg is normally omitted by climbing to the lowest col from the north side, and later descriptions have not counted the Mullach as one of the Pinnacles. So the traditional numbering proceeds from 1 the pinnacle above the lowest col to 5 – the last pinnacle before the Mullach itself.

[3] *The Northern Pinnacles of Leagach,* SMCJ, 1894, III, 131-5

[4] *A Reverie,* SMCJ, September 1898, V, 93-102. Collie referred to this ascent in a letter to Douglas dated 26-4-98, which began: "We had a great time at Kinlochewe, and I think I have discovered the finest rock climb in the British Isles." So it seems likely that this alluded to a recent (thus 1898) visit, although the photographs illustrating Collie's article show that the condition of the crags was not at all wintry. One of the other members of Collie's party was W. Cecil Slingsby. He read a paper to the Yorkshire Ramblers Club on 14-4-96 entitled *An Easter Holiday in the Scottish Highlands* and this was eventually published in YRCJ, 1900, I, 173-87. Slingsby's paper was a report of the activities of an Alpine Club group organised by Collie and friends who were present at Fort William during our own Easter Meet on April 3-7, 1896, an event completed only a week before his address! In a footnote to the printed article he noted that "since I wrote the above paragraph I have had several other little campaigns in the Highlands, and have spent three days upon that most remarkable mountain, Ben Eighe in the Torridons. The crags of Coire Mhic Fhearchair on this mountain are steeper, and in some respects wider, than those of Ben Nevis".

[5] See illustrations facing p. 32.

[6] For the Meet Report see SMCJ, 1899, V, 253-6, and for Glover's account of the Waterfall Climb see ibid. 257-60. Apart from those mentioned, the other members present were President R. A. Robertson, D. S. Campbell, W. Douglas, T. Gibson, J. Gall Inglis, D. Mackenzie and F. C. Squance. Glover, when complaining about the absurd bulk of cameras on the route, identifies the unidentified member of the Waterfall Climb party as a photographer. Since the only other known climbers, Lawson and Ling, were active elsewhere that day (Slioch) it is very likely that the unidentified third man was – given his zeal for photography – the self-effacing Douglas.

[7] See SMCJ, 1900, VI, 59-60. Alexander Morrice Mackay is an unsung but interesting early member. A son of Aberdeen, he went to Trinity College, Cambridge and there fell under the influence of Geoffrey Young. He formed an Alpine partnership with Young which ended with the bad and stupid accident to Mackay on the North Face of Cir Mhor described in Young's book *Mountains with a Difference.* This brought a promising mountaineering and tennis career to an abrupt conclusion. Mackay went on to become a Court of Session judge. He is best known for the audacious ascent of the Barrel Buttress of Quinag with Raeburn and Ling in 1907 (see the belated account in SMCJ, 1928, XVIII, 207-13) and for his biographical sketches of early members, and of Young, in SMCJ, 1950, XXIV, 169-80.

[8] The gathering is shown in the splendid photograph facing page 33. Identification of the climbers in this and the 1899 photographs was helped by the considerable overlap in those attending. A poor photograph published in SMCJ, 1927, XVIII, 8 shows Squance in 1897; Susanna Kerr of the National Portrait Gallery supplied a photograph of Mackay; Mackenzie and Lawson were identified by inference based on knowledge of their ages and the fact that they attended both meets; the 1899 Campbell is the same man as one of those in the Yacht Meet photograph, and is therefore taken to be D. S. – he being the only Campbell recorded as present there; Gibson, although also present at the Yacht Meet is distinguishable from Campbell by age. In the captions, identifications based on positive evidence are in roman type; those that depend on inference are shown in italics. The figure positively identified as W. Lamond Howie, (cf. 1906 Meet photograph) has moved his head and so this is offered rather tentatively. In addition, Howie was not recorded as attending the 1900 Meet, but Naismith (not in the photograph) was definitely there. It has been suggested that 'Howie' is Naismith. However, he seems much older than Naismith. If it is Naismith, then he has been patronising Howie's bonnet-maker.

[9] *The Northern Pinnacles of Liathach,* SMCJ, 1900, VI, 87-90.

[10] *Meets, 1897-1950,* SMCJ, 1950, XXIV, 190-93.

[11] *Safe keeping,* I am ashamed to say, has meant languishing forgotten in a cupboard for almost 30 years!

[12] Ling's diary places him and Lawson on Beinn Eighe on Friday, so Monday was the only day of the Meet when the five in the photograph were together on the hill.

BEER AND ROCKING IN LAS VEGAS

By Allan Scott

The Rannoch Club eating, drinking and climbing at Red Rocks, Nevada. November 2001 (though not necessarily in that order).

THE Rannoch Club dates back to around the 1960s and boasts among its early activists such great luminaries as Ted Maden, Colin Stead, Dave Jenkins, Morton Shaw and Ed Jackson. The Great Meteor Catastrophe in the 1970s caused the mass extinction of climbing activity and in the early 1980s a Renaissance began with the addition of a group of non-luminous new members mostly ex-Glasgow and Strathclyde University climbers.

With the current decline in weather standards (probably due to that meteor) the club have regular trips to Spain in the quest for warm dry rock and cold wet beer. This was the second Rannoch trip in 2001. We had already been to Majorca in May, and after another typically poor Scottish summer we opted for a 'once in a lifetime' trip to the US to end the year with some good weather and good rock.

The flight from Heathrow was L-O-N-G, but was helped by an endless supply of free swally. Travel was spoiled only by an irritatingly loud, alcoholic, tattie-howking caricature of an Irishman whose rowdy protestations (sic) caused me to be banned from the drinks trolley, I guess I shouldn't have said I was a 'Bluenose' from Glasgow, but thankfully, it was near the end of the flight. However, the worrying thing was that he said he was also going to Las Vegas, on the same flight as us from San Francisco...but he died of a liver failure induced heart attack when they announced there would be no drinks served on the flight. His body was jettisoned at 34,000ft. As they say: "It's the luck of the Oirish."

Our arrival in Las Vegas was more or less on time and we picked up a hire-car, a Chevrolet Redrocker and moseyed-on-down to the apartments on the east side. Not a bad hut, with a big fridge for the beer and a telly for the Afghanistan War updates. There was a pool with jaccuzzi round the front. In Hut One were Stefan Kass, with John Dunn, Colin Grant and myself. Hut Two had Alan Shand and his girlfriend Carol, with Tim Whittaker, Iain White and Bish McAra. An interesting combo, but at least they had someone to do the housework.

There were four climbing teams, each with at least one SMC member. This would ensure sound mountaineering practice and good hill-sense at all times. Naismith's Rule would apply to all walk-ins and there would be no retro-bolting on mountain crags.

First Night: We went out looking for food, and drove just down the road to a place called the Long Horn Casino, it looked promising. There were

wall-to-wall slots, and wall-to-wall sluts. Elvis was in the corner trying to make himself heard over the cacophony of fruit-machines. Some trailer-trash rednecks in check shirts and stetsons were slugging it out over a pool table. Then unbelievably, an elderly, long-haired, grey-bearded dude walked in and *he had breasts.* Honest! Yee-ha! This was Las Vegas alright.

An enormously fat, sweating waitress approached. I said: "Gonnygeezalookatamenu," in my finest Glesga accent, she visibly wobbled all over and stared with a (fat) blank expression: "D'uh...Excuse me?"

"May we possibly peruse one of your menus perchance?" I enunciated in my best Invernesian BBC accent.

"Yes-sirree-bob! Have-nice-day-you're-welcome-sir," she drawled in her best Texan.

We ordered good wholesome American fare...Mexican food and French Fries!...portions were enormous but cheap, e.g. my starter, the Taco Salad consisted of a pound of chilli in a bucket-sized taco with piles of salad and a quart of guacamole, and only $3...hmm, a sign of things to come I thought. After the meal we went back to the hut for some much needed jetlag-induced slumber.

Day 1: We had no food at the hut so we went out for breakfast and found the Blueberry Hill Pancake House. On the menu was something called the Double 2-Double 2, consisting of 2 eggs, 2 bacon, 2 sausages, and 2 pancakes...2 much!

Crag: It is around a half-an-hour drive to Red Rocks from Las Vegas. Access to the climbing areas is from a one-way loop road. We decided on some sport climbing for the first day at the Black Corridor and Magic Bus crags from the Second Pull Out (car park). The routes – 5.9, 5.9+, 5.10d, 5.10a, 5.8, 5.9+, 5.8. Great climbing, and it would be good to see if it would improve performance on the Glasgow Climbing Wall when we got home. The Black Corridor was a bit like the Whangie with a short walk-in to a narrow rock gash with superb rock and well-bolted routes...hmmm...nothing like the Whangie really, but anyway it was a good introduction to Red Rocks, although it did get a little busy later on.

Evening: Back to the hut for a beer and scrub-up, then along the road to the Boulder Station Hotel. Slot-machines as far as the eye can see, wall-to-wall-craps etc, etc, the usual Vegas thing. For eats we tried El Diablo Mexican Cantina. Tons of tacos, tortillas, burritos, fajitas, dips, guacamoles and buckets of Corona beer. Well, we were on holiday after all!

Day 2: Breakfast – Blueberry Mountain of Pancakes. It just had to be the Double 2-Double 2...2222 calories.

Crag: Some more sport-climbing at Dog Wall, First Pull Out, 5.10a, 5.10b, The Gallery, Second Pull-out, 5.8, 5.9, 5.10a, Wall of Confusion, 5.10b. Superb routes again. Perfect rock and warm and sunny. Marvellous.

Evening: Boulder Station Hotel, American Steakhouse. All-you-can-eat soup and salad starter followed by all-you-can-find-room-for meat, cow, buffalo, bison, steer, heifer, moose...and all-you-can-drink beers, of course.

Day 3: Mega-early start – an improvised Double 2-Double 2 at the hut, (Double coffee, 2 toast, 2 cereal)

Crag: Black Velvet Canyon – Prince of Darkness*** (5.6, 5.10b, 5.10a, 5.9, 5.9, 5.10c.) A fantastic route, face climbing of the highest order on a stunning wall with all belays hanging. It was unusual in that the climb was really a six-pitch sport route on a predominantly traditional crag. We got started ahead of three French climbers. I met the leader on the first hanging belay and he seemed *tres* friendly..."Grimpeurs Ecossaise? Ooh-la-la! Haw-hee-haw! C'est magnifique! Mon amis!!".

However, the tone quickly changed at the end of the route, as first Stef and I, then Colin and JD (on the same descent after doing Dream of Wild Turkeys***) had to abseil over, under and around them, totally tying them in knots and scuppering the *Entente Cordiale.*

"Sacre bleu! Zut alors! Vous etez merdes bastardes d'Ecosse." Alas the Auld Alliance is no more.

Shandboy and Tim enjoyed their route (Fiddler on the Roof***), and the crag so much they decided to spend a very cold night out, on a hanging belay halfway up the wall after an abseil-rope jammed. Bad show lads...even the rappel-rope-ravaged frogs managed to get down...but shit happens I suppose. Anyway *we* got down safely but starving, imagine my horror to find an empty foodbag...gofers ate my snickers! Wee furry bassas!

Evening: Couldn't face another Tex-Mex pork-out so it was an American-style phone-up pizza pork-out instead. Three satellite-sized pizzas were duly delivered and scoffed with mucho beers while watching American Football on the TV. We were really getting the hang of this American stuff. The evening was, however, fraught with worry about the lads stuck back at Black Velvet Canyon: "Pass another slice of pepperami and a beer"?..."Sure, cheers buddy"!...hic!

Day 4: International Rescue is go go go. We were up at the climbing area at first light to assist Tim and Al off the crag. After a few worrying moments, (i.e. we could only see one of them at first), everything turned out OK. Shandboy, after all, is an old hand at this benightment lark.

After a late breakfast at IHOP (International House of Pancakes, or more accurately, Indescribably Huge Order of Pancakes)...Double 2-Double 2...a double fry-up, 2 many pancakes, and 2 visits to the john. The team adjourned to the hut for a spot of R&R. Even in late November temperatures were in the mid-70s, just nice for a couple of hours by the pool. Then it was off to the Crag – Sandstone Quarry Area, Mass Production

Wall, sport routes – 5.8, 5.9, 5.10a. A-hootin-and-a-hollerin! So much good rocking!

Evening: Boulder Station Italiano Ristorante...mucho vino collapso at the JD and Colin end of the table, and mucho birra italiano at every other end of the table. With the drinks I had antipasta, midpasta and postpasta. (No wonder I'm a fatbasta). On the way back to the hut we made a major discovery. The Dew Drop Inn, just a few hundred yards from the hut and perfect for the lads...Cheap beer ($5 for a three-pint pitcher), pool table (25c a game), great Jukebox, and a barmaid with nice buns...it was the American Dream...God Bless America. We met some interesting characters, mostly construction workers, including Loopy Lou from Arkansas, sporting an American Civil War Confederate cap and very chatty and laid back. Indeed, he was totally unflappable in the face of a slightly inebriated and aggressive member of the party who shall remain nameless, with his one-liner self-introduction: "How come so many Americans are fat bastards?"

I'm just glad it wasn't Big Detroit Dave he confronted, he was like a Yankee version of Giant Haystacks.

Later, Lou started cracking 'Religious' jokes (must be a Southern Thing, The Bible-Belt and all that). Hilarious! Here was I, a 'Teddy Bear' from Glasgow listening to an American telling me sectarian jokes. Bizarre indeed.

Day 5: Breakfast – Double 2-Double 2...Double helpings, 2 barfs, 2 paracetamol.

Crag: Willow Spring – off the loop road. One pitch sport and trad routes. 5.10, 5.9, 5.11-, 5.10, 5.8. Hot-diggety-dawg! This climbing lark just gets better and better.

Evening: A trip to the Strip, the Neon-Nightmare in the centre of Las Vegas. We went to Caesar's Palace for the buffet meal. WOW! MEGUM HOTELUM! What a size of a place! What a size of a plate of food! After several visits to Caesar's vomitorium, we took a cab back to the Dew Drop to meet some more American nutters. Tonight's characters included, The Hustler – a dude playing pool with personal cue, cue-glove and chalk-clip...he was shite – I gubbed him, and Air-Guitar man who stopped mid-shot several times to perform whenever a guitar-solo was on the juke-box. Also Juan Kerr a Hispanic pool shark – I was shite – he gubbed me.

Day 6: Breakfast – Double 2-Double 2...getting 2 fat, 2 rounds of toast; 2 little; 2 late.

Crag: Pine Creek Canyon, The Mescalito – Dark Shadows*** (5.6, 5.7, 5.7, 5.8+), superb bridging up a big 'varnished' corner at a very amenable standard. Total enjoyment even though it was the first time on the holiday to have been cold. The route being on a north-facing crag with a howling wind. It was just like being 'up the Ben' (without the English hordes and



Kinlochewe, Easter Meet, 1899
Standing: D. S. Campbell, G. T. Glover (sitting in window), W. N. Ling, R. A. Robertson, F. C. Squance, J. G. Inglis, W. Douglas.
Sitting: D. Mackenzie, L. Hinxman, W. I. Clark, J. Rennie, T. Gibson, H. G. S. Lawson.
Photo: J. Gall Inglis, SMC Collection.



Kinlochewe, Easter Meet, 1899.
Standing: H. T. Munro, R. A. Robertson, H. G. S. Lawson, G. T. Glover, F. C. Squance.
Sitting: D. S. Campbell, J. Rennie, L. Hinxman (on window), D. Mackenzie, W. Douglas (on window), W. I. Clark, T. Gibson, W. N. Ling. Photo: William N Ling, SMC Collection.

Kinlochewe, Easter Meet, 1900.

Standing: W. N. Ling, Cookson, W. L. Howie, H. Raeburn, J. G. Inglis, H. G. S. Lawson, H. T. Munro, L. Hinxman, H. C. Boyd, F. C. Squance, A. M. Mackay (in window). Sitting: A. E. Maylard (Pres.), W. Douglas, J. Rennie (on ground), J. A. Parker, D. Mackenzie.

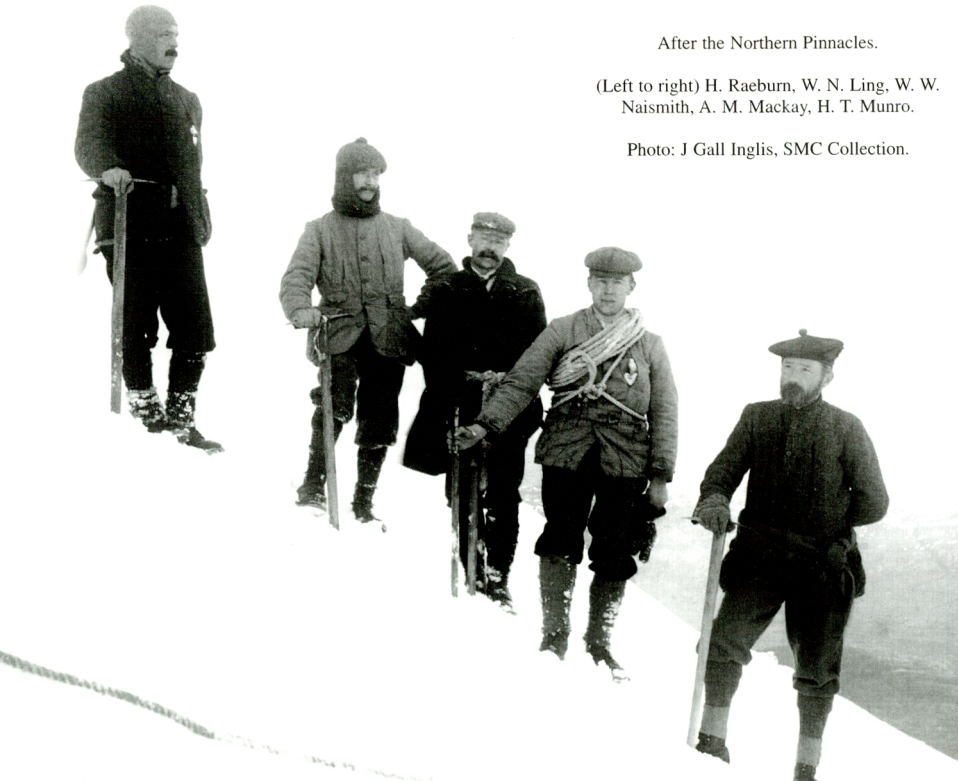
Photo: J Gall Inglis, SMC Collection.



After the Northern Pinnacles.

(Left to right) H. Raeburn, W. N. Ling, W. W. Naismith, A. M. Mackay, H. T. Munro.

Photo: J Gall Inglis, SMC Collection.



midges.) Also visited Brass Wall (surely a misnomer), on the sunny side, 5.9+ trad route. Superb and hot-hot-hot.

Evening: Pizza phone-in. Mini-Dish size this time…still couldn't finish them. Then we dropped in to the Dew Drop Inn. Tonight's entertainment…Steve, The One-armed Bandit, astonishingly able to play pool using only one hand. In one game he slammed the cue-ball so hard he potted the black, just the black!…an incredible and rare shot, (indeed, only the second time Steve had done it in 20 years!) and under American Rules an automatic win. Imagine his chagrin when we told him we were playing Scottish Rules and he had just lost! Oh how we laughed, and drank, and laughed some more.

Day 7: Breakfast – Double 2-Double 2…2 late I'm blobbed-out now, 2 of everything, with double maple-syrup. Not even any room left for a wafer-thin mint.

Crag : I went to Pine Creek Canyon with Tim. Stefan had gone home to the gym and Shandboy was away shopping with Carol on the Strip. (I guess that's one of the drawbacks of bringing your girlfriend). We went to Straight Shooter Wall and Brass Wall on the sunny side. Routes 5.9+, 5.10, 5.8+.

Evening: Another Boulder Station Mexican trough-session with bucketed-Corona overload. The Dew Drop Inn seemed to be holding some kind of Ironworkers Union Convention. Big Lew (an American Arthur Scargill), was handing out car bumper stickers, badges etc. He even hinted at offering us some work…I was sorely tempted, with rates of pay at $60 an hour! One of the union guys, Septic Hank, (so called after he likened living in Scotland to being in a septic tank…cheeky yankee sod), told us his life story (zzzzzzzzzzz) and about his three beautiful daughters. This was all very doubtful, since he was a short, fat, grizzled, stinking, one-eyed, bow-legged, halitosis-suffering hobo. It all led to another beer-fuelled frenzy, with some raucous badinage with our American hosts.

Day 8: Rest day. So I thought I'd take a wee walk down the road to the Toys'R'Us I'd spied on Flamingo Road…2 hours and 3 litres of Gatorade later I arrived rather footsore. Got a sack load of Harry Potter stuff for my kids and got the bus back to the hut.

Brunch: Double 2-Double 2…2 stomach pumps an enema and a double colonic irrigation. I was knackered and spent the rest of day by the pool.

Evening: A plethora of pizza, pitchers and pool.

Day 9: Last day. Breakfast – Double 2-Double 2…It's Lardsville, Nevada-drastic measures called for – 2 stomach staples, 2 liposuctions and a double jaw-clamp.

Crag: It was those old 'last-day blues' when you know it's nearly all over and you're going home soon. We went to Pine Creek Canyon, and rather fittingly to Flight Path Wall, 5.9, 5.9, 5.9. Then finished off at Calico Basin, 5.9+

Evening: A team trip to the Strip. We did the Rollercoaster ride at NewYork, New York. Brilliant! Then on to the buffet at Bellagios'...and I thought Caesars was big! You could fit the whole of Byres Road into the foyer of this place. They had top-quality food in exquisite surroundings. Incredibly, with superb *haute cuisine* on offer (braised red snapper, roast wild hog, duck a l'orange etc etc) most of the Yanks were porking-out on PIZZA for chrissakes!

No wonder they're all so fat. Yes, Colin, you were right all along. Afterwards, we shoe-horned ourselves into a cab back to the hut. A couple of us went for a final fling at the Dew Drop. We soon became barfast, chatting to the locals with a few pitchers and swapping addresses with a few folk. Truly a terrific bar. Magic and unforgettable.

Days 10-11: It was with heads heavy with hangovers we dropped the cars off – then it was a blur of airport lounges, trolley-dollies, double vodkas, cans of Bud, airport sushi-bars and last-minute gift shops all the way to a dull, damp, Glasgow.

The Routes: bonaire–bone2–crudeboys–dancinwithagod–neonsunset–electrickoolaid–technicolboursunrise–catwalk–itsabitch–sportsclimbingisneither–bucksmuscleworld–gelatinpooch–therunaway–princeofdarkness–partsisparts–batterypowered–trigerhappy–bigfoot–blacktrack–unknowntoprope–planf–raggededges–darkshadows–toplesstwins–straightshooter–simpatico–varnishingpoint–asimpleexpedition–cartalk–dointhegooddrive–pendingdisaster.

The Future Tick-list Too many routes, too little time, too many big breakfasts, too fat. (Catch Double 2-Double 2).

I can't wait for the next 'once in a lifetime trip'.

(Apologies to Hunters. S. Thompson and Joseph Heller).

GRADE I GULLIES CAN BE FUN
(or the perils of guidebooks)

By Nigel Suess

LEVEL 4 avalanche risk, especially in North-facing gullies, winds up to 50mph and wet snow lying down to Loch Leven. The hut was not troubled by early breakfasting. Some chose to walk in the woods; others opted for a Corbett or a low ridge walk.

John came over. "Have you a car?"

"Why?"

"Because I don't."

We paired up, then debated hills. "What about this one?" He pointed to the most boring Corbett in the West of Scotland.

"Done it." To the next suggestion. "Did that a couple of years ago."

Well, we both have more years mountain experience behind us than ahead of us (as the reader may conclude after reading on).

"What about Sgor na h'Ulaidh and perhaps we could have a look at Vixen Gully? Of course, if that is not in condition we could take the walkers' route. The point is that the gully will give us some shelter from the wind; and the book says: 'Grade I...a straight-forward snow climb.' MacInnes gives the same grade and says: 'An easy route to the summit, can sometimes be used for descent.' We can check out the conditions when we get to the corrie."

"Got any gear?"

"An axe."

"Well, I've 90ft. of rope, four krabs and three hexes."

The hexes proved to be all about the same size. No rocks, no friends, no slings, no pegs, no ice screws, no deadman, no second ice tool, no harnesses.

"My last bowline tie on was in 1973."

By the time we parked the car, patches of blue sky evidenced the swift passage of the clouds, but there was no rain, sleet or snow. We enjoyed our walk up Gleann leac na Muidhe. We had not been out on the hill together before and chatted about the Alps. John had been on a first British ascent on the Alphubel in 1956 and had climbed most of the 4000m peaks. Well, that inspired confidence.

In recent years we had both pootered about on the Ben classics. Spirits rose further. But the overnight snow was soft and deep up into the corrie. We chose to dismiss its windslab-like texture when we got to around 600m. The hill was clear and we could see right into the gully. Here the volume seemed fairly minimal, probably blown out by the wind which was strong and northerly. We agreed that there was no serious cornice to plop off and

that the gully, though continuous, had several rocky outcrops. These suggested a closer look was not entirely imprudent. But first, hot coffee and some food.

We gingerly moved up into the jaws of the gully and soloed to below a short ice pitch. Here, we geared up, a somewhat grand name for tying on to each end of the rope and getting out the three hexes. I made a good bucket seat. John reckoned that the short ice pitch should be followed by a simple snow couloir to the top (after all the SMC guidebook and the MacInnes book are clear in their description of the route and definition of Grade I).

"With a short rope we should not have any problem keeping in touch."

No sooner was he over the 5m ice pitch than he looked for a belay. Yes, a good placement for two of our hexes. I trotted up and took the residual rack. The next section was soft snow on névé and I ran out the rope to a wee bay; no gear here, so I excavated another bucket seat. John had a similar third pitch, but found a placement for a sound belay anchor. My next pitch was probably the most worrying. For about a dozen metres there was deep slabby snow over the névé. We had both agreed to keep near to the gully walls where it would be marginally less deep. The technique was to jam in the single axe and use the other hand to snow plough the gully ahead (depositing most of it onto the unfortunate belayer). The rope length stopped the pleasure and a hex belay was found below a névé groove (presumably where the soft stuff had blown away). Above, we saw the next short ice pitch leading to a rock bollard centre stage. John moved up, commenting on the excellent hand holds on the bollard, above which he planted himself. As we climbed higher, the wind blew more and spindrift was now a nuisance.

The character of the gully began to change, less defined and twisting left to a steeper section with more ice. I set to work. As the ice steepened, I used my adze to cut nicks for the other hand and progressed with tradition on my side. The pitch seemed rather lengthy in relation to our rope. I decided that I would need to belay on the 55° ice. Miraculously, a crack appeared in the rock overhead on the left – yes hex-sized. I kicked nicks in the ice and hung there. By now spindrift was becoming a real concern (as was confidence in the route descriptions in the guidebooks). I faced inwards with the shoulder belay somewhat inadequate. John motored up, took over the second part of the ice-pitch, here more than 60° for a few metres, and found a good block where the ice ended. We had now completed seven pitches and knew that the top must be close. Three more pitches, notable for spindrift not ice, left me 5m below the negligible cornice on névé, but without adequate belay. My partner came up quickly, over the rim and tied on to a fence post.

Amazingly, here at 990m on an exposed ridge we were sheltered somehow and loosened our bowlines. Just below, on the South Face

vortices of spindrift played. To the west the entire summit ridge of Meall Lighiche was silhouetted by spindrift, back-lit by the mid-afternoon sun. A few steps took us to the summit cairn and we agreed that it had been a great day, when careful assessment of the conditions on the ground and experience of more serious routes had seen us through. John noted that as a descent route it could be lethal. The variability of Scottish winter conditions emphasised that one should use a guidebook as a guide and not as an instruction manual. Or, perhaps guide book editors do not get many reports back on Grade I gullies?

LOOKING WEST

I dream we are two Viking jarls
today, with simple action plans
and strategies – along the lines
of take life by the throat;
travelling in thrall into high places
spying out these wide Hesperides

from Skye's blue jagged Cuillin
to Jura's rounded paps, Kintyre
and even far-off Arran's hazy peaks
and all the lateral wonders
of a world adjacent and in between
the blest islands of the west:
Iona, Colonsay,
Coll and Tiree,
the Uists,Barra, Mingulay,
stretching into the blue,
with Staffa,Ulva,Eorsa nearer to
our vantage point of Mull's big hill.

This summit is among the high points
of two lives. Mind how you go,
you two. Evade descent.
Postpone the parting handclasp.
Consider another golden moment
and reflect. Beyond this pinnacle
a setting sun declines
into the anecdotage of Valhalla
and the sea, for everything
that rises has to ebb.

Gordon Jarvie.

TWO DAYS IN THE CAIRNGORMS

By John Irving

CONDITIONS change quickly. On Friday afternoon I had arranged an early exit from work, to continue the struggle with that summer's new toy and stumbled and rolled in the Pease Bay surf. On Saturday morning the alarm kicked in to California Dreams, and dragged me onto the A9 for the familiar sweeping curves and fast straights that lead to the frozen Northern Corries of Cairngorm. I met Finlay trying on hats in Clive Rowland's, unable to settle on that season's colour. I passed on the universal fashion rule: "Black is the new black," and that seemed to help. We headed through Rothiemurches to the car park.

The walk in was a pleasant one. Shallow snow lay on soft peat, we left chocolate footprints in sugar icing, and chatted along the few miles to Coire an Lochain. Visibility was restricted by the low clouds, but we hoped for good conditions on the crags as cold damp weather had been present all week. The back corner of the Lochain was the best bet in Scotland for thick riming and Savage Slit was a long-standing ambition.

Contouring below No. 6 Buttress felt exposed. The steep slopes dropping a long way to the lochan had sufficient snow cover to feel slippy but not enough to provide support. I edged nervously along to the base of the route, clutching at the rocks above as my feet felt all the rigid limitations of the unfamiliar plastic boots. Then freezing fingers and threatened hot-aches hustled me into the harness and onto the first pitch before I could settle properly. Rounded granite blocks rise to the base of the crack. These are obviously moderate in summer, and pangs of longing for warm dry rocks, and sticky rubber filled me as anxiety refused to dissipate.

This was very different from the last winter outing which had featured reassuring hooks and clamping torques on blocky Quinaig quartzite. Fin was tied onto a single, and far-from-perfect Friend, belaying with an air of impatience contained with deliberate effort, and an implied intolerance of faffing that verged on disgust. Hexes refused to settle in flared cracks and I continued to make insecure lurches upwards, fighting the growing conviction that this was a big mistake, and asking myself; had I not properly learned the folly of belays on single camming devices from the run-out below Point Five those eight years before?

I grovelled onto the ledge below the start of the actual crack, fixed a runner and immediately felt better. One move up with good hooks on flat edges and this brought up another ledge and another good runner – I was in the swing of things again. Long-standing ambition had led to detailed inspection of numerous magazine articles, and I knew the precise distance out from the wide corner crack to sweep clear the hoar, and excavate a second crack that took solid, large wire runners at two-metre intervals.

Neat knee locks for the left leg provided a solid base to clear hand holds and axe placements from the horizontal striations that seam across the corner. I made steady progress to immediately below the next ledge, perhaps the last runner had been fitted with slightly too much haste, considering the one before had been lacking true bombproof credentials, but safety lies in a confident state of mind. I moved onto small crampon edges and stretched slightly precariously for the ledge, hunting for the turf to bang home the axes and get really secure again.

There is none on such a popular route, and in my digging, I pulled off a face-full of snow. This lodged behind my glasses and I was effectively blinded. I shook my head but failed to restore vision. This was serious. I did not have a spare hand to clean the glasses. I could not see the footholds to step back down to. The early neurotic panics did not return but were not far away. Peering through the gap cleared by a hurried index finger showed the location of a flat hold opposite my right hip. Twisting quickly on my left toes I planted the right knee and thrutched all my weight up and onto it. Supported by a single point of contact I was entirely committed, but I could now reach blocks at the back of the ledge and haul myself off the vertical and catch my breath.

The glasses were secure in a pocket, I had another proper runner, and the next section of crack lead steeply to the halfway ledge and belay. I had heard of people climbing this section inside the crack. Certainly, it was wider than body width, but not by much. I found the verglassed depths repellent. I could imagine a horrible rattling fall, axes clattering off the walls on wrist fracturing leashes, and wedging beyond reach as a grisly warning to over-ambitious winter climbers. Perhaps I might survive the season, maintaining a fragile existence, advising passing leaders on the lower section of the pitch and surviving on Mars Bars tossed in by bored belayers. I would crawl out ready for summer with a rock star's thin frame. Actually, the climbing up the jaws of the crack is easier than it looks. More leg jams and precise crampon work, and a combination of hooks and cold crimps took me up to the belay on a wedged chokestone.

This had been a very satisfying pitch, and my enjoyment of it was to be augmented. Fin was obviously out of form and was struggling hard. Every move was accompanied by an unintelligible commentary. His breathing was loud. My helpful suggestions were not acknowledged. He approached the belay in a slow series of painful spasms. In the top crack his increasing fatigue led to unorthodox technique. With a muttered: "Hope this works," he slotted the pick of his hammer through the slotted adze of his piranhas, then wedged the composite creation across the crack. He slithered his body up behind, wedged and quickly advanced the tools to another precarious jam. As he tried, and failed, to hook the rounded top of the chokestone I took pity on him and stood on his axes, which landed him on the belay. After two minutes he had sufficiently recovered his breath to

blame it all on the sack. I was a bit dubious as it only held the other empty sack, a duvet jacket and a two-litre bottle of Irn-bru.

I enjoyed the contents as he readied himself for the second pitch. There is nothing quite as enjoyable as a climb that is in the bag, I had a solid belay at the top of a hard-fought lead, and could look forward to enjoying a top rope up the last difficult pitch. Warmth and rehydration were my sweet companions as Fin's form improved and he accelerated up the corner to a belay on the edge of the buttress. I was looking forward to the next bit.

The sack still seemed light swinging it round onto my back as the ropes tightened above me. I stretched for the first hooks and had to step down again. The straps needed adjusting as they impeded the free reach of the arms. I tried several arrangements but none seemed to help. As I set off on the climbing my arms seemed unusually exhausted. The careful, calculating technique I had enjoyed on the lower pitch was immediately replaced by fumbled lodging of axes, and tired thrutches between inadequate footholds. My initial discomfort crumbled rapidly into anger, I was too knackered to unclip runners from the ropes and the frozen quickdraws added to the awkward encumbrance. My language deteriorated until I was left shouting a single repeated obscenity at every object that blocked my way. Fin was giggling quietly to himself, which transmitted down the rope in infuriating shakes. I understood that I was making a spectacle of myself but lacked inspiration to lift myself from grim frustration. I slowly gained height, and polluted the pristine hills with my moronic litany. A final ledge allowed me to suspend the sack from the harness, which made the climbing easier, but it jammed fast on the final chokestone, requiring some uncomfortable guddling before I could be released.

Humour was restored by an easy pitch, and the sight of a lost vole falling in my footprints and taking an inordinate time to climb out again. We wandered along the plateau to the Goat Track and easily made Tescos in time for steak and Roquefort.

A few weeks later we were back at Feshie Bridge. This time things were more serious. We were climbing for the first time with Mark Robson, who would be on the next summer's trip to Pakistan. Some prestige was at stake. The alarm went off seriously early and we were away at an unprecedented hour.

Snow had been falling all night and though there was no more than a couple of inches, it was possible that the snow gates would be closed at Glenmore. The ski fences had yet to fill up so ploughs would not be clearing the road before tourist hours. However, we had risen before the gates could be closed and followed a single set of tracks up the hill. Our celebrations were premature as we slithered to a halt below the Sugar Bowl car park. The previous car was stuck halfway up the slope. Mark and I were ordered out and onto the bonnet over the wheels, to add traction.

No joy. The wheels spun and blue fumes filled the sharp morning air. I was ready to grab the pack and start walking but Fin had other ideas. He turned the car and slipped it into reverse. The wheels only spun faster, and the unburned petrol spewed from the exhaust. Instead of moving upwards the car started pivoting across the road towards me. I stepped back smartly and as the wheel spun towards me it caught on the verge and briefly regained traction. The Nissan Sunny moved six inches up the hill. Fin was spinning the steering wheel back the other way and the car slewed back towards Mark. He jumped clear, the near side wheel caught on the verge, and the car gained another six inches. Mark caught my eye.

As the car swung onto my verge I reached out and shoved. The car gained two feet of altitude, It spun back over the road and Mark did the same. Fin kept spinning the wheel back and forth and swinging the car from verge to verge and with the aid of our well-timed shoves, briefly jolted upwards at every turn. The upwards progress was slower than glaciers in retreat, but loads more fun than walking. The smell of petrol was overwhelming. The Nissan engine squealed in protest. Around us rare lichen curled up their fronds and died, ptarmigan fell choking from the sky.

We gradually drew towards the perched Vauxhall Astra, and its occupants emerged. Geoff and Graham had beaten us out of the cottage, but were flabbergasted by the Bennet solution to the hill. They meekly backed down the hill to let us pass. We quickly regained lost momentum and disappeared from their view. As we rounded the left-hand corner the gradient eased, and by sitting over the wheels, the car made progress in a more conventional fashion. Facing forward again, Mark and I passed the time of day as the scenery rolled by. We were by now attaining speeds of five, even six miles-an-hour but the day was windless. We were very comfortable perched on the bonnet, rolling cigarettes and swapping stories.

We passed the empty Coire na Ciste car park and swung round onto the level traverse towards Coire Cas. Traction improved and gradually, the car began to pick up speed. The acceleration was minimal but constant. Mark and I were ready to quit our positions as external ballast and knocked on the windscreen but Fin ignored us. With fingers hooked under the bonnet, we stayed in place, now not enjoying the ride so much. The rush of winter air blew away the earlier convivial warmth. Then the junction with the direct Coire Cas road appeared. A two-foot mound of drifted snow blocked our way. We belted towards it.

"Fin…! Stop!"

"No!…"

The car hurtled into the drift and stopped. Mark and I were catapulted forward, cleared the drift and landed on the tarmac. We somersaulted into the crash barrier, which blocked a long drop to a distant burn. Fin got out looking slightly sheepish. I picked myself up and seemed to have escaped major trauma.

"There's often a drift there from the snow ploughs, said Fin. "We'll make it next time."

Like lambs walking obliviously into the slaughterhouse we settled back over the wheels, and retreated for another run up. Sure enough we made it through the drift and onto the car park, whooping like cowboys going to town after months on the trail.

(We later learned that the snowgates were subsequently closed, reopening at I0am Everyone else went to S'neachda.)

After an approach of this kind the walk over to Loch Avon should have been a piece of cake. The guys had invested in Salomon 9s which seemed as light as carpet slippers. They disappeared into the mist. I was massively burned off. As I sweated up to the cairn at the top of the Fiacail, they shivered theatrically and set off down Coire Raibert.

The Loch Avon basin is a special place for Scottish mountaineers, the romantic heart of the Cairngorms is guarded by many steep granite crags. The outlook over the loch to the remote mountains at the head of Glen Avon is truly wild in the romantic tradition. Unfortunately, it is very well publicised. In summer large crowds of Duke of Edinburgh Awardees and German Uberbackpackers erode further the many paths that follow each contour in rings above the loch. I once found a plastic bag of rubbish with that Saturday's *Times* shoved between two rocks. The readership is going down market faster than the paper these days.

Anyway, we had it all to ourselves. We emerged from the clouds and rounded Loch Avon to the boulders below the Sticil. The towers and buttresses of Cairn Etchachan loomed above us out of the murk. We followed the entry ledge along to the base of Crevasse Route. Fin set off up the first pitch. Mark and I settled into the pleasure of a shared belay, conversational gambits were initially wide-ranging, but were increasingly dominated by negative assessments of the leaders skill, as warmth drained from both body and spirit. This was again an imposter, appearing moderate in gradient and decorated with helpful features, but on closer inspection, rounded and bleak. I find seconding on a single 9mm rope unsettling. It emphasises the exposure, the consequences of a slip seem more serious. Mark and I were climbing simultaneously and generally getting in each other's way. I misjudged a move but lacked space to reconsider it. Spreadeagled on poor holds, with the ropes twisting through runners and pulling sideways, I was close to falling off. Incipient hot aches added to my woes, but with company my usual morale-boosting strategy of foul swearing was suppressed. I stayed on, but only just, hiding my pull on the runner with the last dregs of cunning.

At the belay we debated the lead of the crux. I declined to offer to lead it. Mark raised his eyebrows, but did the honourable thing. Steep flakes lead up the corner. He cammed both axes in and laybacked up, crampon points on ripples, poised cat-like below the ledge. Then a curious change:

his left knee flexed up gracefully, hooked the ledge and initiated a scuttling sideways thrutch, three metres along the ledge to another crack that he used to stand up with. "Interesting," he said, placing one of my wires in the crack and wellying it home with some heavy blows from his hammer. He disappeared into the chimney above and kept the ropes moving at a good pace to the next belay.

Fin followed first, leaving me to dwell on my fragile climbing psyche, and the third pitch which was unavoidably mine. Described as a steep crack, I was gloomily imagining hanging over my head. This distracted me from the matter in hand, which was a shame. It's a great pitch, technical torquing up the corner, then a vertical chimney that twists up to a fine ledge, perched below the unavoidable crack. My companions were well settled on the ledge, resting on their laurels and their packs. Savage Slit's wee brother split the headwall of the buttress. No parallel cracks offered reassurance of intermediate security. The crack was much bigger than any protection we carried. Feeling like a condemned man I assembled our rack. No pleading was going to get me out of it, and I set off. Once again appearances were deceptive: this was a very civilised slit. Flat ledges provided big holds, and a remarkable number of runners. As I wrapped the ropes around the boulder at the edge of the plateau, I was once again enjoying myself, and feeling satisfied that I had contributed a decent lead to the expedition. The guys joined me and we shook hands.

Dusk was gathering as we decided to avoid the long walk around the plateau, and headed down a shallow gully on the east side of Carn Etchachan. This had been in the lee for the day and I was concerned about the potential for avalanches. I hung back as Fin stepped off the rocks onto the snow slope. I had never before believed that it was possible to fall up to one's neck in snow, but seeing is believing. Fin dug himself down the slope, and into the boulder field, and I followed carefully.

I wondered if they had maybe tired each other out with the mornings efforts, and would be walking out at a slower pace. I was wrong. Mark was so concerned by the effort with which I mantel-shelved off the steep bouldery steps at the top of Coire Raibert he handed over his last Mars Bar in a clear understanding of whose need was greater. They outpaced me again on the slopes up to the cairn at the top of the Fiacail, and I was left in my own pool of headtorch light. The night was calm but visibility was minimal in the cloud. Without my glasses my perception of the trail was difficult. I followed my nose, trying not to worry about the lack of ability to fix accurately on my bearing, peering anxiously for steep ground at the top of the Mess of Pottage or the Coire Cas headwall. The wide path off Cairngorm was a reassuring landmark and I found my companions again in the lee of the cairn. We headed down into Speyside together, out of the wilderness and into the ski fields.

'THE BOYS' FROM EDINBURGH

By Douglas Wood

THE diaries and photograph album of my father George Wood give an interesting insight to this group of climbers from the early 1930s. The group was based around four young bankers at the head office of the Bank of Scotland at the Mound in Edinburgh – Ian Charleson, Ian Macdonald, Charlie Ruxton and George Wood, who referred to themselves as 'the Boys'.

At times they were joined by others, with Alan Lennox and Ted Forde featuring frequently. Charleson later became President of the SMC, and he along with Forde are credited with having accomplished the first Greater Traverse of the Cuillin in a single day in June 1939 – the main Cuillin Ridge with Clach Glas and Blaven. Opportunities for regular serious climbing at that time were limited considerably by a six-day working week, and a highlight was the expedition during the two-week summer holiday. Descriptions of these expeditions by the Boys are given in some detail in the diaries and can also be followed through a series of photographs.

It was the time of nailed boots, the Bergen rucksack, Primus stove, Tinker tent, aneroid to support map and compass for navigation, and when kilts were worn for walking in the hills. Postcards were sent home to report progress, and mail collected from Post Offices *en route* brought letters and parcels of baking from home. In fact, the journey was as much a part of the expedition as the climbs. In June 1932 the Boys headed for the Cairngorms and had a two-week trek that started at Kirriemuir and eventually finished at Pitlochry via Braemar and Kingussie. This took them over the Tolmount hills, all the high tops of the Cairngorms, as well as Beinn a' Ghlo in Glen Tilt.

A routine that features throughout was to rise in the morning and then go for a swim in the nearest river or loch. They would then go looking for milk and eggs at any habitation nearby, and quite often this was provided without payment – indeed the offer of payment could sometimes cause offence. Typical breakfast menu was porridge and milk, bacon, sausages and eggs, bread and marmalade, and lashings of hot cocoa. It could be over three hours before starting.

An expedition to Skye followed in the summer of 1933, the first night being spent with the lighthouse keeper at Corran, Mr McKechran. It was a long approach on foot taking three days to reach Mallaig by Loch Sunart, Acharacle, Moidart, the hill track to Glen Uig, and finally the train from Lochailort. At Mallaig the Boys negotiated a crossing to Skye and were taken the following morning in a small open boat to Camasunary for eight shillings a head, ascending Blaven in the late afternoon. Poor weather dogged them for the next week enforcing some unscheduled rest days that used up precious supplies. A six-and-a-half hour trek in the rain was

required for the walk round the coast to Glen Brittle, via Loch Coruisk "rather disappointing compared with Loch Avon", followed by endless rock and bog. Gaps in the rain gave opportunities for at least two worthwhile days. On one of these days the Boys ascended the stone shoot to Sgurr Alasdair, then continued on to Sgurr Sgumain. They then proceeded to Sgurr Dubh na Da Bheinn, Sgurr Dubh Mor, Sgurr nan Eag and Garsbheinn, then back over the boggy moor to Glen Brittle.

The following day, in brilliant weather, they climbed Sgurr Dearg by the west ridge, bypassed the Inaccessible Pinnacle (which they returned to another year), then on to An Stac and Sgurr Mhic Choinnich, back to Sgurr Dearg and on to Sgurr na Banachdich, Sgurr Thormaid, Sgurr a' Ghreadaidh, Sgurr a' Mhadaidh, and down over Sgurr Thuilm – 11 hours. These two days were not without some tricky moments but the Boys were clearly inspired by their first experience of the Cuillin. Continuing poor weather forced the group to make an early departure from Skye and they headed over to Sligachan, from where they got the bus to Broadford and then a boat back to Mallaig.

Of course, as soon as they left Broadford the good weather returned! After a swim at the Silver Sands they made their way along the north side of Loch Morar. Arriving at the lodge at South Tarbert, Mr Caldwell, "a crusty old boy", refused to ferry them across the loch and insisted they would have to go up the loch for a farther nine miles of rough ground and bracken. However, a little farther on, in the glen to Loch Nevis, they pitched camp and had better luck later in the evening, meeting Sandy Macdonald who arranged to ferry them over to Meoble in the morning. So the journey continued by Meoble, Loch Beoraid and over to Loch Eilt to camp the night in the station waiting room at Glenfinnan, courtesy of the Station Master.

The penultimate day saw them catch the eight o'clock train to Fort William, then a 12-hour day on the Mamores before returning to camp in Glen Nevis at 11.45pm. In fact, it was six years later and after two further visits to the Cuillin that Charleson and Forde did their pioneering Greater Traverse which is described by Charleson in the Journal (Vol. xxii, p 127-132). In the article he refers to his companion rather grandly as Woodhurst E. Forde.

It records setting out from camp at the base of Gars-bheinn at 1.30am on Monday, June 12, 1939 reaching the summit at 3.05am. They had left caches of food and drink at the base of the Inaccessible Pinnacle and on the summit of Bidein Druim nan Ramh and a tent stocked with food and spare clothing near the mouth of Harta Corrie. In a strong blustery wind the two of them completed the traverse of the main ridge to Sgurr nan Gillean by 3.35pm and had a rest at the tent in Harta Corrie before continuing over Clach Glas to reach the summit of Blaven at 11.05pm.

By 1934 two of the Boys had cars. That summer they had two days in Glen Coe (Aonach Eagach, and Ossian's cave/Aonach Dubh/Bidean), then

continued on to Dundonnell, Torridon and Glen Affric. The diary records a day on Beinn Alligin and Liathach.

"Our camp is situated at Glen Grudie where a path leads up the glen between the Beinn Eighe range and the Liathach group. As bread is scarce bake scones which, surprising though it may seem, appear to be enjoyed. Have breakfast of shredded wheat and prunes, boiled eggs and marmalade. As this is to be a big day we try to get away early. By 10.30 we are off in Ian Mac's car for Torridon. Leave car above Torridon House at Coire Mhic Nobuil and at 12.30 set out in blazing heat for Beinn Alligin. See huge dragon flies. Head up ridge of Gruagaich (2904ft.). Reach summit at 2.30pm and then easier going to Sgurr Mhor (3232ft.).

"Descend over broken ground and stop for lunch at 3.30pm. Here we sunbathe and waste precious time until 5.30pm. Ian finds a young fawn nearby. Drop down to about 1000ft. and then commence long climb over broken ground to gain ridge of Liathach. Commence the climb by 5.45 and after hot pull up and scramble over steep ground gain summit of Meall Dearg (3150ft.) by 7.30pm. From here to Mullach an Rathain (3358ft.) we have difficult climb over and round pinnacles of loose stone. Rock gives way in huge chunks and earthy scree gives poor foothold. Charlie successfully makes traverse round grassy ledges on the east side of second last pinnacle while we others go round west side dropping some height before clambering up stone gully. This takes fully 1 hour 30 miutes but we consider this the worst part so far.

"On the way round the pinnacles I come across a magnificent specimen of fossil vegetation in sandstone. We continue along ridge with pinnacles to Am Fasarinen with low incoming clouds below us. Then by 11pm we have reached Spidean a' Choire Leith and finally complete the ridge at 11.45pm at Stuc a' Choire Dhuibh Bhig (3000ft). Then commence difficult descent over broken and very steep ground at midnight. Taking care, we accomplish this successfully and by 12.45am have returned. The two Ians return to Torridon to collect the car arriving back at 2am. After hot Oxo, chocolate and cake we are soon fast asleep. We have probably climbed 7000ft. over the day."

Elsewhere on this trip, there is a comment: "Proceeding to Coinneach Mhor (3130ft.) we come upon a ptarmigan sitting on young and she lets us stroke her gently."

On another day: "Milk not obtainable owing to cows calving so we return and have breakfast of porridge and buttercup cream, boiled eggs and fruit salad."

It is fascinating to appreciate the different context of self-sufficiency and physical stamina that emanates from these accounts, and to hear about some of the characters the Boys met on their travels. Nearly all the people they met were those who lived there. While the hills and the routes may have changed little, developments in communications, equipment and transport have without doubt altered the element of adventure.

WEIRD SCENES INSIDE THE GOLD MINE

By Bish McAra

TUESDAY. It was a Tuesday. I think it was a Tuesday. Does it matter? In any case Project-X had loomed for some time. This was a private project. A project not to be shared. Not even when it was complete. It was to be a non-recorded adventure that left no trace. Just an adventure to be reclaimed by those who follow. Project X was to be a recyclable project. A project still preserved for the satisfying of the egos of those yet to come.

A Tuesday was a good day. Let's say it was a Tuesday. I'm not one for recording dates. My photo album and diary is my mind. But a Tuesday was good. The hill would be quiet with no witness to record the project. A quick raid. Done and dusted. A gem of high-risk self-indulgence left unrecorded and free to satisfy the vanity of future explorers.

The line was obvious. In point of fact it was nothing new, being clearly visible from road and rail for all to view.

The nature of the plan had dictated a night of worry. An early departure was assured. Northward progress up the loch side was rapid on this March morning. Flexitime had clearly failed the masses and my plan for an empty hill was assured.

Park up, pump-up. Make sure these bike tyres will take the load. No timely walk-in to Project X. Approach on foot might result in more time to rationalise the risk and abandon the plan. No, a fast and committed approach by bike was called for.

The project looked feasible. The weather was excellent with just a little frost overnight. Progress was rapid with Eas Annie slipping past within 35 minutes. Not much ice on that today. A smile crept over my face and the tension lifted for a moment recalling past adventures in these environs. On being unable to tolerate waiting our turn for Eas Annie I recalled a retreat into the gold mine for an afternoon of alternative adventure. Capstan full-strength perhaps aided the weird scenes inside the gold mine.

But today was different. Years of inactivity and life commitments dictated a drop in grade. But for Project X this mattered little.

With bike abandoned, upward progress was swift. Perfect névé. Not best for Project X but what the hell, I was there now. All this high-tech gear makes it easy. And music softens the feeling of risk. The narrows approach and my scheme to emulate the early pioneers via a crampon-free ascent came to an end. With crampons on and rope out I now at least had a companion. With 60ft. between us we climbed upwards though the narrows and on towards the summit. On topping out it's confirmed. I have the hill to myself. The route had demanded respect and it was some time since I'd ventured upwards on a Grade 1 gully. The line was strong and

the summit snowfield worryingly steep but it was a classic by any account, with a great summit finish. With crystal clarity past projects were in view. The Y-Gully on Cruach Ardrain to the east, Ben Ime to the south and Stob Ghabhar to the north-west.

Considerable time was then spent in assessment of the feasibility of Project X. In the event it lived up to expectations, the narrows flashing past in a flurry of adrenaline and the exit onto the lower run-out marking the point of assured survival. The return to the bike was over within minutes.

Back at the car the bike and kit was flung into the boot and consideration of Project-Y commenced. On this trip, my companion was manufactured by Buff, a maker of snowboards.

An account of the descent of the Central Gully of Ben Lui on a snowboard by Bish McAra (March 1999).

Footnote: I record this event with some misgivings as my preference is to share my good fortune with those adventurers still to come via a policy of non-recording. To view some on-line resources with a different view of Scottish climbing please take a moment to view www.climbrannoch.co.uk



Alan Shand on the Red Rocks classic 'Running Man' (5.11), Las Vegas, Nevada. Photo: Iain White.

From the new series guide to Glen Coe and Ardgour. Emma Williams climbing 'Lady Jane' (E2 5b), Aonach Dubh. Photo: Mark Glaister.





SURVIVAL TECHNIQUES FOR USE IN COMMITTEE MEETINGS

By Iain Smart

I know from conversations that many members of the Club use their mountaineering experiences to relieve the excruciating boredom of long committee meetings, particularly those in which they are powerless participants. Cases of brain damage from unprotected exposure to such meetings are common. In this context the recycling of mountaineering experiences is a useful technique with many successes to its credit. I know someone who claims to be the first person to have mentally climbed all the Munros during a single committee meeting (Munrosis psychorepetans or, I suppose, in some cases, Munrosis waltermittiensis). According to him, he survived unharmed while everyone else suffered severe psychological collapse. These notes describe a fairly pedestrian, run of the mill application of the technique. I remember it because of its ending which showed me I was not a lone skywalker. I am sure others have more exciting accounts that could be added to the literature on this commonly used but little written about form of committee survivormanship.

I was almost at the top of Integrity a climb just within my ability. I seemed to be climbing solo and yet enjoying it immensely, moving skilfully on the sun-warmed rock, relishing the exposure. I stopped for a breather before finishing the last few moves, sensing the vast emptiness of Coire Lagan behind. I looked between my feet down the cleavage of the east face to see the Cioch with some aspirant climbing on to it. I topped out from the crack with a few more confident moves, walked over to the skyline and beheld Rum and Canna and let my eye roam over the silvery sea cats-pawed with little breaths of wind to the low profile of the Long Island. Just then a voice sounded somewhere to my left. It was saying, "And what conclusion has your sub-committee come to on this matter, Dr Smart?". I had been waiting for it and knew what to do. I mentally abseiled down from Sron na Ciche . . . . . .

. . . . . *.into a committee room in the University in the middle of a meeting planning yet another curriculum reform. As I was re-entering my body I heard my preprogrammed voice saying, "Our sub-committee agrees with the conclusions of the main committee on this matter and has nothing to add." I sensed all round me the general approval of the good sense of our sub-committee. Originally we had been enthusiastic and creative but this only caused trouble. We were now more mature and had given up wasting the time of our betters by having a mind of our own. The next item I would be required to agree with was much further down the agenda so I*

Getting to grips with the 'Incredible Hand Crack' (5.10c), Supercrack Buttress, Indian Creek, Canyonlands, Utah. Photo: Tom Prentice.

was free for at least another half hour. To endure the intervening tedium while remaining fully conscious of the present would be dangerous. Preservation of sanity required another journey into the astral plane. So setting part of my mind listening on the emergency channel I teleported the rest of it back to the Cuillins . . . . . This time I found myself walking up to the Coire Tairnealar on a hot summer's day. I stopped for a dive into each be-water-falled rock pool as it passed by, enjoying the tingle of cool, clear water against skin and seeing the sun-dappled surface from underneath as I rose up from the pebbled bottom where the shadows played in jumbled colours, then the pleasure of drying off luxuriously on a warm rock slab while watching the breeze ruffling the feathers of the little poplar trees. Eventually I reached the inner Coire and started up the vast intimidating boiler plates of Mallory's climb. This time I wasn't in such good form as on Sron na Ciche; the old familiar fear radiated from the pit of the stomach. I definitely needed a companion. Tom Weir appeared from somewhere. We had an exhilarating time particularly when a warm wind got up and tried to pluck us off the slabs. We then went up Bidein Druim nan Ramh, my favourite peak and had lunch on its platform summit. It was a clear day and the view was great. 'A real magic moment', I heard Tom saying as clearly as if he had really been there. . . . . By way of contrast I then changed channels to the top of Sgurr na Lapaich on a winter's day of some sunlight and a lot of moving shadow. The glen bottoms were filled with glooms of navy blue and black; lonely patches of sunshine wandered around the upper snows sometimes keeping up with the gaps in the clouds and sometimes getting lost and dying. It was a day of high drama – I was so grateful to be there. Five other people were also present: two Snaddens, a couple of Slessers and our national hero, William Wallace - all good company on the hill. When I arrived they were about to ski back down again towards Glen Strathfarrar. A brilliant rainbow now appeared spanning the glen in front of us. The others took off. They spread over the slopes of the curving corrie, turning gracefully like autumn leaves floating down in the wind until coming together again as black dots a few hundred feet below under the enchanted arch of many colours. I enjoyed the loneliness for a moment savouring the ambience. Before following on I sharpened up the focus of the landscape to reveal more detail, adjusted the contrast between light and shade to add to the drama and modulated the colours of the rainbow to the maximum glory consistent with retaining the aesthetic balance of the whole. On occasions like this you might as well take advantage of all the facilities available. I could hardly believe my good fortune to be skiing down after the others amid so much space and colour. It was good Spring snow, the turning was easy, I could hear the skis biting in at each turn. The rainbow and the autumn leaf effect of

the skiers must have cross-referenced in my mind for suddenly I found myself ..... miles to the Westward on the shoulder of Beinn Dearg Mor, looking North across Strath na Seallag on a luminously gloomy day with little wind. It was indeed autumn because the birch trees were yellow in the bottom of the glen. A half rainbow with its open side directed to the west arched over the head of the Loch, brilliant against the blue-black raincloud with trailing silver showers veiling the brooding bulk of An Teallach. Just then a skein of about a dozen geese (barnacles I think) flew honking down the glen. They entered from the darkness on the right into the brightness within the arc of the rainbow and as they caught the sunlight, the voice again obtruded ..... *and I was back in the Committee room. My voice was saying: "Yes my committee would gladly consider the changes that had just been proposed and I would bring back their agreement at the next meeting". I would of course have to find out from someone what the required changes were. My answer phone had failed to record the details. I spent the next ten minutes hanging around in the meeting. Those who had power were manoeuvring around trying to use it, most of them (to be just) with the best intentions. Once I was sure there was no way I could usefully contribute I left and found . . .* ..... myself at Loch Scavaig enjoying an evening beer in the cockpit of the yacht "Goodbye Girl' which was riding at anchor there on a calm summer's evening. My friend Phil was on the foredeck playing his pipes and the vale profound was overflowing with the sound of 'Farewell to the Creeks'. We were pleasantly tired after traversing Sgurr Dhu na Da Bheinn and, as we sipped our beer, felt some detached sorrow for the campers on the nearby shore being driven crazy by the midges. . . .. The scene then changed of its own accord to another time and place. I found myself on Ladhar Bheinn on a sunset evening. It must have been a clip from the time in the late forties when I dossed there on a fine night of high summer with Hamish Nicol. He was a student friend who, after graduation, vanished somewhere down south and nevermore was heard of again in the land of the living, a pity because I seem to remember he was an amusing character. ..... I then fast forwarded memory 40 years on to another time on Ladhar Bheinn on an equally fine evening. We had ascended directly from Loch Hourn and could see our yacht anchored below our feet in the shadows of the coming night. ..... Then I hopped a few miles south into the rough bounds of Knoydart and

wandered about on Sron na Criche for a while watching the glens fill with midnight blue before descending . . . . . *to the meeting again in response to bad vibes arriving on the emergency channel. There was a stushie of some kind going on . It didn't seem to concern our sub-committee but was, nevertheless deserving of attention as it was developing into good theatre with some accomplished ham acting. The plot as far as I could gather was that some of the people who had power had ganged up against one of their own number. It looked pre-arranged to me, a clever ambush. The ambushed party was eventually forced to submit but not without some considerable recititivo and a plangent terminal aria before the curtain fell. For those who had ears to hear there was some silent but enthusiastic one-handed, zen-type hand clapping. It had really been quite a creditable performance. Things were going to be quiet for a bit as each side regrouped, so I hopped into the teleporter and beamed up again to the astral plane.*. . . . . .This time I landed up on the top of Blaven and took control of events. I started with a clear fresh dawn with one star still awake and made the sun come up over the mainland until the world was filled with light. As the morning wore on the shadows shortened until the glare of noon flattened the landscape, the profiles of the world becoming blurred in heat-haze. As the torpid afternoon progressed shadows gradually returned and the trembling land regained relief. The mellow evening progressed. A full moon rose exactly opposite a setting full sun which is, of course, how it should be in real life at high latitudes at the summer solstice. The panorama of sea and mountain changed to silver and shadow; the stars came up and a mild summer's night gradually entered into another dawn. . . . . *a quick nip back to the committee - all seemed well - so I returned to the astral plane* . . . . . I adjusted the position of the moon until it kept a geostationary due south on the plane of the ecliptic. This resulted in a full moon every night and a solar eclipse every day at noon. This must have done something terrible to the tides but I couldn't work out what even on paper. Easter and other lunar dependant events would have had problems too . . . . . Then transporting the scene to the equator, I brought the sun straight up from the horizon, overhead at noon and straight down again so that night fell with a bang somewhere behind Benbecula. It made a noise a bit like the one o'clock gun in Edinburgh. The southern constellations then blazed in a black velvet sky. Skye itself had already shrivelled under the noonday heat into something resembling the Sinai peninsula. I don't know what the good people of Skye were thinking while this was going on but no doubt it has all been

recorded in the West Highland Free Press. Certainly it must have thrown astrologers into confusion. Being fairly confused myself by now .....

.....

.....*I returned briefly to the meeting where the top predators were repressing an attempt to come back from the dead by the disaffected victim who seemed unable to accept the brilliant success of the original ambush. He thought he had been misunderstood. They were trying to get through to him that he* had *been understood (that was the major part of his problem) and that he should shut up and settle the matter later in private with his fellow carnivores rather than embarrass his peers by carrying on in such an unsophisticated manner in front of the herbivores forming the rest of the committee. We herbivores sat there with eyes averted placidly munching away at the low-calorie intellectual diet that was our lot. For a little respite from life at the bottom of the pyramid I* .....

.....teleported to Greenland to a fine day on a granite ridge on a peak at the head of the Roslin Glacier in the awe-inspiring Stauning Alps. It was one of those overwhelming Greenland days of windless silence. Frost and granite crystals were a-twinkle in the morning sun and the clear air brought the structural features of distant peaks into sharp focus. I was just beginning to enjoy the fabulous panorama. In fact Malcolm and I had started to inspect a knot of spectacular rock spires to the north. We were discussing possible routes when I had to leave Malcolm there alone as I sensed the meeting was about to end. (He must have got back alright because I saw him again recently.) .....

..... *The Chairman was saying, "Before we adjourn could I ask Dr Eccles if he has done anything about the accommodation required for the new course we have been discussing ?" There was dead silence. The Dr Eccles referred to, a herbivorous nonentity like myself, was sitting next to me and his eyes were fixed on the horizon. He vouchsafed no answer. The chairman repeated the question. It was obvious to all that Dr Eccles was not with us, so I gave him a gentle prod. He jumped a foot and started to talk incoherently; he was obviously under considerable stress. I knew he was a fellow space traveller and recognised that he was having a malfunction of his teleporter. I threw him a lifeline , "Say , 'The matter is receiving urgent consideration'" , I hissed at him. "The matter is receiving urgent consideration", he dutifully intoned. "Do you think it will be satisfactory?". Prolonged silence. Charles was still somewhere else. I think his teleporter had got fankled up in the coordinates of space-time. (Easily done, I have often had that trouble myself). I could hear him broadcasting an SOS on the psychological equivalent of the international distress frequency, namely 121.5 kilopsychles. "Say 'Yes' I broadcast. "Yes, Mr Chairman," announced Charles, "It should be all right." The emergency was over. He had returned and was coherent again.*

After the meeting he said: "Thanks for your help. You got me out of a tight corner. I really was in great danger. I had been sailing alone around the world. I was off Cape Horn; I could see it through the rain less than a mile away. The boat was being driven before a wind of gale-force, maybe more, gusting, I'd say to Force 12 at times; even the storm jib had been carried away and I was running under bare poles trying to keep her from broaching. I had one hand on the helm and was struggling to get some warps out of the rope locker to trail behind to slow her up. That was when you poked me in the ribs; I thought the tiller had broken off. No wonder I jumped; I thought I'd had it."

BEGINNINGS

The holds were there
somewhere
asking to be caressed
into a route of sorts
Extremities
(finger tips and toes
not yet frozen) –
were made aware
– tinglings
– tensions
– tremblings
– and laughter

Rock rasped the core
of a pumping heart,
pulling in my sack
and belayed me
with cobweb delicacy
to the hard rock
of a daft game
I thought was reality.

The first frost found us out
Gaping at a lit moon.
Honed by the knife edge of cold,
Salt-sharp star-shivery,
We took refuge under the pines
And pulled on a pullover of past years
To face the winter ahead.
But the ice and the moon and the roaring
Zeroed our reality. Cold, moon, stags
Were all present, our NOW –
Which is all the place
We can ever be.

Hamish M. Brown.

PETER B. AYSCOUGH AND THE NAISMITH HUT

By Bill McKerrow

WHEN the Club was informed in February 1993 that it was to be the recipient of the sum of almost £74,000 in an astonishingly generous legacy, the natural assumption was that this was as a result of the foresight and thoughtfulness of one of our own august late senior members. It turned out, much to the surprise and curiosity of the Club hierarchy, that the benefactor was not only not a Club member, but was not even known to any Club members, as far as they were willing to admit! The man who had the best interests of Scottish mountaineering at heart was one Professor Peter Brian Ayscough, late of Leeds University and otherwise man of some mystery, of whom more anon.

As befits an organisation renowned for its thrift and prudence, the legacy was quickly stashed away in the Club coffers and, if not quite forgotten about, at least ignored for the next year or so. Discussions followed among the great and the good of the Club with even the members being tentatively canvassed for ideas as to how to put this smiling of good fortune upon us to best use. A consensus slowly emerged according to the best traditions of obfuscation and mysticism, which are hallmarks of the conduct of the Club's affairs, and on this occasion, the debate was largely uninfluenced by the hard core of the 'awkward squad' within the membership! The solution of how to unload our bounty with the least embarrassment and the maximum potential benefit for the majority of the members was obvious. The near mythical concept of 'a hut in the North West' was born and by the time of the AGM in December 1994, the Club was happy to accept the recommendations of the Committee and put the plan into action

The next challenge was to decide where the hut would be situated. Nearly three years elapsed without very much happening until the Committee took the decision that 'something would have to be done'. Never known to shrink from a joust with the near impossible, a small team of completely unqualified non-experts consisting of Gerry Peet, John MacKenzie and myself were charged by the then President Bob Richardson to scour the country north of Ullapool with the brief to identify either a suitable property or possibly a site where a hut could be located. Several trips north and various discussions with landowners and the planning department followed. Numerous properties and several sites were prospected, discussed, considered and rejected on various grounds until finally, what seemed like a possible viable hut was identified in Elphin. The property in question was known as Hillside, birthplace and, at the time, still residence of 78-year-old 'Murdo the Joiner' fittingly, one of the MacKenzie clan (but uninfluenced by any pressure from the clan chief) who had finally

given in to the unequal struggle involved in keeping his birthplace wind and watertight and had decided to opt for a council house in Ullapool.

At first sight it didn't seem ideal. It wasn't exactly how most of us envisaged a mountain hut, in that it was part of a small hamlet of several houses, some of them relatively modern and it was right next door to a modern house owned by Murdo's son. Nonetheless, it did fulfil the brief set by the Committee to find a traditional property north of Braemore and south of Kylesku which was reasonably close to the main road. The house itself was really on its last legs. The tin roof was leaking and the interior damp, cramped and in poor condition. The view, however, was stupendous, with Suilven in pole position and set up to the westering sun. The price, too, if not quite so breathtaking (we had already become used to the concept that the price of a few square feet of bog amid countless thousands of similar acres commanded around £25,000) was reasonable, so it seemed almost a bargain to consider paying a few thousand more to have four walls and an electricity and water supply thrown in. The Committee agreed and, after sterling attention to the legal side by Peter Macdonald, the house was purchased in the early summer of 1997. Within a few months I was, by some mysterious process, which had something to do with the force of personality of the then President of the Club, nominated to be Custodian.

The next decision was what to do with it. The choice seemed to be between patching it up in the short-term and just using it as a glorified bothy or going for the full monte and converting the building into a proper mountain hut. It shouldn't have been too difficult a decision. After all, we had the money thanks to the generosity of Peter Ayscough. Nonetheless, once again, prudence and thrift reared its head and considerable effort, primarily by Bob Reid, was put into ascertaining that we were not eligible for grant assistance for converting the building, at least not without major potential strings attached.

Meanwhile, that unsung hero of the Club, Dougie Niven, relatively recently retired but still an architectural consultant and fresh from triumphs at the Raeburn Hut and Lagangarbh, happily (or perhaps not) took on the substantial task of designing the conversion. The primary remit was for simplicity together with functionality, with systems as failsafe as possible, bearing in mind that the building would be unoccupied for several days or even weeks at a time. The 'idiot factor', exhibited not only by those visitors who are not members of the Club, had also to be incorporated into the design. Tenders then had to be sought for the work. This turned out to be a far more difficult task than we had forseen, builders being in relatively short supply in the area. The original favoured contractor, a local Ullapool joiner, after initially giving the impression of enthusiasm, withdrew at the last moment and several other tenders turned out to be dauntingly high. Comparative figures were obtained from two central belt contractors that confirmed that these tenders were not unreasonable at around £75,000.

The fact that some of the possible contractors were based 40 or more miles away did nothing to increase their enthusiasm to take on the contract or to price for it competitively. Finally, we hit what turned out to be the jackpot. John Smith, well known in the area as a skilled tradesman indicated that he would be keen to take on the contract. However, he had pursued a somewhat unorthodox and fairly relaxed lifestyle over the years which had included building fibreglass boats, smoking mackerel (and possibly other things), assisting in running a caravan site, being a nature warden on Coigach estate and general 'good lifer', as well as doing jobbing joinery work. I had known John for more than 20 years but I was reluctant to push his name forward to the Committee for fear of having to field the flak if things did not go as planned! Nonetheless, John tendered by far the lowest price at £51,200 and with much of his contracted work being VAT exempt, he was the obvious man for the job.

In the event, he turned out to be an extremely happy choice for, apart from a rather 'west coast' timescale lasting for the best part of a year and partly weather related, John has delivered superb workmanship, excellent aesthetics and overall a first-class job at a very reasonable cost to the Club. I strongly suspect (without being in any way partisan) that this is in no small measure related to the fact that his roots are in the North-east, and his work ethic is accordingly strong! He had the additional advantage of living relatively close by at Ardmair and was willing to deal with any problems at short notice and at times when it may have been difficult for me to deal with them. He even managed to impress Dougie with the standard of his workmanship and several helpful hints on how to avoid problems with the planning regulations. This was especially beneficial as direct architectural supervision was very difficult in view of the distances involved. Dougie and John seemed to earn each other's mutual, possibly grudging respect, in that John's standards remained high throughout the whole contract while Dougie's attention to detail was exemplary with more than 40 architectural drawings for every fine detail of the building.

And so, with a little gentle encouragement and a following wind, John finally completed the works to a level which made the building habitable. Furniture and fittings were purchased and the hut was officially inaugurated on the occasion of the annual dinner in Strathpeffer on the first weekend of December 1999. Full furnishing and commissioning took another few weeks and by early January, the first use of the hut by members was possible. Since then, with a few minor hiccups, the hut has been universally acclaimed by both members and visiting guests. It has hosted the great and the good of the Club, old and young, Tigers and Salvationists, and the worst that the climbing clubs of the UK could throw at it – so far – with really very little in the way of problems, and hopefully, this will continue for many years to come. Its convenience for the unique hills of the far North-west offering some of the most remote Munros and Corbetts in the

country, idyllic coastal outcrop and mountain rock climbing and demanding winter routes, has contributed to its popularity but, whatever the prime interest of the visitor, there is no doubt that the ambience of the hut appeals to virtually all who spend time there and will ensure its lasting popularity.

So much for the hut, what do we know of the man? Who was Peter Ayscough, our mysterious benefactor? As far as we can tell, no one in the Club knew him personally and attempts to get more information from the solicitors administering his will by our Secretary John Fowler were unfruitful. It appeared that he was a very private individual, unmarried, who nonetheless achieved academic prominence as Professor of Physical Chemistry at Leeds University. He died in January 1993 and it appears from the terms of his will that he intended, provided she survived him, that his mother would be his sole beneficiary. In the event, she predeceased him and in the terms of the will, his estate was to be divided into five equal parts between the Masters and Fellows of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge (his old alma mater), The National Trust, The Spastics Society, the Mountaineering Association of Great Britain and 'The Scottish Mountaineering Club of Glasgow'. It turned out that the Mountaineering Association of Great Britain had been absorbed into the Youth Hostels Association and after legal discussion, this part of the legacy lapsed, and eventually, went to the late professor's distant relatives. No such detailed debate was required about 'The Scottish Mountaineering Club of Glasgow'. Fortunately, it appeared that at the time the will was made, the club secretary and hence the address for correspondence was indeed in Glasgow and so the good Professor's executors and solicitors were quite happy that his intentions were that part of his estate should go to our Club.

In the absence of any information about his recreational activities, likes and dislikes and any affinity he might have with mountaineering and with Scottish mountaineering in particular, the reasons for this beneficence remained obscure to us. It did, however, seem likely that one of his main interests was in the hills, bearing in mind that two of his beneficiaries were mountaineering organisations,

In the spring of 2001 I received a booking for the hut from John Farrow, a member of the Rucksack Club and a few of his club colleagues. In the course of conversation it turned out that Peter Ayscough was also a member of the Rucksack Club and was reasonably well known within that club, although he was also known there as a very 'private' man. John asked a fellow Rucksack Club member and former colleague of Ayscough's at Leeds University, Don Smithies, to write a brief biographical note from his admittedly limited knowledge of his colleague.

This reads as follows:

"Peter Ayscough was born in Lincoln in 1927 and educated at City School, Lincoln and St. Catherine's College, Cambridge. From 1953-55

Peter worked in research in Ottawa and then moved as a lecturer to Leeds University. In 1975, he became Professor of Physical Chemistry there, retiring from that post in 1989.

In his younger days he was a keen cyclist, touring Europe, and in his 50s took up motor-cycling. His introduction to the hills came through the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club and from his Leeds base he was particularly fond of walking in the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales. Peter joined the Rucksack Club in 1990 and until his untimely death was an active member, climbing some of the easier Alpine peaks and setting out to complete a round of the Munros.

He died in 1993 at the age of 66 years of a heart attack while on a solo walk in the Pennines."

This sums up all we know of our Club's benefactor but from these brief details it seems probable that he would be highly satisfied with the Club's stewardship of his legacy. It seems likely that he would have relished spending days among the hills of Wester Ross and Sutherland at what we now know as the Naismith Hut. I suspect also that he would approve of the name selected for the hut by the Club commemorating one of the founding fathers of Scottish Mountaineering and would have found 'The Ayscough Hut' somewhat pretentious and not at all to his liking.

We, as a Club, and many other clubs who have used the hut and will do so in future, owe him a debt of gratitude for his generosity and, judging by the testimonials so far to the quality of the hut, the money has been well spent.

REINCARNATION ON THE BEN

By M. G. Anderson

I ANNOUNCED to the ice-coated rock in front of me: "Sod this for a game of soldiers."

Why did I bother? The only person remotely within earshot was my second, 80ft. below and he didn't give a monkey's as long as we were out of here before chucking-out time. 'Here' was a vertical groove smothered in slushy ice, two-thirds the way up Ben Nevis, a blizzard blowing inside my anorak and night about to fall. A dodgy move lay in waiting on iffy snow with crampons scratching about on something or nothing, and throbbing forearms overdosed on lactic acid to the point where I was about to lose contact with the mountain. The alternatives were proceed and perhaps fall, or stay put and certainly fall. I took a peek at the lonely ring peg 30ft. below, my only point of attachment to the mountain besides Dudley. Its rusty crust did not inspire confidence. My heart was going like a jack-hammer on overdrive, flushing my system with adrenaline.

"C'mon you idle sod, stop posing, and get a bloody move on, or do you want us benighted?" That was the thing with Dudley, he was so there for me. Even without his encouragement, I had to move. What was I doing stuck up here so late, in these crummy conditions I kept asking myself, frutching about on tenuous whiskers of ice? There was nowt I could do about it, so the question was academic. The bed-and-breakfast caper hadn't helped for a start. "Did you say Earl Grey?"

"No, thankee, Lapsong Souchon with a touch of lemon and a sprinkle of sugar, please.

Dudley had to have his little comforts. "Just a sprinkle, mind," and the landlady who had taken a fancy to him went off to fuss.

"Just a sprinkle," said she half-mocking half-admiring to her husband hovering uselessly on the fringe of the breakfast room.

"Such a particular gentleman," she murmured loving every minute of it. With every little fuddy-duddy fastidiousness my stomach churned like a doomsday clock. B & B landladies don't do Alpine starts, and with each passing minute, I could see a bivouac on the Ben looming larger.

"A full Scottish Breakfast, you'll be having?"

The diction was precise, naice almost, with none of the explosive glottal stops beloved of the tartan proletariat. And why not, we've paid for it. So we got our money's worth, wading through a multi-course extravaganza of porridge, bacon, eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, beans, black pudding and the requisite supporting items. What with that, paying the bill, complimenting our hostess on her Wedgwood china, we were late on the hill. Now the conditions. I have always been a believer in 'if it don't feel right it ain't right'.

Today the ambient moisture content was that of a tepid Turkish bath. Now, as we turned the corner into the great cirque of the Allt a'Mhuillin there was the proof of the pudding. "Look at it, Dudley. You can see it's a bag of shite." He looked. The warmish temperature had melted the Ben into a soggy Baked Alaska, with great sickly grey sheets of ice dribbling down into lumps of black sludge, gobs of soggy ice making little splash bombs on the path. The other two, Dave and Jim, stopped, took stock and waited for us to make up their minds for them. Odd, I thought, as all of us were familiar with the Ben and it's wintry moods, and today it was at its most malignant, dark dangerous and dismally off-putting. Maybe they were being subtle. Deferring the decision to someone else is an old climber's game.

"If you think I've driven all the way from Manchester, just to put my arse down in some bloody Scotch pub...

Neatly put, Dudley. That was that then. Never mind the weather, when you're out on the heather. Dudley had the car and therefore the casting vote. On we went bashing our way upwards in execrable wind-slab snow. The others soon sped ahead, and I could hear them above thumping the snow with their ice-axes, sounding as if they were assaulting cardboard boxes. So here we were stuck on Observatory Ridge, rime-covered breeches crackling in the gale, way past our bedtime, on snow that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. The climbing up to this point had been not much more perilous than your average winter outing, but I had lingered longer on my leads than Dudley who had been dashing and efficient, thus making us late.

If I had been properly assertive this morning the only thing cold would be the pint I was nursing. "Get a move on." This was me talking to myself. "There's bugger all you can do about it now." My forearms turned to rubber, while farther down a knee trembler started revving up. After a few nervous false starts I managed to howk my boot onto a thinly-iced slab, which held me grudgingly. My left axe planted into névé, was tested with a slight tug. It would hold, maybe. The right axe sunk in soft snow, was pulled gingerly. The reply was not reassuring.

Meanwhile, my right foot was straying inexorably down the slab wrapped in a cellophane layer of broken ice. I had to move very soon. Catching sight of the shards of ice glinting underfoot, I hesitated. Would the axes hold? Just then. "For Pete's sake get a jildi on, you lazy pillock." I remembered he had been on one of those sensitivity courses. OK, holding my breath I pulled myself up. Immediately, the right axe pulled like a knife through hot butter. The ice under my crampon shattered into a thousand sparklers as my foot shot down the slab. I was off! I jack-knifed backwards through the dark air, thinking: "Christ that piton has to hold me." There came a resounding ping, and the ring peg was whipped out. Jesus Christ! But Dudley must catch me on his belay. Out of the corner of

my eye I saw a grey shape as he was yanked off his stance, hurtling down beside me. The information was passed onto my brain and so quite objectively, I knew I was going to die. Oh well, this is the way it goes. I put my hands in front for protection, thinking why am I bothering, Andy was chopped on Lochnagar in similar circumstances.

These thoughts came to me calmly despite my increasing velocity as the ground 1000ft. below came speeding up to meet me. Whoops! I was jerked to a halt, bouncing up and down at the rope's end like a demented bungy jumper. Something had grabbed the rope. The Hand of God perhaps or another supernatural entity. It was a bloody miracle, a one-in-a-million chance, for, as far as the eye could see through the mist, the wall we had dropped over was plumb vertical, without a bump or projection ruffling its surface. The second I came to rest at the end of the rope, serene detachment went out the window, and panic took over. Whatever was holding my lifeline could easily let it go, like Eurydice snatched from the brink of Hades only to be casually dropped back again into the maws of death. I must have shouted: "Help!" because out of the mist a surprising number of voices shouted back: "Where are you?"

"Hanging off the side of Observatory Ridge."

"You OK for now?"

"Yea, I suppose."

"OK Hang on. We'll fetch the rescue."

A ragged fracture just right for a large hex was staring right at me within arm's length. Thank Christ! I whipped a moac stopper off my rack, stuffed it into the crack, pulled this way and that till it lodged, and clipped in. It would do the trick for the time being. Frantically, I fumbled through my harness for a bomb-proof anchor. There, I found it. A shiny ice peg with the price tag still sticking to it. I hesitated. It had cost me all of nine quid that week, a pretty penny. Scots miserliness battled briefly with self-preservation. What the bollocks am I thinking? It took about a second for me to work my instinctive parsimony through my mental processing unit. Casting £9 to the winds, I frantically hammered the piton hard into the crack, tied on, and immediately the tension surged from my body. I was safe for the moment. A cry came from above: "Are you all-right?" This was Jim. Dave had vomited on the spot when he saw us peel.

"Yea, like bollocks I am," I thought, but confined myself to saying "Yea, but drop me a rope fast, like."

"Will do. Wait a sec till we get a belay."

Then followed the ring of a hammer bashing a peg in. Swinging gently in the breeze, there was nothing else to do but take stock. As my mitt had fallen off in the fall, my right hand would soon be out of commission, while below me Dudley hanging upside down with the rope caught round his ankle was twirling round in little circles. "I'm in the shit," he said. Right, I thought, and there's sod all I can do to help you. Far below the icy

terrain of Observatory Gully beckoned uninvitingly. Not much cause for optimism anywhere I looked. The wind spun me round to face the rock again. The peg I had hammered in so lustily as a lifeline had shattered the frost-riven crack, leaving peg and nut clasped together by what was not much more than a mosaic of tottering biscuit crumbs. "Oh God!" Peering through the gloom at my disintegrating lifeline, I prayed for the first time in my adult life.

"I promise if I ever get out of this bleeding jam, I'll never mess around with other people's wives, never steal Biros from the kids, and look at their mums as bonking fodder. And I'll never ever, never use people, if You will save me, God."

I knew that was a major road block to salvation and if I could get it past the front office I could be home and dry. "I'll make my own cups of tea and not blackmail my girlfriend into brewing up," offering up a specific sample of the previous. Promises, promises. I would have promised the Earth if I'd had it. Only this time I meant to keep them, honest! Fear cleaned out the mind's Augean Stables, purging life's petty squabbles out of my system. Even people I cordially hated came up for re-evaluation. Trying not to breathe on the fragile piton, I made a mental note to make a tick list of the above, seek them out and in the unlikely event of them getting over the initial surprise re-befriend them.

Jim called from up above. "Still alright, Gavin?"

"Am I buggery! Send down a bleeding rope, pronto, mate."

"OK, won't be a minute with the belay."

I heard the dull banging of a piton hammer. He sounded calm and deliberate like it was Monday morning and he was back in the classroom, handing out papers to his pupils.

Meanwhile, was I imagining things or did the peg really twitch in the crack? "Hurry, for Christ's sake!"

"Don't worry, Gavin." More banging as another peg was bashed home.

"C'mon, Jim!" It came out high pitched, pure counter tenor-who said castrati were extinct – as my situation came home to me. If the rope rolled it would pull nut, peg, and me, back onto the original flight plan.

"Would it be too much to ask if you could possibly expedite sending down the bloody rope?"

"Just a mo." No exasperation at all, the assured teacher facing a difficult pupil. Another peg sank home. Slowly, out of the fog a rope poked and prodded its way down, slithering like an Arctic snake. I tied on and started to breathe. Another rope was dropped, to which I attached two prussik slings. This was tricky as the hand without the glove was as useful as a lump of frozen wood. I began slowly jumaring up the rope, with every step giving me grief. Experimenting with prussiks in the comfort of your own home in front of an admiring audience, whose idea of adventure is a stroll to the pub, is a lot different from Saturday night on the big, bad Ben

swinging back and forth on a frozen cable, snow pouring in at all the surprising gaps in your clothing. At every step, the reluctant knot froze and had to be untied with one hand and teeth, all which frigging about not aided by the temperature dropping and the blizzard seriously picking up momentum. There's a lot to be said for sticking to the movies on a Saturday night.

I looked down and saw Dudley safely ensconced on a snowy ledge, a bit forlorn, but not too much the worse for wear. When I rolled onto the ledge, for no apparent reason Jim said: "You're a great guy, Gavin." No one had ever called me that before and it was doubly odd coming after my cock-up. I was touched. He tied me on. "What about Dudley?" I asked, for the first time thinking about someone apart from myself. "Too late. He'll have to stick it out till morning," and he leaned over the cliff to pass the bad news on to poor Dudley. No dithering about making that unpleasant decision. I had to admire his powers of leadership. Two weeks ago I had been on an all-night bus from Andorra, and thought it the longest night of my life. Now shuffling about on a tiny ledge on the Ben I recalled it's hedonistic luxury with nostalgia.

There were other things I was finding out that night. For instance, I never believed it possible to fall asleep standing up. It is. But it has the serious drawback of getting jerked awake whenever I slumped onto the belay. Bin bags over our heads protected us from the worst of the blizzard, but the insistent drubbing of little avalanches were a constant reminder of our unpleasant situation. It was a bitter night, but I didn't care. For some reason I was as full of beans as a kid on Christmas Morning revelling in a euphoria, that would take weeks to shake off. I was going to live. To pass the time, we concocted little divertissements, which held out the promise of reward, coming in the shape of a chocolate biscuit. The law of supply and demand inflated this commodity's exchange rate to such an extent that the prize could only be won by telling a successful joke. A gale of hearty laughter was optimistically judged as the standard to be aimed at; mere chuckles would leave you hungry.

For a while the icy flanks of the Ben were the unlikely setting for Saturday Night Comedy Theatre. Old ones were dredged up from dusty drawers of memory. Stories about vicars at tea parties, vicars drunk in the pulpit, vicars and choirboys, bishops and actresses, bounced from buttress to gully making the round of the crag making it a bad night for prelates all round. I am here to tell you that not a biscuit crumb was awarded after the first round. No one laughed; not even a titter emerged from that ledge. Each rib-tickler was met by a stony silence. It wasn't the way we told them, but humour requires a modicum of bodily comfort and warmth for the funny bone to function. Our currency became so devalued we ended up giving the prize to anyone just having a go. By the way the biscuits turned out to be very salty, something you don't notice under normal non dry-mouthed conditions.

Peter Ayscough above Loch Monar. Photo: John Farrow.

'The Boys', June 1934. Left to right – Ted Forde, Charlie Ruxton, George Wood, Ian Macdonald and Ian Charleson.







Dawn came seeping in grudging and grey, mist blanking out every feature. At cock crow, the buzzing of rotors heralded our rescue, then the helicopter appeared, circling above the hut, firing off green smoke bombs like it was Apocalypse Now. The chopper hung in the sky above us, the rotors birling only feet away from the cliff. Out popped our Redeeming Angel in the shape of an RAF corporal at the end of what seemed like a fishing line, hands clasped in front of him as if praying. Here was a joker who could get a real laugh. I had first go, irritating our rescuer, him bouncing to and fro from the ledge like Peter Pan, while cack-handed me couldn't untie my knot, what with one hand a frozen lump and the rest of me not much better. "Haven't you got a bloody knife?" He shouted unangelically. No a bloody knife was something I had omitted to bring along. Jim sorted out this one, hacking the Gordian Knot apart with his axe, and the next moment I was flying skywards hugging my rescuer. When level with the chopper, someone grabbed me by the seat of my pants, threw me into the cabin – so this is how they do it – and then checked me for damage.

The others followed tossed in like potatoes bouncing about in a hopper, and without further ado we were whisked off to Fort William for our brief encounter with media stardom. Flashbulbs popped, mikes and cameras thrust in our faces, as we were served up for our 15 minutes of fame. Jim the real hero of the affair rendered himself ineligible for celebrity by refusing to play up for the cameras, answering each stupid question in an abrupt: 'How can you ask such a stupid question?' manner. Unsatisfied, the battery of cameras, mikes assorted electronic gizmos swung round to face me. Sensing he was not giving them the goods, I put on my 'I am seriously thinking about this', act, when they asked me: "What were you thinking about when you were falling?" I pondered, looked straight into the camera lens and replied gravely that all I could think of were the generations of schoolchildren who would now be deprived of the full riches of their education.

On a lighter note I regretted all the exercise books I had failed to mark. I was asked that daft question so many times I began to believe my daft answer. Getting into my stride I described with much gesticulation, the drama on the mountain so that I, the screw-up, emerged as a charismatic TV personality, holding the nation enthralled for all of the two and a half minutes allotted to me, while Jim the real man of the moment found himself relegated to a minor footnote. Funnily enough my mates did not seem to resent me hogging the limelight, so maybe they were all camera shy. The linesman was wheeled out and we were made to shake hands, no hardship in that, but it made me wonder how many similar gestures are merely setups. I was asked to say something. I must have dried up for all I could think of to say to him was: "Thanks." Then he was asked to say a few words. Oh dear! Here we go. I'll be exposed as a wally expecting other

The CIC Hut and Carn Dearg Buttress, Ben Nevis. Photo: Donald Bennet.

people to risk their lives. But all he said was: "Next time take a knife." He was a professional after all.

That night we were on every TV channel; after the usual litany of disasters, the upbeat finale to the Sunday night bulletin, so we could all go cheerfully to work on Monday. At school I had the novel experience of being stared at as an interesting phenomenon with an aura, nothing to do with my miraculous escape, but because I had been on the box, and for a moment walked with such gods as Terry Wogan, and Simon Dee. For the next week we were fodder for the Press, receiving all sorts of unwarranted attention, and at its end we were tossed aside, last week's news, our only use, wrapping for fish suppers. We were of interest as a freak phenomenon, during that weekend eight people had died in the Central Highlands and Ben Nevis. Somebody up there had liked us. The episode had a weird postscript. Instead of being chastened, I went around in a state of intoxication, thinking I had been granted the gift of invulnerability, like Achilles without his foot problem. I insulted bigger folk than myself in pubs, put lighted cigarettes in mates' pints, and went barging up to women, who wouldn't have touched me with a barge pole.

Fortunately, this notion of immortality wore off before they locked me up, but my odd behaviour caused not a few friendships to be put on hold. Nowadays, of course, I would have gone into therapy, then they just kept me at arms length in the bar, till I had passed a satisfactory period of probation. Twenty years on I seldom think of the incident, involving as it does dwelling on the awful consequences if the rope had twitched a millimetre or so to the side. When I do think on it, I ask, why me? Life since has done me few favours, nor have I reciprocated. I have not been set aside for some special destiny. My country has never called me in her hour of need. No cure for cancer has been discovered in my laboratory. I have no cello concertos to my name. I haven't even found a new way to cook chicken. Life goes on. The four of us drifted apart, as is the way of things. An occasional Christmas card and an even more occasional sighting has to do for the camaraderie of the rope. Last summer, I bumped into Jim in the Lakes. An indifferent damp week had ended in a glorious weekend. We were sitting outside the New Dungeon Gyll enjoying the Lakeland summer evening, contented with our outing on the hill and relishing our pints. He had had a great day, he said, and now seeing me had topped it all off for him. The complement as unexpected as it was undeserved reminded me of the nice thing he had said as I rolled onto the belay. Perhaps, just for that it was all worth it. I did go back to the Ben, once.

The incident had shattered what little confidence I had on ice, so when confronted with this medium I climbed with timid skittering steps, tentative surges followed by scurrying retreats, and as a consequence I went back to relearning the basics. When I completed my repeated apprenticeship, I sought out a climb suitable for my swan song. Green Gully, it had to be.

Rod and I climbed it late in the season, so fortunately, we had plenty daylight. The four major ice pitches were tackled successfully and we arrived below the cornice just as the sun was dropping behind the Ben. I climbed a rope's length on very steep unconsolidated snow. No falling here; Rod had only a fragile ice-axe belay. The cornice overhung by about four feet. I crept up to nestle beneath it like a sparrow under the eaves of a house. Tapping the ice I realised it was as solid as concrete. My axe couldn't even scratch it. It would need a pneumatic drill to break through this lot. My familiar icy companion, fear, seized me.

Our position was unenviable, for we were virtually sealed in the gully. Over to the left I could make out faintly in the gloaming, beyond the swirling snow devils, a steep arête where the cornice had fallen away. It had to be the way out. Reversing the steep unstable snow was something I would rather not linger over. After an anxious half-hour I reached the exit, clamped my axes over the edge, and performed a neat Western Roll to end up sprawling flat on the summit plateau. Beneath the icy crusts of the mountains, the whole world was as black as Hell's Night, except the great sea lochs, which the echo of the sunset had plunged into molten fingers probing into Scotland's dark heart. We trudged down the hill, crampons making that satisfactory creaking noise, when you know all is well with the snow. The wind cutting across the plateau made us suddenly aware of the cold.

MOONLIGHTING

By Jamie Thin

"Oh it's a wond-er-ful ni-ght for a moon-dance..."

IT WAS Saturday night and I'd been working all day, but for once Van the man was right. And as I drove north, the moon was full and bright, throwing silver shadows across Fife. The end of the financial year, stock-checks ... life is too short for all this accounting... I picked up John and Serena in Ladybank, and then by a devious route we made for Braemar. Now John (or Coylie as we know him) is still a youth – and as a youth is prone to sudden enthusiasms.

"Time for a wee adventure, Mr Thin?" Not with a dodgy character like you, I thought – but at least Serena might keep him in line.

Chips and curry in Blairgowrie and I was beginning to shake off the weariness of the day. We got to Braemar at 11pm, just as the Gypsy Kings were breaking into the Salsa, and John and Serena spilled out onto the empty street to dance.

The advance party were ensconced in the pub. The day had been fine and they were happily supping their beer. "But lads, you can't sit in here, its a beautiful night – who's on for a midnight foray to the hills?"

Not even Serena could be persuaded, so I found myself alone with Coylie at the Linn o' Dee, talking in the hushed voices of conspirators. There was a dusting of crisp snow, and we opted for the fell-shoes to make the run-in more enjoyable. The rest of the kit, plastic boots, axes and crampons were hurriedly shoved into bulging sacks.

The snow covered path led us through the dark of the woods, and out towards Derry Lodge. The deer moved sleepily, as we ran past, lifting their heads and pausing. While behind them, the moon broke through the clouds to show the glen in sharp contrast.

Barely a breath of wind, the only sounds were our own. We turned up Luibeg and made for Coire Sputan Dearg. As the snow got deeper our progress slowed, and we switched back to big boots. We climbed higher and we could just begin to see the tops of Cairn Toul and Braeriach, silvery and bright, before we plunged back into the gloom of the coire. The moon cast a broad shadow across the crags.

Axes and crampons were out now and the névé was perfect. Slab chimney was in the dark shadow, but when we paused in the neck of the gully, we looked back to see a ghostly Derry Cairngorm framed by the gully walls. We hardly dared speak lest the spell was broken – magic.

We topped out and headed across the plateau, the moon casting our long shadows on Ben Macdui. Down below, the winking lighthouses on

the north coast seemed strangely near. A faraway glimpse into another world of boats and the sea

Back over Derry Cairngorm, it got dark again at 5am as the clouds swept in and the moon disappeared. But not for long, and the first light of dawn saw us running back to Derry Lodge in our stiff and frozen fell-shoes.

Now it was a race. We winked at each other, it would be great to get back to Braemar before the others were out of their beds!

* * *

The Grand Traverse:

Winter had come again, and conditions were perfect for the much discussed alpine tour. We had planned and waited and planned again. Purist style, no messing – ski to the west face, climb the route with skis and then ski off the slopes to the east. The approach would be long and hard, the route would be committing and we would need the strongest team possible. First, I had to persuade the boys. But that wasn't hard – the trap had already been set – for the last few months I had been regaling them with tales of perfect verglas and solid névé from the previous year, and they were just waiting for the call.

"Right. Early start. See you at 5am."

Mick and I stepped into our skis in the gloom of the half-night. Just as we were setting off on ski, Garry caught up with us, just down from Inverness. He preferred to keep to his feet, still carrying the Highlander's inbred suspicion of the ski. We laboured up the slopes, sweat pouring through the layers of fleece. Thoughts of success and failure loomed large in our minds as the dark crags looked on at us coldly. It always looks steeper from below I told myself half-heartedly. At last as the steely grey of dawn began to pick out the features, we reached the foot of the gully. Steep snow lead to the first rock step, and then the route disappeared into the depths of the gully.

Mick and I took off our skis and fixed them to our sacks. Garry caught us up and for speed, we all tied into one rope. I set off up the first pitch, sparks flying as the crampon points skittered off barely covered rocks and the axes sought out uncertain placements. Onto the first steepening – balance difficult with the skis pulling me backwards – nothing for it but a big lunge up, hoping axes would gain purchase on some edge. Some undignified scrabbling followed and I was up into the gully proper, the others followed. Now ensconced between the narrow walls, I felt a bit more secure and while the others followed up, I turned round to admire the magnificent skyline – grey clouds, the pink hint of dawn and the jagged peaks of Allermuir, Craiglockhart and St. Giles!

Aye, it was Edinburgh, and we were on the wee gem of a route that is

the Cat's Nick. An innocuous moderate in the warm light of a summer's day, but in mid-winter it has the situation and atmosphere of the pipes on Meagaidh. Perched high above the city, it feels like you're on the big mountain, even if you're only five minutes from your kitchen.

Neither Garry nor Mick wanted to fight their way past my skis, so I was left to lead up the rest of the route. The conditions were perfect – I mean there wasn't any ice, but it was winter and it was cold, and if you looked down it almost looked like there was lots of snow.

Like all classic routes the crux is the last step, bridging out past a prow of rock, to reach the only good placements on the whole route, in the turf at the top. That was the crux, but the highlight was watching Mick follow up, as he tried a direttissima and got his skis stuck under the prow – there was much cursing and growling before he finally emerged. We were now in great danger of being be-lighted, so Gary disappeared at the run to get to work, while Mick and I got back on the skis to finish the last leg of our grand traverse – or at the very least to finish off our last legs as we charged into great tussocks of grass and were catapulted headfirst into Hunter's Bog.

They say you have to travel the world, so that you can arrive back home and see it for the first time. And they're right. The best adventures are on your own doorstep.

EDINBURGH CASTLE ROCK

THE following account of climbs on the Castle Rock of Edinburgh and other public buildings has been sent in by an, understandably, anonymous correspondent. No law-abiding citizen would think of climbing on the Castle Rock of Edinburgh today. About 50 years ago it was otherwise. At one time you could even do it in public on special occasions with minimal interference from the authorities.

Our correspondent writes:– In the late Forties there was a thing called Charities Day when the student population went around extracting money from the public. As far as I remember it took place on a Saturday in May. Students dressed in whatever fancy dress they could and went round the town in the morning shaking collecting cans at the dismayed citizens and doing various stunts to entertain or amaze the good people of the town. Among the exercises to impress the public the EUMC staged an assault on the castle, climbing up the rock facing Princes Street starting from the region of St. Cuthbert's Chapel. There were several routes up to the base of the wall, all of about Diff. standard.

Although good enough climbs, as far as I know, they never achieved guidebook listings. The crux of the ascent of the Princes Street Face was the final wall of the castle itself. There is a recessed corner which can be straddled. I remember a certain Derek Haworth climbed this free. The rest of us clambered up an old wooden ladder used during the war for firewardens to get onto roofs to put out incendiary bombs. (Each block of flats had one between the doors of the top flat.) I also seem to remember we had a bugle which sent inexpert calls across the gardens to the watching crowds who shook their heads sadly.

There was also a certain amount of night climbing during the dark winter nights. Edinburgh in the late Forties of last century was not the bustling, cosmopolitan, over-ripe metropolis it is now. On a winter's night after, say seven o'clock, the streets were empty, even Princes Street was quiet and the darkness was lit by circles of brown gaslight. On such nights it was possible to enter the castle by a pair of pipes on the Synod Hall Face that led up the wall to just below the overhang of the parapet. From there a stretch and heave brought you inside the wall. Once over the wall you had the freedom of the dark castle – no flood lights in those days. The windy battlements and moon-shadowed courtyards were all your own. The farthest we penetrated was into the dungeons below the half-moon battery.

These were not the first climbs done on the rock. I remember reading in a pre-war Journal that ascents were made from the Johnstone Terrace side. As so often happens I cannot find the reference again. It may be that there

are other unrecorded explorations of this massive piece of volcanic crag. It is also a fact that one night the final spire of the Scott Monument was climbed, not from the ground but from the topmost balcony. Admission to the staircase within the tower was gained when it was found that the key to someone's backgreen door also fitted the door at the bottom of the monument.

Another ascent, or strictly speaking partial ascent, was of the Mercat Cross in the High Street. A strenuous move took you above the overhang and over the parapet onto the platform from where announcements are made to the public. On this occasion I seem to remember that Scotland was declared to be a free and autonomous nation. (Could this be a clue to authorship and the grouping responsible? *Ed.*) The ascent of the final pinnacle was abandoned at the request of the police who arrived from the adjacent station. The force was a benevolent institution in those days. The admonition, "come doun oot o there, laddies. Awa hame tae your beds and dinna gie us onie trouble", was sufficient to restore law and order – 'autres temps, autres moeurs'.

It is said that the participants in these ascents were later admitted to the Club, even rising to high office. This is unlikely but the tale should be kept alive as an entertaining myth. Nevertheless, it might be interesting to look at the application forms of Edinburgh people who joined in the Fifties to see if any of these pioneer efforts were recorded as qualifications. Without such evidence no credit should be given to these folk tales. Nevertheless, if there is any truth in them it might be wise to consider retrospective action to protect the name of the Club.

Anon.

NOTE: SMCJ, 1959, XXVI. 150, p419 gives the following: Robin Smith and A. Frazer send a belated report of the ascent in May 1958 of the Closet Climb on the Princes Street Face of Edinburgh Castle Rock about, 350ft. (S).
(1) 80ft. Up broken rocks and short steep column to start of obvious white shelf left of great central overhang.
(2) 70ft. Up shelf and left to belay.
(3) 50ft. Right by zig-zags past tree to stance above overhang.
(4) 120ft. Up overhanging corner 15ft., then by steep grass to foot of Castle wall (no belay).
(5) Up wall.
I have no doubt that the committee will be sympathetic to a request to meet bail should a re-enactment attract the attentions of the law, provided, of course, that the Journal is given an exclusive. The implication by the writer that the present guardians of the city, Lothian and Borders Police, may no longer be 'a benevolent institution' as in days of old is borne out by the fact that the only recorded ice climb on the Castle Rock, again on the Princes Street Face is called Breach of the Peace.

TWENTY-NINE HOURS IN THE CUILLIN

BY ADAM KASSYK

THERE was no moon, and the peaks were shadows in the night, their presence sensed rather than seen against the star-studded sky as I climbed the path from upper Glen Brittle towards the north ridge of Bruach na Frithe. Underfoot, fat slicks of ice gleamed dully among the dry grass. After a couple of hours I gained the lower part of the ridge and sought a place to stop. It was well after midnight, and since I had spent a day at work and had a long drive, I felt very much in need of sleep. There was a brisk breeze and I cast around for some shelter, but the few boulders nearby were disappointingly small. A few minutes later I was settled into a slight hollow, looking out over the dark rolling moors beyond Sligachan, a velvet landscape quiet under the blanket of night. A distant car headlight waxed and waned, briefly lighting the horizon as a late-night traveller returned home. The light served as a reminder of a different world that I was briefly leaving behind.

It was mid-January and the hills had already been under snow for more than two months. I had envisaged in my mind the perfect solo day, a long narrow ridge on a sharp, snowy peak, leading eventually, after suitable commitment and effort, to an exposed summit. Of such dreams are perfect days made – but all too rarely. It hadn't taken long to decide that the best place to find such an objective was Skye. Unfortunately, I then discovered that the recent good weather was forecast to end at some point during the weekend. A long drive for possibly only one day's climbing seemed a little rash, but nothing ventured nothing gained, so the decision was made. The chances of doing the entire traverse seemed low, so I had decided to start at Bruach na Frithe, reasoning that if the weather held until the following day, I might get as far as the Coire Lagan section, or even to the Thearlaich-Dubh Gap.

I slept well, and when I awoke the dark blue of night was retreating westwards and daylight was already spreading across the sky in its place. I was greeted by the sight of the Cuillin, a line of icy fangs in the teeth of the wind. Breakfast was not a success. There was nothing to shelter the stove, the flame guttered faintly and the chips of ice hardly melted. Eventually, I gave up, threw away the ice cubes and drank the remaining cold water as there seemed little point in adding tea. In any event, I was impatient to be off. Sunrise was at hand and I was drawn inexorably to the crest, where the sky was touched with a tinge of cream and wisps of cloud glowed with a translucent sheen.

Above, a steep slope of frozen scree led to the horizontal crest. Here the ridge narrowed and, climbing along it, I sensed a sudden transformation

in the mountain environment. As I left behind the landscape of earth, grass and loose rocks and the snow cover increased, so too did an intense sense of radiance all around. The rock seemed a burnished golden brown, almost glowing with a tangible warmth and colour, the snow reflected the pale cream luminosity of the sky and I knew then that these mountains promised riches beyond the dreams of extraordinary days. I felt an intense anticipation of warm sunlight on snow crystals on the crest, the promise of lightness, air and space that one feels high on a mountain, and this drew me urgently upwards. Perfect firn snow in runnels, ramps and crests led between rocks of immaculate colour and texture to the summit.

The promise of below was more than amply fulfilled. As I reached the crest, I saw that the entire Coruisg basin was filled with a shifting mist. Where the mist thinned, it was stretched and spun into gossamer veils, vapours of transparent delicacy that were almost invisible. The winter sun was low on the mainland horizon and the countless water droplets captured its rays, diffused and diffracted them, till it shone with a golden light The effect was as if the air itself glowed with an iridescent warmth, as if each atom had absorbed the sun's light and reflected it again with a renewed intensity. A wreath of mist floated past behind me and I was greeted by my own shadow, a wraith with a halo to keep me company in this island paradise in the sky. Imperceptibly, the mists faded and the sweep of the mountain ridge was revealed, rising and falling in its great encircling curve. My senses were dazzled by the brilliance of it all, as the peaks unfolded in their serried ranks, white teeth rising from the black jaws of the corries and etched by the light reflected from countless sparkling snow crystals. Sky, rock and snow were enchanted by a spell of incandescent beauty but only for fleeting minutes that ought to have been prolonged into a contemplative eternity.

But time and tide wait for no man, and I was curious to know what other wonders lay in store. A firm, broad, snow crest led easily downwards, a pleasant high level promenade, but soon a deep narrow gap appeared with a steep black wall frowning at the far side. I approached this obstacle with some trepidation only to find that its steepness was tempered with reassuringly incut holds and beyond I found an exposed groove well supplied with lumps of ice in all the right places. Confidence boosted I pressed on up the first of the three summits of Bidein Druim nan Ramh, eager to see what difficulties lay ahead.

The next section provided some engrossing route finding. In summer the Coruisg face here consists of wet slabs strewn with loose stones. Now it was heavily carpeted with densely packed, hard frozen snow. This snow was bonded to the underlying rock more firmly than I'd ever seen, shading from white on the surface to an ever denser grey where ice met rock. I couldn't recall encountering snow conditions as good as this before. I crossed the gully which fell from the deep gap between the first of the two

summits and climbed up a long ramp on its far side. At its apex was an exposed step, where a swing round the edge gained the snowed up slabs beyond. In powder this step would have been a precarious exercise requiring protection, now it was an exhilarating move with reassuring security for both hands and feet. Beyond, a series of traverses and upward moves crossed the face to gain the east ridge from Coruisg, and the summit a little way farther. Now confidence was at full pitch and I was absorbed in a steady rhythm on the steep snowy switchbacks, always with a breathtaking drop and always on the most reassuring of snow.

Of course, the ridge in winter is sensational but by the time I'd reached the first of the four summits of Sgurr a'Mhadaidh, sensational had become the norm. A short abseil off each of the first three summits made life easy and secure. As I approached the main peak the mist came in again and the summit ridge appeared ahead and above as an impossibly steep crest, falling away at an exaggerated angle on both sides and seemingly too sharp to allow anything but a precarious passage of the summit. This must have been a trick of the mist, for in fact, just beyond the highest point there was a spot just big enough to sit down with my back against a restful rock and revel in the atmosphere and the knowledge that most of the difficulties of the day should now be over.

The mist cleared again, to reveal the shadowy and snowless basin of Coruisg, embraced by the mountains but looking out to calm waters beyond. Ahead now lay Sgurr a'Ghreadaidh, a sinuous curving fin, gently scalloped along its crest. Unexpectedly, this proved to be the highlight of the day. A long and sustained section of impressive narrowness, too steep to allow passage below the crest, required progress in balance along the very apex of the ridge with no handhold for physical or moral support. There was no cornice but the sense of exposure was formidable and required continuous concentration. Truly, like tightrope walking. I was getting tired now and stopped frequently to take a deep breath and gather my resources. Despite the nervous tension there was a pronounced sensation of breathless excitement, almost weightlessness, of being more than usually detached from the solidity of the earth and closer to some other more intangible realm. When the ridge finally relented and broadened out the tension eased and was replaced by a surge of exhilaration.

Swinging round to the south I could look out across Glen Brittle towards the Minch, where a deep haze was settling on the western horizon, the softening sky bringing that air of calm contentment which marks the approaching end of a good day. The ridge was friendlier now, less steep, more of a faithful companion than a challenging adversary. I passed welcoming spots which appeared designed for contemplative relaxation, sheltering boulders and snowy hollows for luxury bivouac sites. The shadows lengthened, the light began to colour the snow and rocks again and my senses seemed both dulled and heightened at the same time by

fatigue. The lower part of the western sky was turning to pastel pink and smoky blue and the horizon was smudged with soft colours as the daylight started to slip away beyond the ocean on the ebbing tide of time. I crested the summit ridge of Sgurr Dearg with a little daylight to spare and my euphoria was tempered only by an icy blast of spindrift.

The Pinnacle looked superb with all the holds coated in hard ice, but my immediate task was to find somewhere sheltered to sleep. Halfway down the base of the Pinnacle on the Coire Lagan side there was a slanting slot created by a sloping overhang. There was a snow drift in the slot and I excavated a mummy-shaped niche. The slopes below swept down into the bowl of Coire Lagan, the snow fading into a wild rocky chaos in the dying light. I felt very pleased with my efforts as the stove purred away inside the niche, well sheltered from the wind. As I got into my sleeping bag, it occurred to me that my bivouac site was somewhat coffin-shaped, though I felt reasonably safe in the assumption that it was unlikely to be my last resting place. At this point the solitude was interrupted by the arrival of three other climbers over the top, the first people I'd met all day. It turned out that their efforts rather put my adventures in the shade. They'd driven all the way from Sheffield on the Friday night, and had started from Sgurr nan Gillean that morning. They did not stop to talk for long, and plunged downwards with the last of the daylight. I could have descended too, but I felt a strong affinity with this cold high place which I was reluctant to break.

Sleep did not come easily that night. The wind had strengthened considerably, and from the security of my little niche I heard and felt the gusts buffeting the mountainside. The chances of continuing tomorrow were fading with the passing of the day. Across the coire, the twin fangs of Alasdair and Thearlaich brushed the base of a dense horizontal screen of cloud. Above me, looking round the overhang, I could see rents in the cloud cover and a few stars still shining through. The night scene carried a sense of foreboding, a threat voiced repeatedly by a cold angry wind. I turned over the possibilities in my mind. Would the weather hold till dawn and allow me to get as far as Sgurr Alasdair at first light? Would I be caught in a storm during the night? Should I make an escape now? Looking beyond the ridge I caught a glimpse of a light on the horizon, somewhere far away to the south, along the coast, far from the Cuillin, far from Skye, a reminder of the security of the other world. The wind whistled around the towers of An Stac and smacked against the wall of the Pinnacle above me. Instead of counting sheep I counted the minutes between gusts.

The decision was made when the interval between gusts could be measured in seconds rather than minutes. Despite the lack of sleep I felt well rested, visibility was adequate enough to find the way and I lost height easily on good snow. Below the bealach, the snow cover ran out, my torch failed and I found myself stranded in the middle of frozen screes

in total darkness. But it was now only a case of going straight down and a few bone-jarring minutes later the tiny bowl of the upper coire appeared. The lochan, sheeted thickly with ice, formed a horizontal plane, counterposed by the sharp verticals of the surrounding huge blocks of gabbro, the whole creating a ghostly impression in the gloom. I sat down to remove my crampons and as I looked up at Sgurr Dearg, a veil of soft grey mist drew across the screes and a light rain began to fall.

On the way down the rain steadily intensified. After a while the bulk of Sgurr Dearg faded completely into the mist and the darkness, the going underfoot turned from rock to grass, then to the path, the track and finally the glistening tarmac road. Glen Brittle in the middle of a wet January night seemed eerily strange, a desolate place at the edge of the world, utterly quiet, the few dwellings shuttered and oblivious of the stranger passing through. The rain came down in sheets and a wild gale blasted the few trees by the side of the road.

It was after five in the morning when I finally regained my starting point. It must have been after midnight when I decided to descend, not a moment too soon. The timing of my return added an acute sense of satisfaction, of completeness, to my trip. I felt little sense of regret that a second day and the complete traverse had slipped from realisation with the arrival of the Atlantic front. After all, it had been the best mountaineering I had experienced in Scotland.

SCOTLAND'S MOUNTAIN NAMES: THE VIEW FROM TIMOTHY PONT

By Ian R. Mitchell

In the Pantheon of Scottish mountaineering there is, at the moment, no place for Timothy Pont, though there undoubtedly should be. Not only was he the first person to produce accurate drawings of many Scottish mountains, but he was also the first – outside of Gaelic poetry – to record the names of many of those mountains as well. In addition, he climbed – or persons associated with him climbed – Ben Lawers in the 1590s, the first recorded ascent of a Highland peak by any Lowlander. In this article I will deal with Pont's contribution to our knowledge of Scottish mountain names, and the interested reader can follow up other aspects of his mountain investigations in the sources indicated at the end.

Of Timothy Pont little is known. His father was a leading figure in the Kirk and three times Moderator of the General Assembly. Pont was born in the early 1560s and graduated from St. Andrews University in 1583. He was minister in Dunnet, Caithness for a decade or so until about 1610, and died possibly four years afterwards. Financed partly through his father's agency, Pont travelled around Scotland from 1583 until about 1596 on an extended cartographic study of the country. A project like Pont's could have been initiated with a view to extending knowledge of the country, especially the lawless Highlands, as an instrument for the imposition of central authority, governmental and/or ecclesiastical.

Though the mapping work had started with the approval of James VI, he had lost interest on his move south in 1603, and later Charles I provided a grant towards publication. One of those involved in that task was Robert Gordon of Straloch in Aberdeenshire. Gordon confirms in a letter that the map-maker's journeys were made on foot, and that he travelled extensively,

"He [Pont] travelled on foot through the whole of the Kingdom, as no-one before him had done. He visited all the islands, occupied for the most part by inhabitants hostile and uncivilised, and with a language different from our own; being often stripped, as he told me, by fierce robbers, and suffering not seldom, all the hardships of dangerous journeys, nevertheless at no time was he overcome by the difficulties, or disheartened."

That any one person could, in the social and physical conditions of the late 16th century, have undertaken such journeys is impressive. That he could, in addition, have mapped the areas visited to a good standard is almost incredible. Pont's work found fruition in 1654 in Amsterdam in *Blaeu's Atlas*. The maps printed therein, though based on Pont, are not by him, having passed through various hands before being engraved by Dutch cartographers. The mountain detail on these atlas maps is also poor, stylised

peaks predominating, though the names of the mountains therein are largely based on Pont's original sketch maps. Pont is therefore the father, or step-father, of our knowledge of mountain names.

We can assume that Pont, like almost all Lowland Scots at this time, initially had, in all probability, no Gaelic. His father certainly did not speak the language, and Gordon implies that Pont was in the same position. He undoubtedly picked up some Gaelic over his decade of travelling, but the point is that there is no possibility that Pont was responsible for naming the peaks he drew. For his place and mountain names, he must have relied for information on local informants and guides. Pont took great care in his transcribing of the names, attempting to capture the phonetic sound of the Gaelic. We can thus have no hesitation in stating that Pont's mountain names are original and authentic.

Leaving aside hills outside the Gaelic speaking area, and minor hills, there are 90 names of 'significant hills' (largely Munros and Corbetts) on Pont's surviving manuscript maps. There are a further 60 names in a document generally ascribed to Pont. These names cover areas from the Southern Highlands to the North West Highlands. (See footnote for detailed explanation) Of these, 150 names, the overwhelming majority collected by Pont 400 years ago are those which, in slightly altered form, we use today. Six names on the maps and six in the document bear no relation to those currently in use, or are corrupted beyond recognition, i.e. about 8%. Given that the names in all certainty preceded Pont's investigations by some time, we can say that the mountain names of Scotland he collected have now been laid down for well over half a millennium.

Some current names occur in Pont's sources in forms little altered, e.g. Bin Nevesh for Ben Nevis, Bin Lawers for Ben Lawers, Struik Chron for Stuic a' Chroin and Month Kyin for Mount Keen. Others have worn a little more from usage, but are still easily recognisable, such as Bin Liachann, Liathach; Bin Gloin, Beinn a' Ghlo, and Karniler, Carn an Fhidhleir. However, other names have become so corrupted with the passage of time, that they have led those investigating the meaning of the names to deal with great difficulties. I would suggest that those seeking inspiration should turn to Pont, and the original and probably less corrupted forms of the mountain names, for their solutions.

One name I have always 'hid my doots aboot' is Seana Braigh in remote Ross-shire. This is given in my *SMC Munros Guidebook* (1985) as "old upper part", though I have seen it as "old slope" In his *Scottish Hill and Mountain Names,* (1992) Drummond repeats this as "old height" but is unable to provide an explanation of why the mountain gained such a strange name. Could this be because it is in fact a corruption? Or indeed, the name of something else?

In the written documents attributed to Pont, are two references to a mountain called Skormyvarr and then Scornivar. In the first instance we

are told that "Coygach is at the west" of the hill and in the second that the Carron (Charroun) River "falleth out of the great hill of Scorinvar....on the south syd therof sum 2 or 3 myl from the mayn top." (p 547-8). These comments would also apply to the mountain now known as Seana Braigh. Pont himself drew a mountain called Scormyrvar after making a trip up the River Lael from Inverlael and mapping settlements in Gleann na Sguaib and the terrain at the heads of the River Lael and the Allt Gleann a' Mhadaidh. (I am indebted to Chris Fleet of the National Library of Scotland for help with identifying this drawing). From thereabouts Seana Bhraigh can be seen, and in Pont's depiction (Map 4b) Scormyrvar is shown with a prominent eastern summit, which might represent the presently-named Creag an Duine. I feel that Scornivar or Scormyvar could be an earlier form of Seana Braigh, and that the English meaning might usefully be derived from unravelling the former name and not from efforts to decipher the latter.

There is another possibility. Names of parts of mountains sometimes get transposed to the whole over time. The classic example being Lochnagar. In the *SMCJ* 23 (137), p323, E. M. Hodge states that the gamekeeper at Corriemulzie Lodge told him Seana Braigh represented the rounded and domed outlying hills to the right of the cairned summit, as seen from Corriemulzie (Probably Meall nam Bradhan and its partner), and NOT the massif presently designated by the name Seana Braigh. Additionally, according to the keeper, a Mr Mackenzie, relying on old records, the prominent subsidiary peak of the mountain, designated Creag an Duine in the guidebook, was known locally as Sgurr or An Sgurr. Craig an Duine was properly the name only of a crag on An Sgurr, recalling the attempted rescue of a sheep and thus in all probability a much later name than the one current in Pont's time. Is An Sgurr our Scornmyvarr? Dwelly's Illustrated *Gaelic Dictionary* gives an interesting possibility for barr, which would aspirate as bharr and then be anglicised as varr, as meaning topmost part. Do we therefore have Sgurr a'Bharr as the peak of the topmost part? I throw this suggestion out for consultation. At the least I feel that Seana Braigh cannot be reliably taken as the proper name of the hill in question.

Bidean nam Bian in Glencoe is a fine mountain with a fine name; but what does it mean? Can it be "peak of the mountains", as suggested in the Munros guide? Though thinking this most likely, another possibility is given by Drummond as the "peak of the hides, or pelts", or possibly as I have seen elsewhere, peak of the deer skins. I think Pont can help us out on this one, and that none of these suggestions are accurate. In Pont 12c, beside Loch Trichardan (Achtriochtan), there are two sharp twin peaks, which can only be ridges of Bidean nam Bian. Pont has named one Pittindeaun, which at first I thought was Bidean (Pittin) (nam) Bian (deaun – with d/b transposed, a common error). However, next to this is written Boddin Deaun, and two d/b transcriptions struck me as excessive. What

North-west Highlands: Wester Ross. (Ben Leckderg).

Loch Eil and Loch Leven. (Ben Nevis).

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L: Fmnauon
B:
Skorg
Larigh
L: Carron
Coryerback
Benn
Achnashelach
Ry Vouachan
Edaiva-charn
L: Dowll
Achnashela
Ylen L: Doull
Achnanty
Innernakaig


Auo Lochay
Blairn-gleyrach
Achaintour
Inner-Lochy
Druym Erban
Blairmack foylach
Blairmack dreynich
Ylen Loch-Doun-ta-Vra
Auon Neuesh
Blair-mackaj
Blaerheuryn
Auo Kechanish
Bin Neuesh
PART of LOCHAY-ABRE

we in all likelihood have here is an early name for Bidean nam Bian, of Boddin-, or Pittin-deaun, i.e. Devil's Prick, quite a common Gaelic name for such eminences, and of which the current name may be a replacement to remove the impropriety, or more likely simply a corruption. What is especially interesting is that Pont has written what seem to be two attempts at the name, as if to get it right, and these represent reasonable Gaelic pronunciation. (Pottendeun (so-spelled) appears on Map 12b as well.)

It might be argued that these eminences were, in fact, supposed to be the two Buachailles, but not so, since Pont knew those as well and drew them separately. If we look at Map 25b we have a faintish mountain in the Glencoe area, with the barely legible Bogle beside it. Is this a Pontesque Here be Dragons in good old Scots? Eye-strain revealed e.i. (?) beside it, and the nearest we can get to the proper Gaelic for Buachaille Etive Mor, is, in my amateur phonetics, Bokle Eite. (Bogle e.i. (?)). Scales fell from strained eyes and revealed a multi-peaked vista of the Buachaille, with the top of Crowberry Tower showing.

Aside from corruptions, some mountain names have actually changed over the last 400 years. A good example is Pont's Bin Chroby or Bin Chromby (it appears on two maps, 20b and 27a). From its position in both cases this is clearly the hill today designated as Carn an Righ, between Glen Shee and Glen Tilt, a name given it after James VI had used it as a hunting ground, i.e. after Pont's surveys were made. That is a simple enough explanation, but what of the following?

In the area of Strathcarron (Map 4a) Pont gives us Benn Leckderg, a name not in use today and designating a very prominent and jagged peak. After some puzzlement I identified as Fuar Tholl . Its position is exact, above Loch Dughaill and east of Fionn Abhainn river (Pont: A; Finnavon). Leckderg is shown by Pont as a three-topped hill and is in my opinion a directional aid, as many of his mountain drawings would appear to be. The three summits of Leckderg/Fuar Tholl are seen very clearly from Strathcarron, and from the foot of the Coulin Pass, (personal observation 28.4.00) which route Pont probably took to Loch Maree. At some point Leckdearg was re-named, by local Gaelic speakers, as Fuar Tholl. Possibly when transhumance took the Gael with cattle up to the 'cold hole' behind the Strathcarron slopes? Or do we have here a mountain which had one name in Strathcarron and another in Torridon, and when the OS men were doing their work they asked a Torridonian rather than someone from the mountain's southern side, for its name?

Pont did not place any mountains to the south of Strathcarron in this map, but the written sources indicate a mountain we are not familiar with: "The high hill of Bhearnish with the haughis and stank thereof...the hie hill of Bhearnais within two myl of Luir-moir," (p551-2). Those who know the area will feel that this is Bidean a'Choire Sheasgaich, between Lurg Mhor and Bearnais bothy, which had possibly yet to acquire that specific name. Again, transhumance might have provided it later.

Blair Fyffe on the third ascent of 'Trail of Tears' (VII 8) Tough-Brown Face, Lochnagar. Photo: Ed Tressider.

Pont took considerable trouble to draw a mountain beloved of all Scots mountaineers, and generally known today as the Cobbler, though it probably has more alternative names than any other hill. He shows its three peaks clearly and writes below, "a craggie hill", (Map 17a). The Cobbler in Pont's day was not a shoemaker, or even Beinn Ghobhlach, the forked hill, but Arthur's Seat, Suy Arthire. This would appear to give weight to a further variant on the hill's designation, Ben Arthur. But Pont didn't put in Suy for dramatic effect; he was told this by locals to whom the mountain had significance in Arthurian legend, and it would seem to be that Suy Arthire (i.e. Suidhe Artair) should be considered the legitimate name, confirming Drummond's speculation – *Scottish Hill and Mountain Names,* p.112. While we are hereabouts, Pont gives the name of a mountain in the exact position of Beinn an Lochain as Bin Ailt, indicating possibly another change, rather than corruption, over time.

Another change, and an extremely puzzling one, is that for the mountain we know as Schiehallion. On Map 23, Pont draws this fine hill, and clearly names it Kraich, which may be Creag or Cruach. It might be that Pont here was simply misinformed, and this seems likely when we consider that in the documents, generally thought to be by Pont – or his helpers – the mountain is referred to as Suy Challen, or Maiden's Seat, much closer to the name it now goes by. This however, would give no credence to those who argue that the mountain's name is something to do with Caledonian Fairies. Interestingly, the maiden root was carried over into Roy's mid-18th century maps, when he translated the Gaelic term as Maiden's Pap. Was the Caledonian element a Victorian Fairy Tale?

In this International Year of the Mountain we should recognise the pioneering work of Timothy Pont. And, while not arguing that we should revert to his nomenclature where locals for various reasons changed the name of a hill, I do feel that those corruptions which his work appears to highlight should be corrected in appropriate locations such as OS maps and SMC Guides.

Footnote: The Pont maps which survived were first published in *The Pont Manuscript Maps of Scotland,* Ed. Jeffrey Stone (1989), and all my references are to the maps in this source. The maps are now available digitalised, and are much more legible, in the National Library of Scotland's Pont website www.nls.uk/pont The written texts often attributed to Pont but which might be in part by his associates, are the *Noates and Observations on Dyvers Parts of the Hielands and Isles of Scotland* in MacFarlane's *Geographical Collections* Vol. 11 (1907). Page numbers quoted refer to this source. My article *Timothy Pont and Scotland's Mountains,* which has tables of the peaks identified from both sources, as well as an account of the ascent of Ben Lawers and other matters montane, is in *The Nation Survey'd,* Ed. I. C. Cunningham (2001), a collection of essays about Pont and his work, which readers of the *SMCJ* might enjoy perusing.

WHERE THE LAND MEETS THE SEA

By David Kirk

A BEAUTIFUL granite slot provided a perfect Rock 7 placement right at the start of the traverse. I couldn't see where the next gear would be and it looked thin. I could feel sea spray wetting my hair as I leaned back and pushed the tiller further out. This section would make or break things – I had to do well. The only other viable alternative was to give up now and that wasn't in my game plan.

The laser picked up speed beneath me. The sea was calmer here. If I could get up on the plane, then that would really help. The angle of the traverse ledge was increasing as I padded along it. A handhold would be nice – gear would be better. A gust of wind caught me unawares and instinct caused me to release the main sheet a little. I cursed myself as I sheeted in and made a few more tentative steps along the ledge.

The sea was altogether more bouncy now. I might still manage to plane her, but first and foremost, I needed to calm down and make sure I didn't do anything stupid. It would be a long fall from here. The wind had definitely picked up and was making balance more problematic. A small hole appeared which could possibly take a micro between granite crystals – but how strong were they? I quickly lurched my body inwards as the fluky wind suddenly backed. At least I hadn't let the sheet out this time – but I'd felt a lot closer to going over. If I could reach the buoy, at least I'd have the wind more on the quarter. Regardless of how poor it was, I felt a little better with the micro in. The corner at the end of the ramp traverse was near – surely I'd get good gear there. As I approached the buoy, I realised that the sea below it was very short and the wind was still squally – I could definitely speed up with the prevailing wind more aft, but would allowing her to plane be a good idea?

It could only be one more move to the corner – I could see a great jug handle. I wanted to be there, to be holding it. My calf muscles were screaming due to the angle of my feet. I could possibly make one quick dart. If I were lucky, I would round the buoy with inches to spare without having to sheet in and bear up. The alternative was to traverse the whole bloody ledge again and give up. I went for it. I did what was probably my steepest ever slab padding move, and suddenly, I was round the buoy. The hold was excellent. I relaxed my legs, shaking them out alternately. I pulled in the tiller to bear away from the wind and sheeted out.

Although the sea was choppy, the boat's balance felt good. I felt the speed increasing as a strong steady wind blew off the port quarter. Suddenly, I felt the hull tremble. I realised that, although the hold I had was excellent, there was no similarly excellent gear placement in the corner.

I could feel the boat starting to lift. I'd never planed in water like this before. Could I control it? My hands were sweating on the tiller. I quickly chalked up – that's normally a good confidence builder but it didn't seem to be working today. One or two little fissures in the rock might take a couple of wires. Once more I took out my small wires. Surely, I would be up at any moment. The short spell I'd had of steady wind had ended and it was gusting again. On this point of sail, I wouldn't exactly slow down much by letting out the main sheet. I would have to bring her head right round to slow down and that would really spoil my chances. Mind you, that was better than some of the other outcomes I could conjure up. Resigned to my destiny, I clipped the second of my poor wires to a rope. It would be a few tricky moves up the corner, then the angle leaned back a bit blocking my view of the rest of the cliff, but surely it would be easier. I stepped up gingerly onto a small granite ripple and made a few tentative moves up the corner.

Suddenly, I was up and on the plane. The boat's speed felt like it was tripling as it skimmed from wave crest to wave crest. It was anything but a smooth ride, but that didn't bother me in the slightest. Adrenaline coursed through my veins and I whooped with exhilaration. I no longer felt any fear. I could see that I had only a couple of moves to go and I'd be on a small ledge with good holds and a Big Solid Crack. The next buoy was approaching. I would need to bear up as I went round it and the boat would drop off the plane. Could I hold out until then? Using a tiny edge for my left hand and just the slab for my right, I pulled up.

My God, what was happening? From being on the quarter, the wind was now full abaft. Was this just a fluke, or was it changing? The cliff to my right – it was affecting the wind, causing it to back. With no warning, my foot slipped. My other foot came off too as weight distribution altered. The realisation that the wind was being backed came too late. I started to fall. The boat's stern was already through the eye and suddenly the wind had caught the sail. In a fraction of a second the boom was swinging across towards me. I felt the tendons in the fingertips of my left hand stretching as my full weight came onto them.

As it swung across, the boom caught the side of my head as I tried to duck out of the way. It continued round and slammed against the water and the main sheets, as the boat broached. The boat was on its edge now, capsizing and probably about to turn-turtle. I think I was already in the water. Pain and nausea were all I was aware of.

My tendons screamed but I succeeded in holding on. I quickly pulled myself back up into my previous position. This time my foot didn't slip. I stepped up a little higher and finally I got a good hold for my right hand. One more move and I was on the ledge. My mind buzzed with euphoria and I burst into song. The next section looked much easier, but it was time for a belay – the Big Solid Crack was exactly what it promised to be.

Once established on the ledge, I began to take in again my wider surroundings. The wind was a bit stronger here, out of the shelter of the face. There was obviously some dingy race going on down below. The dinghies were well strung out. The one nearest the cliff appeared to have capsized. Someone was next to it in the water and what appeared to be a safety boat was heading across.

ASSYNT

From the anchorage of that derelict january coire,
I argued a way with loose tongues of nomadic snow,
To enlighten my northern burden of hopeless despond
Upon a ridge of sun-lit space . . .

If time is a commodity it's in short supply,
But I make a deal and trade-in deadlines,
Shake out the prudent reef – and now can linger,
Drifting on an oscillating, rippling winter wave.

There is no upward surge to tramp the corniced crest,
To settle the point that the hugh-god called a top,
Or, poles apart, risk encounter with telescopic munroman,
Who wouldn't understand why I am here.

I have arrived at some strange natural node,
A sutherlanderish interface of colour, phase and form;
Reflecting, I measure this harmonic change of state
And roll the choral taste around my mind.

The deep blues have distilled to cloud the darkened day,
May hunt you down as you contemplate the city's separation,
A rising wind makes saxophonic threats to blow out my sail,
And now I know why I am here.

Mike Jacob.

CHILE VOLCANOES AND HIGH ANDES

By Dave Snadden

SEPTEMBER 14, 2001, 0500. Edinburgh Airport: Steel eyes and pert lip confronted me over the check in desk. "No, I cannot check you in. There are no flights to America."
"But I am going to Santiago in Chile, that is South America. I am going via Paris to Chile direct, I don't go within 3000 miles of America."
"There are no flights to America."
"I checked with the carrier last night and the flight is OK."
"I have been instructed not to check in anyone going to America."
"I am not going to America".
Stuck record repeated. Totalitarian doorman syndrome *par excellence.*

How can anyone be so imbecilic? Four of us and mountains of rucksacks and Skis – (though still way short of our amazing 70kg. per person allowance.) Even a McEnroesque tantrum merely hardened Steeleyes' resolve. I headed off for the information desk to hear someone else being sent home who was also going to Santiago. A Prozac moment was beckoning. I am not renowned for giving up easily however, so turned the big brown eye treatment (hard for someone with greenish ones) on a warm, fuzzy, motherly looking one and sweetly told my story. She at least understood geography, listened, phoned Paris and asked in her perfect French if the flight was OK – it was. This took time and we arrived back at Steeleyes as she was thinking of closing check-in, had a very terse closed body language conversation followed by boarding cards, fifty-minute transfer in Paris and only two bags missing in Santiago. Air France knew they were missing before we did. One arrived next morning via Madrid and one a few hours after that, all delivered to our door. Our plan was to piste bash and jet lag recover for the first couple of days anyway, so it was not an issue.

Our main aim was to savour Chilean ski-mountaineering. We had arranged with John Biggar to set the trip up for us (www.info.andes.com) recognising that John's local knowledge and fluent Spanish would be essential. He also sorted out logistics in terms of accommodation, transport, and food and met us at the airport with a minibus as he had been in South America for the previous week.

Stepping into the warm Santiago spring after the start of a dismal Scottish autumn is a wonderful experience. First impressions were of 25°C, us in shorts and skimpy T-shirts and the locals all running around in fleeces. It must get a bit hot in summer! Chile is a fledgling western democracy with surprisingly easy access. We needed no visas and no cash, with holes in the wall everywhere accepting our credit and Switch cards in return for copious amounts of pesos. Everything was cheap compared to Europe, but expensive for South America, or so we were told. There was fresh fruit and vegetables in abundance, plenty of supermarkets and oceans of

glorious wine – it being hard to buy anything for more than a fiver and easy to find good stuff for 75p a litre. With friendly people, helpful police and a feeling of safety in Santiago the omens were good, even though the Spanish spoken by the locals bears no resemblance to that bandied around evening classes in Scotland.

Santiago is squashed between the Pacific and the Andes. The sea is far enough away (100km) that you can't see or smell it, but everywhere you go the Andes beckon. There are a number of ski resorts within a couple of hours drive of the city. These are big enough and high enough to give some really good skiing and quiet enough not to have queues, especially at the end of the season when we were there.

Our plan was to head south to the Chilean Lake District, acclimatize on some volcanoes and then head off into some bigger mountains. So we piled into our rented minibus and drove 800km south to Pucon. This is the only town in Chile that could remotely be termed a mountain town, in that it had some touristy shops and postcards and lived under the shadow of Villarica, a fume belching monster that has wiped the town out a few times over the centuries. We coaxed our soon to be abused vehicle up a cinder track to the Villarica ski resort – two tows on the flanks of the mountain that looked very closed. We scrounged a lift up by smiling sweetly at the attendant who was still recovering from some all night celebration and found ourselves shrouded in mist on an anonymous snowfield somewhere – it could have been anywhere, all we needed was the famed Andean wind to make us feel we were back in Scotland. Volcanoes are pretty easy to get to the top of in poor visibility as all you have to do is go up. Getting down can be different as a very small compass error can land you miles from where you started, a mistake easily compounded by poor maps, so we were pretty pleased when we climbed out through a temperature inversion into the most amazing scenery. Villarica is isolated and at 3000m is about 1000m above any of the surrounding hills. Snowy summit cones 20-30 km apart punctured the sea of cloud, each subtly different and each gently smoking, belching fumes or sleeping quietly depending on its mood. Villarica was the most active one we climbed and standing on the crater rim on skis with fumes and steam belching forth and having hot rocks lobbed at us was a pretty surreal experience. No wonder the locals thought we were mad. The descent was on perfect spring snow at an angle just right for skiing. It went on and on and the views were breathtaking.

Now, so as not to bore you with descriptions of the finer subtleties of volcanoes, we skied four, working north in the process. Llaima was huge and steep, Lonquimay gave an orgasmic descent and Antuco will be ever remembered for the succour of its warm rocks in the teeth of a biting wind. Everywhere there was perfect snow, the flattering sugary type that ski-mountaineers dream of. We also, at this early stage, climbed the smaller peak of Cautin and were turned back from Sierra Nevada by an approaching

storm, but not before we had lunch on a windy ridge covered in monkey puzzle trees while being closely inspected by a baby condor with a 12ft. wingspan. Its spectacular mother came to check up that it was safe and, once we were deemed harmless, hurtled down the valley leaving her offspring to circle us for a magic half-hour, probably in the hope we would die from hypothermia and provide a tasty snack or two.

This was our first trip on skis in the Southern Hemisphere and it does take a bit of getting used to. On a spring-snow descent you tend to know where the non-frozen snow is because instinct tells you where the sun has been, but here it was all the wrong way round with the sun going the right way in the wrong place and northern instinct guiding you to the frozen bits. However, It doesn't take long to reset the internal compass.

Acclimatised and fit it was time to get into the remote mountains. So we stocked up at a supermarket and headed up a valley to Lago Maule, excited at the prospect of tents in the snow and total wilderness. We spent a day driving up a gravel road to a remote police post 20-30km from our goal. They politely laughed when we explained our plans.

"The road is blocked."

"How blocked?"

"Well – very blocked. You see it has been a bad winter with lots of storms and we had a landslide."

"Any chance of getting round it?"

"Oh no, we even have to get off our horses to get round it."

This doesn't sound much until you have been on a Chilean horse! So we camped in an old quarry and tried the Rio Teno valley the next day. Here we fared no better. This time water had washed roads and bridges away and we were again halted 20km from anything worthwhile. Another camp and the compensation of a Scottish-type day on the peak of Altos los Padres – a long carry, a stormy summit, a short ski and a long carry. We needed to re-think.

We then headed to Santiago and drove up the Cajun del Maipo, which is an impressive valley heading due east from the city into the heart of the high Andes. Like most roads, except the new tarmac Pan-American Highway that runs the length of the country, this was dirt track and ended at Banos Morales a small spa village surrounded by incredible peaks. Cerro San Francisco being the most spectacular with its leering South Face really looking like its nickname – the Eiger of the Andes.

Banos Morales sports an Alpine hut run by the German Andean Club, a hut straight out of the Alps, except every one speaks Spanish and it bizarrely serves up canned British beer. It seems devoid of mountaineers in the spring and is a good place to sort gear before heading into the mountains. We spied a quarry track winding up the side of the valley towards the snow line, packed the bus and were soon brought to a stop by a bulldozed pile of rocks across the track. The snow line seemed so far away and the mountain of gear huge, added to which, the attraction of actually using

snow shovels for something useful was too strong. An hour of navvying and we were on our way up again till the gradient got too much by which time the snow line was only a couple of km away. We dumped the gear and started ferrying the loads while the bus was taken back to safer pastures. The road back had been re-blocked by a zealous bulldozer and only sweet smiles and pleadings of being stupid foreigners got us to the right side again. We then sledged our gear to the old spa of Banos Morales at 2500m. A spectacular approach through a steep valley flanked by rotten moraine and dizzy peaks. Banos Morales was deserted and was no more than a couple of ruined shacks. Tents were pitched on snow and we sat down to enjoy the spectacular scenery, tranquillity and birdsong. Birdsong? Up here? About 200m away a hole in the ground spewed forth a torrent of boiling sulphurous water, too hot to touch. It had carved a track through the snow to a river in the valley bottom. Under the cornices were myriads of insects, and lots of little birds obviously arriving for the summer, feasting on the insects and keeping warm by the banks of the water. So here we were in the middle of nowhere, with no maps, fantastic weather and dressed only in ski boots and Factor 30. The sunset temperature transformation was sudden, the stars incredible and the silence – oh the silence.

Dawn found us high in the valleys looking for possible routes. It took all day to explore and pin-point likely ascents. Fantastic snow and hot. What must summer be like? We found our way to the top of Cerro Catedral one day, and an unnamed peak the next. Both about 4000m. Both magnificent in terms of interesting ascent routes, amazing views and long, long descents on perfect snow.

We then made another exploration of the main valley towards Argentina under the shadow of Volcan San Jose, a 6000m monster. It would need another week to get farther into the system and another camp – for another day perhaps. Unfortunately, it was time to go. So much to do here.

There is good ski-mountaineering in the Andes. Access into the mountains is a major problem with few access roads, and those mostly dirt tracks vulnerable to winter destruction. The mountains are deserted. Transport and local knowledge do make an enormous difference to what can be achieved. We skied until the first week in October and for the high Andes this is probably getting to the end of the Ski-mountaineering season. John and David left us then and the rest of us headed north in a wild bus ride – 500km for £5, lunch and bingo included – and trekked on horse back to a 3000m camp for a night. No snow, unbelievable scenery of desert and piles of rubble masquerading as mountains, all on horses that seemed quite happy to carry you at V. Diff. over granite slabs and through wild foaming rivers. Chile is not for faint-hearted vegetarians where the options in remote valleys are large plates of slabs of steak or starvation. At least we stored up enough B12 for about a year.

We were David, Moira and Alison Snadden, Will Cadell, David Roberts and John Biggar.