

---

---

JERRY GORE

## Windmills in the Mind

(Plates 31A, 31B)

Alpinism is changing fast. An obvious statement, perhaps, as most of us are aware that classic routes like the North Face of the Eiger are now climbed solo in well under ten hours, and that standards must have risen dramatically if two men can climb a new line on K2 in pure alpine style where many large-scale expeditions have failed despite the use of fixed ropes, bottled oxygen and the choice of the easiest line on the mountain.

The question I would like to ask is: how truly in touch are we with real alpinism today? I would argue that on our protected and closeted island we find it difficult to comprehend what alpinists are doing amongst the world's Greater Ranges, even if we have the basic details in front of us. After talking to mountaineers up and down the country, as I do on a weekly basis, I have reached this sad but inescapable conclusion – sad because we used to lead the world in this game of climbing. The talent is there amongst the young and brave, but it seems to be far too narrowly centred on very small pieces of rock or ice, rather than on the massive unclimbed walls littered across the globe.

As a result of these thoughts, and in an attempt to inspire discussion and controversy, I have set out in this article my own thoughts on alpinism in the nineties by citing a few examples. I hope that these will give some indication of the motivation which lay behind my own attempt, with Andy Perkins, on The Shield in the Paine National Park, an account of which follows this introduction. But first a word on alpinism as I see it: I am differentiating here between pure alpinism and all the other associated games. I am not talking about traditional mountaineering, pure ice climbing, or even the siege game. No. Alpinism, to me, is very simple. It normally involves two people, total commitment, a fair proportion of very technical ice and rock, and involves starting at the bottom of the climb and going to the top in one continuous unsupported push.

An excellent example of modern alpinism is *The Grand Voyage*. This route lies on Great Trango Tower (6286m) in the central Karakoram and was climbed by John Middendorf and Xavier Bongard over 19 days in 1992. The route is graded VII/5.10/A4+. So what does all that mean? Grade VII indicates a long and committing climb. This route took well over two weeks of continuous climbing, all at altitudes in excess of 5000m, with every night spent in a hanging tent called a portaledge. 5.10 is the technical grade for the free rock-climbing part of the route, ie British E2, of

which there was only one pitch on this 1381m route. The greater part of the climb was made using artificial techniques on vertical or overhanging rock.

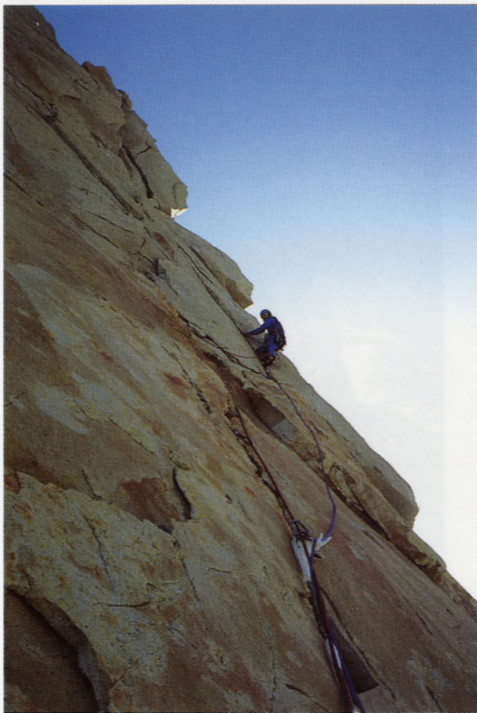
So what is the big deal about A4 when people were doing A5 in America way back in the 1970s? The answer is that this is New Wave grading and so, by most people's understanding, John and Xavier were doing old grade A6 at 6000m over many days through storms and snow. To give an example of what this standard of artificial climbing involves, New Wave A4 typically can result in a fall potential of up to 130ft. Despite all their problems, these climbers were also extremely ethical. For instance, Xavier, on one of the crux A4 pitches, despite numerous pieces of protection that were all marginal, only put in one tiny rivet (a small bolt designed to hold bodyweight only) in the entire 60m pitch. This was only to avoid a broken limb.

During the climb they encountered pitches of grade VI Scottish rotten ice and a four-day storm, but were entirely unsupported, with no helicopters, no porters and no pre-placed ropes. They started at the bottom and kept going.

Another example of modern alpinism was the attempt on the S face of Annapurna by Jean-Christophe Lafaille and the late Pierre Beghin. Basically they tried a very technical mixed route straight up the middle of the face, became storm bound after three days and decided to retreat. Beghin fell soon after initiating a series of abseils, leaving Lafaille still high on the mountain to make it back alone over many days of tortuous descent, with a broken arm and no equipment.

Though that particular expedition ended in tragedy, it is the concept adopted by this team that illustrates my point. Beghin was a 'super alpinist', able to climb steep ice solo at 8000m, fast and without oxygen. He was not a brilliant rock climber. So he asked Lafaille to partner him because Beghin reckoned he would come in very useful on the rocky bits of the route. In Britain Lafaille would be regarded as a fantastic rock climber. He has soloed without a rope up to French 8b (E8), succeeded in numerous indoor competitions while in the middle of his military service, developed whole sport crags single handed, and was responsible for *Patience* at the Roche des Arnauds, graded French 8c. This is still one of the hardest sport climbs in the world. These feats alone are inspirational. He also happens to be an astounding solo alpinist doing multiple new route *enchainements* by himself, with nothing to help him but his own body and mind. Combine all these abilities into one person, partner him to an equally gifted climber, and one can begin to realise what modern alpinism is all about.

So what sort of skills does one need to climb today's harder alpine routes? The first requirement is a leading grade of E5 6a on natural protection, and 7a/b on bolts. These are bare minimums and ideally one should be at home on both crack and face routes. Technical expertise up to grade V Scottish on both ice and mixed routes is essential, with a few East Coast VIs under your belt to ensure efficiency on steep rock with crampons.



*Left*

- 31A. The North Tower of Paine:  
Andy Perkins on pitch two.  
(Jerry Gore) (p58)

*Below*

- 31B. The Towers of Paine.  
(Jerry Gore) (p58)



Thirdly, knowledge of big-wall techniques and experience of Yosemite A3 nailing always pays dividends when aiding sections to maintain speed. Finally, you will need 100% commitment, combined with a high level of organisational ability. These are prerequisites.

So what about the routes? The following are just a few of my personal favourites. There are plenty more waiting to be done!

- 1 The Ghilini/Piola Directissima on the N face of the Eiger (1300m/ Abominable/A4/6b)
- 2 The W face of Gasherbrum IV (7980m) by R Schauer and V Kurtyka
- 3 The NW ridge of K2 (8611m) by C Profit and P Beghin
- 4 The NW face of Cerro Kishtwar (c6200m) by M Fowler and S Sustad (Scottish VI/A3/1000m) (See *'The One That Nearly Got Away'*, pages 48-53.)
- 5 The E face of Cerro Standhart (2800m), in Northern Patagonia: *Exocet VI* by J Bridwell, J Smith, G Smith
- 6 The E face of Aguja Poincenot (3036m), in Northern Patagonia, by D Anker and M Piola (600m/ED/6b+ obligatory)

On that note let's go to Patagonia for a complete rest and, by comparison, a real holiday! To climb among the Towers of Paine in Southern Patagonia had been a long cherished dream of mine ever since I attended an Alpine Club symposium on South America. I had been captivated by an old black and white film taken during one of the early flights over the range. In August 1992 I had still not managed a trip abroad, and the N ridge of The Shield (2400m) seemed to offer everything I wanted – a good alpine objective with a bias towards rock, a new route and one that might yield to a lightweight approach. All I needed was a partner.

Andy Perkins was an obvious choice. A seasoned campaigner with a predilection for the cold and wet stuff, Andy could be relied upon to stay focused through the appalling weather we anticipated. Practically every account I had ever read about Patagonia mentioned the hideous winds, but one quotation stuck in my mind. It was Toni Holdener's comment on the Swiss attempt of 1973/74 on Fitzroy's E pillar: 'During the subsequent retreat – which would have been impossible without fixed rope – everyone had to give his all to escape those elements of hell.' He was one of six, we were two, and we were not taking any fixed rope.

## 15 December

Breakthrough. After four days of carrying, digging, stashing kit and bitching about it, we made the 'Windmill' col and saw the ridge for the first time. Climbing alpine-style in Patagonia is rather like juggling with mercury – hazardous to your health and every bit as frustrating. It is a specialist's game with only a few taking part, and even fewer succeeding. All the other teams we met in the Paine were sieging the Towers with fixed ropes, heaps of ironmongery and a lot of vino. Most were at least four-man teams or larger.

An Argentine group operating on the dihedral to the right of the *South African route* on the Central Tower of Paine seemed to have a weekly change around, with an assorted team of South Africans, Argentines, and Chileans. While one unit was bashing away on the face, another would be off leading treks around the park to raise money so that they could maintain their assault on the wall. Theirs was a strange existence but it did mean they could spend most of their time at camp partying.

Not for us the easy life of wood huts and smoky fires. Like banished monks, we retreated to our Advanced Base: a large boulder perched under the Gothic vastness of The Shield's E face. Our route took its long, curving N ridge, elegantly describing the mountain's right-hand sky-line. The Shield was first climbed in 1968 by two Italians, M Curnis and M Dotti, from the Rio Frances side. That expedition encountered the usual hurricane-force winds and great technical difficulties on a route that required 1000m of fixed rope and 200 pitons.

Andy and I arrived at the col leading to the summit ridge armed only with a basic rack, fifteen pitons and two 8.2mm ropes. Up to this point we had climbed a 5.7 rock band just above Advanced Base, grade II snow and ice slopes to the approach gully, and then a series of interesting mixed pitches up to the col. These involved strenuous IV/V climbing, loose rock, waterfalls, A1 nailing and vertical snow. I felt like a mountaineer again.

It was so windy that when I heard it cracking like a whip above our heads it reminded me of the little explosions from a Chinese festival dragon. I considered attempting to climb technical rock in this sort of wind and shivered.

I remembered talking to Alan Kearney, the American Patagonian expert, in Yosemite a couple of years back. He had raved about the N ridge then, saying it would probably go. He is a great promoter of alpine-style climbing in the region, making the first true ascent of the S face of the Central Tower without recourse to fixed rope. He completed the ascent after four major attempts over two months and ended up spending two nights on the wall with only minimal clothing and food. His subsequent account of the climb was full of shredded rope, frozen and bleeding hands and the sheer savagery of being in a full-scale Patagonian storm with no place to hide.

Alan's story came back to me as Andy and I stood doubled up on the col, peering at the huge sweeping arch that formed The Shield's northern battlements. I clung hard to the rock, my fingers already beginning to freeze, and looked up at the serried ranks of granite towers that stood between us and the summit. It was late in the day and the weather was deteriorating – certainly no place for a couple of alpine rats!

'Rack your gear and let's piss off!' Andy yelled against the furore.

## 23 December

At 3am it was fairly clear and we decided to go for it. After seven days of gales and sleet huddled under a rock, it was good to get moving again. We were climbing by 4.15am, up the ropes of the first rock band, across

the snow and onto the ice that leads to the approach gully. Halfway up on jumars, covered in spindrift and sodden Pertex, the wind roared and the world seemed to be closing in on me. I went to clip my top jumar above the belay piton and suddenly I was falling. There was a jerk on my harness and I was stopped by the thin line linking my second jumar to the rope.

The wind held its breath as I hung motionless by a thin strip of tape. There was silence for a split second – just the drip, drip, drip of the melting icicle above me. My jumar system, invented by Geoff Hornby, had worked and I was still in the game. Cursing deeply at my own stupidity, I offered up a quick prayer and determined to be more careful next time. At the col the wind was so strong I couldn't hear Andy even when he was yelling in my ear. Dejected, we descended.

### **24 December**

Weather shit – lost at chess twice today. Christmas Day tomorrow and then it would be practically New Year. I thought of home, hot water, good food, clean sheets. Then I prepared the freeze-dried; another tin of tuna, the inevitable noodles all washed down by tea and the mandatory Mars bar. Four bars per person per day – our diet had a startling variety. I zipped into my bag and drifted off as the wind picked up and the snow started falling.

### **29 December**

At 3am the skies were clear, so we went back up to Windmill col. We arrived at 8am, to be blown flat by the winds. The weariness of defeat surrounded me as I accepted that the conditions were too bad to continue. The delicate face-climbing we anticipated above would simply be suicidal; so it was back to Advanced Base. Wandering along the glacier, I stopped under a large boulder and watched the falling snow as the wall shimmered and the sun's rays pierced the light cloud to pick out streaks in the meltwater. I trudged back to the tent to listen to Frank Zappa and crawl inside my protective shell.

Andy woke me at 4pm, very agitated. The vario was singing; the pressure was going up fast. Outside it looked clear but still windy. He was sure the weather – coming now from the south instead of the west – was getting better. We checked at 6pm and again at 8; the pressure was still going up. Axes were sharpened, food packed and spare clothing sorted and stowed. We lay back, but sleep came only fitfully.

### **30 December**

At 3am the alarm buzzed and I practically sprang to attention – old habits die hard. Outside the sky was clear and still. Brews, a packet of Alpen and I was out into the night, as a well-rehearsed ritual unfolded itself perhaps for the last time. I cleaned the pans. Andy donned his Buffalo suit and packed his sack. Ice tools attached, head torches secured firmly on helmets, we moved out into the darkness.



In four hours we were back at the col. Though cold, there was no wind. Plastics were swapped for rock shoes and Gore-Tex socks. I led off up the short, strenuous section onto the easy ground leading to the ridge proper. Despite our big rack and 60m ropes, we were quickly moving upwards on pitches that gradually became harder and steeper. Across slabs, up cracks and grooves, and we were doing the bastard in style. Rough granite onion layers, three-quarters peeled, hung above us like daggers as Andy laid siege to a blind crack off to the left. It was choked with ice and he had to clear it with his axe to make progress. He took a hanging belay near the top of the crack system.

Panting hard from bringing up the sack, I moved past and immersed myself in what proved to be the first crux. I tore my frozen hands jamming up the ice-filled cracks, my shoes now sodden and useless. I reached the roof and dithered for a few moments before stepping gingerly across to another system. It led through the overhang and onto easier ground.

The route continued tortuously to the Big Shelf, signalling the halfway stage. Andy led off on the second crux, bridging delicately up a rotten corner-cum-chimney. It emerged onto friable and loose flakes and he took an awkward stance on slabs. I raced off and found myself climbing cracks on the very edge of the ridge. I could look straight down the E face, a vertical drop of 2000ft. I quickly popped another Friend in.

I could see easier terrain above and after the 25th pitch we stood on the summit rubble anxiously looking at the weather. I paused for an instant, glancing across to the E face of the Fortress, reviewing the Yugoslav route carved out over a two month period of sustained aggression in 1990. The irony of this hard-won route to a Patagonian summit was reflected in its name: *One Minute of Wisdom*.

We started down. At 1am, exactly 22hrs after waking, we were back in the tent. *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, in places both dangerous and exciting, had been a long wandering journey set against a Spanish backdrop. On New Year's Day the weather was perfect and, as a bonus, we climbed the N ridge of the North Tower of Paine. Last year it took six Italians five weeks to climb this route. On the summit, it was so still I could have flown my paraglider back to Base Camp. The whole of the Patagonian ice cap was spread out before us and the Central and South Towers spiked the horizon like burnished spears painted on a blue canvas.

Perkins finished his fourth bottle of wine – and I was on my third. I switched off the movie as the drink took effect and dozed fitfully through a dream world filled with huge spires of rock torn apart by the explosive howl of violent winds: Patagonia – Land of Tempest. I was glad to be going home.

**Summary:** An account of the first ascent of *The Adventures of Don Quixote* (ED1/5.10/A2/28 pitches) on the N ridge of The Shield (2400m) in the Paine Group, Southern Patagonia by Jerry Gore and Andy Perkins on 30 December 1992.