Mont Blanc – The Girdle and the Cross

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On a day last summer my wife and I, with John Whyte and Peter Ledeboer, crossed the Col du Tricot and paused for refreshment at the Châlets de Miage, amid a crowd of tourists under the coloured umbrellas. We were half-way along the route which traces a girdle around Mont Blanc, very much in vogue nowadays among the longer alpine treks: the *Tour du Mont Blanc*. The mountain has been much in the news of late, highlighted by the 200th anniversary of its first ascent. Our journey had come into my mind while attending the celebrations in Chamonix in 1986, and I had looked forward to it, knowing that it would awake many memories: of successes and failures on Mont Blanc and the Aiguilles, and of friends with whom I had shared those climbs over a period which spanned more than one quarter of those two centuries.

As I looked up at the great head-wall to the Col de Miage, 1800m above us, one of those memories came sharply into focus; my mind flew back 32 years. David Cox, Michael Ward, Wilfrid Noyce and I had set off from these chalets on 3 August 1955 to attempt one of the great classic routes of those days: the double traverse from south-west to north-east and from south to north, known as the *Croix du Mont Blanc*. The first stage of our journey had begun at Les Contamines, which my diary records as having been 'a sweet little village, quite unspoilt and no tourists'. Now, alas! it has been transformed into a modern tourist centre.

We had started by limbering up two days beforehand with a traverse of the Aiguille de Lex Blanche and the Aiguille des Glaciers from an idyllic bivouac site where now stands the Refuge des Conscrits, but our state of fitness was severely tested as, with heavy loads, we toiled up from these chalets (no refreshments or coloured umbrellas then) towards the Durier hut. Indeed, our plans nearly foundered when, nine hours after leaving Les Contamines, we were still groping around in a thick mist, sleet and inky darkness, searching for the hut. Typically, it was Wilf who guided us to it. We were very tired and when, at 3am next morning, dense mist still persisted, I half hoped it might provide an excuse for a rest day. But our spirits rose half an hour later; the moon shone clear, near to full. So bright was it that we made quick time up the ice-clad rocks of the S buttress of the Aiguille de Bionnassay; the ice-slopes behind us on the Dômes de Miage were like polished silver.

Then, with daylight, a curtain of mist descended again, to herald a truly dreadful day. But the summit arête of the Bionnassay is too narrow to permit errors in navigation and we reached it in under three and a half hours from the hut. Likewise the snow-ridge connecting with the Dôme du Goûter guided us

safely to that summit. Then our troubles began, and continued through the day. We groped our way downhill with visibility reduced to 20 yards and, even with the aid of a compass, only chanced upon the Goûter hut. Well known, even in those days, for its chronic overcrowding, we soon found the pressure of humanity wellnigh insufferable and, against all sane mountaineering judgement, decided to depart for the Vallot in a near white-out; visibility was now down to 10 yards. My diary continues the story:

> 'It was now snowing hard and there was a storm in the offing. Our uptracks were quickly filled in with fresh snow. A French guide with an American client, who had started out two hours beforehand with the same idea as ours, came running back as we left the hut. I was in the lead and persisted for one and a half hours through thick snow, peering for signs of the vanishing track but guided by compass, until opinion in the party hardened against my obstinacy. We must have been just beneath the Dôme du Goûter when we turned back.'

Within a few minutes we had lost our uptracks. Visibility was virtually at zero and at times we were uncertain whether we were going up or downhill. Then, after prolonged casting around, we suddenly found the hut close at hand and pushed our way, thankfully this time, into the pandemonium within.

We were all aroused at 3am next morning and stepped out into a peerless, moonlit arena. Forging ahead of the long trail of climbers, we reached the Vallot cabin in one and a half hours and were on the summit two hours later. I have never seen the peaks looking more clear and beautiful, and there were many familiar summits to greet us in that vast panorama. We were alone on the traverse that day and were glad that there were no signs of the tracks of Raymond Lambert, who had done it two days before us. My diary continues:

> 'On we went along this wonderful high level walk: down the Mur de la Côte to the Col de la Brenva, meeting two weary Germans who had come the old Brenva route. We made an error in trying to traverse beneath Mont Maudit and had to climb back again, along an enjoyable rock ridge. Looking back across the Brenva Face at that point, Wilf and I noted with satisfaction how nearly we had reached the summit ridge before being forced down by a storm last year.
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> 'Then weariness set in. Mike and I both found the long plod over Mont Blanc de Tacul, down and across the Vallée Blanche, a severe trial. Wilf, as always, was a tower of strength and returned from the Torino Hut with coffee for Mike.'

Thus we completed the long arm of the *Croix du Mont Blanc*, a memorable journey in itself. We had hoped to complete the Cross – by traversing the mountain from Courmayeur to Chamonix via the Route Major – with only one overnight stop at the Torino. But I have long since learned the lesson of patience and – above all – persistence in wooing this particular snow goddess. Twice in the 1940s my companions and I had been thwarted in attempts to climb the



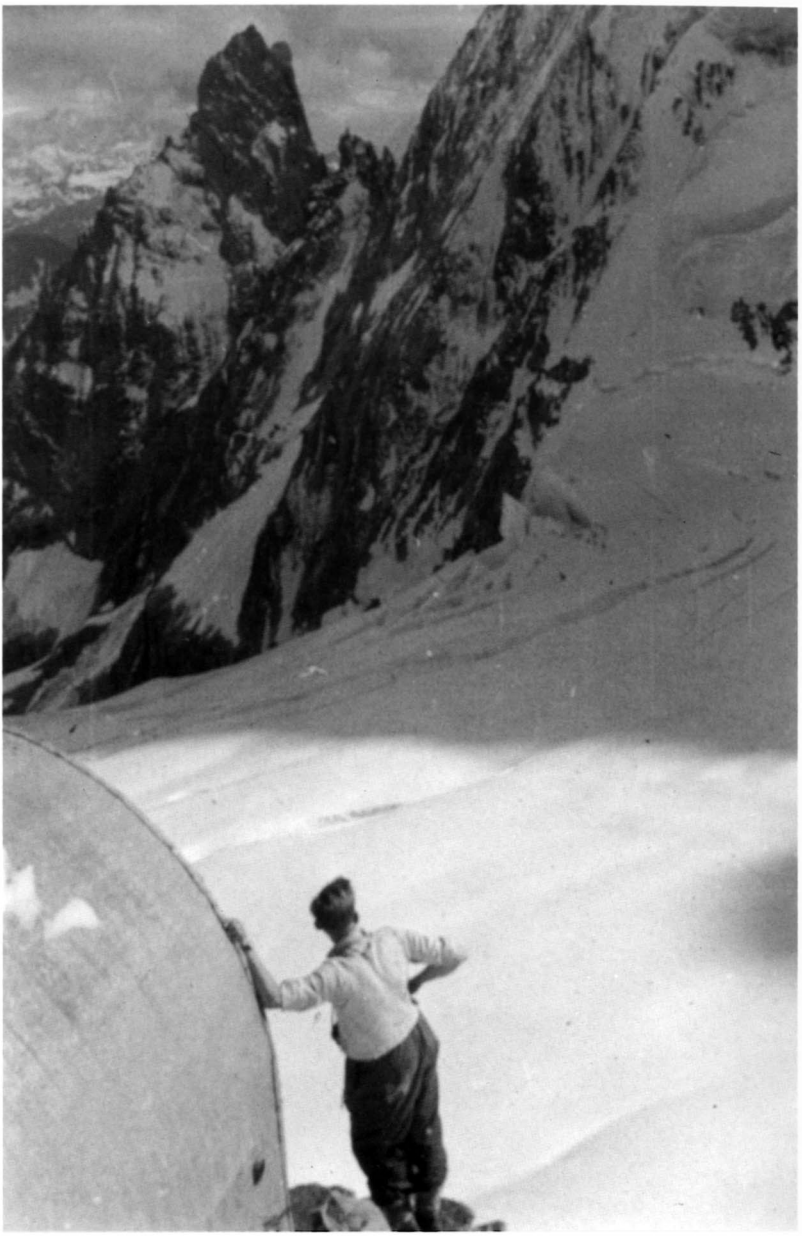
53. Stephen Venables and Luke Hughes.



54. Mont Blanc from Mont de la Saxe (1987).



55. Frontier Ridge, with John Hunt (1954).



56. Col de la Fourche, with Wilfrid Noyce (1955).



57. Descent from Mont Maudit (David Cox and Michael Ward) (1955).

mountain from the Grands Mulets, in weather so atrocious as to render the return journey through the *Jonction* a hazardous experience. I have been turned back, by another storm, from the Peuterey Ridge. And the previous year, as my diary has already recalled, Wilf Noyce and I had made our way up the Frontier Ridge, relatively sheltered from the tempest raging on the summit. So bad were the conditions that we had no choice but to reverse our route just below the crest. From that frustrating experience I retain one delicious memory of a moment when, facing inwards on a very steep snow slope as we made our way back to the Col de la Fourche, Wilf suggested breakfast. It was not exactly a perfect picnic spot; but we managed it, our faces pressed against the snow wall.

Now, a year later, we were back at the cabin on the Col de la Fourche in weather so thick that any thought of descending to the Col Moore for the Route Major – even another attempt on the summit via the Frontier Ridge – was quickly dismissed. Disconsolate, we steered our way by compass back to the Col du Géant and down on foot to Courmayeur via the Châlet-Refuge du Pavillon. Its *gardien* was Ubaldo Rey, fresh from the Italian triumph on K2; we were to meet again in Courmayeur in 1987, a little further along our *Tour du Mont Blanc*.

The bad weather continued to thwart us. Amid the fleshpots of the town, abetted by lavish hospitality and plagued by the importunities of attractive Italian autograph seekers, we were in danger of losing our zest and fitness for the completion of the *Croix*. We made an effort to offset these distractions by climbing the Aiguille de la Brenva by the splendid Grand Dièdre on its E face. It was a Sunday and, on returning to the Torino, we were once more besieged by starry-eyed fans. One brazen lass bared her bosom and insisted that I autograph that part of her anatomy; our morale was being rapidly undermined and stern resolve was called for. We departed once more for the Col de la Fourche.

The whole great flank of Mont Blanc, displayed in profile through the missing door of the refuge, was a spectacle sufficient in itself to restore a sense of proportion; yet in another context I was struck once again by the failure of mind and eye to appreciate contrasting scales of altitude between the biggest mountains and the lesser ones. This face is not much bigger than the W face of Lhotse; yet the Lhotse face, dwarfed by the highest and fourth-highest mountains in the world, seemed a trifling obstacle compared with the problem now confronting us.

We rested, brewed tea and invoked the lenience of the Furies, our eyes tracing those famed routes up the precipice, whose shadows were now adding emphasis to its height and sheer lines. We were waiting for the sun to slip behind the summit crest, leaving the chill shadows to harden the snow before making the crossing to the Col Moore. We looked down to the upper Brenva glacier, 120m directly below our perch. There, dug into the snow, was a sight reminiscent of the Himalaya but oddly unfamiliar in the Alps – a little group of tents. This we knew to be a camp of six Bavarian climbers; we had met them during the previous, abortive visit to the Col de la Fourche. They had already been there a fortnight and intended to remain for some 10 days longer.

Later, chatting with them over jam-jars of Ovo-Malt, we agreed that theirs was an example which might well be emulated by other mountaineers, to reduce overcrowding in the huts.

It was 6pm when we left their camp and climbed the short ice-slope to the Col Moore, at the foot of the old Brenva route. Here we had our first setback. From the col begins the long, steep traverse across a series of minor ribs and intervening couloirs in order to reach the centre of the face. In view of the poor weather forecast for the next day, we had decided to lower our sights and aim at the *Voie de la Sentinelle* rather than the Route Major, and we had intended to bivouac beneath the Sentinelle itself. But to reach it in safety and before dark the snow would have had to harden enough, after many hours of exposure to the sun. Although the shadows were now deep upon the slopes, the air was too warm and we noted that clouds were forming over the mountain. We had travelled barely a hundred yards across the steep slope, sinking into rotten, sun-saturated snow at every step, before recognizing that the task was too dangerous. We returned to the col. This was a blow, but we could still make valuable height by climbing some way up the Brenva ridge. So up we went, balancing delicately on its sharp blade.

The clouds thickened and it began to snow. It seemed that our persistence was again to be ill-rewarded. At short intervals, three avalanches broke from the ice cliffs beneath the summit and thundered down the gullies on our left: the same gullies which we would have had to cross to reach the Sentinelle. As if to underline the call to halt, there was a distant growl of thunder. About 150m above the Col Moore we stopped on a ledge on the rock buttress upon which we had been climbing, and settled down for the night. It was quite a salutary discipline, after so much *dolce vita*, to submit ourselves to a somewhat cheerless bivouac. The little petrol cooker, balanced on a slab of rock between David's knees, was spluttering comfortingly as our soup was heated.

Would it clear? Would it freeze? On the answers to these two questions rested all our hopes. No other cares in the world mattered to us at that moment. For a long while it did neither. We knew that the moon stood at three-quarters full, on the wane. If it were to shine on the face we had to cross, we could start at midnight. But a blanket of mist enshrouded everything. Then suddenly, something caught my eye. A jagged line of ridge, far above, was etched black, even against the dark sky. Stars were blinking in gaps in the clouds. Below, in the inky well of the valley, other lights were winking up at us from Courmayeur. The vision vanished; but at 3am the curtain was lifted again, this time for good. It became bitingly cold.

We stirred ourselves to action, for there was little time to waste. The cooker purred while we rolled sleeping-bags and duvets. At 3.40am we were off, stiff and clumsy, climbing to the top of the rock-buttress in clear moonlight. The sky was already paling with the new day. My diary continues:

> 'The mist still persisted, but we were off, beginning the great traverse upwards and across to the Sentinelle. Very steep indeed and I, in the dark, a trifle unsteady. Wilf led us a tremendous pace. We came to the deep groove referred to by Smythe: an awkward

six-foot descent into an ice runnel, tilted at a sharp angle. I came out of the step (cut by Wilf) but managed to land on my crampon points. (I think that we were still unroped at that time.)

'We crossed all four couloirs and passed beneath the Sentinelle at 5am. Continued left to the main containing wall of the Great Couloir and on, without pause, to the lowest extremity of the Côte Tortueuse. Here we stopped to eat, enjoying the dawn view on a glorious clear morning. We climbed the easy rocks of the Côte, dispensing with crampons for the next one and a half hours before tackling the seemingly endless ice slopes, steep and exposed, which led eventually to the summit ridge. There was no security, for we were all moving together, with Wilf and myself as the leading rope.

'At about 9am there were the first indications of a change in the weather: clouds appeared over the crest, borne by a westerly wind. We were soon enveloped in mist which became rather denser as we climbed. I was following Wilf, moving upwards for 30 to 40 steps before pausing for breathers as he kicked his way up.

'At last we passed the ice cliff crowning the rock rib on our left and emerged on to the gentle slopes immediately under the summit. The familiar wind and mist greeted us, with visibility again reduced to 20 yards. It was snowing when we reached the top at 11.35am.'

At the Vallot hut a large crowd of Germans and Italians were marooned, in conditions so uninviting that we raced on down to the Grands Mulets, passing through a huge and recent fall of seracs on the Petit Plateau in which, we had been told, two Swiss climbers had been buried early that morning.

And so down to Chamonix, tired but elated, to greet a number of French and British friends: Mayor Paul Payot, Maurice Herzog, Gaston Rébuffat, Lionel Terray and Armand Charlet among the former; Roger Chorley, Blackshaw, Downs, Gawkroger, Fraser and Sutton among our own compatriots. High life in Courmayeur was as nothing compared with that being enjoyed in Chamonix. Our arrival coincided with the *Fête des Guides*; the guest of the Commune was no less a star than *Mademoiselle Monde* for 1955, a Swiss beauty possessed of a charming personality. To exercise my privilege as an honorary citizen of Chamonix, in order to dance with Miss World that night, was an experience which I greatly enjoyed.

But already we were impatient to be away from such perils to the greater safety of the mountains. We left next morning for the Montanvert, bound for the *Intégrale* of the Moine by its SW and N ridges.

In the succeeding days last summer we made our way back to our beginning at Champex, completing the Girdle of Mont Blanc. As we traversed the high ground above Courmayeur over the Col Chécrouit and the Mont de la Saxe, I looked across at that great southern precipice and remembered those days so long ago. I thought of the good companions with whom I had shared the Cross of Mont Blanc. In particular, I remembered Wilfrid Noyce, whose

effortless ease and tireless strength on a mountain were, in their day, unsurpassed and who, the most unassuming of men, was so unaware of any limits to his power and skill.