

The W.H. Murray Literary Prize 2002

CLIMBING IN THE COLD

By Mick Fowler

The appeal of Scottish winter climbing is not something readily understood by the average person. I have to admit that I too struggled to come to terms with it. Perhaps though, that is one of the attractions. Successes that are won too easily are inevitably those that are the least rewarding.

My first attempts to savour the pleasures were back in the mid-1970s. At that time I was based in London, pennies were tight and I depended on the cheapest possible reliable form of transport - in those days an Austin Minivan. I got through 13 in all before moving on to other vehicles. By buying them second hand from small businesses, running up perhaps 25,000 miles on weekend climbing trips and then selling them six months later as a 'private' owner, I usually broke even or made a small profit. There were two engine sizes, 850cc and 1000cc. The 1000cc engines were much better but somehow I tended to end up with 850cc ones. Either way, the drive to Scotland seemed to be a long way, although we were spurred on by stories we had been told about glorious, crisp, clear days and fantastic climbing.

The usual form was to keep the driver awake through the night by quizzes based on climbing guidebooks. For some reason this has left me with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Crew/Harris 1970 guidebook to Tremadoc. Why this should be so, when so many more hours were spent testing each other on the Scottish guides, I do not know - but if anyone is interested I can still, to this day, reel off the graded list of Tremadoc extremes in the 1970 guide. (Best steer clear of me at parties, when too much alcohol tends to prompt recitals whether asked for or not!)

My regular climbing partners in those early days were Mike Morrison and John Stevenson, both south Londoners who, like me, had an urge to escape the smoke whenever possible. One of my earliest Scottish memories is of arriving in Glencoe intent on spending a week front pointing up crisply frozen classics. The rain poured incessantly and the water by the Clachaig Inn was ankle deep. In the then harshly cold confines of the public bar (up to then the only place I had ever worn my down jacket), we were just in time to hear the well known guide Terry Taylor say how good Zero Gully on Ben Nevis had been the day before. We were gutted. Were we too late? Had we missed the 'conditions'? "What do you think about tomorrow?" we enquired naively. "Only one way to find out" came the calm and practical reply.

But we hadn't learnt the game by then. We equated wind and rain in Glencoe to wind and rain on the Ben, (bad mistake this!) and spent a whole week drinking in the Clachaig and splashing our way up wet snow slopes. I remember John being particularly excited when he was able to find a section of ice substantial enough to get 4 or 5 consecutive placements in. Looking back, Ben Nevis was probably in excellent condition or, as Gordon Smith - a keen activist of the time - once entered into the CIC Hut log book...

"...Ground conditions excellent, air conditions disgusting."

I liked that comment; to me it summed up the unique flavour of Scottish winter climbing.

One week in particular sticks in my mind as the turning point in my attitude to the Scottish winter. 1978 had seen magnificent conditions in North Wales, and Mike Morrison and I had spent a superb week ticking off unclimbed, or rarely repeated, ice streaks throughout Snowdonia. It wasn't that we were particularly talented. It was simply that, after a series of lean years, winter climbing was nowhere near as popular as it is today. We couldn't help but conclude that, if Snowdonia plums like the 300ft high Craig Rhaeddr waterfalls in the Llanberis Pass were unclimbed, then the scope for adventurous action in Scotland must be unlimited. So in 1979, Victor Saunders and I got together to take advantage of two unfilled places, booked by the Croydon Mountaineering Club, in the Charles Inglis Clark hut on Ben Nevis.

It was the first time that I remember climbing with Victor. True to form, he had introduced some uncertainty into the proceedings by arranging that we would give a lift to a friend of his. I never did work out quite who this chap was, but on the drive up it became clear that, whilst we had decided to climb in Glencoe on the Saturday, this chap wanted to be dropped off in Fort William, 30 miles or so further on. For some reason I refused to let anyone else drive, with the result that, by the time the trusty minivan had rumbled its way from London up to Fort William and back to Glencoe, I was falling asleep badly and not feeling at my perkier. I can still vividly recall hallucinating and swerving sharply to avoid imaginary (well I think they were!) animals on the road. In contrast, the Saunders body had snoozed gently all the way up and was nauseatingly enthusiastic. Somehow we struggled up Ravens Direct before returning to Fort William and taking up our places at the hut late that night.

Times had moved on in the years since our early week splashing about in Glencoe, and I had made a couple more attempts to get into winter climbing on the Ben. Success had been very limited. Once, Mike Morrison and I camped about an hour short of the hunt. We managed to climb Zero Gully, but my main memory is of our much prized tent freezing to the ground and the bottom parting company with the rest when we tried to prise it away.

On another occasion, Phill Thomas and I tried to camp outside the hut itself. Arriving in the dark, we discovered that we had somehow forgotten the poles, and so tried to use the fabric to construct a bivouac of sorts against the wall of the hut. It was a foul night, and at about 9pm a very refined sounding gentleman ventured out to complain that, firstly we were breaking rules by using the hut wall as a shelter, and secondly we were irresponsible in not treating the Highland weather with the respect it deserved. The tone of his voice was such that we felt inclined to take up semi-permanent residence. But as the night progressed, the cold seeped in and discomfort grew, to the extent that a foray down to Fort William to pick up the poles was deemed in order. Come the morning, there was much unhappiness when our plans to be the first away were thwarted by he who had upset us the previous night stepping briskly from the cosy interior and striding purposefully up ahead of us.

But I digress. This time I was inside the hut for the first time. It all seemed so unethically easy. The Ben was there on our doorstep, and Victor was his usual, irrepressible self with a long tick list of routes to do. Success on new winter routes in Wales had led me to view the Ben differently than on previous visits and I couldn't help but notice a thin ice streak dribbling down the right hand side of Carn Dearg

buttress. The classic routes attracted us more to begin with, but by late in the week we decided to give it a go and managed Shield Direct, our first new winter line in Scotland. I remember clearly feeling that, if obvious ice streaks were unclimbed on popular crags like the Ben, then the possibilities elsewhere in the Highlands must be immense. I also remember the route being heralded as the first Scottish grade VI. Victor and I had graded it V, and never did quite understand how it came to be rated VI before anyone had repeated it. Not to worry; it was good for the ego!

By the end of the week the Fowler body was knackered. It was tough going to climb big routes every day, even from the luxury of the CIC hut. Also, the hut was only convenient for the Ben, and looked like being a one-off experience anyway. A different approach was clearly necessary if we were to make any impact on the more remote crags up in the North West.

For some years, a group of us from London spent a week or so roaming Scotland at Christmas/New Year. The weather was invariably poor, and most of the time was spent checking out various (very fine) drinking spots in the North West. But, in between the sheets of rain, we did manage to explore some of the areas that we were interested in. Applecross, Torridon, Achnashellach.... all names that I had heard of, read about and longed to visit. And all of them appeared to have unclimbed ice streaks adorning rarely visited corries. We managed a few routes, things like Sheet Whitening in Applecross, on these early ventures, but they tended to be one offs from the road or outings from damp bivouacs under boulders. It wasn't until we had pinpointed venues and weekend trips started in earnest that we really got to grips with the almost unlimited severity on offer in the North West.

Partly, I suppose, it was better roads that allowed the introduction of the weekly dash from London - but it was also a matter of learning from experience. I have never been the world's best walker (many would put it stronger than that), and experience was beginning to show that more than a couple of consecutive days on the Scottish hills led to increasing lethargy and unproductive time away from the desk. Weekends were much better. Even I could keep going for two days with five at the sedentary office desk in between. In driving terms, 650 miles had to be looked at as just over 150 each. Then it somehow all seemed a bit more manageable.

Fellow weekenders were not difficult to come across. I have always thought that one of the best things about London is that, whatever perverse urge one has for the weekend, like-minded characters always seem to materialize. In climbing terms this meant that there was always a full car, whether the venue was chalk cliffs on the south coast or ice streaks in the north of Scotland.

In the 1980s and early 1990s there were some real characters on the scene. Strange nicknames came their way: Phil 'Lobby' Butler (after being memorably buried alive by an avalanche of lobster pots); Jon 'Carless' Lincoln after his reluctance to buy a car; Chris 'One Pint' Watts after an infamous Chinese drinking occasion; Dave 'Willie' Wills named after I don't know what; and Phil 'Ode' Thornhill named for reasons I won't go into. And there were others too - Simon Fenwick, Danuska Rycerz, Peta Watts, Henry Toddwild and interesting characters; the list was long and easily drawn upon.

A full pool of willing activists meant regular visits - 11 weekends in a row being my personal record - and an ability to keep abreast of the conditions. If it was pretty

good in, say, Applecross one weekend, close monitoring of the temperature reports during the week meant that we had a very good idea of what things were likely to be like in, say, Skye the following weekend. And of course the more we climbed, the more objectives we spotted. The list of 'possibilities' grew distressingly long, so long that I am glad to say that many still remain today!

The North West became a firm favourite, its relative remoteness and lack of people being particular attractions. It is interesting to note the increasing popularity of this area over the last 20 years. When I first started venturing this way in the late '70s, a strong body of people wanted not to record climbs and keep the place a wilderness area. The guidebooks that did exist were hopelessly out of date, and it is fair to say that I cannot recall ever meeting another climber on the hills in winter. It was fantastic. By the mid to late '80s we would meet the odd enthusiast, but these were virtually always people we knew. The '90s saw a sea change, with glossy guidebooks sporting photos of instantly attractive climbs, the number of activists increased sharply and, shock horror, we began to come across other climbing parties that we didn't know!

But the North West is a long way from the centres of population, and competition for the plethora of new lines was limited. Andy Nisbet, as ever, was in action on a broad front, as were people like Rab Anderson and Martin Moran. Martin in particular tended to have a similar eye for a line to me. On at least two occasions we ended up competing for the same route.

Once we were a bit uncertain about the conditions, and so I telephoned him on a Friday night before leaving London. We chatted for a bit, confirmed that it sounded worth going, and headed up to Achnashellach, just a few miles from his home in Lochcarron. Parking by the station at 5am or so, we set off immediately (experience having shown that trying to catch a quick snooze in the car is a bad idea) and, even at my pace, managed to arrive at Fuar Tholl's main cliff by 8am or so. This is an excellent, rarely visited venue, which streaks up well in the right conditions. I remembered that when climbing the central streak, Tholl Gate, (in the conditions an outrageous lead by the normally reserved Phil Butler) there was another streak adorning the wall to the right. This was what we were heading for. Amazingly, Martin was too. Out of all the unclimbed lines throughout the North West, we had somehow chosen to head for the same objective on the same day!

They followed us up one pitch behind. Even I felt a bit guilty - after all it was Martin who had been good enough to admit that conditions were pretty good. Without his advice we might easily have gone elsewhere.

A similar situation, though not quite so close, arose on Skye. Here, Deep Gash Gully, on Sgurr a'Mhadaidh was, for those in the know, an obvious winter challenge. Frankly I was not completely 'in the know', but I was very aware of the guidebook description which referred to the summer climb as being deeply cut, normally damp, greasy and, at HVS, challenging.

From previous jaunts in the area, particularly Waterpipe Gully where Doug Scott beat Victor and me to the first winter ascent by one day, I was vaguely aware that there was a gully of sorts up there, but I had no real idea about how good it might be. Jon Lincoln and I just about managed it in time to spend a relaxing evening in the Sligachan lounge - a special Skye attraction complete with roasting log fire and

snoozing in situ Labrador. We didn't get round to recording it for a few weeks, in which time Martin had repeated the climb, thinking he was doing the first winter ascent. Sorry Martin!

In line with the increasing popularity we had noticed elsewhere, other climbers were visible (in the distance admittedly) when we finished Deep Gash Gully in 1991. Even so the sight of an unattended car parked after dark on the Glenbrittle road was so unusual as to be brought to the attention of the police!

Other areas too produced their fair share of memorable action. Applecross became a favourite, and I well remember doing Gully-of-the-Gods on Bheinn Bhan with the classic East End character Simon Fenwick. This, we knew, had been attempted way back, around 1960, by the intrepid duo of Chris Bonington and Tom Patey. We had sniffed around at the base during one of our Christmas/New Year forays, and so knew it to be an intimidating parallel-sided wet gully, which might ice up well.

At our walking speed it was near on 4 hours to get to the foot of the crag, but it was worth it. We were rewarded with orgasmic conditions. Ice smeared the sides of the weeping fault line and it was one of those 'now or never' days.

Simon announced that he felt ill. He looked distinctly pale. Clearly he wasn't joking. But turning back now, when faced with such perfect conditions, was out of the question. We must have made an unusual first ascent team. At one point Simon stopped seconding and I spent some time pulling as hard as I've ever pulled, only to discover that he had clipped into a peg to be sick. But regular blasts of wind-whipped snow in the face were clearly what the doctor ordered - or perhaps good Scottish winter days are a tonic in themselves. Either way, the Fenwick body was clearly in better condition at the top than it had been at the bottom. Probably a first!

Andy Nisbet has long been one of the most prolific and respected activists on the Scottish winter scene. I first remember meeting him on the North Face of the Eiger way back in 1980, but it was some time later, at the roadside below Creag Meaghaidh, that I first recall coming across him in his native environment.

Victor Saunders and I had just completed a rather faltering drive from London. What with a miraculously disconnecting distributor cap and spells of challengingly slippery roads, we eventually arrived just in time to see a torch click on in a small roadside tent. A head poked out and the unmistakable outline of the Nisbet beard glistened in the moonlight. We regarded each other blearily, and spoke only enough to confirm that both teams were heading for the Pinnacle area. I didn't really need to know any more. I had already driven literally thousands of miles in an effort to nab the first full ascent of an obvious direct winter line based on the semi-sieged line of 'The Fly'. The chances that Andy would be heading for the same line were distinctly high.

But the Nisbet body was bound to be a speedy walker. Victor looked distressed but knew that, with me present, we would inevitably lose any walking race. In any event, by the time we were ready to leave; the Nisbet team was surging forth. I tried ineffectually to run after Victor - but it was clearly hopeless. The snow underfoot was crisp and frozen; there was one slim possibility that sprang to mind. "The river bed!" The end result was a first (and probably a last) in Fowler walking history. Victor and I crunched crisply along the smooth snow of the river bed whilst

the Nisbet team followed the longer route along the path. We arrived perhaps 5 minutes before them, and stepped briskly on to the perfect ice streaks of Fly Direct.

All those miles of driving had been worthwhile; the conditions were the best I had ever seen on Creag Meaghaidh. White ice drooled down the lower slabs and choked the 600ft corner line which formed the meat of the route. We twanged our way upwards whilst Andy contented himself with yet another Nisbet first, 'The Midge', just to our right. It was one of those rare days when everything goes exactly according to plan. Lying in the sun on top of Creag Meaghaidh was a moment to be savoured. Victor was bouncing uncontrollably as he does when excited.

And so on the Sunday we found ourselves in Glencoe, peering up at a hanging ice streak up and to the left of the well known column of Elliott's Downfall. Our approach had been interestingly unconventional, and at one point involved overcoming a particularly steep rock wall by clambering up a handy, if fragile, tree. It wasn't until we were roping up beneath the line that Victor realized that he had left his axes behind. "You lead and slide yours down the rope." He suggested. And so I set off on disturbingly steep and brittle ice, clipping in just one of our two ropes.

The pitch was insecure and unnerving, to the extent that I felt increasingly uncomfortable with this arrangement. Eventually though, I pulled on to a ledge and belayed. Looking up, it was clear that we were above the main difficulties, and without a further thought I clipped both axes into the free rope and let them zoom off out of sight. The pitch was vertical for some distance, and the axes descended most efficiently. Regrettably I was unable to see Victor's strenuous efforts to run away from a couple of Kg of sharpened steel homing in on him - being tied onto the other end of the rope there was no escape and after fruitless exertions he bore the full force of two axes from 50m. A muffled cry reached me, and it was a not very pleased Mr Saunders who arrived at the stance some time later. As he led off, I made very sure that the Fowler body was protected by an early runner in both ropes!

To me these recollections sum up a lot about Scottish winter climbing. Conditions are fickle, early starts wearing and success comes only to those that persevere. But the memories bite deeply, the friendships are warm and the pleasures long lasting. These are the important things. I remain hooked.