

The W.H. Murray Literary Prize 2000

W.H. MURRAY REVISITED

By Des Rubens

It was still possible to have heroes in the Seventies (1). I have still, errant pages taped in, a scuffed and stained, Dent copy of **Mountaineering in Scotland**, priced 8/6. Its archaic font and diminutive type harked back to a bygone age. The cover shows a Homburg-hatted climber, many-pitoned, boldly tackling the impossible by employing ascent techniques reminiscent of the Munich school of mountaineering. A more proper illustration would have been a ladder of crafted ice steps surmounted by a forthright mountaineer spiritually strengthened after a bout of honest labour.

The book was often with us (the respected Cohen, Geddes, Gibson *et al*) on escapades. To cries of anguish, one copy fluttered down from a belay on the steep Meadow Face of Beinn Tarsuinn. Another copy accompanied us to far away Pakistan where nightly readings were held at base camp at 14,000 feet. For us, Bill was a heroic figure of a more innocent age. This was not so much through the quality of his climbs, though we respected these. Rather, through the images conjured by his writing he articulated much of what we felt of our own early experiences of the hills. As Edinburgh University students being bussed to the hills in numbers sometimes requiring two of Allans of Gorebridge's larger buses, we envied his personal discovery of the empty hills of the Thirties. To us, his time was a Golden Age of Scottish mountaineering.

Of course, as students at the tail end of the Sixties, our respect for the man and his contemporaries was coloured by the anti-authoritarianism of the time. The tales brought back by student club representatives attending SMC dinners were eagerly awaited. These tales of our (still living) Victorian mountaineering heritage were as remarkable to us as to those scientists who discovered the living fossil coelacanth brought up from far down in the Indian Ocean. Descriptions of pipe-smoking, quavering-voiced, tweed-jacketed eccentrics were recounted in dramatic form around many a squalid bothy fireside or campsite (2).

Now, having earned our respectability through decades of sober behaviour, it can be disclosed that during those student days a Bill Murray evening was held. The parts of the Bills, Archies, Bells *et cetera* were allocated for historic re-enactments. Mrs Malloch was played by a bewildered girlfriend roped in for the occasion. Quantities of Mummery's Blood (3) were consumed and readings of the Works were held.

The Works, as *Mountaineering in Scotland* and *Undiscovered Scotland* were referred to, were critically analysed, and phrases stockpiled for use in times of drama. For a large party in difficulty on smooth slabs the cry was 'boots off'. For some suspect initiative, usually brought on by spindly arms, we needed a piton like the 'Queen of Spain's legs', ... not only ought never to be seen, but must not be supposed even to exist. On beating one of our many retreats in the face of weather, darkness and disintegrating headtorch batteries (4), the party was much comforted by being 'tied to men of high heart, that whatever the outcome, they, at least, will not falter'. Despite this infantile taking the piss (well, it was so much youthful fun), we were with Bill. Whilst sometimes gently derided, the spirituality of his writings struck a

vibrant chord. Our enthusiasm and love for the Scottish mountains in all their glory and wrath and beauty paralleled his.

Then, he was a remote figure. Later, through the SMC, we did come to know Bill and some of his fabled contemporaries. Not least was Ben Humble, who became a friend. (There was, in similar vein, a Ben Humble Memorial Meet, but that's another story.) Conversations with Bill were valued and his keen interest in modern climbing surprised us. The eccentricities of some of his friends were well documented in *The Works*. That these gentlemen were as eccentric in later life added to their charm when we met them. Even now, a very few are still doggedly completing ascents, well into their 80s.

Despite his influence, I had done remarkably few of Bill's accounted routes. The Glen Coe ascents eluded me, due to weather, conditions and crowds. Later, to avoid the crowds, I went elsewhere, mainly the north-west. Later still, loss and new directions diminished interest further. But only this year (5), age and a distaste of long drives took me back to Glen Coe and a delightful rediscovery. The Buachaille - what a mountain! Predawn starts, Alpenglow, and the wonderful scenery rekindled a joy of winter climbing.

And so, on a fine March weekend at Lagangarbh Hut, with friends Geoff Cohen, Simon Brown and Gordon MacNair, the answer to the first question of the day had to be Garrick's Shelf Route. Buachaille Etive Mor, that most splendid of earthly mountains, maintained the silence of a minister as we ascended the lower slopes. The few other pilgrims on the ascent were, to a soul, bound for Crowberry Gully. We redirected a few wanderers away from Easy Gully and found ourselves below the first obstacle of the climb. On this occasion, we were earlier in the day than Murray, Mackenzie, MacAlpine and Dunn. On their unsuccessful first attempt on Garrick's Shelf in December 1936, they had been delayed by Dunn who once again '...had forgotten his boots and had had to return to Inverarnan and back like a rocket to collect them.' Cohen and Brown were directed to Naismith's Route, while MacNair and I repaired to the start of the Shelf. There was a surprise at this point. On a visit in January the access ledge had overlooked a forty-foot drop to the Crowberry Gully. The gully had so filled in with snow that the drop was now a simple slope. We roped up and MacNair opened his innings, making short work of a tough morsel in the form of a steep rock pinnacle. The shelf then opened up for a few pitches, with constant, though straight forward, front pointing. As we approached the final pitches, the climbing steepened abruptly and the exposure overlooking Crowberry Gully increased dramatically.

It was my lead. I examined the first of the top pitches with interest, this being close to the point where Murray's party had been forced to retreat because of bad weather, extreme difficulty and nightfall. The initial crack, which yielded to Murray only on his third attempt, proved straightforward, being on this occasion clear of snow and easily protected with modern equipment. The same was true of a laborious outward-tilting mantelshelf. After the mantelshelf, Murray had attempted to effect an escape onto easy ground on the Crowberry Ridge. I was now level with the final six feet of rock that had thwarted these escape attempts. Murray's initial movement on this short section of rock would of necessity be made without handhold, a down-and-out strain being placed upon the feet, the foothold being a sloping slab covered with verglas. I examined the critical section. Even with the benefits of glorious weather, enough hours of daylight left to play a cricket match and the passage of sixty-three

years of technological progress, the move still appeared very hard. To have attempted such a move thirty feet above a belay at dusk would indeed have been risking disaster. On that occasion, in rising storm, Murray recorded that 'I reported my position and the party consulted.' Following which the decision to retreat was made, leaving the party with fourteen hours of tribulation before a dawn return was made to Rannoch Moor.

Turning my attention to the present, I pondered the difficulty of reaching the next port of call, a square-cut recess directly above. Murray, on his successful ascent with Bill Mackenzie in March, 1937 regarded this part of the climb as the crux, being very severe and occupying them for two hours. Reaching the recess over steep ground involved some of these delicate moves on poor snow and with no positive axe holds. Such climbing always taxes my imagination. In this case, the final moves were surmounted by the precarious method of the 'breath holding' technique. I thought this the hardest move on the route under the conditions in which we found the climb. We continued out of the square-cut recess and over a dramatic pinnacle that proved, as Murray records, unusually delicate .

The final pitch consisted of a groove 'choked by an icefall of a hundred and fifty feet, twice bulging in fifty-foot pitches, which tried the leaders severely.' In contrast to the rocks below, these old horrors yielded without difficulty to front pointing. From the top of the Shelf, we were rewarded for our toils by a delightful ascent of the sunlit Crowberry Tower. The outlook from its summit is remarkable. So we came to the summit of Buachaille Etive Mor as the afternoon light yellowed the final slopes. The mountains cast giant blue shadows east over the Moor of Rannoch towards distant Schiehallion. We looked around us to pay our respects to the mountains of Argyll and Lochaber. We were content. In contrast to our own experience, Murray and his friends had undergone, both in defeat and victory, physical pain and trial in order to achieve their climb. Murray, perhaps affected by the difficulties and precariousness of the route, described the climb as leading through snow and ice scenery of deathless beauty. Although many changes have taken place in the climbing world since the first winter ascent of Garrick's Shelf, the beauty of scenery that Murray described is still there for all mountaineers who climb on the Buachaille in winter.

Our ascent of Deep-Cut Chimney on the following day proved to be an emotional experience. In contrast to Garrick's Shelf, Deep-Cut Chimney falls within a category of routes filed under 'sociable'. For us, this added to its interest. On the climb, some friendly English fellows accompanied us, a few minutes in the rear. Gordon led off and, after a hundred feet or so, surmounted a fine overhang to the belay. On following, I found the exit from the overhang awkward, due to the familiar lack of purchase for the axes. Eventually, I struggled up in the usual undignified fashion and joined my companion.

Shortly afterwards, the top third of one of the aforementioned Englishmen appeared, friendly and chatty as before, and free with his opinions of the joys of the climb. After some time his output of talk became more desultory as he continued to fail to make progress. I felt sympathy, though I did not express this. The situation was awkward and even embarrassing. To offer a rope could be taken to imply that he lacked ability and might therefore be interpreted as an insult. Even in 1999, insulting other climbers, particularly from the more sensitive areas of some of Scotland's larger cities, can create problems for the initiator. We were long learned in avoiding any possible disparagement of our fellows, at least until they were known to be from

our own tribe. Furthermore, the situation of the Englishman was already demeaning, with his axe ringing ineffectually on the Glen Coe porphyry around our ankles. On the other hand, not to speak out and offer help could also be problematic, at least for the Englishman. There was no immediate security to protect him, while a fall could be detrimental to him in respects additional to embarrassment. Gordon and I exchanged glances and breathed deeply. The gentleman in question solved this delicate social problem by requesting a rope in a strangulated tone. Feelings of relief were experienced on all sides.

With everyone (to our knowledge) on the climb again secure, I turned my attention to the next pitch, which gave access to a beautiful little cirque of an amphitheatre. After forty feet, the slope reared up to a rocky wall. This was the crux of the original ascent where Murray and Mackenzie had been faced by two overhangs, one of snow and the other of rock. Today, the pitch was largely rock. Indeed, it consisted of the largest area of clear rock in the area, with only the odd bucket hold surviving in sheltered crannies. Unless the popularity of ice-climbing changes, the snow cornice that taxed Murray's wits is unlikely to form before the onset of another ice age.

The rock wall ice pitch, having been demolished by the pounding of many crampons, was thus straightforward and unattractive. However, a few feet to the left, an unsullied pillar of grey ice topped by a short snowy groove also gave access to the amphitheatre. Instantly, I made up my mind to make an ascent of this attractive feature and without further ado stepped onto the ice. Revelling in the steepness, the Chimney falling away below, and the figure of my companion diminishing as height was gained, the joy was that of simply being in this exposed place. Other distractions were out of sight, or just being quiet, allowing full concentration on climbing. The grey pillar was ascended by the fun techniques of whacking, bridging and kicking. The exhilaration was, unfortunately, short-lived. Bridging wide and awkwardly, I stretched over the top of the pitch to make the final move up onto easy ground. The axes slithered through weak polystyrene. I experimented elsewhere on arcs up to the limit of shoulder-wrist-pick radius. More weak polystyrene.

While strains on muscles, ligaments, cartilages and all these other things that keep the body stable increased directly over time, ideas circulated haphazardly within the brain, as chaotic as Princes Street on Hogmanay. Why hadn't I put in a runner at the start (no convenient cracks, idleness?) Why hadn't pegs been carried (principle?) How did I get into this situation (forgetfulness?) What would be the consequences of falling off (hospitalisation, probably?) What would other people say if I did, given the modest grade of the route? Why did I forget the First Rule of winter climbing? (6)

The gyrations of thoughts ceased and rationality succeeded in overcoming emotion. Something had to be done, and shortly, but the brain, comfortingly, was now in order and again in charge. Then, and now discomfortingly, a great blast of spindrift engulfed the climb. My head being immediately above the parapet, cold material at maximum velocity was injected forcibly into gaps and orifices of clothing and body. Meanwhile the pain acting on various body parts continued to increase as before. I was minded of Bill's words on a wet day on Slav Route. 'Mountain nature is not chivalrous and wields the sword ... most fiercely when the plight of the climber is sorest.' The discharge eased and I was able to attend to the problem. The only solution was to firmly plant both axe picks into the defective snow and slowly transfer my weight acting through my crampons to the axe picks, all the time ready to reverse the process should the force on the picks be greater than the holding

force of the snow, as seemed probable. I managed it. A higher and more secure foothold was gained, thus bringing the long sought and familiar, (unfortunately) dispensation (7). Sanctuary was won and reprieve savoured.

Modern experiential theories encourage practitioners to review actions in order to make future behaviour more effective. I did so at this point, concluding that I ought to be more careful in future when I went ice climbing. The fact that I had come to the same conclusion many times in the past without having gone to the trouble of studying the theories was, however, discouraging. A major advantage of climbing in the Thirties was the unavailability of such distractions.

Returning to practicalities I recalled Bill's problem in 1939, in gaining this beautiful little cirque, as being similar in some respects. Then, he was blessed with high quality hardness of snow material. However, he also deployed his ice pick for security, and his mind was taxed by uncertainty as he did so. On this occasion, on transferring his weight onto his nailed boot on the top of the snow cornice, he wrote, 'I let go the rib, flung my whole weight on to the foot on the cornice, at the same instant whipping the axe-pick into a crack in the rock above.' This account could be accepted as an early-recorded example of tooling, although here used to secure a position, rather than make upward progress.

We had gained the amphitheatre. Where the pioneers escaped right, we tackled the 40-foot crack, which on Bill's ascent had been lacquered in black ice and therefore impossible. The initial moves were indeed scanty, icy and tricky, but thereafter led through a delightful chimney to the upper rocks. These also were enjoyable, and sufficiently interesting to merit keeping the rope on. Finally, unlike Murray and Mackenzie, we went on to the summit of Stob Coire nam Beith. The pioneers, eschewing the summit, as in the modern idiom, had chosen to descend an easier part of the face where, through the twilight, 'there whizzed three feet above our heads an enormous boulder...I like to think of it as a shot fired in celebration: to commemorate a first ascent and to mark the close of a year's campaign.'

I was delighted to have enjoyed two grand days on Bill's routes. One inevitably reflects on the similarities and differences of our experiences. This exercise is probably not very profitable, but was undertaken nevertheless. Like most of us, I am interested in risk. The consequences of falling off a climb are not usually as stark in the present day. Although one can still get into difficulties through lack of forethought, it is sometimes assumed that the pioneers were men who always acted with complete deliberation and where risks were always seriously measured. Yet there is a rare moment in Bill's writings where he described a loss of control. At one point on the retreat on Garrick's Shelf Route, the fixed rope somehow rolled off its hitch above. 'A split second later I landed astride Dunn's shoulders. We are, most of us, guilty of making mistakes during our careers, and most of us are lucky.' It was always thus. However, it is perhaps pointless to dwell overmuch on these matters. In an era when we are guilt-ridden over mountain exploitation, it is good for us, sometimes, to recall the words of Bill Mackenzie. After the first ascent of the Buachaille following Murray's release from wartime prison camps, he remarked, '..the one thing that matters among mountains is that we enjoy them.'

From the summit, we descended to Coire nam Beith. As we did so, we beheld the wonderful grandeur of the views over Loch Leven and Ardgour and the stunning exposure of Glen Coe. The white world of the peaks contrasted brilliantly against the

dull green below. From heaven above, the winter light shafted down on the world.
We were with Bill Murray.

Footnotes:

1. This homage assumes a familiarity with - or, better, experience of immersion in, or, further, a Biblical wisdom of - the works of W.H. Murray. To assume such familiarity in readers of this Journal is, naturally, entirely reasonable. That a few Murrayisms creep into the text is inevitable and will, hopefully, be accepted with the usual tolerance.

2. As this era coincided with increasing environmental awareness, there was even talk within our circles of approaching the conservation bodies to encourage an embargo on changes to the SMC constitution, thus preserving the club's archaic structure for the enjoyment of future generations.

3. This mountain elixir consists of equal parts of navy rum and Bovril, served boiling hot. Mummery's Blood never gained lasting popularity in our circles, perhaps because of the availability of more modern (and, it has to be admitted, more palatable) stimulants.

4. Difficulty was also a problem.

5. 1999.

6. Things are quite often bad at the top of a pitch. Actually, this may be the second rule.

7. Unfortunately, not because it was a dispensation, but because it was familiar. You knew this, of course.

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