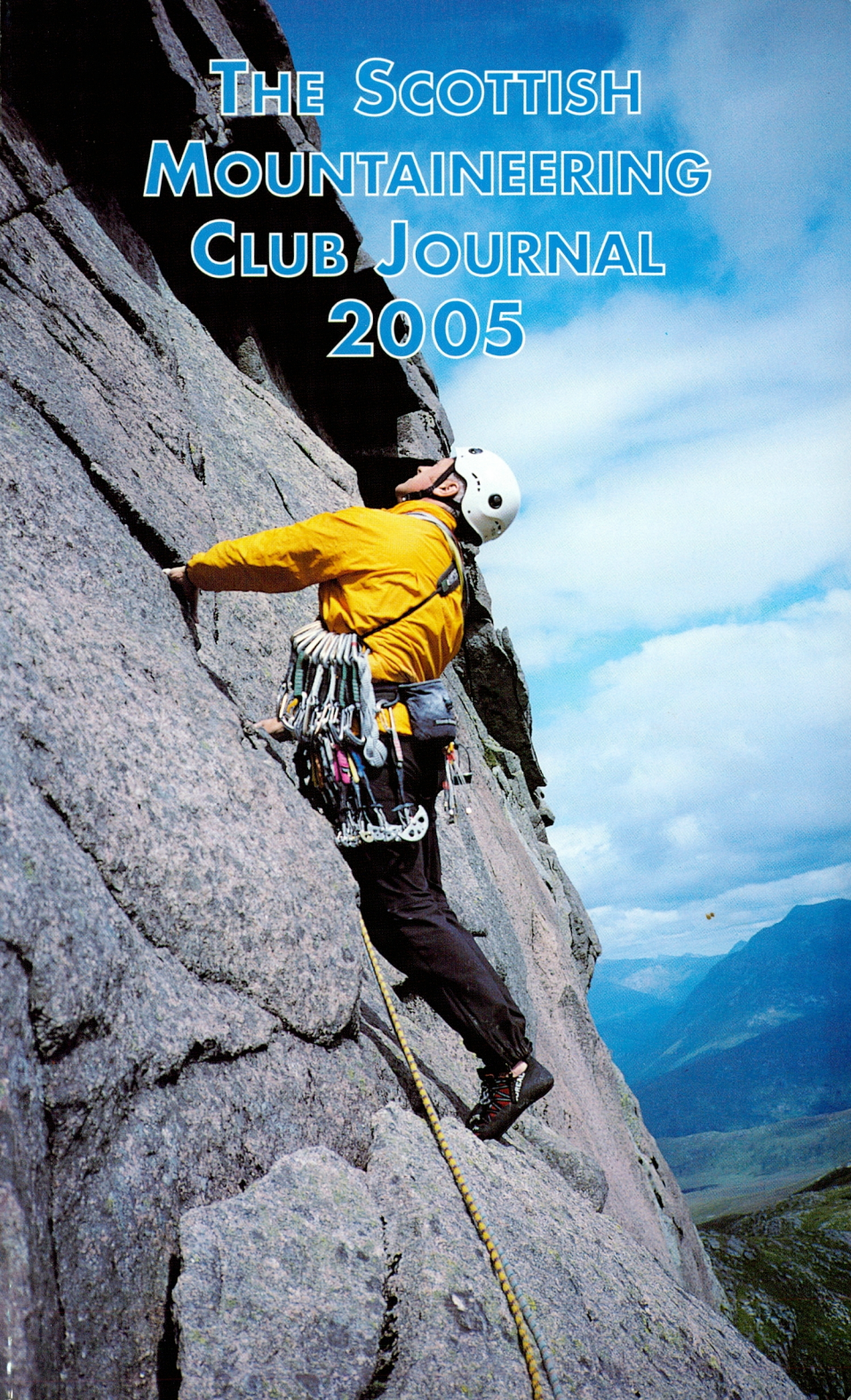


The Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal 2005

CONTENTS

	PAGE
THE FAR END OF THE FAR CUILLIN By Iain Smart	1
ALEXANDER M. KELLAS: EVEREST FORERUNNER By George W. Rodway	13
THE PEAK OF THE QUARTERS By Bob Richardson	21
COMING OF AGE ON THE LAMMERGEIR SPIRE By Graham E. Little	24
A GUIDE'S TALE By Davy Gunn	28
DUNGEON DAYS By Stephen Reid	30
A TALE OF THREE ACCIDENTS By Adam Kassyk	41
DANCING WITH STICKS By Phil Gribbon	46
WARMER CLIMATE AND SCOTTISH SNOW By Adam Watson	51
A MOVING EXPERIENCE By David Adam	60
CLIMBING ABOVE THE WORM GRASS By Geoff Cohen	63
MINUS ONE DIRECT WITH THE DOC By John Workman	68
GOLDEN JUBILING By Dave Broadhead	72
NEW CLIMBS SECTION	77
MISCELLANEOUS NOTES	173
MUNRO MATTERS	202
IN MEMORIAM	209
MALCOLM STIRTON SMITH	209
PHILIP 'BISH' MCARA	213
WILLIAM B. YOUNG	214
HARRY TILLY	216
JOHN SMITH	217
PROCEEDINGS OF THE CLUB	218
JMCS REPORTS	219
SMC AND JMCS ABROAD	224
REVIEWS	233
OFFICE BEARERS	240

EDITED BY CHARLES J. ORR
Published by THE SCOTTISH MOUNTAINEERING CLUB
Printed in Scotland by ARC Colourprint Ltd., Newtongrange

ISSN 0080 - 813X.
Distributed by Cordee, 3a De Montfort Street, Leicester, LE1 7HD

Front cover: Chris Cartwright contemplating the crux roof on the first ascent of Steinway (E2), Ben Cruachan. Photo: Simon Richardson.

Back cover: Mark Shaw and Neil MacGougan on Bruach na Frithe, Skye. Photo: David Ritchie.

THE SCOTTISH
MOUNTAINEERING
CLUB JOURNAL

Vol. XXXIX 2005 No. 196

THE FAR END OF THE FAR CUILLIN

By Iain Smart

I EMERGED from the BMC hut in Glen Brittle one brilliant June morning as the brief shadow of the night was fading over the northern hills. The rising sun was just catching the dew drops weighing down the grass, each drop photo-multipying the oblique sunlight into a star, achieving effortlessly and in abundance the effect artfully-cut diamonds strive for; try as they may, such artifacts can never be as good as the real thing. The birds were singing, the force of gravity had been turned down to a peep and the midges were off duty. Aesthetically, it was a full house, four aces on a king, if not the fabled five aces that are said to occur occasionally in skilled hands or in rare transcendental moments – a morning like this seemed to be one of them. As an extra bonus I was all by myself without a companion to disturb the local geometry of space-time.

I intended to contour along the base of the Cuillin to Garsbheinn, come back along the ridge as far as Coire Grundda and return to the splendours of the BMC hut where some slices of filet mignon, assorted mushrooms (morels, ceps and the ordinary ones), new potatoes and mild onions awaited me – a simple repast after a long day on the hill. Oh yes, there was also a bottle of claret, more expensive than I could prudently afford.

I was off to Garsbheinn because it is the least popular of the Cuillin summits, yet has one of the best panoramic views of the wide sea to the south and west, the dragon's back of the Cuillins to the north and beckoning Blaven and the receding horizons of the mainland hills to the east. I was going to spend a long time on the summit just enjoying being alive. I would relax with a loaf of bread, a flask of wine, a book of verse and if I needed a 'thou' or two beside me dreaming in the wilderness I could summon someone up from the richly-populated mansions of the past to share the enjoyment.

One thing I wanted to do was to look down on Soay and remember the day we had tried to get across there to work for Gavin Maxwell in his shark fishery. The arrangement was for us to light a fire on the Skye shore

The Inaccessible Pinnacle from Sgurr Thearlaich, Skye. Photo: David Ritchie.

at 2pm on an agreed day and they would come across to pick us up. In spite of a large smoky fire, nothing happened. As we walked disconsolately back to Glen Brittle Maxwell's shark-catching motor torpedo boat sped into the Sound of Soay from the west with a scraggy, sardonically smiling shark no more than 10ft. long lashed to its side – their total catch for a week. Gavin Maxwell had been operating the fishery for a year or two and after a period of success basking sharks for some inexplicable, Osgood-Mackenzie-like reason had all but vanished. Consequently, there was no work to be had on Soay. There was a telegram to that effect waiting for us at the hostel when we returned. So we had to make do instead with midge-bitten toil cutting bracken around the struggling foot-high Sitkas that now in their maturity dominate the glen.

And so that morning I started off with a spring in my step but after half-an-hour or so slowed to a trudge; it was after all more than 60 years since my first visit. By conserving energy I arrived at the summit in fairly good nick and spent the afternoon there enjoying my flask of wine and book of verse and letting my mind out of its box to soar around looping the loop and enjoying its freedom. It turned into a hot shimmering afternoon and I did a sort of *après midi d'un faune* for a couple of hours, followed by a substantial zizz in the shade of a rock.

As I was about to bundle and go I was disturbed by the arrival of two youngish men. We greeted each other and agreed on the superb weather. They dumped their rucksacks and modest rack of chocks and runners, then started admiring the view pointing out landmarks to each other and arguing over some of them. Then taking out their picnic they reverted to the conversation they must have been having when they arrived. They seemed a pleasant couple, light on their feet and obviously fit. Then one of them gave me a second look.

"Didn't we once meet a couple of years ago in the Nevis Hut?" he enquired. "You helped us during our retreat from a debacle on the Orion Face."

This could only be the man who was the prime mover on that memorable occasion. I reported the events of that night in the Journal a few years ago (*SMCJ*. 1996, xxvi, 187, p7). Their party of four had straggled down from the Ben in darkness and blizzard and I had offered them shelter in the hut. You may possibly remember that an interesting little bit of theatre unfolded with a colourful *dramatis personae* that included Maggie, the dark dominatrix and the Storm Goddess whose name I never discovered, the *deux femmes sans merci* who spiced up the evening and, of course, there was the hapless Harry. Mike, the leading man on that occasion still had a slight Australian overlay to his Scottish consonants and vowels and the same relaxed genial manner.

"Yes, how could I forget? It was quite a night. That was a remarkable bottle of brandy you had. I remember it well."

"We expected to hear from you again. Did you lose our telephone number?"

"No, I lost my nerve. All that nonsense you talked might have been true. I don't take risks any more. I try to be happy as I am." I said, sententiously.

You may remember they had come out with some plausibly implausible story about their ability to sustain life beyond its natural span, enough to be highly entertaining science fiction. They had been great company for an evening and, toned down a bit to make it believable, the evening had made a good story for the Journal.

"I am disappointed in you," he said, cracking open a can of beer and handing it to me.

"Well, let me introduce you to my friend Dirk here. He is a sailing man. Mostly square riggers. He's old-fashioned but much sought after nowadays by training ships."

I exchanged how-do-you-dos with a pleasant man of middle height, rugged appearance, fair hair, blue eyes, a broad smile and a notably firm handshake. It appeared they were off Dirk's boat anchored in Portree. It wasn't a full square rigger he said apologetically. Well not really. His present vessel was a brigantine. Squaresails on the foremast only. Easier to handle with a small crew. He and Mike were having a day off. They had just done the main ridge in a leisurely 10 hours from Sgurr nan Gillian by way of the Pinnacle Ridge and were going back along the ridge to descend to Glen Brittle via Coire Lagan They were to be picked up at Glen Brittle House that evening by one of the crew.

"Join us for a bite to eat," he invited indicating a spread of crusty bread, sausage and relish he had laid out on a stone. I accepted, more to be sociable than anything else. I tried to make some mileage with Dirk, reminiscing about the Centennial Yacht Meet and the joys of sailing in state-of-the-art ships of yesteryear. We rambled on but it was an unequal conversation. Rounding the point of Sleat or even Barra Head was a pussy cat compared to the Cape of Good Hope.

"I'd like to see your yacht," I said to change the subject from my embarrassingly inadequate sailing experience.

"She is not a yacht – she's a brigantine!, a real ship," he exclaimed banging me on the head with the remains of the baguette in mock huff. "Usually, I use a belaying pin to correct remarks like that. Be grateful that there isn't one handy."

And so at their invitation I travelled back along the ridge with them in a late afternoon of purring warmth. We conversed easily together, mostly about history and literature. They were both scholarly souls very well read with a breath-taking historical perspective. I kept up with them conversationally fairly well, but I started to lag increasingly far behind on the uphills. The verve of the morning had gone. I reverted to my own

leisurely, great-grandfatherly plod. They waited for me at the bottom of the final ascent to Sgurr Dhu.

"Here we must part. It was nice to meet you all again," I said offering a parting handshake. They declined the gambit. Mike made the suggestion that since it was such a fine evening we all saunter slowly to the Thearlaich-Dhu gap I could join them in a rappel down the short side and then go back down to Coire a'Ghrunnda from the bottom of the gap. It sounded sensible and I was enjoying their company, so I accepted and we plodded communally onward.

I managed the rappel into the gap with a fair show of residual competence. We sat companionably at the bottom, sharing some chocolate. Dirk said it would be really easier for me if I kept on the ridge and went back to Glen Brittle down the stone shoot and home by Coire Lagan in their company.

"We can all go together. No need to hurry. The sun is still high and the colours will get better as the shadows lengthen."

The offer was confirmed by Mike: "We'll give you a top rope. It would be a pity to miss the view from Sgurr Alasdair on an evening like this. It will be worth the effort."

I've seen the day I could have led the steep side but now I knew I didn't have the strength or control to get up under any circumstances. It would be too humiliating to be hauled up like a sack of potatoes. So, I declined. "No thanks, I'll just rest here a bit and then wander back in my own good time. One of the joys of maturity is that you know how to take your time," I added, not too convincingly.

Mike looked at me appraisingly and then produced a flask and some small nesting metal cups not much bigger than thimbles from his rucksack.

"Okay then let's have a final dram afore we go."

"Is it that stuff again? I don't mind if I do. A little snort would do me good."

"It's not exactly the same stuff, but it's pretty good."

Whatever it was, was strong – bitter with a pleasant herbal taste, a bit like Gamle Dansk, the Danish pick-me-up. We continued to chat companionably. At one stage they were arguing together about something to do with the next stage of their voyage and I poured myself another dram without being asked. I don't think they noticed.

A few minutes later I heard my own voice saying: "I've got a good idea. I'll just lead this pitch then we can all go down to the hut and you can have dinner with me before you drive back to your yacht, I mean brigantine. I have some good wine and a bottle of Old Brora." They exchanged a worried glance.

"Steady on old fellow," said Mike. But I was already tying on the rope.

Then they gave each other a meaning look. Hendrik nodded: "Let him try," he muttered under his breath. "Let's see what he can do. We can

catch him when he falls." I think they both moved to cushion my fall on the first move.

The fact was that I climbed the nasty smooth side with confidence and some aplomb. The rock was much smoother than of yore and unsightly grey, green, greasy limpopo chalk marks were everywhere. Nevertheless, I went up like a competent 20-year-old. I could feel parts of my nervous system, dormant for 50 years, emerging from retirement. My fingers read the rock like brail and my eyes transmitted data about the geometry and texture of the coming rock. My nervous system integrated all this information, optimised the configuration of my body in relation to the pull of gravity and the expected frictional properties of each hold and organised the sequence of action of the appropriate muscle groups, checking that they could exert the required power. I seemed to be just coming along for the ride. It was a bit like driving a perfectly tuned aeroplane, operating under an efficient autopilot. I got to the top before I was ready, belayed expertly and brought the others up.

"That's a bloody good dram you have in that flask," I remarked as we untied.

"We'll have to watch you," Mike replied. "I thought I saw you have a second shot of that stuff. You shouldn't have done that. Never mind. We'll make sure you get home alright."

"What do you mean 'get home all right'? I've never felt better."

"I am sure you haven't. Not for years anyway. I mean what you have just done has a cost. The stuff you just knocked back opened up blood vessels in brain and muscle and is even now emptying your liver of glycogen and catabolising your brown fat reserves. When we get back to the hut you're going to have to keep off alcohol and take aboard as much glucose and skimmed milk as you can to protect your liver and let it resynthesise its energy stores.

"I thought it was supposed to be a 'magic' elixir'," I said provocatively.

"You obviously don't know what magic is," he replied. "We can't break the Laws of Thermodynamics. You always get less useful energy out of a system than you put in. Free energy is a misnomer. In the end you have to repay the bill with interest even if you happen to be a magician."

"Tell me more," I asked fascinated by this tutorial on the metaphysics of physics but any further exposition was interrupted by Dirk.

"Enough of this babble," he said. He had finished coiling the rope and was preparing to go. "There is some magic to be made on top of Alasdair on an evening like this. Let's go where the magic will actually happen."

We wandered on and spent a full hour on the summit while the sun got lower, the colours richer and the shadows longer. It was one of those Aphrodite moments when the mind and the world get fankled up together. This is an interesting subjective state to be in. Nevertheless, I have little doubt the great wide world out there was completely indifferent to the

fact that our nervous systems were transmuting all the mindless radiation it was emitting into a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. Although we take it for granted the ability to do this is profoundly magical. I remarked as much to the other two. They asked if I was sure I had got it the right way round.

Then we picked our way lightly down the great stone chute into Coire Lagan, loped with long strides over the great elephantine boiler plates of the coire floor and on through the rough bounds of the lower glen in the luminous afterglow of a summer gloaming.

When we got back to the hut they accepted my invitation to dinner.

"Show me your stuff and I'll cook," said Mike. He saw the mushrooms which I had left re-hydrating in a bowl. "I'll make soup. Dried ones like these have better flavour as soup."

He sat me down, took out some gadgets from his rucksack and clipped something on to my wrist which displayed my blood pressure and the rate and character of my pulse. Then he had a look in my eyes with a little ophthalmoscope. "I never travel without one, he explained: "The retina is the only place you can actually see blood vessels. Yours are alright. Your circulation seems up to it. I am just being careful. Just checking your tyre pressures, as it were."

"Now go and pour Dirk a dram," he directed as he unpacked more things from his rucksack. "Chat about derring-do on the high seas with him. You'll find him interesting. I'll bring you a liver-saving drink in a few minutes."

Dirk was an impressive character. He seemed to have sailed everywhere but he was appropriately foggy about dates. Most of his stories seemed a bit old-fashioned. He told them with grace and interpretive skill. He listened appreciatively enough to my story of going through the Corrievreckan and the Grey Dog but it couldn't match his story of being dragged southwards by the Benguela current through the teeth of a full gale blowing in the opposite direction in a full-rigged ship without an auxiliary engine.

I was reminded of a similar experience some years ago. At a formal dinner I was seated next to someone because we were both pilots. Our host obviously thought we had a lot in common. "How many hours do you have," my neighbour asked after we had introduced ourselves.

"Two hundred," I replied, quite pleased with myself.

"Is that all? I have 40,000." He had been chief test pilot for the RAF and had once got a Vulcan bomber out of an inverted spin. The rest of the evening he talked to me about chess – not playing it but about the set he was carving from hippopotamus teeth harder than ivory; each piece representing a figure from Eskimo mythology. The significance of each he explained to me in some detail. I saw the full set later; it was exquisite. After years of experience in this sort of thing. I have learned to enjoy the

rewarding experience of being an eternal pupil. I learned a lot about life on the high seas in big ships.

Mike came through with a drink in a pint mug.

"You must get through two more of these tonight," he announced.

It wasn't bad stuff – smooth, warm, milky, redolent of honey with a prolonged, rich, nutty après gout. A little later he came back with a couple of bowls of mushroom soup and garlic bread which he and Dirk supped with great enjoyment. Mushrooms, he explained to me between spoonfuls, had toxins which my liver couldn't handle in its present state. I went off and boiled the new potatoes, grilled the filet mignons and returned with the bottle of claret. This they partook of with relish, commiserating with me but assuring me, while I sipped my liver-protecting posset that it was for my own good.

The hut was full of climbers noisily reliving the near-death experiences they had confronted during the day. To escape from the clang of decibels we moved outside to a green bit above the road, they with their coffee and drams, me with my third posset. It was a lovely soft summer night with enough breeze to keep the midges away.

"Tell me," I said: "What was that stuff you gave me up on the ridge? Was there amphetamine in it? Are you a couple of junkies just keeping going on performance-enhancing drugs?"

"Of course not," Mike replied matter of factly. "We are not escapists, at least not in that sense. We are just knowledgeable about replacement therapy. We are no more junkies than a diabetic is for taking insulin. We have just learned how to use replacement therapy for a greater range of conditions than diabetes. Aging is a deficiency of the renewal systems and can be controlled. We know how to keep collagen from gumming up the system and the elastic tissue in the body healthy. We are pretty good at tweaking neuro-transmitters and keeping mood at its optimum. You tune the engine of a car or the sails of a boat for optimum performance, don't you? You do that as a matter of course. Why not tune your mind and maintain your body in optimum condition just like you would a car or boat?

"Sounds logical, but how long can you go on for?"

"In theory, indefinitely, but accidents do happen. Harry Nieve for example – the chap you met in the CIC hut – is no longer with us. He was in the twin towers on 9/11. We can only do physiological longevity. We haven't cracked immortality yet."

"But we are working on it," interjected Dirk, raising his glass and getting a disapproving look from Mike.

"Okay, but don't you get bored being on holiday all the time. Aren't you just a couple of self-indulgent playboys? There must be more to life than climbing and sailing endlessly round the world."

"Bored? With such a remarkable thing as life? Bored with having an intellect that has hardly been used?"

He then enlarged on the challenges of what he called 'the fifth stage of learning', the period in our later years when we actually began to learn something. Even if we have gained a reasonable pass in the University of Life most of us are denied admission to this great experience, due to the lamentable inability of our deteriorating support systems to keep body and mind in decent nick for more than the trivial period of a few score years.

"Well why do you risk all this by dangerous activities like climbing and sailing?"

"We climb and sail because both require route finding and calculating risk under stress and have no rules except those imposed by the laws of nature – wind and tide and gravity – against which there is no appeal. Apart from the enjoyable adrenalin-buzz, it is the perfect practical metaphor for us. It helps to steady our nerve for route finding at the wild frontier of the fifth age. We are no longer exploring the edge of our climbing ability. We have done all that. We climb well within our ability. We have new unknowns to explore."

He and Dirk expanded on this theme for a couple of hours in the deepening summer dusk. However, I won't bore you any more on these matters. This is after all a mountaineering journal and not a text book on the wild frontier of creative living beyond three score years and 10.

The session ended about midnight when we saw the headlights of a car coming down the glen.

"That must be Gourlay," said Mike rising and dusting himself down.

As we walked back to the road Dirk looked at the impeccable sky.

"The weather is stable. There isn't going to be much wind," he said sniffing the air. "No good for sailing. Why don't we just stay and do a climb tomorrow? Our friend here and Gourlay would make good climbing partners."

The car arrived and I was introduced to Gourlay, a big genial rough-hewn man who turned out to be the ship's engineer. ("We have an auxiliary engine nowadays," Dirk explained, having the good grace to look shamefacedly at his boots).

Gourlay exuded competence and had a handshake like a friendly velvet vice. The weather report he brought was good for the next 12 hours; then an Atlantic front was due to arrive. It was decided to grab the good weather while it was on offer and make an early start.

The Wild Frontier Of The Fifth Age:

We managed to squeeze in to the hut for a few hours to get away from the dew that was settling over us. A few hours later as dawn's left hand was in the sky and the first birds were tweeting tentatively we left quickly

without breakfast, except I had to drink something rather neutral tasting. The dew-laden grass was seeded with pearls gleaming silver-grey in the directionless light – there were no shadows yet. A few strands of mist decorated the black skyline of the Cuillin. The attention to detail that morning was immaculate. We moved fast through the fields of pearls as they transmuted into diamonds under the first sunlight. The rolling flanks of grass and heather gained texture from the first long shadows and oblique shafts of sunshine. I was moving easily and seemed to have lost weight.

At the entrance to Coire Lagan we paused to appreciate the ambience and have breakfast. We looked out over the sea to Rum of the fretted skyline, to Canna of the golden sunlit cliffs and over the Minch to the Long Island, to green Barra of the waves and fair Uist of the songs, all bright in the sunlight and set in a sea patterned in blues, greys and silver. For breakfast, I had another pint of the rich emollient mixture Mike had been feeding me with the night before. He also tested my tyre pressures and had a cursory look at my retinal vessels, pronouncing my systems to be operationally satisfactory. I remarked on how well I was feeling and asked why I was so spry and light on my feet after all yesterday's activities and so little sleep. He explained that I had used up my brown fat and had now switched over to converting the fat in my spare tyre into energy. My fuel tank was emptying, that was why I felt as if I had lost weight. But there was nothing to worry about unless I started running on empty and he wouldn't allow that to happen.

We split into two teams. Gourlay and I were to do *Cioch West* and *Integrity*. Dirk and Mike would do the *Direct* and the *Crack of Double Doom*. We would meet at the top. Gourlay insisted I lead the first pitch. The last time I tried a few years ago I couldn't get off the ground. This time I had the power and control to climb with easy competence. I had the feeling that mind and body, liberated from the shackles of age were really enjoying themselves. Physical competence in my 20s had been great but its return 50 years later was even better. Physical well-being was now a mere vehicle for something much more exhilarating. I was more comprehensively aware of the surrounding world than I'd ever been before; a strange sense of intellectual adventure had arrived. You know these pictures made of incomprehensible wiggly coloured lines that were fashionable a few years ago, the ones if you look into them a certain way, a three-dimensional scene, otherwise completely invisible, appears. It was a bit like that.

We reached the Cioch and sat there for half-an-hour just enjoying being alive. Gourlay was a good companion. He seemed to have a comprehensive practical understanding of how things worked. The old familiar feeling of being outclassed returned and I adopted my accustomed role as pupil, listening to accounts of everything from the deficiencies of the old British

Seagull outboard engine to the working of molecular nano-machinery. He wasn't a boring pedant merely the willing provider of asked-for information

En passant he explained how the brain worked. Ordinary computers, he pointed out, are hard-wired, use electronic current, generate too much heat and have to be programmed. The living brain uses the much more subtle system of ionic current and comes hard-wired with a program already installed donated by your ancestors. We are dragged through the first part of our lives as our inherited program makes us conform to its priorities. As you have no doubt noticed we don't always approve of what our inherited program is doing with us. That is because we have so much surplus circuitry that we are capable of exerting quality control on our behaviour – which of course is over-ridden if it becomes too sophisticated and gets in the way of survival. Our soft wiring is configured by our culture and education and tends to become hard-wired. Dogma is a particularly deep and irreversible conversion from soft to hard-wiring. As you know once you get down to someone's hard-wired dogma, appalling behaviour can result. Here he glanced westwards to the scene where the hard-wired dogma of the psychopathic Calvin had destroyed so many songs and stories. He also muttered: "Alas, poor Harry," presumably referring to the demise of the chap I met so briefly in the CIC hut.

Reclining in the sunshine on the top of the Cioch like an intellectual Bacchus he explained further: Once our inherited program has been run through we, as individuals, are redundant. Our body has done its biological job and is ready to be recycled. However, this is also the beginning of a golden age. Once we are freed from the tyranny of our biological program we are left with a mighty intellectual engine which, biologically speaking, is surplus to requirements. The tragedy is that just as we become free to use these latter-day processing skills our support systems start to fail. The brain is a demanding organ; it needs more oxygen and glucose than other tissues to work efficiently. Like Moses we see the promised land, but don't have the metabolic wherewithal to enter.

He went on like this for quite a bit. I was fascinated. But I won't bore you any more. I know this is a mountaineering journal. I am only trying to describe a day out on the Cuillin as it actually happened.

Back at the climbing we addressed *Integrity*, a well-named climb of uncompromising verticality which previously would have tested me to my limit but now was so well within my physical and mental competence that I sang as I climbed. It was so exhilarating to be operating well within the limits of my ability instead of continually husbanding my aging resources to make them last. We met the others at the top and continued towards Sgurr Alasdair. I really enjoyed the bad step on Sgurr Sgumain; an out-of-balance move I found amusing. The last time I had been there was in winter with Malcolm a few years ago on a windy day with snow

drifting around our knees. We didn't have the strength to get up. This time I scarcely paused.

And so on to Sgurr Alasdair and Sgurr Thearlaich. On a spur looking out over the Coruisg side we stopped for a prolonged lunch. Mike explained in his usual matter-of-fact way that life originated as one of the many back eddies in the downward energy flow of the universe on its way to absolute zero. A back eddy by definition contravenes the Second Law and uses energy to create order.

"Life is a self-propagating back eddy, a special type of wave phenomenon," he declared airily pointing to the lichens on the rocks and a passing raven which croaked wisely in confirmation. (This was probably a coincidence.) The particular retrograde surge which produced life configured a chemistry that was capable of utilising energy to propagate itself and to create other retrograde waves of increasing orders of complexity. Imagine a swirl in a mighty river with a standing wave going against the current. Life is the crest of a retrograde energy wave with an edge ruffled like a Mandelbrot set. It is distinguished by each wave, before it dies, harnessing more energy from the ambient universe to generate and diversify yet other retrograde waves of increasing complexity – evolution is, I think the appropriate term. We, he indicated Dirk and Gourlay, are just able to keep our own particular little wave going for longer and we know how to make this psychologically bearable by building on our hard-wired desire to explore the unknown. We are the opposite of Buddhists who strive to put the mind into the neural equivalent of zero degrees Kelvin where everything is still and, as far as we know nothing much happens except happiness. We feel we have more interesting things to do then await terminal recycling with minds in tranquil neutral. Breaking the Second Law of Thermodynamics is, of course, the Original Sin, a capital offence carrying a mandatory death penalty. We have just negotiated a longer stay of execution than most."

Seeing my dismay, he said: "For goodness sake cheer up. Don't you understand that the ability to have a conversation like this is a miracle? It's like making an irreversible move over an overhang into unknown problems possibly beyond our capacity to solve. We are trying to find a route on a new mountain where all the usual rules are invalid, where everything is unpredictable. You must remember what that was like – the exhilaration of pushing yourself into the unknown, the creative excitement of making the great irreversible move. The wild frontier of the fifth age is where the action is. Just think of it, no guide books, no artificial aids, no leaders, no foreknowledge of what is beyond the metaphorical overhang."

We passed the next hour or two in silence and comfortable companionship, each of us utilising energy from the surrounding universe to surf along on the fractal edge of our own little wave. We reassembled ourselves a couple of hours later at what seemed to be the appropriate

time and continued along the ridge via King's Chimney and the Inaccessable.Pinnacle and then down the long shoulder of Sgurr na Banachdich to the glen. The weather by then had begun to change, the air turning sultry and close. Tall anvil-headed cumulus clouds approached from the south-west. The sun developed a halo; colour and relief slowly drained from the landscape. Normally, this would have made me depressed but this time I seemed to interpret it as a different sort of splendour.

At the hut I pressed them to stay for another meal, but they just asked for a pot of coffee and then they'd be off.

"We have a lot to do," Dirk explained. "I have to get the ship ready for a new voyage. We are hoping to navigate through a barrier of treacherous metaphors and explore the uncharted seas beyond."

I am not sure what he meant by this. He did smile as he said it. Maybe he was pulling my leg.

Before he left Mike tested my tyres again and left me some stuff I was to take in decreasing doses over the next few days added to a posset of skimmed milk and honey with a grating of nutmeg. He warned me to follow closely the instructions he was leaving and in a few days I would be back to my old self again.

"Sorry about the pun, but here is my card with my e-mail address. Contact me in a few weeks if you like and we can have more discussions about this and that." Once again he waved his hand about airily

As we sat having our coffee, the bad weather front arrived and the rain started. Nevertheless, they insisted on leaving. I saw them to the car. Curtains of warm, grey rain swept past in the special Skye manner and thunder rumbled around here and there in the gloom. We rapidly shook hands. Both Gourlay and Dirk said they hoped to see me again soon. After they got in there was an impressive display of lightning followed closely by a *basso profundo* roll of thunder. Mike must have seen the expression on my face. He rolled down the window and said: "Don't look like that. This extravagance has nothing to do with me. It's too theatrical. I'm embarrassed."

They drove off in a cloud of spray turned silver by a wan shaft of sunshine that momentarily appeared. I ran back into the hut into the smell of wet clothing, tinned soup and someone's burning toast. Mike's card was damp and the print discreetly small. I was about to start looking for my glasses when I found I could read it easily without them.

(My eyesight seemed to have improved.) The card read: michaelscott@aikwoodpharmaceuticals.com.

I really don't know what my next move should be. Contacting them again is tempting, but there are so many practical difficulties in deserting the doomed ship of your own generation.

ALEXANDER M. KELLAS: EVEREST FORERUNNER

By George W. Rodway

INTRODUCTION

Dr Alexander Mitchell Kellas, 1868-1921, a pioneering Himalayan explorer and mountaineer who spent nearly the last 20 years of his working life as a member of the chemistry faculty at the Middlesex Hospital Medical School in London, died of illness during the 1921 British Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition. He was born in Aberdeen and educated at Aberdeen Grammar School.

In 1889, Kellas went to Edinburgh to study for two years at the University and the Heriot-Watt College. He then moved on to University College, London, where he obtained his BSc in 1892. Kellas stayed on for several years as a Research Assistant to the chemistry professor Sir William Ramsay (of noble gas fame) at University College before going to Heidelberg University in Germany to study for his DPhil degree, which he received in 1897.

As a boy, Kellas had become fascinated with the hills, walking and climbing first among the Grampians, then later in Wales and on the Continent. This love for the hills drew Kellas to another academic chemist and well known mountaineer in Ramsay's laboratory at University College, London – J. Norman Collie. During the 1890s, Kellas and Collie made several climbing trips together to the British hills and the Alps. It is very likely that Collie was instrumental in introducing Kellas to the possibilities for exploration and mountaineering in the Himalayas.[1]

Kellas remains to the present day a surprisingly unknown figure despite his noteworthy contributions to high altitude physiology and exploration. He was almost certainly the first person to apply state-of-the-art knowledge of high altitude physiology to field investigations at altitudes above 6000m. Additionally, it is extremely likely that he had spent more time above 6000m than anyone on earth by the time of his death in 1921. He undertook no fewer than eight expeditions to the greater ranges during a Himalayan career that had its inception in 1907.[2]

Without doubt, one of the most far-reaching contributions Kellas made to Himalayan mountaineering is that he was among the very first Europeans to recognise the natural mountaineering talents of Himalayan natives, and he was almost certainly the first to rely extensively on them as sole climbing companions during numerous extended high altitude explorations and climbs in the Sikkim and Garhwal Himalaya.

Some of Dr Kellas's obscurity can certainly be attributed to his retiring

disposition, not caring to publicise his high altitude physiology and mountaineering accomplishments with other than a few articles in publications such as the *Geographical Journal* and *Alpine Journal*. Many of these articles have been 'lost' to history and are virtually unknown today. As well, unpublished material written by Kellas concerning a little-known proposed expedition to Everest in 1915-16 had resided in the files of Henry R. Kellas (nephew of Alexander M. Kellas) for many decades until John B. West unearthed it in the 1980s while researching the life of Alexander Kellas. West's research led to the first extensive review of Kellas's climbing and scientific achievements to appear in English.[2, 3]

This article aims to not only present in print, for the first time, a portion of the 1915-16 Everest proposal that pertains to mountaineering, but to explore Alexander Kellas's involvement in other important events leading up to the 1921 Everest Reconnaissance. Kellas's 1920 scientific expedition to Kamet in the Garhwal Himalaya will be the specific focus, as the results and conclusions of physiological observations made at high altitude during this venture had important implications for the attempts on Everest in the years that followed. However, it is probably not an exaggeration to suggest that some important lessons learned on Kamet died with Kellas, only to be resurrected several decades later.

THE 1915-16 MOUNT EVEREST PROPOSAL

Prior to the first successful penetration of the inner sanctum of Everest in 1921, British explorers and mountaineers had for more than two decades shown a serious interest in planning a reconnaissance expedition to the mountain. Several months before the initiation of hostilities that marked the start of the First World War, Colonel C. G. Rawling, the surveyor who had identified Everest for the first time from the north during the 1903-04 Younghusband mission to Lhasa, proposed a reconnaissance of Everest from the north to commence in the year 1915. This was to be followed by an attempt on the summit in 1916. Although this scheme necessarily had to be shelved because of the outbreak of war, it had gained the approval of the Alpine Club and RGS, and Kellas drafted a proposal of expedition activities and personnel. Kellas had by 1912 made several mountaineering ventures in the Sikkim/Tibet border area while exploring the region north of Kangchenjunga,[4-6] and was arguably more familiar than anyone with, not only the physical approaches to Everest, but with the physiological problems associated with attempting to climb it, as well. A portion of the proposal for a 1915-16 expedition follows (quoted verbatim):

"Mountaineering: The expedition proposes to examine Mount Everest with a view to ascertaining the possibility of climbing it and to reach the highest point attainable. The experience of the Duke of Abruzzi, Colonel Bruce and others of recent years in the Himalaya has upset many of the old views as to the limits of attainable altitude. It may well be that Mount

Everest is unclimbable on the north side by any mountaineer however skilled, or that, even if the mountaineering difficulties are not insuperable, the altitude makes human advance impossible. These questions however have not yet been settled, and it is the aim of the expedition to do something towards their solution.

Plan of the expedition:

Line of approach: The intended route is a direct one: from Darjeeling to Gantok, the capital of Sikkim, and thence due north to Khamba Dzong (in 1903 the temporary headquarters of the Tibet Mission). From Khamba Dzong a westerly route will be taken until the slopes of Mount Everest are reached.

Area of investigation: The work will be limited to the block of country bounded on the north by the Brahmaputra, on the south by the border line of Nepal and Tibet, and on the west and east by the 86th and 88th meridians of E. Longitude.

Date of operations: The routes out of Sikkim will be practicable about the middle of May 1915, which will allow of the expedition being in the neighbourhood of Mount Everest not later than the middle of June.

Anticipated progress of the work: During the first four months – that is from July 1st to October 31st 1915 – the following work should have been accomplished: the formation of the zoological, botanical and geological collections; the investigation of the deflection of the plumb line, and most of the magnetic and meteorological observations; the triangulation of all visible peaks, and a complete topographical survey of the immediate neighbourhood; a large scale plan of Mount Everest, which, together with the photographs, will show which of the routes hold out the best prospects to the climber. Possibly an altitude of 20,000ft. will have been reached, but it is unlikely that any greater height will be attained during the first year. In November 1915 the expedition will return to India to work out the results of the past season and prepare for a return to the same district in 1916, when the scientific work will be completed and the whole efforts of the expedition will be concentrated upon an effort to ascend Mount Everest.

Personnel:

The leader of the expedition will be Major C. G. Rawling CIE. (Companion of the Indian Empire), Somerset Light Infantry. In addition to important journeys in other parts of the world, Major Rawling has travelled in Tibet on five separate occasions, and in northern Tibet has explored and surveyed 40,000 square miles of unknown country. He was employed throughout the Tibet Mission under Sir F. E. Younghusband, and was in command of the Gartok expedition from eastern Tibet to the sources of the Brahmaputra, Sutlej, and Indus. He is familiar with the Tibetan language.

As medical officer, botanist and entomologist, Mr. A. F. R. Wollaston, if his services are then available. Mr. Wollaston has travelled extensively in the Sudan, central Africa, the Pacific and New Guinea, and had fulfilled the same duties with notable distinction on three separate expeditions.

As chief Surveyor and officer in charge of the survey, plumbline and magnetic operations, Captain H. T. Morshead R. E., Survey of India, whose services have been lent by the Surveyor General of India. Capt. Morshead accompanied Capt. F. M. Bailey in the successful exploration of the lower Brahmaputra and reached to within three days march of Lhasa. He will be assisted by a native surveyor.

As transport officer and photographer, Lieutenant J. B. L. Noel, East Yorkshire Regiment. This officer has had considerable experience on the frontier roads of Sikkim and is familiar with mountain transport.

A meteorologist (with approval of the Director General of Observatories).

An officer or assistant of the Geological Survey of India (with the approval of the Director General).

A Tibetan interpreter from the Magistrates Court at Darjeeling (with the approval of the Government of Bengal).

Three Alpine climbers, one of whom will be Mr. A. M. Kellas. In the Himalaya, Mr. Kellas has made the first ascents of Chomiumo (22,450ft.), Kangchenjau (22,700ft.), Powhunri (23,180ft.), and Langpo (22,800ft.). Two other members of the Alpine Club, and it is hoped that Dr Longstaff may also join this expedition. A Swiss guide will be added who has had experience in Himalayan climbing. The members of the expedition destined for the attempted ascent of Mount Everest will only join during the second season.

A staff of Gurkhas, Bhutias, and Tibetans.

Cost of the expedition:

It is anticipated that the total expenditures on the expedition, including wages, travelling expenses, transport, food, equipment, and instruments will reach 4,500 pounds sterling for the first year, and 2,500 pounds sterling for the second year – a total of 7,000 pounds sterling."

Even though war put a reconnaissance of Everest on hold, whenever the opportunity presented itself during the years of the First World War, Noel would visit Kellas in his chemical laboratory at Middlesex Hospital to talk about Everest. During these discussions, Kellas told Noel "many things that have never been made known about his plans and work concerning the mountain".[7]

In *Through Tibet to Everest*, Noel described Kellas as "a pioneer in every sense. He established new records in Himalayan travel and climbing and in feats of physical endurance. Furthermore, he pioneered in ideas and methods."[7]

Everest Forerunner – Alexander M. Kellas. Royal Geographical Society.

Noel relates how Kellas had "worked out a plan to lay depots of food in uninhabited high valleys west of Kangchenjunga by means of his own trained Sherpas, and of his hopes of reaching Kharta, crossing the river and going up to the eastern glaciers of Everest by the Kama Valley, escaping the watching Tibetans."[7]

Apparently, so detailed was the plan, and so confident was Kellas that he could reach Everest (Noel had seen Kellas's reconnaissance photos of the aforementioned area), that Noel had agreed to accompany him on this adventure "as soon as the War was finished and we could both get away".[7] However, this proposed "furtive private raid", as Noel termed it, never came to fruition after the end of the war. It would be rather intriguing to know what had prompted two experienced Himalayan travellers such as Noel and Kellas to seriously entertain the idea of a "private raid" on Everest after obviously giving careful consideration to the planning of a reconnaissance for 1915. Unfortunately, Noel does not discuss his thoughts regarding this issue in *Through Tibet to Everest*.[7]

Kamet 1920:

Aside from the author's recent article in a scientific journal,[8] no one has revisited in any detail what was the first field study of its type at Himalayan altitudes – A. M. Kellas and Henry T. Morshead's 1920 Kamet Expedition. This undertaking by Kellas and Morshead was unique because it specifically emphasised investigation of the practical difficulties inherent in climbing at very high altitudes. During this endeavour Kellas carried out the first rigorous tests of the value of supplementary oxygen for climbing at high altitude.

Kamet (7756m.) lies in the Garhwal Himalaya on the Indian-Chinese (Tibetan) border approximately 300 km. north-east of New Delhi and roughly 75 km north-west of the more famous Nanda Devi, 7816m. Kellas and Morshead's 1920 visit to Kamet was Kellas's third attempt at the peak, and late arrival of scientific equipment from England delayed their climbing and research plans until well into the late summer and autumn. Their highpoint on Kamet in 1920 was Meade's Col, just over 7100m. Kellas had hoped to use Meade's Col as a high camp for an attempt on the summit and as a platform for physiological studies, but his porters could not be persuaded to camp there because of the excessive late season cold.

In a letter written in February, 1916, Kellas remarked that as preparation for Everest: "A preliminary expedition to Kamet, on which a camp could be formed at 22,000ft. (6705m.) or over would be of great value in order to gain experience regarding effects of prolonged camping at 22,000ft. (6705m.), suitable diet, etc."[9]

He also realised that "the oxygen necessary for the work of ascent is the difficulty" in considering the first ascent of Everest.[9] By December 1918, a few short weeks after the armistice of the war, the RGS had resumed

Jim Lowther on the approach ridge to the Lammergeier Spire, Miyar Glacier, Lahul, India. Photo: Graham Little.
Miyar Nala peaks. Photo: Alastair Matthewson.

official contact with the Secretary of State for India, stressing the need for support of scientific-oriented high altitude exploration. Understanding that an expedition to Kamet was to be organised as the first step in the operations aimed at the eventual conquest of Everest, the Government of India agreed to lend technical and logistical support to Kellas's proposed high altitude physiological investigations in 1920.

Kellas started for Kamet from Darjeeling on June 25, 1920. Morshead joined him several weeks later in the Garhwal. By September 8, the expedition was camped very near the actual base of Kamet on rough glacial detritus at 5639m. Illness of the expedition's porters at Camp 4, at 6400m., delayed progress from September 11-18. A day after establishing Camp 5 at 6700m on September 19, Kellas, Morshead, and three native porters from the village of Mana reached the maximum elevation attained by the expedition, Meade's col, 7140m. (which is the prominent saddle between Kamet and Ibi Gamin). At this point, the porters refused to ascend farther. The group descended to Camp 5 that afternoon, and the next day the porters refused to entertain the idea of moving a camp up to the saddle, alleging that the 'winter storm' was due.

Morshead bade farewell to Kellas on September 22, and turned his steps toward home, his leave from the Survey of India coming to an end and the season now too far advanced for further efforts at the highest altitudes. Regardless of the disappointments encountered during the expedition, Morshead had nothing but praise for the few Bhotia (Sherpa) porters of the higher Himalaya that Kellas had employed: "On rock they can climb like goats, while on ice they readily learn step-cutting. It appears very doubtful if the present-day expense of importing Alpine guides can ever justify their employment in future Himalayan exploration."[10]

Looking for an opportunity to complete several physiological experiments, Kellas eventually settled for a camp at approximately 5486m. on a considerably smaller peak to the north-west of the Bagini Glacier. After a week's worth of experimental work at this location, Dunagiri village was regained on October 16, with Kellas eventually returning to Darjeeling on November 9, after an absence of four-and-a-half months.

Notable scientific results and observations of the expedition included the very first field tests of the value of supplementary oxygen for climbing at high altitude. Preliminary experiments on Kamet at 6400m. confirmed that the oxygen tanks sent from England were unsuitable, but not until Kellas reached the 5486m. camp on a smaller peak to the north-west of the Bagini Glacier (after Kamet was abandoned) was there an opportunity for systematic experiments designed to determine the usefulness of the oxygen tanks for practical climbing work. During the week of work in the vicinity of the 5486m camp, climbing trials with the oxygen tanks were carried out over three different courses. Regardless of the course undertaken, the porters that Kellas managed to enlist for these experiments

had consistently greater elapsed times *with* supplementary oxygen from the cylinders than without. He concluded, no doubt rightly, that "the cylinders are too heavy for use above 18,000ft., and below that altitude they are not required."[11,12]

Additionally, tests of 'Leonard Hill Bags' containing Oxylithe also yielded interesting results. Professor Leonard Hill of University College, London suggested that Kellas carry out practical climbing trials using rubber bags containing Oxylithe (sodium peroxide), which produces oxygen when water is added. The most intriguing experiment that Kellas performed with the Hill bags involved continuous breathing from the bag during ascent.

Kellas indicated that during these trials "the gain while using oxygen was quite decisive, the advantage being up to 25%. This again was to be expected, and clearly indicates that light oxygen cylinders...might be of considerable value as regards increase of rate of ascent at high altitudes."[11]

Conclusion:

The 1920 Kamet Expedition provided strong support for the use of supplementary oxygen at high altitude, provided it could be supplied in a relatively lightweight form. After Kellas died on the approach march to Everest in June of 1921, insufficient interest and technical expertise in the oxygen systems guaranteed neglect of the apparatus by other expedition members. Just as the 1921 British Mount Everest Reconnaissance Expedition was catching its first glimpse (quite literally) of Everest, Kellas met his untimely demise due to illness in early June, near Kampa Dzong, in Tibet.[13] George Mallory described the scene of his burial on a hillside south of the village: "It was an extraordinarily affecting little ceremony, burying Kellas on a stony hillside – a place on the edge of a great plain and looking across it to the three great snow peaks of his conquest (Pauhunri, Kangchenjhau, and Chomiomo). I shan't easily forget the four boys, his own trained mountain men, children of nature, seated in wonder on a great stone near the grave while Bury read out the passage from I Corinthians."[14]

Of the other personnel who were listed in the proposal for the 1915-16 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition, Major Rawling became General Rawling and also suffered an early demise when he was killed in the early days of the First World War. A. F. R. Wollaston and H. T. Morshead both participated in the 1921 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition. Wollaston assumed the duties of expedition naturalist and physician, while Morshead was one of the two surveyors that mapped the area around Everest as well as the mountain itself. Morshead was also part of the climbing team (including Mallory, Somervell, and Norton) on Everest in 1922 that pushed through the 8000m. mark for the first time, though Morshead, unfortunately, had to turn back just short of the team's highpoint. Both

John Noel and Tom Longstaff accepted invitations to join the 1922 British expedition to Everest. Longstaff served as the medical officer and naturalist of the expedition and Noel was along as the official photographer and cinematographer. Noel also returned to Everest in the capacity of official photographer and cinematographer for the 1924 attempt.

Thanks to the efforts of George Ingle Finch, the second summit attempt of the 1922 Everest Expedition was able to utilise supplementary oxygen with reasonable success. However, the lessons learned about oxygen use at high altitude during Kellas's trials in 1920 and on Everest in 1922 were not fully applied to subsequent Everest expeditions of the 1920s and 1930s. Not until the early 1950s was supplementary oxygen for use in high altitude mountaineering once again the subject of intensive investigation. Mountaineers were, by this time, prepared to exploit the more efficient supplementary oxygen systems then available, as well as an improved understanding of human physiology, in order to successfully tackle the troublesome 'last thousand feet'[15] of Everest.

REFERENCES

1. Mill C. Norman Collie – A life in two worlds: Mountain explorer and scientist 1859-1942. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987.
2. West J. B. A. M. Kellas: Pioneer Himalayan physiologist and mountaineer. *The Alpine Journal* 1989/90;94:207-213.
3. West J. B. Alexander M. Kellas and the physiological challenge of Everest. *Journal of Applied Physiology* 1987;63:3-11.
4. Kellas A. M. Mountaineering in Sikkim and Garhwal. *Alpine J.* 1912;26:52-54.
5. Kellas A. M. The mountains of Northern Sikkim and Garhwal. *Alpine J.* 1912;26:113-142.
6. Kellas A. M. A fourth visit to the Sikkim Himalaya, with ascent of the Kangchenjhau. *Alpine J.* 1913;27:125-153.
7. Noel J. B. L. Through Tibet to Everest, chapter 5. London: Arnold, 1927.
8. Rodway G. W. Prelude to Everest: Alexander M. Kellas and the 1920 High Altitude Scientific Expedition to Kamet. *High Alt. Med Biol.* 2004;5:364-379.
9. Kellas AM. Correspondence to A. F. R. Wollaston. London: Alpine Club Archives, February 27, 1916.
10. Morshead H. T. Report on the expedition to Kamet. *Geogr. J.* 1921;57:213-219.
11. Kellas A. M. Dr Kellas's expedition to Kamet. *Geogr. J.* 1921;57:124-130.
12. Kellas A. M, Morshead H. T. Dr Kellas's expedition to Kamet in 1920. *Alpine J.* 1920/21;33:312-319.
13. Howard-Bury C. K. Mount Everest: The reconnaissance, 1921. London: Arnold, 1922.
14. Robertson D. George Mallory. London: Faber & Faber, 1969.
15. Ward M. The first ascent of Mount Everest, 1953: The solution of the problem of the 'last thousand feet'. *Journal of Wilderness Medicine* 1993;4:312-318.

THE PEAK OF THE QUARTERS

By Bob Richardson

A YEAR after I left school (working for £160 a year) I had managed to acquire a 'Commando' rucksack, a pair of boots and a groundsheet. My mother made me a sleeping bag from an old quilt and I borrowed my father's Primus stove and a couple of dixies. When my holidays came at the end of May I took the train to Spean Bridge and hitch-hiked as far as Invergarry.

The road was quiet and by the time I had walked to Tomdoun it was getting dark. There was an old stable at the back of the hotel where the road to Cluanie started over the hill. It had no door and a cobbled floor but it was shelter, so I laid my groundsheet on the cobbles and got into my bag. But the floor was cold and hard and after a while I got packed and walked on into the darkness. By the time I reached the bridge over what was then the Loyne River, it was raining hard and I crouched down behind a buttress of the bridge inside my cycle cape. Once more, after a while, discomfort and restlessness got me going again and I rounded the side of Creag a'Mhaim as a faint light was becoming apparent under the cloud.

As I was heading for Glen Affric, I decided to cut the corner and went down the track towards Cluanie Lodge. In those days the glen had not been flooded and I had hoped to cross the river and head directly towards the pass of An Caorann Mor. As was often the case in the Highlands there was a light left burning in the lodge but I stayed well away to avoid awakening the dogs. Down at the river I found it too deep and, uncertain of fording it in the half-light, turned wearily to head back up to the road. Shortly afterwards, I walked into a bog-hole and got soaked to the waist. Back on the road, I skirted Cluanie and turned down the road to the start of the track through to Glen Affric. At least there was daylight under the ever-present mist as I trudged through the pass towards the Youth Hostel at Alltbeithe. The hostel was listed as "open during summer months" but was empty and padlocked. I went over to the old stable at the back to find another cobbled floor. But it had a roof and walls and I could light the stove and cook a meal.

I lay on top of my sleeping bag and tried to sleep but the burn running outside the door played the old trick of sounding like human voices as the wind shifted and eddied. Several times I was so convinced that I went to the door, unfamiliar then with the mimicry that water and wind can produce. Sometime that afternoon, bored and not yet exhausted enough to sleep, I wandered up the slope behind the stable.

I had no definite intentions, just passing time by walking slowly under the mist in a type of landscape that was still strange to me. The slope levelled off after a bit and I found myself in a shallow corrie. Above me

the slope steepened again and I thought of going back but continued on up. I climbed into the mist and eventually found myself on a ridge. I had started with no intention of reaching the summit but now I turned left and continued along the mist-obscured ridge. Somewhere along it, cold, fatigued and feeling for the first time that presence which hills have in mist and half-light, I stopped. In my solitary and weary state Sgurr nan Ceathreamhnan had overawed me. I turned back down the hill towards the cobbled floor and the thin sleeping bag. This time I could sleep on the hard floor and the burn didn't talk to me again until the next morning.

Next day, I walked down the glen then up over Mam Sodhail to Carn Eige. Coming down the ridge of Sgurr na Lapaich there was sunshine on its lower slopes. Lying in the sun, looking down on the loch and the pine woods and feeling warm for the first time in two days, I began to think there might be elements of pleasure in this hill-walking business.

Another night on the cobbles and then I went westwards to Glen Lichd and out to the Youth Hostel at Ratagan. The next day I went over the Five Sisters in light mist and occasional snow. Blue sky showed just above my head but the mist was faithful and never deserted the ridge. Back down in the Glen, the local policeman gave me a lift down the road and told me Everest had been climbed. The flags put out at Invershiel for the Coronation hung limp and wet. The next day I went out over the south ridge below the Saddle and down to Kinlochhourn. When I was about a half-mile along the Barrisdale track, I was hailed from the shore by a keeper in a boat who had just landed a couple of lads on their way back from a dance at Arnisdale. He gave me a welcome sail down to Barrisdale and, as there was still plenty of daylight, I continued on to find a bothy at Loch an Dubh-Lochan. The next day I went over the pass to Carnoch and then out eastwards to Glen Dessary. At Loch Arkaig I found the second sunshine of the trip and a road-repair gang. I lay in the sun until they finished their shift and then bounced on the back of their lorry all the way back to Fort William. And that was my first long trip into the hills.

I was back in Glen Affric the next year, at the start of a transit from Cluanie to Dundonnell, but the mist hung over the hills again and I left the Peak of the Quarters to brood under its cover. Over the years, I was conscious that I had unfinished business – but failure has its uses. It did me no harm to have a memory of the way in which I had been defeated, psychologically as much as physically, on that final ridge.

Nearly 50 years later I finally realised that if it were to be done, it were best done soon (if not quickly). This time I came from the north with an over-ambitious plan to sweep the summits from Bidien a' Choire Sheasgaich, then do the round of Loch Mullardoch to finish on the summit of the Peak of the Quarters. I had a bivvy bag, self-inflating air mattress, a good sleeping bag, lightweight gas stove and about four days food and whisky. What I did not have was youth. I went in by the track from Achintee

to Bearneas bothy on a very hot day and on the climb up from Loch an Laoigh my plans fell apart. The heat, the decrepitude of age and the weight of my pack combined to tell me firmly that my days of scampering the hills had gone and another day like this might just about be terminal.

As I was lying resting on the summit of Lurg Mor a pair of Munro-baggers appeared, so after a brief courtesy chat, it was off down south-eastwards to cross the river and thread the bogs to reach the track from Patt Lodge to Iron Lodge. Farther up the Allt coire nan Each there is a nice little grassy island which provided a luxurious bivouac site. In the morning the mist was down so I lay in comfort until it began to clear. From Loch Moicean I went south over the bealach and crossed the river.

The ridge over Mullach na Dheiragain and on to Sgurr nan Ceathreamhnan stretched out in front. I climbed slowly to reach the ridge and at last I could see the summit. Coming down the ridge were two Englishmen who were doing the round from Iron Lodge where they had left their bikes. (You're never alone with a Munro.) I wandered on in clear weather to reach, at last, the summit of the Peak of the Quarters. It had taken me most of my life to get there but now it felt like just another summit. There was no elation and I couldn't even be bothered to search in my sack for my whisky supply. Another bivouac (in rain this time), another day and Ben Attow and then the road would lead me to the bar at Loch Duich Hotel. The Peak of the Quarters had taught me two lessons and I didn't much like the second one.

COMING OF AGE ON THE LAMMERGEIER SPIRE

By Graham E. Little

THE ageing process is a matter of compromise, about balancing ambition and ability. To pretend it isn't happening is a sure-fire route to frustration and suffering.

Descending to base camp at the foot of the Miyar Glacier, I sensed Jim's disappointment, we had failed on The Orange Tower and I had reneged upon our plan to try the big mixed line on the north face of Point 5760m. Both my physical prowess and my tolerance of risk were in question — in truth my body was tired and my head just wasn't in it. Peaks and rock towers all around us yet we had achieved so little. Jim had every right to be annoyed with me, yet he was both tolerant and philosophical. After all, reaching a top is fine but the icing on the cake, our exploration and appreciation of this magnificent mountain world has the deeper value. All the same, there was a sense of unfulfilled business. It called me, siren like, as I drifted into deep sleep.

The pleasures of family and home are just ten days away and I keenly anticipate them. We have only three days left at base camp before a walkout down the flower decked Miyar Nala. Clearly, we can't just sit around for three days! Our friends, Kevin and Brian, are heading down the valley to do some rock climbing on the flanking slabs. I catch Jim gazing up at the splendid unclimbed rock spire high above the east flank of the Miyar Glacier that had immediately caught our eye on arrival at base camp ten days ago. There really is no debate – we have to climb it! The plan is simple; we will get as close to the base of the spire as possible, bivouac, climb it the following day and then descend. Dan Singh, our head Kumaoni porter, is willing to carry our hardware up to the bivouac, allowing me the benefit of a relatively light load.

The ground leading up to the foot of the spire is much more complex than it appeared from base camp. We are forced to set up our bivouac at about 4800m, well below the foot of the spire and to the south of a rock ridge bounding an apron of wet slabs. Before heading down, Dan Singh joins us in some heavy engineering to create something approaching a level bivi ledge on the boulder strewn slope.

Jim and I agree that it would be wise to undertake an afternoon recce of the approach ridge in preparation for tomorrow's attempt of the spire. The nagging doubts are returning, my base camp enthusiasm is on the wane, but I keep them to myself. As I scramble up the narrow, scree filled gully towards the little col on the ridge above, I decide to adopt a 'pitch at a time' tactic and see how it goes. From the col we solo a short distance until the ridge narrows to a near knife-edge. Roping up, I ease past a perched flake and then climb an awkward step to reach the edge of a wide

gap in the ridge. Jim descends to the foot of the gap and dumps one rope and most of the rock gear. I note that the wall on the other side of the gap has no easy line. As we reverse down the ridge, a great bird glides below us, wide wings stroking the air in effortless glide. The ease of the lammergeier's flight contrasts with my own feeling of clumsiness. It is *of* the mountains; I am *in* the mountains.

Our bivi site slips into deep shade as Jim cooks up a splendid dinner of soup, tortellini and smoked fish. We slip into our sleeping bags at 6pm, the clearing sky promising a cold night. Jim is soon asleep. I lie gazing up at a dazzling star filled firmament. I watch and think for hours before gliding with the lammergeier on the wings of dream sleep.

Jim wakes at 5am. I lie white and cold in a sharp frosted bivi bag. Our water bottles are frozen. Jim makes breakfast — the hot fruit tea encourages me to get moving but I eat some noodles with little enthusiasm. The first ten minutes out from our ledge is mind over body stuff as I battle with leaden legs and morning phlegm. However, I soon get into a rhythm. Moving over familiar ground, through the shadows of the sharp dawn light, we return to yesterday's gear cache. Jim leads a fine, long groove pitch out of the gap and I follow with the clumsy sac. Jim volunteers to take the sac and I hand it over without compunction. Clicking into route finding mode, I weave an intricate line up slabs, grooves and chimneys until the angle eases back and snow patches merge into a well-frozen snowfield. I edge and kick up the steepening neve, using my nut key as a surrogate ice axe. After nearly four hours of hard labour we gain the slabby foot of the spire's west face at an altitude of about 5150m. It is a good feeling.

I take the first pitch and run out nearly 60m on beautiful, easy angled grey rock. It is covered with a battery farm of chicken heads making the climbing embarrassingly easy. Jim leads on through to the top of a short vertical wall that defines the obvious gash that separates the lower third from the upper two thirds of the face. Nearly kneecapping myself when a large flake slides off, I climb down into the gash to belay at the foot of a squat pinnacle. Jim climbs a snow/ice groove to a narrow neck on the upper side of the pinnacle. The sun warms us as we swap big boots for rock shoes. I run out 60m up poorly protected but pleasant slabs. Sitting on the exposed belay, a biting north wind chills one side of my body whilst a weak sun warms the other. Gathering clouds soon shut out the sun's rays and by the time Jim joins me I'm chilled to the bone. Jim leads through and up into the 70m corner that is so obvious from below. The climbing is immaculate though much easier than we had anticipated. Donning my thermal top, I carry on to the top of the corner, taking great care not to dislodge a stack of poised blocks at the belay. As I watch Jim climb the final pitch, it becomes clear that the weather is about to break, the midday sky darkening around us.

The summit is perfect, a narrow spine of orange and grey granite, wildly overhanging a snow gully far below that separates our spire from its parent peak. At only 5350m. we are on top of the world! Churning grey clouds soon mask our deep view into the Miyar Nala. It is time to get down.

We down-climb and abseil to the gash in a rising wind and quickening snow flurries. The snowfield gives a soft landing and we swiftly slip-slide to the top of the rocks. Snow flurries merge as I solo down wet slabs and chimneys. In descent, I am in command, the survival gene switching into overdrive. The terrain is treacherous, yet I am in my element. The rock steepens as we approach the wide gap. I wait for Jim and we agree that it makes sense to abseil down into the gully demarking the north side of the approach ridge. A 60m abseil, down wet ropes, takes me through a veil of whiteness towards the grey gully.

It is as in my dream, the great bird drifting past again, it's wide wing feathers heavy with wet snow, unreal and surreal, yet of this place. I am as close as I can ever be to the world of the lammergeier.

Jim and I plunge unroped down the gully, the soggy snow sucking at our tired legs. 'This is the place to climb out', Jim says with absolute confidence. I know that he is right. The steep, icy groove is not easy but we are going home and nothing can stop us. As if pre-destined, we arrive at the notch in the ridge that overlooks our bivi site. Jim starts to down-climb the greasy rock. 'It makes sense to abseil', I insist. He knows that I am right. Soon we are stuffing wet gear into wet sacks and then heading down.

I am tired, and have to fight a strong desire to sit down. Snow covered boulders do their best to break me, but I plug on, just keeping Jim in sight. As we loose height, the terrain gets easier and a strange yellow light settles around me. Jim waits at the lateral moraine but I urge him to press on. As I stagger over the terminal moraine towards base camp, young Homu Singh runs towards me, offering to take my sack. I refuse, but I am warmed by his offer.

Many brews, a good meal and a glass of whisky in hand soon banish fatigue. The effort of a twelve-hour non-stop climb and descent is in the past, our success and return are in the present. There have been many similar occasions in my life, yet this time I have come of age. I have taken many risks yet I am still alive. It is the end of a perilous journey, a journey of seduction and beauty, yet a journey where many friends have died. I know that Jim is pleased with our ascent. It is modest in the greater scheme of mountaineering achievements but it has a perfect feel, as if symbolising all that is best in this crazy game.

Walking down the long stretch of the flower splashed Miyar Nala, I think of many things.

The expression 'quit while you're ahead' comes into my head and puzzles me. I decide that the importance of winning sits at the root of this

expression. It is very clear to me that mountaineering is not a sport, is not about winning, but is a way of life. It must co-exist with other ways of life. Striking the right balance between the lives we lead is the key to fulfilment. Age of course must be factored into this balance. Through ageing we gain experience, sometimes understanding and rarely wisdom. Satisfaction and survival come from the right equation of effort, risk and reward. The equation will be different for every individual and is ever changing. I now see the way ahead.

I feel a sense of profound equilibrium at this place in time. A flight of glossy-winged choughs rise up from the dung splattered flats ahead of me. They wheel and call as if complaining about the disruption to their beetle-eating breakfast. This is all new, yet there is a strong sense of deja vu. The walk in, the climb and the walk out — they are the journey of life.

Jim catches up with me and we walk down the valley together, through the resin-rich pines and then across the footbridge to the dusty road-head.

Summary: Thoughts on ageing and climbing plus a description of the first ascent of the Lammergeier Spire, 5350m, above the east flank of the Miyar Glacier, Lahul, India, by G. E. Little and J. Lowther, May 22, 2004.

A GUIDE'S TALE

By Davy Gunn

June 1974:

GUIDING was confined to an elite few within the Glen and these few mostly in the employ of the old fox or his 2ic who was 'Big Ian' Nicholson at that time. Many were recruited on an *ad hoc* basis when business was brisk. Notables being the likes of Fyffe, Spence or Dave Knowles.

At that time I was a mere youth, not tempered by attempting hard men's climbs and harder drinking in the Clachaig's wee snug after hours. One climb above all was revered both from behind and in front of the bar. This was partly out of convenience. Like the hindquarters of an elephant described by Bill Murray, starting only 10 minutes from the bar door 'The Gully' could be accomplished either solo before 12.30 Sunday opening, or roped between two-thirty and six-thirty, usually by a mixed company of barman/maid and customer. It is fair to say 'The Gully' was well known to us.

Walking down the village one Saturday a passing car stopped and the driver wound down his window inquiring if I knew of a local guide for hire. A couple of names were passed to him and the chosen route asked. When the reply came that it was none other than 'The Gully' I offered my services, for a reasonable fee of course.

So I was hired, but not before my clients revealed that they were a professional couple, betrothed, that they belonged to a 'socialist mountaineering club' and were happy to support the local proletariat, but not at excessive cost. We settled on a less than princely sum, perhaps due to my obvious youth and assumed lack of experience which, in reflection, was the correct assumption. I went home to collect my climbing gear.

My kit at that time was by modern standards very meagre, dances, ceilidhs and girls taking priority. So, as an aspiring bergfuhrer I assembled my worn out rack at the foot of The Gully. 300ft No 2 Viking nylon donated by Robin Turner after an abseil lesson off his cottage roof, a pair of new Lionel Terray boots from Hamish, as mine had been stolen from Kingshouse after a rescue in Ravens, and the most modern harness of its age – the ubiquitous Whillans. This, along with a set of nuts attached to wire hawser, a selection of pegs and several slings in bright pink tape concluded the ironmongery for the ascent.

It had not rained for a month but never the less it would not have occurred to me to wear rock boots, even though I had a pair of EBs donated to me by Sandy Whellan's a local policeman. The Gully is a boot climb. That's how Bill Murray did it and you always emulate the footsteps of the master.

We started The Gully at its root via a pitch shown to me only the Sunday before by one of the barmen. This pitch is walked past by most but I thought that, as I was getting paid for the job in hand, a refund might be

requested should all available rock not be included in the ascent. It went very well, with the pair climbing very fast and alarmingly competently, in parallel on the twin No. 2 weight nylon ropes. During conversation it became apparent that 'proper guides' were hired on a regular basis by the couple, indeed the previous weekend a 'proper guide' had been secured in the Llanberis Pass for the same rate as I, and three of the classics of the pass including the renowned *Wrinkle* had been successfully ascended.

By now the haze of morning had become a black menacing shroud of early afternoon and soon the occasional very large plop of rain fell. By this time we had passed the lower greenery and had arrived in the more austere surroundings of the crux slab above the 'Great Cave'. The atmosphere was oppressive and it was clear that it was going to become very wet. We passed an 'ICE' roadsign complete with metal post, put there the previous year by some pranksters on a fresher's weekend. The slab was climbed and soon we were at the redoubtable 'Jericho Wall' which at that time was pitch 7 or 8 if you included the lowest pitch. I regaled them with stories of derring do and an account of the early history of the gully, and of course a few rescue stories to enhance the atmosphere. It clearly had the desired effect, as they were keen to push on and seemed apprehensive. This was further heightened when the rain started in earnest and they realised this was a deluge. How quickly the atmosphere changed from overcast and dry, to heavy rain, mist and gloom.

Could the aspirant bergfurher pull it out of the bag without needing the services of the rescue team to which he was apprenticed? Afterburners on and it was all go, as I had no wish for ridicule from Messrs Thompson and Nicholson who always felt compelled to give their apprentice rescuer/ climber a hard time.

Each pitch was dispatched at full speed with a full blown thunderstorm breaking around us and with the prospect of drowning and falling as a combined incentive the pair climbed well, despite being visibly terrified and soaked to the arse. So credit to them as I was feeling a burden of responsibility way beyond my 17 years. We topped out after a five-hour ascent, 30-odd pitches, more than 1700ft. of climbing and in a reasonable time for a roped party of three. Some parties have taken upwards of 14 hours and in one case two full days. For us, all that remained was the knee wrecker down to the pub and a beer by the fire.

Two hours later, a bedraggled crew, we arrived at the pub. They reluctantly bought me a beer (I was underage) and complemented me on a fine, though short, day. As the day was 'shorter than they had in the Llanberis pass', the speed of ascent 'rushed' and the climbing 'inferior', they said they had discussed the fee and felt that it should be halved. So, barely enough cash for a decent piss-up was handed over to the naive bergfurher, who there and then decided that the people's flag was 'brightest pink, and not as red as he might think'. Guiding might not be a career for him after all.

DUNGEON DAYS

By Stephen Reid

WHEN I started climbing in 1978 it was as if I had discovered true enthusiasm for the first time in my life. Here was a pastime that was really exciting, well, as exciting as one wanted it to be anyway. So many new places to discover, so many climbs to do and so many new friends to do them with! And yet little over a decade later I was seriously in danger of becoming rather jaded. By then I was living near Penrith and had exhausted just about all possibilities round about, up to my maximum leading grade. And though discovering a new route gave the occasional extra buzz, good new routes at sub-E3 level in the Lake District were as common as hen's teeth. One winter's evening, as rain lashed the window panes, in a moment of inspiration, I fetched a road atlas, a pile of guidebooks, and a large whisky and soda, sat at the old pine table in the kitchen, and weighed up possibilities for exploration.

To the west lay the Lakes, hardly *terra incognita*. To the south and east, Lancashire and Yorkshire were if anything even better explored, and the same could be said for Northumberland in the north-east. To the north lay the Borders and Dumfries – I'd already had several excursions to Clifton and Meikle Ross but was not aware of anything much else thereabouts worth visiting. In fact, only to the north-west was there any glimmer of hope. Here lay a region that in over a decade I had never heard another climber mention – the Galloway Hills. A glance through the 1986 SMC guide revealed a crag with routes four pitches in length, but with only five of them – the mysterious-sounding 'Dungeon of Buchan'. Reasoning that any crag so big must have room for at least another line or two, I made an early start on my next available spare day and drove to Glen Trool intending to make my way to the Dungeon via Craignaw – a distance that, with my Lakeland experience, I expected to be a longish but straight-forward day. However, I soon discovered that a path in the Galloway Hills is not like any path in the Lakes, in fact, it isn't really like a path at all, and I slithered, stumbled and cursed my way up the Gairland Burn to the silver-sanded shores of Loch Neldricken and then on to the craggy summit of Craignaw.

And yet, and yet, and yet… there was an extraordinary magic about the place: the wildness and the ruggedness and the massive emptiness of it all. Something about its rawness that immediately touched my soul in a way the Lake District for all its beauty never had. Like many before me, I fell completely under its spell. From the northern end of Craignaw I could not only see the wide wilderness of the Silver Flowe with its glittering treacherous tear-shaped pools, the Merrick and the Range of the Awful Hand, and southwards to the deep dark blue of the Irish Sea, but also, to

the north, Dungeon Hill. And though the rapidly disappearing winter day put a stop to any closer approach, I saw enough to know that a return visit would be worthwhile, for the south-east face of the hill was a mass of steep clean grey granite, turned golden by the lingering rays of the setting sun.

All that long summer, Joe Grinbergs and I spent our days off driving north from Penrith and then cycling up and down seemingly endless forestry tracks along the River Dee and Cooran Lane, and in between, sounding out and climbing new routes on the fantastic south-facing cliffs of the Dungeon. What are now recognised to be almost classic (albeit obscure) climbs such as *Heir Apparent* (HVS) with its E3 *Direct Finish, The Colonel's Corner* (HVS), *Incy Wincy Spider* (E2), and *Bannockburn* (E1) were just a few of our dozen new routes. Later on, I visited the crag with others, including the late Dave Wilson who added the impressive *Parcel of Rogues* (E3). Of all the climbs on the crag, it is perhaps *The Colonel's Corner* that most parties of reasonable ability will opt for on their first visit. The initial huge corner pitch is the crux and gives sustained and well-protected climbing, though more than the usual rack of Friends is needed to maximise this. A long mix of slabby bridging and jamming moves leads, without much rest, to a slight respite in the form of a small sloping footledge under a slim groove. Here any number of wires can be placed until one feels safe enough to pull out left with a steep lunge for sanctuary in the form of a good ledge and easier ground from where a fantastic belay is soon reached. Time to pause and enjoy sweeping views of the desolate Silver Flowe with its pattern of pools shimmering in the morning sun like gilded islands, the abode of huge blue and yellow dragon flies, strange white-flowered water plants, and who knows what creatures of nightmare lurking in the depths. The next pitch is straight-forward but logical enough, a wending up the crag by little grooves and short steps to a commodious ledge beneath the highest part of a steep band of granite that bars the way ahead. Numerous interchangeable short lines exist up this band, but the way we went on the first ascent is the best and the most exciting. A crack forms the start, but it becomes unattractively earthy, and is soon quit for the bulging wall/arête on its right where a succession of invisible jugs reduces an apparent E2 to a pleasant VS. On the first ascent 60m. ropes allowed us to gain the final headwall in one pitch, but, for those with more standard gear, an interim spike belay and a heathery scramble saves the day. This top wall is impressive, no more so than to the left where the bottomless free-form flake of *Heir Apparent* and the compelling top crack of *Cyclopath* are enough to make any climber's pulse quicken, but our route lies on the right where two huge stacked rounded blocks test your jamming ability to the full before a short, awkward and highly exposed groove provides a suitably testing key to gaining the

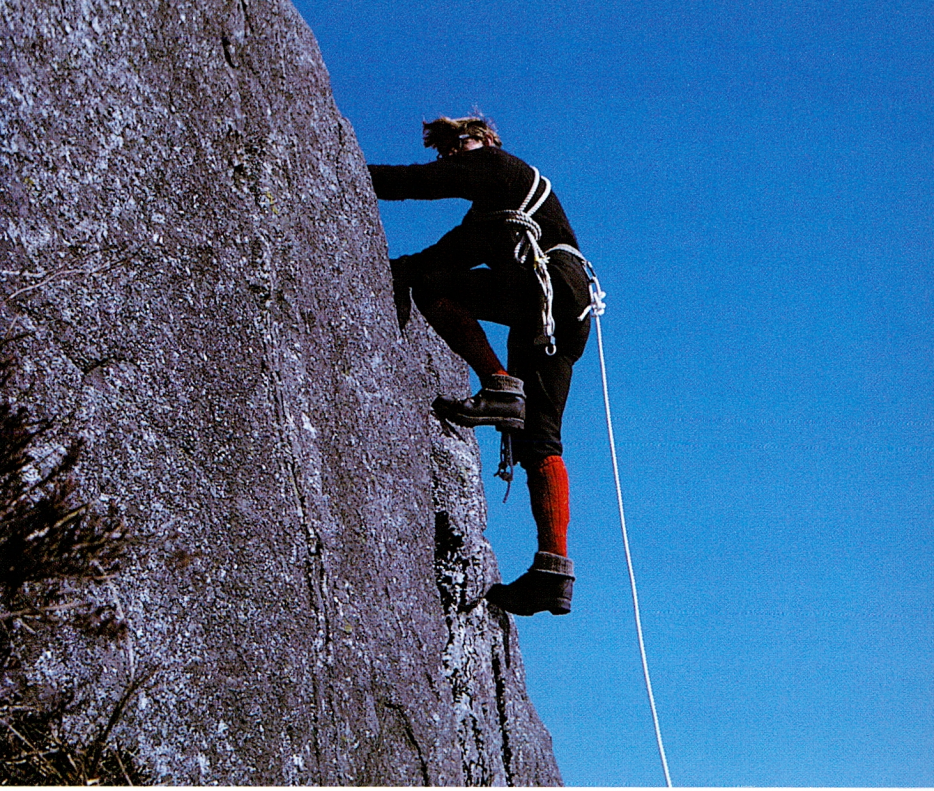
fine flat summit with its superb views, north to the Dry Loch and the Dungeon Stone, west to the Rhinns of Kells, and south as far as the eye can see, line after line of dim and distant blue hills, growing ever dimmer as they grow more distant. When we first did the route, my father, whose own climbing career had been cut short by the small matter of having to fight Rommel in North Africa, had just collapsed and died while landing a salmon on the banks of the Tay. The name suggested itself immediately, and I am sure he would take great pleasure in knowing how many people have enjoyed 'his' climb.

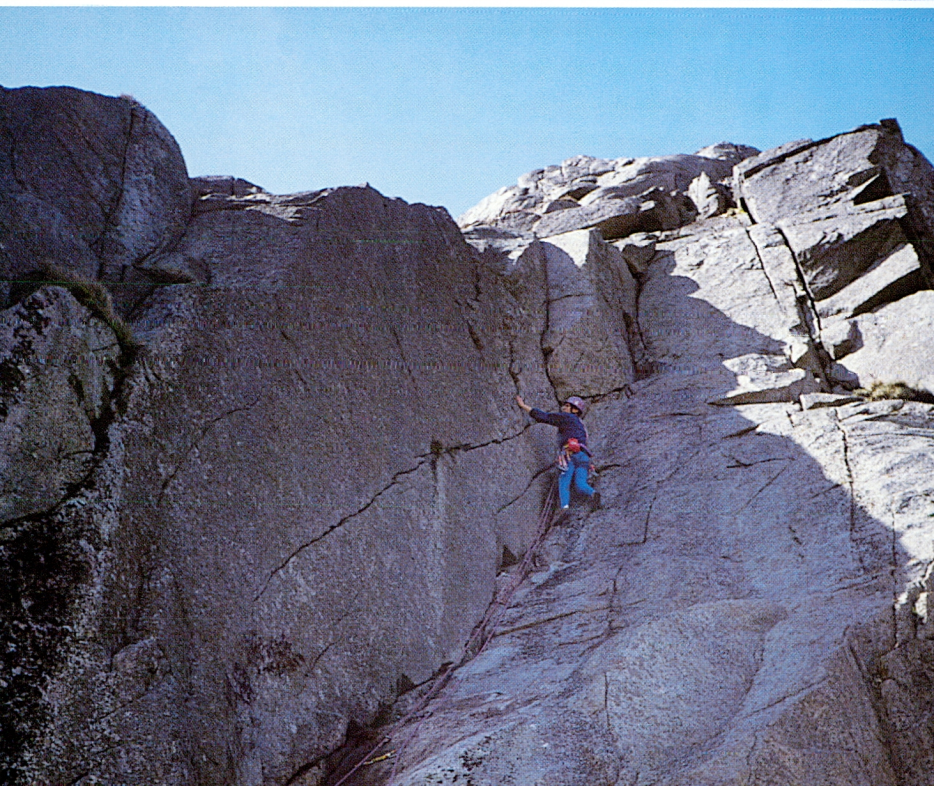
In the years since then, I have become rather intrigued that earlier visitors to such a superb crag didn't make more than one or two fleeting visits, and in particular did not pick the obvious plum of *The Colonel's Corner*, which was even mentioned in the 1986 guide as a "steep unclimbed diedre". If one discounts the extensive scrambling activities of J. McBain in the early part of the last century, and the exploratory ramblings of Edred Corner around the same time, the first route recorded on the Dungeon was *Cooran Buttress* by Jim Simpson, Jean Ractcliffe, Gordon Waldie and Mary Shields in September 1955. The route was Waldie's in conception; he had spotted it from the Backhill of Bush, but Simpson, although new to the sport, was the stronger climber, so he and Jean went first, while Waldie brought up the inexperienced Mary on a second rope. Interestingly they graded it V. Diff. at the time, but by comparison with other routes of that grade today, it fully deserves its Hard Severe. Years later Jim returned and soloed the route, but he and Waldie never really felt the urge to explore the Dungeon further. To them, the Highlands and the Lakes held a stronger pull, and Galloway was reserved for off days in the autumn. Indeed, Waldie's tone when he wrote up the climb in the SMC journal of 1958 was almost apologetic.

"The disconsolate climber, enervated by the balmy climate of Galloway and preserving his nails on its lush vegetation, might well consider selling his rope to the Solway boatmen," he began, before admitting that "while tramping the moors in search of good trout fishing" he might just find the chain of granite hills between the Merrick massif and the Rhinns of Kells "worthy of exploration".

Over a decade passed before that inveterate explorer of outback Scotland, Graham Little (then living in Girvan), together with Jimmy Dykes, visited the crag in April 1968, and made the first ascent of *The Highwayman* (HVS), a fact that, being very young, new to the climbing scene, and unaware of the protocol, he didn't record at the time. This superb four-pitch route was done in big boots and with only a couple of sling runners – no mean achievement. Although he vaguely recalls climbing a few other short things around this time. Little only returned once and that was to solo *The Highwayman*. The resulting near death experience when a large

Dave Wilson, belayed by Bill O'Connor, on the first ascent of Parcel of Rogues (E3), Dungeon of Buchan, in 1991. Photo: Stephen Reid.





flake came off in his hands, combined with his impression of the crag as rather vegetated was enough to turn his attention elsewhere. Almost another decade passed before April 1976 when a youthful Andrew Fraser, Donald Gibson and Willie Todd (all teenage school students from Dumfries) forced their way up the vegetated *Cooran Gully* with the moral assistance of 60ft. of hemp rope recently liberated from their Scout Hut and a few pegs. Not being put off by this heathery experience, Fraser returned several times to the crag. An attempt to straighten out *Cooran Gully* was abandoned due to a rucksack containing the vital rockshoes being dropped from halfway up the route. Then, with Todd, Mike Burgess and Davie Walker, he went back in 1978 to climb *Roraima,* a series of variations on Waldie's *Cooran Buttress*, though they were unaware of this at the time. Emboldened by success on this rather overgrown line, Fraser embarked on an ascent of the cleanest sweep of rock he could see, the slabs of *The Highwayman*, though again the team were unaware of the existence of any route there. However, with their minimal equipment and experience, the rounded cracks proved far too scary, and a traverse right was made onto what later became the line of *Heir Apparent*, before finally a long traverse back left was made onto *Roraima* and safety. On another visit, in June 1984, he soloed the superb four pitch *Traitor's Gait* (MVS) before having a narrow squeak when he fell trying to solo *Cooran Buttress* in order to work out how it compared with *Roraima.* Fortunately, he managed to grab the heather ledge he landed on – but understandably it rather put him off returning to the Dungeon, besides which university and work kept him away from the area for many years. When I questioned him recently as to why, knowing how good the crag was, he hadn't gone back, he said that he, and he suspected Little, and latterly the Fotheringham/Whillance, team had all been put off by what they perceived would be a lot of gardening, his ethic at the time being to climb on sight from the ground up. In fact, this was mainly a misconception – certainly as far as Cooran Buttress goes, and of all my new routes done there in the last 13 years, only two required much gardening, and that still minimal.*The Colonel's Corner* needed a large caterpillar of turf removing from the first 20ft. of the first pitch, and *Cooran Chimney* was relieved of a huge turf cornice that overhung the crux pitch. Other than that, all our new routes on Cooran Buttress were climbed ground up on sight, the only other major exception being the E3 Direct Finish to *Heir Apparent* which I top-roped prior to leading, due to the fact that the top half of the pitch, which included the 5b crux section, was completely devoid of protection for about 40ft. Dungeon Buttress was a different matter. Many of its jamming cracks required removal of considerable bilberry growth prior to an ascent. This was not difficult though – a quick abseil with an old ice axe running down the crack lines being all that was required.

Graham Little on pitch 3 on the first ascent of The Highway Man (HVS) in 1968. Photo: Jimmy Dykes.

First ascent of The Colonel's Corner (HVS) in 1991. Stephen Reid on the first pitch. Photo: Joe Grinbergs.

Just before Fraser's solo of *Traitor's Gait*, the strong Lakeland team of Jim Fotheringham and Pete Whillance had visted the Dungeon, cycling in, and staying overnight at the Backhill of Bush Bothy. Fotheringham had noticed the crag while perusing maps of the area shortly after he first moved to the Lake District, and had made a solo visit to reconnoitre the possibilities. However, it took him some time to find anyone prepared to accompany him to such a remote area. When he finally teamed up with Whillance they only did two days climbing there, repeating and naming Little's *The Highwayman*, and also adding two excellent major long new routes, *Cyclopath* (E1) and *Saddle Tramp* (E2), the latter being the first climb on the Lion's Head. Although there were patently further routes to do, including the obvious line of *The Colonel's Corner.* Whillance soon moved on to harder things at Creag an Dubh Loch and Creag a' Bhancair, and Fotheringham became more involved in the Greater Ranges. Somehow he never quite got round to going back until he and I visited Craignaw in the winter of 2001-2 to climb the classic icefall of *Dow Spout* (II) and make the second ascent of *Silver Flow* (IV). (smcj 2003)

Finally, the tale of the Dungeon, and indeed climbing in Galloway, would not be complete without mention of Kenny and Ian Livingston from Castle Douglas. They made an early visit to the crag with a view to rock climbing, but went away empty handed as it was too iced up! It is a rare corner of the Galloway Hills that these two haven't visited, and a glance in the first ascents list of the new guide will show that they had sounded out several crags well in advance of their subsequent development.

By the end of 1991 I had made 10 visits to the Dungeon and, except for the line of *Cooran Chimney* that I returned for in 1993 with Doug Scott (an occasion notable for Doug's bike acquiring a puncture that necessitated him stopping to blow the tyre up every 400 yards on the way back to the car), I considered the place worked out, and started casting my eyes farther afield. To the north, the Tauchers sounded intriguing but our one visit was on such a dismal day that we never even saw the main crag. In fact, unbeknownst to Joe and I, Fraser and friends were developing this remote spot at much the same time that we were discovering the Dungeon. Craig an Eilte on Craignelder to the south yielded a few short routes, but its main wall looked too wet and mossy to bother with, and on Cairnsmore of Fleet, the long Spout of the *Clints Gully* which I climbed as a summer VS in 1992 with Adrian Moore and John Campbell, proved a much better grade V winter climb when I returned with Chris Bonington during a sharp freeze in 1997. But except for that final foray, and a repeat visit with Doug Scott two days later to catch the adjacent Grade IV icefall of *Smear Test*, I figured I had done all that was worth doing in Galloway.

Thus things might have stayed but for a chance meeting in 1999 with John Biggar from Castle Douglas. I had met John once before on the

Dungeon when Joe and I had turned up to what we rightly considered our crag, only to find two climbers busy repeating our new routes – one of them being John. At the moment of our arrival, his partner took a 40-footer off *The Highwayman* when a hold snapped, which luckily for us rather put them off further exploration for a while. But now it seemed John had found a secret crag, or at least a secret craglet, lurking in the woods, close to the road, and not far north of Newton Stewart. He had already done several easier climbs there, but his forte was expedition mountaineering and he had (reluctantly?) decided that a technical rock climber was required for the harder lines. Not knowing any technical rock climbers, he ended up with me instead. So it was that I was sworn to secrecy and introduced to Corwar. This single 30m. high buttress of superb south-facing crystalline granite gave us many happy days of cleaning lines of a thick carpet of moss and pine needles that the crag had acquired when it was surrounded by forestry. Fortunately, John had 'contacts', and the offending conifers had soon gone towards the Euro chipboard mountain, so now the crag is wonderfully clean and also has majestic views through a fine clearing in the woods. Routes soon followed, every one a gem. John had already put up some fine VSs and the heightist *Peach* (graded HVS/E1 depending on whether you are taller than 5ft. 10ins. or not) but there were still lines aplenty. The day we did *Corwar Wall* (HVS) and *Plum Line* (E2) was perhaps the best of many superb days. Corwar Wall was one that John had inspected earlier, but didn't really feel up to leading. A fine pitch with a reasonably straight-forward start to gain a leaning break: here an awkward move of the sort that, having done it you still can't quite work out quite how, allowed the edge of a niche to be gained. A lunge up for a jug and a strenuous hand-traverse before moving up to a resting place all proved jolly exciting, though it has to be said that the gear is brilliant. This is definitely not so on *Plum Line* which was one that I'd inspected earlier and didn't really feel up to leading. The line is cracking – straight up the centre of the buttress at its highest point via a shallow pink groove/niche at half height. The first crux would be gaining this niche and the gear looked poor to the point of non-existence. There was a horizontal hairline crack though and with great reluctance this was compelled into accepting the tips of two knifeblades by dint of a large hammer. To their left, a very shallow sideways wire did nothing to boost confidence, but, after much to-ing and fro-ing, the move was made and the pink niche gained by nose-grinding mantelshelf. Here a precarious rest was possible and a good wire helped to calm a pounding heart. The exit moves were if anything more technical, but better protection kept the to-ing and fro-ing to a minimum and huge holds on the final steep headwall allowed me to show off an impressive technique, noticeable by its absence lower down. Two more extremes to the right of *Corwar Wall* gave equally

tricky moments before they succumbed. But eventually, even we had to admit that there was not a line left for us to squeeze in. Dave Armstrong later added an E4, and, in a remarkable re-enactment of the Dungeon/Tauchers parallel development, while myself and John had our hands full at Corwar, Fraser and Ian Magill ignored the ban (since lifted) on climbing in the nearby Goat Park to surreptitiously develop Craigdews. While they discovered some nice pitches, and the rather broken crag has some good points going for it (like being south-facing and only 10 minutes from the road), it is really their goat-inspired route names that one remembers most, the best perhaps being *Cemetery Goats* and *Goats of Delirium.*

Around this time came a contact from the SMC – a guidebook writer for the Galloway Hills was sought for the next edition of the *Lowland Outcrops* – unsurprisingly there was hardly a queue for the job. Feeling a bit like a minor edition of Graham Macphee (who while writing the SMC Ben Nevis guide in the 1930s checked nearly every route on the mountain from his base in Liverpool), and with only the mildest show of reluctance, and a short lecture from Mr Prentice on not annoying the locals by understarring their routes, I gracefully accepted the post, and cunningly obtained a vehicle permit for the forestry tracks on the grounds that I was "working in the area", a ploy that I had previously used successfully in Ennerdale. Actually, I should put in a word of praise here for Sandy White who, as Forestry Access Officer, could not have been more helpful or understanding. And the permit meant more than a chance of finding a willing victim to partner me on checking some swamp-bound midge-ridden vegetated horror in the Backhill of beyond. That victim, bless him, was Chris King, a man who I had climbed with a bit in the past. Self-employed like myself, he is more than happy to take days off at a moment's notice given a good forecast. He is also a much better climber than me, a point that proved very useful when he on-sighted Donald Gibson's superb *Delta of Venus* (E4) at Craigencallie, while the guidebook writer required a tight rope the whole way up. Finally, Chris seemed happy to go anywhere and climb anything, even to revisit somewhere like the Tauchers where he had already checked three heather-strewn bilberry-ridden routes only the week before. In short, he is the perfect guidebook writer's climbing partner, and not adverse to an early start either.

To be truthful, I wasn't very kind to Chris, and made him check the Tauchers, Craigencallie, and Clints of Dromore thoroughly, before letting him near the Dungeon of Buchan and its considerably cleaner and more extensive rock. The Tauchers did prove to have one superb route in Rob McAllister's *Behind the Mask* (E1), and a few others that could make a reasonable day, but it is unlikely that this remotest and most romantically wild of the Galloway crags will ever become popular unless vehicular access is allowed along the forestry tracks between Lochs Doon and Dee,

and even then it is doubtful. Nonetheless, we dutifully checked every line, returning several times over to catch some of the slower-drying ones in condition. Wellies were *de rigueur* on the approach, and midge-nets as essential as rock shoes.

Respite from ankle-wrenching tussocky walk-ins came when we moved south to Craigencallie. All the major lines and new routes were checked, but though this crag is close to the road it too is unlikely to become that popular as most of its climbs are lichenous. Some routes though are very good, the aforementioned *Delta of Venus* (E4) being one of them. Also worth braving the adders and bracken for are Fraser's *The Empty Quarter* (E2), the excellent *Alligator* (VD), and the exquisite short pitch of *Thumbs Up* (VS).

At both the Tauchers and Craigencallie, we had added the occasional new pitch, but nothing outstanding. Mostly, we had spent many hours checking rather vegetated climbs. The Clints of Dromore though were more fun. Many people (including Waldie) have climbed on these pleasant south-facing granite slabs over the years, but few have left any record. I gathered together what notes I could and then set about repeating everything and filling in the gaps, of which there were plenty. Many years previously I had noticed a small steep buttress near the very left-hand end of the escarpment. Nothing was recorded here and Chris and I quickly covered the face, with route names like *Make My Day* and *Do You Feel Lucky*? punningly inspired by the Clints. The more major area of Central Buttress was also scoured and several pleasant lines added. Finally, and only two years after initial contact, an access agreement was wrung out of SNH. It was time to move on.

After a long day repeating everything on the short buttresses of Loch Grannoch Crag, and adding a few more problems for good measure, I finally had no excuse for not letting Chris in on the Dungeon. Meanwhile though, I had been sneaky, putting up two routes without involving him. Rob Thomas and I had sought out and repeated the original route of the crag, *Cooran Buttress*. This proved to be an excellent Hard Severe and certainly not deserving of its two-line dismissal in the old guide. It also revealed considerable possibilities for variation and so I returned with John Biggar, my wife Jill, and Mathew Thompson who had contacted me because he was staying near New Galloway and was short of a climbing partner. The result was *Cooran Buttress Direct*, a very enjoyable four-pitch VS with a crux 5a move to break through the long roof avoided by the original route on the top pitch. It was a beautiful day, and looking around the coire it was obvious that there were still new lines to do.

The following spring, Fraser announced that he and Magill were intending to visit the crag, and: "Would I like to come?" This pair had recently made the most of unusual winter conditions to snatch *Hell Freezes*

Over (IV), a winter ascent of Cooran Buttress mainly via the summer line of *Roraima,* so it seemed obvious new routes were in the offing and the invitation puzzled me at first, until I remembered my forestry track permit. Thoughtfully, they provided me with a climbing partner in the shape of Alasdair Gillies. The plan was to tackle the complex area of slabs and walls on the far right of the hill that had been designated "The Lion's Head" by McBain. While our first route was eventually summed up in the guide as "an interesting route on top quality heather with a little rock in places", we slightly redressed the balance by climbing the fine hanging arête high in the middle of the coire at a wind-swept HVS.

Meanwhile the 'A' Team, having already put up the three pitch VS of *Aslan*, a rather poor climb to start with but one that builds up to a superb finish, were not to be put off by encroaching dusk, and were spotted setting off up the slabs to the left of *Saddle Tramp* as we headed back to the car. The result was *Horns of a Dilemma* (HVS), the best of the more recent new routes on the buttress. The crux, on the second pitch, involves a rising traverse along parallel crack lines to a point where you have to choose one or the other: this is also the point where you discover the source of the route name. All the routes climbed that day were done ground up on sight, a particularly fine achievement in the case of Horns which involves bold and technical climbing. A month later, an FRCC meet at Newton Stewart provided the opportunity to glean valuable comments on grades and star ratings.It was noticeable that the first went up and the second down in indirect relationship to the commentator's jamming ability. Apart from providing an unofficial taxi service to the crag, Malcom 'Pike' Cundy and I repeated Monkey Puzzle, and then set off up a line of cracks to the left of that route and were pleased as Punch to emerge at the top of the crag with the first ascent of the four pitch *Castles in the Air* (HVS) in the bag.

So by the time Chris King got seriously in on the act it was already late in the year. John Biggar had been eyeing up a slab above the descent ramp from Cooran Buttress more closely than the rest of us, and realised that it contained quite a large expanse of clean rock that could quite easily be persuaded to part with several fine pitches of VS and below. While he and Linda cleaned up lines on what they later christened Silver Slab, Chris and I set off up the ragged crack to the right of the start of *Traitor's Gait.* Four disjointed, but good pitches, resulted in *Snakes & Ladders* (E1), named in honour of the adder which I had almost trodden on at the foot of the crag. It is a moot point as to which of us was most frightened. In October, we were back, checking *Horns of a Dilemma* on the Lion's Head, and going on to add our own climb of *Aughty Star.* This last was inspired by the obvious off-width crack cutting through the roof at the start of the traverse of the final pitch of *Aslan*. Below the off-width was a crack system,

and below that a fine groove up the right edge of the initial slab of *Saddle Tramp* – we had our line. A quick abseil to remove some bilberry, and we had soon climbed the first two pitches to the good platform below the top pitch of *Saddle Tramp.* By now the wind had got up and it was bitterly cold, but, fortified by Chris's Friend 5, I set off up to the roof, which was all rather steep and more awkward than I anticipated, not to mention damp. A better climber than myself would have almost certainly overcome it with technique, as it was I just udged. But the udging was hard, and my fingers soon froze. I kept having to down-climb to the stance where Chris was starting to look more and more like a potential hypothermia victim. Spurred on by the thought that it would be highly embarrassing to have to have him rescued by the Galloway Mountain Rescue Team (Leader: Linda Biggar), it was on no more than my eighth or ninth attempt that I finally cracked it, somehow squirming up the extra inch that enabled a crucial finger hold to be reached. Even Chris grudgingly admitted that it wasn't a bad lead. We gave it E2 for the guide, though to be frank, it's anyone's guess. Later, we added a gentler and much longer alternative top pitch, taking a counter diagonal line *to Horns of a Dilemma*, and reducing the grade to a pleasant E1.

Later on, in October, John and Linda continued their development of Silver Slab, their best route being the rather extraordinary *Sprauchler's Groove*. This gives a sustained pitch of some of the most awkward VS crack and slab climbing I have ever done, protectable only by cunning cam placements.

Meanwhile, my final new route on the crag was to be yet another multi-pitch affair. Intrigued by a superb wide jamming crack just right of the start of Cooran Buttress, abseil inspection revealed independent climbing the length of the crag finishing up a groove in between the top pitches of Traitor's Gait and Cooran Buttress Direct. December was perhaps not the best month to choose for the ascent, for although a crisp, clear, and midge-free day, it was bitterly cold with verglas on the rock in places, but I was mindful of the pending expiry of my forestry track permit. In any case the climbing was not that hard, being easy VS, with the crux of each pitch well protected. *Bickerdike's Buttress* was named in memory of John Bickerdike, friend and fellow SMC member, whom I had been on two expeditions to Greenland with.

A period of hard freeze that winter allowed Fraser, Biggar, myself, *et. al.* to indulge in a tidying up and sorting out of various icefalls in the Galloway Hills, the most notable probably being Fraser and Magill's *The Lang Scot's Miles* (IV) on the Merrick, though the most memorable day for me was introducing Alan Hinkes to the delights of the classic *Dow Spout*, and then sitting by the Dow Loch at its top, not far from the summit of Craignaw, while he took a call on his mobile from Kathmandu. Towards

the end of the summer, Chris King and I returned to Craigdews to pick the short plum of *Nanny State* (E2), the thin crack up the central slab of the crag that can be so clearly seen from the road – naturally it was Chris's lead. But really the guidebook was done, the manuscript sent off for editing to Davison and Prentice, and, all of a sudden, a most enjoyable chapter in my life had come to an end.

There are 270 rock climbs in the Galloway Hills section of the new Lowland Outcrops guide, a four-fold increase over the previous edition of 1994. Of these, I have climbed all but a dozen or so, and most of those that I haven't done are either insignificant, overgrown, untraceable, or all three. Moreover, I have had the amazing good fortune to have been 'in' on the first ascents of more than 100 of them. Little did I know what I was starting when that wet evening 15 years ago I sat down at the kitchen table with a pile of maps and guidebooks. It has been great fun to be sure, but more than that, it has been a real privilege.

Acknowledgements:
I am most grateful for the help of the following in compiling this article (though needless to say, while the information may be theirs, any errors are entirely mine): John and Linda Biggar, Jim Fotheringham, Andrew Fraser, Graham Little, Kenny and Ian Livingston, and Jim Simpson. I would also like to thank all my climbing partners over the years, and in particular John Biggar, Joe Grinbergs and Chris King, without whose company exploring the crags of Galloway would have been a lot less enjoyable. Finally, I would like to thank Tom Prentice and the SMC for giving me the opportunity to contribute to the guide.

Bibliography:
A Gallowegian Wander, Edred M. Corner (SMC Journal 1900-1901).
The Merrick and the Neighbouring Hills, J, McBain (Stephen and Pollock of Ayr 1929).
Rock Climbs in Galloway, A. G. Waldie (SMC Journal 1958).
Climbers' Guide to Central & Southern Scotland, Jerry Handren (SMC 1986).
Galloway Inner Sanctum, Graham Little (SMC Journal 1991).
The Dungeon of Buchan, Stephen Reid (FRCC Journal 1992).
Lowland Outcrops, Tom Prentice, Grahame Nicoll *et. al.* (SMC 1994).
The Spout of Clints and Smear Test, Stephen Reid (FRCC Journal 1998).
Dow Spout, Stephen Reid (SMC Journal 2003).
Lowland Outcrops: Rock & Ice Climbs, Edited by Brian Davison and Tom Prentice (SMC 2004).

A TALE OF THREE ACCIDENTS

By Adam Kassyk

COINCIDENCE is a funny thing. Lightning isn't supposed to strike twice in the same place, never mind three times. And yet...

The events described in this article occurred on three consecutive trips into the hills, more than 10 years ago. The first occasion was a weekend in January, which I spent at a cottage in Ballachulish with a group of climbers from the north of England. After a long day on the Ben I opted for a less challenging climb on the Buachaille the next day, and paired up with a lad called Nick with whom I'd never climbed before. We set out on an exhilarating morning. The sun sparkled on hard frozen snow and the air was crisp and penetratingly clear. The invigorating weather and the certainty of good conditions seemed to lessen the usually serious atmosphere of the Scottish winter. A hard climb the day before meant a late start, and perhaps a slightly more complacent attitude.

I was keen to climb Shelf Route, long an ambition since I had read Bill Murray's *Mountaineering in Scotland.* At a little step below the Crowberry Basin we met two climbers descending. One had been hit in the face by a big chunk of ice, and we commiserated with their misfortune to be forced to descend so early on such a perfect day. They asked for assistance to lower the casualty down the pitch, and it was nearly an hour later when we resumed our upward progress. It never occurred to us that this might be some kind of foretaste of what was to come. It was well after midday when I arranged the first belay in the icy shade at the foot of Crowberry Gully. When my turn came to climb I found perfect Glencoe conditions of neve bonded like concrete to the rocks. Above the first vertical wall I emerged onto a steep little snowfield. My partner was belayed above, part way up a very steep rock corner. An attractive snow ramp led round the corner to the right from my snowfield, actually the correct line for the Shelf, and I called up that we should take this route. In any event a party higher up the corner was sending a continuous stream of ice blocks down, making it a most uncomfortable place - and increasing the risk of a bloodied face, like the stricken climber we'd met below. Nick agreed, and set up an abseil.

I put a sling round a block, clipped my end of the rope in, and looked up to watch my companion complete his preparations for descent. I saw him lean back, and then time seemed to slow momentarily as he tumbled outwards in a slow motion with a shocked expression on his face. He bounced off the wall, gathered speed then shot past me, hit a projection like a springboard at the foot of the snowfield and shot into the air turning a full somersault before disappearing in free fall down the vertical drop below. The full impact of his fall must have been on the gully bed below,

because when the slack rope came tight on my sling, I felt very little tension.

My immediate reaction was that he could not have survived a fall like that. Images of what I would find below, and of the aftermath, haunted my mind. I became pre-occupied with the question of whether to re-arrange the ropes so I could retrieve them after I descended. Somehow, recovering the ropes seemed pointless. With numbed emotions I prepared to descend. Once the abseil was ready I called down, in the rather unlikely hope that there might be some reply. A seeming deathly silence met my anxious calls. But then, to my great surprise and relief, a faint cry floated up. I rearranged the abseil so I could retrieve the ropes, and descended with my heart in my mouth, eyeing my abseil spike with wary caution.

I found my partner sitting in a hole in the snow. I didn't stop to ask whether he'd created it on impact, or it had already been there. His face was purple and blue, and his helmet was badly dented. I suspected his head might be as well. He was able to answer questions, and it was clear that he had lost consciousness briefly on impact, and might have a fractured skull. I quickly established that apart from extensive bruising and associated pain, there didn't appear to be any other obvious injuries, though his ribs hurt badly. I made him more comfortable, and talked to him, noting his reactions. He seemed lucid and I realised that his condition was improving, if anything. It was now late afternoon, and Nick quickly agreed to try to descend, belayed from above by myself, rather than wait for a rescue. However, there would be a clear risk of him passing out again as he stood unbelayed while I descended, and I looked around for some assistance.

Just at this point a party of three climbers appeared, roped together and moving alpine style, traversing across the steep snowslopes on the flank of North Buttress. I hailed them, to discover to my surprise that they seemed to be more relieved at having come across us. They had come up the lower part of North Buttress, were now lost, and were looking for Curved Ridge. Nor did they know the way down from here. There was some mutual benefit in joining forces, so we agreed that I would show them the way down, and they would help by securing my companion after each rope length of the descent.

My partner managed the descent surprisingly well, but the three assistant rescuers turned out to be a mixed blessing. They were reluctant to down climb and wanted to be lowered as well. Since we came across few belays on the lower part of the mountain I had to make it very clear that after events above I didn't want to rely on marginal abseil anchors any more than was absolutely necessary, and they had to down climb, whether they liked it or not. After six hours and ten rope lengths of painstakingly slow descent we reached the Waterslide and the path with some relief. The walking wounded was now walking remarkably well, without support,

and seemed much recovered. I handed him over to his friends for the long drive to Leeds, where he checked into the hospital to be examined by a doctor who confirmed there were no serious injuries, and remarked how lucky he was to have escaped without any greater damage.

As to why the belay anchor came out when he abseiled, we never did find any satisfactory explanation.

Four weeks later I was making the long drive north from Manchester again, this time with an old friend who I hadn't seen for years. He shall remain anonymous for the sake of his reputation. As we caught up on the past, it transpired that he had never climbed on Ben Nevis, despite having made first winter ascents in the Alps and been up to 8000m. without oxygen. This serious omission from his CV was put right the following day with an ascent of Observatory Buttress. The Ben was in a suspiciously benign mood – the weather was settled, there was plenty of ice, we even found the occasional belay. Everything was just about as good as you could hope for. We descended Number Four Gully, far too early in the afternoon for a normal day in winter, with a sense of relaxation and achievement. The churned up windslab high in the gully gave way to icy neve as we dropped below the upper limit of the recent thaw.

It's a great pleasure to linger, and savour the high mountain atmosphere on those rare occasions one finishes a climb with time to spare. I paused in the dip by the lochan for a while, and then became aware that my partner had disappeared from view. It seemed a little strange that he had descended the snow slopes below so quickly. I sensed an odd disquiet as I looked down the sweep of icy snow, to where it disappeared from view into the left hand of the two gorges that drains Coire na Ciste through the lower rock barrier. My disquiet increased as I cramponed down the brick hard snow, to the lip of the gorge. Below me, the recent thaw had melted back the massive depth of the snow in the gorge to create a gaping chasm. There were seracs with vertical walls some forty feet high, and a waterfall somewhere deep in the abyss. Just where the snowslope narrowed and steepened into the gorge, a crevasse had formed across the full width of the slope, about a metre wide and two or three metres deep. My companion, looking very shaken, was trying to climb out of the crevasse, with some difficulty, having lost his axe.

It turned out that, having descended the windslab to the lochan, he had applied alpine thinking to the situation, and decided that since the snow should get softer with the loss of altitude, he could take his crampons off and glissade. Unfortunately, this being Scotland, the snow got icier instead (as so often happens when you climb all the way to the corrie on perfect alpine neve, only to find powder and crust on the cliffs). He had lost control of the glissade immediately, lost his axe trying to brake, and was well on his way towards terminal velocity and an untimely end. He was only saved from the icy jaws of the Ben by the appearance of the aforesaid crevasse.

All this had happened in a matter of seconds, which explained why I had noticed nothing.

Thankfully he was able to walk, but I still went through the usual checklist of questions, to discover quite a lot of minor damage, including possible cracked ribs and some worrying pain in his neck which restricted head movement. He effected a self rescue unaided, though rather haltingly and painfully, still visibly shocked at his brush with the grim reaper. It was a very thought provoking drive on the way south the following day. None of my friend's injuries were serious, though the damage to his neck took a long time to heal. He wasn't the first Himalayan veteran to have come to grief on the Ben. And sadly, since then, not the last either.

Another six weeks passed, to find me setting off from Glen Nevis, with the intention of climbing the North East Ridge of Aonach Beag alone. I might have been forgiven for assuming that I was unlikely to be involved in someone else's accident on this occasion. The mist was low and thick, and ridges, snowfields and gullies floated in and out of the fog. None of them matched my impression of what I was looking for, and I eventually gave up trying to locate the start of the North East Ridge, and found a direct way to the summit, up a vast snow field and a narrow arete.

The top of Aonach Beag proved to be a thoroughly disorientating place. Despite the mist the early spring light was uncomfortably strong, and with my eyes screwed up against the painful brightness it was even more difficult to tell where the whiteness of the snow ended and the whiteness of the sky began. Finding the col to the north, to Aonach Mor, was the proverbial needle in a haystack - a point feature surrounded by hazards for the unwary. At one stage I had to pace out three sides of a triangle, to establish the true angle and aspect of the slope - a real navigational challenge.

From the col I set out, counting paces for company, to cover the mile to the summit of Aonach Mor. I was saved the need for a sweep search for the summit cairn by the presence of a group standing beside it, four spectral figures in the shifting mist. The unreality of the situation was increased when they insisted they were on the summit of Aonach Beag. I disagreed, but they continued to insist. Eventually we agreed to differ, and I left them to the consequences of their navigational hypothesis. I retraced my steps for a short way along the ridge, then found the steep snow slope which led down into the upper part of Glen Geusachan, towards Glen Nevis. Coming out from the mist for the first time in several hours, I emerged into a bleak glen hemmed in between the walls of the Carn Mor Dearg arete and Aonach Beag, the lansdcape reduced to a dull monochrome by the thick mist and limited winter light. At the foot of the last snow patch I stopped to remove crampons and put away my axe. There is a moment, at the end of every winter season, when you take your crampons off for the last time. I lingered, reluctant to descend and leave behind this shadowy, fleeting landscape.

As I sat there, I became aware of a very faint sound, like birdsong. I sat very still, and strained to hear it against the wind and the sound of running water. There was something odd about it, for I did not associate birdsong with this high winter landscape. As I packed my rucksack, I felt uneasy. There was only one other thing it could be, and I couldn't go down without being sure. I dug out my own whistle. I couldn't remember what the international distress signal reply was, but I reasoned that it didn't matter, any regular and unmistakeably patterned sound would do. I sounded six blasts, and waited. Sure enough, a repeated sound was faintly carried and dispersed on the wind. A four letter word crossed my lips as I realised with a sense of *deja vu*, trouble again.

The south flank of Aonach Beag above me was a vast wall, crossed by a continuous barrier of broken cliffs, riven by gullies, shrouded in the mist, and an unfriendly place at the best of times. The sound came from somewhere in this complex and inaccessible area. I set off up the hillside, and in about twenty minutes I had spotted a figure in blue close to the cliff base, on some rubbly ledges. Thankfully he was easy to reach. The casualty was quite lucid, and I went through the now routine checklist of questions. He had a broken ankle or foot, and some other minor injuries. I learned he had fallen after becoming disorientated trying to find the way down. He had been sitting on these ledges for some time, and was now hypothermic. I gave him an extra jacket, some food, and made him as comfortable as possible. Then I set off to call out the rescue, running in plastic boots down the never ending descent to Glen Nevis. It took me an hour to get to a telephone, and it was a few hours later before the helicopter passed overhead to take him to the Belford Hospital.

Later, he wrote to me to say he recovered well and hoped to be back hillwalking. Afterwards, I realised that I was almost definitely the only person to have passed down that glen that afternoon, and I would have never heard the whistle if I hadn't stopped for some silent contemplation.

With hindsight it's always possible to analyse cause and effect. Certainly all three incidents were the result of a combination of circumstances, and some degree of human error. Yet what is striking is not the coincidence of timing, but the fortunate accidents of chance that prevented each incident from becoming a tragedy.

DANCING WITH STICKS

By Phil Gribbon

THIS is a tale of two stickies. They came and they went by chance. I had Sticka, and she had Stic an Dubh.

I had crossed the alpine cow pasture descending quickly to get food from the car parked 1000m. below at the Col de Saint Sorlin. I knew that my metabolism could falter without adequate calories, the first incipient symptom being a hammer-clasping of toes inside my boots and for which the impracticable cure was to walk backwards. I regretted that my breakfast in the frigid hut had been skimpy scraps hurriedly forced down in the pre-dawn light in a rush to get out and assemble the instruments before the sun came slanting and scorching on to the glacier.

It had been an excruciatingly chill night in the metal box, if designated perhaps appropriately as a Laboratoire de Glaciologie; this night of scientific dedication was just another factor that was helping to sap my reserves of energy. Now with the thermometers and radiation meters hopefully ticking away automatically, I could abandon the desolate site and flee downhill. I crunched off across the sparkling filigree of ablating surface crystals, stopped to listen to meltwater trickles seeping musically downwards, and glanced appreciatively at the vapourous scarf banner trailing gently off the summit of the Pic d' Etandard. It was time to go. Little did I know that Sticka was waiting for me on the pasture.

There was no sign of the cows anywhere on the open ground, but what was that in front of my path? A whitened sliver lay stretched on the grass sideways across my path. Naked to the core, stripped of every trace of bark, devoid of all her cambium, it was a freshly pared branch of a scrubby tree brought up by a patient herdsman to whittle while he watched his grazing beasts. Just what was needed, just the right length, thickness, weight and balance to make a good easy-to-carry walking pole, and better still, grown of nature's material and for free. With delight, with no doubt of her gender, I picked her up and admired the carefully carved grooved channel ringing her stem. You're mine now, Sticka, come with me to the hills. On a nearby scree and rock jumble an inquisitive marmot, perching stiffly upright and watching, whistled its note of acquiescence.

Later came the weekend when the lethal rains tracked hundreds of miles across Europe bearing the radioactive detritus from the stricken Chernobyl reactor to the far fringe of our westernmost mountains. Unaware, and as always out of sight and out of mind, they wandered higher up the slopes of Druim an Iubhair far above the rush of waters coming down from the great rocky corrie of Garbh Bheinn. It may have been springtime in Ardgour, with the call of the cuckoo in the freshly greened birches, but pockets of old snow still lurked in the recesses of its gullies. There were

climbers of rocks over there. The sun held warmth and promise but showers were creeping across Loch Linnhe, sweeping a skiff of light rain over the hillsides. Coming up a grassy bowl and close to the ridge they came on a shepherd's crook, walking stick size with a genuine horn handle, just right for leaning on with a distant dreamy expression of contemplation, but now lost, abandoned, and age-mellowed and glistening with rain film laced with radioactive dust. Here lay Stic an Dubh, a helpmate for Sticka in a good Gaelic sort of way.

Twenty years went by, fleeting and passing, both rough and smooth, in their one-way passage through time. Faint memory fragments may be available if still stuck in cerebral cells, ready to be flushed along the neurons.

Quickly Sticka became a natural stravaigher. Although cut from a subalpine thicket and fated to whack the cows, Sticka now had been adopted to be a wild wandering companion. Ahead lay many moons of striding o'er hill and glen; sometimes these were memorable outings yet often it was run-of-the mill occasions, full of pleasure in their own right but building up into a generalised mental construction of a lifetime's intimacy with a mountainous microcosm of the highlands of the world.

Sticka had many jobs to do in her role as a long leggy prosthetic third limb and in her function as an advanced triangular zimmer prototype. She provided balance and support as I cautiously waded and prodded step by step across the hidden boulder-strewn bed of many a dark river gleaming faintly in the dusk. I wasn't too sure of the validity of the triangle of forces at work as her tip was rigidly plonked against isolated rocks amidst a swirling stream as I hopped dynamically from stone to stone, hoping there was always another semi-submerged stone to take me to the far bank. One skidding slip and I would be in deep doodoo, poised to tumble headfirst into undesirable wetness, one good bang on his head and he would float off downstream; it would be no problem for Sticka, she was buoyant, in a manner of speaking, but it never happened. Nonetheless, the flat metal ferrule at her tip with minimum friction on smoothed pebble surfaces provided sufficient confidence to sustain momentary equilibrium. Perhaps a splayed wooden tip would have been more stable but then her useful life would have been abrasion limited. It was a question of longevity and the used shotgun cartridges, red, blue or green, that I collected in quantity provided tip protection and better still they were just the correct dimensions to fit snugly over her tip.

Of course, such homemade ferrules didn't last long but there were plenty more lying about in pigeon-infested woods, grouse butts, and sites of pheasant massacres. Besides few of the high technological spring-loaded, telescopic, collapsible, basketed, buffered, metal-alloyed aid walking poles have golden brass replacable varicoloured tips. Sticka felt quite the model for an environmentally sustainable future, if shooting continued and trees were around to sop up nasty unfriendly gases.

There was another negative point about flat ferrules; they can't dig into hard néve, they can't chop steps or brake simple slips. However, they do add spice to a winter ridge walk, when an iceaxe should be a *sine qua non* implement. One of those recent winters when only the highest ridges hold remnant wraithes and brief white snowfields he took Sticka on an escapade to the far summit of Buachaille Etive Beag. Silly old fart, I thought, scuttering along an increasingly narrowing and icy ridge, the valley was far below but the summit was getting closer. The dice was rattling in its cup; would it toss and spin? A gamble based on a thin length of ageing wood gave false security and it was little better than nothing. I had lots of confidence able to win out the day, if treated with caution, so on I went with every nerve a-jangle and a sixth sense fluttering to every nuance. Tap the cairn, give thanks, and remember most care is needed in descent.

Early summer days were so different. It was a time of year when reluctant Munro compleationists are forced after years of procrastination to get out and get it over with, and then find themselves in limbo and blighted with what next to climb and tick. It is often prompted by erstwhile friends who chiefly wish to have a hooley on the heights to terminate someone else's addiction. They mark the big day by gobbling scrumptious cake through dram-washed teeth, and weaving the dance circle to ghettoblaster reels echoing over the Rough Bounds of Knoydart. There are strange sporting activities too. A roadside skier having been captured and persuaded to lug his downhill boards to the summit of Sgurr a' Mhaoraich overlooking Loch Hourn. Those capable soon took flight wearing his oversized boots to do a few stylish turns on the crystal mush of a remnant snowfield. Sticka stood ramrod stiff surveying the frolics with her chilly cartridge tip stabbed into the snow.

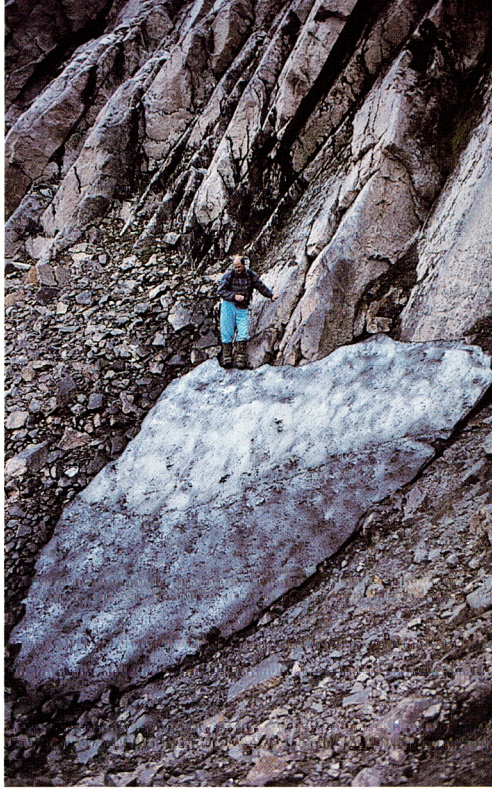
Celebrations over and spurred by a spurious sense of achievement they raced erratically down to the road by Loch Quoich. As the compleater engaged a gear and drove forward the unfortunate Sticka was placed in a Sir Walter Rayleigh cloak gesture across the path of the moving car. Inevitably the rounded wood was crushed between rocky road and rubber treads spelling trouble with a soft splintering splush. Sticka had been transmuted from squat solid staff to short seamed stick with her terminal six inches fanned into a brushy appendix fit only for the chop. Undaunted she still had many leagues to go in a new guise.

However, her existence was not always a bed of roses of gentle walks and exciting routes. There was one task that conscientiously fulfilled the useful role of a wombling scaffy prodder of littering articles thrown away by thoughtless, if selfrighteous passersby. Juice cartons, crisp packets, fag filters, chewed gum splodges, sweetie wrappers, poly bags, rubber objects, snapped laces, rusty apple cores, slowly fading orange peel and blackened banana skins were common fare, but their anathema was

Top left. Garbh Choire Mor, Braeriach snow beds – August 24, 1997.

Top right. Below Sphinx Ridge – September 17, 1996.

The Sphinx Ridge site in 2003 – snow melted on August.23, Photos: David Duncan.



reserved for those scrumpled wads of tissue paper, soft pink, sky blue, lime green or off white, that lurked in allegedly hidden recesses beside a path. Flick, prod, push, bury, removed from sight. Now walk on, hawk eyes sweeping the ground. Where is the next affront to environmental sensibilities?

Now that Sticka was shorter she had become more amenable and suitable for carrying in the sack, when required. She may have resembled a disguised radio aerial jauntily protruding skyward but she was out of the way and both hands were free to grasp rough gabbro indents or schisty pinches. Of course, there were snags, like the inability to toss a climbing rope in a back flick into a belaying waist stance without several spaghetti-like failures, or the limitation in tackling overhangs in damp chimneys. When sackbound there was always the risk that she would jump and decide to return to the bottom of a pitch when least expected.

We had not intended to get into the Thearlaich Dubh gap but the desired route had not appeared where we expected it so we had pottered on into a *cul de sac* cleft between twin walls. What master polisher had got his abrading fingers into the grooves slanting up the ridge? It had never been this way in our youth, but hordes of scuffling feet had stripped away any satisfactory holds to produce a frictionless bathroom tile texture. While we lingered and prepared our gear a strange rattling stone symphony accompanying a flung rope came tumbling into the gap to be followed by a rapidly-descending abseiler.

You are one of our admirable members, said we, and who is your pal? We were too late for their conversational answer as they floated up the short side, suggesting that they were frantically trying to complete the Cuillin Ridge before the forecast rains came.

With my leader ensconced above, the sack with its pallid aerial waggling on the wall was hoisted upwards. Mere optimistic faith had been expected to keep her balanced in the bag, but with an extra applied heave she left her home and leaped down the face spinning and singing her tremulous tone before tumbling out of sight into the dark northern abyss. This must be the time to say goodbye to Sticka, I thought, and moved cautiously to the edge of the gap. No, there she was lying retrievably on a chockstone. Hello, naughty Sticka, and don't do that again. The rain slowly started to filter down as she was hauled up tightly strapped in this time. It was all about to be the most undelightful day for climbing as the cats and dogs began pelting down.

Her last outing had taken Sticka to the veritable edge of the abyss. Few walking tourists have not approached the curving abruptness of the friable pitchstone cliff that stops uncannily at the brink of absolute nothingness. Beyond is unsubstantial air whence only dark birds dare to go, their domain the sweep of land that broaches from the far Cuillin to the tip of Ardnamurchan, all bound by blue shades of sky, mountains and ocean.

Missing a great day on the hill – Ling Hut Work Party taking a break from internal painting – Allan Davidson, Dave Broadhead, Willie Jeffrey, September 1994. Photo: Dave Broadhead.

Do not scamper, he thought, at the top of the Sgurr of Eigg! Feel a wee sense of a touch of the void. Top tap the concrete obelisk with the wand, mutter a prayer, circle circumspectly three times as goeth round the sun, turn your back and return to the shore.

I didn't enjoy following the gouged path downwards, the black claggy peat splodging out of falling imprints, splattering upwards in squirts of eroded muck. Why do the growing hordes of visitors follow in each others footsteps? It is the same on many Munro, Marilyn, or Uncle Ben Corbett an all with deep trenches and serpentine paths created on every worn popular hill in the land. Humans are not sheep that must follow each other in mindless plodding. Everyone is born to create his own trace in the world. Go gently and do not leave a footprint behind. Life is more than another tick in the book. We both felt about it much the same.

The end of Sticka and Stic an Dubh was unpremeditated and unexpected. They lay side by side on a wooden pallet on the pier at Mallaig. When the car returned to collect the baggage the sacks were packed away but the stickies were unintentionally left behind, alone, forlorn, now lost but not in a sense forgotten.

They may have drifted off with the next tide. Shipped on board a trawler to the discordant call of the gulls in flight over the rattling hawsers and the salted screeching machinery, wafted out on the scruffy pallet, pitched into a dripping hold, clobbered with blue plastic boxes, bedded down under lovingly folded nets, unwillingly bound for the deep waters of the Minch.

Their fate perhaps was to be cast quickly upon the waters, there to sink downward or to drift eastward, their choice to landfall on the barren shores of the lochs of Heaven or Hell.

Then again perhaps they had sailed away, and returned on the ferry back to the Small Isles. Thoughtfully dumped on the new elaborate pier at the Isle of Eigg, they would have looked for someone to claim them and accept their offer of shared companionship. They were waiting to join again into that fitful and seemingly endless dance across the hills of home.

WARMER CLIMATE AND SCOTTISH SNOW

By Adam Watson

One of the main attractions of Scottish hills is that they are snowier and icier than hills of the same height in England, Wales or Ireland. Their northern position brings them closer to cold air from the Arctic and Scandinavia. Since the late 1980s, however, winters have become milder, and skiing and winter climbing poorer. Snow patches in summer are smaller and less numerous, and fewer of them survive till winter.

Until recently, many people had heard of global warming but doubted it. Now there is no doubt. Since 1970, Arctic sea-ice has declined in area and thickness, and Arctic land has warmed at twice the average global rate. Six of the UK's hottest years on record have been since 1989. Glaciers are in rapid retreat, and skiing on some Alpine glaciers had to stop in 2003 because the heat wave exposed bare ice.

The Editor sought an account of events so far. After a review of climate change, I emphasise skiing because there are long runs of data, and snow patches because they are familiar on our hills and I have studied them.

Climate change since 1900:

Studies of climate change use many years of daily observations on surface air temperature, wind-speed and direction, sunshine, and rainfall. This is complemented by other data such as the widths of annual growth rings in trees, ice cores from the Greenland or Antarctic icecaps, and glacier advance or retreat. Snow patches respond more quickly to climate change than glaciers, and have been increasingly studied in a number of countries.

Since about 1920 the world's climate has warmed (e.g. Hulme and Jenkins). The rise globally and in central England has been 0.6°C. The rate of warming has also increased, now 0.2C per decade. Continental land has warmed more than maritime Scotland, because land absorbs heat more than water.

A paper by Parker and others reported a cold period at the end of the 1800s and the start of the 1900s, substantial warming between 1920 and 1940, slight cooling of the northern hemisphere between the 1950s and mid-1970s, and warm conditions almost everywhere in the 1980s except in Greenland and the north-west Atlantic. In line with this, Parker and Folland noted cooling in north-west Britain since about 1960, especially in northern Scotland, and surface air temperatures on land showed a slight negative trend between 1967 and 1986, amounting in Scotland to -0.25C per decade or -0.5C overall (Jones). In the late 1980s the manager of a Scottish ski centre sought an overdraft from the company's bank, but the bankers were concerned about reports of global warming, and the manager then asked me for technical advice. After I sent the manager the scientific

papers that showed slight cooling and he passed them to the bank, he got his overdraft.

Since then, Scotland and the rest of Britain have warmed substantially. Because the surface of the seas around us has warmed, winds from the Arctic or Russia are less cold than they used to be. I suppose that bankers would now less readily give overdrafts to Scottish ski companies.

The *Monthly Weather Report* of the Meteorological Office gives mean air temperature and other records at many stations. John Harrison of Stirling University analysed records in 1964-93 at eight Scottish stations, including two in high villages at Braemar and Leadhills. He reported a shift to a run of mild winters since 1987-88. Maximum and minimum temperatures had risen in winter, and yet more in spring. Summer temperatures had increased at almost all stations, and only in autumn was there little change. He found a trend to less sunshine and more rain in the west half of the country. Mayes reported heavier winter rainfall in the west, as far eastwards as the Monadh Liath, Drumochter and east Loch Tay.

Harrison wrote of "a remarkable cluster of years since 1987 with snow cover well below average" and a trend at most stations towards fewer days with air frost. Westerly winds blew more frequently and strongly in winter. He and others report a reduction in the average number of days with snow lying since the 1970s, at a rate of 12 days per decade.

Trends to warmer wetter winters and springs, and to more Atlantic gales have continued since 1993. Take the monthly mean air temperatures for Scotland in November 2003 to February 2005, for instance, and compare them with the 1961-90 mean (from Weather Log, in the Royal Meteorological Society's journal *Weather*). In November 2003 the temperature anomaly was +2.2C, and for December, January etc +0.4, +1.4, +1.2, +1.3, +2.1, +1.5, +1.0, +0.2 in a wet dull July, +2.0, +1.3, — 0.2, +1.8, + 1.6, +2.2, and +0.9 for February 2005.

The North Atlantic Oscillation helps us understand and explain our weather. The NAO index rests on the gradient in winter atmospheric pressure between a coastal site in the Azores and another in southwest Iceland. When there is a high anticyclone in the Azores and a deep depression at Iceland, the pressure difference is big and the index strongly positive. This produces a major Atlantic influence in north-west Europe, characterised by mild air, rain and strong winds as in the winter of 2003-04 and most of the 2004-05 winter. When the pressure difference is small and the index negative, a Continental influence produces a winter with cold air, low precipitation, mostly of snow, and less wind, with extreme cases in 1947 and 1963.

The 'oscillation' in the NAO comes about because the index oscillates over many years, runs with a positive index being followed by runs with a negative index. These oscillations have fluctuated around a long-term mean, but since the late 1980s the index has been atypical in being positive

for far more winters than usual, and in reaching high positive peaks not observed hitherto. Wilby and others found that the number of blizzard days in Britain was negatively correlated with the index (e.g. few blizzard days when the index was high), and "changes in the atmospheric moisture budget over the North Atlantic since the 1960s, in particular after 1980, have contributed to the wetter/milder conditions in Scotland".

In October 2004 the Press reported abundant rowanberries, which a few folk at Scottish ski centres regarded as a portent of a snowy winter, but this was wishful thinking. The old wife's tale is that nature supplies many berries so that birds can survive the winter. Extra wishful thinking in Press comments last autumn was that an unusually early and big invasion of bullfinches and waxwings from northern Europe into Scotland was a sign of early snowy conditions soon to hit us.

Ignoring the auld wives' tales, the Meteorological Office last October predicted a milder-than-average winter for Scotland on the basis of the NAO, and stated that the prediction in the past had proved right in two winters out of three. In the event it did turn out to be milder than average.

In November-January the Azores anticyclone stayed unusually far north and blocked easterly winds from Russia. Atlantic depressions were forced round the north end of the anticyclone and caused mild air to raise midday temperatures in Moscow, Oslo and Helsinki far above normal. Also they sent strong gales, which caused much damage to houses in Scotland. In the Swedish boreal forest, normally subject to calm conditions in winter, one gale blew down the equivalent of three years' felling of timber. As each depression moved east past Scotland, it pulled in anticlockwise northerly winds from the high Arctic, bringing snow to Scottish lowland and hill, but usually only for a few days until the sou-wester blew again.

For a month after about February 10, there came a change, as very cold air from Siberia broke through to the whole of Europe. Just afterwards, the Azores high had moved so far north that it pulled in air from Greenland, which maintained the pool of cold air over Scotland. Snow lay continuously even on lower hills, and sometimes at sea-level.

In mid-March the Atlantic oven opened again. On March 15, it was still cold, and a ski manager at Glenshee was preparing pistes. Next morning the temperature had soared, and at Ballater rose to 19C with a severe gale blowing out of a cloudless sky. Much of the snow vanished within hours. By April 3, I had never since 1942 seen Lochnagar with so little old snow for that time of year. It looked more like July 3.

Skiing, winter climbing, and other snow sports:

Attempts to develop downhill skiing in Scotland failed in the 1930s, but four of the five Scottish ski centres began and expanded during the cooler 1960s-1980s. The fifth, at Aonach Mor, started in 1989 during a mild winter, and has struggled since, as have the others. The annual mean

temperature anomaly for Scotland (relative to the mean for 1951-1980) was above zero in the 1950s except for two years, whereas in the 1960s it tended to be lower, yet lower in the 1970s, and was below zero in four years of the 1980s up to the cold 1986. Surface sea temperatures around north-west Europe and Greenland in 1971-87 were up to 1C lower than in 1951-60. Hence Scottish winters had more snow in the 1970s and up to the mid-1980s.

In these decades, heavy snowfalls usually became consolidated, because freezing soon followed the brief thaws. Since then, there have still been heavy falls, up to an extreme of 75cm at Ballater on February 4-5, 2001 with a south-easterly storm, but the soft unconsolidated snow melted quickly in mild gales and heavy rain soon after. Good weather in recent years has seldom lasted throughout a winter day on high hills, and gales are so frequent that settled conditions for a long day's trip have become uncommon.

The milder winters have seriously affected Scottish ski centres, culminating in Glenshee Chairlift Co. having to sell its Glencoe centre in mid-winter 2003-04 and declaring bankruptcy in spring 2004. During autumn 2004, agents announced that the managers of Glenshee Ski Centre had bought the business, but they received very little taxpayers' money compared with other centres, and face a difficult crucial first two winters. At the end of January 2005, they told the Press that they were desperate, but the snowy month that came in mid-February saved them.

The number of skier-days (e.g. 10 skiers on two days amounts to 20 skier-days) fluctuates from one winter to another, with peaks in snowy winters and troughs in mild winters, but the general trend was upwards from the 1960s to the mid-1980s. The all-Scotland total of skier-days rose greatly from the early to the mid-1980s, peaking at 655 000 in 1986.

Then it reversed. Mackay Consultants had forecast that the total would rise from 707 000 in 1986-1987 to 1,009 790 in 1991-92 and that expansion of existing and new centres would be needed. In the real, not fantasy world, the totals for these two seasons proved to be 615,000 and 149,000! The three poorest, 1991-1992, 2002-2003 and 2003-2004, had roughly 150,000 each.

Instead of the occasional poor winter being quickly followed by snowy ones, since the late 1980s there have been more runs of two or three poor winters in succession. So far there has been no run of four poor winters at any ski centre, but 2004-2005 up till mid February was a fourth, and unless April is very good the recent winter is unlikely to be a shining success.

The number of skier-days is strongly and negatively correlated with the year, i.e. the later the year, the fewer the skier-days. As the total of skier-days plunged downwards, so did figures at each centre, save at the Lecht where they showed a slight upward trend in recent years when the others fell. Some expected the Lecht to be bankrupt first, because its runs lie at

the lowest altitude. In this review it would be a diversion to explain this apparent anomaly fully. Reasons include smooth terrain and no boulders, thus allowing skiing on thin snow and also the effective trapping of blown spindrift by snow fences.

By dividing the number of skier-days at each centre by the total of Scottish skier-days, one can calculate each centre's slice of the total cake. The biggest percentage drop has been at Cairngorm centre, and the only increase at the Lecht. Comparison of percentages at each centre with the year reveals a strong negative correlation at Cairngorm centre.

There is a strong negative correlation between the percentages at Cairngorm and the Lecht, and a weaker one between Glencoe and Aonach Mor. These are associations of events, not necessarily cause and effect. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to suggest that certain centres affect others adversely, through competition for dwindling trade.

I have no quantitative data on ski-touring, but I am sure about the poorer conditions. Conditions on Aberdeenshire farms, woods, riverbanks and even sea-beaches used to be good for a few days each winter, and sometimes for weeks. I wrote (*The Scotsman*) that in most winters in the 1960s to early 1980s: "There were days when I could put on skis beside my house and skim for mile upon mile by the River Dee, or through woods where deep snow lay heaped on the trees. Each winter I had good afternoons skiing on low moors and hills such as Clachnaben, as well as excellent conditions for ski-mountaineering in the Cairngorms" and The Mounth in almost every winter. In recent years, tours on lowland have seldom been possible, and excellent conditions on high hills have been all too rare. Others tell me the same.

Snow conditions for sledge-dogs have worsened. The Aviemore Sled Dog Rally has had to use wheels in recent years, and again for some of its 2005 meet. The secretary of the Siberian Husky Club of Great Britain said (*Press & Journal*, 21 January 2005): "We have been running for more than 20 years – we keep trying to find snow and we never get it these days."

John Coyne near Banchory has recorded days when he trained his dogs on snow. During most winters in the 1970s, snow lay for most of the season, and he noted this in 1984-1985 and 1985-1986 at the start of his log. Since then, his daily records show 1995-1996 as best with 45 days, but two seasons had only four each, one had seven, two had nine, and 2004-2005 only one day up to January 31.

The milder winters have disrupted snow and ice climbing. *The Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* for 2003 reported: "The winter of 2002-2003 will not be remembered as one of the great Scottish winter seasons....The West in particular suffered from a real lack of snow." And the 2004 Journal mentioned "lack of any significant snowfalls until late March (when it was too late)".

Snow patches on Scottish hills in summer:
In 1938 I became interested in snow patches and in 1974 began a standardised survey on land east of the A9. If visibility was good I included other hills to west Perthshire, Ben Nevis and the north-west Highlands, but haze, mist or rain sometimes hid them. John Pottie described a useful different method, noting in 1973-93 when the last snow in Coire nan Laogh of Ben Wyvis melted as seen daily from his home at Gollanfield. The date varied from mid -June to late August.

In my survey, the highest patch at the start of July was almost at the top of Ben Macdui, and the lowest at 600m south of the Lecht in one year. The density (i.e. number or total length of patches per sq. km of ground) was biggest in corries below the highest tops, the latter being too exposed to hold deep drifts. Each summer the longest wreath lay north-east of Ben Macdui. At the start of July in snowy years, it stretched more than 3km from near the summit to the hillside north of the Feith Buidhe waterfall. In the least snowy year, 2003, it was only 200m long, confined to the upper part of the corrie.

The number of patches at the start of July varied in 1974-1989 from 144 in 1981 to 2896 in 1977, and their total length from 5700m in 1976 to 91 900 m in 1983. The smallest number since was 31 in July 2003. The amount declined greatly from month to month, the mean number in 1974-89 being 1218, 281, 64, and 19 at the starts of July to October respectively, and the mean total lengths 40,300, 82,000, 15.000, and 400m.

The main factor accounting for variation in the number or total length at the start of August and later months was the number or total length at the start of July. Summer weather had little influence, save in rare exceptions where fresh snowfall substantially delayed the melting of old snow. In an extreme case, only two small patches remained in the hot late August of 1976, and I expected them to vanish. Then a severe snowstorm in early September buried them into October, ensuring their survival.

Data on snow were compared with temperature, wind and precipitation at Braemar and Aviemore. By correcting for known changes with altitude, we estimated the temperature, snowfall, and wind speed and direction at the higher altitudes where patches lay. Because most snow on Scottish hills falls in strong winds and then drifts on to sheltered lee slopes, the measure 'snow drift' gave an estimate of the directional supply of snow. The number and total length of patches at the start of July were correlated with winter and spring temperatures, and with calculated amounts of spring snow drift.

For 1974-2004 I have analysed the number of patches at the start of July on the plateau and high corries between Ben Macdui and Cairn Gorm, which is the snowiest part of the UK. Statistical analysis showed strong negative correlations with the year, i.e. a trend to fewer patches. The number of patches was positively correlated with the total of skier-days

over the previous ski season, and with skier-days at Cairngorm and Glenshee centres.

Snow patches that survive till next winter:

Some snow on Ben Nevis and the Cairngorms was regarded back to the mid 1800s as permanent, not vanishing within living memory. Manley (*SMCJ* 1972) gave a useful historical account on long-lying snow in Observatory Gully at Ben Nevis. He evidently lacked personal experience of snow at Garbh Choire Mor on Braeriach, and understated its persistence relative to Observatory Gully. In the *SMCJ*, Berry recounted a year's study at Garbh Choire Mor, but incorrectly stated that snow vanished in 1947. Scottish mountaineer and Arctic explorer, Pat Baird, erected a weather station in 1955 north-east of Ben Macdui summit and studied the nearby snow patch. Between the end of April (maximum) and the end of September 1956 the vertical depth declined 'by over 27ft. – but there was still a foot or two left' as fresh snow fell.

In 1971-1996 I found all snow survivals east of the A9 and on Creag Meagaidh. The highest patch to survive in the Cairngorms was at 1255m. on Ben Macdui, the one studied by Baird, and the lowest at 935m. on Ben Avon facing Tomintoul. Many patches survived till winter in some years, e.g. the total length of them on my survey area amounted to 1210m. in 1983. Since 1996, John Pottie, David Duncan and I have extended coverage to all of the Highlands, and an annual account in *Weather* describes this.

All Scottish snow melted in September 1933, early September 1959, October 1996, and late August 2003. In 2004 only one patch survived till lasting snowfall, in the Cairngorms. Although fresh snow can fall in August or September, it usually melts quickly. To find the date of the first lasting snowfall requires frequent observations and sometimes extra trips to check whether fresh snow has melted. Since 1974 the earliest date has been 6 September 1976 and the latest 5 December 1983.

On Ben Nevis the most persistent snow lies at the top of Observatory Gully, on a sloping shelf covered with boulders, from the east wall at the foot of Gardyloo Gully westwards underneath the wall towards Tower Scoop. A less persistent one sits at the foot of Point Five Gully. Another has been largely overlooked and yet may be as persistent as at Observatory Gully, and has been recorded by us only in the last few years, below the north wall of Aonach Beag. On 20 October 2002, when snow had fallen, it exceeded the one at Observatory Gully. Snow at Aonach Mor often survives till winter in Coire an Lochain, and again the exact sites have been recorded only in recent years.

The UK's most permanent snow lies below Sphinx Ridge in Garbh Choire Mor, so deep that it covers much of the lowest pitch of the ridge in summer, including the hardest moves for a climber. The second most permanent snow sits nearby, below Pinnacles Buttress. Ciste Mhearad on

Cairn Gorm is the next most persistent snow-holding corrie in the Cairngorms. Snow has survived in one or more years at many other places in the Cairngorms, and sometimes on other hills including Lochnagar, Ben Alder and nearby Geal-charn, Beinn a' Chaorainn in Glen Spean, Creag Meagaidh, Sgurr na Lapaich and Toll Creagach. There are other hills where snow has survived more rarely.

Most of the surviving patches are in deep hollows facing northeast and to a lesser extent east or southeast. Much snow blows into these hollows from high ground to the south and round to northwest, especially with the prevailing wind from southwest, and avalanches contribute further snow at hollows on or below steep ground, including Ben Nevis, Aonach Mor and Beag, and Garbh Choire Mor. Very few surviving patches face west.

Most glaciers during the last glaciation faced northeast and carved out deep corries and other hollows with cliffs, which now trap blown snow and avalanche snow. Most corries have easterly aspects, especially the deepest corries and tallest cliffs, such as on Ben Nevis, Aonach Beag, Loch Coruisk, An Teallach, Creag Meagaidh, Loch Avon, and Lochnagar. Snow below tall cliffs that face north or northeast receives little sunshine and melts slowly, such as at Observatory Gully. Secondly, rounded slopes and plateaux towards the prevailing southwest wind are too exposed to hold much snow, so it blows into sheltered corries on the lee side. Thirdly, summer sunshine from the northeast occurs in the morning when air has cooled overnight, whereas sunshine from south round to northwest occurs during midday and afternoon when air has warmed.

Seton Gordon noticed in 1912 that snow at Garbh Choire Mor built up because of drifting from Braeriach plateau behind the cliffs and from a big gathering ground on the Moine Mhor to the southwest. Other examples with broadly similar features are Observatory Gully, Coire an Lochain of Aonach Mor, Coire Ardair, Coire Domhain on Cairn Gorm, Garbh Uisge Mor and Garbh Uisge Beag on Ben Macdui, and the eastern corries of Beinn a' Bhuird.

Three of us studied surrounding topography at 24 locations where snow patches survived in one or more years in 1974-89 (Watson, Davison & French). We wrote, 'A striking feature at surviving patches is the light wind or calm there, even on windy days. They are usually sheltered from prevailing southwest winds, and at some sites from almost all directions. The shelter is localised, such that there can be a gale only 50m away.' We used three topographic measures, fetch, topographic rise and leeward slope, measured for each of eight directions round the compass. For fetch we measured the distance of relatively flat ground, for topographic rise the total vertical rise of terrain, and for leeward slope the total horizontal distance of leeward slopes, in each of the three for 10 km upwind.

The number of years that snow survived at each location was correlated positively and significantly with fetch to the north-north-west and west-

north-west, and with leeward slope to the south-south-west. Other analyses that combined different wind directions and topographic measures accounted for most of the variation in the number of years that snow survived. This still left some variation unexplained. We think that the highly localised topography of the snow-patch hollow itself may explain that, but this has not been studied.

REFERENCES:

Baird, P. D. (1957). Weather and snow on Ben MacDhui. *Cairngorm Club Journal 17,* 147-149.

Berry, W.G. (1967). Salute to Garbh Choire Mor. *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal 28,* 273-274.

Gordon, S. (1912). *The charm of the hills.* Cassell, London

Harrison, J. (1997). Changes in the Scottish climate. *Botanical Journal of Scotland 49,* 287-300.

Harrison, J., Winterbottom, S. & Johnson, R. (2001). Climate change and changing snowfall patterns in Scotland. *Research Findings No 14,* Environment Group Research Programme, Scottish Executive Central Research Unit.

Hulme, M. and Jenkins, G. (1998). Climate change scenarios for the UK. Summary report. *UK Climate Impacts Programme, Technical Report 1.*

Jones, P. D. (1988). Hemispheric surface air temperature variations: recent trends and an update to 1987. *Journal of Climate 1,* 654-660.

Mackay Consultants (1988). *The future development of the Scottish skiing industry.* Unpublished report to Tourism and Leisure Division, Scottish Development Agency.

Manley, G. (1972). Scotland's semi-permanent snows. *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal 30,* 4-15.

Mayes, J. (1996). Spatial and temporal fluctuations of monthly rainfall in the British Isles and variations in the mid-latitude westerly circulation. *International Journal of Climatology* 16, 585-596.

Parker, D. E. and Folland, C. K. (1986). The nature of climatic variability. *Meteorological Magazine* 117, 201-210.

Parker, D. E., Jones, P. D., Folland, C. K. and Bevan, A. (1994). Interdecadal changes of surface temperature since the late 19th century. *Journal of Geophysical Research 99,* 14373-14399.

Pottie, J. M. (1995). Scottish snowbeds: records from three sites. *Weather 50,* 124-129.

Watson, A. (2004). Disappearing mountain snow patches confirm warming trend. *The Scotsman,* 10 November, p.19.

Watson, A. Davison, R.W. and French, D.D. (1994). Summer snow patches and climate in North-east Scotland, UK. *Arctic and Alpine Research 26,* 141-151.

Watson, A., Davison, R.W. and Pottie, J. (2002). Snow patches lasting until winter in North-east Scotland in 1971-2000. *Weather 57,* 374-385.

Watson, A., Pottie, J. and Duncan, D. (2003). Five UK snow patches last until winter 2002-03. *Weather 58,* 226-229.

Watson, A., Pottie, J. and Duncan, D. (2004). No Scottish snow patches survive through the summer of 2003. *Weather 59,* 125-126.

Wilby, R. L., O'Hare, G. and Barnsley, N. (1997). The North Atlantic Oscillation and British Isles climatic variability, 1865-1996. *Weather* 52, 266-276.

A MOVING EXPERIENCE

By David Adam

THE pilgrimage had started on The Curtain. Queuing for communion service on Sunday morning at the pulpit of some vast and cold cathedral. Their Bibles were guidebooks with neat ticks or circles on each chapter that they had completed. Journeys there and back again were etched into that personal code, not even a date was scribed, no sign of the epic struggles that climbers seem to be able to recall. When I was young, I had a bird book with a tick list, once you had spotted a new bird you ticked it off and then it was forgotten history. Some climbers are like that.

"What's it called, Dave?" said Paul in a doubting Aberdonian tone, in between sucks on a barley sugar. "Em, I think it's something called, Fawlty Towers."

I couldn't be sure because the guidebook wasn't too sure either. Well, with a name like that it's got to be fun, anything to cheer us up during this foul Ben weather. The traipse up from the hut was in an easterly gale full of icy grit and the sudden shelter of the Douglas boulder was quiet and reassuring. Paul ploughed on upwards, through chest deep powder, to what looked like the initial groove line. The big, black owner of the boulder flew overhead with half a branch in his beak, a Noah's ark throwback in negative. "Barley sugar, Dave?" the offer was welcomed alongside grim thoughts of choking to death on this sugary carbuncle if I happened to fall off. "It's only grade two, in the guide." I spluttered. Experience had soured the imaginary bond of kindness between the mountain and the guidebook years ago. We had no guidebook with us and I was relying on vague memories gleaned from an abandoned one lying on the hut table that morning. One with precise tiny circles next to all the trade route climbs that the owner had worshipped on.

"This must be it, twenty feet right of West gully" I said, feeling like some displaced treasure hunter ready to dig for glory. Steep groove lines are not usually in the grade two category, but after all, this was the Ben. It was nice to feel some ice under the ever impatient front points after floundering around down there in snow that always seemed to encourage excuses to stop and go home. The groove opened up and steepened, my barley sugar had melted in time with the ice and I was scratching around on bare rock. The smell of metal on rock tingled through every nerve. This shouldn't be happening on a grade two. I whacked the Vertige into the one and only ice boss left, some two feet above me. Moved up on a wobbly leg and pulled out the axe at face level. A mad rush of water gushed out of the pick hole, like a demented garden hose. To get this far only to be the first man drowned on The Ben. Face, gloves, sleeves and

oxters were soaked. Bung the hole, bung it. Desperate floundering and bridging to escape the oozing solved the problem, over the ice bulge and breast stroke thrusts sunk into deep snow above, led to a heavenly cave. A feeling of womb like insulation ensued and I crunched up what was left of my barley sugar. From my quiet nest I could spy the service in progress, out across on Cam Dearg the cave shrine was busy.

Stepping out left from the cave now, an escape from the bedlam of twisted ropes and a jostling, uneasy second, easier progress in true gully style was made. A further slabby groove offered up precarious high stepping and bridging. The Ben's tight lipped rock offered no cracks for protection and the ever scanning eye found no comfort in an ancient peg, just bare unwelcoming solidarity. Paul, who was still wondering what route he was on, came bounding up in desperation.

"You didn't waste any time there" I said.

"Dave, I'm bursting," came the exasperated reply.

"Eh, what do you mean?" I enquired, with a hint of suspicion in my voice.

"I need to empty my bowels now and can't wait" said Paul.

"Didn't you think about that this morning?" I said.

"I didn't need then," came the impatient reply. Unfortunately, we were in full view of our friends across on South West ridge, who were hassling us to take a photo of their leader at the crux move. A convenient deepening in the gully was chosen and contingency measures were thrown into action, involving dubiously removing one rope end and tying it on to the shoulder straps of his rucksack, so that he could remove his harness and perform.

"Will that be strong enough, Dave, I'll need to lean back on it a bit" said Paul.

"Can you take a photo?" shouted Mike from the South West ridge.

"No, we can't, he's having a crap." I bawled back at him.

"He's what?" said Mike, in a stretched Lancastrian accent, still struggling on the crux.

"He's having a crap," I shouted. Meanwhile, an embarrassed Paul emerged from the gloomy spindrift looking much better for his ordeal.

"I hope that you haven't mucked up any gear," I said. He had managed all this without taking his harness off.

"Naw, but that spindrift fair freezes yer backside", came the shivering reply.

Back in the groove I was stuck, well and truly stuck. My right knee was wedged like a chokestone in a wide crack below a final bulge. It wouldn't move at all and my left crampon was scratching on the opposite wall. Thoughts of how the rescue team might have to perform open-air surgery up here flashed before me. All the aerobic contortions that I could imagine were put into action, twisting, pulling, wiggling, all to no avail. Would a hydraulic ram fit into that crack? What about the cheap washing-up liquid

down in the hut, that might slide it out. God, my knee could be here for ever. Thrutching up onto the flake gave my left crampon some grip again and I managed to put some weight back down on the knee. Pain had started and a cold dreary sweat had taken over. There's no way out of this, just a farce, a crazy cock-up from start to finish. Logic tried to step in. Treat your knee like a big hex. that's stuck in a crack, I said to myself push it back in the way it came and squeeze down. Don't want to leave it here, not on The Ben. It worked, it bloody well worked, my Scots bred meaness hadn't left me yet! The leg popped out all in one piece to great applause from my belly who quickly mounted the offending flake snout in a friction embrace. The freed right leg bated the crack again and The Ben snapped like a jumping dog but failed to bite. Paul came up, axe at the ready to amputate above the knee, I think he just might have.

Abseiling into Douglas gap was a dream and freedom, wallowing deeper and deeper into the soft comfort of thigh deep powder in West Gully. The sermon on The Curtain was over for the day, yet two climbers approached it. Helmets with head-torches on, the candle-lit procession for mid-night mass had begun. Down at the hut, a tented village was sprouting. Two dark skinned, oriental looking chaps were busy building a huge wall of snow around their tent. Paul and I shared brief, knowing stares and simultaneously blurted out,

"Eskimos"

Back in the hut, two huge rucksacks were taking up all the room on the bench.

"Oh, ye'd betta get thae boys in ere, it's their sacks, see," came the explanation from a Geordie prowling about. I marched out and whistled on the Eskimos, gesticulating about sacks and their removal. "Move now, sacks, yes." not the politest of welcomes, I suppose, if you've just flown in from Canada. Down they came and struggled with these massive sacks, squeezing them through the door. Time for the proving question.

"Eh, where are you from then?" I enquired in a nice sort of way, expecting a reply that might stagger even the most ardent of pilgrims. Baffin Island would have done.

"Canterbury, dear boy, Canterbury".

Fawlty Towers had lived up to it's name, and yet I cannot tick this one in the guidebook, after all, I might not have been there at all. One thing's certain, when the weather is bad and the conditions are foul on The Ben, I'll be back up that groove line for a fine mixed climb to rank alongside the best that any grade' two' can offer.

CLIMBING ABOVE THE WORM GRASS

By Geoff Cohen

In the 1970s I used to have to lecture in one of those characterless tower blocks, epitomes of dreary 1960s architecture, which the University of Edinburgh so cruelly bestowed upon its maternal city. My lectures were probably equally dreary. Emerging desiccated after an hour spent explaining index numbers, or some such exhilarating topic, I would pass by some tables set up in the basement where a rudimentary second-hand bookstall was arranged. The sellers were two delightful hippies, clearly permanent students, with little interest in large profits. I suppose they got most of their books from departing students and retiring academics. There were plenty of classics and course texts, but there was also a sprinkling of unusual gems. In this way I came across, for example, *In search of the Mahatmas of Tibet*, by E. G. Schary, a highly independent American who, in the early 1920s walked solo from Ladakh across the barren Changthang into central Tibet. Another author that caught my fancy was Peter Goullart, a Belgian who spent the inter-war years based in Shanghai. He would escape when he could to the hills of Yunnan in south-west China. His description of Lijiang fixed itself in my imagination, an ancient jewel of a town where exotic ethnic groups lived together harmoniously.

With a certain lack of initiative I made no effort to visit this region after China began to open to visitors in the early 1980s. It remained a kind of Shangri-La of the imagination. I was a bit like the famous physicist, Richard Feynman, who had a lifelong fascination with the republic of Tannu Tuva (a Siberian enclave close to Mongolia). Feynman read everything he could about Tuva, collected its stamps, talked about it to his friends, but never went there. Perhaps he preferred to retain it as a mysterious port for his voyaging imagination.

The stimulus that finally started me on the road to China was Tamotsu Nakamura's splendid series of articles and photographs of *East of the Himalaya*. 'Tom', as he is happy to be called, is an elderly Japanese mountaineer who has made numerous journeys of exploration in Eastern Tibet and South-west China, all meticulously documented. In 2002 I found myself in Greenland talking to Martin Scott of the Alpine Club about Tom Nakamura's exploits. We managed later to draw in Dick Isherwood, a very old friend of mine with long experience of the Far East, and Bill Thurston, an old climbing buddy of Martin's. We were all the wrong side of 55, and Martin and Dick were in their early 60s, so it was clear that a modest objective was called for. No Siguniang–like adventures for us, though we did get enthusiastic advice from Mick Fowler, as well as very generous assistance with maps and photos from Tom. Finally, we focused on Haizi Shan (Tibetan name Ja Ra) which appeared to be quite accessible, was not too high (5820m.), had a reasonably friendly looking North face, and was still unclimbed. This would not take me anywhere near fabled Lijiang, but

at least I would dip a toe in south-west China and eastern Tibet. This was my first visit to China proper. I don't count the so-called SMC China expedition of 1988 which ventured only into Chinese central Asia where we saw far more Kirghiz and Uighurs than Han Chinese. This time we flew to Beijing and on to Chengdu where we had arranged to avail ourselves of the services of an adventure travel company. Chengdu was astonishingly modern and clean (cleaner than most British cities), and boasted climbing shops where we found good down clothing with western labels at Chinese prices! Since nearly everything these days seems to be made in China (even a future edition of *The Munros* apparently, if the Publications Company gets its way! Ed.) perhaps I should not have been surprised by this, nor by the vast Carrefour supermarket where we could select our hill food from among shelves stacked with Boddington's beer, French bread and less familiar Chinese spices and vegetables.

Leaving 40 miles of nearly empty new motorway that runs eastwards from Chengdu across perfectly flat, rich farmland, we drove in poor weather over a high pass and found ourselves back in more familiar Himalayan-type territory – steep, arid gorges and small towns at the confluence of turbulent mountain rivers. We spent our first night in one such place, Danba, lodged in a spanking new hotel, The Old Castle, where next morning we were presented with the traditional Tibetan white scarves by local beauties dressed in traditional costume, all recorded on video for the benefit, no doubt, of some tourist promotion.

However, when we reached base camp at around 3300m. the Tibetans who crowded around our embarrassingly large Land Cruisers were a rather different crowd, variously clad in all manner of ancient and modern dress, a few with the latest leather jackets and sunglasses, but most with traditional plain cloaks. The 10-mile valley we had driven up was fertile and well-wooded, with clear patches for pasturing yaks and a welcoming stream, probably rich in fish. Five minutes away was a large Tibetan encampment in the trees. Their tents were made of a blue and red striped sheeting that appeared ubiquitous throughout this part of Tibet. The community of maybe as many as a hundred people had established themselves there for the spring 'Worm Grass' harvest. This traditional Chinese medicine, made from a fungus that grows on dead caterpillars, is said to increase strength and cure back and knee pains, among many other excellent properties, and apparently forms the basis of the Tibetan economy in this region as it is only found in high mountain areas and commands a high price. Men and women, young and old, scoured the hillsides for this precious commodity using little trowel-like digging tools.

The north face of our mountain rose just a short distance away, looking very snowy above the first 1500ft. of forest. We could easily make out the route attempted the previous autumn by Neil Carruthers, following a moraine ridge to gain a broad snow shelf that ran parallel to the prominent and apparently straightforward east ridge. This pair from Hong Kong had

reached the north summit but had not had time to go to the main summit, some half-mile farther on.

We spent our first day on an acclimatisation walk up to a stone bothy where a Tibetan family were living with their animals. With the aid of our friendly interpreter Xiao Mei we were invited in for tea. There was a swaddled baby in a corner, two pretty sisters, cheeks highly rouged (like all the Tibetan women) wearing long maroon coats made of modern fleece material and an old leather-faced man who turned his prayer wheel continuously. We were told we were the first westerners these people had seen.

Next day we decided on a reconnaissance. The first hour of our approach was on an excellent track used by the worm grass collectors. Families of all ages carrying kettles and picnic baskets as well as their trusty digging tools thronged the path. Noticing my pathetic pace the teenagers had a friendly laugh at me, imitating my laboured steps aided by trekking poles. They offered to carry my sack but I was too proud to accept. At a lake below our peak there were prayer flags everywhere, and the air echoed to the shouts of the picnicking groups. The lake was frozen solid on this visit, enabling us to walk on the edge and avoid the surrounding thick bushes, where the thin track was deep in snow. But above the lake our tribulations soon started. The most feasible route was through thick rhododendron forest where each step meant pushing aside strong-limbed trees then stepping through several feet of powder snow onto a base of slippery branches or icy rocks more likely than not to trip or trap the foot. With moderately heavy loads and unused to the altitude it was purgatory. I very much doubt I would have made progress at all had it not been for Dick's demonic energy, stamping a trail up to a refrain of curses. A little higher we got into a gully which avoided the worst of the forest but not the snow. After a short icy section we left a dump of food and gear by some characteristic trees.

Bruised by this preliminary skirmish we elected to let the snow consolidate for a while. We made a pleasant excursion to some hot springs. Finer than the well-known pools near Askole, these offered the perfect hot bath, the temperature constantly maintained, with a soft gravelly floor, a surface of bright green algae and backrest boulders perfectly placed to let us peruse the maze of couloirs high on the east flank of Haizi Shan. Another day began promisingly with a walk up to a high valley with fine peaks of 14,000ft. to 16,000ft., allowing me to daydream about carefree lightweight camping and weeks spent bagging these attractive Tibetan Munros with only the odd yak in the valleys for company. Sadly the dreaming was soon shattered. A party of Tibetans with a train of yaks was descending towards us from the Tagong direction. As Dick stepped aside to let them pass one of the mastiffs mauled him quite badly on both legs. We had heard of the savagery of Tibetan dogs, but this was my first encounter for real. The ripped flesh was worrying, but Xiao Mei assured us that rabies was unlikely

and Dick patched himself up as best he could. A few days later we returned to the fray, taking five days' food and hoping that melting snow and improved acclimatization would carry us to swift success. Optimism was quickly deflated. The snow remained abominable and the first day we only reached about 100m. above our previous dump. It took us two more days to plough up a twisting moraine ridge and establish a camp at 5200m. We left a dump of gear about 250m. higher but then poor weather set in and we were forced to retreat to base and sit out a storm. Life here was enlivened by the purchase of large supplies of beer from a one-toothed Tibetan who kept a curious shop in a tent. Added to our copious whisky supplies and plentiful reading material, and the unfailing flow of food from our cook Jin-Jin and the ever cheerful Xiao Mei, base camp was not a place of austerity. Gaggles of Tibetans, especially the women, came frequently to stare at us, which gave us the privilege of staring back at them and sometimes photographing them. The ladies wore immensely colourful headdresses in orange and maroon, covered in jewellery, much of it looking remarkably like electrical insulators. I was sorry we couldn't invite them into our mess tent, but space was limited and the others seemed reluctant to give any sign of open house in case we were inundated.

On May 1, we set off again and this time reached our 5200m. camp in a single long day. But next day increasing breathlessness forced us to camp again only a little higher at our gear dump. We had originally hoped to carry the tents up the east ridge of the mountain to a col below the north summit. This would have given us a full day to do the traverse between the north and main summits, which appeared to be the only mildly technical part of the climb. But now, to avoid carrying loads any further I suggested trying to reach the summit in a day from this lower camp. 'Summit day' started with a plod in the dark up deep soft snow at quite a steep angle. From the east ridge at dawn we were rewarded with magnificent views over a cloud sea to the Minya Konka range – hundreds of mouth-watering unclimbed peaks in a land barely touched by mountaineers!

The ridge was steeper than I had expected – not technically difficult, but corniced and mighty exposed. It rose in waves, one beyond another, each concealing the hoped for summit. In a few places we could see faint outlines of the Carruthers party's footsteps from the previous October. Bill and Martin had, unfortunately, decided to descend from the ridge (Bill was not well), but Dick and I kept up a good pace and reached the north summit about 11am. At this stage I was full of optimism. Beyond was a short descent where a crevasse required us to don the rope at last, then an agonisingly slow plod along a horizontal section in deep snow. Confronted by an icy step that from below we had thought might be the crux, Dick took a belay and I stepped across a suspicious chasm to get onto the north face of the step. Front-pointing up this was not really difficult (maybe only 60°), but the altitude was telling. It took me ages to set up a belay at the top and when I had finished I had little confidence in it. The surface snow was

meringue like and my laboriously hammered-in axe belay rattled around in a hole with only aerated ice of the cornice holding it in. I could not find anywhere decent for ice screws. Ahead was a narrow horizontal ridge, then another step very similar to the one we had just climbed but a bit longer. Beyond this the ridge rose at a gentler angle for only a short distance to the summit. For a fit young party it should have been less than an hour to the top. But we were not such a party. Dick, once among the best rock climbers in England, does not climb these days and did not seem at ease on this ground. I was not so put out technically, but was very aware of how slowly I was going and how easy it would be to make a mistake on this unforgiving ground, where safe belays seemed almost impossible to arrange. Pitching it at the rate we were going we reckoned it would probably have taken us four hours to go up and down the remaining few hundred feet. Had we had the sense to carry bivvy gear we might have continued. But in the event an elderly discretion won the day and we reluctantly turned our backs on the attractive pointed summit that seemed so tantalisingly close.

The descent from the north summit was down a glacier recommended by Carruthers as being easier than retracing the ridge. By now the weather had turned quite bad (another factor in our decision), with painful spindrift blowing everywhere. The glacier curved over convexly, forcing us to abseil off a snow mushroom. A little farther down after some awkward routefinding choices a similar abseil was called for over a steeper ice cliff. Luckily, the landing was on a broad soft snow shelf, for when Dick came down the mushroom decided to disintegrate when he was still 15ft. up, landing in a heap much to my embarrassment (as I had set up the anchor). The descent went on and on, as glaciers do, and was followed by a short rocky traverse to regain the snow shelf where we were camped. We reached the tents just as dusk fell, somewhat justifying the decision to retreat.

Next day's descent was long and even more purgatorial in the rhododendron forest as the gully was now too icy to descend. We had to slide down slippery rock slabs hanging onto tree branches. In the afternoon as we reached base the weather turned really bad, making us glad we had not bivvied the previous night or rested on our laurels in the tent. In fact, the next morning the base camp scene, normally a pleasant meadow was totally white and Christmassy, and Xiao Mei built a splendid snowman before the hot sun came out and burned it all away.

We had a few days left, but not enough for another attempt. Rather than wander among the much lower peaks we chose to take a trip farther west towards Tibet proper (the region we were in, though ethnically and historically Tibetan, is now part of Sichuan). This involved lots of driving and enough Buddhist monasteries to jade our appetites for sightseeing, but also offered the opportunity to cross several passes and get glimpses of some of the other barely touched mountain ranges in this part of China. The scope for new mountains and new routes is immense.

MINUS ONE DIRECT WITH THE DOC

By John Workman

SATURDAY 14, August 2004 – the fates threw me and Lex together for a day, *and a night,* on Ben Nevis.

We leave my house on Argyll Road, Fort William at 7am *sur la bicyclette* and puff and pant our way up the BA zigzags followed by a walk up the Allt a Mhuilinn trail in the pleasant warm sunshine. The Hill is unusually quiet – which is nice. The only other parties that we saw all day were the usual dribble of twos and threes on Tower Ridge and another pair on Observatory Ridge.

Our chosen route for the day is Minus One Direct (now E1) and it's described in the guidebook as one of the most enjoyable routes known to mankind, at its grade. We arrive in the basin at the foot of the vast Minus and Orion Faces to find water streaks down the lower part of the route. Too late now to change our plan, so we gear up and scramble up the first pitch. The routes here are 800ft. long, plus the finish either up or down North East Buttress. They have a very Alpine feeling, although the high summer rainfall this year has washed away the large patch of old névé that sometimes remains from one year to the next. Lex gets the honour of leading off and makes short work of a wet 4B crack that I find very awkward to follow. I put this down to the rucksack that I'm carrying, which, although supposedly only containing our approach shoes and spare jackets seems strangely heavy. I suppose it must be the water bottles and sandwiches that are causing the problem – or is it my aging bones and muscles. Anyway, I dump the sack at the belay and look up at the next pitch.

I climbed Minus One Buttress a long time ago – no comments please – when it was a 'Scottish VS.' On that occasion I was unable to lead the harder but better variation and we finished up the original line. Today I'm hoping that Lex and I will crack the Serendipity and Arête Variations.

I remember this next pitch (now given 4C), passing a block on a steep wall. Today, the usual way is running with water so I have to resort to a devious bypass on the left. This goes with a bit of a struggle and then I head off up some short walls looking for a 'great pedestal' – according to the guidebook. I arrive at the said pedestal and it seems fairly familiar but when we check the route description it says that I should have only climbed 25m. when in fact I've climbed 45m. Lex 'has a look' in the direction of where we think the next pitch might go but he returns saying it looks unlikely (aka impossible).

After a recent outing on Church Door Buttress with Mark 2 and The

Apprentice, where my memory served me very badly and took me up a blind and rather frightening alley, I'm beginning to doubt my route finding ability. To compound the problem, although we are at a great pedestal, there's another equally 'great pedestal' exactly 20m. below us. So, we decide to abb back down to it. Lex goes first, I follow, but when I get there the route description doesn't really fit and the line looks bloody frightening. Eventually, we decide to go back up to the first 'great pedestal' from where we'll either go up or down. All this palaver costs us a couple of hours, a couple of hours that will become significant later, as you will see.

Success! Lex tries again from the pedestal, makes some moves around an arête, finds evidence of previous passage and we climb the first crux – supposedly 5b, but I'd shade that down a grade. Next comes the Serendipity variation – across a fine steep slab, around another arête and up, then out of a groove by some unlikely looking moves – 5a. I'm very pleased to get my revenge on this one from 20-odd years ago.

Another 4c slab pitch takes us onto The Arête Variation and into the sunshine. This is good news and bad news, as they say. It's good to have the warm sun on our backs but it means that either we are quite high up on the route or it's getting late in the day. Another check of the guidebook reveals that we still have four pitches to go. The next one being the second crux 5b, and time *is* getting on, around 5pm I think.

This next pitch is a cracker. It traverses a steep slab underneath a very long narrow overhang. Halfway along you move up underneath the overhang and then bypass it on some underclings, arriving at an undercut arête and a stance with nothing below but several hundred feet of thin air. I make it, but unfortunately, drop a bunch of Lex's small wires into the thin air, trying to protect the moves under the roof.

It's a pity we decided not to take the camera. It must be one of the most photogenic bits of climbing I've done in recent years. Lex follows with the rucksack. He arrives safely at the stance and enthuses over the quality and exposure of the pitch. Next another 4c crack and yet another steep slab. I don't know whether it's my antics on the crux or the exposure that have got to Lex (or is it both?) but he gibbers his way very tenuously up the first few moves. He later admitted to having thoughts running through his head that his hands were too weak, the belay was going to fail, and that we'd both be taking a big dive through that thin air that I was talking about.

Eventually, he regains control and climbs another fine pitch. We manage to increase speed up the last two or three pitches as the grade falls away to 4b and then scrambling. The top of the route lands us on the second platform of North East Buttress, with still several hundred feet to go to the summit. We move quickly together up this easy ground,

vanquishing the 'Man Trap' and 'The Forty Foot Corner' at pace. Even so, its 9.30pm by the time we reach the summit plateau in gathering gloom and mist. We have the customary handshake, and with wide grins, we pack away the gear, swig the last of the water and exchange painful rock shoes – aka 'stickies' so I'm told, although such a term conjures up an entirely different image in my head – for comfy approach shoes.

The mist is swirling in and we head off to find the nearest descent route – down the Cairn Mor Dearg arête.

"Time to get out torches," I say, but Lex, the foolish virgin that he is, has not only forgotten to trim his wick but has also omitted to bring a torch. He obviously hasn't been on enough expeditions with the Doc to learn that if there's one thing that you should take with you when out on the hill with me, it's a torch. Getting back on time and in daylight is a rare luxury.

We reach the bealach of the arête in the last of the gloaming. From here on down it's the visually impaired – I'm using a new, but somewhat dim Petzel Tika fibre optic torch - leading the partially sighted - Lex following behind in the vague light and shadows. We teeter and stumble our way down the interminable boulder fields of Corrie Leis at snail's pace. I now feel fully qualified to apply for any usherette position in any cinema in the land.

If the SMC guidebook hadn't given us that bum route description we'd have been well past the hut by the time it got dark and we'd have saved ourselves all this faffing about. Guidebook writers must be among the most-often-cursed people on the planet and we add our two penn'eth to the pot.

Boulder hopping in Corrie Leis even in the daytime often reminds me of John Main who, after soloing something probably quite outrageous on the Ben, a good few years back, slipped in the Corrie and dislocated his middle finger at the second joint. He had to walk alone, all the way down and into the Belford Hospital with the finger sticking out across the other fingers at ninety degrees to the proper angle. Ouch! So I'm always a bit careful about how I tread on the boulders on the Ben.

We reach the CIC hut around midnight and waste another half-hour or more searching for my rucksack that I'd left under an 'obvious' boulder. Finally, we make it to the bikes and we're relieved to slip into downhill freewheeling mode, arriving back at my house at 3.30am Sunday morning. That means it took us six hours to descend from the top of the Ben.

All this will no doubt has a very familiar ring to many of you who have chanced your arm on 'The Hill' with 'The Doc'.

Food, beer and Lex's inevitable whisky, combined with almost twenty hours 'on the hoof' soon reduce us to that pleasant semi-zombified state

and we slope off to bed to sleep the sleep of the just. (Just off the hill that is).

We rose late on the Sunday and I'm thinking 'rest day' but Lex, after showering and breakfasting suggests a walk out – back to the foot of the route to search for the dropped wires. After my initial shock, I suspect that this is some precursor to a negotiation for the cost of replacing his lost gear but it turns out that he really does just want some fresh air and exercise. Before I realise what I've said, I agree to accompany him. So at noon we head off again on the bikes. It crossed my mind to suggest that if we were going that far then we should take a rope and climb Observatory Buttress but something – good sense or old age? – made me bite my tongue.

In the end we enjoyed another pleasant day together. We did find a couple of the wires but the main lot of them must be still somewhere up on the Minus Face. And good luck to anyone who comes across them.

Ambling our way down in the afternoon sunshine we chatted about this and that and remarked on the beautiful clumps of ling and bell heather that are in bloom everywhere. And how the white bog-cotton and dark yellow asphodels are making their appearance, which must mean the turning of another summer. Finally, we call in at the enigmatically named 'Ben Fong' takeaway for chips, but no ice cream, and then to the parting of the ways once more.

I'll be pointing out the 20m. error in the guidebook to the SMC. Strangely, the previous edition of the guidebook is correct, so they'll be putting this down to a printing error. It seemed at first as though it was going to spoil the day for a couple of Englishmen but in retrospect it actually made it more memorable. Having said that, Scots do go up there too, so I expect the SMC will be rectifying the error in due course, so as to avoid incurring the wrath of the natives.

GOLDEN JUBILING

A celebration of 50 years of the Ling Hut

By Dave Broadhead

OVER the years, the Scottish Mountaineering Club has gradually established a network of five huts, situated in some of the finest mountain locations in the country. This aspect of the Club's activities has required foresight, commitment and a lot of hard work from the members involved, and the generous support of others.

Custodians especially have taken on a never-ending round of booking inquiries, sending out keys, collecting dues, maintaining the buildings and organising work parties. It is not just SMC members who have benefited from this enormous effort, as the huts are available to members of all clubs. Climbers and hillwalkers from throughout Britain and beyond have used them as a comfortable and convenient base for enjoying the Scottish hills in all seasons.

To celebrate the Golden Jubilee of the Ling Hut, for many years the Club's most northerly hut, this article looks back through the pages of the Journal and some personal reminiscences.

In April, 1955, the Club opened its third hut, in Glen Torridon, the jewel of the Northern Highlands, an isolated cottage in a superb situation near the entrance to Coire Dubh Mor, separating Liathach and Beinn Eighe, two of Scotland's finest mountains.

Coulin Cottage at Lochan Iasgaic, Glen Torridon, has been leased to the club and is to be known as the Ling Hut. It has three rooms and there is a byre. It has been repaired and equipped. There are six beds. (1955-SMCJ 146)

The official opening of the hut was combined with the Easter Meet, based at Kinlochewe Hotel.

On Saturday 9th April 1955 thirty two members and guests – were present at the official opening – by Mrs G.T. Glover, who came up from Carlisle specially for the occasion.

...the President paid tribute to Willy Ling and George Glover, two great friends through whose generosity the hut has been established in the area where they did so much of their pioneering climbing. (1955-SMCJ 146)

The Journal of the following year featured two tiny photographs of the

new hut. One was a typically solemn group shot of the opening ceremony, while the other showed a rather austere building with the familiar ugly steel security grills across the windows and a makeshift corrugated iron porch. George Peat (Conon Bridge) was first and longest-serving Hon. Custodian, from 1955-1967. AGM reports in the Journals of that era give some insight into 'housekeeping' issues.

Improvements have been carried out – a new kitchen stove, calor gas etc. Already 225 hut nights have been recorded, half of these during the spring. (1956-SMCJ 147)

The Ling Hut was again most popular about Easter. Coal has been delivered to the hut direct, by the volunteer help of Hector Cameron with the Coulin Estate tractor. (1958-SMCJ 149)

...only the porch requires attention (1960 – SMCJ 151)

No more mention is made of the porch, which disappeared into the mists of history. With no easy vehicular access, the problem of delivering fuel to the hut has always been a headache for Custodians.

A supply of coal waits expectantly at the road end. (1962-SMCJ 154)

The open fire also disappeared into history, replaced by total reliance on the familiar big red cylinders of propane for heating and lighting. Originally, these were delivered to the far side of Loch Iasgaich, then floated across and man-handled up to the hut, until the instigation of the biannual gas lift. This requires the organisation of slick teams of lifters and shifters at both ends of the brief flight, when time in the air means money. On the subject of hut economics, details of hut nights etc remain buried in the minutes of Huts Sub-Committee meetings, but Journal reports of Meets give an indication of the popularity of the hut with members. At the Easter Meet of 1960, based in Lochcarron, four people stayed in the hut, rising to five in 1963, based at Kinlochewe. A new Custodian, Charlie Rose (Alligin) took over in 1968, serving until 1971. An alarming AGM report noted:

...use of the Ling Hut fell remarkably (1968 – SMCJ 159)

Fortunately, this seems to have been a short lived trend, as the Journal editor explained in his introduction to the ever growing 'New Climbs':

Because of the volume of exploration in the Northern Highlands I have split the area into 3 divisions... (1970-SMCJ 161)

Roger Robb (Dingwall) took over the Custodianship in 1972, serving until 1974, continuing the tradition of gradual improvements to the building:

New Year Meet – A party of twelve members and guests enjoyed a comfortable and pleasant New Year...All were most impressed by the remarkable improvements in the hut's facilities and décor. The weather was mixed and the snow scarce. (1972-SMCJ 163)

Other incentives were dangled before Club members to encourage greater use of all the huts:

A rise in the Club subscription (to meet increased costs).....was coupled with an offer of free hut use which drew groans of dismay from the Custodians as they saw their only "perk" disappear. (1973 – SMCJ 164).

In Memoriam. Bill Young.

Huts Convenor from 1972-76.....remarkable programme of renovation at all three huts...at Ling...the now standard sleep-shelf replaced the old squeaky uncomfortable two-tiered iron bunks. (2004 – MCJ 195).

Despite these enticements, the main deterrent to making the then long and arduous journey north was, of course, the unreliable weather.

Easter Meet...based at Kinlochewe with quite a few members and guests at the Ling Hut...the weather was somewhat mixed – very wet on Saturday. (1977 – SMCJ 168).

Easter Meet held at Kinlochewe Hotel and Ling Hut...despite the rough weather it was an enjoyable meet. (1979 – SMCJ 170).

Jim Anton (Contin) served as Custodian from 1975 to 1982. According to his obituary (1996-SMCJ 187) he was 75 when he took on the job. In contrast, his successor, Gerry Smith (Inverness) was the youngest, and sadly, the shortest serving Custodian.

The tragic death of Gerry Smith, while descending North East Buttress, after completing an ascent of Minus Two Gully came as a cloud to us all. (1983 – SMCJ 174).

Clive Rowland (Cawdor) stepped in to fill the breach, serving until 1987, and carrying out some major improvements with the help of Ken Hopper, a builder based in Plockton. Ken was a rare practitioner of that fickle trade who seemed to relish working on remote jobs in the hills.

Torridon Meet 17-19 May 1985 – Ling Hut. The hut was full for the whole weekend...12 members and five guests signed in...thanks to Clive

Rowland's magnificent kitchen cum common room, managed very nicely. The weather was mixed. (1986 – SMCJ 177).

By now the outside of the hut was also much improved in appearance by the occasional coat of white masonry paint, making a distinct and photogenic landmark in the glen.

Translocation of Ling Hut. A member who is also a reader of Woman's Own has drawn our attention to an advert in that prestigious publication which shows the Ling Hut in full colour. The blurb avers the hut is the home of Rory McTavish, that it is located on "a remote island" and that Mrs McTavish will soon be receiving from the mainland a new kind of porridge made of wheat and nuts and raisins (yuk). The club legal advisers are looking into the possibility of royalties. (1984 – SMCJ 175).

The present author (Inverness/Muir of Ord) served as Custodian from 1987-1996. By now, upgrading of the A9 road had significantly speeded up the drive to Inverness from the south, and the single-track sections beyond were rapidly disappearing. Weekend visits from the Central Belt were now feasible, and a growing number of clubs booked the hut for their annual meets programme. The flush toilet was finally operational, improving the immediate surroundings of the building. Twelve sleeping spaces were now available on the two 'mattressenlager'in the main bedroom, with four more spaces in the Members Room reserved for Club members. The popular members key system made access easier, with demand high when word spread of good winter climbing conditions. Revision of the Northern Highlands climbing guides in the late 1980s resulted in a lot more winter climbing activity, and the discovery that good conditions were more common than previously thought.

Hamish Irvine (Aviemore) did a temporary one year 'locum' in 1997, enjoying it so much that this stretched to 2002 when Bill Skidmore (Lochcarron), the current Custodian, took over.

Recent improvements include a wooden floor and double-glazing. The latter enabled removal of the original mesh security screens, which always had nightmare implications in the event of a fire. Ling Hut still lacks some of the mod-cons such as showers and microwaves found in other huts, but for most users the magnificent situation more than compensates for the basic facilities.

In December 2004, a gas generator was carried in and a low voltage lighting system will finally replace the fragile (and expensive) gas mantles.

Although the Torridon hills have become much busier over the past 50 years, they remain as challenging and enjoyable to climbers and walkers. Long may the Ling Hut continue to contribute to that enjoyment. Thanks to Coulin Estate, Custodians past, present and future, and their many helpers.


CLEN COE