

THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB JOURNAL 2004



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Front cover: Jamie Fisher and Allan Willoner going over the tops of Sgurr a' Mhadaidh, Skye. Photo: Alastair Matthewson.

Back cover: Patagonia – approaching Cerro Torre from the west. Photo: Simon Richardson.

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THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB JOURNAL

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A FIST FULL OF STEEL

(Repeating the all hardest mixed routes in the world in a season)

By Scott Muir

THE winter season of 2002-03 had been fantastic. I had spent the whole season, 49 days on the trot, climbing blue ice and enjoying good weather. It had been a period of learning and discovering new techniques and exploring what drove me to climb. The November before, I had nearly been killed with Rick Allen on the 2500m North Face of Baruntse 7101m in Nepal and this experience had really shaken me hard. More so than any other near death situations on Greater Range mountains I'd been in. It had been far too close for comfort and I knew it had ended seven years of adventure in the big mountains. Someone once said to me that a year out every now and then probably doubles your chance of surviving. I listened, knowing that I'd be back recharged in a few years with new drives goals and motivation.

This now left a big gap in my climbing – walking back to Lukla, I had a new mission, and that involved pushing myself technically and physically to the limits of my capabilities in winter. I turned to the big Continental projects that had really inspired me over the years, knowing that they offered big delicate ice, huge roofs and a different style from that which I was used to in Scotland. I wanted to experience pushing myself without the chances of dying in the process. Not the so called 'Scottish Hardman' approach, but one that would allow me to climb harder, more technical and physical rock and ice than was available at home. Maybe the danger aspect isn't always as present as it is at home, but it's still there for sure (shit gear on Stevie's pegged routes like 009 and on Mauro 'BuBu' Bole's pegged *Mission Impossible M11*, gear that has been there rusting for more than six years, yes these knife blades bow at you and you're upside down!) nor is their any mountaineering access or descent problems - I'd had my fill of that for a while.

I guess my other reason for going abroad was that it was almost impossible to get a good run at routes in Scotland, the experience of just

Scott Muir only a few moves away from flashing Reptile M10, Vail, Colorado

Photo: www.scottmuir.com

getting going and then doing nothing for weeks held no excitement or interest anymore. Right now I wanted it hard and fast.

Welcome to the Machine M9, Pema M9, Die Another Day M9+ in Italy - routes that I thought might be outwith my current ability level and outwith the period of time that I had abroad that year, passed surprisingly quickly, but not without a battle. The battle involved new rules and tactics. It was very hard to accept falling in winter, something I was told never to do. I also had to adopt redpoint tactics and monkey about roofs, rigging and de-rigging gear, something again I never did in Scotland. The locals helped a lot with all this, but they still laughed heartily at my prehistoric kit, at the time Freney's, 'Top Wing' Comp tools and 'Rambo - Comp Mono' crampons with those click on spurs, top kit at home. What topped off the joke was my full gore suit and 20 layers of base clothing. This was a whole new world for a simple Scottish winter climber.

Looking out from the Haston Cave (Valsaveranche - Italy) across the road stands the *Mission Impossible* roof, a roof that Bubu couldn't believe had been missed. It's so obvious and so awesome. What is really impressive is that he had the vision to go there in the first place. I stood underneath it and looked with my mouth on the floor. I had the same feeling looking up at it as I did when I get shown a big mountain objective. I knew I'd be back for it. I thought - M9 to M11 is some jump in difficulty and it is. I believe that most climbers in the country, with a change in attitude and style, could get up M9 with some effort and training, but the next step is massive.

It took a whole summer at Birnam getting fit before I would be ready for the next winter. Nothing can prepare you for the full body thrash you get mixed climbing abroad, it is just so different, and you aren't going to get up anything without being route fit. I am not a person that finds climbing very easy, I would not even say I am very talented, but I work very hard to achieve what I want to. I always have direction and drive and plenty of self belief and this often make up for a lack of natural ability. Thus this summer, spent on *Too Fast Too Furious* D12 at Birnam was a period of my life where I had to remain focused on my end goal - to repeat all the hardest sport style mixed routes in the world in a season. Although unconventional to most, this route stands as a bench mark for anyone aspiring to the top routes on the Continent and success on it will definitely set you up for a good season abroad. If you don't like it - don't do it, simple really!

December in Canada was fantastic, the start of the season on December 6, climbing most days when it wasn't thankfully 27°C below. With Canada having one of the best seasons on record it was desperate trying to stay focused on the Cineplex (*No, not a big movie theatre - cutting edge mixed climbing location in The Rockies Ed.*) and contender for the hardest mixed route in the world *Musashi* M12. With a few flashed M9s and M8s in the

bag I was going well, but not quite well enough and in the end I pulled my ropes to go home, having fallen off a mere two moves from the ice four times. Each attempt on *Musashi* required a full day's rest. Never have I tried so, so hard on something and walked away empty handed, knowing that it was only a matter of time. But the plane was departing in 12 hours and I had to be on it to start part two of the season.

It was now December 26, and a sprint from the plane followed by a frantic drive north brought me straight to the 'Ice Factor' where I set routes with Dave McLeod till 2am the next morning in time for the Dry Tool Competition. Still burst from jet lag, we managed another night's route setting for the speed and technical ice competition before attending the 'Winter Ethics' debate. This was very poorly attended given the level of concern shown in the chat rooms. Anyway, those who did attend did make progress, regardless of the wide misrepresentation of information floating around about who said what and who wanted that. The gossip mongers would be far better making an effort next time to appear if they are so concerned, rather than assuming and twisting stories wildly. Distance or location is little excuse if folk are truly interested. Those that genuinely couldn't make it will be pleased to hear that a revolution will not take place and the doom of Scottish Winter Climbing is not nigh, maybe this is more likely to happen from the weather than anything else!

With the animated Simon Richardson and Chris Cartwright thankfully both involved in the debate and giving their usual respected views, it was unlikely to run out of control. The discussions will continue I'm sure, openly, and with respect for different demands and styles currently practised in climbing world-wide and without the exclusion of any one aspect!

Next stop, Switzerland, was fantastic, with generally good conditions at Kandersteg. Chris Cubitt, Matt Spenceley and Dave McLeod all pulled off impressive repeats at the same time, creating a great atmosphere alongside Stefan Siegrist, Simon and Samuel Anthamatten, Ueli Steck, Harry Berger, Robert Jasper, Innes Papert, Hans Lochner and later Mauro Bole and Anna Torretta. A place truly on fire. Saas Fee and my first World Championships was interesting with an early bath for me, for touching a line in competition blindness. Still climbing after the fault, I got jumped on and pulled off by three belayers tugging the rope, very ungraceful. At least the wild Saas Fee party could be enjoyed on both nights! My attempts at the speed competition went well placing middle pack, but the 'Rat up a drainpipe' standard was not fast enough to beat the Russians, who somehow managed to half my time.

Mission Impossible and *The Empire Strikes Back* beckoned in Italy. It was now the start of February and we hit conditions perfectly. Within days both routes had gone like a dream. No longer would I have to listen to the *Mission Impossible* ring tone on my phone or look at the screen

saver on my computer reminding me of my goals for the year. 'Mission' is truly a contender for the best mixed route in the world, being spicily pegged, the only line on a huge crag and fully futuristically out there! 'Empire', just a brilliant all inclusive line, inspiring climbing back then from Stevie Haston and well ahead of the pack in difficulty and seriousness for the day. It is still one of the best hard routes in the world

As the season crept on, keeping the momentum going was getting harder by the day. I often had down days where progress was slow, however, these were usually the days that I learned the most. In some ways, Greater Range climbing felt psychologically easier, as normally on my trips there was only one objective and only two weeks plus walk-in and out to deal with it. On this project there seemed no end, with every route very close to my physical and technical limit, so many of them to complete and in so many countries. Often it was stressful having others on the routes, as they would break holds, meaning that sequences would change, making routes a grade harder and changing the intricate sequences already learned. Each time this happened it could cost a day. Not time that was readily available.

After working the brilliant 'Performance Seminar' at Glenmore, the brainchild of George McEwan, I headed straight off to Colorado to meet up with mixed local guru's Ryan Nelson and Rich Purnell. These boys have moved on from what Jeff Lowe started out in Vail and Ouray adding the hardest mixed lines in America. They were both great guys to watch, with massively different styles and strengths. Ryan a stamina man and Rich a bouldery, power merchant. It was a great experience doing the route that provided great inspiration for me, *Octopussy* M8, Jeff Lowe's first big exploration into new wave mixed was awesome and very serious. A now poorly pegged roof leads to a very delicate and not easy stalactite that, if it breaks, you will break your legs on the slab below. So much for sport mixed – Respect.

Flashing *Goldline* M10 at Skylight area Ouray and the next day doing *A Fist Full of Steel* M11 and onsighting *Dizzy with the Vision* at the same venue, finished a brilliant tour of Colorado. The icing on the cake for this part of the trip was a flash of the now famous Stevie Haston *Wild Climbs* series route *Reptile* M10, which I managed leashless, the only beta being the television program. Routes don't get more classic or any more wild – a desert island route to rank with 'Mission' and 'Empire'.

Canada – well, it was like coming home – the last blast and arriving just in time to miss the Festival. Everything was quiet, meaning that myself and Rich Purnell who had joined me for the Cineplex had it to ourselves. *Musashi* M12 went first, Redpoint this time, now feeling strong and cruising. All that was left was the hardest mixed route in the world *The Game* M13. It had seen some action already and in December I'd held Ben Firth's ropes while he worked it, so I had some beta. This helped as, on my first go, I made the 8ft first span, the wild swing and almost out

through the second. I knew it would go quickly, but I now had only days left. Rich sent it quickly as it suited his style perfectly, proving that you didn't have to be 6ft 6ins to make the crux moves. Both of us could use the smallest of directional body tension holds to catch the lip 50% of the time, eliminating the random throw that got across the second blank downward 9ft span roof. It was now late March and I was tired, no one wanted to go ice climbing anymore and I spent a demoralising few days without a partner. On my last day it was all or nothing and, on my second go, I latched the lip, pulled up, hooked through the now half-an-inch thick ice on the slab above, rocked up, pumping bad. Got my weight over my foot and started pushing. With literally my right leg straight, a no-hands rest and the route in the bag, one second away, I ripped the ice off the top of the rail. With a loud scream of "No," I somersaulted, ripping the sheath and three strands of the core clean off my rope as it caught in my crampons. Dying on the last route would have been an interesting conclusion to the season.

So that was it – I couldn't claim a full ascent of *The Game* M13 – but I was damn close and it's easily in the bag next time.

I got on the plane wholly satisfied at having had the best season of my life and ready to come out harder next year. I am excited by the prospect of getting back into Trad. Scottish winter now, with Dave's *Cathedral* setting the pace for things to come. On arriving home, Ally had told me we'd be getting a new kitchen, little did I know until I sat my bags in the living room, that I'd be fitting it! The battle had only just begun.

Route List:

Musashi: M12: Canada – Multiple attempts.
Too Fast Too Furious: D12: Scotland – Multiple attempts.
Mission Impossible: M11: Italy – second Redpoint.
Empire Strikes Back: M11: Italy – second Redpoint, Pitch 1/2.
A Fist Full of Steel: M11: Colorado – second Redpoint.
Tomahawk: M10+/M11: Switz – first Redpoint.
White Out: M10+: Switz – first Redpoint.
Tool Time: M10+: Switz – first Redpoint.
Reptile: M10: Colorado – Flash.
Goldline: M10: Colorado – Flash.
Captain Hook: M10: Italy – first Redpoint.
Power Limit: M10: Switz – Flash.
Orgasmo: M10 – Canada – Flash.
Power Bat: M10 – Switzerland – first Redpoint.
Slice of Scheiss: M10 – Switzerland – first Redpoint.
Twin Towers: M10 – Switzerland – first Redpoint.
Pink Panther: M9+ – Switzerland – first Redpoint.

Misery: – M9 – Colorado – On sight.

Fatman and Robin: M9 – Colorado – Flash.

Quazy Moto: M8+ – Colorado - On sight.

Mojo: M8+ – Canada – On sight.

Octopussy: M8 – Colorado - On sight.

Dizzy with the Vision: M8 – Colorado – On sight.

Amphibian: M8 – Colorado – On sight.

Samurai: M8 – First Ascent – Switzerland – Flash.

Shagadelic: M7+ - Canada – On sight.

Seventh Tenticle: M7 – Colorado – On sight.

Frigid Inseminator: M6+ – Colorado – On sight.

And many more below M6+.

This year's project would never have been possible without the support of my sponsors who dug deep to support and believe in my goals. Although supposedly uncool, to give thanks and highlight these companies, I would like to do it here and thank them for putting money back into our sport, which I feel is highly under-valued and under-funded by our National body Sport Scotland. Climbing has better placed athletes than many other sports and this is sadly overlooked – hopefully, this will change and people like Malcolm Smith will receive the money and support they rightly deserve.

Mountaineering Council of Scotland Expedition Grant; Red Bull; Scarpa; Grivel; Thorlo's – Mountain Equipment; Edelrid Ropes; Tiso and The Ice Factor.

A NEVIS INTRODUCTION

By Morton Shaw

THE bodies made no sound as they fell, or none that we could hear 100m. back and out of sight round the ridge. We were stopped and arguing about where we were. The clouds had parted briefly and it seemed to me that we were looking down into Glen Nevis. Robin however was certain that we had not yet crossed the descent route. We agreed to differ and carried on round the ridge and onto a steep snow bay. The snow was hard and crampons scratched as we crossed the slope. In the middle my eye caught sight of a Silva compass stuck vertically into the snow at my feet, barely visible in the swirling spindrift. My first reaction was pleasure, a win, a trophy. My second less avaricious and more fearful as my eyes followed the slide marks down.

We had left the hut relatively early, cramponing from the start up to the Garadh. This was my first time on the mountain in winter. There was no one else in the hut and no sign of anyone else on the mountain. It was midweek in the Sixties. We were a party of four. My brother and two of his friends from Ullswater.

Garadh Gully was straightforward and led into the great bowl. The light was silvery grey and the buttresses reached upwards into the clouds. I had a great feeling of awe and smallness. A discussion of where next was had. I hovered on the periphery not really part of the decision-making process. A decision made, we traversed huge snow slopes across to the Comb and into the gully.

The height gain in the gully was in direct relationship to the volume of spindrift coming down and by the time we reached the last pitch it was difficult to see, with the holds filling in as fast as they were excavated. The last 50ft. were awkward. Straight up, then a rising traverse rightwards out of the protection of the gully walls and into the howling wind and snow. It was difficult to make out any features and by the time we assembled on the plateau we were white, the ropes like hawsers and my sense of elation replaced by a feeling of unease.

Another discussion, shouted this time. Number 4? No. The tourist track. Maps flapping. Hands cold, compasses adjusted. Eyes stung by the granules of ice swirling about our heads. We set off, still roped, compasses in hand and trying to follow the bearing.

That was when I picked up the compass. I showed it to Robin and pointed down the slope. The light was fading but there was no decision to be made and cautiously we started to crampon downwards towards the drop, noting as we went that there were two slide marks which started apart and then came together to make one. The slope seemed to steepen as we stood contemplating the inevitability of it all.

Rope length followed rope length as we moved, usually together but occasionally belayed, as the gully dropped in short steps. About five rope lengths down a voice could be heard from the blackness below. Robin said: "At least one of them is alive." I registered nothing, my mind totally focused on staying upright and alive.

The gully narrowed again with several short vertical sections and then eased a little into a bowl. In the gloom we could make them out, one standing applying First Aid to the head of the other.

Their story was remarkable. They, like us, had stopped to check the compass. The one behind had tripped taking the other by surprise and pulling both of them down the slope. The injured one despite a helmet had been knocked unconscious early in the slide. His partner had tried to brake but had been unable to stop their combined weight and lost any control, being slalomed at ever-increasing speed from side to side of the gully. When they reached the narrowing he was airborne as he came over the steps and landed in the bowl on a projecting rock which he had the presence of mind to push the rope over. He continued to slide but the rope held and they came to a stop.

The next drop was not a short one!

We patched them up as best we could, lots of pain and some blood but nothing that seemed life threatening, and made our way off the hill in the darkness, moving like crabs as we threaded a route from gully to buttress and back to gully. It did not seem straight-forward. As we lost height the wind dropped, the snow stopped and colour came back into the world in the gleam of the torches. The grass was an intense shade of green.

Eventually, some time after midnight we forded the river, reached the road and then the Youth Hostel. Police were called and interviews held while we awaited an ambulance. We had felt competent while on the hill, now it seemed embarrassing. The presence of a policeman somehow suggested wrongdoing. The one light point for me was the police asking occupations – three Outward Bound instructors and an apprentice accountant. See! It wisnae ma fault mister.

The other two went to the Belford while we had to beg a cell in the police station. Later that day Robin and I returned to the hut to pack up the gear and ferry it back down.

The injured climbers were released from the Belford a couple of days later and we slunk back to civilisation.

The Ben has been kinder to me since.

A HARD RAIN

By Mike Jacob

PRESSING buttons on the cheap car radio merely elicited a variety of crackles and a hissing voice from the loudspeaker. Stopping in a litter-strewn lay-by near Fort William to pull up the aerial, grimy lorries swishing past in clouds of dirty spray, made no difference. Like the radio, which could only get medium-wave, he couldn't think on the correct wavelength so gave up and concentrated on the road. The signs told him what he knew by heart...Onich... Ballachulish...

He drove slowly eastwards through Glencoe, going home. It was February, late afternoon and he could still see the gloomy hills, the snow high up keeping company with the freezing level on Bidean, and pick out the lines of climbs on Aonach Dubh. These mountains had given him every reward but had also sought out all his ambiguities. Misty wraiths drifted around the cold dark crags as he leaned forward to peer up at them and large raindrops, like tears, spattered sadly on the glass inches from his face. It was a sombre scene of dampness, wipers and headlights. How he yearned for something that would return colour to this world of black and grey and bring back the feeling of being glad to be alive. His reflection, a peculiarity of the flat windscreen of the ancient Volkswagen, glinted back at him. Was he looking out or in?

Was it that long ago that life – and for life read climbing, they were interchangeable – had been fun? He had been one of a group of young climbers and hangers-on based in Edinburgh. They climbed hard, lived life to the full and things seemed to happen with no prompting. Events came fast upon each other's heels and all you had to do was just react to them. No decision seemed particularly difficult to make or of any great significance. It seemed natural that he and Malc would climb together as often as they could and that meant virtually every weekend and holiday. Ever since, as young and impetuous novices, they had got talking to each other at Allt-na-giubhsaich in Glen Muick and headed off together up Lochnagar on a day of low cloud and snowfall, this was how it had been and how it always would be. It didn't matter to them that they had been avalanched below the Pinnacle Face and carried nearly to the lochan, with no-one else in the corrie to witness the event. Somehow Malc had lost the rope in the churning, compressing lumps of snow, so, in an act of defiant bravado they had then soloed Gargoyle Chimney.

Over the following years there developed a kind of silent consensus between them, partly due to their complementary abilities but more to do with a natural symbiosis of character and the empathy that is born of experience and danger faced together. They both loved the anarchic lifestyle associated with mountaineering, savouring the rewards that came

from their achievements in extreme situations. He had argued with friends, particularly women, that no other relationship could touch the ultimate trust of this kind of partnership, unaffected by any kind of sexuality, of death faced together. This may have been true – their climbing commitment was absolute – but was it because, or in spite of, the fact that there was no voicing of feeling between them? So, while they communicated totally in one sphere, there was an unspoken boundary beyond which they never ventured in another.

Time passed...and the earth spun its subtle web of change and threw in a bombshell for good measure. Lucy and he had lived together for a couple of years and had then married. She was slim with long dark hair, a musician with a soft-spoken Harris voice. He knew, deep down, that it wouldn't solve the conflict within him but he really fancied her. The relationship was a good one, with the emotional intimacy that comes from shared interests, but there just weren't enough of them. She enjoyed walking but wasn't a climber and despaired of the vanity surrounding much of the climbing scene. Having to curb his desire of trying to share his indivisible adventures with her and deal with the immediate pressures of his work as a molecular biologist at the Roslin Institute would start the erosion, the crispness of the memories would start to blur despite his efforts to relive every transient moment. So, when they weren't climbing somewhere overseas, he would meet his friends midweek at a local crag or the wall, discuss this or that move afterwards in the pub, sink an imaginary banana-pick into the bar-top and plan the next trip, the next fix.

Lucy had grown tired of this self-indulgence and increasingly led her own cultural social life as a professional musician playing in an orchestra. This meant many trips away. He didn't like her absences and tried to persuade her to change jobs but she accused him of selfishness and double standards. He thought that she seemed to find more fault with him, trivial matters became brooding bones of contention and developed into long-running arguments. Then, just as he had started to think about facing up to the inevitable, of reappraising his priorities, the decision was taken out of his hands. He saw her one lunchtime, Lucy and another man in Prince's Street Gardens, holding each other close. He felt weak with shock and disbelief, a bitter taste at the edges of his tongue, like the time a timber-wagon had forced him to spin from the road and write off the car. There had been the inevitable furious confrontation with Lucy, everything that could be said was said, he had chosen climbing as a way of life and it excluded her. Tearfully, and with a heavy heart, she left him and went to live in Glasgow. She didn't tell him that she was pregnant.

He felt a gnawing sense of loss but worse was to come. Malc announced that he was moving to Switzerland, initially to earn easy money as a ski instructor in winter and then pursue his career as a surveyor with a civil engineering firm based in Geneva. That was it. Another decision easily

made. He envied Malc, not just for the move but for his total control, his uncomplicated, unquestioning drive, his calculated decisions that always came up trumps as though he had some innate vision of his life ahead. Before he left they went out drinking with the lads, and then Malc too, despite the arrangements to meet up and climb together in the future, effectively walked out of his life. This time, everything that could be said remained unmentionable.

For a while there was venom in his climbing but the circle of friends was fragmented and he found that he had been left with a deep resentment. He felt betrayed – but by whom? He was in an emotional void, the emptiness that was the logical end to the failed relationship with Lucy left him floundering. One of her accusations kept niggling him – that he acted as though it was a weakness to reveal his feelings and that it was impossible for anyone to really get to know him. In his climbing circle he was known for his determination and resolve, traits which Lucy translated as stubbornness and an inability to compromise, and he knew, deep down, that she was right.

As if all this wasn't bad enough his integrity was challenged at work. He had been an important member of a team that was pioneering research in genetic engineering and he was very uneasy about the direction that the earlier results were taking them. Eventually, at loggerheads with the rest of the group, he was called to a meeting with the Institute's director and was given a more technical role in a different department. He felt sure, however, despite all the self-doubt about his inability to compromise, that his moral stance was correct.

In the past when he went climbing he had left any problems behind. Now they began to accompany him. He first noticed it when, alone on the Aonach Eagach on a wet weekday in October, he had looked at a buttress looming ahead in the mist and his legs had turned to jelly. He couldn't relax, he couldn't overcome his lack of confidence and had used the weather as an excuse to turn back, feeling wretched. And then, on a visit to the Lakes, the same thing happened, runners every few feet, clinging too tightly to the holds, calves in spasm, he wasn't in control although his partner hadn't noticed anything until he lowered off.

Around that time the dark dreams had started, fresher in his mind than real memories. A black cobra uncoiled onto the bed so that he jerked awake soaked in sweat. The image of a young boy with blonde hair and blue eyes, dead in a frozen ditch with a sheet of ice, like glass, slicing through him holding his body half-in, half-out of the water, haunted him. Was this a horrible omen? Who was he? He dreamed about numbers ending in zero so, as a test, he bought a lottery-ticket and was relieved when it did not win. Previously, when he was off-form, he had climbed through it but now the more he climbed, as though climbing could drive out the demons within, the more established the gripping fear became.

In keeping with his mood, he went to the most isolated hills. Driving back from Galloway he felt a sense of utter desolation, of not belonging to anywhere or anything. He saw the damp, decaying oak leaves at the edge of the road and felt like one of them, browned-off and dying, with no attachment to the roots of life or the strength and security of a sturdy trunk. He suddenly realised what a double-edged pastime he pursued – no longer did he find pleasure in the hills, thrill in the mountains or euphoria after a climb. The event left him with such a powerful feeling of loss that he remembered the precise point on the road, near the small granite-quarrying town, from then on. When he got home he threw his boots in the back of a cupboard and sat down to write a letter of resignation.

With the constraints imposed on him by a different job, he stopped climbing and took up dinghy-racing on the Forth. For a while, his mood improved, but it wasn't long before the chilling presence of omens lay in the pit of his stomach yet again. Ian, an old friend with whom he had once sailed the Hebridean seas in a wooden gaff-rigged cutter and who could make his clarinet stomp with traditional Clyde Valley Stompers jazz joy as the boat rocked to the tapping waves, was crushed to death by his own Harley motorbike on the roadside bend near the small granite-quarrying town in Galloway.

The phone call had come out of the blue. Malc was back in Scotland for a couple of weeks and had managed to get a booking at the CIC. He wouldn't take, 'no', for an answer and his infectious enthusiasm won the day. They had agreed to meet at the hut despite the poor forecast and he had spent hours hunting out his gear from its various places of storage. The Allt a' Mhuilinn bogs were as awful as always, as he floundered from one to the other. There were only a few folk at the hut, still the same as he remembered it, although now there was a windmill to help keep the place a bit less damp. A couple of hours earlier, Malc had arrived from Speyside where he had been surveying for the refurbishment of a major distillery and together, just like the old days, they prepared a meal. However, there was an awkwardness between them as they searched for some common ground.

There was an atmosphere of quiet contentment in the hut as people murmured to each other. They sat in their favourite corner and Malc pulled out a bottle of malt whisky and fetched a couple of glasses from the rack, wiping them with his sleeve. Gradually, with the help of the alcohol, they grew easier with each other and recalled past times. Slowly, the conversation came round to more personal matters. This was something new and he felt a sense of discomfort but Malc clearly had something that he wanted to say and was persistent.

"I heard that you'd stopped climbing. I didn't believe it. Was it true?"

"Oh, yeah, sort of..." His voice tailed off as he thought carefully about his next words.

"I guess I was a wee bit depressed...you know..."

"What, about Lucy?"

"Aye, I suppose...and work too. You moved on and I couldn't. Instead of success I just seemed to have one failure after another. It just all got to me...I thought the problem was climbing but it wasn't...it was something in me...still is..."

"You know, Rob, there's nothing *wrong* with that. You're allowed to fail. You always did have such high expectations...don't get me wrong, we did some great climbs, but when I went to Switzerland I could feel the pressure lifting. Yeah, I still do good routes but I don't push it..."

"No, it wasn't that...it wasn't the danger. I read something the other day that Freud wrote, about how we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things. I hadn't given it any thought before..."

"Well, that's what the ascetics say, isn't it? To achieve true happiness you have to experience true pain." He poured some more whisky into the glasses.

"I'm not sure that I believe it myself, though having just flogged up here no wonder this place feels like heaven."

They both laughed.

Malc continued: "That's all very well, and I can understand how they distinguish between pleasure and happiness, but life has plenty of other arenas for Freud's contrasts...doesn't it?"

"Aye...I guess..."

Malc was coming round to what he had wanted to say.

"I saw Lucy the other day. She was playing at a concert in Aberdeen and we went for a drink afterwards. She was asking about you." He paused and studied his friend's face.

"Did you ever see her again?"

"No...never did."

"Did you know that she'd had a child?"

"Christ! No, I didn't know. Probably that bloke she was messing about with."

"No, I don't think so, Rob. That didn't last any way. You know what she told me...she would have contacted you but she didn't want to come between you and climbing...she gave me her telephone number. Do you want it?"

"No...I couldn't...not now."

But Malc shoved a bit of paper over the greasy table anyway and he carefully put it in his pocket.

"Why did you change your job?"

"Oh, it's a long story...do you remember all the fuss about Dolly the sheep, you know, the first cloned animal?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was just the tip of the iceberg. There was all sorts of other stuff going on. It wasn't just sheep...you know, we all had to give tissue samples. At first it was pure science but then the Ministry of Defence got involved in the funding."

"Eh, why them?"

"Yeah, you might well ask. It may seem strange but most soldiers don't actually like killing – think of the military advantages if you could clone a load of the best psychopathic squaddies. Look, there's big multinational money in this business now. The latest thing is to clone, say, muscle cells and then put them back in the donor...athletes, footballers...no drugs tests...it's a can of worms. There's no stopping it now, it'll all come one day."

"Is that why you left?"

"Yes."

"What happened to Dolly?"

"They had to kill her in the end. No one really understands it but she had all sorts of problems caused by premature ageing. The Director sidelined me because I wouldn't sign the Official Secrets Act and they couldn't guarantee that my cells hadn't been used, so I decided to quit. It was just a matter of time..."

"You know, Rob, you're about the only person I know who really lives by his principles. I couldn't have done that."

"Well, look where it's got me."

They sat in silence for a while looking into the bottom of their tumblers. Eventually, Malc said: "Hey, what are we going to do tomorrow? What about Zero – we've never done it?"

"Okay, but you'll have to lead. I'm not fit enough."

"Fine. We'd better get some kip then."

He lay in one of the top bunks behind the door into the inner sanctum of the hut, unable to sleep. At one point he thought that he heard the outer door open and someone quietly arrive but it could have been one of the residents getting up for a pee. He thought about Zero – it was nice a round number but did it mean anything? A mood of oppression came over him which was still there in the morning.

He had thought that life was movement up a slope, maybe not steady but surely, continuous, like climbing itself, where one route always led to another. There always had to be one more step. Now that was wrong. He was over the top and making his tired way down the other side only to be trapped above a dripping, slimy cliff, wounded bodies at its base. They weren't climbers but the images from war – it didn't matter where...the Somme, Auschwitz, Kosovo, Iraq...haunted eyes beseeching him for the help that he was powerless to give...all the screams of pain ever uttered by the innocent and blended together, a terrible, piercing shriek carried on the wind forever, a rising crescendo of...

WHOOOMPH!

a hurtling silhouette framed within the walls of the gully flashed past him. He barely had time to see it but, as the body whirled past, there was a distinct change in the pitch of the scream, accompanied by a thrumming from the trailing flaps of clothing. He waited – the almighty wrench that would follow as Malc's ropes ripped through his gloves, twisted him round, ripped out the pathetic ice-screw belays, plucked him into the abyss...

...but it didn't come. Instead, the ropes continued to lead out at a slow rate. He knew what had happened yet couldn't believe it.

He had been shivering on the icy stance no wider than the superfluous guidebook which had twisted in his jacket-pocket and which, like a recriminating finger, was poking him uncomfortably in the ribs, when a solo climber had appeared at his feet. He had seemed confident when they exchanged a few words.

"Alright." Was it a question or a statement?

The stranger, a young Glaswegian lad he guessed, had asked for permission before climbing through, which he had reluctantly given. As the spindrift swept down and covered them both it had been difficult to see much of his face but his eyes seemed familiar. The climber had moved confidently up, and he caught the faint vibrations of a tune that the lad had been whistling to himself. He had started to hum the same tune and recall some distant words...

*and what did you see, my blue-eyed son?
what did you see, my darling young one?
I heard the sound of thunder that roared out a warning
heard the...*

"ALRIGHT." The explosive ferocity shocked him and echoed round and down as splinters of ice flew in alarm. This was neither a question or a statement. It was a demand. He tried to shout back but could only manage a dry whisper. He felt sick. A few moments ago the person had been warm and responsive, now his body would be just shattered bone and torn flesh, blood oozing into the snow. What a waste. Why was he on his own anyway?

The ropes pulled him, urging him to move. He fumbled with the knots, dropping a karabiner before he started to go into auto-mode. His temples throbbed as blood pounded...pounded... pounded...*it's a hard rain's a gonna fall...THUMP...I saw a black branch with blood that kept drippin'...THUMP...I saw a room full of men with their hammers a bleedin'...THUMP...a white ladder all covered with water...THUMP...*

"Steady," as he nearly smashed an ice-axe into one of Malc's plastic boots.

"What?...Sorry." He slumped over, gasping for breath.

"How did you get up there so quickly – hey, what's wrong?" Gulping

great lungfuls of powder-laden air, he asked: "What the hell happened Malc?"

"What are you on about. Nothing's happened. Hey, we've just about climbed Zero. Didn't you hear me shouting?"

"No, no – the guy who came up past me – didn't you see him?" he urged.

"I haven't seen anything, just a load of spindrift. The weather's getting worse. Come on, let's get the hell out of here while we still can. It'll be dark soon."

"I tell you, someone came up. He's fallen, nearly hit me...I know him..." Malc looked at him. Could it be true?

"Look, c'mon. We've got to move. There's nothing we can do now. We'll report it to the police when we get back to the hut."

The road twisted up past the Meeting of the Three Waters and he glanced up to his left, towards Am Bodach where it had all started. Zero...yes, it did mean something...full circle and he was back at the beginning and had the chance to start afresh. The piece of paper was still in his pocket. In the sky beyond Sron Gharbh he thought he caught a glimpse of blue as the clouds parted for an instant. At that very moment too, by some quirk of reception, the radio crackled into life halfway through Bryan Ferry's thumping version of Dylan...

*...where black is the colour, where none is the number
and I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breathe it
and reflect it from the mountains so all souls can see it...
...and it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.*

Scott Muir redpointing Empire Strikes Back M11, Cogne, Italy

Photo: www.scottmuir.com

Scott Muir heading for the ice on Mission Impossible M11, Valsaveranche, Italy

Photo: www.scottmuir.com





THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CLIMBING

By Malcolm Slesser

WITHOUT the force of gravity climbing would be both pointless and boring. There would be no physical danger and, in the absence of risk, the mind is not engaged. What makes climbing so satisfying to its adherents is the intellectual component of an apparently purely physical activity, namely the will to pit your skill against the mountain, not as your adversary, but as a sparring partner. Added to this is the aesthetic reward of reaching wild and lonely places. It turns climbing into a way of life. Furthermore, to caress the rock above you in search of holds is as sexy as stroking the Venus de Milo.

Due to the acceleration of gravity a falling body on our planet Earth, and here I use the term in its scientific context, drops 16ft. in the first second, a farther 48 in the second and an additional 80 in the third by which time its velocity is more than 90ft. per second or 60mph. If the unprotected human body hits *terra firma* at that speed, damage is intense and survival unlikely. So why do we do it?

There is, of course, the purely athletic pleasure of exercising one's muscles in unusual ways. Indeed this is such a delight that climbing walls have sprung up all over the world where, secured from the risk of a fall by an overhead rope, one can test one's athleticism. This is fun, and good training, but it's not the real thing that gets the adrenaline going. Climbing is the solution to a very personal equation. It is the potential consequence of a fall that renders the act of climbing such an intense experience. No-one obliges you to tackle something that may be exhausting or life threatening. The choice is purely yours. Yet the harder the climb the more we relish it, seeking ever-greater challenges until each of us reaches the point where the difficulty either exceeds our technical ability or our mind rebels.

Technology has advanced, and the climber these days has a safety belt of sorts. Risk can be diminished by placing runners, in the old days it was a piton. With such precautions taken, say, every 20ft., the climber's fall velocity is limited to 20mph. While the kinetic energy of the falling body is absorbed by a longer length of rope. Climbs can be stitched up with so many *runners* that a fall is no big deal. Thus assured, the modern climber exploring new routes can push out the envelope of endeavour with less risk than Whymper experienced on his first ascent of the Matterhorn, by what would today be considered the easy route. But there are also places where such precautions cannot be taken for lack of an obliging rock surface. One such example is the technically easy staircase up the Inaccessible Pinnacle with 200ft. of space to one side. What is formidable is the sense

Sron Ulladale, West Face. Photo: Alastair Matthewson.

Al Matthewson enjoying one of many airy jumars on Pitch 4 of The Scoop. Photo: Jamie Andrew.

of exposure to the void below, and its effect upon the mind of the climber, even one roped from above.

So, do climbers attain their goals by shutting their minds to the consequences of a fall? Many do. Up to the age of 21, when I had been rockclimbing for about five years, I believed I was immortal. It couldn't happen to me, could it? Then I fell off. It was on small crag and I suffered little more than an injured ankle and dented pride. Looking back, I realise how lucky I was, for it changed my attitude. Marriage and children alter the balance of risk. Many are induced by their wives to give up. I was one of the lucky ones permitted to continue and even extend my experiences to my children.

The risks associated with climbing are not like the dangers of battle. We are our own commanders. Nonetheless, some overplay their hand, some are careless. Some die. But these are subjective risks, where the mind is, or should be, in charge of events. In a quite different category are the objective risks, things we cannot control, such as stonefall from above, avalanches or a deterioration in the weather. In 1966 five of us were attempting to climb the third highest peak in the Americas, Yerupaja in the Peruvian Andes. To gain the south-east ridge we had first to climb a rock wall. But one look at the glacier surface gave us pause for thought. It was graveyard for the thousands of rocks that were continually falling from the cliffs above. Yet this was the only route possible. Placing our rucksacks on our heads we dashed unscathed through the danger zone with all the speed our breathless lungs could muster at 17,000ft.

If you drive long enough you will eventually come face to face with an accident, so in climbing. For many that is the time to retreat to the climbing wall. For others it is a wake-up call. My first experience of an accident was in 1944 in Skye. My companion and I were striding up the whaleback of Sgurr Dearg heading for the Inaccessible Pinnacle. At a step in the ridge, instead of walking round it, he stretched up and grasped a large detached block to pull himself up. It probably weighed quarter of ton. It slid down and crushed his thigh. It happened during a meet of the Edinburgh University Mountaineering Club, and much as we were distressed at the death of our friend, none of us gave up climbing, for we saw it as an error of judgment that with a greater sense of awareness would not, should not, have happened. The mind is the safety net, not signs, rules or balustrades.

Shortly after this incident I was attempting a first winter ascent of a summer rock climb on Ben Nevis. A gale was blowing powder snow off the summit into a plume that shot 100ft. into space before gently parachuting onto our cliff. Mini-avalanches were constantly cascading down. I was just a few feet from the end of the technical difficulties, and knew from summer explorations that beyond rose an easy snow slope to the summit plateau, capped no doubt by a vast cornice. This in itself presented no problem. One could tunnel through it. But was the slope

safe? Each time I stepped up, my intuition told me to step back down. Each time I did so a voice within me said: "Wimp," and I stepped up again. This cycle was repeated several times. The spindrift grew more violent. I decided to retreat, and was just above my companion, Norman Tennent, when I was embraced by a mass of snow, and pulled off my feet. Norman held me. The avalanche continued for what seemed like minutes but was probably just a few seconds – it was big. Most of it shot over our heads. Now is there a moral to this tale? Had I overcome my timidity, I would have been swept off and my companion would have been plucked after me like a puppet on a string. I had exactly the same experience in the Peruvian Andes many years later. Such events highlight a fascinating issue in climbing, that becomes ever more relevant the bigger and the higher the mountain, that in Iain Smart's immortal words: "Where is the boundary between constructive boldness and destructive folly?"

Being scared is quite an important component in staying alive. It sharpens the senses. One of the qualities that allows one climber of comparable ability to go farther than another is the control of that fear. It can get one out of a tricky situation. Four of us, two of whom were inexperienced, were making an ascent of the famous Wolf's Head arête in the Wind River mountains of Wyoming. This 10,000ft. blade of impeccable granite thrusts more than 1000ft. above the meadow below. Somewhat slowed by our less-experienced companions, it was an hour to dusk when we reached the final move onto the summit block. It required one to shuffle along a horizontal crack barely an inch deep sustained by handholds above. Halfway along these petered out and that last 10ft. depended entirely on keeping one's balance on a near vertical wall. It was a breath-taking move given the 1000ft. drop below, and led with great aplomb by Bill Wallace. Two of the party were quite terrified, yet they admirably controlled their fear. For one, however, it was one emotional stress too many. It was time to hang up her boots. Now how do you explain this sort of fun to people who don't climb mountains?

TWO THOUSAND YARD STARES

By Al Scott

THE term 'Thousand Yard Stare' is one I've come across several times in a few different contexts. For me, it has two very different connotations. Firstly, it describes very well the despair and subsequent depression I suffered after the loss of a close friend in a climbing accident, and the emotions I felt the first time I returned to the scene. Secondly, it much more light-heartedly conjures up the determination required to compleat one's Munros...

Part One:

Hand me a bottle to drink away my sorrow,
Cause I don't want to go back there tomorrow,
But I will, oh I will,
Tho dread does my heart fill.
I go there every day,
Tho God knows I try not to in every way.
For sometimes life is hard to bear
At the end of my Thousand Yard Stare!
(Gary Jacobson, Vietnam War poet)

I write this as I approach the Fifth Anniversary of the death of my good friend, Grant Scotland, in a climbing accident. It is something of a catharsis for me as I have bottled up the feelings and emotions of that desperate and traumatic day for too long.

Grant and I were work colleagues as well as friends, near neighbours, training partners and drinking buddies. He was a keen mountain biker and weight trainer, and developed an interest in climbing through me and we went regularly to the Ibrox climbing wall for a couple of years. We had had a couple of days out on the crag doing Agag's Groove and had been up to the Etive Slabs to do Spartan Slab. Both of these trips had been wonderful days and Grant had thoroughly enjoyed them. He wasn't a naturally gifted climber but was fit, strong and incredibly determined.

We had been out for our usual Friday night pint after work and had arranged to go climbing on the Sunday of that holiday weekend. We didn't have any concrete plans of where to climb, I would just decide on the day depending on the weather. On the morning of that fateful day in September 1998, I left home at around 8am with a rack of Guidebooks – Southern Highlands, Glencoe and Glen Etive, Central Outcrops, still undecided where to go.

We drove north in my car, up the Loch Lomond road where it was wet, so I decided that the Cobbler wasn't really an option. Farther up towards Crianlarich it brightened up, but as I didn't fancy another visit to the bolted routes by Aberfeldy I decided on the Etive Slabs again.

We got down to the road end by about 10.30am and there were only a couple of cars. This was reassuring, as I knew how busy this place could get – especially on holiday weekends. We packed our sacks and headed up to the crag. I had a notion to do either Hammer or Swastika, depending on who else was up there, and which route was free. When we got to the Coffin Stone, there were some parties on Hammer, The Pause and Spartan – so Swastika it was then. Decision made.

I had done Swastika before – many years before, on a GUMC trip back in the early Eighties and I was keen to see if I could free the top pitch. Big Grant was just 'keen' as usual. He was happy to second me on all the pitches as he hadn't led anything outdoors up to that point. It was only his third outdoor rock climb and I wanted him to see what went on with the runner placements, ropework, belays etc.

Things went very well right up to the wee overhang on the section below the final headwall – it was sopping wet. I had to use aid to get up that and Grant had a hard time following it. It was the same story on the final pitch – lots of aid had to be used and I set up belay on a couple of small trees in a bay at the top of the crag.

Grant struggled up the pitch and joined me on the belay. He was totally elated at having done the route, by far his hardest to date, and we stopped a while to admire the views and take in the surroundings. All that was left to do was a short scramble up some heathery terraces to the descent path at the top. Grant had all the gear on his harness and said he would just go on up to the top. As it looked pretty easy, I gave him the nod and said: "OK Grant. Up you go."

It was that single moments decision, more than all the others that I had made that day, that was to prove to be the worst and most devastating of my whole life.

I made that decision. *I gave him the nod. I said: "OK Grant. Up you go."*

He set off up the scrambly heather, a rising rightward traverse up to the path, the rope snaking behind him. He ran out about 50ft.-60ft. It was easy ground. No bother. There was a wee rocky step, no more than a few feet. I can picture it to this day. Grant shouted down that it was a bit wet. I craned my neck to get a better view, just as Grant's foot slipped and he seemed to slither down a couple feet...he stopped for a second then seemed to overbalance backwards...he did that almost comical kind of swimming motion with his arms but his momentum took him back. There wasn't a sound. He tumbled over...and over again. The rope seemed to snake towards me...oh f o r f-u-c-k s-a-k-e G R A N TNO.....

NO.....NO!

In a split second the enjoyment of the moment with my big buddy on the crag was shattered with gut-wrenching intensity. The almost idyllic beauty of the place and the sense of accomplishment were exploded in an immediate paroxysm of dread. An enormously powerful force pulled me with a massive jerk as Grant's weight came on to the rope. How the hell the belay held I will never know. I was pulled all over the place and Grant's weight was hampering me from getting into a position to see what had happened. All the while I was screaming Grant's name, over and over, completely panic-stricken.

After a few moments, I somehow managed to tie off the load-bearing rope and lowered myself down a few feet to the edge of the crag. What I saw below was to hammer home the sickening enormity of what had happened. It was a sight that shall remain etched into my mind forever. I knew in my heart that Grant was dead – and yet just a few minutes beforehand we were on top of the world. I couldn't understand it.

I wept uncontrollably, trying to come to terms with this horrific event. I remember thinking of what the hell I was going to say to Grant's wife, Donna. What *DO* you say? I kept screaming Grant's name...willing him to come back...willing this nightmare to finish. The other climbers on the crag had seen and heard what was going on and had alerted the rescue. I really have no idea of time scale at this point. One of the other climbers lowered down to my position to help out in any way they could.

I remember the rescue helicopter hovering overhead, the powerful blast from the rotors buffeting me. I remember the rescue guy lowering down to my position and the look on his face when he went down to Grant. I remember being shepherded down the descent path by the two climbers who came over to help (and if you ever read this, I am indebted to you). I remember the way the rescue guys lowered Grant's body down the crag. I remember having to identify Grant's body in the helicopter and not understanding why I had to. And I remember being left alone and having to drive home when everyone else had gone. I also remember going to see Grant's wife later that night.

A very difficult year followed, with feelings of guilt dragging me into an abyss of despair and depression. I blamed myself for Grant's death that day, having made all the decisions that led up to it. But, ultimately it was Grant's own decision to be there with me and to set out from that last belay and I do finally, almost, accept that.

On the First Anniversary of the accident I went back up to Glen Etive and with permission from the estate manager, placed a small plaque on the path by the loch side in memory of the Big Man, and I'd like to thank some special friends, particularly in the Rannoch, for helping me with that. On the Second Anniversary I went all the way up to the crag, sat on the oh-so-aply named Coffin Stone and just thought things through. I've

been back to Glen Etive on the Anniversary every year since. Somehow it just helps.

This year I went up again. The plaque was gone. Removed. At the time I was devastated, who could do such a thing? But after a lot of thought I accepted that maybe it wasn't such a bad thing and it was a chance for me to move on. Not forget – just move on.

The whole episode brings home to me just how *good* climbing can be – and just how *very bad* climbing can be. But we still do it because we love it. I thought long and hard about packing it all in, but in the end I just couldn't.

Part Two:

“Sir, I salute your strength,
your courage, your indefatigable air
but why did ye have to
make that List?
cos now I've got a Thousand Yard Stare”
[Big Al to Saddman T. Munro in Baggedhad]

Thousand Yard Stare *n* (from: *Brewing Dictionary of Feeble Phrase*)
– A determined, resolute, single-minded, stubborn and unflagging decision to get up off one's arse and pull out all the stops to get the feckers in the bag once and for all.

...because, Jeezoman it's 26 years since I started doing the stupid things.

...but even before that, by way of a hill education in my pre-pubescent yooof in the late Sixties and early Seventies, three of us schoolmates would take Shanks's Pony from Drumchapel up into the wilderness of the Kilpatrick Hills. We had many enjoyable hours of fresh air, superlager, peat bogs, strong cider, cowpats, and solitude. Until that is, the Clydebanks Shamrock, our arch-enemies, sent out hunting parties and we got involved in running battles with sickening savagery on the bloody slopes of Duncolm, (mostly running it has to be said). The hills certainly offered us young lads an escape from the gangs and grim reality of 'scheme' life.

Yes, 26 years after my first Munro expedition in 1977. Ah yes, the memories...catching the bus from 'The Drum' kitted-out with those big orange aluminium-frame rucksacks; Doc Marten boots; Coopers Fine Fare plastic bags for gaiters; spit-through parka-cagoule-anorak type things; and of course, some bevvy for the journey to Glencoe. Then the interminable walk all the way down Glen Etive and camping halfway up Stob Coir'an Albannaich in a midge-storm...the searing heat, the warm lager, the dust, the flies. Oh yes – it was hell back in those days.

Since then, there have been countless good days on the hill with the Rannoch Club, into which I had been invited by that great old Rannoch luminary B. E. H. 'Ted' Maden. The good-fellowship; the convivial bonhomie; the brotherly badinage; the support and succour of ones like-minded mountain loving friends...

.....NOT

...more like 'Death Race' with trekking poles. Blood, sweat and beers. Last up the hill is a diddy. Lung-bursters interspersed with cruel jibes. Personal taunts. Vicious one-liners and putting the metaphorical boot 'intae yer mates'. I wouldn't have it any other way!

Oh yes, back to the Munros, and some Munro-bagging memories...

During a week away hillwalking in July 1978, doing the Grey Corries, Aonachs and Ben Nevis stuff. There was a heatwave and we seemed to spend the whole time walking around in a 'halo of flies'. Nothing to do with all of us being heavy metal freaks and big Alice Cooper fans, but for the duration of our trip we had an incessant plague of flies buzzing round our heads. Total insanity ensued.

Also, in that same year, this time in winter, we were doing the Bidean-Sgreamhach-Beinn Fhada ridge in deep snow and white-out conditions. Our navigation skills were in their infancy, to say the least, and we took a bearing from Sgreamhach to Beinn Fhada and set out, compass outheld, heads down. Half-an-hour later, we ended up exactly where we started! Very spooky and I still cannot to this day explain what happened.

There was fun and games on Ben Lawers in January 1981, when it became so windy on the hill that we had to lie on the ground clinging onto boulders for dear life, with legs flapping around worryingly and the rucksacks being ripped off our very backs. Very, very scary.

July 1982, a simply idyllic evening on Cairn Bannoch and Broad Cairn after a superb day's climbing on Creag an Dubh Loch. Rock routes, Cougar and Giant if I remember correctly. All followed by superlager and voddie cocktails – but I can't remember correctly.

An unusual day in September 1989. Camped by the roadside near Ben Klibreck, we were rudely awakened by quite possibly the worst clouds of midges I had ever seen. We fled the campsite and skedaddled up Ben Klibreck just to escape the wee biting basturts and were back down from the hill by 8.30am! After a leisurely breakfast in the improved conditions we visited the Falls of Shin to watch the salmon leaping. I'll always remember one of the party (who shall remain nameless) looking *UPSTREAM*, expecting the salmon to be leaping *DOWN* the way! D'uh! After lunch we got bored and went off to do Seana Braigh. A stunning hill, and an utterly brilliant day. Unplanned. Unexpected. Unbeatable.

Coulags Bothy. Nov 1989 saw the first rendition of the Rannoch Club

song (see www.climbrannoch.com/BigAlWrites) during a raucous evening, and the sight of Bunny and Mick the Fish engaged in pugilistics over a woman! A classic night. Followed the next morning by my one memory of beating JD up the hill, *mano-a-mano* on Maol Chean-dearg. On the way up the hill I deliberately dropped a five pence piece, knowing what JD's reaction would be. It hit him on the back of the head! He's like that, and as he scrabbled in the dirt to pocket it, it gave me the valuable time I required to put distance between us and bag the hill first. I admit it, a shocking piece of bastardmanship. But, hey, anything goes on the hill, it's dog-eat-dog out there!

December 1991. Slioch. It's supposed to have an easy bridge crossing – but we missed it and an epic river crossing in spate conditions ensued.

Myself, my wife Maureen and Wee Al had missed the bridge on the way up Slioch, (cue jokes about 'Nam and the Gooks having blown it up etc). We followed the river up the hill until the point where we thought we could get across. It is a raging torrent but not too deep. Me and Mo did the sensible thing and removed our boots and tied them on to our sacks then struggled across the flow together. Wee Al? Oh No. No. No. He took his boots off and tossed one of them across the stream, it landed safely. Phew! He chucked the other one. It landed on the other side then starts to r-o-l-l s-l-o-w-l-y down a wee slope and into the torrent and starts to float downstream.

Oh SHHHHHHEEEEEIIIIIIIIIT!

Just picture it. Wee Al scrabbling barefoot and panic-stricken across the icy boulder-strewn water as his boot (right one I think) floated merrily away, bobbing about playfully, almost in slow motion, taunting him. With a desperate last-minute belly-flopping lunge he snatched the laces just before the boot went 'doon the watter' and into Loch Maree. If there had been a panel of comedy judges set up on the banks of the river that day, they would have shown 6.0 6.0 6.0 6.0 6.0 6.0 6.0s all the way. TOP TOSSING!

Wee Al deservedly got the Rannoch 'Mug of the Year' award, indeed, I think it was his third year in a row – so he got to keep it.

It's a shocker to admit that between 1994 and 2002 I didn't do a single new Munro, and it has to be said, not much rockclimbing either, apart from Rannoch Hot Rocking that is. I guess it must've been something to do with the kids arriving on the scene, followed by my involvement in the aforementioned fatal accident. However, things got rekindled again at the 2002 Rannoch Dinner Meet when I *really* acquired the 'Thousand Yard Stare' after bagging nine of the 11 Skye Ridge Munros, leaving me just 10 to do.

Then in Spring 2003, the usual Rannoch Hotrock Spanish trip had to be cancelled due to irreconcilable wotsit personality thingummies. There was a split. Colin and JD headed north on an ill-fated 'Back to Basics'

Scotrock Tour. Myself, Iain and Chris decided to have a week in the Highlands bagging nine of my remaining 10 thus leaving Beinn Ime for completion in the autumn.

Primary targets were four of the Fisherfields, Lurg Mhor and Cheesecake, Sgurr nan Gillean and Am Basteir and Meall Buidhe (Knoydart). A piece of piss then.

In preparation, I had purchased a pair of 'Superfeet' insoles in an attempt to avoid blisters with my troublesome old canvas/goretex padding boots. So when we set out for the walk over to Shenavall Bothy on Saturday, May 3, I was confident that my feet would be in good nick for the padding week ahead. How wrong can you be! Within half-an-hour I knew there was trouble afoot, and by the time we reached the bothy in the pouring rain my heels were shredded.

The bothy was busy, with around 20 people in residence and a few tents outside. But with a bit of brass neck and luck we muscled into the main room with the log fire, sorted out some floor space, and milled around drinking beer and chatting. It was around 9.30pm and there had obviously been a lot of bevvies consumed and the banter was raucous to say the least. One of the wimmin in the company remarked that she had drunk rather a lot and expected to wake up with 'a big thumper'. I felt I had to clarify the situation by pointing out that it was only blokes that woke up with 'big thumpers', and that seemed to set the tone for the evening.

The following morning, we awoke to a bright day but one with the obvious threat of rain. I put on an extra pair of socks and got 'compeeded-up' in an attempt to avoid worsening my blisters, but to no avail. We waded the rivers to get on to the stalker's track leading over to Carnmore, and followed this up to the col between A'Mhaigdean and Ruadh Stac Mor. The weather really crapped out big time here and there was a very heavy and prolonged hailstorm.

We continued round my remaining Fisherfield hills, and back to the bothy extremely wet and cold. My feet were in a truly shocking state. It had been a long 10-hour+ day. However, I had some canned anaesthetic with me and we had another great night in the bothy. Particularly good fun, were Gordon and Fiona from the Kyle Mountain Club who were terrific company. Much credit goes to Fiona especially, for doing all six hills in appalling conditions, a really tough 12-hour day. I think she had her own 'thousand yard stare'.

Our plan for Monday was to have an easy walk out from the bothy and not a lot else. However, the state my feet were in led to it being a dreadful ordeal. We decided to walk out via the Strath na Sealga, a bit longer but with supposedly easier walking.

.....plod....ooyah!.....plod....ooyah!

...multiplied by about 10,543 approximately, but who's counting? I was sure I'd have to visit my dentist as I was gritting my teeth so much and I was nearly heaving with the pain. Not an enjoyable experience. Mr Simpson, I doff my cap to you sir, I know how you felt. I was touching the cloth.

On Monday night we dossed at the Kinlochewe Bunkhouse, and had a few beers with JD and Colin who had just arrived for their Wetrock Tour 2003. Poor guys – it was wet, wet, wet.

Tuesday was our big cycling day – from Attadale into Bendronaig Lodge at the foot of Lurg Mhor and Cheesecake. It's at times like these that I realise that I am just so NOT a mountain biker. The uphill bits are desperate and you end up pushing the fecking bike and when you do get a downhill bit you get shaken and rattled to buggery. My brakes were 'beagling', my arms and hands were 'screaming' and my legs were 'howling'. What a racket! The hills, however, were surprisingly straight-forward from this side. We got a soaking in some very heavy showers but there was the occasional view to make up for it.

'Stare' still on and going to plan.

Wednesday was our rest day. We drove round to Kyle of Lochalsh, then over on to Skye and the Sligachan Inn, where we booked in to the Bunkhouse. A good pool and beer session ensued. All the while the weather had been poor but it was nothing to what was to come overnight! In all my years I have never seen weather like we had that night on Skye, it was monsoonmungs!

Thursday dawned and it was still really crap. We thought there was no way in the world we'd get on to the hill that day. So we had a Portree shopping trip instead. Iain was looking for something for his chafed hips and arse. I suggested Pampers, but he wasn't impressed. We went to the Outdoor shop where Iain asked the rather attractive sales assistant: "What have you got in the way of underwear?"

I quickly interjected before Iain got a slap.

"He means what you're selling, not what you're wearing."

The lass took it well, because we got a complimentary coffee and the obligatory small talk. By the time we got back to Slig for what we thought was sure to be another pool and beer sesh, there was just a hint of a break in the weather.

We hurriedly got the gear together and Iain had a chance to try out his new anti-chafe undershorts. With the constant threat of the weather changing we really shifted, and were on the top of Am Basteir in two hours from the bunkhouse. Then up and over Sgurr nan Gilleann in a bit of a hail storm which added to the excitement. We had snatched these hills from the jaws of defeat, and it was magic! On a sour note though, I went

over on my ankle several times on the way down the hill. The footwear I was using were little more than trainers with no ankle support and I was paying for it.

Incredibly, we had done everything in our itinerary according to plan. Amazing when you consider the weather, but the Friday was going to be a hard last day. We had an early start to drive down to Armadale for the 9.15 ferry to Mallaig. That got us there in time for the 10.15 ferry to Inverie. We then had exactly four hours to do the Meall Buidhe round trip, and we felt confident enough that we could do it. We were now pretty fit, but in retrospect I think we had underestimated this hill. It's funny what a 'Thousand Yard Stare' can do to you. It's a 21km round trip with 960m of ascent, and even with cycling the first 3km and going at what Iain called 'panic pace' there was just too little time to do the hill and get back for the 15.00 ferry. The weather was appalling, lashing rain and hail, gale force winds and very very cold. Oh Yes! This is May in Scotland all right. The path up the Mam Meadail was a stream and with a dodgy strapped-up ankle it was just never going to be. I was staring defeat in the face. We got to the col at 550m then had to turn back, and even then only got back just in time for a swift pint before the ferry arrived.

If the Skye hills had been snatched from defeat, then Meall Buidhe was a bit of a kick in the baws. Very, very disappointing...a Meall too far...an unfinished Meall...one for the doggy bag to be finished later.

In fact, I would say Friday, May 9, was in my top three of memorable days on the hill, for the wrong reasons.

In third place Meall Buidhe, Knoydart – pishing wet, freezing, sore feet bollocks, so close to being my penultimate Munro, yet so fucking far away.

In second place An Sgarsoch and Carn an Fhidleir from Glen Feshie on a Rannoch Bothy Meet. Nine hours in deep snow in a whiteout only to return to a bothy full of Embra' Yoonie tossers – truly shocking.

The worst/best day on the hill ever is reserved for those countless days (and many still to come hopefully) on the hill with JD and the Rannoch team and the blood-sweating toil of trying to keep up with the sods. Hell. Marvellous.

I did get Meall Buidhe in the bag a few weeks' later at the end of May. A cracking weekend at Barrisdale Bothy. I was then staring my Last Munro in the face – Beinn Ime. It's you and me. In fact, therein lies a strange tale. I had been on Beinn Ime before, way back in the late Seventies. We had reached what we thought was the summit cairn in appalling weather and went down immediately. The following weekend we were up on a neighbouring hill, and we could see clearly the twin summits on Beinn Ime and realised that we hadn't been to the true summit. From that day I decided to leave it for my last.

September 2003, 13 – Beinn Ime. My 'Stare Way to Heaven' was from

the Butterbridge side and my rather romantic idea was for it to be my two sons Calum and Craig's first Munro as well.

I loved the day, but believe it or not was totally stressed out about how it was all going to turn out. Invitations had been sent out but who would come? Who wouldn't? The weather? The route? How would my boys do? What was the hall for the celebrations afterwards like? Have I got enough food? Drink? Would people have a good time? Will folk stay over? Worry-worry-worry. Fret-fret-fret.

Of course, in the end it was fantastic, 30 great friends on the hill, albeit on a cool and misty, but thankfully dry day. Eight-year-old Calum's first Munro. The only slight disappointment was that my wee Craig (six-years-old) and hence Her Wifiness Maureen couldn't quite make it.

The Bubbly, the Stella, the malts, the handshakes, the hugs, the gags, the one-liners, the photies. Then back to the excellent Cairndow Village Hall for a superb night. Naff speeches, great company, superb chilli, bevvy galore, music, dancing, ping-pong and so much more.

And afterwards, the strange sense of Compleat Emptiness or is it Empty Completion? I can't decide. It is really very difficult to explain, so I won't even bother to try, but, there remains...what now?...Corbetts? Grahams? Donalds? Marilyn's? Messners? Buhl!

Aye right!

...stares into the distance.

CLIMBING AND WRITING: THE VICTORIAN WAY

By Robin N. Campbell

I SHOULD like to begin with a confession. Since my taste in literature is irredeemably low-brow, I address my chosen topic as an imposter. My idea of a really good book is one written by Arthur Conan Doyle, Rex Stout or P. G. Wodehouse. If, preparing to bivouac, I were to discover the work of a Booker prize-winner included by some mischance in my rucksack, I should not read it, but instead use it as a prophylactic for piles. So far as poetry is concerned, I share Wodehouse's opinion, epitomized in his golf story, *Rodney has a Relapse*:¹

"I have generally found, as I have gone through the world, that people are tolerant and ready to forgive, and in our little community it was never held against Rodney Spelvin that he had once been a poet, and a very virulent one, too; the sort of man who would produce a slim volume bound in squashy mauve leather at the drop of a hat, on the subject of sunsets or pixies...it was golf and the love of a good woman that saved Rodney Spelvin."

For Wodehouse, as for me, the poetic impulse is the product of a debilitating condition, in its effects resembling malaria, which seizes hold of its victims at moments of weakness and reduces them to gibbering wrecks.

Rodney Spelvin was a poet redeemed by golf. Could a poet be redeemed by mountaineering? Perhaps Andrew Greig would count as such a case. However, there are many counter-examples of mountaineers who, most regrettably, have succumbed to poetry, usually with dire results. The official Songs of our older Clubs (except for our own) bear ample testimony to this embarrassing tendency. The Song of the Yorkshire Ramblers, composed by three mountaineers, whom I will forbear to name, provides a grim example:

Forty in round numbers are
England's counties great and small
And of these shall ever stand
Yorkshire, greatest of them all;
Shouldering the stalwart North,
Buttress staunch and true is she;
Is there county can compare
With her of the Ridings three?

Of course, the problem with mountaineering as a cure for poetry is that it offers too many subjects apparently fit for poetic treatment. That is,

there are plenty of non-mountaineering mountain poets, whereas there are no golf poets – golfing or otherwise, since golf is gratifyingly barren of topics suited for poetry. So golf, darts or snooker are much more promising antidotes than mountaineering.

These prejudices declared, it will be obvious that my own interest in the writings of Victorian Scottish mountaineers is not by any means a literary one: rather, it has been historical. I first became involved with their writings in the late 1960s when I served as apprentice to Geoff Dutton, who was at that time Editor of our Journal. Its first 10 volumes – up to 1909 – are a wonderful evocation of climbing when everything was new, unspoiled and innocent – hills, crags and climbers alike. Editors – even sub-editors – enjoyed a Club copy of the entire run of Journals as a perquisite of office, so I was able to comb through this early material thoroughly. I began this reading with the usual set of derogatory opinions: that the early climbers were technically incompetent; that they were old and portly; that they were hampered by great difficulties of travel and of access, etc. As I continued to read, I abandoned these attitudes one by one and came instead to the view that mountaineering in the 1890s was much the same as mountaineering in the 1960s and 1970s, but much more amusing, since so few were doing it, and since so little had been done.

Behind the beards and moustaches, below the glengarries and deerstalkers, there were extremely fit men in their twenties and early thirties. They reached their mountains using efficient and regular trains supplemented by bicycles and a plentiful supply of ponies and carriages: indeed, many hills could be reached more easily then than today. The absence of huts was no hindrance, since every Highland glen was populated, providing food and shelter near to every mountain.² And I was able to show that technical standards – particularly on ice climbs and mixed routes – reached a level in the 1890s that they did not regain until the 1950s. Harold Raeburn's winter ascents of Crowberry Gully (Buachaille) and Green Gully (Ben Nevis) and William Naismith's winter ascent of the North-east Buttress (Ben Nevis) were ignored or forgotten by the next generations of climbers.³ No doubt they held the same prejudiced views as I did, and never thought to consult the record. Nor was this Victorian competence confined to 'stars' like Naismith and Raeburn. At the Club's Easter Meet at Fort William in 1896 all the great ridges of Ben Nevis were climbed, and the Tower Ridge was ascended by five separate parties.

The rockclimbers of the 1890s, although perhaps less enterprising, expressed surprisingly modern views and interests. For example, the Club's founder Naismith zealously explored many low-level crags and quarries. His friend Gilbert Thomson wrote in 1892 that:

"Saturday afternoons and summer evenings (or mornings, sometimes) might be well spent, not in roaming over roads or moorland, but in hunting

up dainty bits of rockclimbing and the like where there was sufficient difficulty to keep the faculties up to the mark. A precipice 20ft. high does not sound very serious, but there may be more fun and real climbing in getting up and down such a place than there is in ascending the 4406ft. of Ben Nevis.”⁴

In this after-hours fashion Naismith and Thomson explored the Whangie and Loudon Hill and other small crags within easy reach of Glasgow. Later, in Edinburgh, Raeburn and William Inglis Clark made illegal ascents of the fine little routes in the quarried faces of Salisbury Crags. Enthusiasm for small crags was not confined to these fanatics: a post Annual Dinner Meet held late in 1892 at the Whangie and attended by Horace Walker, Alpine Club President, was described by Thomson:

“The whole hill and moor was covered with a coating of soft snow, and the rocks themselves presented a very wintry appearance, which the sense of touch fully confirmed. The crevices were filled with snow and ice, many parts were festooned with icicles and the difficulty of scrambling was considerably increased. An hour or two, however, was very enjoyably spent in various pieces of fancy climbing, the concluding part being done to the accompaniment of a fierce snowstorm, which pelted us well as we made our way back across the moor.”

Four years later the Journal carried an article by another friend of Naismith’s – Fraser Campbell – about ‘bouldering’⁵. It proposed the formation of a Boulder Society and was illustrated by minutely tedious drawings of boulders – this at a time when the Highlands were largely unexplored and large virgin buttresses and faces lay conveniently to hand! Campbell had the decency to allow that “it must be admitted that the exercise of boulder climbing is almost purely athletic, but the training to nerve and muscle may stand the climber in good stead upon some more important occasion”.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this early interest in climbing for climbing’s sake came from John Hart Bell, who 100 years ago wrote a short piece for the Journal entitled *A Purely Climbing Ideal* ⁶. Bell was a fine climber who made many good routes throughout Scotland. Perhaps his best-known efforts were ascents of the Sannox face of Cir Mhór in 1895, of the Church Door Buttress of Bidean in 1898, and a second ascent of the Waterpipe Gully (Skye) in 1896. He had the misfortune to share the same name and a middle initial with a much later Bell – James Horst Brunneman Bell – who became very well known. As a consequence, many of John Bell’s climbs were credited in our guidebooks to James Bell, conferring unparalleled longevity and potency on the later Bell. John Bell’s short article attempted to describe what constituted an ideal climb:

“In my opinion, chiefly four things [make a climb ideal]. It should be *new*. It should be *continuous*. It should be *difficult*, yet, once started, it should be the *easiest available*.” [my emphases].

I doubt whether a modern climber would answer Bell's question differently. Perhaps more salient than the points that he includes are those that he omits. For example, there is no mention of length of route, of a mountain setting or of the quality of rock. And these, I am sure, would have figured in definitions offered by climbers from the Twenties through the Seventies.

Bell goes on to remark that:

"When a man needs all the mountain knowledge that he has, and all his skill and muscle to take him up the next few feet, he is not likely at that moment to pay much attention, even although the sun may be setting in a flood of red and gold over the sea within his view. If at the last hole in a game of golf a man is putting for a half, he won't at that moment think of the ever-changing sounds and sights of the sea, or of the cloud shadow moving across the hill."

So a romantic mountain ambience is not at all an essential ingredient of Bell's ideal climb. Wodehouse would, of course, have been greatly warmed by these vigorous anti-poetic sentiments of Bell's and by his sound understanding of the golfing priorities!

To summarize the tendency of these remarks, the Victorian Scottish mountaineer may, without much difficulty, be seen as the next worst thing to a sport climber. He did not care whether he was on a high crag or on some miserable lowland escarpment or roadside boulder. The climb was the thing: not where it was, nor how long it was and certainly not whether you might watch the sunset from it!

Despite my opening remarks, I will now attempt to make a few observations on the qualities of writing desired and achieved by these mountaineers. Naturally, the general standard of writing was high. In those days – before photography, film, and radio began to compete – the principal amusement was reading and the only forms of record were writing and drawing. So every educated person drew well and wrote well, since comfortable employment depended absolutely on these skills. They also wrote copiously. The early SMC numbered only 100 or so, yet they produced material enough for three Journals a year, each efficiently produced in six weeks from handwritten edited copy to printed product. In more recent times, working with material type-written or in electronic form, we manage only one issue a year, take about three months to get it published, and much of it is not worth reading. Were we to produce three issues, it is doubtful whether the members would take the trouble to read them.

Much of Victorian writing is nevertheless somewhat dull. Perhaps the worst case is Hugh Munro. Munro contributed 85 articles and notes over a period of more than 20 years. As a historical record of events and facts they are exemplary: dates are always given, his companions are fully identified, the weather, mountain conditions and events of the day are

accurately described. But there is almost no humour, very little account of his thoughts, hopes or fears, and little or no evocation of the mountain scene beyond an occasional estate agent's catalogue of distant summits visible from the summit reached. And this is a considerable shame, since Munro's climbing was certainly interesting. Much of it was done alone and in winter: alone since he was not much liked – perhaps due to his habit of talking incessantly – and in winter because, being a landowner himself, he was reluctant to climb in summer where the owner might take his trespassing amiss. In his declining years, when he was struggling to complete the ascent of the 538 Tops of his famous Tables while suffering from worsening rheumatism, he adopted the compromise method of climbing through summer nights – a practice which sometimes resulted in severe confusion and error.⁷

While most of our Victorian mountaineers wrote in the same stuffy style as Munro, describing their climbs in military manner, there were some exceptions. I will draw attention here only to Norman Collie and to Joseph Stott, our first Editor, who initiated 114 years of continuous publication in 37 fat volumes with the hapless admonition: "Let thy words be few!"

Collie's colourful account of his winter ascent of Tower Ridge in 1894 is well-known. It was entitled *Divine Mysteries of the Oromaniacal Quest* and signed 'Orlamon Linecus', an anagram of his name with added Latin masculine suffix – *us*.⁸ It was written in the manner of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as a religious tract, but with intrusions modelled on alchemical or Rosicrucian writings. The two excerpts that follow describe the approach to the Ridge and the conquest of the Great Tower and give the flavour well:

"[They saw] the great Mountain, the Immensity of Greatness, the majestic Silence, the prodigious Dampness, the Height, the Depth, in shape like a great Dome, whereof the base is in the floods and the waters, whence issueth forth delectable springs, welling up for ever, continually ascending, yet ever flowing downwards... Then behold before them rose hugeous rocks and bulky stones standing on end facing to the north, where the ice and snow tarry from one winter even until the following, for in those places the sun shines not, neither are found the comfortable soft and juicy breezes of the south; there the brood of the black Crow and the white vapours and comprehensive congelations of the Mistus Scotorum are produced. So were the three Brethren sore amazed but as yet could see not even the first matter of the work.

'But presently came they to a great rock, a majestic tower; here were they perforce compelled to depart to the right hand, placing themselves in steep and perilous positions on slopes of ice, which downwards seemed to end in the empty air, even in the great void ... Still all things have an end at last, – good Wine, Pinnacles, Spires, cabalistic Emblems, and oromaniacal Wanderings, even the green Sauce of the philosophers and

the pythagoric Mustard of the Great Master himself, spoken of by Alcofribas Nasier in his merrie work. So did the Three find the perilous passage across the headlong steep finish. Then did they pass onwards to the Labyrinth, the rocky Chaos, and greatly did they marvel at the exceeding steepness thereof; so that only by great perseverance, turning now to right and now to left, were they able to break themselves free from the bonds and entanglements, and climb sagaciously upwards to the summit of the great tower."

While there is a self-indulgent immaturity about the 'Quest', Collie's handling of this bizarre style is assured and its application to mountain narrative is certainly innovative and tolerably successful. A later piece by Collie which also exhibits unusual qualities of style is *A Reverie*.⁹ The latter part of this is a fairly straightforward account of exploration of the Central Gully and Buttress of Coire Mhic Fhearchair on Beinn Eighe. But the first part consists of several pages of a 'stream of consciousness' report of an evening spent alone with his pipe in his Campden Grove rooms, mulling over future plans, past deeds and present duties. Here is a brief example:

"By this time my pipe is out. Where are these matches? I know the last time I saw them they were on the corner of the table. I shall look for them presently. In the meantime, my thoughts have taken a fresh plunge, and I follow them with a feeling of languid interest. Where on earth are they going? I see the head political officer of the Gilgit district playing golf on the Maidan above Astor, amongst the stately pines on the Himalayan mountains, whilst ranged round me are the snow-peaks and the glaciers. Those wonderful mountains! What magnificent outlines, what grandeur, what mystery, what! ... Stop! Can I be growing sentimental? It must have been the Stilton or the sardines that have produced this particular physiological sensation. Yes, without doubt, the sardines, for now do I remember having read long ago, in a goodly book of right pleasant and entertaining anecdotes, a story, a most sentimental story, all about two Sardines, who lived and loved amongst the purple waves of the roaring Adriatic. But that is another story."

This style may not be particularly interesting nor very successful, but it shows that Collie had a taste for experimental writing and is a tribute to the taste and tolerance of his editor, William Douglas. In the second part of the *Reverie* Collie concludes his account of the climb with a sarcastic rejection of the poetic impulse (already trivialized in the preceding excerpt as a mere by-product of over-indulgence in sardines):

"It is now evening, and I ought, if orthodox, here to insert a description of the sunset, to become suddenly poetical, to talk about 'The sun-god once more plunges into the baths of ocean'. The sea too is always useful at such moments. 'Banks of sullen mist, brooding like a purple curtain,' &c., sounds well; and one must not forget 'the shadows of approaching

night,' they form a fitting background for the gloomy and introspective spirit which ought to seize upon one at this particular psychological moment. 'The tumbled fragments of the hills, hoary with memories of forgotten years,' come next, with a vague suggestion of solitude, which should be further emphasised by allusions to 'the present fading away, and being lost in the vast ocean of time, a lifetime being merely a shadow in the presence of these changeless hills.' Then, to end up, mass the whole together, and call it an 'inscrutable pageant'; pile on the shadows, which must grow blacker and blacker, till 'naught remains but the mists of the coming night and darkness'; and if you have an appropriate quotation, good, put it in! What the party really did was to hurry down into Allt a' Choire Dhuibh Mhor, and hasten with more or less empty insides to the 'machine' and dinner."

The first Editor, Joseph Stott, did not much care for this sort of bathos. In a letter to Douglas,¹⁰ he complained that "the Oromaniacal Quest is amusing, but so damnably vague that, but for the note in *Notes and Queries*, you would not know what they'd been up to on Ben Nevis". Stott had firm views about how mountaineering should be described but he was generally scathing about the lifeless narratives usually produced. In another letter to Douglas¹¹ he complained bitterly that his beloved Journal had become full of "miles, feet and minutes, and endless dissections of the unhappy points of the compass. To me these are really little more interesting than an architect's specification for building a stane dyke!" Instead what Stott required was "something in which I can hear the roaring of the torrent, and see the snows, and the brown heather, and the clouds and scud flying athwart the blue above the rocky peaks...something which will set my pulses beating, and conjure up dear old Scotland!"

Naturally, we should expect to find evocative descriptions of this sort in Stott's own writings, and indeed we do. However, they are usually over-written and sometimes nauseatingly sentimental – the very style that Collie found so uncongenial.¹²

We have, I think managed to improve a lot on the efforts of the Victorians. We know now that humour is indispensable in mountain narratives, that some account of the thoughts of climbers adds life and colour, and that dialogue – wholly avoided by the Victorians – helps as a vehicle for humour, gives the characters in our narratives the semblance of independent life and draws the reader into the scene more intimately. There is occasional deployment of all three ingredients in earlier writings (Mary Mummery's account of the Teufelsgrat is an outstanding example,¹³ as are many of Dorothy Thompson's narratives¹⁴), but it was perhaps not until Tom Patey and Allan Austin that the most compelling evidence favouring the use of this mixture was provided.

Other ingredients are desirable, too: fine writing, of course, and, although he did not have the trick of it himself, the missing ingredient that Stott

complained about – evocation of the mountain scene. There is great drama in the scenes of mountaineering and I do not think that modern writers convey that drama any more successfully than did the Victorians. Certainly Patey and Austin did not do so. Perhaps this is because, as John Bell observed, the activity of climbing is so engrossing that the dramatic aspect of the scene escapes us. Indeed, it may be indispensable in technical climbing to keep the imagination under wraps. “This hold is OK,” we say, “and this one too. So I might as well be lounging on a street corner. No problem here. Up I go.” and never think about the difficulties ahead or of the clutching void below.

If there is a weakness in modern mountain writing, then I would locate it here. As a cure we might study writers of the period between the Victorian era and the Sixties, such as Claude Schuster and Bill Murray, who both knew well how to evoke, with a light touch, the drama of the mountain scene. Here my taste in reading, announced at the start, makes its point, for Stout and Wodehouse were nonpareils in the use of wit and dialogue in first-person narratives, and the narratives of Conan Doyle, of course, were effectively film-scripts in which the drama of every scene was perfectly conveyed. Oddly enough, in view of his attitude towards poetic or sentimental display, Collie occasionally made the effort to capture in writing the strong impression which mountain scenery made on him. When he did so, he succeeded very well. Master of all types of climbing, Collie seemed determined to master all styles of writing, too. The closing paragraphs of his *A' Chuillionn*¹⁵ are everything that poor exiled Stott would have wished for. Although there is too much of the prose-poem about these descriptions for modern tastes (and certainly for mine), those who know the Cuillin well will recognise the mysterious mountain essences which Collie strives to characterize here.

“The individuality of the Coolin is not seen in their summits, which are often almost ugly, but in the colour of the rocks, the atmospheric effects, the relative largeness and harmony of the details compared with the actual size of the mountains, and most of all in the mountain mystery that wraps them round: not the mystery of clearness, such as is seen in the Alps and Himalayas, where range after range recedes into the infinite distance till the white snow peaks cannot be distinguished from the clouds, but in the obscure and secret beauty born of the mists, the rain, and the sunshine in a quiet and untroubled land, no longer vexed by the more rude and violent manifestations of the active powers of nature. Once there was a time when these peaks were the centre of a great cataclysm; they are the shattered remains of a vast volcano that ages since poured its lavas in mighty flood far and wide over the land; since then the glaciers in prehistoric time have polished and worn down the corries and the valley floors, leaving scars and wounds everywhere as a testimony of their power; but now the fire age and the ice age are past, the still clear waters of Coruisk ripple in the

breeze, by the lochside lie the fallen masses of the hills, and the shattered debris left by the ice, these harbour the dwarf hazel, the purple heather, and the wild flowers, whilst corrie, glen, and mountain-side bask in the summer sunlight.

“But when the wild Atlantic storms sweep across the mountains; when the streams gather in volume, and the bare rock faces are streaked with the foam of a thousand waterfalls; when the wind shrieks amongst the rock pinnacles, and sky, loch, and hill-side is one dull grey, the Coolin can be savage and dreary indeed; perhaps, though, the clouds towards the evening may break, then the torn masses of vapour, tearing in mad hunt along the ridges, will be lit up by the rays of the sun slowly descending into the western sea, robing the gloom with a vesture of diverse colours, of which the threads are purple and scarlet, and the embroideries flame; and as the light flashes from the black rocks, and the shadows deepen in the corries, the superb beauty, the melancholy, the mystery of these mountains of the Isle of Mist will be revealed. But the golden glory of the sunset will melt from off the mountains, the light that silvered the great slabs will slowly fail, from out the corries darkness heralding the black night will creep with stealthy tread hiding all in gloom; and last of all, behind the darkly luminous, jagged, and fantastic outline of the Coolins the glittering stars will flash out from the clear sky, no wind will stir the great quiet, only the far-off sound, born of the rhythmic murmur of the sea waves beating on the rock-bound shore of lonely Scavaig, remains as a memory of the storm.”

¹ In *Nothing Serious*. Herbert Jenkins, 1950.

² See ‘Transports of Delight’ in Peter Drummond and Ian Mitchell’s *The First Munroist*, Ernest Press, 1993.

³ ‘The First Scottish Ice Climbers’. *SMCJ*, 1972, 30, 48-57.

⁴ ‘Practice Scrambles’. *SMCJ*, 1892, 2, 8-12.

⁵ ‘On Bouldering’. *SMCJ*, 1896, 4, 52-56.

⁶ *SMCJ*, 1904, 8, 1-3.

⁷ E.g. the well-known debacle on An Scarsoch, *SMCJ*, 1909, 10, 230, repeated in *SMCJ*, 1989, 34, 219-227.

⁸ *SMCJ*, 1894, 3, 151-157.

⁹ *SMCJ*, 1898, 5, 93-102.

¹⁰ Headed ‘Wellington, 22/10/94’. This letter and others identified below were preserved by Douglas and are deposited in the National Library. The Stott letters are reproduced in my ‘Dear Douglas’. *SMCJ*, 1990, 34, 388-399.

¹¹ Headed ‘Wellington, 7/2/95’.

¹² See my ‘Stott’s Mountaineering Club’, *SMCJ*, 1974, 30, 257-263 for numerous grotesque examples.

¹³ In A. F. Mummery. *My Climbs in the Alps and the Caucasus*. Fisher Unwin, 1895.

¹⁴ See *Climbing with Joseph Georges*. Titus Wilson, 1962.

¹⁵ *SMCJ*, 1897, 4, 259-266.

SKYE IS THE LIMIT

By Julian Lines

TROPHY CRACK was one of those routes that had been playing on my subconscious for well over a decade. Did I have the audacity to solo it? It felt really tempting and on completion would leave me with a reckless sense of pleasure and an eternal memory.

April 2003, and it was time for my trip to Skye, the forecast of two sunny days and no midges to contend with was a real opportunity and one not to be missed.

On arriving in Glen Brittle, I had little incentive as the mist was down over the Cuillin and darkness was imminent. However, after a brief spell of procrastinating, I made my way through the gathering gloom up to my usual haunt in Coire Lagan. During daylight, it is a beautiful spot, a clear blue lochan idling in secrecy among the dark chocolate coloured spires. The lochan only allocates you a small shale/mud beach to pitch a tent on, in close proximity to a plethora of dreamy boulders. These boulders lure you on to try the beautiful moves they have to offer, but, like the 'Sirens', there is malice here. It's akin to playing catch with an angle grinder and, in return for graceful movement, bloodied fingertips are your reward. Gritstone is soap in comparison to this stuff!

I arrived in the dark and started walking through the lochan in the mist. Within minutes the tent was up and I was cocooned in my bag, staring at the walls wondering what the morning would bring. Deep into the night the patter of rain tinkling on the fly sunk my hopes a little. Tents always amplify sound I assured myself, while hoping the whole trip was not going to be a total waste of time.

Morning light, visibility is down to 100ft. and, cursing lamely, I curl back up into the embryo position. Some time later, lying on my back and carefully studying the guide, a direct ray of the sun's energy makes contact with the tent and, like a cold-blooded reptile, I mentally and physically metamorphose in a split second, springing out of my nylon tomb and into the awaiting world. The mist still embraced those dark menacing summits but the higher cloud dispersed gradually to produce those lovely azure patches bringing heat and hope.

The only crag to have the mid-morning sun in April was on the south buttress of Sgurr Dearg. I remembered eyeing an unclimbed central slabby arête up there some years before and, as I looked up, there it was winking at me. A beautiful edge of perfect gabbro basking in the sun and casting its shadow onto the wall behind, making it even more appealing. Once again, could this be mythology repeating itself? The edge peering down on me like 'Circe', trying to lure me on and kill me in cold blood. Am I the suitor she is looking for? Will I fall victim to such atrocities? I consider

myself typically humble, a Hobo! Not a warrior, I have no hardware, just two slabs of sticky rubber and some white powder and quite possibly the wrong white powder for the unknown mission ahead.

After 20 minutes I arrive at a small oasis beneath this foreboding edge, where a burbling spring emerges out of the base of the cliff producing this small area of pure green, springy moss. The adjacent route is aptly named *Styx* (HVS), another omen, was I going to hell? A perfect wall of gabbro is bounded on the left by this arête and, with the sun's energy on my back, this seemed light years from hell. I started with caution up a thin basalt dyke to a resting point. Then I had to make a decision, the flake on the right or the arête on the left, I decided to thinly move out to the jug on the arête. Committed now, the Gods seemed to smile kindly on me as huge ladder holds just kept emerging all the way to a comfortable ledge at 25m. The remainder looked easier and it was. Pleasant climbing up cracks and slabs on warm rough rock.

The pitiless *Hobo* (E3) was born.

Soon I was back down at the lochan, the sky had ripened and flourished into a deep shade of blue but, disappointingly, a certain keenness to the April wind that stopped me spiralling into total lethargy.

It was time for *Trophy Crack*. From the lochan there is a dyke like path, which cuts across the base of the west face of Sgurr Sgumain, a scramble in parts, it provides quick access to Sron Na Ciche. The sun was arcing across the sky, but not yet enough to touch the high, looming face above. When it does, the face portrays its age, the shadows of the routes are like wrinkles. *Cioch Direct* (1907) being the first wrinkle to appear. Fifty years on and *Trophy Crack* (1956) adds another. Others will form, the face is immortal. More wrinkles, more wisdom and more worshippers. But I still haven't calculated how a *Cioch* grows out of a face!

Scrutinising the face above, I found a patch of grass out of the wind and buckled down to some serious sun bathing to speed up the rate of my own wrinkle growth. The earth's rotation is slow and I was becoming impatient watching the huge shadow diminish all too slowly. The rays of sun gradually caressed the tip of the *Cioch*, alas, the sun's best notions did not make it grow, it remained sombre and motionless.

Cioch Grooves (HVS), first climbed in 1957, seemed like the logical start on this 900ft. bastion of impeccable gabbro. Although the first pitch was rather wet in places, it was fun on immaculate rock, up slabs and cracks. The wall at the start of the second pitch was rather scary, but when I arrived at the crux thin traverse, it was all quite readable and positive. The next pitch gave immaculate jamming leading to the terrace.

ArrowRoute (VD) was next on the agenda. I bet this puts the fear of God into most V.Diff. leaders, an absolutely amazing piece of low angled rock, perfect and near protectionless. Sixteen years before, at the tender age of 18 I had climbed *Slab Corner* (D). I remember feeling safe in the





corner and just looking out across the exposed *Arrow Route* scared the shit out of me! I now savoured the next five minutes of fine high-quality climbing making my own path up its dimples and contours. Moreover, what could be better than sun on top of the Cioch where I stretched out and took a short catnap.

Trophy Crack (E1) was not, however, revelling in the sun and I thought it was rather unjust to have to climb in the shade. It was chilly and a low level of anxiety was pumping round my veins. A pleasant little grass platform lies at the base of this route, and weirdly, it gives peace of mind to a soloist, a haven among hostilities. The start was steep and powerful and, after 15m of brilliant sustained climbing, I came to realise that it was not as slabby as I thought it would be. I smiled to myself as I recounted this being a Pat Walsh route.

I met Pat once at a party, a jovial sort, short with grey hair, even at 70 he looked bloody strong. He seemed the sort that if you asked him for an arm wrestle there would be a broken ulna splattered over the table, and you would be knocked unconscious from the fumes of pure malt (quite possibly a Talisker) to ease the pain! What a legend, and, if I had had more time to listen, I'm sure the sagas would have bumbled out of him. This route seemed to typify him, being constantly sustained and somewhat traditionally powerful.

A piece of white tat hung out a few feet below the belay so I assumed this was the crux but it turned out okay. I remember looking down and placing my feet on some dimples and the glare reflecting back in my face off the *Arrow Route* slab which was now basking in the sun 50m below. I savoured the moment and the atmosphere then leisurely cruised up the perfect second pitch.

My inner happiness on completion was cut extremely short by an icy persistent wind. I had to keep moving. The sun was still high in the sky and I realised that the west face of Sgurr Sgumain would be in the sun. I had read there was a recommended classic there called *The Klondyker* (HVS) which sounded like it needed to be searched out. I had pre-written the description down on a piece of paper which I had slipped down my pants hoping it would catch in the elastic at the waist.

Another impeccable piece of climbing as I reached the ledge halfway up the second pitch. This is where things all went slightly wrong. An obvious crack went diagonally left and there was a direct line, which looked improbable. About this time there were about five people at the lochan on their way down from the summits, they saw me and, as I didn't want to give them cause for concern and scare them shitless, I sat down in this niche and meditated. Staring out over the Isle to the sea and infinity, no finer country in the world than Scotland when the weather is good, I mused.

Back to reality, back to being between a rock and a hard place. The holds dictated my movement straight up but I had lost my rhythm and

became a little ruffled. The roof seemed hard for the grade, a poor jam in the lip but the feet were good. One move at a time then big laybacks. On up to the terrace where I pull out my description, memorise the last three pitches and climb them in little time. I remember the 4c pitch being space-walking on buckets, one of the most exposed and out there VS pitches I had ever done.

My feet were aching and swimming inside my boots and I thought that was enough for one day, but there was still about three hours of sun above the horizon. It was a perfect day and they do not come too often in Scotland. I knew exactly what was nagging at my subconscious, it was the words, Vulcan Wall. The sun had arced sufficiently to soak the wall in glittering light and access was little more than five minutes from the top of *The Klondyker* across scree. I knew I would kick myself if I didn't.

Within 15 minutes, I had just completed the most enjoyable and perfect 70m of HVS climbing in Scotland, if not the UK. Now was a good time to call it a day and prepare my itinerary for tomorrow's play. At least if the weather turned foul this was not a wasted trip.

Cheese, oatcakes, beetroot and tuna was the gourmet meal, which awaited me. On these short trips I tend not to bother with cutlery or stoves and anyway, it's a good way to detoxify for a few days and feel healthy.

It was another restless night with little sleep, my thermarest did not hold the air in a uniform manner and was more akin to a waterbed tossing me in all directions. I had melted it in Spain (on a deep-water soloing festival) while trying to sleep over a high wattage light, set into the pavement in a harbour area. The light was so strong that I decided to sleep over it to curb the brightness but I was burned for my chivalry. I lay with the tent open just staring up and gazing at the stars, Ursa Major, Ursa Minor...Ursula Andress that was about my limit. The wind picked up, buffeted the tent and rendered me sleepless.

At last, the light was dawning and it was time to get up and head over the ridge to the Coireachan Ruada face. The descent route *Rotten Gully* lived up to its name, but it was really sheltered over on the east face. I stood awestruck at the size of the cliffs and the blatantly obvious unclimbed lines. It was like the cliff that time forgot. Moving round to the foot of *King Cobra* (E1) and *Dawn Grooves* (VS) the face loomed menacingly and far bigger than I had ever anticipated. I had decided only to do one route because the access was difficult and time consuming so *King Cobra* it was to be. The sun was a sulky orange behind some thin cloud and only about 5° above the horizon. Shit, it can't have been much past six in the morning (I never wear a watch), was I properly awake? My legs felt rather tired.

With a written description shoved down my pants again, I ventured up into unlikely looking and hostile territory. 45m. of scrambling on dark and shattered basalt began to fray my soul. I felt like a soldier on the front

line told to go out and fight an unseen enemy with no weapons. If I had any intelligence I should be running for cover, but, oh no: "It's bound to get better it's a classic!" I thought to myself. Soon the line took shape, a sort of corner with large holds. The enormity of the cliff and its remoteness was making me rather anxious which in turn ran a low level of adrenaline through my body making me tremble slightly and lurch for holds. The whole scene was all rather pathetic and it was about to get significantly worse.

Having passed a rusty peg I swung right to the base of the bottomless crux groove where I stood on this ledge about 18ins. long and 6ins. wide visibly shaking with more than 60m. of space beneath my feet. This so-called ledge was written up in Tom Patey's *One Man's Mountains* as being a "sloping foothold, large enough for a roosting seagull".

I was now standing there shaking and trying to work out how to do this almost holdless groove and thinking what a good effort by Bonington. Two rusty stains in the crack in the back of the groove were no doubt from the first ascent. My mind wandered as I built this picture in my head of the two stalwarts hammering in these long lost relics and doing battle with the groove back in 1960.

Hey, snap out of the reverie you bloody fool! The reality was I had to negotiate a blank groove more than 200ft. up with no ropes and a body akin to a sapling blowing in a Force 8 gale, just marvellous!

I carefully studied the groove and worked out all the options discarding certain holds and searching for anything useful. All I had was a shallow fingerlock for the right hand and a good hold on the right wall that was too low for the hand and too high for the foot. The left hand was a poor layaway, but there seemed to be better holds higher up. They were red herrings. The feet were just on smears on either side of the groove. In a short time, my feet were swimming in my boots so I had to down climb 15ft. to a ledge, tighten my boots and try to relax. Try doing yoga when you are frightened – it is impossible.

Soon I was back up at the groove, I bridged across to a smear, this was unbearably frightening – the exposure gripped me something akin to a rabbit being frozen in the headlights of a 10-ton truck. Movement seemed to be in slow motion, right foot up to toe smear in the groove: "Wow I am still sticking." I thought to myself, now I will just step down have a wee breather and then commit next go. But then it all went horribly wrong. I tried to put my foot back down but could not bring myself to re-weight the right foot in case I slipped. In that split second my unconscious and conscious minds went into a state of combustion. For once, there was no indecision between them, preserve life no matter what. The adrenalin surged and my soul had changed from being frightened and frozen to a "Give it everything you've got and climb for your life" scenario. I slapped to a reverse layaway then to a good lock and then out to a bridge, the

holds were better now and I started really enjoying the pitch and the exposure in this smooth groove. It seemed to be all over to soon.

Above, the climbing went back to the shattered basalt type, but the holds were reasonable, not a place to be soloing on though. No one had warned me of this route but then again, I didn't know of anyone who had done it, possibly because I never asked. The word 'classic' certainly took on a new meaning that day.

A huge overhang loomed above me and two spikes stuck out of the ledge I occupied, just like two fangs. Maybe that is where they got the name *King Cobra*. Before I embarked on the next pitch, I studied my surroundings trying to take it all in and relax. The car-sized boulders at the base now took on the form of a shingle beach. I knew deep down I didn't want to be here, the rock was far from perfect and this worried me. I made doubly sure of every hold as I meandered my way up another 300ft. of interesting climbing, a jammed friend being the only sign of modern passage.

Thankfully, the ordeal was soon at an end atop the ridge in a refreshing wind. The descent, however, was arduous as I threaded my way down the east face from the notch on the ridge.

Back at the base of the cliff I glared up at the face the sheer size overwhelming me. The only words I could think of were: "Bloody idiot!." There's no way I would of soloed that had I first seen it, as it now was, in the full light of day.

I decided to scramble round by the Thearlaich Dubh gap and try *The Asp* (E2) and *Cons Cleft* (HVS). The sun was moving round and, being south-facing, both climbs would be in its light and not so sombre as the previous route. I dug out a semi-comfortable patch beneath the crag for some sun bathing and a snooze. Voices could be heard reverberating around the corrie. I tried to pick them out but could not until some ravens, obviously looking for food, hovered beside them and gave away their position.

I decided I was only going to do one route and I went for *The Asp*, a splitter chimney-cum wide crack line. Beautiful jams and thrutchy body positions led on upwards until my fleece caught on a huge needle of rock on the back wall and pulled it up out of its lodgement. After throwing it down, I went to jelly and wobbled my way back to terra firma.

"That's enough for one morning!"

With tail between my legs, I sloped off down to my tent in Coire Lagan for a siesta. I spent most of my relaxation time bubbling with anxiety for what lay ahead. At least, I knew this route was not to be as loose as *King Cobra*, albeit technically harder. When the sun was about 40° above the horizon in the western skies and hovering over the Minch, I realised it was time to release the tension and go. And so, with chalk bag strung round my waist and rock boots shoved down my jacket front like a huge pair of breasts, I made tracks for Eastern Butress.

Climbing parties were strung out over Sron Na Ciche indulging in classics such as *Cioch West* (S) and *Wallworks Route* (VD). The face shone boldly in the evening light and soon I was standing at the base of Vulcan Wall. This time I had brought my newer boots, the first time I had used them on this trip. As usual with big solos, I tend to tie and re-tie my boots at least twice before an ascent, a weird subconscious kind of karma. If I was seconding the route I would not bother to tie the laces.

There is very little niggling psychology with soloing mountain routes. Once above 15m. you really are in the death zone anyway and it is just a case of do not fall. On gritstone, the routes rarely reach 15m, and sometimes soloing an E5 with a good landing has so much more 'peace of mind' than an E2 with a real bone-chewing landing.

The real beauty of soloing *Spock* (E3) was that the steep thuggish start really gets the blood flowing and leads you perfectly into the more delicate climbing above, the holds are always there and the rock is totally impeccable. It was like climbing in a trance enjoying the exposure and brilliance of the route. A few metres below the roof I climbed a move rather badly. There was 35m. of space below my feet and I knew at that point, while committing to a rockover, that if I slipped then...game over. In a strange way I was smiling through my inner being, with no state of anxiety or fear, my mind was playing out a version of me freefalling in slow motion and then nothing but happiness. Maybe this is due to the animal instincts from evolution, an inbuilt sense that all creatures have, but one that humans are losing in a civilised society. For instance, a gazelle in the clutches of a lion will do anything to escape its predator, but somehow, when the odds are stacked against it and it's caught between two huge paws it accepts its predicament and dies gracefully. It's all part of the evolutionary cycle. Humans have no predators and so, to acquire this natural fear, solo climbers position themselves between a rock and a hard place, add a sprinkling of gravity and...Hey Presto...but I don't fancy that opportunist raven up there pecking my eyes out. The higher I went the slower I moved, the holds were friendlier and I just took my time savouring every moment of the route's perfection.

On the way down, I tried to think quickly of anything else I could do in the allocated time between now and when the golden orb of the sun disappeared over the horizon. Deciding however, that I wanted to savour one of my most memorable solos ever, I went back to the tent and juggled with the some angle grinders until dusk had settled. After another *Cordon Bleu* meal I was lying face up in my tent peering out over to Sron Na Ciche and watching a climber on *Slab Corner*. It was rather bizarre to watch someone climbing upside down in near darkness.

GUIDEBOOK ODYSSEY

By Ted Maden

AUTHORS were being sought for the new edition of *The North-west Highlands District Guidebook*. Donald Bennet and Tom Strang were stepping down, having given long service as authors of recent editions of *The Western Highlands* and *The Northern Highlands* and then the first edition of *The North-west Highlands*. Dave Broadhead was in on the new edition from the beginning, I joined soon afterwards, and Alec Keith completed the group. Rob Milne succeeded Donald Bennet as series editor, and soon his e-mail transmissions were humming with messages commencing: "Hi, team." Nevertheless, it was clear to all of us from the outset that the size of the area to be covered demanded division of labour, especially for the fieldwork.

My assignment was the Northern part of the Western Highlands, from Glen Shiel and Glenelg to Glen Carron. This region is 'relatively' compact, but is larger than the English Lake District, for which Wainwright wrote his famous set of seven hillwalking guidebooks. Moreover, Glen Shiel and Kintail contain a high concentration of Munros, aptly dubbed 'Munropolis' by Dave Hewitt in *Walking The Watershed*.

I had completed the Munros a few years previously, but not all of them by the best routes for the purposes of guidebook descriptions. I had done only a couple of the many Corbetts in the region. Therefore my aim for the region was to repeat all the Munros and do all the Corbetts. My journeys would be from Liverpool, following a precedent established by Graham McPhee long before the motorway era, when he worked on his *Climbers Guide to Ben Nevis*. I anticipated a few trips of about a week each and a few shorter ones. The reality was very different, but my long-distance commuting gave me a sense of identity with the many potential readers who would also travel long distances to the area. Here, then, is an account of my guidebook fieldwork odyssey.

The first short trip was in March 1997. Beinn Sgritheall seemed an attractive initial proposition. During the drive down Glen Shiel there were hints of the Kintail Curtain ahead, but I persevered over the Bealach Ratagain hoping for sunshine on the other side. I was met by low cloud and drenching drizzle. Lesson learned! Back to Cluanie, where the cloud base was now above Corbett level. Am Bathach was 'on'. My wife had given me a miniature tape-recorder for recording impressions during the fieldwork. This piece of technology served admirably throughout the campaign, except on this first hill, when, as I discovered that evening, I had failed to master the controls. The next day I ascended Meall Fuar-mhonaidh. This fine eminence overlooking Loch Ness is of less than

Corbett height and was not in the first edition of the Guidebook, but its merits were recognised by honorary inclusion in the Corbetts Guide. The cloud level was higher than yesterday. Clear air with occasional shafts of sunshine made for memorable views along the Great Glen and to the big peaks to the North-west. I was satisfied that my fieldwork had started. But there it stuck for six months, during which time no opportunity arose for a week-long visit.

Little white mice of panic:

By September further progress was becoming a matter of urgency. I opted for another short trip and drove to a B&B by Loch Lochy. During conversation over evening tea and cakes I mentioned the purpose of my visit. A Canadian guest quizzed me as to the possible hazards of solo hillwalking. I assured him that all was well if one took care.

Next morning I set off from the road head car park in Glen Affric. Mist filled the glen, but as I climbed Glen Affric's Sgurr na Lapaich the promise of blue sky above materialised. Mam Sodhail gave wonderful, far-reaching views. As I descended to the north the sun's rays were touching the slope exactly at grazing angle. This prompted some trivial pursuits-style mental arithmetic: at the equinox the sun was over the equator, at the solar noon the sun was at its highest in the sky, I was at 57° north, so the slope was 33°. I continued to Carn Eighe and then to the fine promontory of Beinn Fhionnlaidh. On the way to the latter I heard a distinctive clanking, which turned out to be emanating from a walker with a metal leg. We exchanged greetings. He had come up from Loch Mullardoch and was heading to Glen Affric. I did not think to inquire as to his starting point; most likely he had been ferried to the head of the Loch by boat. He was the only person I encountered all day.

Regaining Carn Eighe, I made good pace over Tom a' Choinich to Toll Creagach, where I arrived just after 6.30pm with sufficient daylight in hand for the descent. Afterwards an easy walk on a track and the road would take me back to the car. I paused briefly to take in the wild prospect. Benign cotton wool clouds had been building up over Loch Mullardoch, and one of these stealthily enveloped the summit. I set off down, resolving to check the compass soon. I had used it in the morning mist, and it had been transferred from its usual place in the top pocket of my rucksack to an anorak pocket, and the anorak was now at the bottom of the rucksack.

I emerged below the mist onto some level ground, decided I had come down too far left and traversed rightwards a bit. The lie of the land was not easy to reconcile with my expectations. I rationalised that the large loch below must be Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoinn. Soon I should see the road. I gained an uninterrupted view down to the loch shore. No road! Simultaneously, all sorts of things were not making sense. What were those big hills across the loch? Why was the sun's afterglow illuminating

clouds in the east and not in the west? I retrieved the compass, hoping it would provide a reassuring explanation. Its message was brutally unambiguous. I was looking north. The loch below was Loch Mullardoch. I was halfway down a remote hillside, in fading light, the Mullardoch dam far away to the right, the intervening ground notorious for its deep, untracked heather. I was utterly alone. A phrase from Robin Smith's *Goofy's Last Climb* described my state: "...little white mice of panic whispered round the walls of the brain..."

What to do? Retrace my steps to the summit, arrive in moonless darkness and mist and seek the right descent? I was tired and this would be folly. The line of least resistance was to keep traversing, but the level ground soon ended and I met the first of the deep heather, on a steep hillside, with hidden holes. I was beginning to sweat profusely. Moreover, I was in fell-running shoes. I *had* to take care. I accepted the inevitable: I would have to descend. The ground got worse. After losing height I even considered bivouacking in the heather till daybreak, but I had made arrangements whereby I would be missed if I did not get back to civilization by about 10.00 pm. Down off the slope the heather was waist-deep on an ankle-twisting, knee-wrenching base and the last twilight was fading. I decided the loch shore might give easier progress. The water level was low, and fortunately, I had a head torch. After about an hour-and-a-half of slow, careful going I reached the dam.

There is no way across the top of the Mullardoch dam due to an impassable central tower. I already knew this, but I went to check anyway. In the darkness, and with my analytical faculties not at their best, it did not occur to me that there would be a road down from the south side of the dam. So after yet more thrashing around in heather and across two dry riverbeds beneath the dam I reached the road on the north side. Soon I was lucky. The first of the few buildings in the glen was a hostel housing some Danes on a deer-stalking holiday. They gave me beer and drove me down to Cannich, where the hotel I had booked into was still open. Next morning, some hillwalking guests gave me a lift up Glen Affric to my car. During the drive back to Liverpool my thoughts touched upon the question of whether, as a 60-something-year-old, I really should be doing this kind of project. I resolved to give it one more try.

Steady progress:

I made a two-day trip in a spell of good weather at the end of October after the stag stalking season had finished. Arriving soon after noon I did an enjoyable round of Meall Dubh and some of its secluded satellites, starting near the Loch Loyne dam. Access to this group has subsequently become more problematical due to new deer fencing and to parking restrictions near the dam. The next day I traversed Ben Killilan, Sguman Coinntich and Faochaig in superb, crisp conditions, with luminescent

sunlight and deep autumnal shadows picking out the features of the Ling River basin and the Monar hills beyond, and in the middle of it all the solitary white speck of the Maol-bhuidhe cottage bothy. I walked down Glen Elchaig at nightfall beneath the dark mass of Carnan Cruithneachd and a starry sky. I was away from Killilan soon after 6pm and home in Liverpool before 2am.

A pattern was emerging. Short visits could be made between other commitments and to fit the weather. I had listed the hills into geographical zones and had a good idea of the various options: short versus long days, regional preferences to suit weather patterns. Visits lasting two or three days worked well. By making 'Alpine' starts from Liverpool I was able to do the motorway driving including the section through the Central Lowlands when the traffic was quiet and to make good use of daylight for the hills. Similar considerations led to relatively late departures at the end of the trips. I took adequate short rests in motorway service areas. I preferred midweek visits, particularly after my work in Liverpool changed to part-time. Given the somewhat strenuous nature of the visits including driving I favoured a Sybaritic mode of accommodation and cuisine, usually booking into B&Bs or hotels and dining at restaurants. Every intended hill day was productive, objectives often being chosen on the day to suit conditions.

Most of the walks were done solo, but early on I enjoyed two days on the Maoile Lunndaidhe to Lurg Mhor group of mountains with my former climbing mate Reg Pillinger, who was nearing his compleation of the Munros. Then Rob Milne, soon after taking over as editor, suggested that we meet up, which we did for the Cluanie Horseshoe. I was impressed by Rob's command of technology, which included phoning his office from the summit of A'Chralaig and checking the altitude with an aneroid contained in his wristwatch. Also I walked for various distances with people I met on some of the hills, sometimes mentioning the guidebook work, and, perhaps incautiously, the expected date of publication. Meanwhile, the project had been expanded by inclusion of the Grahams. These hills of seemingly modest height, which had recently been researched and written up by Andrew Dempster in his book *The Grahams*, offered attributes of remoteness, lack of footprints and, in some instances, a degree of seriousness that added interesting new features to the work.

From 2000 onwards the last of the fieldwork was being interspersed with the first drafts of writing. There was much healthy, even robust, mutual feedback, during the course of which my co-authors perceived that my grasp of historical matters was not especially strong. They were right; history had been my least favourite subject at school, and I had languished at the bottom of the class in that discipline. It now seemed timely to repair this deficiency, so one of my last field trips was devoted primarily to a remedial tour of brochs, castles, monuments and plaques. My attention to

these objects was enhanced by the fact that the weather was unattractive for hillwalking, with low cloud and intermittent rain. However, I still had some unfulfilled hill objectives, among which were the remote Graham, An Cruachan, and the not quite so remote, Carn na Brebaig. These two hills can be accessed via Glen Elchaig, preferably by bicycle up the glen. During an evening diversion after the second day of history I discovered that I could hire a bicycle at Camas-luinie near the foot of the glen.

Next morning the weather remained unchanged, low cloud with a suggestion of rain, unattractive but not prohibitive. At 7.45am, in the car park of the Loch Duich Hotel where I had been staying, I placed the onus of decision upon a coin. Tails, I would turn left at the exit and drive home. It came heads. I turned right and drove to Camas-luinie and hired a bike. The first two miles of pedalling, to the start of the private road at Killilan, were flat. Then I narrowly avoided premature termination of the venture. I breasted a small hill, not expecting a descent on the other side. The brake handles were in an unfamiliar orientation and for a split second I could not locate them. A panicky grab brought them to hand and I thankfully regained control.

At the road head at Iron Lodge it was drizzling. I made heavy work of the walk up mist-clad Carn na Brebaig, perhaps due to a light breakfast and the unaccustomed effort of the cycle ride up the glen. A bite of lunch at Loch Mholcean reinvigorated me and I decided to press on past the head of the loch and look round the corner towards An Cruachan. The vantage point overlooked the Allt Coire nan Each tumbling down a wild V-shaped glen. The top of An Cruachan was truncated by cloud, which seemed to be lifting slightly. Tentatively at first, and then with a growing sense of purpose, I made my way along the overgrown right of way on the east flank of the glen, and thence up the hill. The summit is reputedly the most remote in Scotland from a public road. The cloud had now lifted, it was no longer raining and there were a few patches of sunlight. It was a magical place in the heart of wilderness, overlooking lochans, and ringed by higher mountains except to the west, where the Allt Coire nan Each becomes the Allt an Loin-fhiodha that passes lonely Maol-bhuidhe, then joining the Uisge Dubh to become the River Ling that flows to the sea at Loch Long. My return by way of Loch Mholcean to the bike at the road head at Iron Lodge, and a largely free-wheel ride down Glen Elchaig, were followed by the long, nocturnal drive home.

Last fling:

Meall Fuar-mhonaidh had been the first Graham of my campaign, though unwittingly so. An Cruachan was the final one. There remained seven Munros that I had climbed previously but had not managed to repeat during the guidebook work, and one Corbett that I had not done. By the summer of 2003 the writing had gone through multiple drafts, and for those few

hills that I had still not visited during the campaign I had blended my own prior knowledge with available Scottish Mountaineering Trust descriptions. It was still possible to make small revisions to the text. At the end of June a short window of time for a trip coincided with a spell of good weather.

The Munros that I had not been able to revisit were those to the north of Loch Mullardoch and the Sgurr nan Ceathreamhnan group. Moreover, my strategy of short visits had not encouraged very long hill days; 12 hours had been my longest. In the text I had recommended the Mullardoch round as a possibility for fit and experienced hillwalkers, leaving open to individual preference the options of a single long day or an overnight camp, and the choice of how many of the 12 Munros to include. Alec had done the complete round in an impressive sub-12-hour time and had e-mailed me enthusiastically about it. I could not hope to emulate Alec's time, but I wanted to do the round in any shape or form. I decided to have a go.

I drove up one afternoon and evening in perfect conditions until reaching Inverness, where I was met by a haar. My plan was for a single big day with a very early start, requiring that I forgo the comforts of overnight accommodation. The gloomy haar persisted as I drove up Glen Cannich. I dosed down in the car at the road junction about a kilometre before the dam. After sleeping fitfully for about three hours I set off at 2am. Because of the cloud it was darker than I expected at this northern latitude and I carried a head torch. I was glad of this after the road ended just past the top of the dam, for the path soon became an abominable morass.

Despite my previous knowledge, and having described the way correctly for the book, I went wrong on the ascent of Carn nan Gobhar, taking a sketchy and energy sapping path up the east bank of the Allt Mullardoch instead of crossing the bridge and heading up the spur of Mullach na Maoile. The path faded out in a corrie. I was now between two layers of mist in improving light, but was navigating by compass from an imprecisely determined location. After some moderately steep ground in the second layer of mist I emerged onto a broad ridge, hoping I was to the east of and fairly near the summit of Carn nan Gobhar. This hope was dramatically realised by a parting of the clouds and a magical sunrise, the orange rays making a brilliant backdrop to tendrils of mist that continued to boil out of the corries, while the peaks all around became increasingly clear. I was prompted into a flurry of photography.

The Mullardoch Sgurr na Lapaich was swallowed up in cloud again before I reached the summit. I was in and out of cloud along An Riabhachan, but the sun was now gaining the upper hand, and the cloud dispersed as I descended the rocky ridge to the Bealach Bolla, giving a wonderfully clear prospect across the Monar basin. The ridge of the descent is in a supremely wild setting, and is also somewhat exposed and not a place to miscalculate, a point that I added in the final revision of the text.

Two walkers with big packs were descending from An Socach and we chatted at the bealach. They had walked along the shore of Loch Mullardoch the previous evening and had camped by the Allt Coire a' Mhaim. They were impressed by the amount of ground I had covered that morning. Nevertheless, I was off the pace for the full round, and on the summit of An Socach I felt the need for a rest and sustenance. It was 10am, spectacularly clear, and I enjoyed a superb all-round panorama, with the topography of my An Cruachan trek particularly well displayed. Still feeling somewhat tired, I descended towards the head of Loch Mullardoch, weighing options and even considering walking out along the north shore of the loch. However, on the lower slopes I began to feel the beneficial effects of my summit nosh and decided to go for a 'short' version of the round, omitting the Ceathreamhnan group.

At the river just west of the head of the loch I exchanged greetings with a party who had transatlantic accents. They were taking a noon break on a camping trek but I was unable to ascertain their itinerary; they said something about planning to walk along the loch and "maybe doing some of those Munros". They looked a little surprised when I splashed across the river without first removing my fell-running shoes.

A refreshing easterly breeze was blowing up the loch, but this did not reach round the corner into Gleann a' Choilich, and the midday heat was enervating. I filled my water bottle and made a slow ascent, with stints of step counting and short rests, to the Bealach Beag between Beinn Fhionnlaidh and Carn Eighe. A threesome who looked like parents and a sprightly teenager were making good time across the bealach and onto Fhionnlaidh. Given my slow pace I deemed it judicious to omit Fhionnlaidh and to proceed directly to Carn Eighe, which I toiled up in bottom gear.

During the ascent I had noticed wisps of mist spiralling into the air between Carn Eighe and Mam Sodhail. This had seemed odd on such a clear day. I now saw the explanation. Although the mist had dispersed by mid-morning from the northern glens it had persisted to the south, and even now filled Gleann nam Fiadh almost to the brim. Mindful of my previous experience on Toll Creagach I was apprehensive of the intentions of this sea of mist, and in the now cooler air I made my way with the limited haste I could muster along the length of the ridge. I arrived at Toll Creagach at about 7.30pm. The summit is for the most part dome-shaped. My previous error in the mist was explained but not condoned; instead of descending to the south I had veered west and then north-west, so dropping down towards Loch Mullardoch in the opposite direction to the dam and precipitating my long struggle along the south shore.

Subsequently, Alec had told me that when descending intentionally to the Mullardoch dam most of the heather can be avoided by continuing from Toll Creagach eastwards to the next, smaller peak before turning downhill. Now, however, the intervening bealach was swathed in mist

from the south. Not wishing to chance my luck again with the obscuring vapours, I instead went down the north-east spur of Toll Creagach with my final destination clearly in view. I reached a little col before the slight rise to Creag a' Bhaca. To the right, steepish ground fell to the Allt Fraoch-choire (stream of the corrie of the heather) and I could not get a clear view down. So I contoured easily round to the left. And then I hit deep heather with an almost audible wham! It was still full daylight and I did not have as far to go as last time. The loch shore still seemed the best way, but the water level was higher than before. When I had less than a 100 horizontal metres to go I encountered a cliff that fell steeply for about 10m. into the water. This minuscule obstacle cost me 20 minutes of retracing steps, shinning over deer fences, ploughing through more heather and casting around until at last finding the way down to the road. I had been lucky with the low water the previous time. I part walked, part jogged to the car, drove down to Cannich, and relaxed in the manner to which I had become accustomed, in a B&B.

Footnote:

This description of my fieldwork for *The North-west Highlands District Guidebook* is a personal one, but the book has been very much a team effort. I thank my co-authors Dave and Alec, editor Rob, and production manager Tom Prentice as the major players.

NAE MAIR BLACK BUN

By M. G. Anderson

“You dinnae like Hogmanay? Ca’ yersel a Scot?” My interlocuter paused to summon up all his reserves of amazement and contempt. Telling him that more days are lost to British Industry through alcohol etc, would have been a waste of breath. Besides I was used to being impugned for this heresy. If I am guilty of rejecting Scotland’s civilisation at her zenith, so be it, but after one December 31, when I walked along Rose Street, saw the drunks stretched head to toe in the gutter and witnessed the bad-tempered fights between friends fuelled by the ‘fiery cratur’. I decided enough was enough, although, one of the accessories to this festivity almost makes it all worthwhile. I am talking of Black Bun, that fruity concoction of sultanas and fly cemetery, which makes its fleeting appearance annually at this unhallowed hour.

I was planning to sip a quiet dram, bite down a bit of black bun and retire to bed, before friends in the Edinburgh JMCS, proud new owners of the Auld Smiddy in Dundonnell, invited me to join them. The offer of a retreat from the hullabaloo of Hogmanay, to the unsullied wilderness of Torridon was too good to refuse, so off we went. When we arrived, people were already settling in, laying out their sleeping bags, bagging the best places. Everyone laughing, even some singing, Glen Campbell’s, *Galveston*, for no apparent reason, the usual high spirits at the beginning of a promising weekend. A homely glow was provided by the old furnace, crackling and creaking in a most satisfactory manner, but after years of disuse, prodding the blocked chimney with ice axes simply increased the general stour in the air, so that a smoky layer of cumulo-nimbus clouds nestled above the top bunks with the result that, at the end of the weekend we went home with sooty faces, hair clogged with carbon, the auld grey heids a lot happier and all of us coughing intermittently.

But even here, amid the wild and craggy splendours of the Western Highlands, the obligations of New Year couldn’t be evaded. The locals, purely out of old fashioned Highland hospitality, had invited us to bring it in *a la Gaeltacht*, so that even I, the Hogmanay hermit, could hardly refuse without appearing selfish and discourteous.

Stepping outside the howff was a pleasant relief from the choke-damp within, the frost on the roof of the Smiddy a glittering white carapace under a crisp, starry sky. When we entered the hotel, still coughing and spluttering, no one greeted us. Lined up in front of the bar in an assortment of deerstalkers and flat caps, each hat sporting a medley of fishing flies, stood an almost motionless rank of drinkers, for all the world like a congregation at prayer. There was no hum of conversation, only a few indistinct orders breaking through the slurping and clinking. Any Englishman happening on this still-life would assume this was Scotland

at its dourest, the toper's version of Sunday in the Kirk. But this was purely preparatory. Every man-jack of them was busily injecting the required tonnage of booze into his system in order to get up the requisite head of steam for the arduous night ahead. The muffled orders gradually distilled themselves. There was: "Pint O'heavy an' a hauf, Jimmy," or simply: "Hauf'n heavy, Jimmy."

Jimmy was moving like a whippet from end to end of the bar, dispensing refreshment without pause or interval. All the taps were on, and when one glass was filled its place was taken by a clean glass with ne'er a drop of spillage. And it *was* a clean glass. There was no malingering of the sort that you sometimes get: "In the same glass, then?" There was no doubt Jimmy was the hero of the year's end, the Stakhanov of the Bar.

Towards 10pm, the tempo increased to a frenzy. People were ordering double, treble and even quadruple rounds as the hour of doom approached, when the shutters clanged down on that awful final note. Would we all be flung out at closing time, forgotten by our hosts, and have to celebrate by the frozen lochside? This question was answered when our genial host – not Jimmy; he was merely a superior factotum – appeared and announced: "Ben the Hoose."

Once ensconced in the best room my social sloth took over, so I slunk into a remote armchair, but even hiding in a corner couldn't stop the torrent of whisky coming at me from all directions. A few nips was enough to tell me I'd had more than enough. Refusal was pointless, when my glass was half full, for them it was half empty. Putting my hand over the rim didn't staunch the deluge either. They simply poured over it. Luckily, there was a pot plant nearby. Nobody took any notice of my watering it with pure spirit, but later in life, when I became an environmentalist, I felt a bit guilty about that sozzled flower.

The return to the Smiddy was unmemorable, that is to say I have no memory of it. Getting into my pit was awkward, but eventually, both legs were in and, bodily logistics taken care of, I immediately fell asleep.

I was awoken by the first light of day peeking timidly through the slats of the shuttered door, as it slowly creaked open. Figures were creeping about in the shaft of dusty light coming from the doorway. A louder creak sent a spasm shuddering through my head, my hangover's First Footing.

"A Guid New Year tae yin 'n aw!"

Silence.

"Are ye a' deid?"

More of the above.

Three locals, who had missed out on the party were doing some catching up. Everyone was asleep or dozing half awake, struggling to return to it. Nobody answered their genial salutations. One of them, giving up this thankless task, sat down by the post in the middle of the room and within a moment collapsed into a drunken slumber. The other two split their

forces. One Gaelic Goliath dished out cheer to the top deck, while the other catered to the lower bunk. They offered refreshment from their New Year bottles, shook hands or in the case of the girls sealed the moment with a Gaelic snog. As far as I could make out most people blearily complied, even though the liquor must have tasted quite revolting on their heavily encrusted tongues. The Highlanders were fairly forceful with their greetings. Refusing "To tak' a New Year," was asking for trouble. Several slumbering climbers were shaken into the New Year anew and much whisky gurgled its merry way down reluctant throats. The sleeping damsels clearly were not enjoying the mauling they were getting but if their boyfriends were too spineless to intervene, they had better just lie back and think of Scotland.

Two along from me a girl was weeping miserably as the drunken giant plied her with festive cheer. It would be my turn soon. I dived down leaving only my nose poking through as a snorkel. A pointless exercise, for pretty soon my draw-cord was tugged open to reveal a visage that was to provide material for my nightmares for years to come. Worse than the worst hairiest Heelander in *Braveheart*. For no reason at all I found myself talking in an uptight voice as if I had spent my formative years at Fettes.

"No, thank you so much, I have had quite enough to drink and now, my good man, if you wouldn't mind letting me go to sleep. We have a long day on the hill, tomorrow, or rather today, and unless I get to sleep right away there won't be time for brekkers and I can't imagine there will be any place of refreshment open this Ne'erday to supplement our rations."

"Hey Fergus, jusht listen at this English Pfluff. No law de daw plaice o'ar refreshment open todaih. Listen, Twala," he roared, "jusht stuff this boattle, sorry *supplementary ration* doon your place o' refreshment or I'll mak ye remember Prestonpans." He grabbed my sleeping bag jack-knifing me upright, just as I was wondering why anyone from south of Loch Lomond is immediately suspected of Englishry.

"Get a dram of the Fiery Cratur in yer belly and ye won't need tae stoap for refreshment. Ye Mealy Pudden!"

"Well, if perchance you have some of that delicious black bun, I could entertain a nibble."

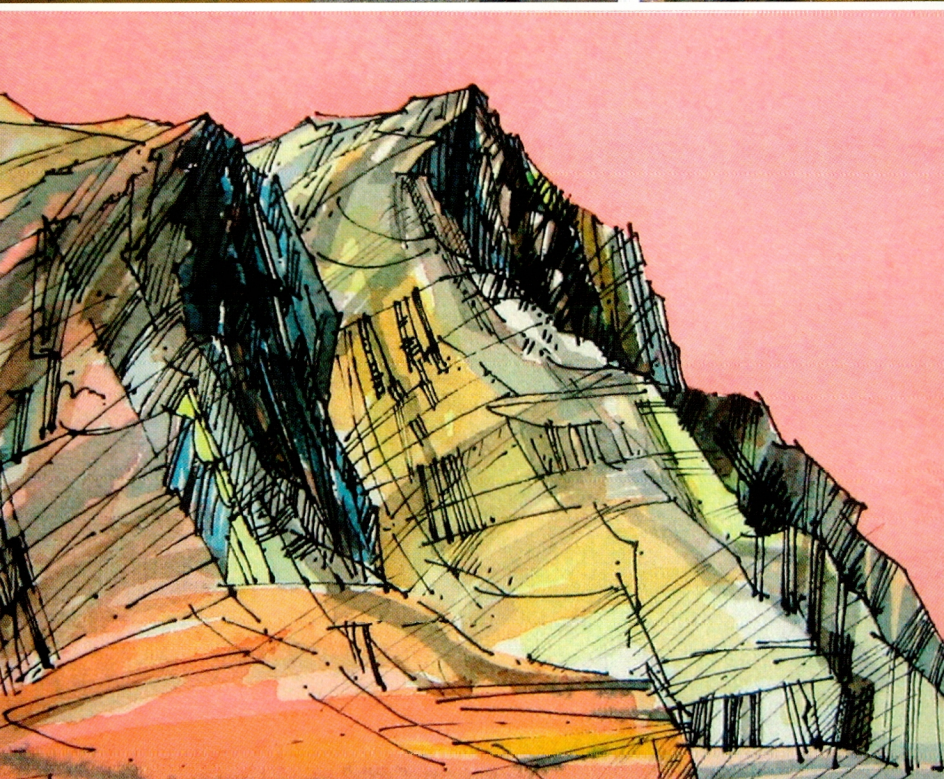
"A nibble, Ooh entertain a nibble! I'll gie ye a nibble! We've nay mair black bun, an' if we had I'd ram it up your Sassenach erse! Noo tak yer dram!"

"Maybe he disnae want ane." This voice of reason came from the lower deck.

"Whit?"

His chum, Fergus, was upholding a less rigorous standard of enforcement of sharing the cup that cheers. Perhaps being less of a lion-hearted patriot than his pal, or possessed of that other powerful national characteristic, being canny with his bawbees. I couldn't help noticing the bottle about to





be rammed between my teeth, was a 12-year-old Macallan, entirely wasted on the furred up tongues of the libatees.

“Haud on, Donhail. I tellt ye. Leave the laddie alane.

“Whit? He’ll tak his New Year like a man.”

“Go on gie him a break. He doesnae want yer whisky. C’mon doon.”

“Whit?”

“He doesnae want it.”

“We’ll. He’s goin’ tae get it!”

“Leave him alane!”

“Awa ‘n bile yer heid!”

“Whit?” – A favourite word of theirs now swopped over to Fergus.

“He’ll tak his New Year.”

“No he winnae! Let’s awa hame tae oor beds.”

“Fergus, awa and bile yer heid!”

“Whit?” A dangerous pause. “Nae-yin tells me to bile ma heid!”

“Well am tellin’ ye the noo. Awa an’ bile it wi a sheep’s heid an’a!”

“Whit!” This was Fergus in case you’re losing track.

At that moment all extraneous noise was drowned out as the bottle was upended against my tonsils, and in order to prevent death by drowning I had to swallow the whisky to the last drop.

“Yer a real Scotsman, noo!” was the last bulletin from mine unwanted host, as his legs were dragged down off the bunk by his inflamed friend. Desperately, Donhail scratched for some purchase. Captured in the glimmering fire light was a *Kilroy Was Here* cartoon figure peeking over the bunk, except this one had a raggedy beard, with an expression trapped midway between surprise and anguish.

“And let me wish you a Happy New Year!” I shouted festively.

“Whit?”

This “Whit” was Donhail’s Farewell to Dundonnell as Fergus was about to demonstrate precisely his objections to boiling his head. Now preferring action to words, Fergus took off his jacket and threw it at the third member.

“Hector, haud that.”

The jacket plopping over Hector’s heedless head, to make him a sleeping coat-rack. Down below, there were three loud cracks followed by: “Ye’ll no tell me to bile ma heid!”

The brawl was brief. Fergus was a bonny fechter, and briskly sorted out the attempted enforcer. Besides, Donhail was not allowed to take his jacket off, it was stuck midway, half-on, half-off, impeding efficient combat. Unfair perhaps, but these Highlanders never learned to play cricket.

The commotion at last managed to wake Hector – the third reveller. He was completely taken aback, blindfolded in addition to being befuddled by drink.

“Whair am? Turn on the light! Mah e’en, mah e’en!” He shrieked panic stricken.

Mountain Painting Weekend 2003: John Fowler, Neil Quinn and Iain Smart view their subject – The Three Sisters, Glen Coe. Photo: John Mitchell.

John Mitchell’s interpretation of Gearr Aonach and Aonach Dubh.

"Help! I've been blinded. I've lost mah sight! Oh Jings! I should have never hae drunk yon porridge whisky at the bothan!"

He rushed about the Smiddy and I watched in fascination as he smacked straight into the anvil with a horribly painful crack then neatly pole-vaulted over it. He looked about him like a lost dog. The jacket-cum-blindfold had fallen onto the floor. Silence. He touched his eyes.

"It's a miracle! It's a New Year miracle! I was blind and now I can see! – see?" He pointed to his eyes in case anyone was interested, and limped out at a run.

"I'm going to the kirk right noo. Whaur is it?"

Far away I just caught him practising his New Year Resolution: "I'll never, Meenester. I'll never touch a drop again. So help ma, Boab. No hooch onyway."

* * *

As sometimes happens Ne'erday turned out to be extremely fine, bringing with it the promise of a bright fresh new start. Kissing goodbye to the lame half-life of mediocrity and failure of the previous 12 months, a delusion lasting as long as snow in the Lake District. There was a fiery lurid dawn of orange and yellow cloud, while we tramped the frozen bog to the foot of the ridge. So far it was like any of a 100 grey days in the hills. Another day, another set of wet clothes. Mounting up to the shoulder of the ridge the team was sucked into a thick clammy mist. The wind blew, the wet drizzle spat in our faces. Hunching down into our anoraks, we resigned ourselves to another dreary outing. Sheets of mist billowed down in long columns, each one damper than the last, first grey, then brighter and sparkling with little sequins. An Teallach, clad in veils of swirling mist, coyly wrapped up, then slowly revealing all. A stone Salome, its gorgeous towers uncannily bringing to mind the first sighting of Dracula's castle in an old Hammer Horror Movie.

Then, all petty thoughts disappeared as the mist boiled away evaporating as a glorious winter sun took over. All the regrets, the melancholy of the past year were burned out in that spectacular array. Set in front were row upon row of pinnacles, crags and battlements glistening white, giants' milk-teeth under a cloudless sky. The snow, a flawless satin, so bright that even with sun glasses, we had to turn from the mountains and look to the plain for relief. In contrast with the monochromed heights, the heather, gorse and broom of the lowland provided a patchwork of amethyst browns and greens, fragmented by a myriad of startling blue lochans stretching towards the horizon where it melted into the snow whitened hills. To the west the Atlantic shimmered in a calm sea broken only by the Summer Isles, rubies in a sapphire setting.

Nothing could disturb our harmony with the mountain that day. Surmounting the brow we all whooped in exultation, voices carrying easily in the still air. Even the creak of crampons and the snap of crisply crackling

snow could be heard clearly. No other human sounds disturbed the calm. Brushing snow off the handholds, we discovered the rock warm and dry within minutes, the midwinter sun hotter than on many a summer day.

The climbing itself was beyond perfection, *névé*, safe, solid and plastic, affording technically interesting moves in a scenario of apparent drama, but well-secured with ropes and runners. Balancing and tiptoeing over spikes, spillikins and gendarmes we saw, peering up, a never ending series of delights. Snow covered bushman's huts and pot kilns all in a line, the towers, bulbous haystacks out of a painting by Courbet. Sitting on the leaning tower known as Lord Berkeley's Seat, with all around us the lavish splendour of a winter's day in the Northern Highlands, mountain upon mountain varnished with silver, strewn about in prodigal abundance, the thought occurred that if there was a magic carpet, there was nowhere else to be, not even the Karakorum. The little breeze that had sprung up when the trip started, died away. A century ago Mummery, atop the Matterhorn, noted the air was so still that cigarette smoke ascended directly heavenwards. None of us smoked to put it to the test, but today, would have been such a day.

Too soon we left behind the last ice-crust ed pinnacle and descended to a grand sloping plateau, wind polished into an icy mirror, its surface changing into a burnished gold by the lowering sun which, dropping behind the ocean, set the Atlantic afire with molten red. On that last slope down to the Smiddy the dusk air turned chilly and lifeless as if the sun's going had switched the magic off.

Minutes later we were in the hut chattering away over a warming brew and hot soup, the cold forgotten, a row of blue-flamed primuses purring away like happy kittens, dixies on the boil dancing, and everyone burbling away in the *joie de vivre* of this wonderful day. Each team coming in had given their verdict. We had been dancing with the gods and angels in the empyreum. No one exactly said that, the English language failing miserably to meet the demands put upon it, so we had to fall back on hackneyed expressions of exuberance for this once in a lifetime day on the hill, as in: "Whit a great day!"

Absolutely trounced by: "It was better than a fish supper!"

Bringing it down to a common experience we had all enjoyed. One bright spark who fancied himself as being in touch with the great world outside, came out with: "It was better than a fish supper when W. H. Murray dined alone." But this was met by deservedly blank stares all around.'

Or so they all told me. I was part of that ecstatic crew only by proxy. My great day had been spent, head over a bucket clenched between my knees inspecting my very own Jackson Pollock therein, my headache thumping away to a perpetual, *Galveston*, while afar off, as if in a distant glen, my stomach was erupting on a diminishing ration of nutrients.

And you wonder why I avoid Hogmanay.

THE SCOOP

By Jamie Andrew

“Oooooffffff!!”

Another rusting piece of iron crumbled and snapped as I tried to stand up on it, sending me thumping back down into my harness.

Hanging free from the rock, 200ft. up, my harness digging painfully into my side, I sat for a moment, exhausted and frustrated, my head pounding, arms aching and knuckles oozing blood. Once again I found myself questioning my motives for coming here of all places, Sron Ulladale, for a holiday. We could have all gone to the south of France in the same time for much the same cost, but here we were in Harris, messing about in a tangle of ropes, etriers and pitons, dizzy-headed, high above the windswept moor.

When I first began rockclimbing, in the mid-Eighties, aid climbing was well and truly extinct as a branch of the sport. In Britain at least, the cliffs no longer rang to the sound of hammer on piton and brightly clad, super-fit free climbers had moved in to clean up the remains.

However, one great British aid climb in particular was not to be forgotten, preserved forever in Ken Wilson's coffee table classic, *Hard Rock*. Situated on the impressively overhanging north-west face of Sron Ulladale in the Outer Hebrides, *The Scoop* remained as a testament to a style of hard climbing which had all but faded away.

The Scoop was pioneered by Doug Scott back in 1969. 450ft. high and overhanging by 150ft., it was climbed over six days with several bivouacs and more than 30 hours' climbing and was given the grade A4. At the time it was hailed as a pointer to things to come, but actually, it turned out to represent the high point of British aid climbing.

In 1987 the inevitable happened when the talented duo of rock stars, Johnny Dawes and Paul Pritchard paid a visit to Harris. Their free climb of the face took a line based on *The Scoop* and weighed in at a mighty E7 although they avoided the A4 roof pitch which remained unviolated by the free climber.

Ever since first reading about *The Scoop* I had longed to do it and was fascinated with the thought of swinging free in etriers, high above the desolate moor with nothing but space below me. The thought of it also terrified me. Year after year passed by and always I found other ways to pass the summer, subconsciously putting it off until finally, in 1994, the excuses had all worn thin and *The Scoop* could be delayed no longer. The approach of midsummer spurred me into rallying some support.

Dave Kirk, an uncompromising Aberdonian and stalwart climbing partner was readily roped into the idea. My old friend Al Matthewson was

also keen to come along but was careful to stress his purely supporting role, muttering something about taking photographs. Ric Davies, another level-headed friend wanted to come too, but “only for a holiday”.

So it was that in May of that year, the four of us found ourselves rattling northwards from Edinburgh in an overloaded mini on a mission of discovery (and, it must be confessed, in pursuit of that elusive ‘puerile tick’).

Twenty-two hours, 230 miles, two ferries and a two-mile walk with ridiculously heavy sacks later, we arrived at base camp beside lonely Loch Ulladale. It was 3pm and as it doesn’t get dark in the Outer Isles in midsummer until...well at all really, we planned to make a start immediately.

Dave and I sorted through the gear we’d brought: Six ropes, countless karabiners, a fortune of Friends, great arrays of pegs and nuts and all sorts of other interesting bits and bobs. After some discussion we elected to take all of it.

“Better safe than sorry,” warned Dave. Hopelessly overburdened, we stumbled up the jumbled boulders and steep, slippery slabs that led to a dripping stance at the foot of the route. Feeling totally awe-struck by the humbling monstrosity of black rock over our heads, we fell silent as we fumbled on harnesses and wrestled nervously with tangled ropes. Eventually, we were ready.

Dave put me on belay, growling the helpful advice: “Don’t take too long,” and with no little trepidation, I set off. A couple of free moves across a slab brought me out over the void to the first of the difficulties. Difficulties which gave no indication of letting up till the top of the crag. *Oh God!* To say I felt daunted gives no impression of the utterly oppressive nature of the place: 450ft. of frowning overhang loomed above me while I pathetically tried to fiddle in a small nut. I was now having serious doubts about the sanity of this whole scheme. What was I doing here? I might have turned back there and then had it not been for the thought of the expense and effort of merely getting to the foot of this route. I couldn’t simply come back next week when I felt a bit braver.

Al and Ric joined Dave on the belay and spurred me on with various encouraging jeers and insults.

Blocking the wider view from my mind, I concentrated on the few feet of rock in front of my nose. Clipping an etrier into my nut, I clumsily stood up in the first rung. Another nut went in, a friend and then I could reach a peg. Soon, I was totally absorbed. My mind became completely focused on puzzling out the next manoeuvre and I became unaware of everything else around me; Dave, Ric, Al, the wind, the loch, the moor. Only the next section of rock mattered. And the next section of rock suddenly looked very blank indeed.

A bolt head protruded from the rock just above me, hangerless and

slightly downward pointing. I looped the end of a wire over and jammed up the nut to hold it in place. Then I clipped on my etrier and cautiously eased my weight up. Teetering precariously on the top rung I could just reach a tattered length of cord hanging down from goodness knows what above. There was no loop to clip into so I had to simply wrap the cord round my wrist and haul up. To my horror the cord was attached to a rusted rurp wedged into a blind, schisty crack. There was no going back now so, holding my breath, I tied a loop in the cord, clipped in an etrier and stood up. With relief I grasped a more secure piton higher up.

After that little scare, progress continued steadily, if painfully slowly until I eventually reached a hanging stance. "Safe!" I shouted down, but I didn't sound very convincing.

Now it was Dave's turn to begin the learning process. Unpractised in the art of jumaring and unfamiliar with aid stripping techniques, his progress was slow and his curses were frequent as he swung out into space, out of reach of runners and rock. Finally, he arrived sweating at the belay and announced in his inimitably resolute manner that I would be doing the rest of the leading.

Unable to argue I set off up the second pitch, consoling myself with the knowledge that this was a more straightforward section, being only A2. Straightforward it certainly wasn't and several loose blocks conspired to give me a worrying moment or two, as did some *in-situ* pitons which disintegrated under body weight. Meanwhile, back on the hanging stance, Dave was wrestling with the three ropes which were being carried high up into the sky by strong updraughts, and twisted round and round each other, like a huge nest of snakes. But at length the pitch was completed and I landed panting on the beautiful sanctuary known as the First Lie-Down Ledge. Perfectly flat, clean, a golden rectangle in proportion with an overhead crack bristling with pitons, it was a horizontal haven in a world of horrible overhangs. Not long later Dave joined me on the ledge and as it was now 8pm we decided to call it a day there. We stashed the gear on the ledge and set off down our abseil rope, spinning in space, to the welcome relief of horizontal ground, our tents, and a large meal.

Rain swept across the moor that night, lashing our little tents and swelling the nearby stream (and carrying away Al and Ric's treasured supplies of yoghurt and crème-fraiche which had been left there to cool). I slept fitfully, tossing and turning most of the restless night, unable to relax while the route was only part done.

The morning dawned fine, bringing with it, for me, mixed emotions of relief and dread – dread at having to return to do battle with that great black monolith which seemed to almost overhang the loch.

We set off early and a brutal 150ft. jumar shook our chilled bodies awake and returned us to the First Lie-Down Ledge. Dave made himself comfortable and I made a start on the big, third pitch. It took a while to get

going again but soon I was back into the swing of things (literally).

The third pitch consists of a huge, soaring corner, interrupted by three block overhangs which are all turned by the left wall. Climbing the corner proved straightforward enough but the overhangs caused considerable problems with gear placement and rope drag. Moving round the first overhang provided one particularly memorable moment. I managed to reach the lip on Friends but couldn't find any placements in the band of earthy schist around the lip. Standing high in my etriers I could reach another strand of cord, very similar to the one I had encountered on the first pitch.

"Here we go again," I muttered and, throwing caution to the wind, I grabbed the cord, swung out, and hand-over-handed up it. This cord, I discovered, was attached to a very manky looking peg. However, it wasn't the state of the peg which worried me, rather the state of the karabiner which connected the cord to the peg. About a third of the krab, including the gate, was missing. The remaining section was about a third of its original thickness and was white and crumbly with corrosion. In short, it was no longer a UIAA certified krab. I gulped and carried on heaving until in a position where I could slot in a nut and breathe a large sigh of relief.

When finally, the third roof was reached, a tension down and left brought the Second Lie-Down Ledge, a near perfect replica of its brother 150ft. lower down. Dave followed, leaving the original abseil rope in place and another rope down the third pitch to protect our retreat – a distinct possibility as the next pitch was the A4 crux tackling the final 40ft. roof. This great black overhang dominated the rest of the route, looming monstrously overhead as a final threat to those brave enough or stupid enough to venture this far.

But, by now, I was numb to the effects of such intimidation and launched wearily upwards. The leaning wall leading to the roof proved difficult. A thin crack leading round a bulging section was too shallow to take knife blades and so I resorted to using microwires. Carefully, I eased up onto an RP and, craning my neck, surveyed the crack above me.

Whooooosh!!! Suddenly, the world was spinning round my head. Loch Ulladale swung into view above me, the nasty black overhang and the blue sky were beneath my feet and several kilograms of gear was jangling round my neck. There was a brief silence, then Dave began to giggle. The release of suspense overcame me and soon I was swinging around upside down laughing, until Dave pointed out that the outward pull on the ropes had jerked out every one of my wires leaving only three very rusty pitons between me and the belay.

Back to business. This time the RP held long enough for me to ram a Friend in higher up and I was soon clipped into Doug Scott's bolt at the start of the roof. A very long tension and stretch rightwards gained the

thin wet crack which split the roof. Until this point it hadn't been necessary to do any pegging as nuts, Friends and *in-situ* pegs had always been available, but now it was time to unholster my hammer.

Al, who had by now ascended to the First Lie-Down Ledge and was curled up with a good book, looked up with interest.

"What d'you bet he drops the peg, Dave?" he challenged.

"Bound to!" shouted down Dave.

Ignoring their pathetic attempts to unnerve me, I held a small leeper at full stretch and began feebly to tap at it, an action which only resulted in me spinning slowly round out of reach of the crack. After several attempts the peg began to bite and I was able to attack it with a double-handed stroke.

Ping! The peg arced out into space and floated gracefully down through the abyss to land inaudibly among the jumble of boulders 150ft. out from the base of the crag. Dave and Al sniggered. Cursing my clumsiness I began again, this time managing after some effort to get in a body weight holding peg. Getting the hang of it now, my progress accelerated to a snail's pace, and eventually, feeling decidedly space sick, I pulled round the lip and collapsed with relief onto a slabby belay, three hours after leaving the Second Lie-Down Ledge.

Dave followed, totally out of sight from above, his various aerial antics going unseen. Meanwhile, Al began a series of spectacular free-hanging jumars, a long way out from the rock, removing the fixed ropes as he climbed to join us.

The final 'easy' pitch is graded AI/HVS and is merely vertical. However, it still felt bloody hard to me and by then, quite frankly, I'd had enough. Dave and Al were still refusing to take up the lead, explaining that it would be much quicker if I just led it. It was with huge relief that I finally pulled out onto the top, in the early evening sunlight, totally exhausted, both mentally and physically.

It was June 4, 1994, 25 years to the day after Doug Scott and his team completed the first ascent. Theirs' was certainly a far greater achievement than ours – that stands to reason. Nevertheless, it was not without some feeling of dazed pride that I staggered back down the hill, my body struggling to readjust to the strangely normal feelings of gravity and perspective. A mouth-watering meal of fresh trout which Ric had hooked out of the loch and then sleep, oblivious to the driving rain which once again battered the tents.

I had never done anything like *The Scoop* before and I'll probably never do anything like it again. But to have been there, just the once, and tried it, at least I know something of what it was all about. Doug Scott hit the nail on the head with his immortal description of *The Scoop* as "a unique experience in fear and fascination". It certainly provided a unique, fearful, and above all fascinating experience for me.

LAST SHIFT ON THE GROSSHORN

By Jamie Thin

I LURCHED down. Fear grabbed me by the throat, and kicked me awake, but I wasn't spiralling down the face as I had half-dreamed – the ice-screw was still there. I was just swinging over space in the dark. I must have been rocked by the wind or a heavy slough of powder snow from the summit ridge. The belay was crap - it would never take a leader fall - but was just enough to hold our weight on a hanging bivvy.

We were halfway across the crux ice traverse on a veneer of black ice over slabs. I had got a few turns on the ice-screw before it hit the rock below. It was sticking out lamely and flexing every time I shifted my weight. Rog was clipped into another ice peg, little better. We'd ground to a halt after Rog broke his crampon, darkness had fallen and the temperature had plummeted. Now the wind was picking up, sending streams of freezing powder snow down the face. Rog seemed impervious to it. Maybe it was Yorkshire grit or bravado. He half-smiled, or perhaps it was a rueful grin. For me, the fear was seeping into me with the cold. We each had a bivvy bag, but no warm gear or sleeping bags - we couldn't get into the bags anyway - I just stuck mine over my head and sheltered under it.

The plan had been to get up and down in one push and now we were at about 3500m on the North Face, in the thick of a winter storm and the temperature was -25°C and dropping. We were too far up to consider descending. The ice conditions had made any belays difficult - so we had soloed the first 300m up the initial couloir. We had tried to pitch the crux traverse, but the belays were at best psychological.

We ate some chocolate in the first grey light of dawn, and then I had to think about moving. By now I couldn't feel my fingers and was fumbling with the gear. Rog was in no fit state to lead. With only one crampon left, he had been forced to hop the last few pitches before dark, with most of his weight on his arms. Step cutting was impossible. It had been a dry, lean winter and what in some years would have been nice *névé*, was black ice as hard as marble. Even the axes could only bite in a few millimetres on the second or third attempt.

I didn't want to start climbing again, my muscles were stiff and cold, but neither did I want to stay. Movement is sometimes better than waiting for the sunrise.

After a few shaky moves, I got into balance and worked my way across and up. I was desperate to reach the headwall for a decent belay, knowing our gear below would never hold a leader fall. Eventually, I reached the shelter of the headwall and hammered a peg into the first crack in the rock. Rog hopped up to join me.

The finish to the route was a long traverse left below the headwall and then an escape up the ice cliffs above.

I led off again crossing more black ice, sweeping off any remaining powder and trying to keep high so I could place pegs in the rock. Placing one awkward peg on a bulge, I was out of balance and couldn't get my crampons to bite. I got the peg in and hung off it with relief. I continued the traverse, placing a drive-in ice peg halfway along and the confidence began to return, even if my fingers were still numb. I reached a prow of rock and hammered in another couple of pegs for a belay. They went in easily, but I was just happy to be on solid ground and off the black ice. The rope was frozen and I couldn't squeeze it into my belay plate, so I just took a waist belay, and shouted to Rog to follow across.

Rog hopped and jumped over on his one crampon boot, he reached the awkward peg on the bulge, and had to stretch up to try and knock it out with his ice-hammer. It was just out of reach, he edged a little higher up and leaned over...shhhumm...his foot shot out and he was off, swinging down on the 15ft. of slack to the next runner.

The first I knew of it, I was arcing out into space to meet him.

The impact had pulled both the pegs in my belay and I found myself still clutching the rope hanging from the ice peg I had placed as a runner. We stared hollow-eyed at each other, and then at the ice-peg above, from which we were both swinging. I got an axe back in the ice and steadied myself from the swinging on the rope. Rog hammered in a wart-hog and made a makeshift belay. We were back safe, but had been inches from total belay failure and 1000m of free-fall. All we could do was blot the thoughts from our minds and focus on the next move, the next belay.

When I climbed back up to the ice-peg, I found it had been bent into a right-angle and the ice all around was fractured. We took another bivvy in a crevasse on the summit ice-ridge and then were left with the tortuous descent route, first over the main summit, so we could reach the long traverse on a narrow corniced ridge, and then two abseils down to the Schmadri-joch.

By now Rog was doing all the leading - we were both dehydrated after 48 hours without liquid - and I was barely rational, wracked by hot aches up both arms. I couldn't hold my ice axe or rope and just tumbled down the soft snow slopes onto the glacier. Rog disappeared down one crevasse, but managed to pull himself back out. We could see the hut now. But it was still a long way through the powder snow before we could finally dump all our gear and collapse.

The hut was as we had left it, empty and silent, but still with the big bowl of water on the table. We drank and felt the wonderfully cold liquid rush down our throats, moistening our dry cracked lips and painful swollen tongues. We just sat for a long time, happy to be alive and to have the leisure to relax. Then we began the slow painful process of shedding boots,

gear and gloves. I left my inner-gloves till last, not wanting to see the blue-black creep of frostbite on my hands.

Thirteen years later I'm reading the spidery script of my hospital diary:
Interlaken Regional Hospital

"By an almost inevitable progression we have arrived in the hospital wards. I'm clutching my pen with swollen, clumsy fingers dyed bright red by mercurochrome paint. While my left hand is still all bandaged to keep the fingers immobile and free from infection.

I'm beginning to adapt to the daily routine - getting woken by the night nurse for the first of my six-hourly injections to thin my blood and dilate my capillaries.

The slow rising awareness of where I am. The confusing twinges of sensation which come from my hands. I play games with myself trying to analyse the myriad of seemingly unconnected sense impulses and working out how my hands and fingers are lying...but always I'm surprised to find my hands in some other position to the one I imagined."

On that same winter climbing journey, cycling across northern Europe, climbing in the Tatra mountains and the Alps, I read Tolstoy's *Resurrection* - lamented by the critics for its sentimentality. Re-reading it now many years later, it is still sentimental, but the last words strike a chord with my half-remembered feelings...

"And a perfectly new life dawned that night for [him], not because he had entered into new conditions of life, but because everything he did after that night had a new and quite different significance than before. How this new period of his life will end time alone will prove."

Footnote:

My friend and regular climbing partner, Roger Lawson, was killed on the Dru the following summer on August 13, 1992, when an abseil point failed.

HEAVY DAYS IN THE LABYRINTH

By Nigel Kenworthy

AS A local boy from Ayr, Arran was one of Heavy's favourite adolescent haunts. He wanted to relive past glories, whereas I was selfishly ticking Classic Rock (The Scottish ones first, the rest could wait.) It would be a pleasure to sack-haul the old man again. In fact, Heavy had a pedigree – he had been dragged up some of the best routes in Scotland.

I said *Labyrinth*, he said *Sou'Wester Slab*, I said: "Both." He said: "Okay." For Heavy it was his fifth time on *Sou'Wester*, my third. However, an ascent of *Labyrinth* would be a first for me. Heavy had done it before, 25 years ago with Wee Jock, but it was much harder then. Wee Jock had carefully positioned glowing fag ends on vital holds. Simmering hatred between the pair led to violence and culminated in a massive stramash on Brodick golf course. It was evens, blow for blow until Heavy decided to use his watch as a knuckle-duster on the sixth. By the ninth it was all over. After making up, it was into the club bar for a few beers before an alcohol fuelled final nine holes later on that evening.

Cir Mhor, that most impressive of Arran peaks, rises magnificently at the north end of Glen Rosa. It was just a pity that it was such a long way from the end of the road. However, a bit of begging and subterfuge by Heavy and the old pre-rehearsed 'bad knees' acting routine, gained us a key to the gate, which cut a few kilometres off the walk in.

"It looks a bit wet," says Heavy. "Better have a go at *Sou'Wester* first." This was the usual Heavy ruse, go for the climb you have done many times before to get the confidence up a bit. I still found the first pitch awkward. Heavy had [kindly!] lent me a pair of red suede Scarpa vibrams with no tread. Apparently, these were in vogue Seventies footwear, whose previous owner had succumbed to the big C a decade earlier. His taunts of: "Dead man's boots you're gonna fall off" did not help. Nevertheless, pleasant meandering across the great west-facing slab on the next pitch led to the superb three-tier chimney, followed by a relaxing veteran's lunch of sardines among the midges.

Now for *Labyrinth*; a wholly different affair. The route has not always been known by this name, as it was originally christened East Wall Climb by the first ascensionists (G. C. Curtis and H. K. Moneypenny in 1943) and described as "severe (strenuous) giving about six hundred feet of continuously interesting climbing, with magnificent situations" – SMCIJ Vol. 23.

However, it has now been downgraded to V. Diff and straight-forward. The greasy alleyway at the foot of the first pitch was identified eventually, from the pages of the old crusty guidebook. The first 70ft. were easier

than they appeared. A haul on loose, grey, weathered granite and a belay on a spatially inadequate, vegetated platform, led to a right trending crack. This was a good old-fashioned thrutch, just too wide for a thigh jam, but not wide enough for back and fronting. Of course, Heavy had great fun with it. On the whole of Sou'Wester he had let out with irreverent pleasure only two: "Oh my Gods" and one: "Oh God," but he now surpassed himself and with blasphemous gratification let out three: "Oh my Gods" and four "Oh Gods," in only 10ft. of climbing. It was okay though, his father was a minister and Heavy must have heard that sort of language at home all the time.

We were now on a diagonal grassy shelf and a pleasant (he said 'exposed') horizontal traverse led leftwards. I was all set to go, but the lack of protection made me dither on the stance. Fortunately, Heavy was able to point out that even though he had brought me for my technical expertise, he was the 'Maister' and had brought along the experience. "Try the crack lower down son, and do as you're told." He was right; it was a better proposition for the second, as it offered some protection. This ended abruptly on a little grass ledge, the largest midge nest in Scotland.

The crack above was the crux. While I attempted this, Heavy, to keep his spirits up, had decided to raid a convenient blaeberry bush next to the belay. The first 5ft. were trickier than expected and I came back down for a rest, only to have squashed Blaebberries rubbed into my face. "Ah ha! it makes you look like Braveheart," says he with a titter, "straight on up, English." So with Blaeberry juice coagulating up my nose, I swung up the crack spurred on by a need to escape. This was a short pitch of 50ft., so he was soon beside me, purple not only from the exertion, but from the blaeberry crosses that he had rubbed on his own cheeks, giving him the appearance of a bespectacled Pict. However, he soon turned ashen after a closer inspection of the next pitch. This was a chimney of two tiers and vertical. Up over the first chock stone, behind a second and then strenuously up 70ft. of protectionless crack. I began to smile inwardly with malevolent glee during the grimaced exertion of the last 10ft., eagerly anticipating the antics to follow.

"Climb when ready."

"Climbing...PULL!" came the reply. I soon forgot about the midges and listened instead to the groaning, scrabbling, grunting, sighing, effing and blinding, punctuated with the occasional: "Oh my God." All too soon and with the last move being an air-cycling, toe-scraping, two-handed pull-up, he landed on the eyrie beside me. "I need to lose two stone he says." My pumped forearms bore testament to that.

The direct line, which was first climbed in 1950, now went up the Hard Severe crack above. However, it was agreed unanimously that the original line off to the right was more traditional, in keeping with the character of

the route and, more importantly, looked much easier. Unfortunately, after a rope length of vegetation, I reached a jumble of boulders with very muddy boots. The last, little chimney had a sting in the tail, no protection. This was not a bad thing, as by this time Heavy was either using it to stand on or leaving it in.

We were quite tired at the top and I was aching all over from all the heave-ho exploits, with my new jacket torn to shreds (bad climbing technique, as Heavy pointed out).

However, we were pleased with ourselves and soon forgot our tiredness to jog silently down Glen Rosa, satisfied and at peace in our private meditations.

LIFE'S DAY

The sunrise brings green chuckling on the fabric
so the tent is set sailing on its hopes;
we crawl out to bathe in blue sky,
dancing in bare feet, shouting down
the gabbling grouse that tell us to go back.
The mountain waits, patiently as peace
before the gods of war we chase.
We will go up and be no less blessed
than all the saints and prophets
who thought they had a monopoly of heights.
(They could have done with better belays
and a friend or two.) We eat greedily,
pecking food, and view, in turn,
like nodding hens.

The gear is rucksacked, in a robber's rush,
and feet itch for godlike wings to soar
to the hard place where we would drink
the cup that will not pass from us.
Much later, much later, hard won,
when only the perfect sky is higher
and the tent a green dot in shadows
laid like plaid across the world's moor
then, only then, we praise, or fall
like the lost leaders gone before,
who leave us tempting chalk marks
on a shadowed wall.

Hamish Brown.

THAT BIG CORNER

By Colin Moody

I CROSSED to The Misty Isle with George Szuca in 1988. We camped in Coire Lagan. On the third day we couldn't find The Cioch and stumbled into Coir' a Ghrunnda. We then moved to Kilt Rock but it also misted over.

The following year, George told me about the Upper Tier at Neist on Skye. "Man there's room fur two hunner routes". He had not let me in on a secret, he told everyone, even wrote about it in the new routes book.

Six years passed before I drove over from Torridon with Yan Taylor. After a disappointing time on *Supercharger*, Yan wandered up towards the Upper Tier and after a while he returned proclaiming "Just like Auchinstarry quarry, we're back to going to Torridon". After a slight protest, I did what I was told.

In June two years later I had got hold of Noel Williams' manuscript for the Skye Sea Cliffs and Michael Tweedley and I repeated most of the routes in the 'Financial Sector.' We were impressed, both with the quality of the climbs and also the amount of cleaning that had gone into them. Some of the lines had been put up that year and the rest the previous one, so the debris was still fresh.

The obvious feature was the big unclimbed corner just to the north. It was slightly overhanging for about 180ft, below that was steep grass for a 100ft or so, then below that another 100ft of vertical rock face plunging to the sea. To add to the atmosphere the corner was north facing and the top 50ft or so was wet. It was a classic feature, but probably about E5 and so, beyond us. I didn't want to waste any time on it but Michael was keen to abseil down for a look. I got out the old static rope and tied it to the two bombproof belay stakes beside 'The Tower', then backed it up with three or four unnecessary rock belays. Michael went down the rope, spinning uselessly in space. After his abseil he admitted he had been scared. I was only two stone heavier, so I had little excuse not to launch into space as well.

Michael didn't know about the rope! I had bought it twelve years earlier when it looked fine but it wasn't new and had possibly fallen off the back of a lorry at some time! I had left it to bivvy out at a big cliff one autumn and when I took it out of the survival bag in the spring it was soaked. Caving Supplies said it 'should' be ok. Fortunately it had no sheath so any damage was easily seen, but conversely it was easily damaged and spun you round too much, preventing you from getting a good look at routes.

I set off down the abseil trying to keep my mind blank (more difficult

than it should have been)- if I didn't think about the rope it wouldn't snap! It reminded me of the end of the film *Village of the Damned*, but I was keeping my thoughts from a rope rather than aliens! I fed the rope through the plate trying to keep it as smooth as possible. Relief on reaching the ground at a controlled speed didn't last, as Michael wanted to move the rope slightly and go again to get a better look.

We both went again. There was an obvious belay ledge occupied by a loose flake which I left in situ, my thinking being that if it was missing on my return I would know someone had been there and would leave the route to them. Below that, unbelievably, there was a weakness at the overhang which made the line seem almost feasible.

Michael wanted to spend our remaining two days of holiday on the route but the idea appalled me. I wanted to climb, not waste time getting greyer on abseil, cleaning a route for someone else to do. I talked him out of it then drove him to Torridon. Afterwards I went back to work on Mull and Michael returned to college in Leicester.

I was back climbing at Neist with Bruce Taylor the following month and I showed him the corner; we thought it was a fine route for Neil Smith. For climbers of our modest ability Neil was a sort of Rope Gun. If you showed him a route he would take your rope up it so you only had to follow and remove the runners.

In September Neil, Bruce, Roger Lupton and I set off to climb the route. When we got to Neist it was raining hard, blowing in from the southwest, so we did a few routes at Staffin instead. Whenever I spoke to Michael on the phone I got the inevitable "Have you done that big corner yet?" He also informed me that it was 'wicked', a fact that I was not aware of. I also had a lot of mixed feelings about the route. It was a compelling line which I really wanted to do, but didn't want to fail on.

The following year I was back on Skye with Louise Gordon Canning and a new(ish) length of static rope. I started the abseil to look at the line again. I went down twenty feet then without warning my belay failed and I was plunging to my death. My life didn't flash before me. I woke up at Sligachan, my heart pounding. This was getting ridiculous. After a few minutes I calmed down and went back to sleep.

Back at Neist (in day time) I talked to a Glaswegian on *Bridging Interest* who said, "Have you seen that big corner?" Someone else had noticed one of the most obvious lines on Skye (aren't they all?) It was time to spring into action.

Next day Louise went off to do her Yoga while I set up all the belays and abseiled down the corner. After sticking the rope end out of rockfall range, I went up the gully to the belay. The next abseil was to dislodge the flake. I felt that I was now committed to the route.

A further ten abseils and the first pitch was ready to climb. Because of the angle there was not much loose rock and it was a bit tiresome unclipping





and reclipping runners to keep me from swinging into space. The bottom twenty feet had a thick base of clay which was difficult to dislodge with a pick. Each time my legs started to go numb I would finish the descent and trudge back up *Tower Gully*. It would have been sensible to have a plod around then reclimb the bottom twenty feet of rope, but this did not occur to my scared brain. The cleaning was interrupted when we reclimbed a few routes in the area - a day without climbing was not an option for either of us.

Next day we did the pitch to the missing flake ledge. Louise was not impressed at being lowered from the belay as she had been expecting to do the whole route. I had had enough of the place and had invested too much nervous energy; the best part of the route had been climbed.

Back home it was obvious that a return was needed. Next month I met Neil and Roger at Kyle, Neil wanted to go to Rubha Hunish but I persuaded him we should do the corner and, with a highland start, we were away by the crack of noon, or soon after. I have witnessed Neil arrive at the Cioch for a day's climbing after six p.m., but he would be climbing in the sun while others were in the pub. When we got to Neist I thought ten minutes and we'll be there, but no. Certain protocols have to be followed, out came the coffee and Rizlas. Eventually I left them to it and set off across the moor. After the climb, which Neil led in his usual casual manner, the coffee and Rizlas reappeared. Done at last, time to get back to some proper climbing.

Bad Dream E3 5b,5c, Neist, July 1997.

Dansketinde, Staunings Alps, from Col Major. The S Ridge starts from the "Douglas Boulder" (L foreground) and takes a line directly to the summit. The SW Ridge forms the L skyline. The Original Route gains the col on the right and then takes a hidden couloir just right of the R skyline. Photo: Stephen Reid.

Stephen Reid starting the first pitch of the main part of the S Ridge, Dansketinde on the second (successful) attempt. Photo: Stephen Reid collection.

FLASHBACKS

By Iain Smart

TOTAL recall is a disconcerting experience, at least in the way I experience it. I will be engaged in some task or other when, without warning, for a second or two, I will be back in an event in the distant past. For a few fleeting moments I experience all the sensations of the five senses that were arriving at some particular moment that happened long ago. Most interestingly, I experience the moment with the unsophisticated psyche I had at the time, not with the psyche I have now which is battered and disillusioned by the attrition of subsequent living. These flashbacks seem to arrive spontaneously without being triggered by Proustian madeleine cakes or any other contextual reference. Ordinary memory by comparison is a woollier picture, an old dog-eared snapshot pulled out consciously from the filing cabinet of the mind and seen by the 'me' I am now, not by the previous unsophisticated 'me' that was there at the time the event happened. The total recall I am referring to is a sort of epilepsy of the memory centres in the temporal lobe, an involuntary replay of some event in the past. Some of these recalls are pretty dreadful others are happy. Here are three happy ones.

I was on top of the Cat Nick on Salisbury Crag. It was a peaceful morning. The whin was yellow and the grass a fresh green. Beside me was Bob Grieve. I could smell the smoke of coal fires and a whiff of Bob's asthma tobacco. There was no sound of traffic. I could hear church bells striking all over the old and new towns. I could see the pall of smoke from the household fires over the tenements of the Dumbie Dykes and the Pleasance. My hands were glowing from clutching holds all morning. I heard Bob speaking. I could make out only one word of the sentence he was uttering. It was: "...morning...". I had at that instant no memory of anything that had already happened in my later life, just a feeling of being aware of the present and feeling happy before the whole scene vanished.

The greenery and yellow whin indicates that this scene must have taken place in early summer. It must have been just before 11 on a Sunday morning to judge from the quietness and the church bells. The date must have been some year of the late Forties.

There is a lot of social history in this transient flashback. Sunday mornings were quiet because there was no traffic. Car ownership was low and I seem to remember you were not allowed to park cars in the street after dark unless you left the lights on. In those days cars were kept in the local garage and taken out at weekends, a bit like yachts in marinas today.

The breakfast fires were lit late because a Sunday morning 'lie in' was for most people less of a luxury than a physical necessity after a six-day week under what today would be considered brutal and illegal working conditions. Our future President, Professor Sir Robert Grieve, was at that time a minor functionary in the Civil Service with his coming greatness unsuspected. He was smoking asthma tobacco in his pipe because it was cheap. By smoking this dreadful stuff he was gradually saving enough to buy records of the Beethoven symphonies. The records would have been 78rpm, played on a wind-up gramophone with a fibre needle. In those days technology was basic and affluence was not widespread. Many Edinburgh professional families were satisfied to take their annual holiday in remote resorts like North Berwick or the adjacent slightly more upmarket Gullane (pronounced 'Gillin', if you were the sort of person that went there).

I was standing outside the bothy at Upper Steall. It was dark. It had just been raining. A warm wind was blowing clouds across the stars. I could hear the roar of the great waterfall across the glen. Two people were standing next to me. One was saying: "We are sib to the wind....". I could hear his accent and voice as if it was happening in real time, whatever that is. I felt an overwhelming sense of freedom and discovery as if I had escaped from a cage into a magic world where few others had entered.

This embarrassingly naive event I now remember took place one April in the mid-Forties of last century. I was 15 years old and going through an animist phase. Every rock and tree had its spirit, every glen and mountain a presence of some kind. In lonely places the sense of the ambient world was at times quite frightening. In those days Upper Steall had a roof and walls that kept out the rain, if not the wind, a battered caravanserai in the wilderness of remote upper Glen Nevis. Now all that is left of its once-sheltering halls is a crumbling gable end and a pile of rubble. It is passed by scores of walkers each weekend, if not each day.

On the occasion of the flashback I can recall from ordinary memory that I had arrived at this battered caravanserai late, late in the gloaming about the hour that Kilmeny came home. I had been camping alone for some days in the Mamores and White Corries. I tried to enter the darkness of the surviving habitable room. Compared to a tent the place seemed a haunted cavern wherein a presence lurked. I was on the point of pitching my cotton tent outside instead of braving the unknown forces within the gloom of the ruined house when another rain squall arrived and provided the courage to enter. I gritted my teeth and stepped into the wood-smoked darkness and lit my candle. Things weren't so bad once I got a fire going, better still after a primitive meal. My memory of these days was of constant hunger kept inadequately at bay with dried egg, baked beans, bad margarine

and Beattie's bread. Only the beans survive to the present day, the rest are now happily extinct. But there were still shadows moving around and the wind souged in the roof tree and there were of course 'unidentifiable sounds'. We animists find it bad enough in the daylight but in firelight and shadow the world is full of unchancy things. Then I heard footfalls. Panic and a flood of adrenalin.

Fortunately, the footsteps came from mortals, two boys from Falkirk. The elder was a soldier on leave and the other was about my age and being taken on his first trip to the glens. The fear and emptiness vanished. We talked far into the night of bothies in the snowy north and places ill taen. We felt that our presence here showed we had broken out of the conventional world and discovered the real world for ourselves. Having done this we were 'special' in some way and belonged to an elite group; we were 'sib' - to use a forgotten term that describes that feeling of brotherhood between free and equal spirits who had independently broken through into the real world without any psychological support. Youth leaders had yet to be conceived, let alone invented; indeed, their very parents had yet to be conceived. I think at the time we would have regarded youth leaders and adventure training, even if we could have imagined such things, as akin to loose gorgon heads wandering around turning adventure into stone. Anyway, in this war period such things were psychologically out of context: 'adventure activity' at this time was compulsory and for real.

My independent reading was limited and embarrassingly unsophisticated, probably only Ratcliffe Barnett, Alasdair Alpin MacGregor and Wendy Wood, all now forgotten romantics who put emotion before logic. Scott, RLS, John Buchan, D. K. Broster and Seton Gordon who also influenced us are still remembered and indeed still have priesthoods to tend their flame. I also remember reading Omar Khayam with empathy from whence the repeated intrusive references to the 'battered caravanserai' in this story must be derived. We had read Frank Smythe and Tilman, but their adventures seemed to take place in some unattainable never-never land; we discussed them with awe in our voices.

We had also, I regret to say been influenced by the disastrous example of Captain Scott. I had, of course studied SMC Guides and Journals in the gloomy cathedral-like halls of the Public Reference Library in Edinburgh's George IV Bridge, reached by a walk across the blacked-out Meadows lit by the grudging brown gaslight from every second veiled lamppost. These sacred leather-bound volumes with round-cornered pages and evocative sepia illustrations were hidden deep in the stacks and were handled reverently. They smelled of old books and old lore, a bit like the Bible except that you had some hope of actually approaching the holy ground where the events described had taken place. The stars of Bill Murray and Tom Weir had yet to shine upon us. At the same time as we were sitting

round our fire in Upper Steall Bill may well have been writing the first draft of *Mountaineering in Scotland* with a blunt pencil on toilet paper by the light of a similar candle in a bleak prison camp in Germany and Tom, the gun-layer, working out the mathematics of counter battery fire in a howitzer emplacement on the Channel Coast. The psychological map we were using was worn, dog-eared and out of date. School leavers at the end of the war fell between two dispensations. We were schoolboys among war veterans and understandably deferential. A few years later youthful energy could get away with being arrogant and disrespectful. Alas, this luxury was not available to us.

I find the scene I have been describing unbelievably Arcadian. Was the world ever really like that? Could three reasonable intelligent teenagers be so unsophisticated as to raise their arms in the night air, to the throbbing waterfall and say sincerely and without embarrassment: "We are sib.... sib to the wind!"? In spite of the commercialism of the present outdoor industry there will surely always be unprofitable people, the despair of admen, who won't buy what they are told, who walk through the prevailing fashions without noticing them in the way ghosts pass through walls as if they weren't there. You occasionally pass a youth, obviously in the possession of a vision of his own, walking Alastor-like uphill into the gloaming while the rest of us are proceeding downhill to the pub as fast as our fading nervous systems will allow. Sometimes I feel as if the figure might be me walking out from the past through a chink in spacetime which just shows that even a hard-bitten realist can write sentimental nonsense.

I was lying on the stern of a boat. I could smell the aroma of old rope and hear the beat of a big engine. Around me there was space and light and colour and the mellowness of a summer evening. I felt luxuriously fulfilled and happy and being acutely aware of the ambient world.

Rummaging around in the untidy filing cabinet of ordinary memory I recall that this must have been another clip from the late Forties. We were returning from an illicit visit to the forbidden Isle of Rum where we had spent a week climbing on Ruinsival, Trallval, Hallval and Askival, but for some reason not Barkeval. I was with young versions of the Great Slesser and the Great Dutton. (Even at that distant time they were under heavy suspicion of future greatness.) We had stayed in Canna after our return from Rum while the rest of the party had returned to Embro. Lorne Campbell had given us permission to sleep in the loft of an outhouse down by a little bay below the old castle where the princess was held prisoner. We had intended to achieve fame by making daily first ascents on the cliffs above the harbour or on the precipitous north coast. The weather was against such crass activity. We were in the middle of a long heat wave. (There used to be such things.) The sea was glassy calm and

had been for a long time. The atmosphere was too heavy and soporific to do much except eat of the Tennysonian lotus flower. We passed the time serenely watching yonder amber light that would not leave the myrrh bush on the height and so on. Even the Great Slesser was moving in slow motion. Canna and Sanday at that time had a substantial native population and was not often visited. As rare strangers we were treated with distant politeness. When we first asked at the farm for butter and milk we were provided with it diffidently. The next day we were judged by our polite behaviour to be harmless and were invited in for a strupach and a ceilidh. Milk, butter, eggs and home-baking survived unrationed in these quiet places.

The next boat to come was a dilapidated freighter inward bound from green Barra of the waves. In the glory of a summer's evening she wove her way into the harbour and amid a flurry of ringing bells she hit the pier with a crunch that cracked the pier's woodwork. The captain peered over the bridge, looked at the altered geometry of the wood and muttered: "That bloody pier is always getting in the way."

Macbrayne's had freighters in those days - old tramp-like vessels with a proper straight cylindrical funnel that emitted abundant smoke. These picturesque vessels took occasional passengers and we were given deck accommodation to Mallaig. Sobriety among captain and crew was not considered essential in these less prissy times. For most of the voyage the crew including the stoker assembled on the bridge absorbed in some discussion. Meanwhile, this latter day Birlinn Clann Ranald steered for Mallaig, imparting from time to time an interesting pattern to its wake - an occasional shallow curving zig followed eventually by a more positive zag. In those days the Western Isles still had a whiff of the old frontier between two civilisations.

Anyway, back on the coiled rope hawser on the stern of this romantically ramshackle vessel I was surrounded by an extravagant sunset reflected in a smooth oily sea, full of the reflections of the surrounding mountains. For a brief second or two I had been who I used to be with no memory of the future. But that's normal - not being able to remember the future, I mean, unless, of course you have the second sight.