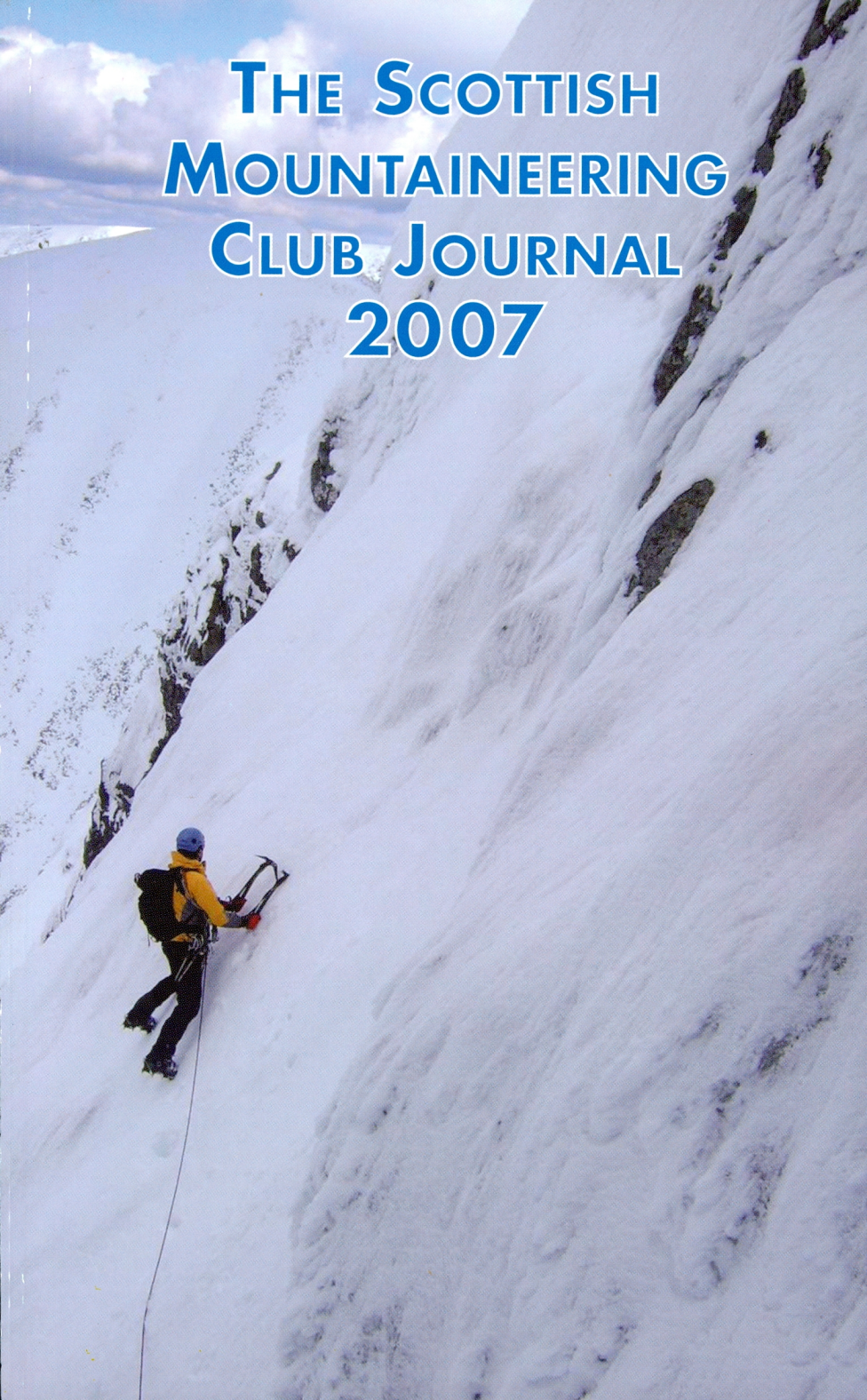
The Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal 2007



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EDITED BY CHARLES J. ORR

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Front cover: Ben Nevis Girdle Traverse, Simon Richardson on the Indicator Wall area heading towards Point Five Gully. Photo: Brian Davison.

Back cover: Davy Moy climbs the penultimate pitch of Dragon, Carnmore Crag. Photo: Andy Tibbs.

Opposite: First ascent of the Silmaril HVS 5a at Eshaness, Shetland. Climbers: Ross Jones and Peter Sawford.

CAPTIONS ERROR

Due to an unfortunate error in the binding process the photographs between pages 508-509 and 524-525 have been inserted wrongly. The captions should read as follows:-

PHOTOGRAPH OPPOSITE PAGE 508:
Blair Fyffe climbs the second pitch on the First Winter Ascent of Knuckleduster (V111,9), Ben Nevis.
Photo: Steve Ashworth.

OPPOSITE PAGE 509:
TOP -
Hamish Irvine cuts his way up Green Gully, Ben Nevis in traditional style on a Centenary Ascent, April 2006.
Photo: Roger Webb.

BOTTOM -
Mount Shasta from Mount Lassen in The Cascade Range, US.
Photo: Carl Schaschke.

OPPOSITE PAGE 524:
Steven Gordon approaching the South Peak of The Cobbler:
Photo: Dave MacLeod.

OPPOSITE PAGE 525:
TOP -
Dave McLeod on the first ascent of Apllo 8a+, Tighnabruaich Viiewpoint Crags, Cowal.

BOTTOM -
Simon Jenkins on Yammy, Upper Great Gully Buttress, Glencoe.
Photo: Peter Wilson.

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EDITORIAL

THE JOURNAL has not been given to over use of the 'Editorial' – in fact, from perusing back issues, it seems that this device has only hitherto been occasioned by the demise of one editor and the accession of another and, while recognising that tenure may not be solely in the gift of the encumbent, I take solace in the fact that history has shown there to be significantly more job security than that found, for example in the post of football manager. However, complacent I am not, and am only too aware that the 'full support of the committee' may lie just around the corner. Having said that, I have also been aware in recent years, (this year being the worst yet of my tenure) of a great deal of that very complaceny, indeed apathy, among the membership who, judging by the little feedback I do receive, seem all too happy to have the Journal fall through their door every summer but do little or nothing to support it by way of contributions. One does not need to be a demographic statistician to realise that our mainstays, the Smarts, the Slessers, the Campbells, Gribbons, Duttons, Biggars *et. al.* are getting on a bit and there are very few coming to replace them, and that does not bode well for the future.

There are a number of reasons for this and, apart from the obvious lack of literacy in the young, one of the main ones, I would suggest, is 'The Lure of The Mags.' I happened to be in Borders bookshop recently, tempted to 'consider my position' over worry about where this year's Journal was going to come from, when, after a triple shot latté from Costa, I sought further solace in a quick browse through these very 'Mags'. The fact that I picked up three, one after the other, and in each found major articles on Scottish climbing, two by our members and one by a recent W. H. Murray prize-winner, only served to take me a bit closer to the edge. I can understand that there are economics involved here and that the Journal cannot compete at that level, nor would I wish it do so. I only tell the tale, not as a criticism of those involved, who contribute greatly to the Journal, but to point up a reality that, unlike in days gone by, the outlets for writers are many and the Journal, for a number of reasons, is not necessarily the first port of call.

It should also be noted that I see the rise and rise of the 'Mags' as being directly responsible for our decline, both in circulation and in advertising revenue. Unlike the former, I don't think that the Club should be overly

Dave McLeod on Rhapsody E11, Dumbarton Rock. Photo: Steven Gordon.

concerned about this and seek in any way to change our focus or to compete in order to raise revenue because, put quite simply, we are in the hands of the market in this and what was a bonus – selling a few copies to defray costs – was simply that and its time has passed.

We are a club Journal first and foremost and that is what our focus should continue to be. That said, I would wish us to retain a position in the forefront of such publications and this can only be done if members – across the board – will contribute. Your president voiced the opinion to me of late (in a phone call after hearing reports of my fragile state of mind following the 'Borders Incident' sounds very Le Carré does that!) that he felt perhaps the high standard of writing intimidated would be contributors – nice thought – but personally I'm more inclined towards the 'lazy buggers' theory myself.

Please guys it's your Journal, it has a good reputation, it has enjoyed 116 years of unbroken publication – Let's all get involved and keep it up there.

Charlie J. Orr, Hon. Ed.

THE LAST OF THE GRAND OLD MASTERS

(Tom Patey, a personal memoir)

By Dennis Gray

"YOU'RE a long time dead," as Don Whillans often observed. But if it is true that, as the ancients believed, one lives on while anyone still remembers you, then Tom Patey is still with us in spirit. Along with Don he was the most unforgettable character in my five decades plus of climbing. He was a doctor, musician, writer, raconteur and mountaineer of the highest ability. I have never met anyone else in the climbing world with such an array of talents. And to give some indication of this versatility I would like to record some of my own experiences in his company.

In 1951, as a 15-year-old, I hitch-hiked on my own from West Yorkshire to Skye, and there, in the MacRaes' barn, I first met Tom and his fellow Aberdonian Bill Brooker. They were older than I was and Patey, though himself still a teenager, had started training as a doctor. Bill decided I was a "cheeky little bugger" but from that first meeting I remained friends with both of them and enjoyed many memorable 'excursions' with Tom until his tragic death in 1970.

His climbing record bears comparison with most, recording a myriad of first ascents in Scotland, particularly in the Cairngorms and the Northern Highlands; outstanding new routes in the Alps, and the first ascents of the Mustagh Tower and Rakaposhi. Plus some early pioneering in the south-west of England on the Shale Cliffs, Chudleigh and the Dewerstone. Most of which was achieved when he had to meet the demands of his work as a doctor – with a huge geographic area to cover – and in being a family man. But above all, a fact making him unique, was the marrying together of so many high-standard abilities into what can only be termed the mountain scene. Anyone not familiar with Tom's writings and climbs, and the spirit in which they were carried out should read his posthumously published book of articles and songs, *One Man's Mountains* (Gollancz). Many of these had previously been published in the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal* or in magazines such as *Mountain*.

I climbed in several different locations with him, and even on one occasion accompanied him to one of my local outcrops Almscliff, where his highly unorthodox techniques were tested to the limit. Somehow he climbed the *Bird's Nest Crack* (HS), a smooth crack climb without jamming but with lots of judicious use of his knees! But it was in the high mountains that he came into his own, and on mixed ground of snow, ice and rock I never saw anyone to equal his ability at picking a line and moving fast. However, my own most memorable outing with him was when I lived in Scotland and, in March 1966, we visited Applecross together.

We stayed in the inn near the Bealach na Ba pass, where Tom had once been based while working as a locum for the local doctor. When we arrived, old friendships were renewed, and that evening – and subsequent evenings – after a fine meal and a few drams, the music began to flow. A heartening feature of these outposts in the Highlands is that people can still make their own entertainment.

The next day we solo climbed three routes, including the famous *Cioch Nose* of Sgurr a'Chaorachain, a fine climb and then a long rambling Hard Severe, which, when I suggested that it looked a bit loose and vegetated before we set out Tom admonished me with: "Good god mon it has some of the finest vegetation in Applecross!"

Our final route was for me an epic. Much shorter than the other two it was nonetheless 350ft. in length; *The Sword of Gideon,* pioneered in 1961 by Tom, climbing solo. It lies on a buttress a few minutes up from the Bealach na Ba road, on the north side of the pass. The crux is 5a and in the guide the route is graded HVS. Tom climbed in front of me, this being something he was enthusiastic about, climbing what he called "solo together". By the time we reached the 5a pitch I had lost my enthusiasm for this, and needed a rope, especially as we were climbing in boots and carrying light sacks. Tom had his old 'for emergency only' light rope in his, but by that time he was so far ahead I had to grit my teeth and keep battling upwards on my own. We ended the climb in the dark – with Tom a good day's climbing always finished at the day's end – and descending, we came down on the wrong side of the buttress. We escaped swinging down on Tom's old rope, descending in the darkness. My head torch had packed in and Patey did not have one, claiming to be able to see in the dark. I have never been so relieved to set foot back on a road in my life.

With Tom every outing was an adventure. This was the spirit in which he approached his climbing, but do not misunderstand this, for although he often had to climb solo for lack of companions, and despite his unorthodox climbing style, he was an extremely safe climber. As he pointed out, the habitual solo climber has to be competent, otherwise he will soon be dead, and Tom did not die during such a climb. He was killed while abseiling in the company of experienced companions after an ascent of The Maiden, a sea-stack in Sutherland.

Tom was the most unlikely looking doctor I have yet come across. Powerfully built, of medium height and with bushy dark hair, he had a face which looked as if it had been hewn from the granite of his native county. Spontaneity played a large part in his climbing activities, and he often made do with a minimum of equipment, enjoyed travelling light and would think nothing of climbing all day without a rest or a stop for food. He had built up an incredible bodily stamina over the years and he could manage on a minimum of sleep for days on end.

On one occasion we based ourselves in Jimmie Ross's hotel, The

Rowanlea in the Cairngorms for five nights. Each night there was a ceilidh in the bar, and each day we roved far and wide into the hills. One day to Braeriach, another a route in Glen Avon. Our party was made up of Jim McCartney, Eric Beard, Tom and myself, and by the fourth day I had to insist on climbing in Coire an Lochan which is easily reached from off the ski road. I just could not stand the pace of the other three who moved at great speed on the long walks in and out again. Eric held just about every worthwhile fell record in the UK, including the Skye Ridge, when he was killed in a car crash in 1969. And Jim, a fellow Aberdonian, could have been Tom's natural successor on the northern Bens in winter, for he was one the most powerful ice climbers of his generation, but cruelly, he was to die in an avalanche on Ben Nevis in January 1970.

News spread about the evening ceilidhs and more and more climbers and skiers turned up for the event. Jimmie was one of the outstanding exponents of the Highland fiddle and with Tom backing him on the accordion or piano they were an unforgettable duo. Patey had the finest repertoire of tunes and ballads of anyone I have met, and his own songs, poking fun at our sport and its institutions and personalities, were masterpieces of subtlety.

When I lived in Scotland in the mid-Sixties I worked for a Glasgow printing and publishing firm and I had a roving commission over the whole of Scotland. We printed the Aberdeen bus tickets, the Cairngorm chair lift passes, and the timetable for the Orkney and Shetland shipping line. On the back of the latter there was, on one occasion, a picture of the Old Man of Hoy. Shortly after this came out I visited Ullapool, where Tom was the doctor, to meet representatives of the Council for they wished to have a tourist brochure published to promote the delights of their picturesque town. I stayed with Tom and his wife, Betty, and I showed him the picture of the Old Man of Hoy and asked him if it had ever been climbed. He thought not and took the brochure from me and the rest, as they say, is history. He went on from the ascent of Hoy to climb several other sea-stacks; The Old Man of Stoer, Am Buachaille, Handa etc. which earned him the nickname of Dr Stack!

Tom kept a set of scrapbooks and you were very privileged if he showed them to you. In them he kept photographs and magazine cuttings, particularly about the Alps and on these he had traced many new route possibilities. It was from this source that many of the new climbs he pioneered around Chamonix in the Sixties were gleaned. First ascents such as the West Face of the Plan, the North-west Face of the Aiguille Sans Nom, the North Face of the Point Migot and several others, usually in the company of the 'uman fly, Joe Brown.

The Bailie of Ullapool went by the nickname of 'The Giant', and he was a great friend of the Doctor's. I expected him to be a huge Highlander like the man on the Scott's porridge oats packet, and was surprised at our

first meeting to find that he was a wee fellow and that his nickname was obviously given in jest.

Behind Tom's house in Ullapool was a bothy, which he had caused to be set up for any visiting climber to stay, and from which a vast swathe of the Northern Highlands were accessible. There was also, adjacent to this, a small operating facility, for sometimes in winter the road to Inverness became blocked with snow. Amazingly, word of his bothy had reached as far as Munich. Once when I was visiting, some climbers from that city were in residence and they had brought Tom a record entitled *Hitler's inferno*. Tom could hardly wait to play it to me when I arrived and I was surprised that this included a selection of wartime Wermacht marching songs. In his youth Tom's initial Salvationist approach to the hills, had been eroded. Gordon Leslie, one of his early companions, cultivated a distinctly Teutonic brand of humour, which had left its mark on him. It was with Gordon that, in December 1950, Tom pioneered the first Grade V winter route in the Cairngorms, *Douglas-Gibson's Gully* on Lochnagar. One of Tom's earliest songs contained the following verse:

Two tiny figures on the ghastly north wall
And a hungry great bergschrund just right for a fall
Let the Valkyries howl in the pitiless sky
But the two tiny climbers must 'Conquer or die!

It was in Tom's bothy that the Alpine Club song *Red Pique* was written. I was with him on that occasion and my prior task had been to visit the pub and obtain a bottle of the Doctor's usual 'Morangie'. The original of the Alpine Club song was too trenchant for general release and so a watered down version was subsequently prepared and this is what appears in *One Man's Mountains*. I kept the original under lock and key for more than 30 years and then, deeming it alright to do so, passed it over to the Club's Secretary for safe keeping. Perhaps some day the original can be published and I will make the suggestion that the Alpine Club arranges for this song to be performed on a suitable occasion. Perhaps at an Annual Dinner? Meanwhile, it would still, I am sure, be rewarding to hear sung in good voice a verse such as that below which is from the version which is published in Tom's book:

The noble blood of an English Peer
Adapts to a rarefied atmosphere
And that is why the Old School Tie
May be expected to go high
Up they go, Damn good show
Kicking steps in the virgin snow
Hey nonny No! Fol de rol
Jolly John Hunt and the Old South Col.

And before the editor is tempted to reach for a red pen, I can assure the reader Tom's intention was always to have fun and not to jeer. He was happy that I kept the original out of circulation pointing out that such whisky-fuelled rhyming might be construed as libellous. He wrote a song about myself, not as good but in a similar vein to his outstanding, *The Legend of Joe Brown*. But as it included reference to a young lady with whom I was having what is now referred to as an 'affair Blunkett', and it all ended rather sadly, he was happy that this too never saw a wide circulation. The chorus line was:

Dennis Dillon Gray she has taken him away
And he'll never climb on Cloggy any more!
He'll be fitter he'll be fatter, but still full of bleeding patter
That poor old Yorkshire Pudding Dennis Gray
(Sung to the tune of 'Keep your feet still Geordie Hinnie').

Tom's songs such as *Onward Christian Bonington*, *The Legend of Joe Brown*, *The Last of the Grand Old Masters*, and a spurious Teutonic version of the SMC club song *Oh My Big Hobnailers*, but tranposed by him into *Ach Mein Grossenbotten* were satirical masterpieces. No one so lampooned ever, to the best of my knowledge, took offence. But to understand just how effective these were you had to have heard Patey sing these parodies in person. Such songs and singing have a long historical tradition in these Islands. When I was studying in Leeds I organised, a folk and poetry club at the Grove Inn, with five other students. One night at a party I sang and played a couple of Tom's songs for them and everyone then wanted to meet him. One of my acquaintances was Bob Pegg who, with his wife, Carol, had their own club and, with another friend Nick Strutt went on to form 'Mr Fox', the first folk rock band which was the forerunner of the subsequently famous 'Fairport Convention'. They asked on the strength of this if I could bring Tom to their club in Kirkstall.

By diverse means, on our way back from a trip to Wales where we had been the guests at a Pinnacle Club dinner, and after a failed winter attempt on *The Slanting Gully* of Lliewedd, subsequently *en route* for Lochnagar, I managed to persuade him to stop off. Tom played and sang for them as they wished, and afterwards Bob and Nick agreed that as a lyricist his word play was outstanding. No mean accolade for Bob Pegg held the first Doctorate in Folk Music.

In 1967 I persuaded Tom and Joe Brown to do a lecture tour on their Mustagh Tower expedition. Joe will not normally undertake such activities, and the only other occasion I have known him take this on was when Don Whillans died and a group of his friends came together to raise funds for a suitable memorial to him. Climbers in England had never then heard Tom or Joe lecture and the three events I organised were all well attended

despite it being 11 years after the expedition had taken place. The first lecture took place in the Holdsworth Hall, Manchester, Joe's hometown, and it was a sell-out. Afterwards, Joe went home to his mother's, while Tom and I went out on the town with some of the city's climbing fraternity. We ended up in the Riverboat Club in Salford where we were gobsmacked to find on entering, that there was a strip contest in progress. Tom the son of an episcopal minister observed that: "Nothing like this ever takes place in Ullapool!"

The second night was in Liverpool in the Mountford Hall and again it was well supported. Both Joe and Tom were excellent speakers, and the crowd loved it. Joe was already a legend in climbing circles by this time, while Tom was also a mythical figure. Afterwards, Joe again went off home to spend the night at his mother's in Manchester, leaving Tom and I to be the guests at an after lecture party in a large house in the Sefton Park area of Liverpool. Tom was, in such company, extremely sociable and he loved mixing with fellow climbers. Out came the accordion and he sang and played the night away. I remember Pete Minks, Tony Stead, and a young Al Rouse were among those present and I think it was because of such meetings that Tom eventually agreed to take on the Presidency of the Alpine Climbing Group in 1969. But then I lost him, he just disappeared and I was in a blind panic.

The following night the final lecture was at the St George's Hall in Bradford. In an absolute sweat I arrived there early hoping Tom would appear out of the ether, for he was driving himself around in his Skoda car. On arriving at the Hall I pushed open the door and walked in. All was darkness except on the stage where someone was playing a Steinway grand piano. A part of the first movement of the Grieg Concerto rang out as I walked down the darkened aisles of that huge hall and I realised it was Tom. He was no Ashkenazy, but then few people are, however, he really could play and as in the past I had only heard him playing jazz, climbing songs or folk music. I sat down in the front row and listened quietly until he had finished. It was obvious that the music meant a lot to him, and as I enthusiastically shouted out when he finished playing he looked sheepishly back at me and dismissed this by saying he needed more practice. But as I knew already that it had been a toss up when he was young as to whether he would follow a career in classical music or medicine, I was not as surprised by this performance as I might otherwise have been.

Tom had to drive enormous distances in carrying out his medical duties in the Highlands and because of this, like his stamina for climbing, he had developed an impressive facility for driving long distances. He would occasionally phone me in the middle of the night at my flat in Edinburgh. "Would yea be available for a climb?" he would demand. If the reply was: "Err…err… yes", I would then receive an instruction to rendezvous somewhere near to Fort William, at the Laggan Bridge or in Rothiemurchus

with the admonition: "Do not to be late or I'll go without you!" Usually, this meant being there by dawn, and if you protested that the roads were icy and that it might take some time, he would point out that it was only 3am. and: "Good god mon yea have at least three hours to get there!" For someone who drove such amazing distances, often in inclement weather, it was surprising he had so little mechanical knowledge. A glib salesman had talked him in to purchasing a Skoda car, back in the bad old days when they were a joke. I write this tongue in cheek for I later drove a Moskovich, but he was stuck with them. No other dealer would take it in part exchange and he needed to buy a new one nearly every year. I drove his car on several occasions, and once we crashed when Tom was driving due to experimenting with the adaptation of the O. G. Jones climbing grading system, to the road bends. I shouted out a Severe when it should have been Extreme on the old acute Z-bends at the Ingleton Bridge. He merely shrugged his shoulders and said: "Is it serious?" There was water and oil pouring out all over the road.

From 1957 to 1961 Tom served in the Royal Navy as the medical officer on attachment with 42 Marine Commando. Like all of us in the Fifties he was called to do National Service and took on a three-year short service Commission. Unfortunately, as he later told me, there was a mistake in his pay and emoluments at the Navy pay office, and they grossly overpaid him. He was thus forced into paying this back and the only way he could do this was by serving an extra year. His opinion of pay clerks was not very high, and I kept from him the news that as a non-combatant, my two years of forced service were spent at the Army Pay Office in Manchester and my task there had been to prepare the pay and emoluments of Officers!

At the end of the Sixties I did some lecturing for Exeter University to HM Forces units and many of Tom's commando climbing acquaintances were still in the area. Dickie Grant who had been with him on Rakaposhi was Colonel in charge at the training depot of the Royal Marines at Lympstone. Mike Banks was still around, and he had reached the summit of Rakaposhi with Patey on the Services expedition in 1958 of which he had been the leader. And Vin Stevenson, an old mate of mine from our Langdale days in the early Fifties, had been the leader of the Cliff Assault Wing. They all had stories about Tom; on Marine training trips to the Cairngorms, forays to Norway during which he had made a winter ascent of the Romsdalhorn with the legendary Arn Randers Heen, and climbing at Chudleigh (of which he was an original pioneer), on the Dewerstone, at Morwell etc. The story I liked best (and one that Tom told me himself) was 'The buggering of Brigadier Billy's boots'.

Tom was in the Cairngorms in the winter with a group of trainee Royal Marine commandos. By the end of the first week all he had taught them was how to find Karl Fuch's hostelry at Struan House in Carrbridge, but then he received a signal to report that Brigadier Billy was going to visit

them to inspect their training. "Bloody hell this was serious!" So he sent his men up onto Cairngorm, in the command of a Sergeant and told them to dig into snow holes in Coire Raibert. The Brigadier duly arrived that evening and, after spending the night sharing quarters with Tom, decided early next morning to go up personally to see the men on the hill. But Tom in a panic could not find his boots. Mercifully, he found a new looking pair under a bed and surprisingly they fitted him.

Off they went up the hill and found the men all happily dug into snow holes. "Well done Patey," was the Brigadier's verdict but, on returning to the valley, and as he was preparing to leave he was ransacking the billet. He was looking for his best boots, which had been bulled and bulled by his batman until you could see your face in the toes. Of course these were the boots Tom had worn, and by then they looked like something even Charlie Chaplin would have discarded. Patey discreetly made himself scarce.

Academically gifted, Tom won the gold medal for Physiology while at Aberdeen University, and if the mountains had not held him in thrall all his life he might have followed two or three other brilliant careers. I think now we were fortunate that it was climbing which turned out to be his leitmotif. In the British mountain world during the 50-plus years I have been climbing, only three personalities known to me have, I believe, earned the status of being 'A Legend' – namely, Joe Brown, Don Whillans and, of course, Tom. To hear him play and sing *Dark Lochnagar,* a mountain on which he had writ his name large into its long climbing history, was a magical experience. He was truly one of the last of the Grand Old Masters who represented more than anyone else I have known the freedom to be found in the hills.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE 'IAS' HILL-WALKING CLUB

By Graham E. Little

IT SEEMS that the European Union (EU), formally the European Community, is forever expanding with an enthusiastic queue of aspirant members. There are clearly strong attractions to being a member of this big club with all the economic and social benefits it offers. In homage to the pleasures of being a member of a much smaller club, I had the idea in 2002 of visiting all the mountainous countries in Europe with names ending in 'ia' before they joined the EU (in the comforting knowledge that my club would operate in a rapidly-changing environment with no hope of permanence). As the founding member, I immediately gave myself permission for a little bit of retrospective ticking, instantly claiming Slovakia, even though I'd visited in 1991 when it was still part of Czechoslovakia. This was essentially a rock climbing trip to the Tatra Mountains and the fantastic sandstone towers of Teplice and Adrspach. However, it did include an ascent of Lomnicky Stit, 2635m., not to mention saying goodbye to the last Russian General to leave the country – somewhat bizarrely at a pop concert in Prague (with a guest appearance from Frank Zappa). Slovakia joined the EU in 2004.

The true beginnings of the 'ias' hill-walking club coincided with a change in lifestyle, with family holidays taking over from climbing trips with the boys (although the bi-annual expeditions still linger on!). With an impressive membership of three – including my wife and son – the club's first outing was to Slovenia in July 2003. This small country at the eastern extension of the Western Alps, where if the guidebooks are to be believed, every citizen has a genetic desire to ascend Triglav, 2864m., the country's highest peak, is many times blessed. With the magnificent Julian Alps in the north, fertile plains to the south, a little section of Adriatic coastline and a healthy national identity, it is as close to an ideal country as one can imagine. Surprisingly, considering the mayhem that was later to engulf the Balkans, Slovenia achieved its independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991 with only a 10 -day near bloodless war.

Armed only with the expression 'Dobra Dan' (often shortened to 'Dan') we booked a package deal and established our base at the Bellevue Hotel on the shore of Lake Bohinj (where Agatha Christie wrote a number of her detective stories). We ranged across the stunning limestone peaks, limited only by what a six-year-old boy was capable of doing (at a push!). Avoiding Triglav, the highest peak, for logistical reasons (it's a two-three day outing), we tackled several of the more accessible peaks, largely following way-marked routes, with the steel cables and ladders giving reassurance on the more exposed sections. After a hard day on the hill, it was a delight to walk through the flower decked meadows and to swim in the surprisingly warm waters of Lake Bohinj. The mountaineering highlight was an ascent of the mighty Prisank, 2547m., from the high Vrsic Pass, via the East Ridge route,

with a descent down the South-west face. Roped adults were somewhat taken aback at the sight of a small boy picnicking on the summit! A couple of days later, I left the other club members to enjoy a canoe outing on Lake Bohinj and climbed the excellent Razor, 2601m., to the south of Prisank, finding the name of Terry Isles in the summit log book. Trying not to sound like a hyperbolic member of the Slovenian Tourist Board, I have to say that Slovenia is a really brilliant country with a day in the capital Ljubljana a must. Slovenia joined the EU in 2004.

Given the political and economic restrictions on foreign travel, it's not surprising that hillwalking and climbing on home ground or in immediately adjacent countries was the only real holiday option for the vast majority of people in the Soviet block countries. The breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991 heralded a slow increase in holidays abroad for the locals and an influx of Western Europeans keen to sample the delights of hitherto unknown mountain ranges, using the fine network of paths and huts and enjoying the favourable exchange rates. Bulgaria well illustrates these changes. Bulgaria holds two main mountain ranges, the Perin and the Rila, both with peaks close to the 3000m. mark. Although the Black Sea coast has long attracted tourists of a certain persuasion, the mountains, with the exception of the winter ski resorts, have been largely neglected by Western mountaineers. Bulgaria is now easy to get to, good value to stay in and, with the exception of some truly terrible roads – erratic driving is mandatory – a pleasure to visit. The road signs are mostly in Cyrillic script and the maps pretty hopeless but this all adds to the sense of adventure.

In July 2005 we flew to Sophia and, from a base in Bansko, enjoyed several great days in the Perin Mountains. This fine range is composed of granite in the east, limestone in the west. At the interface is the shining marble peak of Vihren, 2914m. (the second highest peak in Bulgaria) which together with its fine neighbour Kutelo, 2908m., gave us a splendid outing from the carpark at Hizha Vihren, descending over shrinking snowfields below the shovel–shaped North-west face. Another excellent day was had, again starting from the same car park, when we hiked past Frog Lake and Long Lake to scramble over great granite blocks up the narrow East Ridge of Bunderishki Chukar, 2731m.

A very hot day in the Rila Mountains proved too much for my wife and son who mellowed out at the magnificent Rila Monastery (a UNESCO World Heritage Site), deep in the valley. I struggled to the summit of Maljovica (Malyovista), 2729m, under a basting sun and under constant attack from huge cleg-like flies with bulging green eyes and a well developed blood lust.

Lost in the heart of Sofia, on our way back to the airport at the end of the holiday, in desperation my wife accosted some Bulgarian police – in mid arrest! – to ask directions. Bundling their suspects into the back of their car and with blaring sirens, they guided us through the city centre at high speed to gain the route out to the airport. I can't imagine that happening back home.

In May 2006 I managed a short rock climbing trip to Croatia with the boys, encouraged by my wife who realised that I needed to get to grips with some serious rock. Although bolt protected and therefore relatively safe, the solid mountain limestone in Paklenika National Park is a joy to climb on which is qualification enough in my book for Croatia joining the EU immediately. There is something for everyone, from single pitch top-roping exercises to multi-pitch classics on the highest rock wall in Croatia. For me, the highlight of the trip was the magnificent *Velebitaski*, a 12-pitch 6+ route (climbed with Phil Ebert) leading to the summit of Anika Kuk, 712m. The superb fish restaurant, appropriately called Dalmatia, in the nearby village of Starigrad was definitely a bonus. Croatia is currently an EU 'candidate country'.

In July 2006, having recently watched a daft, but rather entertaining, film about Transylvanian vampirism, we flew to Bucharest in Romania to pick up a hire car and embark upon our grand tour of the South Western Carpathians. Arranging accommodation as we travelled and enjoying daytime temperatures ranging from 7° to 37° centigrade, we climbed in five mountain groups, and visited the stunning medieval centres of towns like Brasov, Sighisoara and Sibiu. The evidence of the Ceausescu regime was everywhere with crumbling concrete factories standing witness to misguided attempts to industrialise the countryside. However, Romania proved a captivating country with much to enthral the mountain lover.

Starting in the verdant Ciucas, with its strange conglomerate towers, we progressed to the limestone spine of Piatra Craiului, to the great schist mountains of the Fagaras and the Parang to finish on the excellent fine grey granite peaks of the Retezat range. My son was delighted to realise that a month's pocket money made him a Romanian millionaire and we thought nothing about blowing two million lei on a night's accommodation. The cabanas (mountain huts) ranged from very run down to the well maintained and from road accessible to those requiring a two-three hour walk to reach. We climbed over a dozen peaks with the highlights being an ascent of Parangule Mare, 2519m., in the Parang from the excellent roadside Groapa Seaca Cabana and an eleven round in the Retezat, including Custura, 2457m., Papusa, 2508m. and Peleaga, 2509m., (the latter two in Romania's top 10) from the Buta Cabana. We even took the tourist soft option by staying in the modern Balea Lac Cabana (the only accommodation we stayed in that would accept Euros), near the highest point of the spectacular trans-Fagaras highway. From this high point, the main Fagaras ridge is easily accessible, with the rocky summit of Vanatoarea lui Buteanu, 2507m., less than an hour away.

Climbing days were interspersed with cultural pursuits and sampling the local produce, especially the wine. Romanians love eating al-fresco, often to blaring music, but have the unfortunate habit of leaving all their rubbish at the picnic site – there are some strange contradictions in the national psyche. Both Bulgaria and Romania are lined up to join the EU in 2007, although certain governance concerns are outstanding.

So where to next? The only other 'candidate country' that I haven't visited is Macedonia, having been refused entry from Bulgaria because we couldn't provide the required car hire documentation. However, as it definitely has some mountains we will no doubt make a second attempt some time soon. After that there are only the longer shots of Bosnia, Serbia and Albania who's EU membership aspirations will no doubt grow. Sadly, we missed the boat with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, although I guess they can hardly be classed as mountainous. Another option would be to change the club constitution at the next AGM and climb a hill or two in Austria!

BOULDERING WITH GHOSTS

By John Watson

GHOSTS have different solutions to things, they bring you different gifts. Nonchalantly, they walk through the walls of time, in swirls of out-moded language and kit, often dressed absurdly, sometimes in tweed or wartime surplus, sometimes in lycra, recently with strange beds attached to their backs like colourful hermit crabs. Each one has a different approach, a different piece of rock in mind, a different way of saying the same thing.

Here I was thinking I'd have the boulders to myself – I'd squeezed the boulder kit into the Dropzone mat, hauled the beast onto my back and stomped off up the new path to The Cobbler, intent on the clean schist swirls of the Narnain boulders. Out of nostalgia, I turned right up the old pipe-walk, steeper but quicker, stopping at the water-cup cistern on the flat bit before entering the corrie under the horns of The Cobbler. Maybe that diversion is what started it all. It was a fine summer's day, the sweat stung my eyes and a pleasant breeze whispered stolen conversations through the deer grass. I dumped my boulder mat by the first boulder and took off my top letting it dry in the breeze. I pulled a Sigg bottle out and glugged down the cool contents.

Then I heard the voices…a party of folk on the other side of the North boulder, but there was something odd about them, like the words inside a church meeting, they seemed deeper, differently inflected, sterner, but also light and relieved with the joy of a summer's day in the high corries. Normally no boulderers up here, I thought. Maybe walkers? I threw on a fresh T-Shirt (www.scottishclimbs.com – a fetching blue with orange logo, I seem to recall) and stepped round the corner. The shaded north face sported a stand-out arête on which a flat-capped climber in ragged short-cut pantaloons was fully stretched. He seemed to be wearing walking boots, loosely laced about his ankles, I was quite impressed, for I knew the problem was British 6a and steep, with tiny footholds and surely too technical for a pair of old leathers. There was a posse of similarly dressed

lads around him, from teens through to bristled looking industrial types in flat caps or double-rolled beanies, old woollen sweaters and army surplus trousers, odd fashion I thought as I nodded at one or two of them who glanced my way.

"Go oan John!" shouted one. "Show them SMC boys how it's done!" and he winked at me for some reason.

"Don't look at me," I whispered and looked up at the climber, while peeling a banana.

"Where'd you get that?" said one of the younger boys.

"Sainsbury's," I said. "...organic." He seemed to be fixated on the banana. I pointed the banana at the problem: "That's at least an E3 crux," I added. He blinked. I decided to say no more. Our attention turned back to the boulderer.

A high hand-hold allowed him to pull down powerfully and get his feet high on the arête and then a steady leaning-back, studying the next holds, showed he was a poised 'trad-man', though I had the oddest feeling he'd done this before and that this was for effect. Indeed, all the other lads looked humbled – the greatest sign of this being a communal burying of hands deep in the pockets and the hunch-backed stance like a heron, which either means: "Yeah, it's easy, I could do it if I was bothered," or it could mean: "No way I'm trying that!" I wasn't sure which way it was with this group, but I felt I was witnessing something a little special, the gentle banter surrounding an event of some significance being treated as casually insignificant, the trademark of all great moments. The climber topped out, turned round, leaned over and put his hands on his knees.

"Right lads, who's next?"

Uproarious laughter and a dismissive waving of hands. Smiles all round. I found myself smiling too.

"Grand bit of climbing, John, just grand!" said somebody.

"Aye, no bad," I piped up. "What about the sit start though?"

John Cunningham stared down from on high.

"The whit?"

I swallowed as the posse all turned and looked blankly towards me. I had the acute feeling that I'd just stepped into a welder's yard with a tray of Tiffin.

Other ghosts can leave you furious, despite their reputation. Here's what happened. I was busy tending the handholds and footholds of a Font 8a, smacking them vigorously with a chalky beer mat. Clouds of carbonate dust made me choke and step back, then return to flog away again, hoping to squeak the holds dry enough to allow some sort of friction. I was thinking of using 'pof', but demurred and thought the rag would do, I'd be pilloried anyway, my shame would be all over the forums. There was a polite cough behind me as I applied the finishing touch of the toothbrush to the extra carbonate slick. I stepped back from the overhanging crack I was busy

cleaning, defensively dipping my hands in a large chalk-bag like it was one of those film-star's hand-muffs. I raised my eyebrows.

"Alright?" I said.

The man was dressed head to toe in tweed, plus-foured at the bottom with puttees spiralling into the top of two brown leather boots. A fringe of hob-nails winked along the lip of the soles like shark-teeth. He wore a nifty trilby-style hat and he was smoking a fat pipe which was wedged heavily into a moustachioed mouth. Very camp, I thought.

"A stumbling block, eh?" he inquired, running his pipe up the line of the crack. "Mind awfully if I give it a jolly?"

It was a rhetorical question. He put the pipe back in his mouth, rummaged through a bulging hip pocket and pulled out a stubby hammer. From his left pocket he pulled some ironmongery, stepped up to the crack and, before I could offer him my toothbrush or chalk-bag, began to bang in an iron piton. The echoing clangs sank the peg deep into the crack and he expertly fiddled a short cord through the eyelet, tied it off, then, giving it one tug, he hauled himself up, hobnails scrabbling on my 'poffed' little ledge. He reached the big flange, explored it experimentally for a few seconds, then dropped back down to the ground. He was reaching in his pocket for another peg before I touched him on the elbow...

"Hey, what the hell do you think you are doing?"

I recognised him now...it was Harold Raeburn, he'd soloed *Observatory Ridge* in this outfit at the turn of a previous century. I liked the guy in his books, with his earnest instructional photos from *Mountaineering Art*. But hell, he was no boulderer, he had no ethics at all...abominable approach! I scolded him: Hobnails? Pitons? Did he know the damage he was doing? I had to ask him to leave, politely of course, put his hammer away. He pocketed his ironmongery, walked off sulking with his pipe and stood under the crag a while, gazing up at a long snaking crack which withered away before the apex of the cliff.

After I wiggled the peg out, I went back to working my project, shaking my head occasionally, brushing and re-chalking all the scratched and muddy holds. When I looked round after a while he had gone. I felt the pang of unexpected sadness.

"Dammit," I said to myself, dipping my hands back into the chalk sack, "I meant to say cheerio."

Other times the ghosts are not climbers, they appear as souls and people who, despite any rational rigour, invade your emotions in certain landscapes at certain times. They can leave you invigorated with a sense of the great wheel of life, or they can leave you angry, embittered and sad at the random swipe of history and its cruel tantrums of indifference.

My bouldering was interrupted by my own ignorance one day. I'd escaped to the Trossachs, to a special bouldering spot known as 'An Garradh', or 'The Garden' – a jumble of boulders under a wooded copse

Andy Nisbet on Still Game (VI,7), upper tier of West Buttress, Coire Mhic Fhearchair. Photo: Dave McGimpsey.

on the flanks of Loch Katrine. I was aware of a curious ghost following me through the boulders in the copse. I didn't see her until I'd gained some height and could see the shadowed grass of her family's run-rigs, the melted rubble of her shieling.

It is the late spring sun which brings her out to play, away from the stern retributions and privations of her home. She is dressed in a filthy linen smock which barely covers her driftwood frame, but despite that she is happily singing away among the boulders, occasionally chewing wild garlic leaves and spitting them out in disgust: "Yechhh…"

Suddenly, she's at the top of the boulder I am climbing.

"You can see for miles here… aw the way to France." She clutches her skinny raw legs and bites her knees, soaking up the glory of her Highland home, tranquil in the sun, a lookout at the junction of these perpendicular lochs, watching the smoke of her house rise into the still air of a clear Scottish day. She frowns at me. "What are you doing? You should be working, the cattle need shiftin', does your father know you're here?"

I gain the top of the boulder but she is gone again. I clasp my own knees and stare out over the landscape for a while, looking for clues to something I don't quite apprehend. When I look carefully, hold my gaze longer than a few seconds, the blunted outline of the ruined shieling rebuilds itself like the internal magic of salt crystals, the run-rigs sprout with crops, the detail sharpens and there she is, running over the tufted grass, through the sucking sphagnum up to the boulders where her favourite spot is, where she gains reflection, where she comes to claim this land as her own. This is her view, these are her stones. Her mother will call her down, but for the moment she is queen of the rocks in this hardened place. I am a curious visitor, like a coloured bird from the woods, or a strange beetle she might poke with a snapped reed.

Then the vision wipes as a cloud passes over. The smoke fades in swirls of nothing, the shieling sags down under the grass like a fugitive hiding under a cloak, there is the sound of schist rock calving and blocks of stone heaving to the bluebelled earth. Erosion. Time. Deer collapse and shrink into their bones, flies buzz their furious dot-to-dot pictures and flesh dissolves into the ground. These are Clearance lands, I must remind myself. These are not necessarily pleasant visions and it is right and proper I get things in perspective.

I pack up my boulder mat for another day, closing the book on another landscape and head back to the city, all the ghosts stuffed back into the mountains – layers in the rock, one on top of the other, assuming the geology of silence, the end of all our brief skeins of time on this earth and I am happy in my own way. Indeed, it seems to me that bouldering can be a form of listening…to deeper histories, to voices that ring like struck stones and too easily vanish into the clear air.

Heather Morning with trainee SARDA dog, Milly, looking south towards The Devil's Point. Photo: Carl Haberl.

Niall McNair throws for a hold on the second ascent of Spitfire 8a, The Anvil, Loch Goil.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH TOM WEIR

By Ken Crocket

My first real encounter with the free spirit that was Tom Weir took place around 1985; I had finished the manuscript of my Ben Nevis history and before I had approached any publisher the Scottish Mountaineering Trust asked me if I would consider them. They gave the MS to Tom to read, and following this he invited me to his home in Gartocharn.

As just about everyone who has visited Tom will know, a pair of boots or wellies is advisable. He whisked you off for a walk through the neighbouring Nature Reserve betwixt Loch Lomond and the Endrick Water, where his gimlet eyes, trained by a lifetime of animal watching, would pick out small birds, made microscopic by distance but obvious to the maestro. Although I remained appreciative, I could never remember one small bird from another, but he never showed any annoyance.

Before our first walk, he stopped me in my tracks with a question about the book: "Who is it written for?" In my blinkered enthusiasm for the subject, this crucial commercial point had never entered my mind.

"For climbers I suppose," was the only answer I could give. He gave a non-committal grunt and the walk began.

The book went ahead and Tom, with typical generosity, wrote the Foreword. Our paths met from time to time, and I was a Vice-President during his time as President. I even received the honour of having a cover photograph of The Ben for the Scots Magazine, thanks, no doubt, to a friendly word from Tom. This was in 1986.

Tom was by now in his mid-70s, when most climbers would be content to wind down a little, ease off on the grades, and certainly lose interest in the latest bit of shiny, tinkling gear. Not this man. I received a telephone call one night. He was curious about this "front-pointing thingy", and would I possibly be able to show him what it was all about? My brain began to go over the potential outcomes, good, bad, and disastrous. So I asked him whether he had any particular route in mind, thinking he might suggest some easy snow gully. Would I mind *Crowberry Gully* was the answer, he quite fancied doing it again using the new methods. I said yes, all the while wondering quite what I had gotten into.

We agreed to wait for a good spell of weather and conditions, and go for a mid-week date when presumably the hill would be quieter. February came and so did the day, so off up to Glen Coe we headed. Neither of us had children, and we had not reckoned with school holidays, especially English school holidays. The gully was lined with teachers from down south, all slowly and deliberately stepping up the wonderful line that is *Crowberry Gully* in good condition.

I tied Tom into a spare Whillans harness, gave him a two-minute basic primer in the use of two banana picks, and off we went. We moved steadily until we reached the belay below the Junction Pitch, where the inevitable traffic jam was waiting. Having climbed Crowberry four or five times previously, I knew how much time we needed. I also knew how much daylight was left, and, at the pace of the slowest rope above, it would be a night finish. Climbing with such a senior statesman as Tom I was in an awkward position; I was going to leapfrog several ropes by traversing hard right onto steeper ice then climb straight up parallel to the more normal line – there was no other way. I could do it without interfering with any of the other teams – who were paragons of good manners I must add – but I had to run the plan past Tom. He was perfectly content to let me do what I felt had to be done if we were to finish the gully.

The traverse right and the climb up led to a steep belay on deep snow. A deadman and an indifferent foot ledge had me sweating blood. The embarrassment of a fall here was one I would never live down – assuming I lived that is. Tom came up like a trooper of course, admitting to being impressed by the ambience. And all the while I was leading, the gully was echoing with conversations between this rope and that rope with Tom, lecture dates were arranged, names exchanged and friends made.

Apologies were made as I passed climbers, but no feathers were ruffled as we made the belay at the foot of the last real pitch, the icy Cave Pitch. Another apology to a pair of teachers and I set off up the bouncy ice. I belayed above and watched Tom closely here. He was by now showing signs of tiredness, unsurprisingly. Most novices at front-pointing expend too much energy at first, until they gain some experience. Tom had been a pensioner for some years now. As he made the last moves over the ice bulge his picks were bouncing gently, but his legs were as good as they had been at the start and we were soon up, out, and standing on the summit. He was happy and I was happily relieved. In Lagangarbh Coire we indulged in a monster bum slide, both of us whooping like the two children we were. The teachers, well some of them anyway, were far away in the gully, but we were free!

Like many a day with Tom, it ended sitting in front of his coal fire, admiring the flames from a deep armchair with a healthy dram. The glow we both had went deeper than the skin on our flushed faces.

I had thought that would be the end of it, but not with a human dynamo like Tom. The next winter he decided he would like to try it again. This time we chose the Cobbler, a mountain which for both of us held an almost mystic hold. What to do? Four years earlier, in 1983, Alastair Walker and myself had found a surprising gully on the lower tier of the North Buttress. It was unrecorded and gave us *Chockstone Gully*, an unusual Grade II, finishing by a pot-hole like squeeze below Great Gully. So Tom and myself headed for that on St Valentine's Day, 1987.

I led the first easy pitch then handed over to the old reprobate. I watched as he led the crux pitch, shuffling up a rocky ridge *a cheval* in grand old style. There's a photograph of Tom leading this pitch in the 1988 SMCJ, (facing p.64). He has a huge grin on his face. Once out of *Chockstone Gully* ahead rose Great Gully Buttress. Tom had experienced his first front-pointing gully, now it looked like he would discover the joys of frozen turf.

For a few minutes I examined the North face of South Peak – *North Wall Traverse* looked to be in excellent condition. However, at IV, 5 this was a fairly serious proposition, with long, traversing pitches above a steep wall. I turned instead to the rocks ahead. There was a blank stretch of buttress, turfy ledges and short, icy walls zig-zagging up the buttress. That would do. A few moments explaining to Tom that frozen turf was easily the best climbing material in the known universe and off we went. It was as if our ages had been reversed and I was the father, he the child, as he discovered that a pick in turf would hold an elephant. He romped up the route and soon enough we had a new Grade III in the bag. On the summit we watched enthralled as snow crystals, caught in the sun, glittered as they drifted in the air over the col.

As it was St Valentine's Day I called the route *Heart Buttress*, but privately I also intended it as a tribute to the wee man with the big heart. We did a few summer routes as well over the years, including *Spartan Slab* on the Trilleachan Slabs, but it was those two magical days in his company which stand out. Like others who knew him, I have been truly privileged.

WE NEVER KNEW HER NAME

By Gavin Anderson

It was just a matter of time.

"There it is!" The other three leapt forward running through the snow to the head of the corrie, little white puff balls spurting off their heels. I had no illusions about what lay ahead, so bracing myself I walked slowly and deliberately.

They were standing around the body in a dither of indecision. It didn't need more than a glance to tell me that whoever it was, he or she was dead.

"It's a woman." Brian broke the silence, and I realised, I knew who it was. This was a long time ago. How different climbing was then. We were all disciples of W. H. Murray, whose two volumes arrived as if with our mothers' milk. Rock climbing, ice climbing, and hill walking were all building blocks, all of equal weight in the grand collective experience we called mountaineering which had a lot to do with the romance and poetry of the outdoors and nothing to do with the world of designer labels. Isolation was the ideal, the frenetic proximity of the gym anathema. If there were any who didn't take off their PAs in September to pad around the brilliant coloured hills in bendy boots, I had never heard of them. As to the affair itself, nowadays you would call it a learning experience like Whymper's descent of the Matterhorn was a learning experience.

Our base this weekend was the freezing squalor of Jean's Hut, at that time located somewhere in the bog land below Coire Cas on the Rothiemurchus side of the Cairngorms. The door couldn't be shut as, uninvited, a whale-back of snow had pushed its way into the centre of the room bringing with it unseasonal air-conditioning. However, we must have managed some sleep in this frozen midden, for the skier banging at the door complained he had been knocking some time.

"Have you seen a women in here?"

"No?" Still baffled by sleep, I couldn't figure out what he seemed to be hinting at, this not being the sort of question generally asked of climbers huddled in an igloo, hardly your ideal assignation location. Then, when he told us that a women had been wandering about all night looking for her companion, we cottoned on.

"There's a search party out here looking for her."

"Do you need our help, then?" This came in the tone used for unwanted doorstep salesmen. There was a blizzard outside and I had no interest in swapping it for my warm pit.

"You seem to have loads of volunteers." Outside I could see a long queue of skiers lined up earnestly prodding the snow with their poles. Although, for all the good they were doing, they might as well be searching for Roman coins, as the terrain was flat.

Robertson leaped out of bed as if scalded.

"Of course we're going," chiding me for my chicken-heartedness and him representing the selfless tradition of the hillman.

Outside the skiers were still there, patiently pricking out needles in haystacks on the gentle slope of Coire Cas. Adding to their number was pointless, so we crossed the ridge into Coire an t-Sneachda where there were real cliffs to fall over. On our way we picked up two English lads, plodding through the porridge towards some route on Aladdin's Buttress, who immediately volunteered to join the search.

Both Robertson and I were still pretty green. Most of our experience was second-hand, a combination of reading *Mountaineering in Scotland* and *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage,* making for a volatile mixture. We were still boys really, products of Edinburgh public schools, with the arrogance of callow youths who thought we were God's gift to wherever we might presume to donate our talents. That weekend was to give our presumptions a stinging rebuke no schoolmaster could deliver.

It was to be our first excursion into the realm of the ice climb. We had howked our way up Ben Lui's *Central Gully* and other venerated snow bound classics in the canon, religiously following in the footsteps of the Grand Old Masters, even to the extent of wearing tricouni nailed boots. This was different. The Cairngorm climate was far less hospitable than the West, with its frigid gales whipping across the Arctic plateau, added to which vertical ice was a particularly unyielding medium.

We were tackling *The Vent*, a Grade III winter climb tucked into the left-hand fold of Stob Coire an Lochan. Its ice-pitch, elementary to the expert, was furnished with traps for the neophyte. The rock that looked as if it was sporting an accommodating jughandle was ice-coated, and that snow patch luring you on to a safe haven was just a sugar coating sprinkled on ice.

It was also the first time on crampons. The man in Lillywhites assured me they were a perfect fit, despite the two front drop spikes sticking out a good half-inch from the toe of my boot, and they had the habit of falling off on any excursion exceeding 10 yards. My fault in not strapping them on properly, the salesman told me, like he knew and I was an idiot. To prevent loss, I should pull the straps tight enough to get frostbite, then wrap two old tent guys round boot and crampon.

The only way up ice was by step-cutting, every upward move invested with labour and craftsmanship. Try skipping a few steps, hoping to levitate to the top of the pitch, then expect trouble. The belays weren't too hot either, a belief in prayer as effective as an ice-axe stuck in the snow, and as for running belays, good luck. Measured against the march of technology, we were at the rubbing two sticks together stage. Ice pegs were superannuated tent pegs from Bertram Mills Circus, hard to insert, requiring a dentist's tenacity to extract, and they didn't come with a

guarantee of arresting a fall. Over spiky rocks we could drape a sling, and that was that. Stories, filtering up from down south, of nuts purloined from railway sleepers jammed in cracks as runners, were taken as another example of the Sassenach's insidious ways. Flodden and all that.

Real security only came when you were on *terra firma*, and sometimes not even then in the ferocious blizzards that passed for the norm hereabouts. Better say safe when that first pint is slithering down your throat in the boozer. Whymper wouldn't have blinked if he could have seen us, attired splendidly for grouse shooting with Prince Albert, in our hairy breeches, which when wet gave off an aroma redolent of Highland cow pastures. Harnesses were not yet a gleam in Whillans's eye, a rope round the waist tied off with a bowline sufficed, and slow strangulation after a fall was guaranteed, so peeling was no fun. But we saw sunsets to set your heart afire and heard our boots scrunching crisply over the snow on lonely Bens in a Scotland as quiet as of long ago, where only ghosts remained in the ruined sheilings in the glens.

So there I was struggling slowly upwards, bodily heat, unrestrained by any thermostat, pulsating to every corner of my being. I was gasping from excitement and effort, picking away at the ice like a mad pointillist painter. Way up above, the gully exit was hidden in the quickening murk with now and again a patch of blue flickering across the cornice, gone in the blink of an eyelid. I glanced up. Two women were standing on the cornice, waving at us! "Jesus!" I about jumped out of my britches.

"For Christ's sake get back," I shouted. That cornice didn't need much of a push to tumble. Their washing the windows wave told me they were women, men would give a half-hearted Neronian salute, or point out what a coo's erse I was making of the step-cutting. They retreated. The blizzard redoubled its efforts, throwing chunks of ice upwards through the funnel, freezing my face and hands, so I returned to chopping with extra vim.

A short trudge up a snow slope, and I rolled over onto the plateau, plonked my axe into the snow, tossing my rope round it and called it a belay. Euphoria charged through my veins in a surge of glorious voltage, which not even wet breeches freeze-welding onto the neve could dampen. Robertson came up breathing rapidly, so I assumed he was suitably impressed.

"Jeez, man, You spaced these holds out for a ffff…lipping giant!"

"Oh. I forgot you're the dwarf wi' the plastic heid!"

These pleasantries dispensed with, we stuffed our snow covered gear into our sacks, not bothering to sort out the frozen spaghetti of ropes, but after a few steps we reluctantly pulled them out again as we were navigating blind. The wind knocked us back and forth into each other, making steering akin to riding a bucking bronco. With the rope between us now arched like a bow, now whirring like a crazy skipping rope, we stumbled over the ice-speckled frozen tundra, back down to our frozen slum.

The weather was so miserable that night we went to bed early, but the cold forced us up to make a brew, the stove and the hot drinks managing to drive the temperature fractionally upwards. Eventually, we returned to the chill embrace of our sleeping bags, managing to fall asleep till the agitated skier knocked us up early the next morning.

The four of us were now spread out into a line along the corrie basin. I thought it was more realistic to fix on the crest not on the soft snowy slopes far below, and sure enough there was a neat V snipped out of the cornice bisecting its graceful arabesque.

Directly below scuffed up snow, a red snowball the size of a football, and what looked like a log laid awkwardly across the slope told all. A curious thing now happened. Approaching the body, I felt I was stepping out of reality, and watching events unfolding as on a screen. The mind's defence mechanism to cope with the dreadful? Or was our own existence so tediously insignificant that reality only exists through the medium of the small screen? It was the first time I had seen death up close. It could only have been one of the women we saw yesterday.

We stood around. Nobody wanted to go near to touch the body. The face was totally smothered in ice, obviously dead, but I felt somebody should check for any vital signs.

"Suppose we should check for a pulse and that." They all nodded, but no one moved, so I knelt down in the snow, pulled back the anorak, a thin jumper and lifted the corner of her blouse, feeling weird and intrusive, as if I were a necrophiliac. If she had been alive I don't know what we would have done, but she was stone cold dead.

My initiative with the corpse somehow put me in charge of the operation. Next thing was to get help. I asked who was the fastest, and this English lad in the middle of a Cairngorm blizzard standing over a recently dead woman, gave me a stride-for-stride account of his prowess as a cross-country runner, filling me in on all the cups and honours won as corroboration. He paused in his eulogy, giving me time to say: "You're the man for the job. Run like the bleedin' wind, and get help. There's 200 skiers in the next corrie piddling around on a slope that couldn't harm a fly. Go get 'em!"

He was off like a rocket, ably demonstrating his resumé, leaving the three of us standing guard over the girl's body, with time on our hands. Anticipating a long wait, we passed the time as if we had just missed the bus and the last one was a long way away. With the gale blowing we had to stand with our mitts against our faces to protect us against the snow pellets stinging our cheeks. We talked about climbing. And, as in any situation where you are not called upon to perform, we bragged. We've all done it. Holds recede, slabs are tilted up just a wee bit and the second is hauled up on a fishing line unable to follow our awesome leads. We did the hand ballet familiar in every climber's pub, a lay-back here, a hand

jam there, here a jug there a jug. A few minutes of this usually palls for anyone of voting age, but we hadn't established anything else in common so we kept at it, slapping the air for virtual handholds, while taking breaks to scour the intermittently visible skyline for succour.

When the rescue team emerged from the white-out they were treated to the incongruous sight of the three of us, hand jiving over a woman's dead body. Without fuss the body was bundled onto the stretcher, the legs bouncing on the canvas with the stilted gesticulations of a marionette. The fact that none of us knew her name added to the impression that this was just a shell left on the hillside the person inside, whoever she was, long gone.

The clouds parted for the cliff to take a final curtain call, then they drifted away like smoke unfurling until the last particles of mist were nibbled up by Strath Spey. Framed by a suddenly enormous blue sky the snow glistened and sparkled where the light hit the slope, while the crags, now red, now pink for that moment appeared friendly, making for a scene of beauty, capable of holding anyone for as long as visibility allowed. But to me it was a hideous kind of beauty, a sterile wasteland of indifference, lacking even the pitilessness of the diabolical, more depressing than frightening. I thought then that Mallory was wrong. Nothing is 'There'.

We were driven down to Aviemore to report to the police. In retrospect this seemed hardly worthwhile as by a process akin to Chinese Whispers our account was mangled by the Press unrecognisably the next day. Fortunately, the Mountain Rescue waited and gave Brian and myself a lift back up to the road end so we could retrieve our gear. We collected it, swore never to return to this dump and trudged back to the van through the snow. As we were loading up, the sun dropped over the horizon in a sunset you might wait for a whole lifetime, as if in dying it had thrown a challenge at all the colours of the spectrum. Beautiful, but for me it pricked the heart with melancholy.

Just 24 hours ago another could have shared these feelings. I began wondering about the woman, and not knowing who she was, I felt free to ad lib. I imagined her enjoying simple things like going to the pictures, throwing clay about in a pottery workshop and having her pals round for a coffee and a blether. She liked to laugh a lot with her own little circle. She had a gift for friendship and was loving and loved in return. Now that self-contained little world was switched off. I wished I had been nicer when I shouted at her to stand back. The last words she heard from a stranger were not kind. But then if wishes were horses… I never knew how that saying ended.

"Hurry up, Jimmy, We're freezin!"

"Okay."

The door was shut, the engine chugged ponderously into life, and off we went down into the gloom.

THROUGH THE EYES OF THE OWL

By Ian Mitchell

Joy of my heart Creag Uanaich, where I spent my youth
Crag of hinds and stags, a refreshing, joyful, bird-filled crag
A crag where the hunt went frequently and which I loved to frequent
Sweet was the baying of the hounds, driving the herd into the narrows

THE verbal memory of the old Gaelic poets was legendary. Duncan MacIntyre, for example, could recite all his 7000 verses of poetry by heart. In centuries before, this faculty must have been at least as well developed. But what about visual memory? The Bards of the Bens, I think, had this faculty developed almost as well.

I took the train to Corrour a wee while ago, with a mission to fulfil. When, 10 years ago, I was researching my book *Scotland's Mountains before the Mountaineers*, I had come across a poem, written probably around 1590, by a Gaelic poet, Domnhall mac Fhionnlaigh nan Dan. This described the poet taking refuge in the area around Craig Uanaich because "there was much fighting and raiding in Lochaber at that time". There, according to the poem, he lived off hunting the deer as he roamed an area about 10 to 15 miles in radius from the hill. From a study of the poem I was able to argue that Domnhall probably made the first ascents of several mountains in that region of Lochaber, including Sgor Ghaibre and Carn Dearg (Mountaineers, p14-16). Time subsequently allowed me to work more on the poem, and its place names, and to go from the text and maps to Craig Uanaich. My aim was to ascend the little mountain and, taking in the view from its summit, to see if I could identify more of the places mentioned in the poem. The results were surprising.

At Craiguanaich Lodge I observed the increasing decay of the building which had still housed a family when I first came here 25 years ago, but which is now only used for occasional sheep shearing and dipping. The hill, a Graham, which gave the lodge its name, towered above it. The first thing I noticed was it was very steep, the second that it was very craggy, and also heavily vegetated on the crags. Ascent from the south being problematic, I skirted the mountain through a little 'Khyber Pass' and waterfall to its eastern flank and there began an ascent. Its cragginess had protected it from grazing, and allowed a splendid mixed wood to flourish on the hill, and this was certainly, as it had been 400 years ago, 'bird filled' as I ascended. Large amounts of animal droppings also showed that it hosted a varied fauna, and near the top I came upon some deer grazing, on a grassy summit endowed with natural pools of drinking water, where the poet, Domnhall, probably refreshed himself after the hunt.

From the summit I was able to compare the poem with what I could see, and found that mountains mentioned with the rider 'I see' (chi mi) were all visible, while those which were mentioned without it, were not. Domnhall wrote this poem long after he had left the sanctuary of the Loch Treig area where he had gone around 1560, and was composing the song from his visual memory, which proved astonishingly accurate.

I sit on the fairy knoll and look towards Loch Treig
From Creag Uanach the sunny high ground of the deer
I see distant Coire Rath, the Cruach and Beinn Bhreac
I see Strath Ossian of the Warriors, and the sun shining on Meall nan Leac
I see Ben Nevis above, and Carn Dearg below
Past another little corrie is distant moor and the sea
Splendid is Coire Dearg where we loved to hunt
Corry of heathery knolls and the great stags
I see the summit of Bidean nan Dos on the near side of Sgurra Lith
I see Sgurr Choinnich of the slender stags
I see the wide strath of the cattle and the Corry of Maim Ban
I love today all that I can see
I see Garbh-Bheinn of the red stags and Lap Bheinn of the hillocks
And Leitir Dubh where I often spilt the deers' blood
Farewell from me to Ben Alder, the most eminent of bens
And also to Loch Erricht, where I loved to be
I shall drink my fill from Loch Treig and that will lift my spirits
Farewell to Coire nan Cloich and to the Usige Labhar
And to Bac nan Craobh and both sides of the Bealach nan Sgurr
And the Eadar-Bhealach where the Lowland tongue was unheard
I shall now take my leave of you
The most miserable farewell I shall ever take
No more shall I carry a bow under my arm.
And not till the world's end will I release the hounds

The ascent on the hill from Corrour is done in an easy couple of hours. There was still plenty of time between trains, so I decided to return to Corrour by way of Lap Beinn, and add it to my second round of Munros. From here I looked down on Strath Ossian of the Heroes, where Fingal, Ossian and Diarmid had supposedly fought in centuries before our own poet arrived.

BACK IN GEAR

By Carl J. Schaschke

WHEN the discovery was broadcast of Mallory's sun-bleached body, which had lain undisturbed for the best part of three-quarters of a century, I paid barely more than a passing interest. 'Snickers at 10', the so-called code used by top US big wall climber, Conrad Anker, over the airwaves was intended to throw others in the vicinity off the scent. Now I was fully engaged. A member of the North Face Team, Conrad had almost by chance found Mallory's body on the north side of Everest. Photographs of Mallory's corpse made the front pages of newspapers around the world.

Conrad and I had once been members of an international expedition to the impressive granite spires of Kalidaha in the Dharlang Nullah of the Kishtwar Himalaya. Back in those carefree days of the late 1980s we had shared just about everything and got to know each other better than we ought to admit. I had a reasonable measure of everyone on the trip, yet I never quite got my head around Conrad's *raison d'être*. "You see", offered fellow US big wall climber Kev Gheen, also on the trip, by some way of explanation: "He's not American, he's Californian."

Years later, I met up with Conrad again, this time in Glasgow. He was on tour from the US, and I'd spotted a larger-than-life poster of the career climber in Tiso's announcing a lecture that evening at the Mitchell Theatre. I popped along and was pleased that he remembered me without prompting or reminding. Tall and lean as ever, his fine golden locks were shorn but otherwise it was the same old Conrad. After his well-attended show in which he didn't even mention our trip – clearly it didn't appear on his radar of impressive places he's climbed – he suggested we go for a beer. Catch up on the news, that kind of thing.

"You still climbing there, Carl?" He still rolled those r's with that West Coast burr. Conrad seemed genuinely interested. I avoided the answer. Breaking the awkward pause, he began to reminisce and told tales that suggested to me that our trip had, for him, been some kind of kindergarten outing. It didn't seem like that to me. It was an unclimbed set of granite spires which soared skywards. Damn it, I'd put my life on the line.

Again: "You still climbing?" Ouch! It made me wince. The ensuing silence afforded me a false air of equality. With such an impressive accrued portfolio of mountaineering achievements into which I could casually dip, where should I start? Oh, the dilemma of picking and choosing from those bulging filing cabinets of outrageous routes and mountaineering escapades lodged inside my skull. Where to begin? Truth is, I was struggling to think of anything at all, let alone anything even vaguely comparable. My CV in recent years was blank. And I knew it.

Perhaps I should mention that I finished the Munros? Would he know what a Munro is? Would he even care? What about Auchinstarry? It's a

great place to climb but it's not really in the same league as the walls of the Big Ditch for which Conrad holds numerous speed records on El Capitan.

"Sure, I've been to…" My mind drew a blank and the words trailed off into nothingness. I cursed myself. Yes, it was great to meet Conrad again that evening but I had to content myself with the fact that our lives which had once so closely crossed, had gone off in diametrically opposite directions. While he is actively living the NFTs 'Never Stop Exploring' and is now running the Khumbu Climbing School in Nepal, I pass my days locked away in an office in Glasgow. The closest I now get to a Himalayan mountain is the one made of paper. Not quite the same, really.

Persistently, racked by thoughts of what could have or should have been, but never was, I have searched long and hard for answers. I'd long lifted the foot off the pedal running trips to the planet's bigger ranges. I'd once put teams of twinkies together, and I could do it again. I'd been the one to raise the finances, sort out the administration, do the peak booking, travel arrangements, organising food, seeing the expedition through to its conclusion, braving life in a thousand ways and still coming home unscathed. People relied on me to do it. To hell with the weekend over-climbed over-rated guidebook routes. I needed to light that fire again; something big; something abroad; a team effort. A real focus, something different.

Was it a blindfold decision, the proverbial pinning the tail-on-the-donkey, that had somehow picked out Mount Lassen as the target? Well, it seemed to fit the bill nicely – a big dormant Californian volcano. And in Conrad's own backyard, too. Before the 1980 eruption of Mount St Helens in Washington, Mount Lassen was the most recent volcanic outburst in the contiguous 48 American states. The volcano sits at the southern-most end of the Cascade Range which thrusts up into British Columbia, Canada. Characterised by its great lava pinnacles, jagged crater and steaming sulphur vents, it is surrounded by forestation, steep valleys and meadows. Yes, Mount Lassen would do nicely.

The dream was alive again. The team of four had bought into the idea and flew out to the US. Arriving in the small hours, we went to pick up the hire car at San Francisco International Airport.

"You looking for an upgrade on this occasion, Sir?" It was very late and we were very tired. "No, just give us the car we ordered."

"I'm sorry, we haven't got one available right now, Sir. But we do have a van."

We'd been dropped off at Glasgow airport in a van, uncomfortably squeezed in among a set of tool boxes. I was not in the mood to negotiate with this over-cheery rep for the prospect of driving around the searing Californian heat as White Van Man. She could forget it.

Reading the situation well, and looking to rapidly defuse a near international incident, the rep twisted her VDU to allow us to see what was being offered. "This, Sir, is a van."

So apart from the four wheels and steering wheel, vans in the US bare little resemblance to vans in the UK. So a van it was. What a monster! It was more like a bus – and a luxury bus at that. What does it cost to run a bus like this? With US fuel prices a fraction of those anywhere else, it wasn't an issue. Fuel in the US is well worth abusing. Who cares about CO^2 emissions when it's this cheap? The gas-guzzling monster with its essential air-conditioning served perfectly as a mobile beer chiller. We took turns at sitting in every seat. Hell, this was fun.

The team were of mixed ages, capabilities and experience. Well balanced, I thought. Collectively, we could claim a reasonable list of achievements with a few volcanos chucked in including Kilimanjaro and Mount Bromo in Indonesia. We'd all been up Mount Toro (where?) Mount Lassen was ideal and unless it was going to erupt again, it was well within our capabilities.

Peter Lassen, for whom the peak and its National Park are named, was a Dane who'd pioneered trails way back in 1848 as routes to the west during California's gold rush. Lassen had guided settlers and tried to establish a city. Mining, power development projects, ranching and timbering were all attempted. American Indians – Atsugewi, Yana, Yahi and Maidu – lurking in the pine forests are a thing of the past; the last, a Yahi Indian named Ishi, being flushed out around a century ago. Only bears now remain a threat.

As required in the Park, we made base in a designated camp site which came complete with camp fire bin. The Ranger tediously lectured us on the Park's rules: the don'ts and the don'ts. Strictly forbidden was the use of collected wood for fires which lay temptingly all about. All logs were required to be purchased from the Ranger. Sounded like a nice little earner. The group in the site next to us merrily burned their purchased logs in a oner, impressively creating flames licking a good 10ft. into air with the sort of burn NASA uses to launch space rockets. The scorching radiative flux was either going to melt the synthetic fabric of our nearby tents, or the shower of embers was going to pepper the fabric with burn holes. With the flames equally perilously close to the surrounding tinder-dry pines, I contemplated how it was that devastating forest fires should ravage California on an annual basis. Creating insanely over-sized infernos are, strangely, not against the rules.

Although tantalisingly close by, the big peak remained out of sight being obscured by the canopy of pines. Near the tent lay the fresh water lake of Manzanita. From the far shores, the snowy summit could be viewed. We all took a dip in the somewhat refreshingly cool waters. The Ranger was on our case again. Surely, not another rule? No. In his 30 years he'd never seen anyone swim in the icy waters. But then he obviously hadn't met anyone from Scotland. We eat porridge.

Time to go. How was it done again? A route carefully planned and executed with plenty of contingencies along the way and strong leadership. Clearing the forest, Mount Lassen was straight ahead. Wow! Was this the

surrogate unexplored steep granite with tasty bonatius hand cracks with occasional pitches of hooking detacho flakes, copperheading kitty litter, dicey runout friction or big ugly chimneys with verglas in 'em? Should I pull rank and take the driver's seat and steer the team in the right direction? It was my idea, after all, wasn't it? Onwards and upwards. It was steep. First gear and power up all the way. No heroics: just follow the line of least resistance. Keep the wheels on the road. I knew how it was done.

Passing features such as Hot Rock and Devastation Area, we climbed up through King's Creek close to Bunpass Hell. It was now within launching distance of the summit. This had been good progress. We were still all together. Surely, another push would do it. Up here it was cold and the air thin. It was a strange world of volcanic rock, snow and ice. But the mood had changed. I sensed there were thoughts of no longer reaching the summit. The focus had shifted.

It seems I was right. The two youngest members were overcome by the nauseous vapours of sulphur percolating from hidden underground fumaroles all around. In places the ground was so hot, our Vibram soles melted on the hot rocks. They'd had enough. Together with the third member, they opted to remain by the frozen and aptly named Summit Lake – their high point. What were they thinking about? We'd only just begun, hadn't we? Had I picked a weak team? Too young and inexperienced? So it was down to me to finish the job. I would meet them again on the descent.

How far, how long from here to push alone to the summit? A team of Cheese-Eating Surrender Monkeys were ahead, caught up and rudely overtaken, plumes of ochre cinders kicked up and spat out. And there, at last, was the rarefied atmosphere. The lungs could feel it. This is what I'd come for. Like a child with a toy at Christmas, I was excited. Not far now. I carved my way past a couple of Americans making heavy weather of the ascent. There was an exchange of unpleasantness and gone. Less burgers, boys.

No more up, this was the caldera – a rim of jagged volcanic rock. Snow lay in the crater. To the north Mount Shasta was clear above a heavy haze. Result!

Barely half-an-hour after threading the summit, the mix of snow and cinder ash allowed swift descent. Fast approaching the frozen turquoise lake below, I could make out the three far distant dots of the other team members. Were they going to be disappointed? Would they even talk to me? So near yet so far for them. It was their choice, wasn't it?

The team had tracked my descent and seemed pleased to see my return. "Look! We've made a snowman with Mum. What do you think of him, Dad?"

The little darlings. We climbed aboard the van parked by the lake. Back in gear again and back off down the long mountain road. Mission Mount Lassen complete. I wondered what Conrad would have made of it. Frankly, I no longer cared.

RED FLY THE BANNERS OH!

By Iain Smart

We CLIMB in the spirit of our times. At present, we live in a Golden Age. Climbing shops are Aladdin's Caves full of shining metal and brightly coloured nylon. Climbing gear, camping gear, and clothing are wonders of intelligent design. Climbing standards have reached stratospheric heights of excellence. The whole world is accessible to people of modest incomes. I once heard some of our members discussing the possibility of climbing Mount Kenya in a long weekend from Edinburgh. I remember leaving my home in Glen Shee about lunchtime and the next evening standing on a remote peak in East Greenland watching the sun set briefly behind a jagged row of northern peaks with my ski tracks leading to a comfortable camp on a snowfield far below. My friend Phil Todd standing beside me had also flown over the day before from his home in Oregon on the far Pacific shore. Nearer home my grand-daughter has to have all her gear, ropes, slings, karabiners etc. in matching colours.

It was not always so. I write of the years of the mid-1940s spanning the last years of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. During this time Russia became morally dominant and the extension of Communism seemed imminent. Russia and its leader, Stalin, were idolised and idealised by many in the industrialised West and in the emerging post-colonial countries of Asia and Africa. The great fear was that the Americans might use 'The Bomb' if Russia attempted to overthrow Capitalism in the small part of Europe west of the Iron Curtain. I remember people saying with fearful awe that the Communists had learned how to 'change human nature'. Top of the Pops was the Red Army Choir singing loud and vigorous renderings of stirring songs. In comparison the Rolling Stones would register less than the half droop on the virility indicator and the Beatles would seem soft and self-indulgent and ideologically immature, if not, frankly decadent. It is only against this backdrop that the events described below are plausible.

Glencoe by lamplight:

This episode must have taken place in the middle of the war. We were in Glencoe Youth Hostel. It was a winter night. About a dozen and a half young boys were in the common room; we were all below military age. The smell of beans and dried egg still lingered after the frugal supper. The room was lit by tilley lamps; electric light was not yet with us. A group of seven or eight lads sat together at one end. They were engaged in serious talk. The rest of the room gradually fell silent as the group broadcast their earnest conversation to engage our attention. They told of the new world to come after the war. They were members of a Young Workers Club from somewhere in the Glasgow area. I remember watching with the fearful awe of an outsider in the presence of dedicated believers. They had hope

and a frightening idealism. They talked of the dictatorship of the proletariat that would be established after the war and how the working class would be released from bondage; their vision was of education, intellectual advance and high endeavour, not booze and free-loading on the broo. They were not unfriendly, far from it. But they did glance at the rest of us, implying that this was the new reality; it was coming and we had better adapt to it. Stalin and the USSR were models of a workers' republic. They would liberate the whole of Europe and after the war there would be a Soviet world of working class unity in which the nation state would wither away.

They sang a lot of songs. One I can still remember. Instead of *Green Grow the Rashes* it was a rousing, *Red Fly the Banners-oh.*

Five for the years of the five-year plan
And four for the four years taken,
Three, three the rights of man,
Two, two a man's own hands,
Working for his living-oh,
One is workers' unity
And ever more shall be so.

Another had the chorus line:

With every propeller
Roarrrrring 'Red Front!'
In defence of the USSR!

We crouched behind our paper-thin copies of RLS and Frank Smythe as these songs were followed by the inspiring sound of the *Internationale* and the *Red Flag* passing over our heads. I knew that if the workers' republic ever came to pass I was doomed. Not because I was against a fair society – an educated population was what civilization was all about – but, in the one they offered there would be no room for solitary seekers; individualism would be classified as deviationism and suppressed for the good of the community. It was this need to conform that struck an icicle into the heart.

The next morning we climbed up the path to Binnein nam Bian in shabby clothes and sub-standard hobnailed boots. We clumped through the snow on the final slope without rope or ice axe. At one time we saw the vanguard of the proletariat silhouetted against the skyline of the Aonach Eagach on the opposite side of the glen. As far as dress and equipment were concerned we and they were indistinguishable. We were all shabby, under-equipped mountaineers. They were, if anything, more affluent than we were; they had jobs and an income however small; we were still at school and dependent on our cash-strapped parents. Even so, between us there was a deep glen of incompatibility. If only we could have suppressed our desire

to explore by ourselves we could have joined their band of hope and marched in the vanguard of a reforming movement singing rousing songs. People who won't follow a leader have always been a problem in any well regulated society.

Ben Alder Cottage:
Also during the war as a schoolboy on a visit to Ben Alder cottage, as reported in SMCJ, 1991,xxxiv, 182, pp 593-596, I encountered Communists who were more intellectually sober. They had guns and one had fought in the Spanish Civil War. In their conversation there were quotes from Marx and Lenin. I felt an empathy with these robust exponents of the great ideal; they were worldly wise and serious but this was tempered by oblique, dead-pan humour and an agreeable gallusness. I felt at home with them, perhaps because they went out on the hill in ones and twos and fished by the lochside alone. Their type of Soviet Scotland might not have been at all bad.

Playboy of the Western World:
My first visit to the Alps was with early versions of Malcolm Slesser and Geoff Dutton who were even then bright stars in the firmament. It was just after the war, probably in the summer of 1947. We were inexperienced and overawed by the scale of the Swiss Alps. It was quite a challenge even to get to Switzerland. Money was short, tickets were hard to get; they had to be bought in advance in London. Malcolm's sister who lived there queued for them. They were the size of a pamphlet printed on low-quality brown paper. After the dinginess and frugality of war-ravaged Britain and France we entered undamaged Switzerland where food was abundant – except we didn't have money to buy much of it. We climbed the Fiescherhorn and the Wetterhorn and then ran out of Swiss francs and we had to return.

I stopped off in Paris and stayed at something called a Camp Volant – about a dozen old army tents pitched on a dusty bombed site. The address I remember was 8 Rue Barbet de Jouy, somewhere near the Musee Rodin. For a very small sum you got a camp bed, a well-used blanket and breakfast of a single tin cup of curious flat coffee and a piece of dry bread. In the evening a simple one-plate meal was served. We sat around trestle tables lit by hanging kerosene lanterns and ate beans and bread and cheese. I think you could buy 'coffee' as an extra.

The other people at my table that night were young intellectual communists; they were students; none were working class. They, too, assumed that Capitalism was doomed; it was just a matter of knocking away a few rotting props and the whole shoddy edifice would come tumbling down and socialist republics modelled on the Soviet Union would bring, justice, education, self-respect and honourable employment to all. It was here I first heard the word 'dialectic' used in discussion. I did not understand what it meant.

The man opposite me was a young Englishman complete with beard and spectacles who exuded moral superiority with a quiet matter-of-fact scholarliness. He had practical experience; he had spent the summer working on the Yugoslav Youth Railway. In this project young idealists from all over Europe had assembled to help build a rail track somewhere in Bosnia. Each morning they marched off to work singing rousing songs. (Those members old enough to remember Len Lovat singing *La Banda Rossa* will recall how rousing these songs were.) From such seeds a new socialist Europe would grow, the man opposite me declared. I kept quiet. I felt like a spoiled brat, a playboy who had been scrambling in the Alps while European youth were resisting the re-establishment of the yolk of monopoly capitalism and the tyranny of the military-industrial complex. The group of Left Wing intellectuals at the table came from half-a-dozen countries. They seemed less abrasive, less aggressive than the bright-eyed singers in Glencoe or the practical working men of the Ben Alder Soviet; they were intellectual by-standers who were witnessing the inevitable; they felt no need to man the barricades. But once again I felt out of it. I could have climbed the Fiescherhorn any old year, but the Yugoslav Youth Railway was an unrepeatable moment in history. A few years ago I met by chance in a bothy someone who had actually worked on the railway. He had shared a barrack with Austrians and Palestinians. On the wall he distinctly remembered a slogan reading: "Long Live Arab-Jewish Anti-Imperialist Unity."

The spirit didn't last. The professional priests and politicians couldn't allow power to slip out of their hands and they had to re-exert religious and political differences; their futures depended on exploiting these divisions. The politicians were on a loser since they promised heaven on earth. The religious authoritarians won because they were more astute; they very sensibly promised heaven after death and, unlike the politicians, have yet to be proved wrong.

The sunny side of the street:

About the same time I encountered idealists working from the other side of the social order. I was an instructor one Easter in one of the first mountaineering courses run by the Central Council of Physical Recreation. Its acronym CCPR was not too different from USSR in Cyrillic lettering, but there the similarity ended. We were based in the luxury of the Cairngorm Hotel in Aviemore – war-worn Glenmore Lodge had yet to be renovated. We went by lorry each morning along the dirt road from Coylum Bridge to Loch Morlich, then by footpath to Coire an t-Sneachda or Craig Calaman. Many luminaries graced the course. Frank Spencer Chapman of Arctic and Malayan war fame spoke of facing down adversity by sheer force of character. Prunella Stack an attractive, athletic, up-market lady who was a leader in the Health and Beauty movement spoke of a healthy mind in a healthy body; I have experienced this combination myself from time to time although only for short periods and she was quite right, it

really is a very agreeable state. Norman Odell, the last man to see Mallory and Irvine on their way up Everest was there and I had the honour of climbing a route in a corrie of Braeriach with him. He cut the most enormous steps even on relatively easy ground, obviously mindful of the train of porters coming up behind. One day I went out with Lord Malcolm Douglas-Hamilton. He feared Britain was in imminent danger of becoming a Left Wing dictatorship. As we trudged up the path through the old Caledonian forest, he explained how it was quite likely that within the next few weeks Aneurin Bevan would mastermind a coup, seize parliament and the radio stations and declare a Socialist Republic. The *Daily Worker* would replace *The Times* and public schooling would mean just that. It was all maybe a little paranoid but in the context of the time not entirely implausible.

Epilogue:
In the event it was the *Sun* and the *Mail* that replaced the *Daily Worker* and *The Times* as the most widely read and influential papers in the land. The *Internationale* that united the human race and caused the nation state to wither away was a global market in which everything was for sale and international boundaries were archaic impediments to maximising profit. Nevertheless, feral Capitalism, for all its faults, encouraged inventiveness and individuality. Inventiveness in the mountaineering market has generated affordable equipment of astonishing ingenuity and sophistication beyond the wildest dreams of the gas-cape-clad denizens of the mid-1940s, carrying their cotton tents with separate groundsheets in heavy ex-army Bergen rucksacks. Individualism has flourished as never before as is evident in the pages of our Journal.

Under a Soviet system an off-beat organisation like the SMC, full of difficult people who won't do what they are told and don't like being led, would not have been allowed; the present membership would have been sent off to the Gulag for re-education. Ironically, we would probably have found the Creag Dhu already there as even worse examples of incorrigible individualism. Unless, of course, as is not unlikely, they had finessed the situation and were actually running the place, in which case they might extend a kindly tolerance to those of us who could climb above HVS.

One day runaway Capitalism will collapse under the weight of its internal contradictions and drown in its own excrement. Before this unhappy terminal event we have great opportunities for travel to the world's remotest mountain ranges. There is even a railway to the fabled Forbidden City of Lhasa where you can erect your tent in the municipal campsite. We can also do it all in greater safety than before. With our GPSs we can now find out exactly where we are and, if we do get into difficulties, we can use our mobile phones to summon a helicopter. If we ever get lost, now we can be found. Truly an Amazing Grace! It's all too good to miss. Let's get on with surfing the present wave of prosperity with all the originality we can muster… before it hits the beach.

DEATH BY MISADVENTURE

By Alan Mullin

Alan died in tragic circumstances earlier this year. He wrote this article after his ground-breaking ascent of Rolling Thunder *on Lochnagar and it is offered here as a tribute to a climber of exceptional ability – a complex character, never far from controversy, who climbed as he lived – giving his all. (Ed.)*

I ARRIVED back from the Accident and Emergency unit three hours ago and my eye is till excruciatingly painful. I should have known better than to sharpen my crampons with the angle grinder without wearing goggles, well I paid the price for my stupidity, a shard of steel straight in to the old ocular. I don't yet know what is more painful, the shard that was lodged in my eye or the needle used to remove it. I am lying in my darkened living room looking like black patch straight out of *Treasure Island.* I still intend to go climbing though, as I can use one eye to climb with, of that I am sure. I only have one problem! No bloody partner to climb with. I had my heart set on *Rolling Thunder* on Lochnagar having looked at it with my binoculars the previous summer. It is an E1 rock route and to my knowledge no one had yet repeated it since its first ascent in 1982. It was an ideal target for a winter ascent being very grassy, wet and foul in summer and, surprisingly, it looked to me to be quite easy from the ground. I was sure it was climbable.

I had called various people about doing this route, but sadly, I had been let down again as usual, with promises of "I will call you back, honest Alan". As was the case on so many occasions, the phone call never materialised and I resigned myself to another missed opportunity. The weather was looking fine – albeit a bit stormy. I guess it was the thought of on-sighting this unrepeated E1 on a cliff notorious for its few weak spots that put partners off. I believe now that if I had known how tough its armour really was I would not have embarked on my appointment with fear. I don't consciously know what made me want to solo it. I guess it just popped into my head and seemed the right thing to do, but in retrospect, there were probably subconscious factors at work as well.

Firstly, I had climbed *The Steeple* a month before and I felt confident in my ability. Secondly, I had been having a particularly bad time of late, much criticism in the media and by other climbers of my ability and a fair amount of personal problems had turned me into someone even my wife could not comprehend. I truly felt I had come so far in life, yet people who did not know me on a personal level could not help but put me down. I really felt that my life was one big bloody mess. I've had to fight so hard all my life just to achieve the smallest goals and I've suffered many set backs, such as losing my beloved job in the Army and at the same time

losing some of my lower spine. This, consequently, resulted in my addiction to painkillers and alcohol sending me spiralling into depression. I had to fight so hard to overcome all these things, and more, and now this shite about me being a crap climber had really taken its toll on me, even though I had worked so hard to achieve my goals.

I made my mind up there and then lying in the dark alone with my thoughts – I was going to solo *Rolling Thunder*, and what better time than right bloody now.

It is 10pm and my eye still hurts but as I say goodbye to my wife I can sense she is not happy with yet another one of my insane ideas. I reassure her that my eye will be fine by the morning and that if it still hurts I can always come home. I know this is a lie and even if it feels painful I will still climb. I know deep down inside that she worries intensely about me, but I am selfish at heart and always have to get my own way. Perhaps that's why I love her so much, because I guess she understands me better than anyone else and does not hold my selfishness against me.

The weather forecast is crap and the roads are almost blocked but that does not deter me, I simply take the long road towards Aberdeen and even this main route is quite hazardous. I am missing out the road through Tomintoul as everything is blocked over that way. I am struggling slightly with the driving as one eye is not as good as two and when I arrive at the Loch Muick car park it is still dark. I sort myself out, and although I have not slept since the previous night, I feel OK. I see a car arrive just after me and I think it looks like Pete Benson, but I don't bother to go and speak to him as I am in a world of my own right now and don't feel very sociable. I have to wear my goggles for most of the walk in and with deep snow underfoot it is tough going with a heavy sack that soon starts to make my shoulders ache. I have no other thoughts in my mind except for *Rolling Thunder*. I can feel the wind pick up as I reach the Meikle Pap Col, but I don't worry too much as cols are often blustery places due to the channelling of the wind. I can't quite see the Tough Brown face yet, as it is shrouded by low cloud cover, but I can feel the chill in the air. This is definitely going to be a full-on winter ascent and no mistake. I carry on humping my load through the now thigh-deep snow in the Corrie and am beginning to feel slightly tired, but one bonus is that my eye no longer hurts so badly and I can now remove my goggles which have been misted over for the past three hours.

I eventually reached the First Aid box and can now see clearly my objective up on the right of the Tough Brown face: "Jesus, it is wintry alright." I witness an airborne avalanche sweep over the top of *Parallel Gully B*. I still have to negotiate the slopes and the deep snow that lies in the bowl formed just below the Tough Brown face. It is hard work, and as I approach the foot of the route I can see other climbers over at the First Aid box. I am sure they are wondering what the idiot over here is up to. I finally get this monkey off my back and have a well-earned rest. I survey

my route above, a series of steep slabs and grooves finally ending at a big roof. I am sure I can climb this route on-sight, but I have no idea what gear I will need. I have just brought my normal soloing rack which consists of four pegs which are all I own, along with my trusty hexentrics, a few nuts, quick draws and a few cams. I have come to rely heavily on my hexentrics as they can be hammered into icy cracks where nothing else will suffice.

I sort out a peg belay and anchor one end of the rope to it with the free end running through my soloist and am now ready and start climbing up the initial overhanging roof that is harder than it looks. I clear the snow from the groove on the left side of the roof only to be confronted with a horrible blind crack. "Damn." This is quite confusing as it looks just like the cracks normally found in Cairngorm granite, in other words quite accommodating. Sadly, this was not the case here, as the cracks seemed to be horrible, blind and misleading. I hope this is not normal on this cliff otherwise I could be in trouble. I manage to get a semi hook in the groove which allows me to reach a little higher and get some turf and strenuously pull over the roof. I am now on a nice terrace. I go right under a small roof and climb another unprotected blind groove right of it and immediately above. After 10m. climbing on reasonable ground I eventually find somewhere to place a decent hex. I thank God for this as I am beginning to get seriously worried here. I make a small traverse out left and pull up right onto a half decent ledge below what looks like a hard slab with two cracks running up it. I am sure this will certainly constitute the lower crux as it is steep, and as it leans left I can't seem to get straight on it without doing a barn door out leftwards, which is throwing me off balance. I have now searched for half-an-hour in vain looking for protection. I finally get a small nut at the base of the slab in a very icy crack that I know is shite but it is better than nothing.

I survey the slab above, a horizontal crack runs up the middle of it with a smaller corner crack on the right edge of the slab. I try to convince myself that they will be nice deep Cairngorm cracks! "Wrong," they are bloody useless, shallow and crap. I now know that when I attempt to climb the slab I will not be able to stop and place pro as there is no possibility in this blind rubbish, and anyway it is way too strenuous and looks technically awkward. I eventually manage to place a lousy copperhead at the base of the corner crack. I dare not test it as it has fallen out twice already. However, it does allow me to work a few moves up the slab.

"Jesus", it is technical and there is nothing much for my feet but, more worryingly, there is nothing in the way of protection to stop me hitting the ground should I fall. This makes for a very hard decision. I have calculated a ground fall as my hex is 10m. below and if I fall I will go 10m. past it. Obviously, this means a ground fall and I must give it my all if I am to commit to the moves above. I focus on the moves, remembering everything

I have ever learned about technique. I make my mind up and take the gamble.

"OK" – get psyched and go! Left tool hook in the crack, flag left foot out on the slab and hook the right tool in a small corner up right, bring the right foot up for a mono in the crack. Now high step up, left tool up above head and crap hook in the crack, right tool again in the corner, now quickly heel hook with my left foot on the ledge above.

"Man this is bloody mad!" No gear and well mad. I remove my right tool and thwack into turf and mantle on the heel hook. I feel great! I am amazed! That took total concentration and I did it. I actually climbed that in a trance, I really felt no fear – nothing but the moves coming together.

I can sort myself out now and calm down a bit. I feel happiness like no other, a sense of elation even. I look up at the next section, and a small groove leading to a ledge.

"No problem." Or so I think. I manage to place a decent nut at the base of the groove but it's choked with ice above so I know I won't get gear there. I get a hook for my left tool and move up, get a thin one for the right in the ice above but as I try to pull up into the groove my hook rips sending me flying backwards and partially down the slab I have just climbed. I am also upside down. I pull myself upwards and immediately check myself for movement of all limbs.

"Phew, I am OK." No injuries and I can now pull myself back on to the ledge. "Well that will teach you to be so cocky you dick head!"

"OK." This time I get a slightly better hook that allows me to pull onto the ledge above. The guidebook description, which is firmly implanted in my memory, says go out right on a grassy ramp, but I can see a better alternative directly above. I look up and can see that it's a thin groove leading to another slab. I manage to get another nut at the base of this groove, albeit it's small but it's better than nothing. I start up the overhung groove and, bridging out, I can at least maintain balance on this one. I really wish there was some pro here but it's all blind shite, only good enough for small hooks and little else. I pull on to the slab above and just as I get a decent hook my feet come off.

I fall all the way back down to the ledge somersaulting in the process. I am very lucky that the back-up knot stops on my Soloist and, unbelievably, the nut has held – just!

I don't feel scared just annoyed and even manage a deranged sort of laugh to myself. I stand up and go again as there really is no time like the present and this time I am successful. I climb the thin groove up the slab and reach a really nice ledge above, thank God!

I am really hoping for something bomber here as I need to go down and pull my rope up, I manage to get a good thread and half-decent cam, I sort myself out and rap back to the base and get ready to remove the bottom belay. I can't believe what I am seeing here. The bloody peg that I have been belayed on has fractured and as I hammer it outwards it snaps off.

"Well, once again that was bloody lucky Alan."

The weather has now turned really bad with strong winds and a chill that's eating away at my very bones. However, I am more determined than that as I know deep down inside I am a good climber and I can deal with this and refuse to give in despite the atrocious conditions now prevailing. I re-ascend to the belay above. I have a 60m. rope so it should be enough to link the next two final pitches together.

This section looks hard as it's a 20m. slab problem and I am now guessing that I will be getting no protection due to this totally unaccommodating bloody granite. I climb up a shallow groove and look at my problem. There is a bulging arête to my left with a shallow crack running up it's right side. I scrape away at the crack in the hope of finding just one deep weakness but, predictably, it's another useless shallow load of pants. I can see some small clumps of turf higher up the arête and if I could just reach them then I am sure I can link the moves above to the ledge which is tantalisingly close now. I can just put my left foot on a sloper on the arête. As I try to stand high on it my foot comes off and I have no bloody tool placements. I am catapulted backwards through the air and the next thing I know I am dangling upside down on the slab below the ledge.

Once again I am only stopped by my back-up knot. Sadly, the Soloist does not work on upside down falls so I have to rely on back-up knots which can be difficult to tie or untie *in extremis* but they are my only fail safe. I have one tool in my hand and cannot see the other, is it on the ledge above? or has it gone to the bottom of the cliff? I really hope not, this is all that concerns me at this point. All I can think about is where my other tool is. If I lose it I will have to retreat and there is no bloody way I am giving up on this route for anything.

I pull back onto the ledge only to break out in the loudest fit of insane laughter I have known. I see my tool lying on the ledge and thank God once again for his kindness. Predictably, I can't believe my luck. "What a jammy bastard Alan." Not a scratch or a mark in sight. I quickly sort myself out and I am now fully confident that I at least have a totally bomber belay. This time I stick to the foothold on the arête and precariously reach up high to get the moss and some more turf which allows me to climb the arête and mantel onto the ledge above. I now arrange some rubbish runners under the slanting roof which is the junction with the route *Crazy Sorrow.*

The guidebook says you carry on straight up, but the weather is really foul and I don't like the look of the way ahead or what little of it I can see through this horrible blizzard. Instead, I opt for the other guidebook hint at 'escape out right.'

"Jesus, it looks no better." A large roof blocks the way with yet another slab below it. I am fed up with this slab climbing as I find it all rather thin and more to do with good footwork than strong arms. I traverse up right to below the left side of the roof and look below. "Cool," there is a load of

ice under the roof but I can't see anyway of protecting it and the ice only means that there is not even the chance of a psychological runner. I manage to place a spectre hook in the turf on the left side of the roof and now I can step down to reach the slab. It feels steep and a fall here will send me smashing down left for a bad landing. I really need to focus my attention and stay nice and calm. I traverse under the roof delicately, no room for mistakes here, I am now climbing with my feet and I am grateful that they are sticking for now.

Finally, after much heart in mouth I reach the right-hand end of the slab and can get a torque under the roof, which allows me to reach high with my right tool and get some turf and thankfully reach a ledge above. "Phew." That felt weird but only after I climbed it, not during – quite bizarre this climbing game. The weather has really taken a turn for the worse and I am being blinded by spindrift and the wind feels fiercely strong. I carry on for a while traversing, the ground is friendlier here and I am getting better gear at last, albeit not where I really need it. I traverse along at first but I am forced to make a slight descent and then more climbing straight up which takes me to the crest of the Tough Brown Ridge – or what I believe is the ridge anyway. Sadly, I can't see where the hell you are supposed to abseil from. Something in the description about a block with a sling around it – but as I can hardly see my hands, I don't think I am going to find it now.

I switch my head torch on and look again. Bloody nothing but spindrift blasted in my face. I think I'm going to panic, but wait – what about reason. And for me that's the way I have just come. I know where everything is and I have belays that will allow me to descend. I mean, what's the difference? Descend here, providing I find said block, which is looking more unlikely by the minute, or go back there, which I have to anyway, then descend. I have made my mind up and it's back the way I came and descent for me.

I pull my way across my rope, and eventually, I am back at the roof. I am not keen on this traverse but it's this or, in my mind, confusion over on the ridge, trying to find a lousy block in this shite. I manage to place my tools on the turf and step back down to below the roof. I know the ice is good enough so I just have to remember that. I traverse again tenuously and thinly but my feet are doing all the work and they're sticking to the thin ice here. I seem to be willing my mono points to stick and they are doing it. It feels like the longest traverse of my life, almost being blown off several times, I begin to feel sick. I can now get at the turf on the other side of the roof and pull onto the ledge. I throw up all over the ledge the retching has made my eyes water and my tears are freezing straight onto my cheeks. I also discover the spectre hook has completely ripped out the turf. "I am so lucky it's not real." Or so I think. I rap from the roof junction but as the gear consists of two nuts sideways under a roof I decide I would be better rapping from the *in situ* thread lower down. Well I have tested

the thread fully and at least I know it's bomber. I rap from the thread to the ledges below, finally another rappel and now I am safely on *terra firma.*

I have problems seeing my hands in front of me and know it's far from over yet. I put away my frozen rope but can't remove my harness as the webbing buckles are totally frozen stiff. I put my sack on and try to get out of this nightmare, I am having a horrendous time descending as I can't see my compass properly and the snow is waist deep in the Corrie. I don't know if I can carry on, my body is exhausted and with no sleep for two days or decent food I am at breaking point, literally.

I am not even at the First Aid box yet and I have been floundering here for more than an hour. I sit down blasted by spindrift and freezing, I start to cry and panic, it's hopeless. So this is how it ends for those stupid enough to defy common sense and all that goes with it in the mountains. I drift off to sleep; somehow it no longer seems important to move. I think I am dreaming, remembering my time in the Army. I seem to remember how many times I had feelings just like this, but when I was at my lowest ebb, tired, starved and feeling hopeless I never ever gave up. I always managed to keep going, that was my spirit and I needed that resolve right now. After all, I had everything to live for, a great wife, lovely kids, and an insatiable lust for life.

I open my snow-encrusted eyes, get up and start moving. I am thinking: "As long as I don't go down or descend I will get out of here." Up and right was the way home and that's where I put my head. Four hours later I eventually reached the Meikle Pap Col after what can only be described as the basic struggle for survival in the mountains when they are venting their fury. I am weary of body and mind but I keep moving with the enduring thought that I must get home foremost in my mind. I reach the track going towards Glen Muick and I can rest now.

"Thank God." It's finally over, and with just a walk down a long track I will be there. I rest my aching body and have the strangest feeling. I start to shake uncontrollably and break down in tears, I am filled with unknown emotions. "Wait a minute." I know what they are now. They are the feelings of remorse and fear. I am remorseful because I could have easily killed myself and that would have been selfish, as I know my wife deserves better of me. "That's it." The feelings I should have been having on the route were those that I had repressed. That's why I felt a profound sense of calm after falling so many times, but now all the feelings of fear and common sense that I had ignored are suddenly filling my mind, flooding back like waves. It feels like a wake-up call and I am suddenly intensely aware of my own selfishness and yet it feels too late. I pull myself together and carry on down the track, I get the frozen clothing off and get in the car anxious to get back home and see my wife. I feel content and am slowly warming up. I feel a strange kind of satisfaction and now I know that I no longer have to worry about what people will undoubtedly say about me.

"I can climb." Of that I am now certain.

TIME FOR TEA

By Phil Gribbon

FRAGILE fragments shimmered through my heat-saturated brain. With limbs limp we lay flat on the rock close to the edge and in love with the sun. We were comfortably warm but thirst husked.

Somehow, the long traverse to the summit had given adequate difficulties. All nicely exposed; it gave a string of short slabs crisp with lichens that stopped by dropping into space, a sequence of uncomfortable straddles along painful sharp edges and open chimneys with downward views. The solitary gendarme had been seduced in a delicate skirting girdle around its waist.

By getting the pitch sequence right I was rewarded with the final pitch. It was all pleasurable, a pull on the edge and a layback onto a slab. Just go on tiptoe, then reach for the top.

Summited, as they say!

Already the day had seemed timeless and endless. Hours had slipped away since we had stood in the early dawn light with mist seeping and eddying in the corrie and a cool dankness creeping off the quiet lochan, and had supped a last brew to salute the virgin mountain looming above us. We had been shocked awake by a chill grasping swirl of the current as we crossed the river and schrunched on to the initial frozen snowfield. Somewhere up there was our objective, an extraordinary rock feature that marked the apex of the ridge.

Now listless and content, we were drooped over this apex. We had perched ourselves on a quirk of nature. It was a gigantic blocky tower, bluntly eroded and tilted askew, that pitched its eaves over a glacier far below. Its whole structure mimicked an improbably ridiculous architecture. Perhaps mystical eons ago the mysterious hand of a marauding giant toupidek had surpassed itself in artistic cleverness and carved out a celebratory fistful of stone. It appeared both secure and immutable but perhaps on some stormy night, in the fury of the elements raging over the broken landscape of southern Greenland, the whole edifice might tumble off in an awesome trundle and crash into the icy depths. Statistically improbable but still possible, and it could happen any time.

I heard and felt a deep rumble. Was this sensation coming from within the earth or did it have a much closer origin? Of course, it was just a hunger pang that fed my fantasy. Try a piece of gum to stifle any inner complaints. Chew on it and dream on.

"I'm off! I want a brew."

Thus spoke Freefall. This was his own chosen sobriquet that he had adopted proudly after having endured several involuntary backward plunges in Glen Clova and elsewhere, but we preferred to ignore such glib self advertisment. It seemed too tempting to Fate in our remote world

to hark back to his past exploits on local crags. So there he was bracing himself back on the abseil ropes, his silhouette dark against the blue sky. He put more tension on his ropes, and with his voice emphatic and decisive he paused and sniffed disdainfully,

"C'mon now, I want my drink."

"What's the rush? It's taken hours to get here." I pleaded in an attempt to keep my sun-warmed indolence intact, "I'm in need of a good rest."

Meanwhile, our third member aka MacFrenzy was staring concernedly and hypnotically at the abseil sling and listening to the crinkling stress as it pulled taut round its anchor block. He refrained from comment but asked tentatively: "How long will it take to get back?"

"We'll say seven hours. but it doesn't really matter 'cos we'll never make it today."

Although we didn't wish to scamper after the fleeing Freefall there seemed little benefit in malingering, but if I hesitated long enough I would win the satisfaction of being the last person to quit the summit.

"You're next," and I handed the loose ropes to MacFrenzy. "Let's follow the guy who longs for his drink."

He went down cautiously, trying to ignore the blankness behind his back but unable to avoid a downward glance at the criss-crossing network of open crevasses on the glacier.

There was the wild world in all directions around the horizon. Silence held its sway on every peak. The sharpest spires were dark in shadow and etched against the dazzling brilliance of the sunlit sea fog and to the north the jagged ridges, bleached of colour, were stretched in rough waves into the distant haze. Gentle cloud shadows had settled tentatively on the adjacent cliffs and in the fjord the lost icebergs that had forsaken the moving pack ice drifting round the coast lay becalmed. I heard a soft whisper of distant white water raging down another valley, while close by the twin ropes creaked in their tension to offset the companionable sounds of Freefall and MacFrenzy drifting up from the hidden under-belly of the summit boulder.

We joined the ropes together. The peak was abandoned and we began our retreat along the ridge, two to move and one to belay. We threaded through the black teeth rotten with rock tripe and over fissures cutting across our route. Any initial uncertainties turned quickly to casual competence. We moved steadily with the rich light of the gathering evening deepening and staining the rocks of the high ridge while the darkening shroud of the dusk spread throughout the valley below.

Sheltering in a niche and bathed in golden glow we shed the token ropes. Unsuccessfully, I tried to stuff a rope elsewhere in the hope of finding its home in another rucksack. However, Freefall had claimed one rope and started his dash towards the other lower summit while MacFrenzy had closed his pack tightly and was looking the other way. All right, I'll be

public-spirited and take my share, even if it lasts all night. There was soon no doubt that Freefall had the proverbial passion and fitness edge on us. In our jaded state we were soon lagging farther and farther behind our leader of the boundless energy. When we caught him up at our objective he was huddled out of a nippy wind and munching his ration.

"What is keeping you both?"

I ignored the obvious slur on our competence because I had a more important matter to consider.

"Now, where is that tin of beans I cached on the way? I'm starving, and even managing to salivatate."

I retrieved the can, ran the wee opener round the edge, flicked back the lid, sniffed my elixir and spooned in my beautiful chilli beans. MacFrenzy was still stacking jam on his biscuits as Freefall shouldered his sack and left, announcing with ambiguous optimism: "We'll make it before the day is done."

In his trail we scuffed our boots down a gravelly steep scree towards a snow saddle and gingerly trod in the icy pits melted and refrozen from our earlier footprints. All around the snow glowed with an alpenrosen pinkness spread out over its white creamy surface, while below the valley depths were darkening imperceptibly. Under the coffee-stained hills and squeezing out a green flash in a twinkle of crimson fire the sun irrevocably dropped under the horizon. On we went, until another icy problem presented itself.

"Put on your crimpons, folks!" Freefall declared in his twisted vernacular, and sidled off across the hardened surface.

Speed was of the essence. No time except the present. We played the crampon game: on an off, and on and off. We crossed little gendarmes with their broken ribs visible in the faint glimmerings of night. We backmarkers in our exertions were breathing hard, but he was racing still further ahead. He skipped daintily in a dance over shifting rattling stones and pushed them into a cascade toppling into the void and then he flitted feline-like on to another pinnacle.

We were glad that he was testing and working out our route. We found him waiting at the lip of a shadowed northerly wall.

"It's down here," he claimed.

In agreement, but with a note of caution: "Sure. Move together, and watch it."

Our numbed minds were losing a detailed recollection of the many foibles of the ridge. We had forgotten about this wall, but we had to move and keep watching every step. Down, and up again on a rising traverse back to the ridge. We emerged from a cleft where, imbedded inside the mountain, we struggled for minutes with our jammed sacks.

"My honour," he assumed.

Out of balance and thrust from the rock I followed, sidling down an

airy gangway where treacherous gravel lurked under moss cushions. Waiting in a tiny amphitheatre I realised the reason for his choice. Underneath was an irreversible wall of which my memory was only of excessive difficulty and constant terror. We had no pegs, so we used a single rope loop to bind a fragmented nest of thin splinters into an abseil point.

MacFrenzy peered shortsightedly at the projected take-off point and kicked it gently.

"May the Good Lord preserve us, and we'll need the length of the ropes to reach the ledge."

Freefall expressed some skepticism of its unseen existence somewhere down the wall, but I insisted: "Aye, there's a ledge, a projecting shelf near the bottom of the rope." We hadn't any other options.

"The first man down finds it."

"Okay, I'll believe you," declared Freefall, and his insubstantial shadow faded into the gloom of the wall. Luckily, the ledge was more substantial than we had remembered and for the moment we could relax.

Across the western sea a wan orange moon sliver cast an unruffled reflection while, in the sunset glimmer, a clearcut outline of twin figures were busy untangling the ropes. They hurried at their task impatient to get to the next problem.

Freefall set off across the face. Suddenly, there was a grating crash as his footholds fell away, but somehow he remained on the rock as the fragments bounded off towards the glacier. This wasn't the moment to live up to his name. It needed some serious self-appraisal to convince myself that what I had traversed in the morning I would now be able to manage in the dark. I moved off with slow trepidation first crossing an icy tongue hanging down from a breche in the ridge, and soon I was crawling up the shelves of a pinnacle and traveling by touch rather than by sight.

"Jings, I'm knackered," I confided to MacFrenzy as we sat below the ultimate pinnacle. Rising up in front of us was a smooth wall down which we had abseiled without a care in the early morning sunshine.

"We'll have to kip here."

All the world around knew it was time to sleep, but I had spoken too soon because, as he loomed up through the darkness, Freefall had overheard my hopeful wish and now he was to reject any plea for rest. More importantly he would never have considered a bivouac was a good substitute to a warm pit in a snug tent.

"No, I'm not stopping here. If you like I'll go ahead."

"Well, if you insist..."

It was an offer I couldn't refuse. I looked in the direction of the indistinct slabs where dark recesses hid the seemingly impossible nature of a ladder of overlapping upward steps. He realised that I wanted to shirk the horrors of those slabs. So Freefall led. I followed a line dictated by a nut. It was

pretty desperate stuff up the virgin flank where a recent rockfall had exposed unweathered slab sheets devoid of features save for a few tottering blocks and some sparse incut holds behind an unstable flake. I climbed in pursuit of my mocking moonshadow, pushing up on tiptoes and clawing with my fingernails. Overhead an auroral curtain bundled itself into applegreen sheaves and a satellite tracked behind a still figure sitting on the skyline. It had been his lead through midnight and into tomorrow.

We went downhill in giant strides with the snow crust grabbing at our crampon straps. The familiar hills began to grow in stature round the cirque. Chill and invigorating blew the night wind. The morning star was on our backs and the stones were brightening for another day. We saw from afar the glimmer of a candle still flickering its welcome to our camp. We waded hotfoot and without hesitation across the river. Refreshing? Yes, but after seven hours a-waiting, the brew was an unfathomable sweet strong pleasure of epicurean simplicity. We raised our mugs in our cupped hands.

"Ah, me..." Freefall spoke in hushed tones of reverence. A careful refined sip.

"Great...great." Slurp.

"Quite a trip!"

Steven Gordon approaching the South Peak of The Cobbler: Photo Dave MacLeod.

WHO NEEDS THE HIMALAYAS?

By Brian Davison

ANOTHER night of reading through guidebook manuscripts loomed ahead of me. It was the Ben Nevis guide this time. I've never been a fan of the Ben. Far too crowded and far too pawed over were my feelings, there just weren't any good new obvious lines left.

Simon Richardson, the author, had produced a flawless text as you'd expect from someone so organised. After several hours I was nearly at the end, I'd reached the traverses. The summer girdle by Bell took a natural line of terraces. The grass and scree covered ledges seemed an obvious choice for winter and I read on wondering what the grade would be. At the end of the chapter I went back, had I missed it, was it re-named? I still couldn't find it. Surely, such an obvious winter line hadn't been overlooked, unless people were put off by the 4km. of traversing. A traverse of Alpine or even Himalayan proportions would require a competent and trustworthy partner and they can be difficult to find.

Simon would know if it had been climbed but if I asked him it would alert him to the line, if he didn't know about it already. But what better partner to choose than the guidebook author, he'd have an excellent knowledge of the mountain. A phone call soon sorted it. We'd wait until late in the season when there was more daylight, and a good firm snow covering was necessary for rapid progress. For good snow cover we had to wait several years. In late March 2006 I was sitting in a snow-covered field in Switzerland. It was supposed to have been ploughed two weeks earlier but a metre of overnight snow dump had stopped that and my work there. Browsing through the Internet I noticed Scotland appeared to be suffering the same fate. If that consolidates and hardens it could be good in a few weeks I thought as I typed an e-mail to Simon.

A few weeks later and still there were reports of avalanches on the Ben. Conditions weren't certain but we could wait no longer as it was getting increasingly warmer. I woke at 3am. from a night spent folded round the seats of my car. I envied Simon in his large estate. A quick breakfast while packing a rack, we were both eager to set off so I decide to leave making up more drink and left with just my flask of coffee, relying on there being water on route. Soon we were there, wandering through damp snow as we climbed *North Gully*. At half-height we reached the freezing level and by the top it was nicely frozen. I looked at the snow at the top of Castle Corrie and wondered about its stability, the first rays of the sun just glinting on it, better to test it now than later, at least I was at the top to test it out. A traverse under the cornice and a few probing stabs and nothing had gone so I headed on a downward traverse under Raeburn's Buttress. I didn't know this area of cliff so just followed my nose which lead to *Ledge Route*. The sun was up and I was overheating, I took a jacket off and Simon passed me, obviously pleased with our progress. I plodded on

Dave McLeod on the first ascent of Apollo 8a+, Tighnabruaich Viewpoint Crags, Cowal.

Simon Jenkins on Yammy, Upper Great Gully Buttress, Glen Coe. Photo: Peter Wilson.

in his footsteps until we reached *Thompson's Route* and tied onto our one rope and grabbed the rack. After 10m. I hit a large piece of ice in the chimney, it lifted and fell nearly knocking me with it. I looked around and found some protection, this late in the season the ice was rotten so I was forced to make some mixed moves on the sidewalls. Progress was slowing but once belayed, Simon soon followed and traversed over Number Three Gully Buttress and down. I passed his belay and the first water I'd seen, I drank as much as I could before traversing across to *Green Gully*.

Simon took us down *Hesperides Ledge* to the base of *Comb Gully* and another belay with running water, he had all the luck to be static at the belays with copious supplies of drinks. We unroped and headed across to *Glovers Chimney*. The going was easier here until just short of Tower Gap were the rope came out again for the final few moves and soon we were across the gap and tucked into an outcrop for lunch. Simon had brought several isotonic drinks, which I greedily drank trying to rehydrate myself as we looked at the way ahead. We'd covered half the route in six hours but I knew that what lay ahead looked more precarious, traverses along ledges with large drops below, not as friendly as the first section. Simon told me of his retreat from *Point Five Gully* along a shelf system through the Indicator Wall section of the cliff so we were hoping to travel this in the opposite direction.

As we headed across, the snow started to feel less secure under foot. It was time for the rope. Simon led off with me hoping he'd reach *Point Five Gully* in one pitch. My optimism was short lived as he ran out of rope and direction and constructed a disintegrating belay by an outcrop. I could see the gully tantalisingly close. A careful traverse down and round some suspect rock led me into the gully just above the Rogue Pitch and a poor belay above. Simon was soon with me and he headed off up the steep Left-Hand Finish to *Point Five Gully*. I passed him on the belay and led up the continuation of the snow runnel looking for a belay rather than the line of the route. After several metres of climbing together I gave up and wedged myself across the runnel until Simon joined me, after which we down-climbed to a line he'd spotted crossing *Observatory Ridge*. This lead to a belay overlooking *Zero Gully* where we debated the line of the route, the options being to down-climb *Zero Gully* to reach a natural line of weakness crossing the *Minus Face* or to follow a gentle rising traverse over *Orion Face* to finish on top of *North-East Buttress*.

The aesthetics of finishing on top of the mountain won the day and I headed off, popping in the odd runner with no intention of stopping until I reached the top and an excellent belay around the cairn. Simon joined me and we looked across the snow-covered peaks, we'd taken just more than 12 hours and there was still several hours of daylight.

The 250-mile drive home felt longer than usual and I was looking forward to some sleep as I pulled in at 3:30am. just more than 24 hours after getting up. Looking round I couldn't find my keys. Oh! well, looks like another night spent curled up in the car.

UNTRODDEN WAYS

By P. J. Biggar

PATRICK O'Dwyer and George Reddle sat in the hut while the warm drizzle crept along the stony hillsides and the effects of a violent midging slowly receded. Both men were still afflicted by that dreadful burning, itching sensation. They had lingered too long in the little pub by the sea-loch where the locals huddled under dripping umbrellas for a quick smoke. By the time it came to make the short walk to the hut, the summer breeze had died away and the curse had risen in visible grey clouds.

"They're a bit like bloody terrorists," ventured O'Dwyer pouring more tea. "Cause mayhem and vanish."

"An' ye can't beat them." Reddle's flat Yorkshire accent came from behind the paper.

O'Dwyer smiled ruefully. The reference to terrorists made him uneasy. From little things they had said it seemed that he and his companion disagreed radically about the recent wars and the violence which had followed them. One might have thought that the dour, old Yorkshireman would take the side of pragmatism and see the allies' point of view, but it was the other way round. O'Dwyer, the younger man, a Scot of Celtic extraction, held that military intervention was necessary to protect western interests. He had half guessed a long time ago that Reddle might have had a background as a pacifist, might even have suffered for it. He had never asked him about it and he never would: Reddle was notoriously secretive about his past and O'Dwyer had always respected that. O'Dwyer pushed his whisky flask across the table.

"Help yourself." Reddle grunted non-commitally but eventually, though he seemed absorbed in what he was reading, his hand strayed towards the flask and he poured himself a dram. O'Dwyer studied the guidebooks and topos which cluttered the table. Choice of crag was important. Reddle had always been by far the better rock climber, but now, with the onset of old age, he had some obscure complaint which meant he no longer wanted to lead the harder pitches. Reddle poured himself another drop of O'Dwyer's whisky and pushed the paper away with a contemptuous snort.

"We'll end up having t'negotiate," he said. "Why not start now, 'stead of years down the line?"

"Who do we negotiate with?"

"These so-called terrorists."

"They won't talk."

"They will if we show we're serious. It's a question of finding the right gesture – release a prisoner, send an envoy."

"But there are so many different groups."

"Send lots of envoys. Give the buggers something to do." Reddle poured the remains of the tea into his mug.

"What's the alternative?"

"I don't think it's as simple as that," said O'Dwyer.

"Nobody said it was simple, lad," said Reddle with one of his strange, infrequent smiles. "What's simple is dropping bombs, but every one you drop makes things worse not better."

"They make things worse every time they blow up innocent civilians."

" No-one would deny it," said Reddle. O'Dwyer finished his whisky and got up.

"I think it's time to put the tatties on," he said.

"If you're putting a pan on…" said Reddle, never stirring from where he sat leaning up against the wall under the map of the North-West.

Smiling to himself O'Dwyer washed the potatoes and got the pan boiling. When he returned to the other room, Reddle was occupied in making a pencil sketch of the old ruin which could be seen in the overgrown meadow in front of the hut. O'Dwyer admired the delicate impression of peaceful crumbling stonework and blowing grasses, with its suggestion of a vanished way of life.

"You've caught that well," he said. "I like the atmosphere."

Reddle shrugged.

"It's a rough attempt," he muttered, sounding pleased nonetheless.

"It's a pity I left that bottle of wine in the car," he went on, "the midges just got to me. I couldn't think what I needed."

"Is this it?" asked O'Dwyer with a gentle smile, producing both bottle and corkscrew. "I found it rolling about in the boot."

Reddle pushed back his empty plate, groaned with satisfaction and stretched himself out comfortably on the long wooden bench.

"How's old Mac these days?" he inquired. "Still getting out with little Harvey?"

"Not so much," said O'Dwyer. "Mac's a bit like me, not so good on rock. Harvey needed someone to push him up the grades a bit. He does quite a lot with Rab Auldburn these days. Mac and he still go walking."

"Rab's got his work cut out," muttered Reddle. "Th'only time I did a long route with Harvey, he got us way off line. I had the devil of a job." He yawned noisily. "Partnerships, partnerships," he murmured drowsily, "they come and go..."

"They're not like friendships are they?" said O'Dwyer, but there was no answer. Reddle seemed to have drifted off to sleep. By the time O'Dwyer had done the dishes, he'd come round again and was sitting by the window sketching the same scene by the changing evening light.

"Tha surely hasn't done the dishes?" he inquired. "That were my job."

"Och, no problem," said O'Dwyer tolerantly. "What's the plan for tomorrow, then?"

The crag they chose for the last day of their little holiday was about half-an-hour's walk from the road, through scattered birch trees at first

and then out on rolling heather moorland dotted with lochans. The sun came and went behind high clouds. The great North-Western peaks stood up clear and proud.

From uncertain beginnings on wet sandstone, O'Dwyer had felt his form steadily improve during the week. Reddle too was climbing more confidently than he had for some time, indeed his chief problem seemed to be lack of practice: when one was nearer 80 than 70, partners were hard to come by. O'Dwyer thought that, if all went well, there was a route they might just be able to tackle – he stored it away at the back of his mind.

Their first climb was a delightful rough slab, just full of holds.

"Tha made that look easy," said Reddle.

Then they chose something longer: a steeper crack line which O'Dwyer had seconded before. He remembered the crack with some trepidation, but found he had climbed it before he had even started to think about it. He turned round just before making the crucial move: "This is good!" he shouted.

Reddle led through, exclaiming over the excellence of the rock. Ahead was a choice of ways. Reddle moved up slowly, placing protection with care. To his right was a steep slab devoid of obvious holds, and to his left an easier traverse into a corner. Reddle hesitated. Watching from below, O'Dwyer could sense the temptation of the steeper way tugging at the older man. He remembered many times watching the soles of Reddle's boots vanishing upwards, remembered also how Reddle would pause before making the vital move and make some light-hearted remark. Now, he hesitated, then made a rather tentative move towards the steeper ground. O'Dwyer could sense a tremble in the rope he was holding.

"George," he shouted up, "it looks much easier to the left." Reddle looked down at him: "Don't you fancy going right, eh?" It was like a wasp sting from the past. O'Dwyer winced. "Mind you, y'might be right – it is a bit steep is this. T'ud be all right wi' a few holds." With some regret he took the easier option.

O'Dwyer lay back partially at peace in the heather at the base of the crag. Reddle got out his sketch pad: he seemed completely relaxed. Away over the moor in a mystical light the great peaks seemed closer than they were. He put down the water bottle, stretched, and came over to see how Reddle's sketch was progressing.

"Almost an Arctic light isn't it?"

"Aye, it is a bit," Reddle agreed. "Sharp spires above the tundra and all that, eh?"

O'Dwyer paused.

"Do you remember canoeing back across the fjord after walking down that long valley?" Reddle looked up from his drawing

"Aye," he said. "Like yesterday." O'Dwyer nodded. He couldn't easily put it into words, but it had been on that specific occasion that he had felt

Reddle's attitude towards him undergo a subtle change. They had been carrying the canoe up the rough shore and he had stumbled clumsily and dropped his end. They were both tired and Reddle had inclined to be snappish, but O'Dwyer had apologised at once and he had sensed a softening in Reddle's attitude towards him. Afterwards, at dinner, he had felt that Reddle was making a special effort to be nice to him – praising his contribution to the meal. Reddle had been a senior member of the expedition and O'Dwyer a mere rookie, but it seemed to him that a relationship which had lasted more than 30 years had its roots in that trivial incident. He was going to try to say something, but Reddle had shut his sketch book and was getting stiffly to his feet.

"I s'pose if we're going t'do owt more, we'd best make a move."

They coiled the rope, picked up the discarded gear and moved round to the main face of the crag. O'Dwyer felt apprehension stir. This was the time to do that route, if only he could make out its wandering, elegant line. They walked to and fro at the base of the crag. The light had dulled a little as the freshening breeze brought cloud from the Inner Hebrides. The gneiss seemed to hang in grey armour plates and reveal nothing. Then a solitary beam of sunlight illuminated the rock.

"That's it!" said O'Dwyer pointing. A sinuous way crossed the crag from top to bottom; it was the longest route and the classic line; it followed slabs and cracks and ever so gradually thinning ledges, steepening as it went.

Although he was eager to be on the rock and doing the only thing which could truly relieve the anxiety he felt, O'Dwyer forced himself to make sure that every bit of gear was in its proper place. Then he stepped up the first few moves and wiped the soles of his brightly coloured rock boots. The rock was abrasive and secure to the touch. Confidence flooding through him, he moved on smoothly up the steepening slab. At the top of the slab he paused. The route went leftwards up a narrow shelf. He slotted a nut into a perfect crack. That would keep the rope right for George. O'Dwyer clipped in and tip-toed upwards. He could sense the rock sticking like sand-paper to his feet.

Gradually, as he moved higher up the receding edgeway O'Dwyer felt something like a brake being applied to his ease of movement. He breathed deeply and made a conscious effort to stand out from the rock, but he still couldn't quite see where the next section of the route went. He looked down. The heather was a long way and Reddle a mere face and shoulders looking calmly up. A few moves more brought him to a narrow bay where two could stand in reasonable comfort.

"I'll bring you up to here, George," O'Dwyer heard himself shout as his hands tied the knots as if of their own volition. Reddle waved an arm in acknowledgement. When all was ready he climbed the pitch steadily, having to make only one longer pause to free an embedded nut. He paused

for a moment before stepping up to the ledge and O'Dwyer could see him assessing the route ahead.

"Tha'd best go on."

"No problem," said O'Dwyer. He noticed that he must have partly expected this outcome because he had not started passing the gear to his partner. Perhaps some tiny part of him would have been relieved if Reddle had been determined to lead the crux, but he knew in himself that this would have been like going back in time. Things were different now. It was up to him: he felt pleased. With careful deliberation he arranged the gear which Reddle passed him.

Leaning back against the rock, Reddle prepared to pay out the rope. His hands looked oddly frail; his forearms, once so muscular, had lanked with age. He glanced sideways at the younger man:

"Dance away, Patrick!" Partly a compliment, partly a challenge: O'Dwyer rubbed his shoes against his trouser legs and started upwards.

The route was like a compelling argument: all men are mortal; Socrates is a man… it was pushing O'Dwyer farther and farther to his left. For all things, if that thing is a man, that thing is mortal. O'Dwyer's hands and feet sought places to go and they became fewer and fewer. A beak of grey rock was approaching – it jutted out over nothing. He didn't want to go there, but the logic of the rock forced him nearer and nearer. He felt little drops of sweat trickling across his ribs and a little tremble began in his legs. He paused, breathed deeply several times and straightened himself up to look. Far below, the breeze ruffled the surface of the lochans. He partly heard a bee buzz across the rocks collecting nectar from the heather which bulged from the ledges. Now out of sight, Reddle cleared his throat. Then he saw it. Just to the right of the grey beak, and hidden until he was almost touching it, was a steep crack in the abutting wall. To left and right were ways he couldn't go: the crack was the last figure of the dance, the conclusion of the argument. O'Dwyer felt very mortal, but he knew he wanted to do it, and he wanted to do it well.

At the base of the crack was another much narrower parallel fissure. After several moments of anxious effort he placed just the right nut. He looked up, the holds were all there. He looked down and then scolded himself:

"No point in looking down, we're not going there." Exposure had always been his bugbear, but now he felt calmer, more in control. He took another couple of deep breaths.

"That weren't too bad at all," said Reddle, as he made the final step up. "Y'did quite well, lad."

"Good rock, wasn't it," said O'Dwyer grinning but trying to conceal the deep sense of exultation he felt.

As they coiled the ropes on the heathery brow of the crag, they could feel the evening breeze starting to drop. Tiffany, O'Dwyer's wife, would

have a meal waiting for them on the far side of the country. They ambled down to the path in amicable silence. Reddle paused to admire the last view of the great peaks.

"You were saying summat t'other night about partnerships and friendships an' that..." O'Dwyer wondered what was coming. Effusiveness was not Reddle's style.

"I've been thinking," Reddle went on. "Y'know we've been climbing for a good number of years now, and," he added generously, "your rock climbing's not quite so bad as it used to be. I reckon we could just about get you in. D'yer fancy joining t'Club?"

O'Dwyer was so surprised he hardly knew what to say. He'd never considered himself anywhere near Club standard, but now that the possibility arose it seemed somehow right.

"Why thank you, George," he said. "I'd like that very much."

"Ay, right," said Reddle, "I'll get t'Secretary t'send you a form. I can't promise owt, mind. Tha knows what committees are like."

"It certainly won't affect our friendship if it doesn't work out," said O'Dwyer. For a moment their eyes met.

"Nay, lad," said Reddle slowly. "Nowt'll affect that." And he turned away down the path. "We'd best shift before this breeze drops altogether."