Valedictory address

Jack Longland

(Read before the Alpine Club on 6 December 1976)

It does not add to the confidence of an outgoing President of this Club, on this the last evening of his 3-year stint, before he creeps in at the diminishing tail end of the presidential portrait gallery on our staircase, to remind himself that of his last 4 precursors in title, 3 spent some time in wondering aloud whether their valedictory addresses were really necessary, and a fourth contrived to escape from delivering one at all. I am going to dodge the customary apologia by beginning in the middle, and asserting that the Alpine Club is in good heart, and well worth talking about.

The Club, after a period in which it had fewer members than belonged to it at the beginning of the century, now numbers over 1000 and so is the largest native mountaineering club in Britain, and there is a satisfactory accession of well-qualified newcomers each year. Our marriage with the Alpine Climbing Group survived without strain the last legal break-point at which a divorce could have been arranged at the instigation of either party. This means that many of the best and most active young mountaineers are unalterably included within the general structure of the Club, while the aspirant members of the ACG ensure a continuing intake of no less quality. I have also had the good fortune to be your President at the time of the most radical—and perhaps the most enthusiastically welcomed—change in the nature of the club since our founding fathers unaccountably omitted to include any founding mothers among their ranks. Since our amalgamation with the Ladies' Alpine Club and the admission of other qualified women members, I am sure that the combined club has become a better and nicer place. Both meetings and dinner are gayer and more civilized, and there are expert and critical eyes watching over the fabric and the look of our premises. The bride also brought with her a substantial dowry; the subscriptions of 150 new members, a large sum in cash, many valuable books and some charming pictures for our collection. The amalgamation gave us at last the opportunity to enlist women members to the Committee, and to do ourselves honour by appointing Dorothy Pilley-Richards as Vice-President, and this in turn may remind us of her fine first ascent, among others, with her husband Ivor and with Joseph Georges, of the N Ridge of the Dent Blanche, an advance of the climbing of that time in the Pennines. Surely now, by the godly doctrine of predestination and election, it will not be long before the Club finds itself choosing, without a hint of surprise, or indeed of condescension, a woman President.

The other big change in the organization of the Club has been the adoption of a scheme of aspirant membership, which the Alpine Climbing Group has practised for some years in its own recruiting. This means we can catch them young, when they have one good Alpine season or its equivalent behind them, watch and encourage their progress over the next few years and then admit them to full membership when they have proved their competence and staying power. There is also a discreet trap-door exit for any who do not stay the course.

All of these recent changes have added strength as well as numbers to the Club. We cannot offer much except our Journal to members who live abroad,

and yet we have in membership more than 200 mountaineers who belong to foreign countries or who are for the time living there. And this does not include the distinguished foreign climbers whom we and formerly the Ladies' Alpine Club asked to become honorary members. For what has been called 'the geriatric eccentricity of the climbing world', we do not seem to be doing too badly.

During the last 3 years, the Club Library has been still further improved, thanks to the efforts of Sir Douglas Busk and his Council of Management, and of Bob Lawford, our Honorary Librarian and inspired odd job man! With the money raised by Douglas Busk, the Library has been able to afford a professional librarian, the catalogue has been thoroughly revised, and work has started on the archives. Not all our members realize that the Club has what is probably the most valuable library on mountaineering and mountain subjects in the world, with many unique items in the collection. The Library Council deserves all the support that members and their friends can give.

I hope to give some account of notable climbs made during the last year at the Club Dinner tomorrow and there does not seem much point in trying to include in this address all or even most of the main achievements of the last 3 years, particularly since they will also be recorded in the *AJ*, and, within a short space of their happening, in the columns of *Mountain.* But if one takes only the most remarkable climbs made by British climbers, most of them members of this Club or of the ACG, or both, it is easy to see that, alongside the big set-piece expeditions, there is a steadily increasing number of small, light parties learning to treat the Himalaya and other big ranges much as their grandfathers learnt to treat the Alps. The range of numbers is between 2, as with Pete Boardman and Joe Tasker on the W face of Changabang, and the 900 porters, 27 tons of equipment and cost over £100,000 which were thought necessary to place one skier on the South Col of Everest, for a 2-minute ski-run much of it accomplished on the seat of his trousers.

Obviously the much-attempted SW face of Everest needed at that stage a full-scale attack, carried out with great brilliance by Chris Bonington and his enormously strong party, and recorded with great sensitivity in his book *Everest: the Hard Way.* But Chris had already showed the way towards the future with his much smaller party which was the first up Changabang, and Messner and Habeler were almost matched in their Alpine-type ascent of Hidden Peak (Gasherbrum I) by Joe Tasker and Dick Renshaw on the S face of Dunagiri, by Dick Isherwood on Kanjiroba, by the 4 Austrians who made a new route on Nanga Parbat, by Doug Scott and Dougal Haston on Mount McKinley and Charlie Porter's solo climbs on the Cassin Route and on Mount Asgard. But I think we shall all give pride of place to Pete Boardman and Joe Tasker this year on that fantastically forbidding W face of Changabang; no wonder the BMC Office were nearly putting on black arm-bands when Pete was a fortnight overdue, only to turn up smiling for their Management Committee.

In our management and day-to-day running, we are lucky to have people in the key positions who are devoted to the Club, and prepared to work hard for it, usually in hours they snatch at weekends or at the end of a day's work. I hope those that I do not mention will forgive me, because there are so many of them. Throughout my years of office, and of course before that too, we

owe a debt which perhaps only the President can fully appreciate to Mike Baker, our Honorary Secretary. His cool and level-headed appraisals have saved you from your President's occasional tendency to go off his rocker, but his imperturbability conceals the vast amount of lamp-lit labour which has made his services to the Club so peculiarly valuable. And, different characters though they are, our Treasurer, Roger Chorley, has an equal measure of imperturbability, particularly when faced by unexpected but unavoidable claims, such as cleansing the Augean stables of the caretaker's flat, or finding money at short notice for the ACG Bulletin. I am sure that, if the Club's finances started a slide mirroring that of the Pound, Roger would be seen, chewing nonchalantly on a straw, but nevertheless producing in a few slow sentences, an impeccable and financially workable remedy for our plight. Ted Pyatt, beset by rising costs, printing and binding delays, and until recently, our own uncovenanted secretarial inefficiencies and resignations under duress, has nevertheless, with his assistants Tom Connor and Bob Pettigrew, managed to go on producing, if for some members in some places a little belatedly, what is undoubtedly still the best mountaineering journal in the world. Robin McCall has also come to our rescue at a peculiarly apt moment, in controlling with admirable good temper and administrative skill the multiform changes that inevitably followed on Mrs. Lewis's decision to retire from her long and valuable services to the Club. And I have still, till now, not mentioned Frank Solari, whose constant help ranges from seeing that even the most incompetent lecturer's slides are clearly seen by club members, through all sorts of voluntary chores, where his engineering or diplomatic skills are fully engaged, to the important job of processing applications for membership of the Club.

I have wittingly given more space this time in this address than is customary, since such thankful tributes are usually paid at the dinner which follows our annual general meeting, to those willing and unpaid members without whose care the administration of the Club would collapse, first because I think it right that the Club's thanks to them should be recorded in print, but also because I think we ought to give more formal recognition to our unsung rescuers.

I owe the suggestions which follow to other members, but I warmly commend them to my successor, Peter Lloyd, and to the Committee. The first is that they might, in view of the current size of the Club and of the duties this entails, consider amending our constitution so as to provide for the appointment of additional honorary officers. It is not for me to prescribe what these offices should be, though perhaps an Assistant Honorary Treasurer, an Assistant Honorary Secretary for Elections, an Honorary Finder Out of not impossibly boring and inaudible lecturers, and—ridiculously daring—an Honorary Organizer of AC climbing meets, might be considered as having some degree of priority. The other suggestion which was sent to me is that, as with other clubs, it might be useful to ask our Committee to appoint a House Sub-Committee, under Robin McCall's leadership. I have learnt, as no doubt have some of my predecessors and all Honorary Secretaries, that the problems of managing, apportioning the use, and caring for the appearance of 74 South Audley Street are both continuing and usually unexpected, and I believe this should be a subcommittee on which, as Robin will surely welcome a harem, there might be a majority of women members. With which highly improper suggestions I relinquish any part in the management of the Club to those that shall come.

While I have tried faithfully to record the blooming health of the Alpine Club, now that *La Différence* has been eliminated, and conscious as I am that the next pitch, which commits even a pensioner President to comment on the state of the nation, has given me shocking dreams of 7.9 and A5, the fact that the Club in entering on its 120th year confronts a world altered in several particulars from that which comfortably supported its founders, gives reason for an unaccustomed modesty. Long muted are the thunderbolts from Sinai which Leslie Stephen, Freshfield, Farrar, Strutt or even our centennial inspirer and mentor Geoffrey Winthrop Young would have launched on parallel occasions, to shock and to chasten the international mountaineering world. And yet this is still the occasion on which, so far as they can be honestly reported by any President, the voice, the beliefs, the traditions and the continuing humanity of the Alpine Club, which puts people before things, and mountains before techniques should find expression. There will be fewer who will listen, but that is no reason the duty should be evaded—because there are good beliefs and practices which this Club began, guarded, developed, was at times stuffy about or censorious over, and which run through the strands of climbing history, as did the red thread which once identified the alpine rope that we used to buy and use with such ignorant confidence when we were young.

I think, because of my shortcomings of knowledge and analysis, that this next section is bound to appear a pattern of brash and black-and-white positives and negatives, and the tigers had best fall asleep, and younger critics must bite on their knuckles until I have done, and they can rise and rend me.

My first assertion is that the craft of mountaineering is to get up, or across, and safely down again, and I ask, 'have we become too insensitive to death?' I recall, as an extreme contrary instance, that Geoffrey Young's father forbade all mention of mountaineering in his household after one of the family had been killed on Mont Blanc, but also Geoffrey Young's own record of the profound shock, as well as compassion and sense of loss which he and his close-knit band experienced when, in short space, H. O. Jones, Donald Robertson and Hugh Pope were killed in the mountains, and later his younger friends, George Mallory, John Barford and Wilfrid Noyce. What he wrote about them reinforces Donne's line, 'Any man's death diminishes me.' It is one of the tests of a civilized society that it respects human life, including, in the final choice, your own life. It is current cant that climbing is 'a risk sport', and that but for this, it would lose its savour. I prefer the doctrine that mountaineering is a hard-won *craft*, without which the climber would find himself too often in wholly unjustifiable danger. Moreover, the *cult* of danger is a sign of neurosis and not of a healthy man or a healthy society. I quote two witnesses who will command respect here. The first is C. F. Meade, who nearly climbed Kamet, years too early:

> 'A sense of unity with nature is one of the principal characteristics in nature-mysticism, whereas the desire for danger in its extreme form is the absorbing preoccupation not of the nature-mystic, but of the danger-mystic who takes to danger as a stimulant.'

And, this is JL not CFM, I do not think this is very much more reputable than an addiction to drugs or alcohol.

I have a younger, but still respected witness to follow, Tom Price:

> 'And having faith in things, and people, is an aspect of having faith in oneself, and that is the self-confidence we are always claiming adventurous pursuits confer. This willingness to step into the unknown, into new experience, is not to be confused with mere recklessness. There is about recklessness a certain *lack* of commitment, a damping down, for kicks, of foresight and imagination. It is essentially frivolous, whereas adventurousness, at its best, is entirely serious. And because a thing is serious, it does not mean that it is less exciting or less fun.'

But what is recklessness? I think most climbers recognize what it is when they commit it. In the Himalaya, it might roughly be defined as accepting as normal a 10 per cent fatal casualty rate, which is more than Lord Montgomery of Alamein would have regarded as justifiable in war, especially if, in an expedition, half the casualties are Sherpas. In Britain, you must choose your own examples—perhaps the conceited and insensitive father who fell off pegging a chimney stack above his 9-year old son, and later killed both himself and son on the Matterhorn, might do. But in these islands, technique has come to the rescue. Thanks to a marvellous athleticism, the standard of rock climbing advances dramatically almost every year; but thanks to technique, and the knowledge how best to use a multiplicity of safeguarding devices, the number of deaths has been dropping slowly and steadily each year, for all the presumed increase in the numbers climbing. Perhaps we may be learning more sense than is attributed to the climber by the then James Morris when he spoke to this Club.

> 'It is as though the mountains are only an excuse: that all your bold adventures, your comradeship, your trappings of mystical guff, only mask something paler and more muted at the heart of you. Perhaps death has something to do with it, standing as it does at the foot of every cliff. Certainly, to this one outsider, the most haunting and nagging thing about the company of mountaineers is a streak in them of a kind of nihilism—something less frivolous than escapism, less sententious than anarchy, less specific than religion.'

For the sake of mountaineering, for ourselves and for what we teach our children, I hope with not too much confidence that Jan Morris is wrong. I prefer it when Chris Bonington weeps at the death of a close companion, and wonders whether even the SW Face of Everest was worth that one loss.

Or there is W. H. Auden to pose a similar question:

> . . . those unsmiling parties,
> Clumping off at dawn in the gear of their mystery,
> For points up, are a bit alarming;
> They have the balance, nerve
> And habit of the spiritual, but what God
> Does their Order serve?

Any widely practised sport, such as climbing now is, must among other things be heedful of its good name, if it is not to be publicly classed as irresponsible or harmful; and here I am not concerned with Queen Victoria's alarm at her bishops disappearing down crevasses. Long, long ago the Alpine Club

regulated the morals and the conduct of mountaineering; later the other clubs, as they became established, assumed a responsibility for mountain behaviour, each in its own district; and clubs whose membership changed rapidly, as those in universities, still tried to transmit good practices. One result was that, then ago, there was practically no litter, and no vandalism. Of course the pressures were much less, but the clubs did provide an orderly framework within which considerate habits were by and large ensured.

The recent explosion in the numbers of those going to the mountains has broken the mould, and though there are many more clubs, with the British Mountaineering Council to represent them and strengthen their voice, there are probably as many climbers again who do not belong to any club at all. No bad thing in itself, since who would wish to inhibit individuals or small groups of friends from finding out about mountains on their own? But it has meant a break in the transmission of tradition, the good as well as the outmoded kind, and, if we are honest, we see the results all around us when we visit the mountain districts. I remember, during one of Geoffrey Young's Easter weekends at Pen y Pass, we found a full rucksack lying at the foot of the E Buttress of Lliwedd. We took it back to the hotel, of course, and began a quite costly set of enquiries, which in the end traced its owner, and the sack was sent back to him. Today, who would be fool enough to leave rucksack, or any of his gear, for a couple of hours at the foot of any popular crag, Stanage, Tremadoc, Dinas Cromlech, or anywhere in Langdale? Or indeed on a climb. My son and nephew and others one winter Sunday pegged the roof leading out of Thor's Cave in the Manifold Valley, but darkness fell before they could finish the upper buttress. They returned next Sunday, and all their pegs and karabiners were gone, and no doubt there was another little bunch of climbers, boasting how smart they had been. Or take the reputation of British climbers at Chamonix, where our technical achievements are as good as any in the world. Thanks to a small minority of cheats and thieves and layabouts, who have thieved from the shops and gardens, stolen other people's equipment and brawled in the pubs, the British name still stinks. This is not my verdict, but that of McNaught-Davis, who is far nearer to the sharp end of climbing than I can ever hope to be again. Others, who have made some name for themselves on expeditions, have openly boasted that they met part of the cost by stealing equipment from our well-stocked climbing gear shops. And there have been British climbers and walkers who have abused the traditional hospitality offered to them in Nepalese homes and villages, by getting up early and disappearing without paying anything at all. There are people whom you can respect for opting out, for leaving the rat-race, for living the green revolution, self-supporting on their own livestock and produce. And in mountaineering, there are genuine professionals, guides, instructors at mountain centres, climbers who endure great expeditions, and make a living by lecturing and writing about them afterwards; and good luck to them, they all enhance and enliven the climbing scene. But, alas! my hackles rise when I am lectured on climbing being 'a way of life' by someone frequently found in the Padarn bars and adrift in Deiniolen, who has left a reasonable job for the admittedly not extravagant embrace of social security. The mountains were 'a way of life' for Geoffrey Winthrop Young, and for Menlove Edwards too, who had hardly a bean, but not at your and my expense.

I do not know the answer. It is fashionable to deride conformism and tradition, to stress the unique individualism of the climber, his anarchic shaking off of customary restraints, his embracing of risk when he knows that there is a convenient helicopter to mend him and his mistake; to extend a possibly rueful admiration towards the first leader of Suicide Wall, who tried to make a subsequent living by stealing from the climbing club huts that had harboured him. I *think* we have got to try and get a bit of sense and decency into these admittedly extreme edges of the game: they do harm out of all proportion to the numbers involved. There has been a shameful tolerance of their activities in climbing circles, and indeed in climbing magazines. It is more than time that good climbers disowned them. I believe and hope that the remedy may lie in the strength and good sense of the established climbing clubs. It is, I think, the only perk of the AC President to be invited as guest to climbing club dinners. And what a wealth of talent, comradeship, good and considerate habits and genuine passion for the mountains, transcending individual ambitions, our clubs represent! One not irrelevant example is that the clubs of the Peak District, where I live, have each adopted a crag, which they will try to protect and keep clean. It is, of course, monstrous that they should have to clear up messes which more stupid and selfish people leave behind, and I hope some of them may go over to the offensive, and catch the fool who drops the litter, thump the idiot who is rolling rocks on sheep, reprove the flustered leader who is desperately pegging a route which his betters have led free. It will cause the club a good deal of embarrassment, but it might do a great deal of good! But I step out of my rôle; it is not for the President of the Alpine Club to recommend direct action, even in the interests of sanity.

I do not think that even those who most dislike what I have just been saying will accuse me of believing that climbing has been spoilt by a vast influx of working-class climbers. I have greatly welcomed the astonishing coalescence of the 2 strands in British climbing, which for me has always been symbolized by the happy presence together, on the near-top of Kangchenjunga, of Joe Brown, plumber, of Manchester, and George Band, geologist, and ex-President of the Cambridge UMC. Chris Bonington now takes for granted that any expedition of his will contain a harmonious mixture of climbing friends from different backgrounds. And I have spent a good deal of my life in trying to provide for all sorts of youngsters ways of learning on the spot about mountains which they might never otherwise have reached. So I take for granted, and salute, the great social mixing-pot of present-day mountaineering. But, though some may cogently claim that early climbing was the preserve of the privileged classes (in spite of Alfred Smith, and the brothers Abraham, and Sam Turner and Eric Byne and Alf Bridge), I think it is important that we should not fall into the opposite error and believe that the only good and virtuous mountaineering is proletarian. Some of it was, or we should earn well-deserved thumps from Joe Brown and Don Whillans, and some of it was not: Chris Bonington led the SW Face expedition, and Nick Estcourt climbed the really crucial pitch. It would be as stupid to claim that today's vastly improved standards derived mainly from working-class climbers as that they were raised by the University types alone. What has been crucial is that able and ambitious climbers, from all sorts of backgrounds, have homed in on our climbing grounds and their 'last great problems' in far greater numbers than ever before. So no wonder the accepted standards of

difficulty have been blown sky-high. Inverted snobbery is no more estimable than its opposite.

If I have a complaint to make against those who attribute most recent climbing advances to the proletarians, it is that they really have not been encouraging them *enough*. Over 20 years or so, a series of surveys about those who still take part in active sports after they have left school has demonstrated that, inside the daunting figure of 80 per cent who give up all sporting activities once away from school, there is far too large a proportion of those in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs. And it is those from mean streets and prospectless jobs on whom the mountains most need to work their abiding miracles, as Elizabeth Coxhead, in her book *One Green Bottle* so convincingly showed. And that, incidentally, is the justification for much of the crusading and initiatory work which the better mountain centres are trying to do. Moreover it is currently the 'in-thing' to claim proletarian status even if you have not earned it. A large proportion of today's best leaders are students, or ex-students—and if they are horny-handed it is from climbing and not toil. The Alpine Club should, and I believe does, welcome the spread among all types and conditions of 'climber-persons' of those passions and delights, the pursuit of which brought our Club into existence. And if they are good climbers as well as good persons, we are delighted to admit them into membership. For all, we should apply Geoffrey Winthrop Young's test that they have—'that feeling for mountains without which no man is a mountaineer.'

The attempted division into 2 opposed camps of 'mountaineers' and 'rock gymnasts' began long before I started climbing. In our rude youth we used to say that the mountaineers were those who could not lead V. Diffs! And we climbed wherever we found a suitable surface and angle, college walls and roofs, Cherry Hinton chalk, the Horspath bridges and Welsh boulders. But fun though most of these were, they were all climbed on the way to something bigger and better, and at that date what we meant was the Alps. There was still a real sense in which the rock climbing was a preparatory exercise, to give you greater skill, speed, safety on real mountains overseas. I wonder sometimes whether today's balance between rock and mountain may not have tilted askew. An instance that comes to mind is 3 large photographs and half a page of writing devoted to an admittedly brilliantly gymnastic climb on that scruffy and aesthetically unpleasing Derbyshire quarry, Millstone Edge. Of course it was yet another 'hardest and mostest', but was it *worth* all that paper and print? I cannot help thinking that even among these small scale achievements, the ascent of King's College Chapel had more style about it: it certainly led to an attractively exiguous top. It used also to be possible to say that a climb followed a good and aesthetically pleasing line: I think particularly of some of Colin Kirkus's, such as the Nose of Dinas Môt. I believe that it was a feeling about such climbs, and not conservation or dislike of gadgets as such, that made much artificial or aid climbing distasteful to Geoffrey Young. It was the rhythm and beauty of adapting the human body to the accidents of steep mountain surface that interested him; the flowing uninterrupted speed of passage over great ridges; the doctrine of what could be covered in a single day, with never a bivouac, unless to get you close to the foot of the climb, at its start; travelling light, since to carry all those precautionary loads ensures that you *will* bivouac. Today's aims, techniques, standards of difficulty are of course

very different, but how much has been lost, as well as gained during the intervening years? There is obviously a new aesthetic satisfaction in sea cliff climbing with the dangerously moving waters below, but there seems to be more effort than beauty in the overcoming of some of those brutal roofs, as at Kilnsey Crag.

And with *style* comes that more elusive quality which we call *grace*. Professor Ivor Richards acutely pinpointed this in his recent talk to the Club when, having spoken for all who have been luckily there, he said of the vision of Kangchenjunga and its satellites—floating so improbably high across the severing leagues of air, simply 'They stopped my breath'; as they did mine, when Ferdie Crawford haled me onto the verandah of the Planters' Club at Darjeeling, to watch the morning clouds dispersing, and to try and focus my gaze at Mont Blanc height, before it became adjusted, beyond belief or probability, to an empyrean level at which first Kabru and then Jannu, and finally Kangchenjunga itself hardened into impossible reality.

Speaking of the first ascent of Kangchenjunga, Ivor Richards acutely observed that it was 'conducted with a kind of calm and grace enough to create the considerable amount of luck which it needed'. I have never heard the quintessential qualities of Charles Evans more accurately defined, nor the importance of the element of grace in mountaineering.

These are personal musings, and the Alpine Club itself is mercifully no longer called upon to decide, as Colonel Strutt once thought it must, between artificial and free climbing. I think we should give a welcome to the ethic which British rock climbers have been largely responsible for promoting, of not using aid on any climb that the best leaders can climb free, and perhaps a faint whiff of disapproval at these little bags of chalk from which some climbers add a yet further disfigurement to already scarred rocks, those unkindly called 'the powder-puff kids'! But the Club's real strength is not in disapproving but in affirming, and in particular in reaffirming that love of mountains as mountains which was the reason for its birth and the warrant for its still continuing.

It is the darkling, stumbling, interminable trudge before the Sultan's turret is caught in a noose of light; it is the sense of wonder at the beauty we so fortunately find on the silver horns of the morning; it is the grace of parched lips meeting the clear mountain stream; it is fingers given loving confidence by sun-warmed granite; it is the exhilaration shared among friends on the last pitches of a chancy and lucky new climb; it is the delight of watching a small son's awakening to mountain glories he might otherwise have missed.

I do not think that these are geriatric nostalgia. I believe they are the stuff and fabric of the mountain dream. It is this fund of shared experience, and a tradition of good and caring practice that still attracts to this Club the great climbers of other countries the young tigers of the ACG, as well as the earnest novice totting up his first diffident Alpine climbs. Our critics may say we are unique only in containing so many elderly members, but I do not think there is much we need to be awakened from except an occasional complacency, or an illusion that we just missed Whymper in the Library last Tuesday afternoon. And was there ever a candidate who was not proud to be elected into membership of this, the oldest but most adroitly self-renewing and adaptable of all the climbing clubs?

For myself I echo the voice of a more distinguished President, that he was

prouder of being elected to that office than on being appointed a Privy Councillor. I would put the ante up a bit and say I'd be prouder of the Presidency than if I were to become Archbishop of Canterbury. And that, as his friends will tell him, is the fate we confidently expect to overtake Ken Wilson.



1 Elena huts, Mount Stanley (This and next four photos: John Cleare)

Ruwenzori

John Cleare

Like all the best 'expeditions' our Ruwenzori trip was planned on the back of an envelope – the letters shuttling to and fro between Nairobi and London. The affair of Mr Dennis Hills caused a postponement in August '75 but by December Uganda seemed quiet enough, so Bill O'Connor and I flew out to join our Kenya friends on 7 December.

As most of our Ruwenzori team were in Education we had time to kill before the Christmas holidays, so for a training climb Ian Howell, Bill and I went down to Kilimanjaro to have a look at one or other of the 2 big problems outstanding on the mountain. Bill and I were very aware that the Ruwenzori might be tough so we decided against what would obviously be an epic on the Breach Wall Direct and chose instead to attempt the Kersten Glacier. The Glacier is the steepest of the SW glaciers of Kibo and its only previous ascent, by 2 Austrians via a very indirect line in 1962, took 3 days and was said to have been desperate. We hoped to make a direct line up the middle.

At about 4700m, the Kersten Glacier – previously nearly ½ mile wide – breaks up and pours 1,000ft over vertical rock cliffs in a series of steep and