

The Books of the Year

Summits and Secrets By Kurt Diemberger. Translated from the German by Hugh Merrick. Pp 344. Illustrated with 78 photographs, 8 maps and diagrams. Allen & Unwin, London, 1971. Price £5.50.

This book certainly evokes the emotive experiences of mountaineering in a new and fresh way. While the author's record in the Alps and the greater ranges—his summits—is outstanding, other qualities in this autobiography—his secrets—rise magnificently over the horizon of contemporary reporting. All the fears, aspirations and visions of a soul are laid bare in the struggle to justify an existence on earth and attain fulfilment in exploring and climbing high mountains.

Kurt Diemberger, though perhaps less well known to English-speaking mountaineers than Hermann Buhl, has been in the forefront of Austrian climbing for twenty years. In ice-climbing it can be fairly claimed that he is the natural successor to Willo Welzenbach, and his daring feats in the *direttissima* school remain unsurpassed. His name is associated with the philosophy of small, mobile teams for tackling big summits without supporting columns and oxygen, and he has done a fair amount of serious solo climbing. He pioneered the advantages of wearing a crash-helmet and has subscribed to the theory of climbing unroped when a party even on difficult ground might be more secure without the conventional safeguard. Against this he reveals deep humility in the presence of the ice-slope and rock precipice, and vivid, nerve-tingling descriptions of his feelings tumble out of the pages like rock-falls and ice-avalanches. Anyone who has visited the Alps regularly will appreciate with pleasure (and pain) the recollection of all the miscalculations, and their consequences, an Alpinist can make in youth, from leaving crampons in the hut, to dropping a peg hammer at a critical point on a climb, or wandering off-route into a precarious situation. 'Young climbers', the author remarks, 'in their early years have all the more need for an outsize guardian angel'. The written word has never conveyed with such nakedness the nature of intellectual searchings and breadth of intimacy that grow in a profound relationship between a man and his mountains.

A native of Salzburg, as a boy 'Kurty' was a crystal hunter, spending his leisure time searching for 'treasures' in the nearby valleys. Then he acquired his grandfather's ancient bicycle and rode to more distant valleys and over passes, to the Hohe Tauern and the Dolomites. The hunt for precious stones extended uphill because the surrounding mountains were now higher. Before long he was climbing mountains because, 'he had discovered something, but was not yet sure what. Was it, perhaps, that he could move about up here—move most marvellously? . . . Was he meant to go on up—up into

the inaccessible world of summits?' Within a year and by the age of seventeen he had been up the Gross Glockner, Venediger and Matterhorn with school friends. In a short time he met Wolfgang Stefan—and so to a famous partnership. The exploits of the Diemberger-Stefan rope, which practised in the rock nursery of the Peilstein near Vienna as London climbers do at Harrison Rocks, and spent long summers fastened to mountain walls great and small across the length of the Alps between Cortina and the Calanques, set the seal on the author's future as a mountaineer and as an individual of great sensitivity in this passion. Less fortunate aspirants will envy the 'grant' he got from his local club to mount an expedition of two for climbing the Matterhorn North Face. Again, climbers without a companion will chuckle at the Diemberger solution, for at the end of another season, after Stefan had had to return home, he still wished to attempt the North Face Direct of the Königspitze. So he telegraphed the club, 'Send me someone at least up to Pallavicini Couloir standard', and Albert Morocutti was dispatched forthwith on a motor-bike to join him.

In the narrative of Alpine adventures the author concentrates on his ascents of the universally recognized test-pieces of the modern age—the walls and spurs of the Matterhorn, Eiger, Jorasses, Dent d'Hérens, Peuterey, Cheilon, Roseg and so forth. When he tells of his Himalayan, and later Hindu Kush, adventures his stamina and endurance seem to flow from the difficulties confronting him, as if they were specially provided for him, so that an intense experience in word-pictures and thought-patterns is transmitted to the reader. The hardship of extreme altitude is nothing compared with the rapture he enjoys, which is of his own making in the search for an infinite goal. He is still the only living man to have made the first ascents of two 'eight-thousanders' (Broad Peak and Dhaulagiri). The man who initiated this achievement, Hermann Buhl, on Nanga Parbat and Broad Peak, fell to his death through a cornice on Chogolisa only a few feet away from Diemberger. When that awful moment of truth penetrated the numbed senses of the survivor we are given the hard facts, incredible as they may seem, separated from the emotion of the terrible hours that followed. Diemberger states that if he and Buhl had been roped together he would not have been able to hold his companion, and both of them would have fallen. Shortly before the disaster occurred Diemberger had himself wandered in the blinding mist on to the cornice and gone partially through it. The now legendary superhuman qualities of Hermann Buhl emerge for the last time in the quasi-idyllic account of their ascent of Broad Peak.

Commentaries on the reality of death are drawn sharply into focus. While the outlook is predictable, the actual events are moving because of the author's honesty. Among several narrow escapes, Diemberger, his wife and several companions survived the great blizzard of four days on Mont Blanc, pinned to ledges on the upper part of the Noire South ridge, while five people died elsewhere on the mountain.

An interlude in Greenland and flashes into the past and present punctuate the chronological order of this book. Originality, yes—also, imaginative

and highly personalised impressions of mountains expressed by an original mind. The literature of mountains has thus been enriched. Poetical encounters with the opposite sex, and awakening to sex, shine with the same frankness that pervades a totally committed way of life.

After years of studying and finally qualifying as a teacher in business management, the author practised this profession, till the strands of conformity snapped one by one under the stresses working to make him feel 'free'. Though now married and with two young daughters, he elected to write and make lecture tours. In this decision he was not the first; it might even be regarded as commonplace today; but it was clearly desirable and inevitable in Diemberger's case.

Hugh Merrick is to be congratulated on his fine translation of a difficult work. For Viennese and Salzburg slang his decision to use a north-country dialect in English for reported speech is a bold and successful one. Misprints are few, but the publishers can be rapped for describing in the jacket blurb the scene of Buhl's death on Broad Peak [*sic*]. The photographic illustrations are excellent and the maps quite helpful. Though quite a long book and in a page size larger than normal, the price unfortunately will limit possession of the work to libraries and serious collectors. An autobiography of this importance may not appear again for a long time.

Robin Collomb

One Man's Mountains By Tom Patey. Pp 282. 23 full-page illustrations. Gollancz, London, 1971. Price £3.

Top-grade climbing today demands such absolute commitment that we have no right to expect anything of the hard men except that they climb superbly well. Quite unfairly we expect them not only to vanquish our perpetual 'last unsolved problem', but to describe their experiences in deathless prose. The remarkable thing is that, quite often, we get just that. Perhaps once in a generation we get even more, I suggest that Tom Patey was one of these very rare exceptions.

Tom Patey earned, and received, his mountaineering laurels: the hammer of the Cairngorms; the power-house of the Muztagh Tower and Rakaposhi expeditions; the man who cut Zero Gully down to size and made the epic winter traverse of the Cuillin; and finally a star climber and entertainer on the Old Man of Hoy T.V. Spectacular. Even if his only comment on these achievements had been an Aberdonian grunt, we would still have revered him.

Not a bit of it. At the time of his death Tom Patey was emerging as one of the most pungent mountain writers of his time, as a growing circle of devotees was only too keenly aware. Over the last few years his occasional articles in mountaineering journals and magazines were setting an altogether new standard in freshness and humour. These articles have now been collected in *One Man's Mountains*, and their impact is formidable. The book is divided, more

neatly than Patey's life, into four sections: Scotland, Abroad, Satire and Verse. All his major attainments are recounted.

Starting with his early days in the Cairngorms, we see the climber and writer develop side by side. We sense the power erupting, in the climbs, in the words. From the outset Tom Patey was unwilling to accept last year's standards, in climbing or in writing. In the first half of the book he tells, with a marvelously light touch, of the new horizons he was opening in winter climbing in Scotland or in a new concept of Himalayan steepness on the Muztagh Tower. At the same time he focused on his friends, and on himself, a positive searchlight of impish humour, kindness and very penetrating satire. He instantly saw through the posturing which is such a feature of our sport. The mickie is taken out of all our heroes, but with such rumbustious good humour that the victims would be churlish to complain. He is at his very best when climbing with, you might almost say *against*, his fellow Scot and comparable Lifeman, Hamish MacInnes. I cannot think of any better mountain writing than the chapter describing Patey's first ascent of Zero Gully with MacInnes and their great winter traverse of the Cuillin.

The third section of the book contains Patey's purely satirical pieces, in which it would have been so dangerously easy to degenerate into undergraduate humour. They may be classed among the very best of mountaineering satire, *Rum Doodle* and all.

Finally, comes the verse, mostly songs. This is how many of his friends will remember him, with that mischievous smile of his, playing his accordion, roaring out a famous air, the words adapted to the mountain scene—and gorgeously irreverent. These songs will be sung in bothies and base camps, and they are just about the only requiem Tom Patey could have stomach.

Even amid the satire, there are flashes of seriousness. While debunking affected stylists in 'Apes or Ballerinas' he writes: 'The sort of climber I like to watch is the man who knows where he's going, and wastes no time getting there. A latent power and driving force carries him up pitches where no amount of dynamic posturing would do any good.' Only too true. I have watched just such a climber: Tom Patey. He could not have painted a more accurate self-portrait.

Tom Patey would be appalled that his book might convey a message, but, perhaps for this very reason, I received one loud and clear. It seemed to be this: climbing is all a great belly-laugh, the beauty, the 'bull', the danger, the comradeship and the insistent need, when a climb is done, to go out and start again.

This fine and unusual book should only have been the beginning of Tom Patey, the writer. I mourn the passing of the writer more than the passing of the climber; and the passing of the man more than the passing of the writer. We should console ourselves that this is his own inimitable obituary.

Mike Banks