

Climbing and Writing: the Victorian Way

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

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

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

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

*Forty in round numbers are
England's counties great and small
And of these shall ever stand
Yorkshire, greatest of them all;
Shouldering the stalwart North,*

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

*Buttress staunch and true is she;
Is there county can compare
With her of the Ridings three?*

Of course, the problem with mountaineering as a cure for poetry is that it offers too many subjects apparently fit for poetic treatment. That is, there are plenty of non-mountaineering mountain poets, whereas there are no golf poets – golfing or otherwise, since golf is gratifyingly barren of topics suited for poetry. So golf, darts or snooker are much more promising antidotes than mountaineering.

These prejudices declared, it will be obvious that my own interest in the writings of Victorian Scottish mountaineers is not by any means a literary one: rather, it has been historical. I first became involved with their writings in the late 1960s when I served as apprentice to Geoff Dutton, who was at that time Editor of our Journal. Its first ten volumes – up to 1909 – are a wonderful evocation of climbing when everything was new, unspoiled and innocent – hills, crags and climbers alike. Editors – even sub-editors – enjoyed a Club copy of the entire run of Journals as a perquisite of office, so I was able to comb through this early material thoroughly. I began this reading with the usual set of derogatory opinions: that the early climbers were technically incompetent; that they were old and portly; that they were hampered by great difficulties of travel and of access, etc. As I continued to read, I abandoned these attitudes one by one and came instead to the view that mountaineering in the 1890s was much the same as mountaineering in the 1960s and '70s, but much more amusing, since so few were doing it, and since so little had been done.

Behind the beards and moustaches, below the glengarries and deerstalkers, there were extremely fit men in their twenties and early thirties. They reached their mountains using efficient and regular trains supplemented by bicycles and a plentiful supply of ponies and carriages: indeed, many hills could be reached more easily then than today. The absence of Huts was no hindrance, since every Highland glen was populated, providing food and shelter near to every mountain.² And I was able to show that technical standards – particularly on ice climbs and mixed routes – reached a level in the 1890s that they did not regain until the 1950s. Harold Raeburn's winter ascents of Crowberry Gully (Buachaille) and Green Gully (Ben Nevis) and William Naismith's winter ascent of the North-east Buttress (Ben Nevis) were

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

ignored or forgotten by the next generations of climbers ³: no doubt they held the same prejudiced views as I did, and never thought to consult the record. Nor was this Victorian competence confined to ‘stars’ like Naismith and Raeburn. At the Club’s Easter Meet at Fort William in 1896 all the great ridges of Ben Nevis were climbed, and the Tower Ridge was ascended by five separate parties.

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

“Saturday afternoons and summer evenings (or mornings, sometimes) might be well spent, not in roaming over roads or moorland, but in hunting up dainty bits of rockclimbing and the like where there was sufficient difficulty to keep the faculties up to the mark. A precipice 20ft. high does not sound very serious, but there may be more fun and real climbing in getting up and down such a place than there is in ascending the 4,406 ft. of Ben Nevis’⁴

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I doubt whether a modern climber would answer Bell's question differently. Perhaps more salient than the points that he includes are those that he omits. For example, there is no mention of length of route, of a mountain setting or of the quality of rock. And these, I am sure, would have figured in definitions offered by climbers from the 20s through the 70s. Bell goes on to remark that:–

'When a man needs all the mountain knowledge that he has, and all his skill and muscle to take him up the next few feet, he is not likely at that moment to pay

⁵ 'On Bouldering'. *J*, 1896, 4, 52-56.

⁶ *J*, 1904, 8, 1-3.

much attention, even although the sun may be setting in a flood of red and gold over the sea within his view. If at the last hole in a game of golf a man is putting for a half, he won't at that moment think of the ever-changing sounds and sights of the sea, or of the cloud shadow moving across the hill.'

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

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

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

Much of Victorian writing is nevertheless somewhat dull. Perhaps the worst case is Hugh Munro. Munro contributed eighty-five articles and notes over a period of more than twenty years. As a historical record of events and facts they are exemplary: dates are always given, his companions are fully identified, the weather, mountain conditions and events of the day are accurately described. But there is almost no humour, very little account of his thoughts, hopes or fears and little or no evocation of the mountain scene beyond an occasional estate agent's catalogue of distant summits visible from the summit reached. And this is a considerable shame, since Munro's climbing was certainly interesting. Much of it was done alone and in

winter: alone since he was not much liked – perhaps due to his habit of talking incessantly – and in winter because, being a landowner himself, he was reluctant to climb in summer where the owner might take his trespassing amiss. In his declining years, when he was struggling to complete the ascent of the 538 Tops of his famous Tables while suffering from worsening rheumatism, he adopted the compromise method of climbing through summer nights – a practice which sometimes resulted in severe confusion and error.⁷

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

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

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

‘But presently came they to a great rock, a majestic tower; here were they perforce compelled to depart to the right hand, placing themselves in steep and

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

⁸ *J*, 1894, 3, 151-157.

perilous positions on slopes of ice, which downwards seemed to end in the empty air, even in the great void . . . Still all things have an end at last, – good Wine, Pinnacles, Spires, cabalistic Emblems, and oromaniacal Wanderings, even the green Sauce of the philosophers and the pythagoric Mustard of the Great Master himself, spoken of by Alcofribas Nasier in his merrie work. So did the Three find the perilous passage across the headlong steep finish. Then did they pass onwards to the Labyrinth, the rocky Chaos, and greatly did they marvel at the exceeding steepness thereof; so that only by great perseverance, turning now to right and now to left, were they able to break themselves free from the bonds and entanglements, and climb sagaciously upwards to the summit of the great tower.’

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

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

⁹ *J*, 1898, 5, 93-102.

right pleasant and entertaining anecdotes, a story, a most sentimental story, all about two Sardines, who lived and loved amongst the purple waves of the roaring Adriatic. But that is another story.’

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

‘It is now evening, and I ought, if orthodox, here to insert a description of the sunset, to become suddenly poetical, to talk about ‘The sun-god once more plunges into the baths of ocean’. The sea too is always useful at such moments. ‘Banks of sullen mist, brooding like a purple curtain,’ &c., sounds well; and one must not forget ‘the shadows of approaching night,’ they form a fitting background for the gloomy and introspective spirit which ought to seize upon one at this particular psychological moment. ‘The tumbled fragments of the hills, hoary with memories of forgotten years,’ come next, with a vague suggestion of solitude, which should be further emphasised by allusions to ‘the present fading away, and being lost in the vast ocean of time, a lifetime being merely a shadow in the presence of these changeless hills.’ Then, to end up, mass the whole together, and call it an ‘inscrutable pageant’; pile on the shadows, which must grow blacker and blacker, till ‘naught remains but the mists of the coming night and darkness’; and if you have an appropriate quotation, good, put it in! What the party really did was to hurry down into Allt a’ Choire Dhuibh Mhor, and hasten with more or less empty insides to the ‘machine’ and dinner.’

The first Editor, Joseph Stott, did not much care for this sort of bathos. In a letter to Douglas¹⁰, he complained that ‘the Oromaniacal Quest is amusing, but so damnably vague that, but for the note in *Notes and Queries*, you would not know what they’d been up to on

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

Ben Nevis'. Stott had firm views about how mountaineering should be described but he was generally scathing about the lifeless narratives usually produced. In another letter to Douglas¹¹ he complained bitterly that his beloved Journal had become full of 'miles, feet and minutes, and endless dissections of the unhappy points of the compass. To me these are really little more interesting than an architect's specification for building a stane dyke!' Instead what Stott required was 'something in which I can hear the roaring of the torrent, and see the snows, and the brown heather, and the clouds and scud flying athwart the blue above the rocky peaks . . . something which will set my pulses beating, and conjure up dear old Scotland!'

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

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

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

¹¹ Headed 'Wellington, 7/2/95'.

¹² See my 'Stott's Mountaineering Club', *J*, 1974, 30, 257-263 for numerous grotesque examples.

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

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

If there is a weakness in modern mountain writing, then I would locate it here. As a cure we might study writers of the period between the Victorian era and the 60s, such as Claude Schuster and Bill Murray, who both knew well how to evoke, with a light touch, the drama of the mountain scene. Here my taste in reading, announced at the start, makes its point, for Stout and Wodehouse were nonpareils in the use of wit and dialogue in first-person narratives, and the narratives of Conan Doyle, of course, were effectively film-scripts in which the drama of every scene was perfectly conveyed. Oddly enough, in view of his attitude towards poetic or sentimental display, Collie occasionally made the effort to capture in writing the strong impression which mountain scenery made on him. When he did so, he succeeded very well. Master of all types of climbing, Collie seemed determined to master all styles of writing, too. The closing paragraphs of his 'A' Chuilionn'¹⁵ are everything that poor exiled Stott would have wished for. Although there is too much of the prose-poem about these descriptions for modern tastes (and certainly for mine), those who know the Cuillin well will recognize the mysterious mountain essences which Collie strives to characterize here.

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

¹⁵ *J*, 1897, 4, 259-266.

purple heather, and the wild flowers, whilst corrie, glen, and mountain-side bask in the summer sunlight.

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