



67 The NE Buttress of Ben Nevis. This and next photo: H. MacInnes

From Zero to Astronomy

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In recent years one of the most significant advances in climbing style has been the change in ice climbing equipment and technique. The old step cutting method has given way to climbing on front points and curved or inclined picks. Steep ice, if solid, begins to lose its terrors, and the old hard ice climbs become classics. Luckily, at the same time that much of the sense of commitment and seriousness was going out of straight snow and ice routes, there was a move on to steeper, more open faces. With less ice and generally harder technical climbing, these routes are now the ones with the Alpine style commitment. Summer VS routes climbed in winter conditions as opposed to the gullies full of ice.

In past winters you laboriously cut steps and Grade 5 gullies were usually minor epics. One day in February 1967 Jim McCartney and I left the CIC hut below Ben Nevis in early half-light full of a greasy breakfast and trepidation, and headed towards the foot of Zero Gully. The climb looked impressive and conditions good but hard. About 60 ft up, an 80° thinly-iced, trough-shaped groove ran upwards to peter out below some roofs: to the right of this was a solid pillar of vertical ice, on the left steep rocks swept out towards the Orion Face. Above this lower 200 ft we could see nothing but knew it was more steep ice. We put on our crampons, Grivels in those days, and holstered our blunt sawn-off ice axes and peg hammers. I led up to below the trough and belayed on my axe and one of our two ice screws. Jim came through, left me with the pack and moved into the groove. An hour later and 150 ft up he was below the roofs after some wild bridging on flattened-off ice bumps. The sole protection was a baby nylon sling which poked out through the ice and a poor ice peg 10 ft below the 2-step stance. Another hour later and a belay had been arranged, an angle in a V groove and an axe in the snow where it curled out into a shelf below the roof. The plea to climb carefully as the belay could not hold a fall inspired no confidence. The pitch dragged out in a hazy teeter broken by the shock of the snow shelf collapsing when Jim tried to give me some tension. Eventually I stood below the belay clutching Jim's ankles while he dropped the gear round my neck. The way was right then—a short vertical section of awkward cutting leading on to the front of the ice where it filled the whole gully. A hundred and fifty ft later after 2 rock pegs dropped from a frozen karabiner, a broken ice screw, no protection, and continuous steep cutting on hard ice, I dug out a vague spike belay. Jim came up the steps, which decreased in size, shape and spacing as the pitch progressed, and led through. Steep but fairly straightforward ice eventually led to our first solid rock peg in 500 ft. At least when seconding, a pitch with steps was a fairly mechanical process except for the spindrift and powder avalanches filling up steps and cutting off sight and generally making life less than pleasant. Life for the second was none too good either though, with the continuous rain of ice chips from above.

What should then have been the last major ice pitch loomed before me, steep and bulging, green hard ice with rock walls splaying out on either side. Zero is not so much a gully as a groove between two huge buttresses. Step cutting was the scene, as small and well shaped as possible, spaced for most efficient use, but allowing retreat. The only snag was the jelly-like arms and aching calf muscles. The pitch must have dragged in the cold for Jim but was eternity for me. Hanging on, cutting, getting nearer and nearer the limit, I came to the last bulge. A blunt arête of ice led on to a slab of ice, followed by awkward cutting round corners and over the lip. On the last move a step breaks; I hang and slip with iced-up gloves until a desperate last-ditch lunge gets me over, calves and arms quivering with strain to a belay.

From then on it was easier. Short ice pitches at reasonable angles led to the final snow slopes, then the plateau in the evening glow, 8 hours from the foot. We went rapidly down No 5 Gully in the near dark full of the joys of a good route near our limit, one we had done and had no desire to do again.

Then, 4 years later came a climb further left. It was a Monday morning, not early admittedly, but weather and conditions were good. MacInnes, Spence and I stood about mumbling about who was to lead off. It had only taken us since early Saturday morning to get here—more than 2 days from Glencoe to the Orion Face on Ben Nevis. First it had been the pre-dawn drive to Creag Meaghaidh, then retreat in the face of bad weather outside the van, then on the way back the Ben showed its face and looked better. We returned to Glencoe, went on to Fort William, then walked to the CIC Hut that evening. The morning thaw drove us down but Sunday night frost sent us back up again. So there we were, under the first pitch of our route in a state of semi-organisation. The line we hoped to follow was that of Astronomy, a 900 ft VS which took a line of corners and grooves and slabs. Because of the time of day and the length of the climb we took bivouac gear, since after the route finished, there was another 600 ft of NE Buttress before the top.

With 3 climbers the system adopted was that each person led 4 pitches before the lead changed, the middle climber belayed the first man normally, and the last man through a Jumar. The last man hauled the gear and used Jumars to hasten things when possible. The climb was in hard but good condition. The ice was good but thin in the lines of weakness and steep bare rock elsewhere, the type of climb where you looked up and saw little snow, looked down and saw little rock.

Anyway I was pushed out into the unknown by way of a short desperate crack in the toe of the buttress. This eventually yielded to a peg and suggestions from below and I reached a ramp of reasonable snow. Linked patches of snow and ice led me in 2 pitches up left, then back right to below a large left-facing corner. The climbing was good, technical rock and ice to a halfway bulge where the gloves had to come off to fix a thread. Bridge and layback lead up until the last move when an unhealed cut on my hand tears open, blood drips into the snow and a flap of skin dangles from my knuckle. A grey



68 *Looking down Astronomy with Zero Gully behind*

coloured handkerchief turns red but the rest of the pitch is easy using the then fairly newly-developed Terrodactyls and Salewa crampons. My last pitch is a shallow flake chimney which is great—technical climbing on front points up steep solid rock and ice to emerge right from our corner into a snow bowl and belay.

Kenny then takes over and disappears from sight to emerge 50 ft higher—profiled on a steep rib, to belay eventually on a thin ledge directly above. The stance is small and the wall above forces you out and as there is only room for one I rest on my jumars while Kenny leads the next pitch, a hard descending traverse into a groove. In my suspended state I watch, as Hamish belays on his tiny ledge, Kenny works slowly up the groove on front-points and Terrodactyls hooked into occasional cracks, until he is up and the impending wall above forces him left to a ramp overlooking Minus One Gully. Hamish joins him and I organise the ledge to follow. The descent and traverse into the groove looks hard but the haul sack makes it easy for me. It is attached to the end of the rope that my prusik is on, so when it falls off the ledge I go with it

and we both describe a graceless arc across the face and into the groove. By the time I rejoin the party they are moving off and it is almost dark. Hamish is in the lead now and working well until eventually a tricky torch-light section is reached, a traverse and descent into a steep chimney cutting the final headwall. His torch disappears; he eventually appears on the ridge. I help Kenny with a back rope and then pendulum in myself and shuffle to the top impressed by the late night lead.

On the top a bivouac ledge is prepared—a small shelf below an overhanging wall. Hamish has dug the ledge so gets the best position. Kenny and I huddle together with the gear tied on above our heads. A long night drags out to a misty morning. Everything is wet with a thaw well set in as we trudge up NE Buttress. We must go to the summit and all that! In the white-out we reach the abseil posts, and on down to the CIC Hut to scrounge a brew, then on valleywards.

Front-pointing up bulges of perfect green ice under cloudless blue sky is a Scottish myth. However, what can be scratched from the weather can compensate. We were lucky to manage that route at all.

