More about the Fifties

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(*Plates 52–55*)

Hamish Nicol's personal account of his climbs in the 1950s (*AJ95*, 85–94, 1990/91) is a useful contribution to the annals of mountaineering, for he records some of the activities of a promising young generation whose first opportunity to extend their skills as rock-climbers came with the ending of the Second World War; some of them have achieved great deeds in the past 30 years. In following the lead provided by Hamish my motive is, admittedly, indulgence of a personal nostalgia. But it may be of interest to add to his reminiscences the doings during those years of some of us from an older generation who first saw the Alps shortly after a previous war which ended in 1918. Our ambitions and achievements were more modest and our failures were probably more numerous, but I doubt if we lacked any of the enthusiasm for the Alps which was evinced by Hamish, when we first returned there after 1945. He wrote: 'When I first saw the Alps in 1949 I nearly fell out of the train in my excitement.' So did I! I recall my emotions in August 1949 as being akin to a renewed love affair, as the little red train carried me up the Nikolaital to join Douglas Side at an Alpine Club meet in Täsch; it was one of several meets which the Club organized at that time to help alpine beginners. I stood, in a state of euphoria, on the open platform at the end of the carriage, the better to view the meadows and forests and to catch a glimpse of the great peaks at the head of the valley.

During the following week of fine, hot weather our climbs were attuned to the lack of experience of our clients and to our proper sense of tutorial responsibility. We traversed the Allalinhorn and the Alphubel; followed the splendid ridge of Hohberghorn, Stecknadelhorn, Nadelhorn and Lenzspitze, and climbed the Dom before moving up to Zermatt, whence some climbed the Matterhorn. The week ended on a high note with a traverse of the glorious SW ridge (Rothorngrat) of the Zinalrothorn. By a lucky chance George Finch, one of my boyhood heroes, with his wife and daughter Bunty, with whom I had climbed on Skye three years earlier, were at the hut when we returned. With them was Josef Knubel of St Niklaus, then in his seventies, famed for his exploits with Geoffrey Winthrop Young and other British climbers of that earlier generation.

During 1950–52 I was serving on the Allied Staff at Fontainebleau, and this provided many opportunities for my wife and myself to make short sorties to the French Alps. I longed to return to the Dauphiné, where I had spent three seasons more than 20 years earlier. We were joined by another companion from

that holiday on Skye, John Hartog. In July 1950 we headed south through Bourg-Saint-Maurice and drove up towards the Col du Lautaret, pausing in La Grave to make enquiries of my guides of those early years, who had accompanied me over the Meije, the Tour Carrée de Roche-Méane and other climbs. The names of Jouffray and Dode featured on several tombstones in the graveyard: 'fusillé par les Allemands'. I was relieved to discover that Paul and Georges had survived, but 20 years were to pass before we were to meet again. From the col we drove down to the village of Ailefroide, the hillsides fragrant with the scent of lavender, and pitched our tent on the Pré de Madame Carle; it was a peaceful alpine pasture at that time.

We had set ourselves a strenuous programme for the first week: a traverse of the three peaks of the Agneaux, of the Pelvoux by the Arête de la Momie, followed by the Ecrins and down to La Bérarde to meet Bryan Donkin and a formidable quartet of fellow *Bleausards*: Pierre Allain, Bernard Pierre, Jean Deudon and Dr Jean Carle. While we were there, I was delighted to meet again my old guide Elie Richard of Saint-Christophe, who had led me over the Ecrins and on other climbs 20 years earlier. In the following week our Anglo-French party traversed the Râteau from the Brèche de la Meije and the Aiguille Dibona by its E face (Voie Boëll). On our way back to Ailefroide we enjoyed a stroll up the Pic Coolidge. The need for that relaxation was mainly due to the truly appalling weather we had experienced.

The Pelvoux traverse had been made in a drizzle of sleet and near-zero visibility. On the upper rocks of the Momie arête a ledge had collapsed and precipitated me down the mountain. Joy, hugging her holds for dear life, had checked my fall after some 40 feet. On the Râteau, to which we had turned after finding the Grande Muraille of the Meije plastered with new snow, we were struck by an electrical storm near the summit. All that had contributed to an exciting first alpine season for Joy. But there were more excitements in store. A few days later we were struck by lightning during a traverse of the NW and central summits of the Ailefroide, experiencing several heavy blows on various parts of our anatomy before we managed to find shelter. I have seldom felt more thankful than at the moment when, in mist, darkness and by chance, we reached the cairn marking the ordinary way from the Col des Frères Chamoix and groped our way down to the Sélé hut after a 19-hour day.

The final adventure for us during that dismal month of July took place on the Drus, from which the weather had earlier forced us to retreat. Some distance up the Petit Dru Joy received a nasty head wound from a rock dislodged from above us: helmets were not in fashion in those days. Fortunately we had a 'shell' dressing in our first-aid kit and she valiantly insisted on continuing the climb. But we were much slowed down; other parties far outdistanced us during the somewhat indeterminate descent from the Grand Dru, and we lost more time in route-finding. Among those who passed us were Hermann Buhl and Kuno Rainer, who had come up the N face. We reached the Charpoua hut in full moonlight at 10.30pm. Messrs Saxby and Viney were there, and they told us that Tom Bourdillon and Hamish Nicol, who had been in the hut when we had made our earlier attempt, had bivouacked beneath the N face and were to attempt it next day.

The weather had the last word that season. John Hartog and I had left the Leschaux hut to traverse the Rochefort ridge over Mont Mallet. But the clouds rapidly built up and we were delayed by the intricacies of the Périades glacier. In despondent mood, we made our way towards the Montanvers. It was just as well, for a spectacular storm overtook us, unleashing some major rock-falls and dispatching a few giant boulders down the mountainside from the foot rocks of the Grépon. It was a truly Wagnerian display of natural forces, such as I have seldom seen before or since.

Chamonix was then, as now, a great meeting-place for British climbers. Michael Ward was there with an Oxford party; so was Basil Goodfellow with a group from the Rucksack Club. And we met many French friends: Gaston Rébuffat had just returned from Annapurna, and our meeting that summer gave rise to several climbs and ski-tours during our subsequent visits to Chamonix. Our meeting with Basil led to our climbs in 1951, when we joined him and his companions Michael Wilson, Ian Charleson and Frankie Mayo in the Valais. That was a season of happy memory, blessed by good weather and unattended by alarms. We camped at Saas Almagell, traversed the Allalinhorn by its pleasant E ridge, and the Rimpfischhorn from north to south. From that mountain we descended to Zermatt, whence we climbed the Zinalrothorn and that delightful little near-fourthousander, the Schalihorn. It had been our intention to traverse that peak in order to reach the Weisshorn hut, but fresh snow would have made that move dangerous. So we returned to the Rothorn hut and, with Charles Warren, traversed the Obergabelhorn over the Wellenkuppe and the Arbengrat. Two days later, on the summit of the Dom, a majority decision in our rope of three not to follow the ridge across to the Täschhorn caused dismay to the leader, but my spirits were revived when, after another false start, Basil Goodfellow and I traversed the Weisshorn by its E and N ridges. We were enveloped in mist on the summit of the Bishorn and had to spend a most uncomfortable night among boulders above the seracs of the Bis glacier. Little did I realize that this partnership with Basil, who was then the Secretary of the Alpine Club, would lead me to the Everest expedition two years later.

Military duties and the preparations for that expedition almost ruled out any climbing in the Alps in 1952; among the few opportunities, attempts on Mont Blanc on skis from the Grands Mulets and on the traverse of the Trois Cols from the Albert Premier hut were thwarted by the weather. But at the close of the year there was one light-hearted success, when Charles Wylie and I climbed the Mönch in December from the Jungfraujoch, while we were testing equipment for the Everest expedition. We had so many samples of high-altitude boot on offer that we resorted to wearing a different boot on each foot, during each of the four days of those trials.

After Everest, it was a great joy to return to the Alps. Notwithstanding his touch of *amertume*, I felt some sympathy with Eric Shipton, who is on record as having said at that time: 'Thank goodness, Everest has been climbed. We can now get back to some real climbing.' But 1954 was another dismal year for us.

Bad weather dogged most of our plans around the Chamonix valley, and the record was largely of failures. Wilfrid Noyce, Michael Ward, David Cox and I were forced to turn back within a few hundred feet of the summit of the Peigne by its NW ridge. A similar fate attended Noyce and myself on the Frontier ridge of Mont Blanc; the summit was a scene of turmoil and we had no choice but to return on the more sheltered side of the mountain to the Col de la Fourche, after arriving close to the summit ridge. But these were satisfying failures, for we had pushed the attack to the limits of common sense. In that miserable season, we were even grateful for such trivialities as the Aiguille de l'M, the Petits Charmoz, the Clochers Clochetons and the Aiguille de Belvédère. Our only success of any merit was the double traverse of that superb snow arête, the Rochefort ridge from the Géant and back. My reverse in 1950 made this success the sweeter.

1955 made ample amends for the previous year. I have described our climbs from Les Contamines, and the double traverse of Mont Blanc, from the Durier to the Torino huts and our return over the Voie de la Sentinelle, in *AJ93*, 123–128, 1988/89. While waiting for the weather to improve for that return journey, we greatly enjoyed a social round in and around Courmayeur. It was a joy to meet again Toni Gobbi and his wife; it was Toni who had led a group of guides from Courmayeur to greet Hermann Buhl and some members of the 1953 Everest expedition, during the celebrations in Genoa for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Christopher Columbus. We met Roger Chorley and Ted Wrangham, who had returned from the Peuterey ridge; Roger was suffering from frostbite. Ubaldo Rey, recently returned from K2, was at the Pavillon de Frêtey. Una Cameron gave us a welcome hot bath in her chalet while she cruised around in her cold swimming-pool, smoking her habitual cigar. A German party entertained us in their camp beneath the Brenva face, where they had been waiting for 10 days to climb Mont Blanc. We were besieged by hordes of ecstatic Italian holiday-makers who pestered us for autographs. But despite all this *dolce vita* we did manage to climb the Aiguille de la Brenva by its E face and Grand Dièdre.

After the return to Chamonix over Mont Blanc, our last climb that season was the *intégrale* on the Moine by its SW and N ridges, a most satisfying expedition during which, I recall, we made at least nine rappels on the descent to the Talèfre glacier, in a thunderstorm. On that high note I was able to join the celebrations of the *Fête des Guides* in Chamonix with all the more zest, in the good company of Maurice Herzog, Lionel Terray, Louis Lachenal, André Frison-Roche, André Tournier and Gaston Cathiard – not to mention the dazzling Denise Perrier, 'Miss World' in that year.

At the end of July 1956, David Cox and I were about to set off for the Strahlegg hut to climb the Schreckhorn, having climbed the Wetterhorn and the Klein Schreckhorn by its interesting W face. We called at Alfred Bhend's shop in Grindelwald to leave our spare baggage. 'Have you heard the news?', he asked. Two British climbers had been killed in the Baltschiedertal; one of them was a member of the British Everest team. Of course I knew this was Tom Bourdillon,

who had told me of his plans a few days earlier in London. Stunned by the tragedy, David and I caught the earliest train to Brig, whence we were taken to Visp by the head of the Swiss rescue service. Hamish Nicol has recalled the event in last year's journal, so I will not attempt to describe the shock and sorrow of the whole British climbing community during that period. I was much involved in the funeral arrangements and in contacting friends and relatives at home, in Chamonix and Zermatt.

Despite our sadness, it seemed best to resume our programme. Robin Hodgkin had joined us and we returned to Grindelwald, going straight up to the Guggi hut, *en route* for the Jungfrau by that route. The weather was very bad next morning and we could do no better than reconnoitre the way up the Kühlauenen glacier; it provided us with some useful practice in ice techniques to negotiate some of the crevasses. The Guggi route has an evil reputation for its crevasses and we took the precaution of further practice from the rafters in the hut that evening. The morning of 4 August brought little comfort but we decided to ignore the forecast and, retracing our steps, pushed on over the Schneehorn and up the notorious Giessen glacier to the Silberlücke. By now the weather had worsened and visibility was closing in as we started up the final ridge towards the Jungfrau.

It soon became clear that a traverse of the mountain to the Jungfraujoch was out of the question; indeed, the only option open to us was to retrace our steps and beat a hasty retreat. But our up-tracks had already been obliterated; in a near whiteout, David Cox suddenly disappeared and fell 60 feet into a hidden crevasse. Our rehearsals of the previous day now stood us in good stead, but David was very fortunate to emerge with little damage. According to my diary, it was 'the nearest possible thing to disaster'.

Messrs Eggler, Reiss and Reist of the successful 1956 Swiss expedition to Everest were in Grindelwald when we returned, and David and I accepted Ernst Reiss's invitation to accompany him to Mürren, with the promise to take us up a sensational new route which he had just made on the Gspaltenhorn. This venture proved to be a hilarious fiasco, for our host succeeded in losing his way in thick mist, on his own home ground. The outcome was a sleepless night in a cowshed among a herd of heifers, to the accompaniment of bells and bellows. Next day we emerged into the same pea soup of mist and drizzle, and there was nothing for it but to cross the Sefinen Furka and descend to Spiez. It was sheer bathos, but Ernst is one of those endearing companions whose endless cheerful chatter can compensate for any disappointment.

From Spiez we took the train to Chamonix to join Gaston Rébuffat, Noyce and Ward, with the Innominata ridge of Mont Blanc in our sights. Once again we were thwarted, for on reaching the Col de l'Innominata we found the rocks covered with new snow; it was raining hard. We made a start across to the Col des Dames Anglaises on the Peuterey ridge but, seeing a large group of climbers already on the Brèche, we realized that the refuge would be full. So we retreated to the Gamba hut in high dudgeon. Alan Blackshaw and Bob Downes, whom we had met earlier in the day while descending on foot from the Torino, had arrived and, next day, we all returned to Courmayeur. It was some compensation to meet other British friends there. Alfred Gregory had returned

from making a new route on the Tour des Grandes Jorasses with Ghiglione; Roger Chorley and Alfred Tissières were also in the town.

Our party then moved up to the Requin hut, having decided to climb at a lower altitude for the time being. We hoped to trace a route on the E face of the Requin, which was described in vague terms in our guidebook. 12 August turned out to be a beautiful day, but the route eluded us at about half height on the face, at a point where we found two pitons. Surmising that this must have been the highest point reached by the would-be pioneers, we moved across to the excellent Mayer–Dibona route on the right and followed it to the top. Our fruitless searches had delayed us and we arrived with the onset of darkness, which forced us to spend a cold and cheerless night wedged in the Cheminée Fontaine. Somehow we survived this ordeal, helped by two prunes, a few lumps of sugar and a packet of glucose. I recall a slow and insecure descent next morning on the steep, frozen slopes, with no crampons and only one ice axe in the party.

My last summer season in the 1950s was, appropriately, the Centenary Meet of the Alpine Club in Zermatt in 1957, when I was President. Joy and I enjoyed a number of climbs in the good company of Swiss and British friends. An Anglo-Swiss party which included Edouard Wyss-Dunant (leader of the first Swiss attempt on Everest in 1952), Anthony Rawlinson, John Tyson, Joy and myself traversed the Lyskamm. After the return to the Bétemps hut, another joint climb was made over the Breithorn via that superb route, the Kleintriftje ('Young') Grat. My companions were Eggler and Luchsinger of the 1956 Everest expedition, Fritz Ganssen, Band, Brasher, Hobhouse and Tyson. A few days later, Tyson, Hobhouse and I, with Mike Banks and two Marine corporals, made the direct finish of the S face of the Obergabelhorn. Towards the end of the meet Joy and I, with John Hobhouse, were involved in a dramatic rescue of another British 'rope' which was stranded overnight on the summit of the Alphubel. We climbed that mountain by its Rotgrat, and effected the rescue of our marooned compatriots just before a team of guides came up from Saas Fee, with Geiger circling in the mists above us.

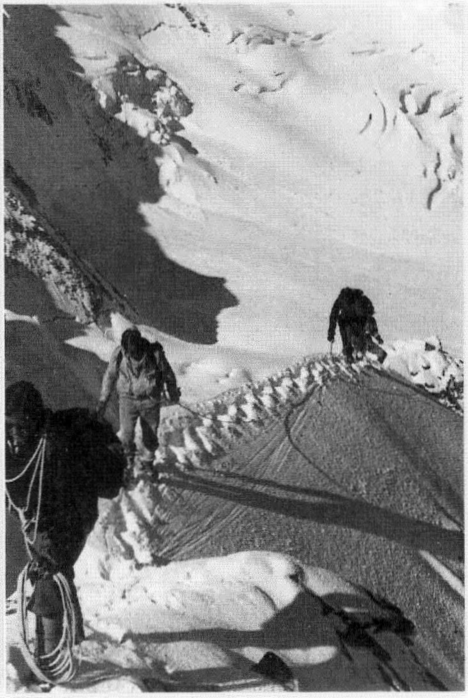
There had also been high drama on the Obergabelhorn. On the final pitches a local guide, Elias Julen, with a French client, whom we had met on the Breithorn, were stranded and *in extremis* on a slab beneath the final chimney. They were exceedingly fortunate to have a rope thrown down to them from the summit by another party which had just arrived there over the Wellenkuppe and E ridge. But perhaps the most enjoyable events during that eventful season were modest family affairs. With a few Alpine Club colleagues, I was able to introduce our daughter Susan to her first alpine climbs, on the Pointe de Zinal and the Untergabelhorn.

Among the many alpine seasons which I have enjoyed, I recall with the greatest delight the months spent in the Alps during the early part of the decade of the fifties. The good memories are not only of our climbs, our successes and failures, nor of the alarms which accompanied some of those excursions. At least as happy was the background: the environment and ambience in which we walked and climbed, uncrowded by hordes of tourists, undistracted by the noise of

traffic, undismayed by commercial development in the valleys, unaided by the ugly technology of the skiing industry. For myself, at the end of the 1940s, there was that sense of wonder in rediscovering a world to which I thought I had bidden farewell at the onset of the war.



52. *Pelvoux: Joy Hunt on the Col Temple-Ecrins. In the background the Arête de la Momie, 1950.* (John Hunt) (p 113)



53. *The Schalihorn summit ridge. From L: Joy Hunt, Basil Goodfellow and Frankie Mayo, 1951.* (John Hunt) (p 113)



54. *With Charles Warren below the Arbengrat on the Obergabelhorn, 1951.* (John Hunt) (p 113)



55. *Basil Goodfellow on the N ridge of the Weisshorn, 1951.* (John Hunt) (p 113)