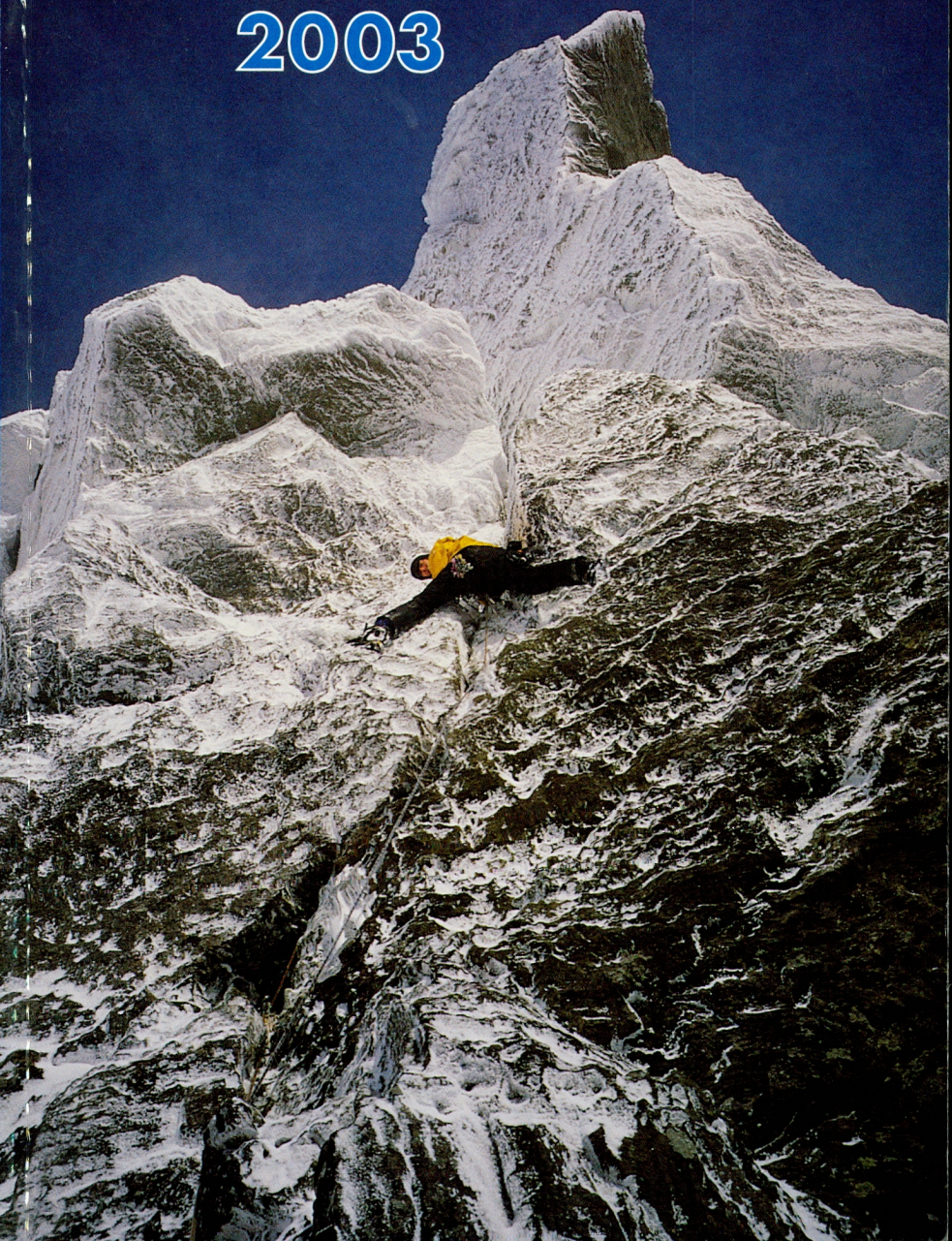


THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB JOURNAL 2003



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EDITED BY CHARLES J. ORR

Published by THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB

Printed in Scotland by ARC Colourprint Ltd, Newtongrange

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ISSN 0080-813X.

Distributed by Cordee, 3a De Montfort Street, Leicester, LE1 7HD

Front Cover: Mark Garthwaite on the first winter ascent of Cat Crawl V1.7, South Face, North peak of the Cobbler. Photo: Andy Clark.

Back Cover: North Face of the Dent du Requin, Mont Blanc Range, taken from Refuge d'Envers. Photo: Ross Hewitt.

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Vol. XXXVIII

2003

No. 194

AN INWARD ADVENTURE

By Dave MacLeod

I HAD been climbing at Dumbarton Rock since the start, nine years ago now. I had come a long way in that time and learned a lot. The general theme was to focus on one thing at a time, beavering away for days or weeks on a problem just above my current level, learning what my body could do and how to get the most out of the rock to help me find a way through. Between repeated bouts of probing around a few feet off the ground only to be deposited coldly at my starting place, I would often glance up at my ultimate aim on the main face above, the great crack of *Requiem*. From my first visit to the rock, the extreme nature of this climb was the direction I wanted to take, and all the learning taking place on the boulders below was stored up in preparation for one day climbing at this level.

I fought and won my battle with *Requiem* in 2000, and thus arrived at an uncomfortable position in my progression as a climber. Having climbed the hardest thing around, where could I go now? I needed another battle to fight. The next challenge was not hard to find. All the routes on the face so far took crack or groove lines, essentially lines of weakness, despite their grandeur. The obvious step forward was to leave behind the safety of one of these cracklines and take on one of the great sheets of smooth wall in between. The Iron Road of *Chemin de Fer* provides access to the most attractive of these orange and brown streaked walls, leading from the kink in the crack all the way to the top. It was a long section of wall and it wasn't hard to see, even from 120ft below, that it was going to take a lot of work on the friendly end of a rope to unlock its secrets. With an open mind and excitement at venturing into new territory, I made the first of many trips to the top of the rock to set up a top rope.

The first big session was one of the best. It was free from reality. The line of the route was nothing more than a nice idea that existed firmly in my imagination. To bring reality in at this stage would have been the immediate end of it. I barely made a whole move in three hours. I shuttled up and down countless times on the rope, back and forth on a particular 10ft section. Work on each move was done in stages. Firstly, I spent 15 minutes feeling around, fascinated, like a baby discovering a new texture for the very first

Dave MacLeod on Requiem, E8 6b, Dumbarton. Photo: Nick Tarmey, (Dave MacLeod collection).

Dave MacLeod on Silver's Route Sit Start, Font 7a. Photo: Richard McGhee, (Dave MacLeod collection).

time. Then 15 minutes of pulling hard, introducing brawn where brain failed to turn a smooth undulation into a handhold. Finally, I spent the rest of the time just sitting in my harness, 120ft up on the headwall, staring at the rock in front of me, computing all the information I had just soaked up and trying to take it from the imaginary towards a sequence of movements which might one day be a route.

With appointments beckoning back in Glasgow and legs on the point of paralysis from hours suspending myself in a stringy sport climbing harness, I abseiled down into the shadows to catch the '10 to'. I was left with some homework which would fill my mind until my return. How to work my left foot up onto a handrail without the luxury of taking my weight off it and, higher up, a problem with a sidepull which was only a sidepull if I could get to the other side of it.

The hard thinking was done on the walk in to university over the coming weeks. This was the perfect place to learn the moves. For this route, optimism was needed to even believe those little holds could become a route. After eight hours dreaming in bed, the morning walk through Partick often felt strangely more enjoyable than it should. My mind had just been having climbing adventures all night and was in just the right mood for believing I could work out a way forward.

I decided that the left foot problem necessitated going back to square one with the lower crux, unless another hold could be found. The sidepull problem had three or four possible solutions. Unfortunately, I had tried all of them already and would just have to try harder or give up. These conclusions were rather unimpressive considering they had taken up a whole week of daydreaming!

After another couple of lonely sessions on the wall, I solved these obstacles and the line progressed from an imaginary hypothesis to an unlikely possibility. A big step forward. The left foot problem was overcome by the discovery of the poorest of sidepulls which, when cold enough for my ring fingertip to stick to, allowed me to scrape my left foot up the wall, reaching the next foothold just in time to slow and stop my body falling away from the wall. The sidepull problem was overcome by the same sequence I had initially worked on, but with the addition of some subtle shuffling of my trunk. There seemed to be a window in space that I had to move my body through for the move to work. I crossed under from a tiny pinch and placed my finger tips on the sidepull. Then I had to twist round in three stages, separate and crucial. I bent my whole body leftward into a C-shape, twisted it round and rotated my shoulder down, letting my head lean back. Once this was executed, the little flat sidepull became a real hold and a half-moon shaped sloper came within slapping distance, providing an escape leftward to improving holds.

With renewed optimism, I moved on to trying the whole route in one push. Doing all the crux section was great, even if it was right at my limit,

but the big problem was that the first hard moves were 120ft of E5 crack climbing above the ground. I was quickly stopped in my tracks once again. After working on the route I tried finishing off by climbing up and down *Chemin De Fer* repeatedly to build up endurance and fine tune every move. Although this seemed to be working and I felt fitter than ever, I still couldn't even reach the top crux. With the summer heat fast approaching and waning interest in a route which appeared to be above me, I decided to come back in the autumn cool. In my mind, I doubted I would try it again.

That lingering doubt persisted whenever I thought about the line. However, late on a windy evening in early September, after a couple more sessions alone on the shunt, I climbed from the ground and slapped my way to the top of the crag, shocked at the sudden success after so much failure. Just as with *Requiem* the previous year, I realised instantly that I had to grab the chance of success and get on the lead before I developed a mental block about the route. I told my friends and girlfriend that I was going to lead the route within the week. There was no going back, I had invested too much effort to back off now.

A feeling of utter dread filled me slowly over the days that followed. I was all too aware of what I was asking of myself. I knew just how focused I would have to be and how flawless my climbing would have to be. A voice from inside was telling me that I was stretching my abilities and my luck much too far. I arranged with friends to make an evening visit to the rock and spread the word that I was going to have a go at the lead. I hoped that telling as many people as I could would help galvanise my inner motivation to draw a line under this long process of preparation.

On the day of the attempt, the weather was perfect. A funny sort of perfect. A strong cold wind was blowing light spots of rain from a threatening sky. Thus, a firm decision to go for it could not be made until the last minute. With a wet weather excuse looking like the likely outcome of the evening, I could happily bypass getting nervous, yet the attempt was still possible if the rain did not get any worse. I warmed up by climbing *Chemin de Fer* to the point where my project left the crack. I placed the highest gear, stared up at the blank wall above and all around me, taking it all in. Climbing back to the ground, I felt an uplifting feeling of excitement at doing something new, climbing the route 'for real' instead of the repetitive, almost robotic process of working the moves on a top rope.

An hour later, the sky darkened as dusk approached and the spits of rain, although constantly present, were not heavy enough to justify backing out. With a large audience gathered and a buzz in the air, I tied back into the rope ends and announced that I was 'having a look'. I told myself I would just climb the crack again and then come down. Pretending to be going for it might be good mental practice for controlling my emotions on the final day.

Halfway up the crack, it all went so very wrong. I felt a huge and horrible

temptation to commit myself. In the cold wind, the holds felt sticky and I floated upwards on a cloud of adrenalin. I tried to remind myself of just how hard the wall actually was. But the crack was feeling like V. Diff rather than E5. In no time I was leaning out from the flat jug where the crack kinked leftward. Decision time. "This is stupid," I said out loud. But I could see the final jug just 40ft above. I could end this right now, climb E9, and never have to get nervous about this piece of rock again. Temptation, temptation.

I was still deciding when moments later I pulled through an overlap and slapped aggressively away from the last gear. A voice in my mind screamed at me as I approached the left foot drag move.

"Jump off NOW before it's too late. It's not a game Dave, you are going to be in hospital for weeks."

As I looked down at the crucial left foothold, I could see the two ropes dangling below me and just how far above the gear I was. It was already too late. All that was left was the moves or the fall.

My whole body trembled with the effort of resisting gravity as my left foot desperately scuffed and stabbed at the crucial edge. This effort and the elimination of my options concentrated my mind and I pushed on with aggressive resolve. Through the wind I could hear my breath squeak and hold as I locked down on each tiny finger edge, only to come back in sharp gasps as I moved my feet and repositioned.

I felt lonely and vulnerable as I continued up, through the desperate twist move until finally my fingers snatched and held the half-moon shaped hold which signalled the beginning of the end of the 6c moves. Matching this hold was the highest move I had failed at on the top rope. I bridged wide, chest against the rock, and slowly brought my right hand over my head towards the hold. Feeling strong on the move, I savoured the moment.

"Here it is. I'm about to climb my first E9. This feels great. And to think I could have just climbed down and gone home."

Just as my fingers curled over the crimp, my right elbow nudged the rock and the outward force caused my left hand to explode off the rock. I screamed as I arched away from the face and dropped through the air. I looked down and grabbed the rope with both hands. When I looked back up, everything was blurred. Suddenly, the picture became focused again and the rope whipped tight, cutting my hands. My trajectory was horizontal now and as I braced my feet, I smashed against the smooth face.

The voices from below which moments ago had been shouting encouragement were awkwardly silent. Hanging limp in my harness, I didn't know what to say, so I broke the silence with a laugh and an explanation for my failure. As I was lowered down, my shock and buzzing excitement turned to pain. I wished I hadn't come so close. Not only did it mean I couldn't give in, but the expectations from within and from those watching were an immense burden. The line had become a real prospect, rather than just an

imaginary possibility. It was there for the taking, but what would I have to go through to take it? I hoped that only one more effort would be enough given how close I had come, but in the back of my mind, I knew that I could have failed on any of the hard moves. So the experience became one of constant failure once more. Over the next three weeks I visited the rock 10 times. I would either visit at 9am for the cool morning air if I could persuade my girlfriend, Claire, to hold the ropes, or at dusk if the evening was cool and windy enough. On each visit I underwent the familiar, but relentlessly demanding, process of mental and physical preparation – only to take the fall every time. The whole experience hijacked my thoughts and my life. I realised that the only escape was to succeed on the route. But despite the fact I had been so close before, I also had to accept that failure was inevitable every time I made the tiniest of mistakes and this pattern could go on indefinitely. With my ankles and wrists in a worrying state following each swing and slam off the headwall, I asked myself how much more of this could I and the people around me take?

At the time I wondered how I managed to find the will to go back and throw myself off the crux time after time and deal with the upset in my life, in the remote hope that I might just sneak through and finish it. After all, I could have just walked away and trained for two years before returning to complete a much more certain outcome. Only in hindsight, and without the cloud of an uncertain outcome, do the enjoyable and fulfilling aspects shine through. For each of those 11 times I took the fall, I have a photographic image of looking down as I dropped away from the wall of the exposure, the ropes whipping around at weird angles and the world rushing past. Each time I took the pleasure of focusing with my whole mind on each move and moment, the next instant was my whole world. Such a feeling is the deepest relaxation I can imagine. Your name and status and every worry you ever had is let go and forgotten in order to align every thought to perfect execution of the next move. These were special moments and experiencing them more than once was good fortune rather than purgatory. I realised later that such experiences in climbing are by necessity very rare due to the enormous effort which is required to reach the true limits of your ability. But when the chance comes around, it must be grabbed with both hands.

Finally, just as my long university summer break ran out and my ankles reached the point of medical emergency, my sheer persistence paid off. I stood at the bottom of the route, stamped out my anxieties once again and half shook, half floated my way through the final crux moves on a wave of cerebral opiates. As I reached the final move for the first time since the very first lead attempt, I detached myself from the growing anticipation of success for a vital few moments more and scuffled through to the finishing bucket. It was over, and I felt happiness, relief, but also emptiness. The route had provided me with direction, excitement and reward for over a year. What could fill the gap now that it was complete?

A DREAM TIME IN AULD REEKIE

By Dennis Gray

THEY say if you can remember the Sixties you were not there. But I was and for a period during the middle of that decade I resided in Manor Place in Edinburgh. Across the road from me lived Graham Brown of Brenva fame and, sharing his abode, was Robin Campbell an enthusiastic climbing pioneer in Scotland and a future SMC Journal Editor and President.

Auld Reekie was a ferment of climbing activity at the time, with Heriots and the Edinburgh University Clubs imbued with the recently departed spirit of Robin Smith. The JMCS and the Jacobites were inspired by Munro bashing and the driving stamina of Tranter, later and sadly to meet his demise at the wheel. Those old stalwarts of the SMC, the Marshalls (Jimmy and Ron), Eli Moriarty and Graham 'Typhoo' Tiso were ageing but still very capable, and finally there were the Squirrels. It was into the bosom of the latter that I was gathered when I arrived and first impressions did not disappoint, varying little from the forecast made by an old acquaintance Tom Patey, regarding the hedonistic possibilities of climbing with such an organisation. It mirrored my previous experience of such loosely knit climbing groups, firstly the one I had grown up with, the Bradford Lads, and then matured alongside, the Rock and Ice.

Besides climbers, Edinburgh was full of arty-crafty folk in that era and there were crossovers. You might go into a pub and find that the guy playing the piano was a chap you had met on Cairngorm the previous weekend. Or the poet reading his own work in the George had also give a drunken rendition of *The Cremation of Sam McGee* the previous Saturday night in Jimmie Ross's in Carrbridge. But I was astonished when, a couple of nights after my arrival I wandered randomly into a bar to find three living guitar legends jamming together in an impromptu session, John Redbourne, Bert Jansch and Davy Graham.

The Squirrels used to meet mid-week in the Castle Rock and the Wee Windaes and occasionally after closing time – not very late in these days – we would repair to the SMC club rooms in the High Street. I recall one memorable occasion when we bought a barrel of beer and rolled it up over the cobbles scattering courting couples and drunks as we progressed. Sometimes from the pub we would go forth and climb in the forbidden grounds of Salisbury Crags. On my first such foray it was icy and covered in snow and I was totally unprepared for the outing. Fortunately, in order to cross the icy pavements of the capital to reach the Castle Rock, I had put on my 'Desmaisons' (climbing boots of the day) but I was wearing a smart work suit and over this a sheepskin jacket against the cold. With Ian McEachran and Brian Robertson (BR) in the vanguard we stole into Holyrood Park on a 'moonlicht nicht' and arrived at the foot of a route that was graded V. Diff in summer. Climbing on 'Heavy' is as bad as

driving on same and I must admit that the alcohol had blunted my reason. I followed the leader, solo, climbing close behind BR who chuckled like a wild thing as we ascended.

After about 40ft we arrived on a ledge below a small roof that nonetheless looked fearsome in the gloom, for we carried not a headtorch between us. However, Brian had been there before and assured me it was full of big holds and, to prove this, he climbed up to the obstacle and, after a slight hesitation at the prow, over he went almost hand over hand. His example demanded that I follow and so, casting off my sheepskin jacket and throwing it down onto the snowy ground below, I set out. When I reached the roof it was icy but BR had cleared the rock of powder snow as he ascended and the large holds were there as promised, but as I pulled over onto the easier ground above I heard a rip as my expensive work suit gave way in the seat of the pants. Everyone wore them extra tight in that era! All of our party eventually ascended the route in good order, despite our state of inebriation. It has to be said, that with one or two glaring exceptions, Edinburgh's Tartan Tigers could hold their liquor.

While walking out of Holyrood I became aware of a young fellow at my elbow who was still high on the adventure and bubbling with talk of epics on future nordwands. This despite a plea for silence from his elders in case any of the Park Rangers were out patrolling looking for trespassers in the Royal Park (at 11o'clock at night this might have impressed even the SNP). This tyro was Alistair 'Bugs' McKeith and soon he and I were to become climbing partners and we subsequently remained friends until his death on Mount Assiniboine in 1978.

I worked for a printing and publishing firm in the Anderston district of Glasgow and, among other contracts, we printed the Cairngorm Chairlift vouchers, produced the bus tickets for Aberdeen, leaflets for biscuit firms in Inverness and, of course, material for some of the distilleries. I had a roving commission the length and breadth of Scotland with a company car and free petrol to boot! Everywhere I went my climbing gear went with me. On a Wednesday night I occasionally stayed over in Glasgow and went to the Langside climbing wall. This was in the college of that name and it must have been among the first such facilities built in this country. Regular users included the likes of Johnny Cunningham, Jimmy McDowell and Willy Rowney. Afterwards the Creag Dhu met in a pub in West Nile Street that had sawdust on the floor and spittoons in the corners of the room.

Outside Glasgow in Balmore, on the edge of the Campsies, lived Mary Stewart an American climber who was a veterinary researcher at Glasgow University and her house was the scene of several memorable parties. On one occasion, her countrymen John Harlin, Layton Kor and Gary Hemming were present along with such regulars as Tom Patey, Rusty Baillie and Eric Beard. The entertainment was of a high order and professional folk

musicians such as Alex Campbell, Hamish Imlach and The Incredible String Band kept the troops amused in between cameo performances by Patey and Beardie.

Edinburgh has, within short distance, several outcrops and in the summer months during the light evenings after work we might repair down the A1 to Traprain Law or across the Forth Bridge to the Aberdour sea cliffs in Fife. Sometimes such man-made facilities as the Currie Walls received a visit and, for those without transport, there was always BR's tree. This was a high arboreal near to his home which he had pegged, and to climb it using only these for holds and without etriers was both adventurous and strenuous. If we could get away from work early enough we might even go as far north as Dunkeld for an evening's climbing where the cliffs of Craig-y-Barns boasted some modern test pieces like The Rat Race pioneered by Robertson.

The Squirrels were good rock climbers but even stronger winter mountaineers. On their fringe was Dougal Haston, someone I had known for many years before I moved to Auld Reekie and, like him, Dave Bathgate, Jock Knight, Fred Harper, Bugs, Ian McEachran, BR and others were all snow and ice gymnasts. I think the strongest rope on this type of terrain was Bathgate and Knight and on one of our winter weekend meets on Ben Nevis they pioneered The Curtain, a route which was to become an instant classic. Bugs and I were more enamoured of Creag Meaghaidh farther north than Nevis and we enjoyed both the mountain's unspoilt and undeveloped nature as well as the outstanding social scene to be found at its base in the Loch Laggan Inn. Mine Hosts were John and Margaret Small and although they looked the part of Highlanders and wore the tartan John was, dare I say it, a 'Der Englander'. He had started climbing at more than 50 years of age in the company of Patey and if you were a regular in his hotel you helped yourself from a five pint bottle of Glenmorangie from off the bar and settled up at the end of the evening! Behind the wooden structure that was the main hotel, John had set up a free rudimentary bothy where we used to stay.

Tom Patey was also often at Laggan with Aberdonian colleagues from the Etchachan Club also occasionally in residence. Many climber/musicians such as George McLeod, Clive Freshwater and Eric Beard, all based in Aviemore, would often appear out of a winter's night and a ceilidh would soon be under way.

Unfortunately, the hotel caught fire and John, who was in the bath at the time, could only watch from outside, naked except for a towel, as it burned to the ground while he waited for the fire engine to arrive from Kingussie. After this sad event we based ourselves in the Cairngorms most weekends but not before Bugs and I had made the first winter ascents of The Scene and Apolygon Ledge on Meaghaidh.

On one occasion during my journeys around Scotland I was in Inverness

on business and Patey phoned. "Why not drive out towards Ullapool and meet up for a dram," he suggested. It was mid-winter and the roads were like a rink but I dare not suggest to Tom that it might be an unwise journey to make in such conditions. Subsequently, following the winding snow-covered road north-west, it took many hours to reach the hostelry which was our rendezvous. Once I arrived, Patey decided, after a single malt, that we might as well head on back to his house in Ullapool in order to get his accordion. I had my tenor banjo with me and so a good evening developed in Tom's bothy behind his house singing along with some of the Ullapool locals. The next morning I had an important business meeting in Inverness and so I reluctantly quit this gathering and headed back to the capital of the Highlands.

The roads were even worse on the return journey and it was to be the early hours of the morning before I arrived back at my hotel in Inverness to find it locked and in complete darkness.

"Sod this," I thought, I'm not paying good money to spend a freezing night out on the pavement and so I hammered on the front door and after a while the manager appeared dressed like Wee Willie Winkie in a long nightshirt and let me in. After profuse apologies I crept up to my room, undressed and piled into bed. However, after some little time I felt the need to visit the bathroom next door. This I did, only to find on my return that the bedroom door had slammed shut leaving me stood in a draughty corridor in nothing but a pair of skimpy blasters. I crept downstairs and had to ring the bell at reception several times before the manager once again appeared in his night attire. To say he was not pleased is a half-truth and the next morning after breakfast, when I went to settle my account, the girl at reception handed me a personal letter from himself requesting me never to visit the hotel again.

I often travelled to Dundee where we had several contracts and I climbed in Glen Clova. One interesting meeting there was with Ron Butchart the founder and original editor of *Climber* magazine. He confessed he had not known originally whether to launch a mountaineering or a fishing magazine. It had been a toss-up and climbing had won simply because there was already a fishing magazine available on the bookstands in Dundee. I used to stay outside the city in Broughty Ferry where the local folk club was led by singer/songwriter Ewan MacColl and American banjo maestro Peggy Seeger. It was undoubtedly the best such gathering I have ever been to. I always believed Ewan to be 100% native Scot but, like many of us in these islands, it turned out he was a bit of a mixture. I was intrigued to learn years later that his real name was Jimmy Millar and that he was from Salford in Lancashire. He had taken part in the 1932 Kinder Scout trespass for which he had penned the famous hillwalking song *The Manchester Rambler*.

The winter scene in the Cairngorms in the Sixties was dynamic. The

skiing developments had rendered the mountains very accessible and a series of keen winters, especially in the early part of that decade, yielded some outstanding conditions. My own hardest lead of that period was an early ascent of Savage Slit in the Northern Corries. I guided an officer from the Royal Marines up this and Eric Beard tagged along as our third man. After the climb, Beardie and I descended riding two up by way of a huge shovel down the White Lady on Cairngorm. This was at the end of the day after the lift had stopped working and we attained a speed that would have done credit to an Olympic luge competition but, as can be imagined, it did not endear us to the skiing fraternity. In the evenings we would assemble at Karl Fuchs's Struan House Inn or at Jimmie Ross's Rowanlea in Carrbridge. Beardie also held his singsong twice weekly in the Cairngorm Hotel which was attended by literally hundreds of climbers and skiers on occasion. Jimmie Ross was one of the finest fiddlers in the Highlands and he loved having Tom Patey accompany him as he played gigs and reels that it was impossible to keep one's feet from tapping to.

The Squirrels owned a hut, The Drey in Glencoe, high up above the road in the pass. It was an amazing place for it had been built at the same time as that group were all keenly engaged in exploratory climbing. I was staying there once with Bugs and Margery Thomson and, after pioneering a new route in the Lost Valley, we returned to find that my vehicle was stuck firmly in the mud. Fred Harper was also there and offered to help us free it and to do this he began placing stones under my front wheels. Unfortunately, I misunderstood the instructions given by him from underneath the vehicle and, revving the engine, I bolted out of the mire but unfortunately, ran Fred over. For a second I thought: "Oh my God I've killed him." But on climbing out of the car I was met with the sight of him standing up out of the mud, covered in goo but saved from serious injury by its cushioning effect. He limped around for many weeks afterwards but, typical of Fred, he never complained or swore at me when this happened.

Many of the Squirrels subsequently enjoyed fine mountaineering careers. Bugs pioneered several new routes in Scotland and, perhaps more significantly, in his adopted country Canada. His most famous first ascent was perhaps The Polar Circus. Dave Bathgate became a keen expedition climber making journeys to Peru and the Himalaya. Brian Robertson climbed in Peru on Huandoy with Dave, Ian MacEacheran and Don Whillans. He also pioneered King Kong on Carn Dearg before moving to live in Colorado. Finally, Fred Harper became president of the British Mountain Guides and was an outstanding figure in the instructional field. He was for many years Director of Glenmore Lodge in the Cairngorms. The last time I climbed with him was only a couple of years ago shortly before he succumbed to cancer. He was visiting the Cow and Calf Rocks at Ilkley and we met up there by chance. He confessed he had always

wanted to climb the classic route, Waleska, and so he led it and I seconded him never guessing that he was so ill. It was obvious when we later said our goodbyes, he to head off back north and me on the short ride home to Leeds, that our climb together that day had meant a lot to him although this was conveyed more by gesture than word. I think this was typical of the Squirrels and indeed of the Edinburgh climbers in general.

I hope I am not falling into the trap of 'selective memory syndrome' by recalling only the good times? But in retrospect it was, for me, a special time in the company of some outstanding personalities and, for the friendship they showed to me, I will always be grateful. And so, to all the Edinburgh climbers still surviving from those days, I wish: "Lang may yer lum reek!"



DEATH ON THE MOUNTAIN

By Gair Swanson

*'As the warmth of sleep overtook him on the third night of storm
He never once thought that he should have stayed home
To wash the car or mow the lawn'*

IT WAS poetry, he had read it somewhere, sometime. It was floating in his head now, or maybe it really was hanging on a sign above the entrance to the snow hole. He was cold, so, so, cold. Maybe that was a good sign. Strange word that, 'good.' All relative really. Mary was dead, yesterday or was it the day before? Warmth of sleep, warmth? Good? Why warmth? It's just before you die see, he had seen it before in a close in the Grassmarket, remember, cold winter, thought she had been raped, ripped all her clothes off. Mind tricks, you see, just before it gets you, think your too hot. Clothes all over the place, blood, stumbling, banging, falling. Just because she didn't have anywhere to stay.

Alistair had seen the neighbours as he left on Saturday, same routine every weekend, Welly boots, B&Q pressure hose and a tin of polish. The big decision was whether to do the grass before the car or maybe do the car first. It looked like rain and the forecast wasn't that good. Be good for the sprouts though, the sprouts could do with a bit of rain. Far too cynical Mary had told him as they started the drive north. Live and let live she had said. He didn't want to die like the pruners and polishers. They had died long ago. It wouldn't be like that for him, it wasn't his choice, but at least he had lived.

He needed her clothes, duvet jacket, trousers. Arms rigid, unbendable, a mixture of death and bone-numbing cold. Crunching bone, breaking as he bent it hard against the side of his unfeeling boot, would only have to do one. Tailor's dummy, not her, spirit gone. Feeling hot tears on his cheeks, dropping, melting into the icy floor of her tomb.

"Hers, it's her tomb not mine," he screamed as he wrenched the bright orange jacket from her marble cold body. Feathers, floating feathers, down, floating down, duck down, laughter muffled under snow as he remembered Geoff's sleeping bag, the 'Prince of Wales' model the boys had christened it – only three feathers. He slumped to the ground exhausted and felt a bit of comfort as he pulled the jacket over his head. Blocking out death, blocking out fear. Black, dark and warm. Yes, real warmth, sleeping warmth. He shot upright. No, no,

"Cold, cold,
bold, bold,
hold, hold,
cold, cold,
bold, bold,
hold, hold."

He repeated the mantra as his wooden fingers tried to unlace her boots.
“Cold, cold,
bold, cold,
hold, bold,
cold.”

“Shit, shit, shit,” fingers gone, he needed her overtrousers. Slumping to his knees he rolled back onto the ground. Get them off he thought, just get them off.

Mary’s mother began to worry as darkness fell on the Sunday. She had said she would phone, she had her mobile. Her father was more matter of fact, preferring to think it was a bad area for phone signals. He was right, the Cairngorm plateau is indeed a bad area for signals but Mary didn’t know that. She died blaming herself, thinking the mobile she had left in the car would have been their salvation.

Every three minutes it was, his body convulsed with shivers, he had read somewhere that this was the body’s way of keeping the vital organs warm. But had he not also read that women survive better than men in extreme cold.

“Mary was dead,
Mary was blue,
Mary was gone,
Mary and you.”

No, not you, not you, not just to complete a crap rhyme. He was screaming again, the snow muffling his anguish.

“Mary was dead,
Mary was blue,
Mary was gone.
Only Mary, only her.”

Blank verse, only her not me, not me.

“Mary marry me
How did it go,
Mary marry me,”

he bawled at the moon except there was no moon, only the grey white interior of his survival chamber and the howling gale driven blizzard outside. Jim Reeves or was it Buddy Holly? The Holly and the Ivy, Christmas Time Mistletoe and Wine. Mary won’t be full grown now, no but I will and my children and my children’s children. Not with Mary no, not with Mary.

"Mary Mary quite contrary
how does your garden grow."

"Cold, cold,
bold, bold,
hold, bold,
cold, hold,
bold, cold,
hold, hold."

So tired now, so tired, closing, hold, eyes closing, bold, cold mustn't, mustn't sleep, mustn't sleep.

Alistair Colin Morgan, born 11.7.53, at Edinburgh, Church of Scotland, freelance journalist, married, three children, Died 17.01.03, Cairngorm plateau, Scotland. Cause of death, Hypothermia.

"Well Alistair here you are, you made it. Surprised?"

This from some sort of security guard type in a uniform that made him look like a cross between a bus driver and a South American dictator.

"Made it, made it where?"

"The afterlife of course," says he, as if it was an everyday occurrence. Maybe it was, there had been a queue right enough."

"Come on mate, stop taking the piss, where am I? I know I was drunk last night and the last thing I remember was getting off with that blonde bird, Mary I think her name was. We went back to her place and well, you don't want to hear about all that, or do you, you little rascal you. Come on stop mucking about. Is this where she stays, she was a bit posh – you the doorman or what?"

"No Alistair, my position here is simply that of – receptionist I suppose is the closest analogy to what you'll have been used to, yes receptionist, that's about right."

It was all a bit surreal but he decided to go along with it.

"You're a climber I believe," said the bus driver/dictator/receptionist as he started to fill in a form on the desk where he sat.

"Yes, yes I am," said Alistair wondering where this was leading.

"Winter or Summer?"

"Sorry?"

"Winter Mountaineering or rockclimbing, your preference?"

"Oh I see. I eh, both, I do both."

"I'm afraid I'll have to press you on this Alistair, we are a big organisation but there are limits and we do have to keep to budget. Winter or Summer?"

"Winter then, ice climbing, technical ice climbing is what I enjoy most."

"Shoe size?"

"Nine."

"That's 42 American isn't it?"

"Yes, I'm not in America am I?"

"No Mr. Morgan," he laughed. "You're not in America, but I've heard our organisation and America described in similar terms but no, not America."

The form filling took some time and covered everything from inside leg measurement to next of kin. He found the next of kin a bit strange. Here was this guy trying to tell him he was in the afterlife and at the same time asking him for his next of kin. Surely, it was a bit late for that.

"Take this form with you, we'll keep a copy here in case of problems. Take the lift to the basement and ask for Michael Scott, he'll get you kitted out with everything you need."

'Pinochet' got up from the desk and, without further ado, handed the form to Alistair wishing him good luck as he left the room. Nice guy.

There were two elevators, he was even thinking American now, lifts, two lifts, one for up and one down. Maybe he had been in some sort of clearing room but that couldn't be right could it. He was going down certainly, but he was going climbing and that had to be good.

"Michael Scott at your service, your form sir."

Now here was a dude. He was like a throwback from the Sixties, Timothy Leary type very peace and love, tie dyed shirt, long hair, you know the thing. As he handed over his form Alistair was looking around for the Volkswagen surfing van he felt sure must be parked nearby.

"Ah ah! a climber. We had one of you cats here before, same name as you, spelt it Alistair though not Alistair, Crawley or Crowley something like that, didn't take to him much, a bit pushy tried to take over the place, you know the type. Come this way Mr Morgan and we'll get you fixed up."

Alistair found himself standing in the middle of a climber's retail paradise, it was like all the climbing shops you'd care to name rolled into one and then some, and the most exciting thing was, it looked like he wasn't going to have to pay.

"Help yourself," the Scott guy said with an expansive if not expensive sweep of his arm. "Anything you need, help yourself it's all the best of gear."

He was like the proverbial wee laddie in a sweetie shop. In all the years he had been climbing Alistair had never been what you would term a 'gear freak'. He had always been three or four years behind the new technology but now, well! Titanium curved shaft ice-axes and Footfang crampons, light as a feather, Gore-Tex and down from head to foot and boots as comfy as slippers. More than £1500 worth of kit in under half-an-hour.

"If this is the afterlife bring it on!"

He went to sleep that night in a room in the basement not far from the 'shop' and was awakened by the sun shining in on his face. From his wooden bunk bed he looked out onto a pristine snow slope leading up to the base of a 500ft icefall approaching the vertical. He got up and after inspecting the interior of the well-appointed mountain hut he found himself in, he put a pot of coffee on the stove and took great delight in dressing in his new gear and boots.

Later that morning he revelled in the wonderful views over a beautiful valley as he kicked his way up the firm snow and into the bottom of the icefall and, hefting his axes, he was delighted to find that they struck home first time into the perfect ice of the fall. Not only did he have the climb to himself, he had the mountain to himself and although at first he was a bit worried about soloing, conditions were so good that his axe placements were 'bombproof' and half-an-hour later he had topped out on a superb Grade IV/V route which he named *Heaven's Gate*.

He slept comfortably that night after cooking himself an excellent curry from the well-provisioned store, and the next morning ventured out again in the same perfect weather with the intention of exploring a wonderful-looking buttress he had seen farther to the west. But strangely enough within half-an-hour he found himself once more at the foot of *Heaven's Gate* and although the ice was again in perfect condition, he knew the climb and didn't get the same kick out of it.

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He slept comfortably. "Whoa hold on a minute, what kind of loop is this I'm in," he thought "same today, yesterday, day before. Rest day, I'll have a rest day."

He tried to stay in bed but couldn't and after a mug of the same delicious coffee he found himself climbing the flawless ice of *Heaven's Gate* yet again.

On returning to the hut he was about to start cooking once more, what used to be his favourite dish, when his eye was drawn to Scott sitting quietly in the corner.

"Nice to see you're settling in Mr Morgan, is the accommodation to your liking?" he asked smiling broadly.

"Yes, very comfortable, but I would like to know what's happening here. You've put me in this climber's heaven, the conditions are superb and I have this fantastic ice climb minutes from the cabin, but I can't seem to explore anywhere else. And what about a rest day?"





Scott started laughing.

"No rest days here I'm afraid Mr Morgan. This is the reaction we get from all our clients in the early days, from whatever background. The fishermen are the same. Cottage by the loch, lovely weather and a four-pound trout every hour on the hour, eight hours a day, seven days a week. Heavenly." He laughed again.

"This, Mr Morgan, is the other place and we try our best to suit the surroundings to our client's preferences. Welcome to Hell he laughed again, a long, crackling laugh and was gone.

"No dogs, no dogs, whose dog is this? Scott, Scott is this your dog? Get off, off."

"Cairngorm Leader to Glenmore," the radio crackled with static, "Search and Rescue Dogs have located targets. Snow hole. Coire Etchachan 242653 repeat 242653.

"Female dead, male severely hypothermic, poor pulse. Chopper immediate 242653 on red smoke flare. Cairngorm Leader over."

"Glenmore we read, Glenmore we read, contacting air crew will advise, Glenmore over."

Three toes on his right foot, three fingers and half his nose was the price. Who was Mary? Well the tabloids tried to make something of their relationship in their *Death on Killer Mountain* pieces, you know the kind of thing. Personally, I don't think there was much in it. Alistair was always a bit scathing of those who took their partners climbing. 'Fit and Fast' was his credo for mountain safety and I think this was nothing more than the case of a middle-aged guy being flattered by the attentions of a young girl and letting that flattery rule his head. Had he been on his own, I feel sure he would have forced his way down on the first day.

He was out of it for about a fortnight what with the drugs and all. He didn't make the funeral and as far as I know her parents never visited him. He's never really talked much about it and he's not been climbing since the accident. Spends most of his time reading. He's got a thing about this Alistair Crowley guy the self-styled 'Great Beast', lived up Loch Ness way back in the 1920s. Into black magic, orgies and the like but, funnily enough, he was also a member of the Scottish Mountaineering Club. We were out for a curry the other night and I asked him where he found out about this guy Crowley, apparently some friend of his, Michael Scott introduced them.

There is one other strange side effect of his accident. When I say *we* were out for a curry, that's not strictly true he had a steak, he used to love his Rogan Josh but since the accident he seems to have gone right off them.

DOW SPOUT

By Stephen Reid

VIEWED from the far bank of the Cooran Lane on the edge of the Silver Flowe, Craignaw was a fantastic sight. The East Face of this huge whaleback of a mountain is nearly 1000ft high and one-and-a-half-miles long, and it was in full winter garb, plastered in snow and rime and bathed in the rosy glow of a low, early January sun. Under the summit, three short gullies could just be discerned. The right hand of these we knew was merely a grassy scramble, but the central was *Drainpipe Gully*, a summer V. Diff. discovered by that veteran Galloway enthusiast and explorer, Andrew Fraser, 20 years earlier.

Now Andrew had returned for the first winter ascent, partnered by another Ayr climber Ian Magill, and myself. As an off-comer and Sassenach from south of the Border, I felt privileged to have been invited, though I rather suspected that it might have less to do with my climbing skills and more with the fact that I had managed (quite legitimately) to acquire a vehicle permit for the forest track leading into the climb.

Over the last decade Andrew and I had been involved in some fairly intensive development on the Galloway crags, though strangely enough, never on the same crag at the same time. As a result we had exchanged many a phone call, e-mail and letter, but we had only met once and had never climbed together before. Naturally, each of us was convinced that his own routes and crags were best! I was thus fully prepared to spend the day fending off endless leg-pulls and good-natured chaffing and to give as good as I got.

To the left of *Drainpipe* was *Silver Flow*, a gully that had only had one winter ascent and which was definitely due a repeat, but far to the left again was the main reason for our visit, *Dow Spout*, a swathe of frozen silver water that tumbled the full length of the mountain-side in a series of icy steps, pink and glistening in the dawn. From our view point, it looked magnificent and forbiddingly steep, but the foreshortening effect of distance was deceptive. *Dow Spout* in good conditions is one of the best Grade II routes of its type in the British Isles. That its first recorded ascent did not take place until 1997 becomes less of a puzzle when it is realised that the only way to reduce the approach time to a reasonable 1hr 30mins is to use a mountain bike on the forestry track for the first leg, and hardly a puzzle at all when one knows how few climbers there are actually operating in the Galloway Hills. Though that is perhaps a puzzle in itself.

The Spout owes its existence to the Dow Loch, a lochan situated just south of the summit of Craignaw. A small stream carries the outflow to

the top of the East Face whence it exits through a notch and cascades, splashes and tumbles over a series of granite slabs and heather ledges until it finally disappears into the floating bog of the Silver Flowe far below. In times of drought it dries up and for good winter conditions heavy rain, followed by at least seven days of hard frost, seem to be required.

The idea of climbing *Dow Spout* as a winter route was that of Jim Lawrence, a doctor from Dumfries, who had noticed the fall featured in that seminal work on the area *The Merrick and the Neighbouring Hills*, published in 1929. According to the author, J. McBain: "Ordinarily, there is but a mere trickle of water down the rocks, but when the *Dow Spout* pours its flood waters over the brink it is by far the most picturesque thing of its kind in the uplands, and as a spectacle it is probably not surpassed in Scotland. It then comes down the mountainside in the guise of a beautiful white ribbon clinging to the declivity from top to bottom. I have seen the *Dow Spout* in a thunder storm transformed from a state of quiescence into a white mass of descending water within the space of 10 minutes: and it is only when its small watershed is saturated with water, and during the continuance of heavy rain or rapidly melting snow, that it can be seen in all its picturesqueness."

On reading this, Jim had duly set off to view this marvel but found a 'mere trickle'. Perseverance paid off, however, when one December a cloud of spray being blown in the wind betrayed the Spout in all its glory, moreover he noted ice forming around its edges. A week later the temperatures were still low and the ice thicker, and a further week on, on New Year's Day 1997, he and Simon Mortlock were finally rewarded with as fine a first ascent as any Scottish winter climber could wish for.

With so few ascents to date, less than 10 as I write, it is hard to be certain as to what exactly is required for good conditions, but certainly the Spout is a fickle beast and, however deep and long-lasting the cold spell, is not likely to form if there has not been sufficient rain. For example, Stuart Lampard and Jim Thompson saw no sign of it when they passed by on their way to make the first ascent of *Silver Flow* in January 1994. Perhaps then, the main requirement for good conditions is a close attention to weather forecasts.

A hop, skip and jump technique was needed to ford Cooran Lane without getting our boots full of water, but the Silver Flowe, normally a horrendous marsh full of exhausting tussocks and bottomless slithy pits, proved much easier when frozen and little more than half-an-hour saw us at the foot of *Drainpipe Gully*. This turned out to be an interesting mixed route with much progress made by way of frozen turf, icy slabs and jammed chockstones. It provided a pitch apiece and a great deal of banter for the team as each of us struggled in turn in full view and much

to the entertainment of those anchored safely below. A quick visit to the summit of Craignaw was well worth the exertion for its fine winter panorama of Merrick and the Range of the Awful Hand. Northwards, islanded Loch Enoch looked to be iced over and the summit of the Dungeon of Buchan was snowbound. Westwards the gleaming Solway, the Mull of Galloway and even the distant mountains of Ireland could be seen, while to the south, beyond Curleywee, Cairnsmore of Fleet and Scree Hill, layers of blue, each fainter than the last, marked the far off Lakeland Fells.

Though the sun shone brightly out of a cloudless sky, a chill wind soon sent us scurrying for the shelter of some rocks below the summit cairn where we quickly scoffed our sandwiches and then scrambled down steep hillside to the south to regain the bottom of the Spout. From below the view was even more impressive. A band of ice 40ft wide cascaded down the cliff in a series of white stalactites, walls and corners, looking for all the world like a magical staircase leading to some fairy-tale castle. Skating rink ledges were interspersed here and there and clean, grey granite boulders promised good belays.

The first section appeared simple, almost a walk if one felt bold enough, but above, any of those short vertical walls could prove a stopper if it were too steep or too high. At the top the fall narrowed and looked even more sustained. But all of it was in stunning condition, the sort of ice that is so well frozen it sticks to your gloves – or your skin if you are daft enough to let it. It was all old territory for Andrew who had made the second ascent two years' earlier and, having led us up the initial easy slabs and over a short bulge, he pointed me towards steeper territory above. A vertical groove about 8m high appeared to be the only reasonable way up the glittering cascade.

There was little ice on its right wall, but that on the left was reassuringly solid, and a few contorted and ungainly heaves saw me up onto easier ground and running the rope out to a good thread belay. Ian now took over, a big moment for him as this was the first pure water-ice route he had led. Nonetheless, he wended his way efficiently up a series of icy steps and grooves until stopped by a short wall. Picking the thickest part of this, a couple of quick pulls and an instant self-taught lesson in steep ice crampon technique saw him up to a big ledge and a good rock belay to the side of the main flow.

Above the ice grew steeper and narrower before disappearing through a notch in the, by now, darkening skyline – my lead again. Edging back into the centre of the fall, I picked the easiest looking section and stuck my axes high into a vague scoop. A strenuous pull up and I found myself looking into a large hole down which a stream of freezing water was thundering. This was not the place to be! Apart from the risk of getting

soaked, the ice felt insecurely attached. A desperate scrabbling two-step bridge out right brought more solid stuff to hand and a few more knuckle-bruising moves attained a good ledge where a splendid nut placement in the right wall calmed me down a bit. Back left, a series of icy runnels and bulges led up through the notch and I gained the top just as the rope ran out. The others followed on as the last dregs of ruby-red sun sunk below the horizon. Before us lay the prospect of negotiating the decidedly awkward descent route in the dark and then navigating across the virtually featureless Silver Flowe. But we couldn't have cared less. What a day, what companions, and what a route.

I returned two days later with Jim Fotheringham and found the Spout in even better condition. Forty-eight hours of freeze-thaw had done splendid work, the sky was blue and barely a breath of wind disturbed the air. So good was the ice that the ascent took us little more than an hour and we were soon back down and gearing up under the deep forbidding cleft of *Silver Flow*. Fortunately, this was nowhere near as serious or difficult as it looked, and three pitches of excellent Grade IV climbing followed, including a new direct finish, followed by another worthwhile trog to the summit of Craignaw and then a long, but pleasant, descent northwards and round under the Cooran Buttress of the Dungeon, the scene of many an enjoyable adventure for both of us in years gone by.

Dow Spout is an easy climb by today's standards, but given a clear day of sub-zero temperatures, it is hard to imagine a finer place to be or a route more likely to be enjoyed by everyone whatever their ability. The arduous approach – miles of pre-dawn motoring, followed by a strenuous bike ride, while all the time suffering that butterflies-in-the-stomach feeling that stems from not really knowing whether the climb is going to be 'in' or not – only adds to the sense of excitement and achievement that is all part of what goes to make a perfect Scottish winter climbing day.

GIVE ME SUNSHINE

(Retrospective on the 1961 JMCS East Greenland Expedition¹)

By Mike Fleming

WHEN a frequent Journal contributor, who may turn out to have more literary talent than judgment, suggested that I write more about the above expedition, the immediate response was "Why?"

"Partly," said he, "to remind people how hard it was to get there."

This rang bells. Today it seems that no-one is much further than a helicopter, boat or lorry ride from one's destination, and, once there, umbilically linked to civilisation by radio, satellite and perhaps even postcard. One can summon support, and for all I know, a delivery from the local takeaway at the flick of a switch. A few years ago an application to the Trust for expedition support quoted 'Bus' as the means of access and 'Guidebook' as the reference to previous exploration. The world has happily become a safer place, but sadly a much smaller one.

In 1958², the Slessor/Smart SS pioneered a crossing from North to South Staunings Alps by the Spørre Glacier, Duart/Roslin Col and hence to Schuchert Dal and Syd Kap. Then, in 1960, John Hunt^{3,4} pushed a reconnaissance party across this route and into the Bjornbos Glacier region of the South Staunings Alps, climbed two peripheral peaks, and reported "a paradise of unclimbed mountains of alpine stature as far as eye could see". This inspired Jim Clarkson to raise an expedition of six Edinburgh JMCS, one London JMCS and two non-members to blitz the area the following year. Personal recollections of this trip dwell on the logistical and physical difficulties of getting there in equal measure to the delights of the mountaineering challenges encountered. Ship to Iceland then charter plane to Mesters Vig were now routine for East Greenland except that 'Del Boy' Clarkson chartered large Dakota DC4/Viscount planes (in/out) rather than the smaller DC3, then sub-leased seats to two other expeditions at highly advantageous rates to ourselves. Thereafter the problem was to get more kit than could be carried some 80 miles over the Skel Glacier, Schuchert Dal (Valley) and Bjornbos Glacier to our main Base Camp at Concordia, the name given to the confluence of most of the major South Staunings glacier systems and the hub of the whole area. We had arranged to use a mining reconnaissance plane to ferry most of our gear to a small airstrip about half-way along Schuchert, but the best laid plans...; the plane had not yet arrived from Denmark. The Danish Airforce came to our rescue by offering a parachute drop at Concordia as an "exercise" on condition that we retrieved the 'chutes. Howard Brunton and Graham

Hendry, our two geologists, were to fly with them to direct the drop then walk in with light (35lb!) packs. The rest of us would go ahead with the balance. Sounds easy? The balance was 85lb per man.

The next 10 days provoke contrasting memories of horrendous slogging across glaciers, beautiful flower-bedecked country in unremitting sunshine and mosquitoes. The relief, as a novice, of staying on the surface of the Skel snows on ski instead of waist deep without, and the despair of falling off those skis, knowing that a split second later an 85lb pile-driver would hammer one's head deep into said snow requiring at least a two-man rescue. The joy of the mining outpost's hospitality at Malmsberg and the horror of a flowing stream of mud – Jim stepped onto a boulder in the middle; boulder? Jim and load started to sink. Fortunately, Keith Murray was close behind, grabbed his pack and pulled him bodily clear. Probing with ski sticks could detect no bottom. What's all the fuss about carrying 85lb? (You will notice that 1961 was yet unmetricated.) Well, you need help to get it off the ground. You walk for 20 minutes only because you know that a 10 minute break is beckoning. For the last 5 minutes you are scouting for a waist-high boulder to take your pack. If you habitually jump down onto a stepping stone in one of the burns your knees collapse and you just keep on going down into the water. Your feet take terrible punishment and your back and shoulders are raw with pressure sores. How we regretted that the weight of the retrievable parachutes had restricted the amount we could drop.

River crossings were quite dangerous. Keeping ever to the north (mountain) side of the Schuchert river we still had to cross the outflow melt-water rivers from the glaciers, the largest of which, from the Lang Glacier, was a major problem. Late in the afternoon, hip deep and flowing like the clappers, it was totally impossible. But time is almost irrelevant in the arctic, so we camped then tried again at 3am with melt-water at its lowest. Even so, crossing in pairs and roped, the thigh-deep water was still fast enough to rumble boulders along the bottom; bad enough without the beladen exit onto a large snow shelf. The falling melt-water had left a gap between snow and surface of the river which was trying for all its worth to carry you under the shelf. It was here that Gwyn Evans emerged to find that the current had torn one of his boots off his benumbed foot. The amazing man immediately sewed a lump of kitbag onto the bottom of a plimsol and spent the next five weeks on one boot and one gym shoe. He even managed the occasional climb in borrowed boots.

We camped next on the Lang River airstrip – a bulldozed piece of tundra. This was of interest since, optimistic of its imminent arrival, the mining plane had been booked to pick up some of us and much of our gear here in five and a half week's time. A rather loose arrangement involving a "most likely day", a "second choice" (the day before) and a "third choice" (being the day after). The fourth choice I seem to recall was next year. (Pay

attention, there may be questions.) And so on across the snout of the Roslin Glacier with some pleasant ice and some extremely unpleasant moraine, then cut the corner to the Bjornbos, and at last we could see up our glacier to Concordia, and why we had done it all. Peak after peak gleaming in the crystal clarity that is Greenland and which makes all things appear three times closer than they really are. A last eight mile day's plod with more and more mountains beckoning – the pointed ramp that was to be *Pisa*, the rock tower of *Kilroy*, the ramparts of *Bastille*, and, far up, dominating the entry to the upper fastnesses of Main Glacier, the snows and cliffs of the mighty *Sentinel*. Glaciers to the right, to the left; icy mountains, rocky mountains. All of it ours! Well, apart from the shale bing on the right – that was Sir John's. So, was it all worth it? Judge for yourself.

The toils of the trek in were compensated by tantalising glimpses of the Staunings Alps tightening the chest with anticipation. Each day's end was a real pleasure when we would camp on a patch of hillside, green with fresh, springy moss set off by colourful cushions of saxifrage, mountain chickweed, arctic poppies and even Scottish harebells. We would watch through the mosquito netting as herds of musk oxen lazily grazed on this abundance – “but don't get too near!”

And once we arrived? – again, judge for yourself. The expedition in the next three weeks climbed twenty four virgin peaks (even more impressively, there were seventy three individual man-ascents of these peaks) and achieved a major trans-Staunings crossing to Alpe Fjord. The mountains were in the 5,000 – 8,600 ft range with, usually, about 2,000 ft of ascent from the glaciers. Ascent times were most often four to eight hours with round-trip times about double, although we did often find quicker ways down. So we are talking big Nevis ridge to comfortable alpine day out, not only in length but also in climbing character, up to mild VS on the hot sun-soaked granite or III-ish on the colder snow and ice routes. There were significant exceptions though. And all this time the sun shone round the clock. We had four cloudy days with light snow on two of them. Our rain gauge was broken in the drop. But it didn't matter. Nothing would have registered. With one sole exception we climbed *every* significant peak in an area of perhaps fifty square miles covering at least five major, multi-branched glacier systems, and including the highest mountains of the South Staunings. There were notable individual achievements too. Jim topped the table with thirteen ascents, followed by Keith on eleven and Ian Douglas on nine. Even bootless Gwyn managed four. Oh yes, on an expedition scale, absolutely worthwhile. But on a personal basis? Keep your judge's cap on. My next three weeks involved an unforgettable ten day journey to Alpe Fjord and back, and a group of unclimbed mountains including the highest and (separately) my nomination for the best rock climb in the world. Read on.

The first may not quite have been the best as they say (about mountains?),

but an auspicious beginning. Keith and I had spotted a good rock peak on the walk in just below Concordia. So here we were. Released at last from our loads we fairly flew up a 200 ft severe wall onto a fairly easy slabby ridge on good rock if you avoided some looser bits, and onwards past a few harder *gendarmes* for 1,500 ft to a final snow slope. Eight hours to our maiden first ascent. Ours to name. Our euphoric rantings had been of the 'Kilroy was here' on the summit block variety so we decided *Kilroy* was a fine name. The Scottish convention in Greenland was to name after castles; *ergo* we had failed at the first hurdle. However Jim was persuaded that Kilroy was an ancient fortress in nether-Fife, so *Kilroy* it stands in the Bennet bible!⁵. Another good peak had fallen that day in the Mars Glacier so the expedition was up and running. Next day, four of us circumvented the impressive cliff behind Base to find a long, fine-looking but rather chaotic ridge which took us, in seven and a half hours of unroped scrambling, to the summit of *Bastille* between the Concordia and Jupiter glaciers. The summit was quite spectacular – a high foot-square pedestal looking straight down the cliff to Base Camp 2,000 ft below. This was a superb viewpoint and we spent an hour or so sunbathing and reconnoitring the wonderful array of pristine summits that would occupy us for the next few weeks.

On the 'morrow I lent my boots to Gwyn who joined Jim, Ian and Ray Tanton on an ambitious assault on a major prominent peak (*Sentinel*) up Main Glacier. They were rewarded by an amazingly easy mixed route by its SE ridge from Pegasus Glacier. The climbing for me was now put on the back-burner since I surprised myself (and the rest of the company) as an obsessive climber – as opposed to walker or skier, by electing to join the Alpe Fjord trans-Staunings party instead of moving up Mercury Glacier for an extra week's mountain-bagging. I'm so glad I made that choice.

Heavy loads on again for Howard, Graham, Ray and myself. Still, 75lb was better than 85, and that included skis which for most of the time at least weren't on our backs. A heavy slog up Main Glacier in by now almost monotonous sunshine. We had a choice of two reasonable cols; one would take us over to the Roslin Glacier and hence to the Duart-Roslin Col and Alpe Fjord by the SS route² of 1958. (This was later crossed by a German party in 1966 and named 'Donnau Passet'.) However, with typical courage we chose the very easy one (Main Col) leading to the top of the as yet unexplored Spörre Glacier. A diversion up a small snow peak (*Darien*) north of this col offered wonderful views of both the North and South Staunings and demonstrated that the former were generally an order of magnitude more serious than the latter. For the first time we looked over the shadowed vale of Alpe Fjord to the icecap of Nathorst's Land. But more immediately the northward descent led gently into a marvellous bowl of uncrevassed, unsullied snow which eventually steepened into some seriously crevassed slopes before the confluence of the Spörre with the

Duart Glacier half-way down to Alpe Fjord (or, more correctly, Dammen, which is separated from the fjord by the combined outflows of the Gully and Sefstrom Glaciers.) The next bit from the Col introduced us to a) the most pernicious and b) the most sublimely idyllic of ski mountaineering. We pointed down a gentle slope onto the strangest of surfaces; a thin but hard, bearing crust on top of unplumbed depths of the lightest floury snow. Fine so far – apparently perfect for skiing. Only the crust had somehow formed into gigantic plates overlapping like tiles but with the overlap of several inches facing upwards instead of down. For some distance the skis stayed on top, breasting the overlaps. But then a larger overlap would take the ski tips *below* the crust into a vertical dive and your face was smashed through said crust by a vindictive pack. All hands to the rescue; and you knew it would all happen again a minute or two later. Fortunately, after a quarter of a mile of this, the plating stopped, the crust remained with an inch or two of icing sugar on top and we were in a skiing wonderland. The next six miles were covered in an hour of sheer bliss. We called this basin “The Sugar Bowl”, camped therein and were tempted just to stay there and ski. However, on and down through some heavy crevasses to the confluence. We all had our moments with crevasses to remind us we were now one hundred miles out from Mesters Vig and assistance. A particular manoeuvre which really concentrated the mind became commonplace – side-stepping across narrow snow-bridges with both ends of the skis overhanging the abyss and praying that they were precisely horizontal. The big packs came to our aid too. Several abrupt descents into narrow crevasses were forestalled by the pack jamming in the jaws. Another strange phenomenon was a number of clearly ‘bottomless’ crevasses of just jumpable width full to the brim with jet-black water. The thought of missing the jump and going in with 75lb packs was really terrifying. The lower stretch of the Spørre down to Dammen, now on dry ice with skis dumped, was a totally shambolic icefall; five and a half hours to cover one mile (contrast to the Sugar Bowl). And so to Dammen; five days out from Concordia. We even found a bootprint – Man Slessor? A day’s recuperation and sight-seeing. Back the way we came. A detour from the Sugar Bowl to investigate an impracticable col to the Princessa Glacier. A brief pause to shelter from a few hours of our first light snow and down to Concordia. What a trip, and in what company! The chrysalid climber had transformed into a mountaineer. Oh yes, it was worth it!

The glacial scenery at Concordia seemed timeless but there was one salient demonstration of its impermanence. A tent had been left at Base while we were on our various ten day trips to Alpe Fjord or Mercury Camp. On our return it was found to be perched on a two foot pedestal. The glacier had melted by that amount but the shaded tent area had been unaffected. We had also noticed that small pebbles on the glacier lower

the melting point and sink whereas large boulders behave like the tent and become raised. This led to an earnest discussion as to whether our bowel movements would be sunken, or reach a critical mass and be raised – stalacturds or stalagturds. Future generations wandering through a forest of stalagturds could be a lasting memorial to our expedition.

Which was going well. The climbing group had had a successful week from a camp on the Mercury Glacier; another five peaks. They confirmed that the deeper you penetrated toward the watersheds, the better the rock became. These high glacier peaks were impressive, yet not particularly hard; good Scottish mixed ridge standard or, on snow, in rather soft condition due to the sun. Fine mountains though. When the expedition reunited, Gwyn decided to take his plimsole and a tent back down to Schuchert Dal and spend the rest of his time *à la* peripatetic Smart⁴ wandering those heathy braes. The rest of us moved camp to the Jupiter Glacier system where the highest and finest peaks of the South Staunings are located. Could we match what had gone before?

In the next six days we would climb another thirteen peaks including the highest and second highest in the South Staunings and, separately, my nomination for the “Best Rockclimb in the World.” Quality mountains all. First, for me, was a pleasant unroped ascent on snow at first, but mostly by a good, blocky ridge with Jim, Keith and Ian; an all Edinburgh party, so the peak became *Edinburgh*. Next, Keith and I had our eyes on what we had already named *Dinosaur*; a great crenellated rampart of rock jutting into the upper reaches of the Jupiter Glacier where it forked left and right in a T-Junction. The down-glacier face was probably impossible being a 1,000 ft convex bulge with the bottom half actually overhanging, but, moving through the top crevasses and left at the T, we reached easier ground – a delightful Chamonix ridge on top quality cracked granite blocks, laybacking and jamming to our hearts’ content at mostly V. Diff/Severe but occasionally mild VS. The exposure down the North Face was terrific without really impinging on our route. A stone lobbed twenty feet out took ten seconds to disappear over the half-way bulge and didn’t strike rock before reaching the glacier. Our climb took us only to the lowest (N) of the three towered summits; about one hundred feet lower than the other two, but separated by a steep gap in which the perfectly crystalline red granite suddenly became completely unconsolidated. You could crumble a handful of rock to powder in your hand. There was no reasonable prospect of a safe route onwards so we called it a day and left the true summit unclimbed. The *Dinosaur* ridge also gave us, for the first time, full frontals of a pair of mountains which dominated the end of the left fork (looking up) of Jupiter. These had been glimpsed from time to time from other peaks and were quite exceptional. The left-hand snow-capped mountain had been provisionally named *Tent Peak*. The right-hand one was a jaw-dropper; a massive three-tiered face of Dolomitic steepness twice the height

of *Dinosaur*'s N Face culminating in a narrow flat-topped tower buttressed on the right by a bastioned complex ridge. Keith and I would have named it Eilan Donan, unaware of Lovat and Bryan's 1958 predecessor². However the alternative unpoetic nickname of *Wedge Peak* was eventually adopted. (Confusion is still likely since a contender called *The Wedge* now exists in the Dalmore Glacier courtesy of Smart's 1968 expedition.) We reckoned that the N Face probably deserved an expedition on its own, but that the *couloir* between *Tent* and *Wedge* and a series of steep, rock-flanked snowfields could provide a feasible route. The mountain just had to be climbed. But not yet. Another even more compelling priority had first to be attended to. The highest peak in the South Staunings.

Unlike many of its neighbours, this grand mountain stands in almost complete isolation and commands the outlook from Jupiter up the Orion Glacier. It has a massive hanging glacier contained between rock ridges on a rocky base. By now the sun was just dipping below the horizon at night when the summit snows of this beautiful mountain would pick out the last and first rosy tints. *Prometheus*, from he who would steal light from the Gods, seemed an appropriate name. Cyril Levene (our doctor, Lev), Ray, Graham and I set off on the three hour trek to its base (thinking then that it might be second highest in the area). Ian and Keith accompanied us part way *en route* for another fine rock peak (*Blair*) also bounding Orion. After an initial icy *couloir* then some pleasant slabs and a rock rib we reached the foot of the hanging glacier on the S Face. Good snow-ice brought us in a further 1,000 ft to the final snowfields and the summit. We were overjoyed to find that we were on the highest peak of all – 8,600 ft (2,570m) according to Ray's surveyor's level and aneroid. As an isolated peak the views round the compass were absolutely breathtaking. With the sun low on the horizon and the extraordinary clarity that is Greenland, we not only had highlit panoramas of all our South Staunings peaks, but also uplifting vistas across the North Staunings, Scoresby Sound, out over the iceberg speckled N.W. Fjord and on across the great Greenland icecap. On the descent, Lev and I avoided all rock below the hanging glacier to reach the bottom entirely on crampons. Keith and Ian had also been successful, and with eight peaks already climbed from Jupiter by the Company, Keith and I decided that the time was ripe for an assault on *Wedge Peak*.

And so, together with Jim and Howard who were aiming for *Tent Peak*, we headed once more through the crevasses to the T, turned left past *Dinosaur* and on to our targets. Jim and Howard turned up a snow gully left of the *Tent* and we carried on. The Face loomed steeper and higher till we had diminished to the size of ants. The *couloir*, our chosen line, was, to quote Keith¹, "throwing stones like Gimmer at Whitsun". So, hazarding another look up the N Face, we decided that "Well, we wouldn't get up but it might be fun trying." Stack the skis and cross the bergschrund to a

ledge just clear of the snow in the middle of the three-tiered face. I was stale and disinterested – a condition induced by terror. Keith wandered along the ledge for a rightward run-out finding not the vestige of a way up till he reached a clean-cut, foot wide chimney that ascended to eternity. So up it I went. Chimneys are more or less impervious to angle and hence the route of choice up the vertical. Severe with a few more difficult chockstones, but not too bad at all. Depression sloughed off and left at the bottom. Through leads again and again. Height being made. About a Rannoch Wall later – oops; we reached the end of this happy chimney. We stopped (had to) in some confusion. Well, I suppose we couldn't really expect it to go on for 2,000 ft. After some haphazard shuffling up and down the evil, overhanging, verglassed groove that had transmuted from our wee chimney. I took the obvious easy ledge out to the left. We had been trying not to notice this since it led out to a bulge hiding the rest of the wall from view – but we remembered what that wall was like! At the bulge the exposure was heart-stopping – out of the secure chimney to emerge onto that great featureless face. But, astonishingly, *onto* was the operative word, because we were *above* the wall, and the ledge led into some easier-angled icy grooves. (Here we encountered some loose stuff for the only time apart from the two great scree ledges which demarcated the three tiers.) Keith did some nifty work with his slater's pick and we soon emerged onto an enormous sloping scree ledge. The line so far had been more or less directly below the abutment of the great W Ridge with the final tower of the N Face far, far above. The ledge looked as if it might provide an escape route into the now distant couloir; and for all we knew it did. But I hoped not. This route didn't deserve the ignominy of an escape. On the ledge, which was clearly one-way to the left, we looked up at the next tier.

And damned nearly fell off backwards! I've never seen anything so steep. The only escape route offered up there was out of 'this mortal coil'. Dislocating our necks, we looked again. A great vertical pinkish wall with buttressed fringes tapered up for maybe 500 ft to be capped by a huge, square-cut, Cobbler size overhang extending the breadth of the visible face. Gulp. Clearly no way for us up there, so left along the ledge ("Please don't make us traverse off!") till a little welcoming bay was found at the back of which two cracks led steeply left or right. We also appeared to be to the side of the overhung wall. Both cracks disappeared over bulges at 30 feet so it was a lottery. Off I went up the right-hand one because it was marginally more direct to our initial line (I lie; it was because it was marginally easier). Splendid jamming granite crack – great fun – developing over the bulge into a chimney line which was almost a replica of that of the first tier. More marvellous sport in the vertical for multiple run-outs till once again it went blind. No messing this time. Straight out on the easy leftward ledge round the bulge and – oops again; it debouched

onto a steep little wall, about 15 ft across, with one detectable small, sloping toe-hold in the middle, leading to another chimney on the other side. Possibly the left crack from the bay might have taken us to this chimney thereby avoiding the traverse which was to be the technical crux of the climb. But I would then have avoided one of the two most cherished moments of my rock-climbing career. (The other would occur further up the Face.) While we were gawping at this wall a distant yodel announced the arrival of the other two at our ski dump after a fine snow and ice ascent of *Tent Peak*. They were somewhat surprised to get a reply from halfway up the Face. We could see them an airy 1,000 ft straight below but they were unable to locate us. We managed to convey to them that we were perhaps halfway up (5 hr; 9:30pm), had no idea how we could get down, and not to expect us before noon on the 'morrow at the earliest. That done, on to the wall. I managed to get a peg in high on the right. With some tension from this and a huge straddle I managed to get my foot on the hold and eventually scramble my body back to the vertical. Here I could look past my heels to the next focal points which were the twin dots of Howard and Jim on the glacier. A wee touch exposed! On my left foot I couldn't begin to reach the edge of the chimney. It was a change foot job on a sloping toehold on the fine edge of balance on a steep wall so devoid of handhold that, for better balance, I didn't even bother to raise my hands above my waist. Curse, up, off the rock, balletic flail (the grace of which was rather spoiled by the big boots) down on right foot, then that long, long breathless pause while Fate decided whether one would remain attached to the world or not. One did. Thereafter it was a moment's work to friction-straddle the left wall allowing fingers to reach the security of the chimney edge. This chimney also terminated but, this time, an easy 20 feet higher. Keith, with the sack, simply pendulumed across. Somehow we knew then both that we had passed the crux and that we would get to the top - whenever. But there was an even more spectacular pitch yet to come.

Another easy run-out took us to the second (narrower) scree ledge. This time, to restore our direct line, we moved right for Keith to belay a short way from the end of the ledge which terminated as abruptly as a pirate's plank. I went on and looked over the end of the world. I was at the outer edge of the 15 ft horizontal roof overhanging the whole second tier which had forced the earlier diversion. My ledge was the fault line of the roof. Beyond it the whole tier had broken off leaving a void below and beyond. The end of the ledge marked the left-hand vertical fault line which continued upwards as a great 5 feet wide slash through the roof. Just narrow enough to straddle and bridge. But to get in? It was the classic "fall across the gap till outstretched hands reach the other side" move; a bit of a heart-stopper at the best of times - but five feet across the outer edge of a fifteen foot overhang with only space below to the distant glacier! Meanwhile

the sun had dipped, threatening clouds were building up, so the scene was further dramatised by a lurid red sunset. I have to confess that I hammed it up even more by then bridging upwards facing out towards the North Pole. It was, I imagine, a sensation akin to free flying. And the ridiculous thing was that it was quite easy! Rough granite with plenty holds at straddling width. Up we went for two pitches, Keith having a moment of pure farce leading a final hard exit where the top of the cleft splayed out and was capped. He needed to mantelshelf onto a small pedestal on the right wall. He did so with great dexterity except that in the last moment he swivelled round and SAT on the pedestal. There he was, like an arctic gargoyle, perfectly safe – and perfectly stuck! Try it yourself – a desperately hard situation to get out of and totally devoid of dignity. The eldritch cacklings emanating from that bloodshot chasm on the upper tower of *Wedge Peak* should surely belong in some wild Wagnerian saga. He finally righted himself to emerge at the junction of the great W Ridge and the Final Tower. When I had stopped laughing I joined him. This Tower was excellent and straightforward; still as steep as ever but multiple run-outs up a proliferation of chimneys, cracks and grooves brought us to the flat tabular summit at 4:30am, an hour after sunrise and after eleven hours of continuously demanding quality climbing. And we were still a far cry from being safely down again.

We were a bit put out to find that the hitherto unseen glaciers to the south were filling with rather ominous clouds and it even appeared to be raining down Bjornbos and Schuchert way. Surely the weather wouldn't break now while we were still atop *Wedge Peak*. (Fortunately the bad weather did not penetrate to Jupiter for another couple of days.) After about an hour for rest and recuperation we headed off for the *Tent* – *Wedge* col. Easy rock past the first snowfield postponed crampons to the unavoidable second snowfield (70°) leading to col and couloir. But this turned out to be one inch of soft powder covering very hard, very brittle ice. We had two conduit ice-pegs but dared not discard them by roping down and they turned out to be useless for belaying because the ice just shattered. Getting down took an eternity (also invited eternity) and resulted in great plates of this peculiar ice flaking away and threatening to take out your standing step. All highly unpleasant. We ended up by inventing modern technique and going down on front points and ice-axe pick (singular, please note) with ice-pick belays. Eventually the ice became too hard even for this and we were forced to cut down again. We were very tired and this was extraordinarily dangerous. It took four hours to descend that 400 ft icefield to the col – and we had the prospect of 2,000 ft of couloir still to come. But rescue was at hand. The rocks of *Tent Peak* bordering the couloir were unpleasantly shattered – now we saw the origins of the couloir stonefalls of (could it be?) only seventeen hours ago – but relatively easy. We began to lose height at a significant rate. Lower down,

the broken rocks steepened dangerously again but the couloir had improved in quality and we were able to romp down good snow-ice to a final glissading leap across the bergschrund to our skis. It was seventeen hours since we had set foot on the N Face.

Down past *Dinosaur* like automatons. Turn right through the icefall screwing up the concentration again to ski the snow-bridges then turn sharply to evade the ensuing crevasses. Down the last slopes to the near level glacier leading to the camp. Here was one last sting-in-the-tail. Trying to make a long stride across a substantial melt-water stream, Keith missed his footing and stepped into a mere foot of water. "Ho! Ho! Ho!" as he started a stately glide down the burn. I watched with glee as this legless torso meandered down the glacier till I realised that his skis were tracked down the centre of a polished, semicircular Venus Flytrap which would inevitably soon plunge into the depths of the glacier. At last he managed to hurl himself at the bank and claw his way out. We finally reached camp ten minutes before our deadline and exactly twenty-four hours after we had left it. I have been reliving those twenty-four hours ever since.

Having swapped tales with the *Tent Peak* and *Kirriemuir* parties we slept the rest of the day away while Jim, Howard and Graham climbed one last significant peak. *Tantalus*, the second highest in the South Staunings, presented a pleasant S Face of mixed climbing from the Orion Glacier. This fine mountain also projects a splendid ridge eastwards to Main Glacier (much admired on our Alpe Fjord trip). With one further day to go and one further peak to climb to complete our total blitz of the area, Jim, Ray, Ian and I set off in lowering cloud. This last was a prominent rock peak terminating the ridge between *Ursus Major* and *Orion*, on the *Jupiter Glacier* opposite *Dinosaur*. It is a sister peak to *Blair*. As we reached it the impending snow began to fall heavily; the second precipitation of the whole expedition. We abandoned the attempt and left it as a crumb for the future. So there it is for whoever wants it. But take a look at *Dinosaur* and *Wedge Peak* while you're at it. So that was it. All we had to do now was get out. Only that?

The plan was for everyone to move out to the Lang airstrip with full loads. Howard, Graham and Keith would go a day early, dump most of their kit at Lang, then race out to Mesters Vig with light packs to liaise with the mine people. Lev elected to ferry his load in two halves and had already gone. He would fly out eventually. The rest of us would pack up the *Jupiter* and *Concordia* camps, dump unwanted gear and carry the rest out. Seems straightforward? But this time we were carrying 100lb per man! – 15lb more than the incoming load which we had thought to be on the limit. This was partly due to our commitment to return all of the 10lb parachutes, but largely due to our avaricious reluctance to dump good climbing hardware. Still it was downhill and only three marches. Glossing over the toil of these three days, suffice to say that the Schuchert vegetation,

Basille cirque with Daldalus behind the climbers, Keith Murray (front); Graham Hendry (back left), Howard Brunton. Tent Peak and Wedge Peak – far right skyline. South Staunings Alps. Photo: Mike Fleming.

Skiing the Sugar Bowl on the Upper Sporre Glacier. North Staunings Alps. Photo: Mike Fleming.





in the last five weeks had gone from Spring to Autumn and was a rhapsody of russet; that we again saw large herds of musk oxen; and that the route over the Roslin snout was much assisted by some large arrows left by the nomadic Gwyn. As we approached Lang our little hearts fairly pounded with nobility; on top of our own loads we had brought out a whole can of raspberries from our luxury mountain rations for poor old Gwyn. What selflessness! At the airstrip was a large encampment. As well as Gwyn's mountain tent were pitched two large canvas things. On one was written "Teahouse of the Midnight Sun." Inside was a replete Gwyn sitting in a nest of packing cases containing *inter alia* cold ham, paté de fois gras, honey, jam, chocolate, prunes, stewed steak, soup and other goodies to the powerⁿ. He had stumbled upon a 1955 prospectors' supply dump. We didn't even mention the raspberries. Most of the stuff was tinned of course so we wellied in with ptotal disregard of ptomaine ptoisoning. The chocolate was defended by a battalion of maggots, but the more central squares were consumed with great relish. He had also found some powdery material which he thought might be oatmeal. He rather fancied making porridge till he noticed it was labelled "Gummy Dynamite." If he had consumed that our stalagturds and stalacturds would have faded into insignificance. His next movement would have truly made the earth move – with a geological cataclysm to rival the extinction of the dinosaurs. (Might even have levelled our *Dinosaur*.) Gwyn had had a splendid time.

After a day of gorging we were on the eve of our second choice fly-out and still no sign of Lev, so Gwyn and I went off at midnight to search. We chanced upon him still on the far side of the Roslin bivouacked in his parachute. We returned early next morning, turfed him out of his 'chute and told him that we couldn't care less if he caught the plane or not but we were certainly going to see that the parachute went out. The others meantime were off on foot to Mesters Vig. The plane duly came on the next (and first choice) day. After an anxious hour watching the pilot search in the wrong place we managed to attract his attention by burning a redundant prospectors' tent. Then one trip for gear and one for Gwyn, Lev and I. And we were out.

At Mesters Vig our committed isolation in the mountains was brought home to us when we learned that the Bangor party on Lang Glacier had suffered a fatality. They got a message out to nearby Malmsberg. By coincidence a US helicopter was on exercise in the area and took him out. Also the mine manager came to see us. Due to unusually heavy pack ice that year his supply ships were long overdue. It was near the onset of winter, and this was a serious problem. In particular they were very low on diesel fuel. Since we had an empty Viscount coming from Iceland, would we mind if he had it loaded with fuel? "Not at all." As we turned to go – "Would £1000 be alright?" Gulp – "Yes." This meant that our personal contributions were almost completely underwritten. So we had had this

marvellous trip together with massive amounts of mountaineering and skiing equipment, clothing, even 35mm cameras with accessories, essentially for nothing. The end of a successful expedition? Not quite.

One last sting-in-the-tail and one final sublime experience yet to come. After we and the other parties had boarded our Viscount we lifted off, climbed and circled to some 500 ft – then went steeply into a power dive. We gaped out of the windows with eyes like organ stops. “What’s he doing?” “Why doesn’t he pull out?” “He’s not going to pull out.” Then, in unison “Bloody Hell!” He had bounced his wheels on the airstrip runway then roared back up equally steeply. It certainly removed much of my fear of violent death, since there had not been time for shock to transmute into terror. If we *had* gone straight in we wouldn’t have known the difference. A mildly apologetic pilot wandered through. It turned out that he had been a Polish fighter pilot in Spitfires during the war and this was one of their celebratory manoeuvres. This was also his last trip after many years on the Greenland run. “So this was not to frighten my passengers; just to say ‘Goodbye’ to the Mesters Vig boys.” In a Viscount for heaven’s sake! However, to make amends, he offered to take us back over our mountains if one of us (Howard I think) went into the cockpit to direct him – he was demob happy and just didn’t care. We then spent the next hour hugging the glaciers, flying round our peaks below mountain level and popping over the cols. What an experience!

When we at last turned for Iceland my last view over the pack showed the Staunings Alps silhouetted against a finally setting sun. It set on this, my expedition. It also set on the multifarious expeditions of all of the mountaineers on that plane. Because each one had his own story to tell. This was mine.

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A HARD DAY'S NIGHT

By Alan Mullin

IT WAS another deep and dark December night in the Cairngorms. I was sitting in my car full of the usual anticipation when contemplating yet another solo climb and, as I stared into the blackness outside, I was taken away to another place. Mesmerised by the silence shrouded, freshly fallen snow, I was transported back to my childhood and the winter snowball fights. I could just make out the snowman with his carrot nose and the fun and laughter with my younger brother that I remembered so well.

The cold was biting and brought me sharply back to reality. I had decided to solo a new line which I had spotted in Coire an Lochain the week before. I would be climbing it on sight, solo and in the dark. It was 1 am and I really ought to be thinking about moving. I had been increasingly pushing the boat out on my solo climbs, raising the stakes each time. On this occasion climbing alone and in the dark made it harder for me to be successful and that was just how I felt about life back then. Nothing I climbed was hard enough, I was not good enough, and only the highest order of difficulty would give me the feelings of self-contentment and achievement I so desired. But, no matter how difficult the climb, these feelings, feelings I had been searching for most of my life were lost to me and it was this search that was driving me to push myself harder and harder, in some vain hope of finding fulfilment.

I did, on the other hand, have a great affinity with the feelings of fear. The fear of soloing was familiar to me. Throughout my life I had truly felt that fear was my constant companion and I knew all its deepest darkest secrets. I had discovered them long ago at home and in the Army and it seemed I had just forgotten how to understand anything else. However, I was now aware that fear no longer presented itself as the intimidating emotion that I had experienced in the beginning. My sense of it had been placed well into the back of my mind and it no longer represented a great threat. I was not fearless by any means, I just didn't sense the emotion of fear in the same way as when I had first climbed alone and I was becoming aware that with each successful solo ascent, these feelings dwindled more and more. I did, however, know that there were still ways to get my kicks with fear like this.

I left the car and switched on the head torch, the yellow beam guided me over the snow, my footsteps crunching crisply with every step, and with every step the apprehension grew stronger and stronger. These feelings were normal for me and once on the route I knew they would fade into the background, leaving me free to climb as hard as I possibly could. An hour-and-a-half later I reached the Coire and switched the lamp to halogen mode. I looked above and could see my route in the distance. It was on No. 3 Buttress and comprised of a steep rib of rock leading into an overhanging corner, above that lay a steep wall and a secondary corner, which ended on

a ledge, common to the route *The Migrant*. I had seen the line the week before when climbing in the Coire with my friend Steve and, on returning home and studying the guidebook, I found that it was not yet a recognized route. It was then that the idea was planted in my mind to solo it. I knew it was risky, as onsight, solo and with no prior knowledge is the riskiest form of winter climbing, but that simply made it more appealing to me.

It was 3am and, as I geared up at the foot of the climb, I pulled my hood up and turned away from the cold and damp that was creeping into every bone in my body. I had been so used to suffering hardships without choices, yet here I was in the bitter cold and damp of my own free will. With the hardships of my childhood and the Army I had very little choice, but here I was my own man, it was my call. I truly felt at home in this freezing vertical world, full of fear and anticipation.

I climbed up the initial rocky rib, immersed in my own little world bounded by the small pool of light given out by my head torch. I was so engrossed in the technicalities of the climbing that I suddenly realised that I had climbed 20m and put no protection in. I heard the clinking of my gear reminding me that I should use it and, when I turned around and shone my torch in the area I had just climbed, I could see my rope hanging free into the darkness below. That I could do without. Now that I desperately needed to protect myself I couldn't get any gear in. I switched to survival mode and calculated every move, being careful to test every axe placement before weighting it fully. I finally pulled onto the small ledge that would be my belay for the second pitch above and rappelled down, did the usual work of removing my two bits of gear and re-climbed to my belay above.

This second pitch would be the crux and it looked fierce and sustained. It was at the kind of angle where having a rest would be impossible and placing gear extremely difficult. I made a short traverse rightwards and reached the foot of the overhung corner where I composed myself as I prepared to tackle the crux. The placements for my tools were thin but I could bridge out really wide and get some kind of balance on this strenuous corner. I couldn't see much in the way of cracks for gear and the only ones I could see were filled with ice. My arms were really aching. I managed to place a small peg and a wire and called them good. As usual I felt as though I was in a state of feud: "It's just me against the route and I am determined not to lose." I clipped the single rope into both pieces and continued up the corner. I was over the worst and now I had to pull onto a slab above and to what I had sworn would be a ledge from below. I got some good hooks for my tools and pulled up hard onto the slabby ledge. Standing now precariously in balance, I became aware that what I thought was a ledge from below was, in fact, no more than a foot rail. I steadied myself and directed the light onto the wall above.

I could see a thin crack that would take a small R.p. I worked it home with the gentle tug that indicates an acceptable placement – relief, I could relax a little and concentrate better on the task at hand. I would have to traverse

right, across the wall in front of me and gain a second smaller corner that would lead to the big ledge of *The Migrant*. There was just one small issue, traversing with my solo device was dangerous and awkward. I'd always tried to avoid routes with traverses but sometimes the line that appears logical from the ground is very different when you get on to it. I so wanted to place a high runner but that would create lots of rope drag and thus make it very difficult to move freely on technical ground. I traversed slowly rightwards, immersed in my pool of light, feeling nothing but the tools and crampons working their magic on the wall above. I knew I had to be cool, as I had learned a lot from my other solo ascents. Each new solo climb was like a whole new lesson for me. Slow the breathing, manage the gear methodically, trust the placements, and above all – don't panic, even if it all looks hopeless.

I reached the foot of the secondary corner and could see that the main crack was filled with ice. I would not be getting much gear in there, although I did have a good hook in the corner for my right tool. I forced a peg into the icy crack and smashed it as hard as my adze would let me and clipped it into the rope. I then pushed my left foot off against the wall and crossed through with my left tool, repeating that sequence until I could reach over onto the ledge above and hook some turf. I finally pulled down hard and mantled onto the comfort of the big ledge above. I could then start breathing more slowly again. I had felt quite calm throughout, the feelings of fear being easier to deal with each time I soloed. Once more I rappel and go through the same routine before reaching the ledge for the second time. I was on a ledge common with *The Migrant*, a route I had climbed three years previously and as it was Grade VI ground I could move more freely. I climbed quickly above the ledge and onto the steep wall and snow slope that signalled the end of the climb. I checked my watch, it was 8am and I had been climbing for five hours. It had indeed been, as they say 'A Hard Days Night'.

As I walked over the plateau towards the Ski Centre, the sun was just rising and its golden hue covered the ground before me. These were the moments I had usually taken little, if any, notice of. But, as the years go by, I find myself appreciating the beauty of my surroundings more and more and for once I bathed myself in the sunlight, up there alone where I felt completely at home. I called the route *After Dark* – it seemed appropriate. The climbing felt much harder than *The Migrant* so I settled on VII.7 and hoped the grade would do it justice, regardless of the fact numbers no longer mattered to me. Once again, no great sense of contentment or feelings of success came. Perhaps that would come with age or something else equally unattainable at this point in my life. I was so familiar with that pattern but I was getting better and better at dealing with it. I had been looking over to my right when on the big ledge of *The Migrant* and could see the fierce overhanging corner of the *Migrant Direct*. I knew it would have to be done, solo of course, but that's another story.

FINNIESTON

Greater Himalayan Traverses and Urban Rescues

By Al Scott

I STARTED climbing around 1979-80, and at that time we didn't have the Glasgow Climbing Centre for training purposes. In fact, in those days to do anything remotely like training was unusual in itself. I had, however, a few friends at the Glasgow University Mountaineering Club at the time who took me under their wing and introduced me to the delights of 'Finnie', the premier rock-climbers training venue in Glasgow (or should that be the rock-climbers premier training venue?) and after a few finger-blistering visits I was hooked.

In the early days, I even had a brush with the Emergency Services – Police, Fire Brigade and the *Sunday Post*. All were involved because of my single-minded dedication to training at Finnie. I was preparing for an expedition to Gasherbrum IV in the Karakorum Himalayas in northern Pakistan. (*Karakorum? – Training? – Finnieston?....hmmm...makes sense*).

It was at the time when they were building the SECC and the area opposite the wall was a massive building site, with a watchman employed to look after the whole area. So, picture the scene – I was traversing the wall, no more than a few feet off the ground and minding my own business. The watchman, across the expressway saw me and assumed that I was in desperate trouble and stuck on the wall. He then called the emergency services to rescue me. Now, I'm not saying that the watchman was thick, but he must have been a few inches short of a builder's bum. That's for sure!

A few moments later – MEE MAW, MEE MAW – the sound of sirens blaring. A fire engine and team of burly firefighters careered round the corner from nearby Trumpton Station. It screeched to a halt and out they leapt with ropes and ladders. I jumped (stepped) down from my lofty perch 2ft off the ground and asked 'Pugh, Pugh, Barney McGrew, Cuthbert, Dibble and Grub' what the problem was, and if there had been an accident? We all had a laugh at the watchman's expense who was doing a Mr Chad: "Wot no emergency?" impersonation over the wall across the road.

After giving a statement to the police back at the station I was back at the wall to finish my greater Himalayan traverse. This was such a big story at the time, that it made the front page of the *Sunday Post*. Hon moots!...it was my 15 minutes of fame, but at least it gave our expedition

some publicity. Anyway, that's history, let's get back to the future presently.

The recent outbreak of Foot and Mouth meant a ban on all movements in the countryside. Coincidentally, I believe that the last major outbreak of the disease was in the 1960s, and funnily enough, I think that is when Glasgow's leading climbers started climbing at the Finnieston Railway walls.

Of course, there is no longer a ban on movements at Finnieston, and indeed, I've been caught short a few times myself and I can assure all potential users that there are plenty of trees for cover.

For those interested in a trip to the Finnieston Walls, park your car at the head of Glen Kelvinhaugh in Yorkhill by the Fire Station (Trumpton) and start your trek southwards under the railway bridge. With the help of your GPS Navigation Aid, turn east onto the Expressway. Care is required here as cars and lorries hurtle past at dangerous speeds. There is the occasional '*toot-toot*' and scary '*swerve-screach*' from some bampot drivers who think they know you and wonder why the hell you are walking there. Soon the towering, monolithic sandstone walls come into view, resplendent in the sun, pock-marked with chalk and redolent of diesel and keech.

The area is a naturalist's paradise. Home to giant shimmering armadillos, and the even rarer Big Finnieston Crane seen perching over the jakey and trout-laden crystal clear waters of the River Clyde. To the south there is a panoramic view over the Carpark Savannah to the vast Mirrored Mountains and the sky-piercing Science Tower Folly. There is the roar of trundling juggernauts, the whirring of helicopter blades and the friggling of a Tall Ship's rigging filling the air. Indeed, it is a heady brew. Believe me, this is not a Scottish mountain environment to be missed.

The lengthy approach march (two minutes) will have sufficed for most as a warm-up, though some may like to 'crank some off' on one of the rare Pull-Up Trees that adjoin the wall. To fully appreciate the climbing here, it is best to wear your oldest and tattiest rockboots. I personally use a pair of Calanques, purchased in 1982, and still going strong. Sensitivity on 'micro-smears' is achieved through gaping holes in both toe-caps, with my foot protected by double mountaineering socks.

The climbing, particularly on the shorter left-hand section, is of a strenuous nature, being vertical or even slightly overhanging in places, with plenty of small edges, pockets and good footholds. I have been climbing here for more than 20 years and I am still finding new holds – particularly after 'Scratchy-The-Dry-Tooler' has been traversing with axes and crampons! DESECRATION! I mean to say, how would *he* like

it if I put chalk marks on his beloved iced-up V. Diffs. Scratchy – go and practice your foul deeds elsewhere – like some poxy old quarry or the Cairngorms for instance.

The crux is traversing past a ‘stick-oot-block’ at any of a number of levels, (add a couple of technical grades if a train passes overhead and the wall starts shuddering). As well as traversing there are a couple of ‘up-and-down’ bits and plenty of scope for boulder problems. Indeed, a ‘Phantom-boulderer’ has been at work at various sites, daubing his creations with purple paint. SACRILEGE! Shocking, and anti-social behaviour. Graffiti? – It would never be allowed at Dumbarton Rock, the Boulderers Mecca. Phantom! – get thee to Dumby, and take thy tin of paint with thee.

The longer, right-hand section, beyond a wee buttress, is less steep and is positively slabby in places. The wall here is amply supplied with good holds, with short cruxy sections and some good resting places. There are even some old pegs and metalware *in situ*. I guess these must be relics from the old aid-climbing hard men of the 1960s. I believe Crocket’s Hardware Store did a good trade in pegs at the time.

Alas, the ‘Greater Traverse’ is no longer possible. At one time you could traverse non-stop for about 150 yards, but years of neglect by the climbing youth of today has meant that sections of this wall are totally overgrown and impassable. Napalm, Agent Orange, defoliants and machetes are called for nowadays. Or some more traffic might do the trick.

I recently introduced the delights of Finnieston to an English friend of mine, a top Lakeland climber who was staying in Glasgow on business. He was very impressed and asked where did they get the sandstone from? I told him that it was quarried from a secret Scottish location and that all the scrap boulders and bing-shite was transported down to the Lake District where it became known as Scafell. He didn’t seem very pleased with my explanation.

Finnieston Wall, an unspoilt natural wilderness, a climber’s paradise right on our doorstep. I urge you to abandon the Church of Latter Day Rock Gymnasts at Ibrox and congregate at Finnieston. The newest of Scotland’s National Parks and administrated by Scottish Heritage In The Environment.

THE SECOND SIGHT

By P. J. Biggar

Hamlet: Do you see nothing there?

Queen: Nothing at all, yet all that is I see.

(Hamlet III; iv; 132-31)

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly.

A strange calm had descended on the mountains in the darkest hours and he had finally slept a drugged, fitful sleep. Now, over the rough meadows where his tent was pitched, snipe were drumming mysteriously in the half light. For a few moments he felt young and expectant, then memory of where he was returned with the nagging discomfort in his abdomen. Perhaps it was just because he had been so much on his own these last few days, but surely the pain was getting worse? It nagged him constantly. He could feel weakness gaining on him. He shifted uneasily in his sleeping bag, trying to find comfort, but the pain followed his motions. And yet the specialist had said he would probably have 18 months and he had barely had nine so far. The word 'probably' caused unequiet. They couldn't be certain could they? No, not about the time, only about the outcome. He smiled wryly and shifted again, but it was no use, without using drugs he would get no further peace. He caught sight of the whisky flask in the corner of the tent. Why not? And yet he didn't want to. Drink didn't fit with this time of day. Truth to tell he had barely wanted a dram the night before and it hadn't tasted good – not like it used to – but he'd had a drop to give him an appetite. Without food he'd be finished.

Struggling free of the tent he lurched uncomfortably to the boulders nearby and sat down.

The breeze was just starting to pick up again, disturbing the layers of cloud hanging over the hillsides. Winter had gone early, but there were still some big snow patches in the coire. He looked up as a pair of Ravens tumbled out of the clouds and a single distant call came down to him. He had always loved these birds, sometimes his only companion for hours on end on buttress and ridge. He had never found them remotely sinister. He imitated their harsh call and waved an ironic hand.

"Poor bastards," he muttered to himself. "Just like the rest of us, trying to live."

As the breeze shifted the clouds, warm shafts of sunlight came through making the myriad dewdrops sparkle on the spiders' webs. Away down in the valley, smoke rose from dwellings by the river and a small boat moved imperceptibly over the surface of the sea-loch on its round from one orange buoy to the next.

The Primus stove roared among the stones and the water began to steam. Mechanically, because he had always done so, he measured out the oats and the salt for the porridge, set the pan on the stove and stirred it before he sank back onto his boulder with his mug of tea. Now that he had escaped the solitude and darkness of night, the discomfort in his stomach seemed slightly less, but each little activity left him feeling tired. He stretched backwards until his body found a comfortable position and gazed upwards.

* * *

Dr. Jenkins stared morosely out of the surgery window while Sergeant MacPhail's monotonous voice droned on and on. It was always the same at this time of year. The Sergeant would appear with some trumpery complaint when all he really wanted was to talk. He claimed he was afflicted with the second sight and had forebodings of disasters. Outside, the sun was shining and the doctor, sensing an empty waiting-room, was keen to be away to the river. In the bar last night there had been reports of an early run.

"And I'll tell you another thing Dr. Jenkins," MacPhail pronounced prophetically. "There will be more work for the Mountain Rescue Team before very long."

"Do you think so?"

MacPhail regarded him as a missionary might have glared upon an unconverted heathen in darkest Africa. "It is not a question of thinking." He said in tones of gentle reproof. "You just wait and see. This condition is a curse, Dr. Jenkins. Within a week, maybe less, we shall be carrying a man from the hill and," his voice sank to a gloomy whisper, "there will be no life left in him."

This was too much for Dr. Jenkins. "Now, come, come Roddy," he said kindly. "You mustn't let your mind dwell on such gloomy thoughts. People are born and die every day, you know. I think perhaps you are a little depressed. I'll write you a prescription. It's the time of year, you know. We're all run down after the Winter."

He reached for his pad. Dammit all! Why couldn't the man just get drunk like the rest of the village?

Sergeant MacPhail received the prescription with a wan smile and rose to take his leave. The doctor was a good man and he tried to help, but he didn't understand.

As the Sergeant's heavy tread retreated down the passage, the doctor felt his spirits rise. He opened a drawer and took out a wallet of salmon flies. He was deep in contemplation of the size and colour for a falling water when a gentle knock came at the door and Nurse Duncan, the midwife who doubled as receptionist, came in. "That poor man," she said sympathetically.

"Been telling you too, eh?"

"He sees such dreadful things."

"He sees nothing but what you and I see, Morag," the doctor grunted. "It's all in the mind – the man's depressed. It's this awful Winter we've had, nothing but rain and gales. You mark my words, a few weeks of sunshine and MacPhail will be off after the poachers and not a care in the world."

Nurse Duncan kept her own counsel. The doctor was a kind man, but although he had been in the village for 27 years, he was an incomer and didn't understand everything. She herself was an incomer, but from the islands and she knew all about the second sight.

"It may be as you say, Doctor," she said gently. "I've just had Mrs Paterson on the telephone. She says her husband is not at all well and has taken to his bed."

The doctor sighed and closed his fly wallet. "I'll call at once," he said.

* * *

He turned to look back. The tent was now barely visible at the edge of the meadows by the jumble of boulders. It had been an effort to pack his bag and turn up the hill once more. He had been tempted to get his mat from the tent and lie in the sun looking back down the valley, but he wanted to keep going. He had a feeling that time was not on his side. A tune kept repeating itself sonorously in his mind, it began with deep chords, then a scatter of bright high notes like shining jewels was thrown over the rich, dark fabric of the rhythm which was slow and sad and marched at a steady pace. With a last look down at the tent nestling securely in the coire, he shouldered his pack. It seemed unusually heavy and yet each day he had been leaving more and more behind. Now all the sack contained was a map and compass, a tattered scarf, a pair of gloves, his waterproofs, some bread and cheese and a flask of hot, sweet tea.

It was a strange ambition this, to climb all the higher peaks in one's own country. In fact, he had always been rather contemptuous of those who espoused it. He himself had been a genuine mountaineer and looked down on mere 'peak baggers'. It had never seemed to matter a jot to him whether he had climbed them all or not. And yet after he had been to the specialist and learned the truth, he had reckoned up the number of hills he had climbed and been surprised to find that he had only 23 left. Faced with a finite time, it seemed better to choose some possibly realisable goal and try to achieve it. Then, it had seemed a good idea. Elise, his second wife, had been all in favour and she had even accompanied him on the first few excursions. Now, nearing the end of the round, he wasn't so sure. Surely this was mere selfishness? What good did it do? Suppose he got to the final summit, so what? The goal was a common one nowadays

– vulgar even – surely he could have done something with the last bit of his life which actually helped other people? But what? It took a special kind of character to do things for other people and he had never been any good at it. He hated raising money for good causes. Part of him distrusted the motives of those who did. He had resisted the idea of getting his last few ascents ‘sponsored’. He didn’t want a picture in the local paper or half a minute on local radio. He felt, in some ways, very much alone. He suspected that Elise was already making plans for a future which did not contain him. And why not? She was an attractive woman. Like him, she had a family by a previous marriage. His own son was in Canada, his daughter in Australia. He usually heard from them at Christmas.

The sun was now dispersing the cloud round the coire rim. Wearily, placing his feet with care, he moved up the long slope towards the col. The ground was steep, loose and awkward. Sweat started to run down his forehead. Tiny droplets fell on to the lichen patterned rocks. His mind was acute and lucid and yet his body was losing the fight. He found himself pausing more often and leaning heavily on his ski-poles. Occasionally, he felt his heart lurch painfully before resuming its steady rhythm. He forced himself to breathe deeply but each step was becoming an effort. It reminded him of the Alps. He looked up. Not too far now to the col. There the going would be easier and only a gentle ridge remained to the summit. The sun was shining strongly now, its heat reflected by the rock. With exhaustion gaining on him, he moved slowly across the moss covered screes. Sighting an outcrop of rock, he made for it. Sinking down on a patch of dry grass under a convenient boulder he found shade. He let his head rest on his sack and looked out over the deep coire. Before long he was asleep.

Liberated from pain and anxiety he was wandering in great valleys topped by towering snow peaks. At night he rested by crackling aromatic fires and conversed with wise companions. His dreams were full of trees in blossom and gentle showers of rain. In the mornings they would go on in an unhurried way, penetrating farther into this strange country. It might have been a place or a state of mind, he never could decide.

“Excuse me! Excuse me!” A hand was shaking his shoulder. The sun had gone behind clouds and the breeze felt decidedly chill. A young man, really no more than a youth, was bending over him looking pale and concerned. He wore faded jeans, dirty trainers and a red tracksuit top. He had no pack.

“What’s the problem?”

“It’s my girlfriend, she’s stuck!”

“Where?”

The young man gestured towards the far side of the col where a long easy rock ridge led up from the dam on the far side of the mountain. He blabbered out his story, but it hardly needed telling. The girl had failed to make the last step up at the first time of asking. The boy was ahead. When

he found she wasn't following, he went back. By this time she had had a good look at the drop and become unnerved. He couldn't talk her up and, of course, he had no rope.

"She saw a dead sheep at the bottom, ken. I think it sort of frightened her.

"What's her name?"

* * *

At the third call a timid cry came up to him. The place was almost a photocopy of the one he had imagined. The difficulties short, the holds perfect, the ledges broad and covered with bilberry leaves.

If only the boy hadn't got too far ahead she might not have noticed the long drop to the coire floor. She was facing in to the rock, gripping a huge flake, fingers white. "Are you the Rescue?"

"No. But your companion's gone for them."

"Will he be long?"

"A couple of hours."

"Oh, God!"

"Sarah, why not sit down and have a cup of tea?"

"I can't!"

"Of course you can."

Gently, he coaxed her into letting go of the flake and taking his arm. She was shaking. She relaxed slightly when she turned away from the rock and saw how broad the ledge really was. He got her to sit down with her back to the mountain and look out over the peaceful valley below.

She had straight blonde hair which covered much of her face, an athletic figure, and she wore pink shell-suit trousers, a pale blue tee shirt and a pair of cheap walking boots. She had no pack, but she carried a cagoule of sorts tied round her waist. From her voice he knew she was English. As soon as she lowered herself shakily onto the ground she began to cry, dabbing ineffectually at her eyes with scraps of tissue. He felt in his pocket and produced a large handkerchief.

"It's clean."

She blew her nose loudly. He rummaged in his sack and got out the flask. He was glad, now, that he'd taken the trouble to brew up that morning. He handed her a cup. She almost spilt it but recovered herself. For the first time she half smiled.

"Were you just out for the day?"

She nodded ruefully and smiled again.

"I'm afraid I'm being a terrible nuisance."

"The only problem was not bringing a rope. It used to say in all the old guide books, 'A rope should be carried unless it is certain not to be needed'. It's good advice."

"We didn't even have a guide book. Darryl got directions from some blokes in the pub last night. It was my fault, I shouldn't have let him bring me up this way. But he was so keen and it was a nice day..."

"I know."

She was looking better now. Her voice was firmer and the colour had come back to her cheeks. He handed her a piece of cheese.

"You know," he said gently, "looking at you, I'd say you could make those moves up there no bother at all with a bit of encouragement. You're fit looking and I'll bet there's nothing wrong with your sense of balance."

"I got scared and started shaking. There's a sheep..." Anxiety showed in her face and her lip started to tremble.

"Yes, I know," he said quickly. "But I expect it was mainly because, the first time, you had no one with you. And then when Darryl came back he couldn't really understand the problem, told you it was easy? Not to make a fuss?"

"Well, he did rather. He meant well, but I kept looking down till I couldn't move. I was sort of paralysed."

"Suppose we did it together?" He could see her shrink back. "I could even give you some protection."

"How?"

"I've got a short length of strong cord. Look, it's the draw cord for my rucksack. It used to be a sling – that's a piece of climbing equipment. You're pretty thin, if I tie this round your waist there'll be just enough to put round my wrist. What d'you think? Should we give it a try?" He could sense that she wanted to, but needed a few moments for the desire to grow into the necessary determination. Looking up, he could see that in a few minutes the sun would come through the light clouds. He poured more tea and let her drink in silence. He felt exhausted and longed to be on his own again, but he struggled hard to overcome his impatience. She seemed a sensible girl. He liked her. She'd only been slightly unnerved. Distant memories of early days in the Lakeland Fells with Janet, his first wife, drifted back fleetingly, but that was in another age.

He could feel her tense up as he tied a bowline round her waist.

"Try to breathe deeply," he said. His own breathing felt none too good, shallow and at times painful. There wasn't really enough cord. But on the most awkward section, he knew that she only had to make two upward steps on slightly rounded rock and her outstretched hand could grasp a satisfying spike. He paused, the looped cord cutting into his flesh, and looked down. She had made one of the high steps and was on the narrow ledge. The next move was crucial. The wind blew her hair in her eyes. Below, steep rocks fell to the stony coire. A fine place.

"One more move, Sarah, then you're safe!" His chest was painful. He wished she'd get on with it then he could sit and rest for a while. She looked up and tried to smile. He could sense the dryness in her mouth.

Her hands scrabbled amongst the heather roots. Through the thin umbilical he could feel that she was shaking. Watching her carefully he tried to gauge just the right moment to pull her smoothly upwards.

* * *

Dr. Jenkins replaced the sheet. He washed his hands methodically and then sat at his desk to write the appropriate official form. In the doctor's lounge where a fire was burning, Nurse Duncan was dispensing tea. Sergeant MacPhail was drinking whisky, he had the telephone in his hand. The young people sat next to each other on the settee.

Nurse Duncan had inclined at first to be severe. ("You young people are not wise to go to the hill!"). But she had soon melted at their obvious distress.

"He was so kind and gentle," Sarah kept repeating. "It was all my fault!" Young Darryl avowed.

Sergeant MacPhail put down his glass and shook his head. "I'm afraid it couldn't be prevented," he said mournfully. "It had been going to end that way since the beginning of Time." His expression was more peaceful now.

"Roddy, you mustn't say such dreadful things," Nurse Duncan admonished him. "You will be frightening our young friends and they have been frightened enough."

The doctor entered the room quietly. "Well now," he said. "It seems that the immediate cause of death was a massive heart attack but," he went on hurriedly, sensing the young couple's contrition, "the deceased was a very ill man. Of course, I haven't carried out a full examination, but it's pretty clear he was suffering from the last stages of bowel cancer."

"The poor man," Nurse Duncan's voice was full of sympathy.

"You could say that, Morag," the doctor said slowly. "But after all, he obviously chose to spend his last days doing something he was fond of, and, at the very end, he was able to do something useful. How many of us are so lucky? Have you any word yet of who he was, Roddy?"

THE FINAL YEAR?

A climber's introspection

By John Steele

Preface:

WHAT follows is a personal account, an examination of a CLIMBER'S thoughts and recollections as he comes to realise that his decades of mountaineering activity are about to change down a few gears, maybe even go into idle. Perhaps he is not alone in his tale.

The observations are loosely based over a year's mountaineering activity, during which time, the CLIMBER has seen that the sands of time, the tank, is running low to empty and the road end appears to be in sight.

Introduction and the 'Round':

Before this happened though, one of the CLIMBER'S main ambitions was to complete 'The Round'.

An extract from that time shows:

"It had been the usual sort of week on the West Coast. The journey northwards through rain-soaked Arran, to fog-shrouded Mull, to gale-swept Skye had left us quite depressed. We then moved onto the mainland and after a restless midge-infested night under Liathach, we were all but for quitting the hills. The final morning saw clouds racing over Torridon, but not a breath of wind found its way onto our damp canvass – Scotland in June. 'Give it one more chance, after all it's light till midnight'. The journey north, past Gairloch and Gruinard through the lashing rain, changed quite suddenly, as the turn east to Dundonnell was made. The ascent of An Teallach that afternoon was truly magical, swirling mist, warm sunshine and numerous spectres, was enough to confirm that 'The Round' had to be completed."

By the following summer, only a handful of Munros remained left to the CLIMBER. The remote summit of Ben Avon and its satellites were traversed on a sweltering Cairngorm day, immediately followed by a long drive to Snowdonia, where he met up with some friends camping under the steep dark cliffs of Cloggy, the Dubh Loch of North Wales.

An extract from that occasion records:

*"Flat flats – yes I know where you're at,
snow, wind, rain, (or sheep),
I know you never sleep,
under those steep, steep faces."*

*I know I tossed your rocks around,
and pressed you with my dusty boots,
but have no doubt your soul remains,
a testament to your glacial roots."*

A winchman being lowered from an RAF Sea King search and rescue helicopter. Photo: Jas Hepburn.

Dead Man's Bogey, Ben Nevis. Photo: Ray Sefton.





And so it was, that on a misty day at the end of summer, the CLIMBER compleated.

Ben Lomond was the altar and his thoughts and prayers at that moment were thus:

*"The power of Shiva.
The gentleness of Sagamartha.
The glory of the Holy Spirit.
The all encompassing Allah.
Each having watched over me.
This was an endpoint of sorts.
The quest was complete.
But the journey was not yet over."*

The descent back to earth was but a glide, a flight down the golden slope.

It was only when the CLIMBER hit the trees at Rowardennan that his plans for the coming year were born.

Contemplation:

He had been thinking hard that winter about how to prolong the journey and continue the adventure. With the Munros completed, it was not however, the thought of new exploits that filled his view, rather memories of past and challenging days on the Scottish hills.

Some examples of these past days were:

"In Winter, getting to the top of a climb on Meggy on a blue sky day only to take refuge in the snowhole at the Window shortly afterwards as a snowstorm engulfed the mountain, a trial on Arran when an ice box climb on a Ben Nuis chimney was followed by a storm-soaked crawl over the A 'Chir comb, or standing in Giants Head on Lochnagar watching the top pitch peel off, after all it was over 70° that day in Ballater in March!

In Summer, tripping over nine ptarmigan chicks on the summit of Lurg Mhor, running from gunfire on a misty Slioch only to return another day and wonder why the cairn was in the wrong place, and blistering his hands in the summer heat on an attempted new route above Coruisk."

This level of adventure, the CLIMBER knew, was coming to an end. His last real rock climb in Scotland had been the one attempted above Coruisk. On ice, it had been a frightening solo venture onto the serpentine ice slopes of Mount Cook's South Face. The game was up. He could no longer be so bold.

The Year in Question:

And this is really where the year begins. With his Scottish sojourn over and his Alpine exploits now curtailed, the CLIMBER had to enlist support if he wanted to continue the journey.

He was given the chance to explore along the Nepalese border with Tibet, then to climb on Everest. Before this though, several weekends of preparation were required and several quick dashes to the hills made, just as the Foot and Mouth epidemic closed in on the mountains. Ascents were done in semi-darkness.

The Salisbury Crags with Edinburgh below. Photo: Alastair Matthewson.

William Wood. Photo: Jim Wilkie.

An encounter of that time records:

*"Two lads they were,
quite happy to stand on my hands
and move on past;
but that was low down. High up; ice, mist, darkness, fear,
and then yes, then, they were on my tail not my hands.
Just behind, just enough behind to see my print.
Bowed heads at the boot."*

Next came the trip to Nepal. A trek into the Manaslu region involving a circuit of the 8000m peak by passing through a restricted area and crossing a remote pass.

An extract from the trek reads:

"This was a sublime journey, not only were we the second group, but also the first Brits to cross the pass that year. We also took time out to visit the two expedition base camps on Manaslu, the Poles and then the Ukrainians, who put up a hard new technical route."

A lot fitter, the CLIMBER arrived in Kathmandu, then set off for Lhasa in Tibet. The initial goal was Everest base camp. His group arrived in a blizzard, took several days rest then set off up the East Rongbuk glacier approach to advanced base camp at 6500m, where he met up with the summit expedition. Several days later everyone was called into the mess tent. The atmosphere was tense.

"We go up tomorrow, all of us, said the leader."

Next morning the CLIMBER set off for the North Col. He struggled through much of the morning to make the col, and on reaching it, collapsed exhausted in the drifted snow. He was not alone, for among the other expeditions established on the col, a number of climbers were already freaked out by the Everest experience. Some retreated in a stupor, others just flailed about among the tents, and they were still 1800m from the top!

The CLIMBER descended late in the afternoon:

"We could only go as far as the col, but still had to get back down before the sun moved behind the NE ridge. Without special gear and oxygen support we could not stay the night above 7000m. Just as we completed the descent down the ice face and moved onto the level glacier below the col, the sun dipped behind Everest. A wind got up and our bodies chilled in an instant. Cold and hungry I kept urging myself to keep calm as my brain was hit by the intense shiver caused by fatigue at high altitude. We all make it safely back to camp that evening. Everest is climbed the following day."

On return, a climbing trip to Antarctica was offered to the CLIMBER. How could he refuse. So by mid-December he was at sea heading due south into the Southern Ocean on the back of a swell, across the icy waters below Cape Horn. A few days later, his first climb was a windswept snow dome which marks the northern most point of the vast frozen continent: "The Ben Hope of Antarctica."

His thoughts at the time are:

"What joy at our very first climb on this magnificent continent. We were lucky. I imagine this point has more days of raging storm in a year than Ben Nevis!"

Several days later and farther south he is again at the sharp end. This time trying a new route on one of the numerous ice peaks that rose from just above the beach. After hours of route-finding and front-pointing, it was decided the climb was proving too dangerous in the difficult conditions, and was eventually abandoned in late afternoon.

On turning round he notes:

"The sleaty view out across the sound was quite surreal, steely blue water, flecked with white growlers, under leaden skies, all of this taken in from a stance on crampon tips."

The weather continued to be fierce. He next came across a tourist ship, which had just run for shelter in the face of a Force 10. The ship he was on slunk past the scarred tourist vessel, then the skipper quite deliberately rammed into the shore pack ice, so the climbers could disembark to try their next snow peak. When the CLIMBER reached its summit, it reminded him of topping out many years ago above SC Lochan, wind blasted, exposed and uncomfortable. His partner now though, had climbed Everest and K2, so he knew he was in good company.

They made a hasty retreat and on reaching the shoreline he recorded:

"Our ship eventually appeared out of the twilight and storm, as we sank wearily through the sea slush of the late spring pack. What a day, or rather what a night, for it was after midnight when we clambered back on board and enjoyed a well-deserved meal. Forget all form of normalcy when contemplating climbing in Antarctica!"

After this adventure, New Year arrived in the UK, with no further plans laid. This did not particularly dishearten the CLIMBER, for he had now completed his three main mountaineering goals, climbing the Munros, climbing high on Everest and climbing in remote Antarctica.

Postscript:

The CLIMBER had reached a point where he thought these achievements would mark the end of a year of personal examination, after all, the culmination of a successful climbing career had been achieved. So, naturally, he thought it was now time to contemplate pursuits other than climbing, pursuits that had been put off for decades. But yet, he was still not certain.

So the CLIMBER took himself away, away up into the hills to contemplate, to make sure that he really had reached the end of his personal climbing exploits. He sat alone amidst the drifted snow and rocks of the Bealach Dubh, watching the frost crystals build on his tent as darkness closed in around him on the remote pass. Eventually, well after dark, he retired to his shelter with a new resolve, that maybe, just maybe, there was one *real* climbing adventure left.

One more tap on the gauge might just be enough.

OLDER, WISER – 40 YEARS IN MOUNTAIN RESCUE

**By Terry Confield,
(Team Leader Lochaber Mountain Rescue Team.)**

I JOINED Lochaber Mountaineering Club in 1964. This was also the year I joined the rescue team, as the Club formed the backbone of the mountain rescue team in the Lochaber area at that time. It was the club that initiated meetings with the local council, the police and the JMCS to find a source of money for equipment to be used on rescues. The money was somehow found and the 'team' was lavishly equipped with, 12 ice axes, 12 pairs of Robert Lawrie Mk IV boots, 12 pairs of mitts and 12 yellow waterproof jackets (with 'Mountain Rescue' stamped on the back)

Typically, the call-out system in these days consisted of the village policeman arriving at your door at any time of the day or night to alert you to the fact that somebody was in trouble on Ben Nevis. We would then meet at the main police station in Fort William where we would be given the details of the incident or search. In those days the team consisted of members of the Club and a number of police officers.

We would leave from the Ben Nevis Distillery carrying every bit of kit we had, as we did not know how many hours, or days, the rescue might take. The stretcher (Thomas or Duff) and ropes were taken up to the CIC hut and left there until they were required for evacuation of the casualty.

In the early days radio communications, (never mind mobile phones! *Ed.*) were almost non-existent with the only contact with the police station being through the CIC hut radio. The greatest disadvantage of this was that we could not be alerted should the missing climbers turn up safe and sound, and on quite a few occasions we found ourselves on the hill all day, despite the missing party having turned up at 8:30 that morning! On one particular call-out we were tasked to search for an elderly gentleman who had set out to walk from Kinlochleven to Fort William via Wade's Road. He was overdue and it was dark so the team was split into two groups, one lot to go in by Glen Nevis and the other by Kinlochleven. The first group was transported up to the top car park in the police van which then returned to pick up the second party and take them to Kinlochleven. I was in the Glen Nevis contingent and we quickly found the missing person at the old Steall ruin, which meant we needed to alert the other team so that they wouldn't leave (and, more importantly, to get the van to return for us!). Communication

to our base was the telephone box at the Glen Nevis Youth Hostel a good five miles away and, because of my youth I was selected to carry the news. I remember feeling quite chuffed walking through the gorge when this apparition jumped over my head. It may have only been a sheep but I took off like a rocket and in what seemed like no time I was at the Youth Hostel phoning the police station. A little slower than radio waves perhaps, but thankfully, still in time to prevent the other party having to start their search.

One of the great benefits of a rescue on the Ben was being able to place the casualty on a trolley on the British Alcan small gauge railway after the long carry down the Allt a' Mhuilinn. This trolley was known to the rescue team (but thankfully not the casualty.) as the 'Dead Man's Bogie'. In all honesty, it would probably have been just as fast to take the casualty down to the distillery, but the long struggle to get off the mountain with the stretcher meant that we could not wait to get rid of it. However, with only one foot brake pedal, it's a miracle that no team member was injured while hitching a lift on the Bogie.

In 1969, Lochaber Mountain Rescue Association was set up to promote a more professional approach to mountain rescue and we became a registered charity to enable us to go out and raise serious funds. A constitution was put in place and a committee was formed to manage the team. The most significant change at this time was the number of rescues we were called out on. Instead of the handful of the past few years, we were now attending more than 40 a year. To assist us the police supplied us with various all-terrain vehicles. First of all a Snowtrack, then a Garron and lastly a VP8, all driven by a police constable. Looking back, we seemed to spend more time rescuing these contraptions and putting tracks back on than carrying out the actual rescue.

Thankfully, help was on the way and the Wessex helicopters that were stationed at RAF Leuchars became available for mountain incidents. This was the start of a beautiful, not to mention successful relationship with the helicopter crews from the RAF and the Royal Navy. I have no doubt in my mind that without their help we could not cope with the number of rescues and searches we are now involved in.

On a modern day rescue there are many differences from the old days, but the job is fundamentally the same. A particularly memorable example was when two climbers were overdue on North East Buttress. We had a full team call-out for first light and had also requested the use of a helicopter. The Royal Navy helicopter duly arrived and went straight to the scene where the crew managed to locate and lift off one of the climbers. The other person could not be found on the face and

so team members were deployed on to the summit and in Observatory Gully. By this time the mist had come in and was covering the upper part of the mountain. We tried shouting but got no response.

In the meantime, the team in the gully below came across climbing equipment and avalanche debris. The summit party descended to meet up with the bottom party and a major probing and digging exercise was started. Nothing was found, and because of the first climber's insistence that his colleague must be on the same route we decided to head for the summit via the Arête. We were eventually forced to retreat because of the high avalanche risk and headed back to Fort William.

We had something to eat and then started back up the Ben by Coire Giubhsachan to the summit. One of the team was lowered over the top of North East Buttress where he located the other missing climber below the Mantrap. He was, sadly, dead and encased in snow and ice. The body was pulled up and evacuated off the mountain. The relevance of this rescue is that it is an example of the determination and self-sacrifice required by the members of any team carrying out rescues in the mountains.

To my mind, the greatest change in mountaineering in the last 40 years is in equipment. We now have clothing that keeps us warm and dry (hence the reason we have not had a victim suffering from hypothermia in years), better designs of crampons and ice axes, and, of course, GPS.

So, we have to ask ourselves, what goes wrong apart from the normal accidents? Well, these haven't changed over the years. They are the old classics of not allowing enough time, tackling routes that are too hard or out of condition, and of course, the cost of navigation errors, especially on the summit of the Ben is still as high as ever. Which is why our mountain rescue teams will always be in business.

LAST SUMMER

Rambles in the Rockies and High Sierras

By Cairns Dickson

OH YES, I had been here before, not to Colorado, not to the Rockies, but to that feeling. The feeling that your head is sore, your lungs open but nothing much goes in, your feet drag over the floor. Yes, my first trip to altitude in quite a while and like hangovers, I'd forgotten I wasn't going to do it again.

Here I am at 14,000ft. on North Mount Massive in the Sawatch Mountains of Central Colorado. There are about 56 separate summits higher than 14,000ft. in the Rockies. They have been classified interestingly enough as 'Fourteeners', and yes, people do seem to want to climb all of them – sounds familiar. Surprisingly, we seem to have strayed from the guidebook description and are now ascending some 'Talus', the local name for scree. Yes, I've been on scree slopes before too, so why the hell am I doing it again. It's long, steep and the sharp little stones are very slippery. No, I am not at all happy, The col we are heading for is at least 500ft. higher and I'm tee eye rr e dee.

Last night, we bivied at the trailhead, in the trees at 11,000ft. Why couldn't I sleep, perhaps my body was adjusting to the altitude? No, I didn't need altitude to keep me awake, although it undoubtedly helped. I was scared, scared of bears, black ones, quite common round these parts. "No no, they don't bother with humans and anyway you can just not look at 'em or play dead," so they say. Scared, I was bloody terrified, my first night in Colorado and I couldn't sleep a wink. Every crack, every insect, every rustle in the leaves was to be the start of my life or death struggle with Bruin.

On with the ascent, the scree had done for me and I had just been overtaken by Duncan. Duncan McNeill, my old friend from Perth. He had moved out to Bend in Oregon with his family a few years before. He had just driven to Denver from Oregon through Idaho and Utah in his magnificent Toyota pick-up, (a cross between a transit and a three-toner). It was well kitted out too. There was enough trail mix on board to get from Cerro Torre to Mt. McKinley (excuse me – Denali). A solid 36-hour drive, perhaps Duncan wasn't at his best. He had spent the previous night sweltering in his pick-up, seething with anger that his old pal had failed to turn up on his scheduled flight. He was, of course, concerned: "Where the **** is the useless ***** *****", he inquired of Margaret.

"Do you know how much this * * * * * phone call is costing me."

"No sorry Duncan, I don't know that either I'm afraid," replied my puzzled wife.

Naturally, I was in Cincinnati – well where else would I be, where was Cincinnati anyway? I could have been anywhere, but there I was in my air con cubicle, courtesy of United Airlines. We, that is the airline and I, had failed to make our connection. Thus highlighting my inexperience as a transatlantic traveller in failing to notice the short transfer time. Perhaps I should have paid more bucks for a more direct flight.

Duncan who had only recently stopped working as a professional ski patroller was well rested at the col long before I eventually arrived, on all fours. I think he was too concerned to gloat.

“Hurry up Cairns – y’ never ust tae be ‘s slow is this,” says Duncan.

“Relax Dunc what’s yer hurry,” says I, looking forward to an extended bask on this airy, but comfortable, col a mere few hundred feet below the summit.

“Thunder.” That was it, thunder storms in the afternoons are a frequent and unfortunate reality for us rambblers in the Rockies. The weather was changing, colder, sudden gusts, then silent stillness. Feeling as awful as I was, I would have happily buggered off down, but that summit, our first ‘Fourteener’, was too close. Duncan having not been this high before, at least on a mountain, was keen to go on. Fear of lightning overtook my splitting head and aching lungs as we made the final ascent up a steep boulder strewn ridge. A cursory glance around from this remote summit and I knew we shouldn’t be here. Plunging downwards, ever faster into the comfort of that warmer and thickening air, it wasn’t long before the hailstones started. Phew! – back to the truck, I’ll recover.

Why am I not? Why do I still feel hellish three days on? I suppose the valleys being at 11,000ft. may have something to do with it.

“I’ll give it a 100 yards then you’ll have to go on yourself,” I said to poor old Duncan who had been listening to me moan about my aching chest, my inflamed pleura and my imminent heart attack. We were setting off up Huron Peak, 14,001ft. in the San Juan range, a delightful stroll up through the trees to an enchanting high plateau. To my great pleasure and astonishment the farther I went the better I felt. By midday we were on the summit of our second ‘Fourteener’. The silence, the space, the glory of this Rocky Mountain chain was starting to hit me and at three miles with 3000ft. of ascent, it was a shorter day than many a Munro. I felt great.

My sense of wellbeing was short-lived, however, as I fell into conversation with an American who had just arrived. I thought that being a local I should check out his knowledge of bears.

“Bears, you don’t want to worry about bears.”

I was immensely relieved.

“No no,” he continued: “It’s mountain lions that you really want to worry about, they’ll stalk you for days.”

I slunk away to eat my burrito and contemplate this greater menace.

Duncan, unfortunately, was not so hot, he was starting to feel the altitude and his boots were too small.

Handles Peak 14,048ft. in the San Juan range was next, I was on my own. Still, you're never lonely in these mountains thanks to the multitude of tiny furry creatures that are just everywhere, all shapes and sizes from dormice to marmots, not to mention the bears and mountain lions of course. I thought with some sadness how barren Scotland seemed in comparison. Over-population by deer, deforestation and over-grazing by the over-valued sheep are perhaps to blame? Not that any self-respecting animals bother to inhabit the dense conifer monocultures that provide such effective tax breaks for others.

So, it's Mount Sneffels next, (14150ft.) Dunc was trying out his toes but, alas! We parted just above Yankee Boy Basin and I continued alone up this rugged and shapely peak. I knew it would be my last Colorado 'Fourteener'. Duncan could barely walk and our long planned five-week walking adventure was over in just 10 days.

My return flight was from Denver and I could soon be at home, decorating. Little persuasion from Dunc was required though and we were back on the road, 1500 miles, 30 hours, Colorado, Utah, Idaho into Oregon and back to Bend. My son, Finlay, and I had been here at Easter, enjoying perfect skiing on the deserted slopes of Mount Bachelor, a volcano in the cascades, not too far from Mount St. Helen's! Round comes my other old pal from Perth, Brian MacMillan. We first climbed together at Craig y Barnes in 1972 and although Brian has lived in Oregon for the last 17 years we kept in touch.

"Well I suppose we should do something now you're here," says Brian.

Training is very important, so I thought I might visit Bend's 'Alien Rock', and found myself on an intriguing little device called a Roc'n roller. A cross between a blackboard and a hamster wheel, I felt like an idiot, a tired idiot. Two days later we were in Nevada heading for Yosemite and then there I was in Toulome looking way down the valley to Half Dome.

"Hi Torch, ya still here then," says Brian to the warden at Saddlebag Lake. This campground at 10,500ft. is cooler at night and enjoys great views over Mt. Dana (13,053ft.)

"Torch, what a stupid name," says I.

"Yea, he lost a third of his skin in a fire."

I shut up. Torch was a lovely character who had had lots of dealings with wolves, bears etc. we talked a lot and I realised then the importance of not sleeping with your food. Saddlebag Lake was the scene of a desperate struggle for survival in the early 1800s when the wagon trains of the early settlers were caught in the ferocious storms of winter. Many died beneath an unbelievable depth of snow.

Brian was recovering from some ailment or other, which meant he would

not be climbing at his best. I was naturally disappointed to hear this, but I had whiled away a few indolent days at Creag Dhubh earlier in the summer with my pals Dave Page and Mike Dougal. I was confident that I could at least get us up something. It turned out not to be that much of a problem as Brian's worst seemed to be substantially better than my best – 5.13c didn't sound like it was going to be in my repertoire and I couldn't understand the grading system anyway. I did have a lurking fear that I would fail to get off the ground on anything that Brian wanted to climb. Toulome at 9000ft. is cooler and quieter than the Yosemite Valley at this time of year.

Our first route was West Crack on Daff Dome 5.9? A couple of delicate slab moves just off the ground then into a friendly crack for 100ft. or so to belay. A short awkward overhang started the next pitch. He was out of sight, I was paying out the rope pretty fast with the odd pause for protection. Eventually, I felt the little tug that told me it was my turn. You could jam fingers and toes in the crack but there were lovely little cubes of quartz studded into the granite all over the place, about one inch wide they were. Wonderful climbing, I was enjoying myself, but where was Brian? Still no sign, my calf muscles were getting that front pointing feeling and this was just the second pitch.

"Well it is a 70-metre rope," Brian explained as I landed on the stance – which was just two of these little quartz cubes. We were basically up the route. Magnificent, what a climb and what a view. I was standing atop a single chunk of granite gazing across at another one, bigger and with an enormous sweep of rock flowing from its rounded summit to the valley floor. This was Fairview Dome and two days later we were on it. The regular route 5.9 (1100ft.) Parallel cracks one metre apart, blind and about one inch deep at an angle of about 75°. Phew! The crux low down. Above lay a series of connecting grooves and cracks. Well protected, outstanding quality and a mantelshelf onto the summit, I was speechless. Two great routes in three days, what next?

A trip down the valley to see the sights and maybe a climb? No chance, too hot, too humid and too busy. We scurried back to Toulome and the cool serenity of Saddlebag Lake.

"The Third Pillar of Dana...no, I haven't heard of it," but this was our next route, 800ft., 5.10c and rave reviews in the topo. Thinking I was on my way up the Allt'a Mhuilinn we eventually emerged onto the Dana plateau at about 12,000ft. Definitely no 800ft. columns of granite round here I thought. The plateau itself seemed to me a lot like the Cairngorms, then it stopped. Over the edge we were looking down to Lee Vining and Mono Lake with the Nevada desert stretching away for ever. Searching for the route we were faced with a mess of broken, soft, awful looking stuff.

"Humm – can't say much for the first and second pillars."

After much ferreting we eventually found the Third Pillar. It certainly was impressive, steepening to vertical on the last two pitches.

"Best 10c in the world, etc. etc.," sayeth the book. We were obviously in for a real treat. This solid 800ft. pillar rose out of nothing, the rock baking yellow in the morning sun. Slithering and sliding down the exposed and broken access ridge (maybe the fourth pillar) there we were with nowhere to go but up, it felt very alpine. Voices. Groan. We were not alone, would this lead to problems on the route? Pair one were already well established, pair two got lost on the first pitch so off we went. Running pitches one and two together we were quickly clear of potential cluster problems. More cracks, grooves and laybacks, I felt my climbing was OK, we had already done two fine routes and I had not yet disgraced myself. This was different however, a harder route in a more remote situation, I was a bit worried about how I would perform on the much vaunted 10c pitches at the top. Still, we weren't anywhere near them yet, my feet were on a very steep slab and my hands were too high.

"Ooops," I was off...shite! "Huh, I can do this, let me at it," says I to myself. Ego dented, I thought it best to get up it quick and try to forget this regrettable little slip. Twang, off again. Humm, my fingers are tiring, I'm puffing and panting. This climb is at about 12,000ft. much higher than the Toulome climbs at -9000 ft. Baking hot, dehydrated, rasping breath, I was feeling it. This really was not a good time for me to be bugging about. As I rested I tried to will a bit more energy into my ailing fingers. Would they hold? Yes...yes...yes I was up - that move at least. What a place, climbing now up a large weathered flake, delightful climbing, amazing rock features and what a view. Nestled in a small stance, looking up this steepening pillar it did feel very alpine and hard to imagine we would top out onto a plateau the size of Ben Macdhu.

The pair above were now on the last pitch, it did look impressive if a bit daunting, but Brian seemed to be more bothered by the heat. He had always moaned about 'the heat' and I puzzled why he moved to a place where the summer temperature can reach 100° F.? The pair below were themselves experiencing some difficulties on the slab. The top three pitches were sensational, very exposed and inviting a varied range of moves. I did find the climbing hard, but once I started I suppose it went well enough. Brian seemed to enjoy it too. His climbing was relaxed yet precise, never spending more than 15 minutes on a pitch. I've taken longer placing a runner.

A refreshment at Tioga Pass then back up to Saddlebag Lake to check out recent bear sightings with Torch. The 'Sierra Nevadas', were going down very well, this local brewery had thankfully produced one of the nicest beers I had come across in the whole of America! Unfortunately, my head was not really quite where it was meant to be. We were on our next route. Brian was pretty keen to do this one and I felt I had a duty to tag along after our three previous and magnificent excursions.

We were back on Fairview Dome. Lucky Streaks, 5.10d and 800ft. with another topo description full of superlatives. Maybe I was feeling confident because we'd been doing a lot of climbing or maybe I was still a bit drunk from last night. I was thinking to myself that it didn't look that bad and anyway the first pitch was an easy-angled slab, Brian was already halfway up it. Bloody hell, a testy little balance move, there's no such thing as a free lunch.

"We're goin up there," drawls Brian. PNW (Pacific North West) talk has eventually gotten to this boy from Stornoway. He was pointing to this little crack, vertical, one inch deep and blind. My heart sank.

"One or two little pulls on that one," he calls from the belay 10 minutes later. I didn't like the look of it and I definitely didn't like the sound of it. Gear pulling would be out of the question with Brian overseeing my halting progress from his luxurious stance. So just how much could I stuff my toes into this wretched little crack?

"Well, your shoes are two sizes too big," laughs Brian, with an 'I'm up here and you're down there' sort of a laugh. I was feeling terrible and I was pumped.

"Yes, very fingery," I slumped into the capacious stance.

The next pitch or two, 10c and 10d had their own distinct pleasures and it would have to be said that the climbing was fantastic. Fantastic that is if 5.10 is your sort of grade, not quite so hot if you're really a V. Diff. man. We had surmounted the technical difficulties and were at the bottom of another very long crack. My sugar balance was returning to normal and I had been eating my protein bars. They taste like shit but it's what we rock athletes have to eat.

"We're too high to rap off on one rope," says Brian, getting twitchy.

"What d'yi want tae bale out for, A've only jist got here," says I.

"Weather."

Here we go again. Brian was off, I could barely feed the rope out fast enough. A big pitch, I followed as quickly as I could. Off again, 30ft. runner, large hole (like the one on the Lilly at Aberdour), horizontal traverse 100ft. out left, no protection. Up I go, balance moves, lots of them. Then it starts, the ominous tink and splat of hail on my helmet. It's raining, I've taken the runner out and I'm traversing left. The rock is getting wet, it's no place to linger and no place to fall. It didn't half clear my head. After one or two moments of quiet reflection I arrived at the stance. Well it wasn't really a stance but I was glad to be there anyway, laying away off a 'Friend' with feet slipping off a slab. The deep crack above was running like the drainpipe it was. It was now pouring. After I had had a good bugger about with the rope, (I felt I was due one), I glanced over to a very drookit-looking Brian. He was off again, very much like a rat up a drainpipe. I was worried about the volume of water cascading around Brian and relieved to see him disappear over the top, it was a splendid lead. My fingers were

numb but the crack was big enough for hand jams. The climbing was a little easier and haste took over from fear. We were both scared of lightning. Arriving on the top of Fairview we dropped the metalware and scuttled into a big crack. At least we weren't sticking out like sore thumbs. Phew, another Toulome classic – food and beers in Lee Vining then back to camp.

"Cairns!" Why the **** was Brian calling me at 5a.m. The bear was wrestling with our coolbox. I froze.

"Photograph it yerself, am no stickin ma heed oot the tent," he must think am an eedjit.

"Shooo," says Brian from the safety of his pick up.

"You'll have to do better than that," says I, but the bear on seeing the movement shuffled off. I looked out to see the backside of this large furry object ambling off back into the woods. I was gobsmacked, what a creature. Mercifully, it had not been able to get into our armour-plated coolbox. Bears getting access to food leads to all sorts of problems for them and us.

Our next outing took us past the shapely Cathedral and Unicorn peaks to the start of the 6km-long Mathes Crest, an endless knife-edge of rock set in magnificently remote country. That fluffy little white cloud doesn't really look like anything does it? Well does it? Paranoia! We'd been here before too and we were for bugging off. A tremendous walk through wild woods and open spaces led us to the Cathedral Lakes then down the John Muir Trail and back into Toulume.

Next day, we ended up doing a couple of short sport routes on Mendicott Dome having failed to locate 'Middle Of Nowhere Dome' deep in the back woods. We had done OK, but it was time for another long, long drive back to Oregon. Duncan explained graphically how his toenails were removed, acting on the assumption that we would, of course, be keen to know. A few beers in the tub then off to bed. It seemed like I had just dozed off when I was being shaken awake.

"Get out yur bed 'am sellin it."

Duncan immediately removed my bed and put it on the pavement. I was puzzled but this was the Pacific equivalent of a car boot sale and sure enough it was sold while still warm!

A glorious day at Smith Rock, (the local crag made of consolidated volcanic ash) included the ascent of Magic Light at 5.11a. I had failed on this route at Easter and was keen for the rematch. Brian continued with some 5.13a, indignant at his slow recovery from illness, Farewells with Duncan, Gina and all my other chums in PNW then off to Denver to get my flight. However, Brian was keen to see Long's Peak and visit friends in Wyoming, so back on the road again. The very long straight road through Idaho led us to the City of Rocks National Park at 6500ft. in south central Idaho. I slept on a picnic table and woke up among an arrangement of massive granite boulders the size of cathedrals thrown down in handfuls by the Gods.

It's roasting at 7.00am. Brian is already ranting about the heat and we are ready to start on 'She's The Bosch' 5. 11d , a sport route put up with some help from the famous power tool manufacturer. This was extremely difficult, the holds, scarcely meriting the name, were little metamorphic scabs peeling off a granitic core. I had no compunction about taking the odd aided rest, 5. 11 at 7am, I must be dreaming? On into Utah, through Salt Lake for lunch in Snowville at 105°F. then on again to Boulder in Colorado for breakfast in the 'Buff' – a pretentious local cafe.

Hacking our way through dense scrubland and fallen trees, we were now lost. We were supposed to be heading to 'The Right Book' crag on Lumpy Ridge outside Estes Park. The truly magnificent 'Twin Owls' looked down in disgust. 'Fat City' 5.10c, another classic of the crag, put up by Ray Jardine, pioneer of the camming device. It looked like a walk in the park. The first pitch was a leftward trending crack wandering up a slab. The friction was splendid but turned out to be harder than it looked. Brian was already up the short second pitch, which was the crux of the climb. A horizontal three-foot roof with a three-inch wide crack loomed above.

"Hello, hello, am I missing something," I inquired feebly. I knew it, it had all caught up with me.

I'd survived the 'Fourteeners', Lucky Streaks and even the bears, but I knew when I was beat. Even with Friends for aid and my friend above I still found it hard. The next pitch was decidedly non-trivial but we were up.

"Yes Cairns, its time you went home."

FROM AULD REEKIE TO THE BEN

By Alastair Matthewson

ON JULY 25, 2002 Jamie Thin and myself were climbing the Great Buttress of Salisbury Crag in Edinburgh's Holyrood Park, 100 years to the day after its first ascent by W. A. Morrison, W. C. Newbigging and L. Briquet, a Swiss guide¹. Of course, making a centenary ascent is more than merely climbing the route in an old set of tweeds with a pipe dangling from your lips. There is that sense of history to absorb and the opportunity to contemplate the characters and ethics of 100 years ago from a closer perspective.

William Morrison was a well liked and respected SMC character. He joined the Club in the same year, 1902, as the Great Buttress ascent and was apparently endowed, with the usual share of delightful eccentricities². "He did not approve of early starts", which perhaps explains his attraction to the short and easily accessible cliffs of Salisbury Crag close to his Edinburgh home. One story recalls how he once urgently cycled to the Crag, clad only in his pyjamas, to carry out the rescue of a cragbound lady climber. The time of day is not mentioned.

It was to Morrison's account³ of the Great Buttress (originally Eastern Buttress of the Great Quarry) climb that I turned after our own ascent, casually slipped in after work one gloomy and rather breezy midweek evening. The rhythmic beat of the Paul Simon concert wafting intermittently from the Castle, along with the distinctive smell of the breweries, lent a particularly bizarre atmosphere to the whole affair. For us a mere jaunt in the (Holyrood) park, but back in 1902 the old boys' ascent merited an almost full-page description in the SMCJ. Morrison described the crux thus: "The upper right-hand edge of the middle slab is grasped and the narrow ledge above the right-hand white slab is gained by the timely assistance of a finger-hold above." Above, a "balance-pull" ended the main difficulties. The red dolerite has maybe weathered a little further, stabilised by a few more ascents, but that description of a few feet of rock and how to overcome it was exactly what we found 100 years on. The "balance-pull" is now a mantelshelf move of course, (when did that particular terminology arise?).

The Great Buttress is an imposing line on the highest section of the Crag and it was this fact, combined with Morrison's description of the rock as being in "a glorious state of primeval rotteness", which led to the climb's reputation. Indeed, the original description fully admits to a degree of prior top-rope practice or pre-cleaning which seems more in accordance with some modern first ascents: "Several mornings were spent by Newbigging about (the crux) while (Morrison) anchored himself above with 120ft of rope to give assistance if required."

Graded Difficult in 1950s Holyrood Park guidebooks, now Very Difficult, this was however not a climb at the technical limit of its day. Three weeks earlier in the late June heatwave, Harold Raeburn (the original Crag aficionado) had climbed his eponymous 'Arete' on Ben Nevis, now graded Severe. Raeburn, no doubt, had been honing his technical skills on the Crag along with the Inglis Clarks, who were with him on the Ben. He had soloed Observatory Buttress (Very Difficult) two days earlier.

Perhaps news of these Nevis ascents stirred Newbigging's urges for exploration, because, a month after the Great Buttress ascent, he made the journey to Fort William with "a Swiss companion". The description of his 80 Minute Route, just left of Raeburn's Arete, immediately follows Morrison's of Great Buttress in the Journal. The first ascents listing in the current guidebook to Ben Nevis (2002) declines to name explicitly the Swiss gentleman who was sampling the delights of climbing on Britain's highest mountain in 1902 but I can't help but assume that it was the enigmatic Briquet in action again.

References:

1. SMC Climbers Guide *Lowland Outcrops*.
2. SMCJ Vol. 27, p393-94 (1963).
3. SMCJ Vol. 7, p241 (January 1903).

PSYCHELING WEEKEND

By Al Scott

"IT'S like riding a bike – you never forget how to do it," I replied, after being asked how I felt about not having done any winter climbing for around eight years.

I was planning to go away with the Rannoch for a weekend trip up to the Ling Hut in Torridon. It was a somewhat daunting prospect, having spent the last eight years or so playing happy families. OK, I had done some rock climbing (mostly hot Spanish sport rock it has to be said), but this was WINTER furfuxake! – I was going to have to do some serious psyching up for this.

The first thing to do was to go up into the attic and blow the cobwebs off my ice-axes, crampons and double boots. Then it was only the cobwebs in my arms and my head to worry about. Ach! It'll be alright man – *riding a bike* – and all that.

As usual with the Rannoch, plans were constantly changing and then being re-changed. In the light of the diabolical forecast, we decided on a criminally early start on the Saturday morning and a stop-off to climb in the Northern Corries, before going on to Torridon.

We arrived at the Cairngorm car park at around 8am, and it was getting busy. A myriad of plankers and board-stupids were milling around preparing to be funicularised. Worryingly, there were also several myriads of 'climbing types' about, and I could make out a serpentine of bodies snaking its way towards Coire An t'Sneachda in the murky distance. Hmmm, things had changed a bit since I was last out winter climbing.

After sorting out the teams and the gear, we joined the crocodile and slithered towards the corrie. Colin and Shandboy edged ahead – they probably had something hard in mind. I tucked in behind Bish – *riding a bike, riding a bike* – I had something easy in mind. The crags soon came into view, and it was with a gasp of incredulity I saw there were millions of the buggers! A swift head count revealed it was closer to 150 and a quick look at my GPS 'accent-o-meter' confirmed there were 68 Nigels, 46 Rogers and 32 Simons, and of course us, two Als (one big, one wee), a Colin and a Bish.

It was like looking at a termite mound, there were little black dots clambering all over the place. But wait a minute, there was a route with only one party on it. A swift look at the guide showed it to be *Doctor's Choice* (** IV,4). OK, that'll do. It was maybe a wee bit harder than I wanted but it was realistically all there was to do. Bish and I geared up and made a zig-zag bee-line for the belay at the bottom, slipstreaming each other all the way – *riding a bike, riding a bike*. The other party was a pitch-and-a-half up so no problem there But wait, a couple of bandits in

a breakaway from the peloton to our right were going for the same route. We had to step up a gear or two before beating them in a bunch finish, and would you believe it, it was wee Al and Colin. "Form a queue lads! Form a queue!"

After losing the toss (I always was a useless tosser), Bish set off up the first pitch, he made it look straight-forward enough and he shouted down he had a bombproof belay. So up I went, full of trepidation and reminding myself – *riding a bike, riding a bike* – and so it was, because my feet were pedalling like buggery all the way up the pitch, and my 'handlebars' were flailing all over the place. Jeezoman! My ego had a big puncture in it by the time I slumped, shattered and shaking, on to the belay.

It was on Pitch 2, the crux, that I realised why I was having such a hard time. My gear-ratio was all wrong – *riding a bike, riding a bike*. My 'gear' was ancient, a 20-year-old Charlet Moser curved axe, a mid-Eighties expedition freebie Cassin ice hammer (rubbish, no wonder they were giving them away) and a pair of old Salewa crampons with the front-points all but filed away.

So Bish was 'in the van' for the rest of the climb, and it was only by the time we got to the final superb, long grade III/IV ice pitch that I finally relaxed a bit in my saddle – *riding a bike, riding a bike* – and actually started enjoying the climbing.

We mingled awhile among the Sauchiehall Street-like hordes on the plateau and struggled back to the car park in ferocious winds by around 3pm. The drive over to Torridon was in appalling weather, so we had made the right choice climbing-wise. After a couple of beers at Kinlochewe we went down to the Ling Hut.

The evening was spent drinking beers, eating curry and talking bollocks – more or less what the Rannoch is best at. The weather outside was still very mild and wet when we crashed out in the late hours, and an early morning inspection confirmed everyone's suspicions that there was no more climbing to be had.

After a long lie and leisurely breakfast we decided on a Ronnie Corbett-bash on Meall a'Ghiubhais by Kinlochewe. In typical Rannoch fashion the day ended up as a bit of a time-trial event – *riding a bike, riding a bike* – with crashes, breakaways, blow-outs, hitting the wall, dodgy overtaking manoeuvres, and sprint finishes – all leading to a very enjoyable day.

I might try a few routes next winter – once I get my puncture sorted. It's just like – *riding a bike* – after all.

DROPPING IN ON FRIENDS

By M. G. Anderson

FOR those days it was your typical boy-girl situation. My interests were him and his interests. My personality was a blank paper waiting for the Xerox machine. I idolised, no that's too soft a word, I worshipped him, and like a squire following his knight, kitted myself out to follow in the pastime he was passionate about mountaineering in Scotland. Where he led, I followed, like Jack and Jill going up the hill, over rock, ice or snow.

It was towards the end of January when we were tramping across the vast bleak wintry Sahara of the Cairngorm plateau, over that crunchy, crusted type of snow that collapses at the last moment, every step teetering on falling over. We weren't absolutely lost, but were lazily hazy about our precise point on the globe. The biting wind kept our hands together with map and compass tight in our pockets. It was getting on for late in the day, when out of nowhere the mist dropped down obscuring everything that might act as a marker. With no rocks poking through the snow to focus on, it became impossible to distinguish ground from sky, as both merged into a grey blur.

We kept stumbling into snowdrifts, but after the first few times were no longer laughing at finding ourselves chest deep in snow. We became increasingly tired and frustrated, even though the snow was too cold for us to get wet, for enough had trickled in through the gaps in collars and cuffs to raise annoying discomfort to the mildest level of misery. With it came the realisation that we hadn't a clue where we were, except that we were somewhere east of the Lairig Ghru. A few minutes later glancing up to my front I saw footprints etched in the peculiar fins of frost that broke up the monotony of the snow's topography.

"Dougie look, we're okay. They'll lead us home."

He looked at them, then me, his eyebrows and balaclava bewhiskered with frost and rime.

"Morag, these are ours. We've been walking round in circles."

He sounded so calm, I didn't feel frightened, at least not until a bit later. He had always been the source of my inner strength. The rising wind was flicking pellets of snow into our eyes drawing painful tears. Reluctantly accepting the inevitable, that we would have to revisit some basic mountaineering skills, we dug map and compass out of frozen rucksack pockets.

"Jean's Hut is that-away." Dougie with the aplomb of the Edinburgh Public School man, pointed a be-mittened paw decisively through the murk.

Jean's Hut, set low in Coire Cas, was, compared to the gorgeous creations erected for the pampered skier, an embarrassing slum. A ramshackle shack providing a welcome respite from the blizzard, for a wee drum-up or a doss for the most indigent climbers. Now, the hut is but a memory, which not even the most nostalgic hillman of the Beatles Era, would wish resurrected. Because I always trusted him, Dougie's self-confidence convinced me, that he would get us home. Using the traditional method of navigation, we attempted to plot a way through the white-out. You know how it is, one of us moving forward in little sorties while the other steered by shouting compass bearings, whipped away by the howling gale, with the wind constantly blowing us sufficiently off our line of travel to reduce our finely calculated course to the level of Blind Man's Buff.

It was my turn in front when I saw the boulders ahead. Thinking to use them as markers, I stepped forward just as the mist swirled away to reveal that my 'boulders', were sizeable crags hundreds of feet below. I was standing on the edge of a cornice! Another step. Well, it didn't bear thinking about. I moved back quickly, then stood leaning on my axe for support shaking with the reaction. The ferocity of the wind was spectacular. At the edge of the precipice, spumes of snow rocketing upwards for about 30ft before being flung away in flat horizontal white jet streamers.

"I think we should rope up, don't you, Dougie?" He nodded, already uncoiling the rope from his sack. After that we travelled roped up in this great white murk, pirouetting around in our traces, torn hither and thither by the gale. Angry flumes of wind-driven snow stung our faces, forcing us to walk with one hand shielding that little area of skin still exposed to the raw elements.

Darkness was now setting in, but we still refused to believe we wouldn't get down before nightfall. My man was grim and silent. I was on the verge of tears but refused to give in to that energy sapping indulgence.

"Hold me!" Dougie screamed, and plunged out of sight. The rope snaked along the snow ripping out its corrugations. I rammed my axe down, whipping a coil of rope round the shaft, and flattened myself on top of the adze to stop being pulled over the edge. The rope went tight and held. I drew breath. There had been no time to feel fear. There was a great howl and then a chorus of curses. The pressure on the rope eased and I wondered if the mist and wind had deceived me.

"Dougie are you all right?" I heard what seemed to be men swearing, with the sibilant flavour of the Lower Royal Deeside.

"Phat the fach are ye daein', mon?"

In a slightly different voice. "Ah'm fachin' aw weet the noo! Ye English Bampot!" To which there was no reply.

Walking to the edge, I peeked over to see Dougie gawping around in astonishment, cosily ensconced between two bulkily clad hillmen, who were wiping snow off their clothes as if they were fastidious diners clearing

crumbs from their jackets. The conversation was warm. Like Santa, Dougie had dropped in on their wee bit But and Ben, an emergency snow cave, destroying it in the process. Thinking, oh well, the damage is done anyway, I slid down his chute to land smack on top of one of the cave dwellers. He was screaming blue murder, not at all appreciating finding me in his lap. Then I remembered I was wearing crampons.

Our companions had accepted long before us that they weren't going to reach safety that night and had dug out a snug snow cave in the lee of the slope. Our unexpected First Footing meant they would have to start ain all over again. Luckily, we were now out of the worst ravages of the wind, whose biting, heat-sapping blast was the most serious danger we faced. We could still see its effect above us, for in the half-light, wisps of snow and ice from the broken cornice kept flying into our gully.

The Aberdonians went to work with a will, taking turns at excavating a new cave. In the school for survival you need to be a quick learner, so I set to with my short axe carving out the entrance, while Dougie stood around waving his axe futilely, as if it was a fairy wand. The men from the Granite City let me have a spell inside.

"Wheech lassie, dae a shift doon the pit. You'll be a'richt in thon salt mines, mun, nae doot."

I had to lie flat on my back howking out great blocks of ice to increase the size of our bedroom. It must have been like mining in the old days, my head torch shining on the dull green ice adding to this resemblance. It was warm work, so much better than standing like a snowman out there; so why was Dougie out there? The two Dons came in putting an end to my reveries, by comparing their places of abode and tonight's temporary lodgings.

"Just fancy this in Union Street, Aye?"

"Aye, better than Donnie's hoose tho'."

"Aye, nae hauf, whit a scunner!" They both laughed. I never asked them to explain the joke, just praying never to be invited to tea by Donnie.

"Nae doot about it, hame's best. Ye weet, mon?"

At last they had noticed me, dripping with snow and sweat. I decided to get into the spirit.

"Aye mon ah'm steamin' an aw'." They both laughed again.

"Yer a grand lass, I'll buy you a pint o'heavy."

"Nae doot," I replied with what seemed their catch phrase, and for no reason all three of us began laughing. Dougie joined us, and at once they became sober sides. The Aberdonians drew sleeping bags out of their sacks, all neatly lined with waterproof poly-bags, while we sat watching, doing nothing, just shivering. Everything they did was impressively organised, piling up neat little packages, putting their poly-bags down as groundsheets, laying out their sleeping bags, then finally tucking themselves in bag and rucksack. Besides them we looked like miserable

ne'er-do-wells. The one called Jock looked at Dougie and said: "I bet you twae hav'nae sleeping bags."

He was right. Dougie's impetuous approach to mountaineering did not allow for properly arranging logistics.

Jock said: "Well you'd better hae mine." You could tell he was disgruntled because he threw it at Dougie. It was a noble gesture although a bit spoiled by his muttering: "Typical Sassenach! Comin' tae the Gorms unprepared."

He persisted in believing that Dougie was from south o' Tweed, despite the fact that my companion spoke in the patois of Auld Reekie. His pal, Dandy, I think he was called, was fairly reluctant to share his sleeping bag, but it was a matter of survival and he grunted his acceptance as the two of them wriggled together for the double sack race. They were not amused I am sure, although it was difficult to read their expressions blinded as I was by the glare of their headtorches. Five minutes later and it was light's out. For a while we just lay there in the darkness feeling the odd icy drip splashing onto our faces. Since our body heat had raised the temperature just that annoying degree above freezing, our damp steamy bodies in close proximity added to the general discomfort.

Hours passed. I nudged Dougie. "What time is it?" He pretended to be asleep. "C'mon, what time is it?"

"Why do you want to know? Was there something you wanted to watch on the telly? If it's *Coronation Street* I can tell you what happened."

His way of saying I can't be bothered. I persisted and at length, groaning in disgruntlement he caved in and began the lengthy process of extracting his watch from the sack. This consisted of dragging his hand up the whole of our bodies, till the neck of the sleeping bag was reached, from where, to wriggle free he had to squeeze my head against his chin. At last his hand was out and he fumbled about for his torch, the beam revealing steamy breath and the moisture accumulated under the face of the watch making it difficult to read. It was seven o'clock. It was the sort of experience often considered character building, or in this case, as I was to see, character revealing. Jock, who was emerging as the more chatty of our crumpled hosts, asked if we had any food, their's being destroyed when we dropped in uninvited.

We had the usual packets of dried up chocolate biscuits. Jock suggested that we play, 'I spy with my little eye,' and dole out the biscuits for each successful piece of espionage. This little contest gave us something to do and raised our spirits as we flashed our headlights around the cave like searchlights in an ice palace. Under torchlight the cave reminded me of Father Christmas's Faerie Grotto in Binns when I was a child, but of the enchantment I felt when lining up to sit on Santa's knee, the present circumstances were dismally lacking.

All participated except Dougie, shivering and sulking in a corner, complaining of being wet and miserable. Well, who wasn't? When this

sport began to pall, which it soon did, there being little to spy on in our spartan surroundings, we scraped together ditties recollected from school, folk clubs, and the wireless. The Aberdonians' contributions were ballads of the Mearns, of ploughboys and their roving lasses, until they ran out of collective memory and had to make do with the *Ball of Kirriemuir*, and other whimsical fantasies of the rugby player's imagination. I like to think I quite outshone them all with my operatic repertoire. Irony of unconscious irony, I started out with, *My Tiny Hand is Frozen*. But sensing this could be bad for morale, switched track to songs of the warm south. Could it have been the first time *O Sole Mio* was sung within the hearing of the Grey man of Ben Macdui? The only sound emerging from Dougie's corner was the chattering of his teeth, which was almost excusable being in rhythm.

With all this excitement, the four of us were dozing comfortably when the sun's early rays turned the dull grey ice bottle green. The steam climbing up from our moist bags must have had an almost hypnotic effect, for we had all dropped off in our glacial squalor. Hours later I awoke with a start. Were the mountain winds playing tricks? Screams that could have been almost human were merging with eerie, thumping sounds that surely signalled the onset of an Arctic storm. I woke Dougie up. "What time is it?"

"Michty Me!" (He was a great one for the *Sunday Post*) "It's noon! We had better make tracks afore we're caught oot anither night."

The Dons woke from their slumber in time to witness Dougie vandalising their home for a second time. With his axe he smashed down the thin melted wall at our front to reveal the sun shining on a happy holiday scene. A dozen brightly coloured novices in a ski class were gawping at us all in a line. All around there were happy shrieks as fashionably-clad skiers cavorted, slalomed and bounced off moguls in joyful abandonment. We had bivouacked right in the middle of the White Lady, Aviemore's most popular ski-slope.

Above and below us were the gates for the McVitties Chocolate Digestive Ski cup, with the biscuit-shaped banner flaunting its sponsorship, and now we had created a giant crater in the giant slalom course. A child halfway down the line of pupils was the first to recover. "Ma, see those twae bummers cuddlin' up with each other!"

The mother slapped the child but she was evidently incorrigible. "Whit about the wee chappie in wi thon big gowk? Jings it's a lassie. Her ma must be gey strict if she has to go this far for a nicht oot wi' her boyfriend."

The precocious brat was hushed with a sharp slap from the maternal ski-stick. The look Ma gave, told me all I wanted to know about my situation. The student, who was about to snow plough straight into our living room braked goggle-eyed collapsing in a heap just in front of our sleeping bags. No-one laughed. Shamefacedly, we packed up and trudged

down the slope. All the way down elegant skiers wheeled in and out of our tattered line. Everyone seemed to know about our escapade, the evidence was as plain as the noses on our faces, since our black hole had howked a massive chunk out of the piste. I dared not look up at the restaurant at the bottom of the slope to see the lines of grinning heads. My cheeks were burning, but not with the fresh air and sunshine.

Just as we were about to make our escape an authoritarian figure stem-christied to a skidding stop directly in our path, spraying us with snow. He was in a fury, screaming, and waving his poles in an alarming manner.

"You're banned, banned, frae this Coire for the rest of your living lives!"

A novel concept, but not one to argue with at this moment. He was in a proper Gaelic tremor: "I'll hae the sheriff on you lot. You've ruined the UK Championship this efternoon!"

Despite our apparent advantage in numbers, no one in our dampened, dispirited group made any attempt to challenge the lone Highlander. We got into our cars sheepishly and slunk away as quickly as was seemly.

Passing the ice floes emerging on the melting Loch Morlich, I tried to make a joke to ease the embarrassment. "Are you driving fast in case the sheriff sends a posse?"

He was quiet for a while, then added: "Aye. A few more like him, and Culloden might have been a different story."

And with you on our side, Bannockburn might have been a different story, I could have added, but kept to myself, as just then Dougie hit a patch of ice and the car fish-tailed across the road, and was skidding towards the Courting Tree at Llynwllg.

STILL LOCHAN ON THE WAY TO AN TEALLACH

Landscape in oils by James Hawkins

By Robert Davidson

Granite sheets, banded gneisses, pegmatite veins
a quartzite glimmer here and there among the hills
reminds you this land was not always as it is now.
The earth ages.

Ruined buildings
the coast
city
your people
all are left behind
the past recedes.
To stray from the path is to risk a thigh-deep plunge
into cold peat.
The land accepts you at a price.

Over the watershed the way narrows
before opening on to a broad, glacial cut that sweeps down
to the mountain's foot, and here
between *the bracken crag* and the high, out of sight
corrie of the son of Farquhar, you find
a lochan.

It is mid-summer, the sun stands high above the defile.
Its light falls near to the vertical.
There has been no rain for days.
Here you rest, pulling off your boots
letting your feet breathe.
You could pass away in a place like this
seep into the ground and be secreted for ever.
Grass might grow through.

Stones for bones.
Prickling forests.
Rivers in place of arteries.
Small mammals resembling all the other lives
that live off your own life.
The eaters of dead skin.

The blood warriors.

The land breathes through its leaves, turns in the heat.

It passes water.

The trickle leaving the lochan halts
its surface flattens and for a moment
becomes completely still.

The light falls straight through.

The bottom becomes so clear there might be no water here at all.

Fish might fly.

This is the silvery eye that raptors circle.

It is where the wildcat waits to kill.

This is where big-eyed hinds come to drink

Centred on it

the towers of rock

the skin of moss

you lie on

all the stones

slowly turning.

You struggle to your feet.

You have to keep moving, to walk through.

If the land has a soul, so might you.