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Valedictory Address

Read before the Alpine Club on 11 December 1998

The honorary secretary asked me a few months ago whether I had started preparing my valedictory address, adding that Tony Streather had started his just a few days after taking office. Indeed, Tony mentioned in his own valedictory address that he had read those of all his predecessors. I have now read most of them and what I find interesting is the way they reflect not just the state of the Club and the retiring president's interpretation of the state of mountaineering at that time, but also how the Club has responded to the way both mountaineering and on a broader level society itself have changed over the years. On many occasions in the last three years I have been thinking about what to say, usually in those moments when there's nothing else to do – perhaps sitting on a ledge while a climbing partner is taking a long long time to complete a pitch, or while wandering the Lakeland fells or walking round and part way up what was to prove a very elusive Tibetan peak this autumn.

I would like to start with a look at what I perceive is happening in the world of mountaineering and then go on to see how the Club and its members fit into this perspective. There certainly is a great deal of change, indeed controversy, in the way climbing is moving today. This, surely, reflects the huge social and technological changes that are affecting all of us, throughout the world, in our everyday lives. But first let's look at what we get out of climbing, because this surely is the foundation from which any understanding of what is happening on a wider front must start. In this respect I feel I must be subjective, for I can only really express what I personally get from climbing and you can judge how close this is to your own experience.

For me, and I suspect for most of us, it all started with wandering, as a child, in the hills and wild places here in the British Isles. I can remember being taken up the side of the Sour Milk Ghyl to Easedale Tarn in the Lake District when I must have been about seven, and then, some years later, a solitary walk across the Quantocks. It was then that another ingredient crept into the mix. There was a sense of discovery, exploration, adventure. And yet this was no wilderness – it was a gentle wooded heathland. But for me, on my own with only the vaguest idea of how to read a map, it *was* the unknown. This appreciation, indeed deep-seated love of natural beauty combined with a spirit of inquiry, was the driving force for an odyssey that has filled most of my life.

And then I discovered climbing. I was still at school, but many find climbing as adults. Tony Robinson, our honorary treasurer, was bitten with the bug only a few years ago when he was not that much younger than I am now. My first climb was *Dark Chimney* on Harrison Rocks. I think it's given 1b, but I immediately knew that I had found something that I loved doing. That initial enthusiasm has carried me through to the present day.

It all started with the joy of co-ordinating limbs, muscles and head to get up a stretch of rock; climbing is no different really from any other athletic activity. I was useless at ball games, lacked the precise co-ordination to be good at gymnastics, but happened to have it right for climbing. I started leading almost immediately, and this of course is where the core ingredient of climbing comes in – the heady spice of risk. Climbing is not about safety, it's about calculating risks, about playing a danger game, about putting, in the final analysis, one's life on the line. This can be taken to very different levels. There's a vast difference between the level of risk taken by a steady weekend rock climber and that taken by someone undertaking extreme routes on the highest peaks of the Himalaya, though the quality of the experience at each extreme can be just as satisfying to the individual.

And then there is the lure of discovery, not just that personal self-discovery which is always there, but of new routes on crags in Britain, in the Alps and in the further ranges. There is the fascination of walking up a valley or glacier where no one has ever trod before; of gazing up at a huge wall of rock or ice, working out a route up it and then making it happen; or of confronting the seemingly impossible and overcoming it by your wit, skill and determination.

There is the comradeship of shared danger, when your lives are literally in each other's hands. Shared experiences make for special friendships, pressured sometimes, even fractured by conflicting ambitions; and yet, even then, a special relationship remains.

More controversial, even unmentionable, is the drive of competition, of ego. Reading the words of some of my predecessors this is something that is frequently deplored, and yet I believe that an element of competition is in almost all of us. As with all these traits, it's a matter of degree and balance. The commendable inner drive to explore and venture on new ground is often accompanied by the desire to be first – first to reach the summit of Everest, to climb it without oxygen, to make the first ascent, or the first British ascent of the North Wall of the Eiger or to find a new route on a much climbed crag in our own isles.

I can remember an incident when Pete Crew and Baz Ingle, hot shots of the mid-sixties on the Welsh climbing scene, made a foray into the Lake District. On the Saturday night in the Old DG bar they met Allan Austin, uncrowned king of Lakeland, climbing at that time with his team. Each party suspected the other of being after the same route – a magnificent pillar in the centre of Esk Buttress. They were evasive about their plans, as we all tend to be in such circumstances, but Crew and Ingle got up the next

morning before dawn to snatch the *Central Pillar*, now one of the great Lakeland classics, while Austin had to console himself with *Black Sunday*, a line off to the side. That was definitely competition, but it was fun and, I think, healthy.

Competition and nationalism very easily become intertwined. It may be a cliché, but I love my country, even if I recognise its faults and would like to make changes. I have carried and been proud to carry our national flag to some summits. But I'm not climbing to make a 'nationalistic statement' or, for that matter, primarily for competitive reasons. I climb for the love of the climbing, the challenge of the unknown. At the same time, I must admit I do like winning.

I suspect we all share these motives, the ingredients of the climbing mix, but the proportions will vary considerably from one person to another and, for that matter, from one generation to another. The secret, I think, is to get a balance and, perhaps most important of all, to remember that climbing is a game. We do it, or anyway I do it, for fun, and even though at times the fun wears thin towards the end of a long grinding epic when you're soaked to the skin, have been without food for days and are very frightened, it is just those epics that we delight in remembering and even find the most to laugh about.

Although we are aware that the fun of a climb or expedition may end in tragedy – it's happened all too often to me – that awareness doesn't reduce one's grief at the loss of good friends; and yet in pursuing our venture, particularly at the extreme end of climbing, each one of us is stretching our experience to its limit, and the risks we court inevitably demand a high price. We need only count the number of climbing partners we have lost, or the number of narrow escapes we've had and survived more by luck than skill, to realise, perhaps unconsciously, that we accept death as a price we are prepared to pay for the satisfaction of the game we pursue.

The other factors I believe we need to understand, before we can try to make sense of what is happening in climbing today, are the unwritten, much-argued rules or ethics which we use to determine how we play our game. They all seem to centre around two conflicting needs: on the one hand, to enjoy the thrill of risk and the uncertainty of outcome that is central to climbing, and on the other, to reduce the risk by placing protection, in order to stay alive. The American climber Lito Tejada Flores wrote an excellent study of this divergence in his article 'Games Climbers Play'.

These factors are the nub of practically all ethical arguments, and their consideration will, I hope, help us to understand and perhaps even evaluate what is happening today. As each generation has pushed climbing standards, and the likelihood of falling off has become correspondingly greater, self-preservation has dictated an improvement in gear; in this country we have progressed from inserted chocks, to Whitworth nuts to ever more sophisticated wedges and camming devices. Yvon Chouinard, always a visionary, pushed this climbing ethic and developed his stoppers and hexes

in the States, but on the Continent, where the piton has had wide acceptance ever since high-standard technical climbing was introduced in the 1920s, the British style of protection has never really been adopted. Most classic routes have had their in situ pegs for years and I suspect we've all pulled on them – I know I have.

But I would like to start on home ground, for this is where most of us started and where we do most of our climbing. What we do on home crags we probably carry with us when we go further afield. The main development in recent years and the one that could have the most profound effect on the way we climb and treat the crags is sport climbing – the use of bolt protection rather than hand-inserted devices.

David Cox, in his valedictory address, very wisely advised in favour of 'looking around at' rather than 'pronouncing about' issues, the latter always tending to be a counter-productive exercise. Whilst broadly agreeing with this view, I believe that the use of bolts represents such a profound change in the way we climb, and one that makes such a permanent and obtrusive presence, that it's very difficult not to start 'pronouncing'. But let's first have a look around the subject. How did it start? At risk of being a little islander, I've got to say 'over there, across the Channel, on the Continent'. It went back to the late fifties with the big bolt ladders that were being put up in the Eastern Alps, not without protest from local climbers. Messner attacked their use in his superb polemic 'The Murder of the Impossible'.

As climbing standards increased, many of the old aid climbs were being climbed free to the point where the drive amongst top climbers, both in this country and on the Continent, was to climb everything 'free'. But climbers were also attracted to the big blank walls between the crack lines where there was no protection. Unless you were very bold or mildly suicidal, you wanted a bit of extra security and bolts were the obvious answer. The challenge became the difficulty of the individual moves, in which the risk element became irrelevant in pursuit of athletic excellence. Competition climbing is a natural development of this approach, giving protagonists a clearly-defined measure of their rating at that moment.

I'm disturbed by this approach on two counts. For a start it means that the climber can go almost anywhere, ignoring natural lines or what the rock offers. The climber is imposing himself on his environment rather than becoming attuned to that environment, accepting it as it is, evaluating the risks that he or she is prepared to take, and being prepared to leave that stretch of rock alone for someone else who might be bolder or better, or even to leave it blank, untouched forever.

The other factor is the removal of risk from the equation. It becomes merely an athletic exercise, an extension of the gymnasium and the artificial climbing wall, which most active climbers now use. These are great places to train or just have some fun on a wet winter's evening, but to enjoy the fullness of climbing you need to get outside. I believe it's only in so-called traditional climbing that you find the full richness of the experience.

And yet, whatever our personal feelings or preferences, sport climbing is here to stay, and in Britain we can see the accord that has been reached where certain crags, usually limestone or slate, often quarries, have been recognised as sport-climbing areas, whilst the traditional climbing crags – practically all our igneous rocks and the traditional limestone ones – have been declared bolt-free. I think this is a reasonable compromise, but it is also one where we have already seen pressure to extend bolt-protected routes onto new areas, as the existing ones are developed. This is a pressure which, almost inevitably, must increase.

It's not a matter of saying that one approach is better or more ethical or truer to tradition than the other, but of enabling people pursuing their sport to do so in a way that doesn't spoil it for others. From this point of view the future is in our hands. It's up to us to show a new generation of climbers that so-called traditional climbing is fun, and infinitely more satisfying and exciting over a long period of time than sport climbing. We must demonstrate that traditional climbing has a depth to it that embraces the beauty of the mountains and, through that, promotes a greater awareness of and care for the hills in which we enjoy our sport. I realise I'm doing a lot of pronouncing – but I can't resist it.

Going on into Europe and for that matter the States, the controversy over the use of bolts seems to have ended, with the exception of a few lone cries. Many, if not most, of the rock routes are bolt-protected and many have been retro-bolted even on crack lines where there is the possibility of natural protection. One can't help being saddened at the building of a hut on the Zmutt Ridge, with fixed ropes to make it easier for the guides to conduct their clients up the mountain. This is desecration of what must be one of the finest ridge routes in the Alps, put up by Mummery and Burgener all those years ago.

And then on to the further ranges, particularly the Himalaya. Not only have all the 8000-metre peaks long been climbed, but they have become like gigantic Mont Blancs with routes up almost every major feature. Everest even has a guide book – 36 routes are listed and graded. I must confess to being slightly miffed to see that our South West Face route was given only a grade of IV – but on reflection that's probably about right.

Just a few years ago almost all routes in the Himalaya were first ascents; there was so much to explore – there still is. Although most of the 7000-metre peaks have been climbed there are still dozens of unclimbed six-thousanders and hundreds of unclimbed ridges and faces, yet today the vast majority of expeditions are going for routes that have already been climbed. Thanks to the diligence of Liz Hawley, former Reuters correspondent, we have exact statistics of climbing in Nepal and on the Tibetan side of the watershed. Last spring there were altogether 87 expeditions, of which 31 went to Everest, 16 to Cho Oyu, all of them not only on existing routes but on the *voies normales*. There were only two attempts on unclimbed routes in the list, neither successful.

I haven't yet received Liz's list for the autumn but am delighted to be able to announce that our future president made a bold alpine-style first ascent of a very respectable peak just north of Kangchenjunga, at least bucking the trend. In some ways, though, this is not so surprising. The innovative climber making new routes has always been in a minority. Most of us prefer the certainty of an existing route with its guidebook description, and the Himalaya have come of that age where there are plenty of routes to go for. But there is more to it than that. It's the lure of the magic number 8000 metres. It's ironic that one of the greatest innovative climbers of all time, Reinhold Messner, should have given birth to the obsession by bagging all fourteen 8000-metre peaks.

It's the same trend surely that we have seen in sport climbing and its partner competitive climbing, a move away from exploration towards more easily measured and defined achievements. This in no way denigrates the effort, determination and mountaineering judgement needed to climb an eight-thousander. Several outstanding climbers have died in the attempt, but in every case, even where the protagonists have started climbing the peaks by new routes or in new ways, as did Messner, they have eventually felt obliged to revert to the easiest ways on existing routes up most of the mountains, just to get them climbed. This must become a gigantic treadmill.

It is certainly a strong motivation, for some of the finest climbers in the world have joined what is still a very small club – only five have completed the course. A year after Messner, Jerzy Kukuczka was successful, followed eight years later by Erhard Loretan from Switzerland, and in quick succession by Carlos Carsolio from Mexico and Krzysztof Wielicki, the outstanding Polish Himalayan winter climber. Our own member, Alan Hinkes, is well on the way to being the first Briton, with just four to go. But our leading climbers seem to prefer high-standard exploratory climbing and pushing limits to the extreme. This is something that I find both refreshing and reassuring for the future.

Then there is the growing popularity of guided climbing on the highest mountains. Most expeditions to Everest and Cho Oyu, in particular, are commercial. Concern about this trend has been expressed by many, but how different is it from the guided ascents of Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn where clients, often of very limited experience, are hauled to the top by the local guides? The scale and risks are undoubtedly greater; at up to \$60,000 a head the cost most certainly is.

But what of the environmental consequences of all this – the piles of rubbish and oxygen bottles on the South Col – dating back to 1953 it might be added? Most of us who have been there have been guilty – I was in '85. I feel guilty now, but I think today we are all becoming much more aware of the environment. The commercial expeditions claim they are hiring extra Sherpas to clear the South Col bit by bit. Everest Base Camp is undoubtedly much cleaner than it was a few years ago and Sola Khumbu as a whole has a rubbish disposal scheme organised by the Sherpas

themselves. They recognise that it is in their interests to have the region looking tidy and attractive, if only to keep their visitors happy and to entice them back.

And what of the effect of these numbers on the environment, particularly in popular areas like the Annapurna Circuit and the Sagarmatha National Park? The local people have certainly benefited on a material level. On a social level some traditional values have probably been eroded, but surely this is a process of change that is going on throughout the world. To me the heartening factor, particularly in Nepal, is the way the local people have developed their own tourist industry in their own style, while maintaining their own strongly individual sense of identity.

So how do we in the Alpine Club fit into all of this and what have we done in the last three years? On the climbing front the Club is certainly healthy with our members doing some impressive climbing in good style around the world – on the big walls of Baffin and Greenland, in Patagonia and the Himalaya. Equally important are the unsung climbs of our members in the Alps and further ranges. The Alpine meets have been well attended and the mini expeditions to the Caucasus have become increasingly adventurous; this summer the intrepid climbers were robbed at gunpoint on two separate occasions.

An outstanding achievement was the first ascent of the North Face of Changabang by Brendan Murphy, Andy Cave, Mick Fowler and Steven Sustad. Although Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma turned back, they had both done a tremendous amount to make the climb possible. It was a remarkable achievement in the finest tradition of exploratory Himalayan climbing and must be amongst the best routes yet climbed in the Greater Ranges. It was a cruel irony that Brendan lost his life on their way down the south side of Changabang, so very close to relative safety.

We also mourn the loss of Paul Nunn in 1996 on Haramosh II. He was one of the great characters of British climbing, a pivotal figure on the Sheffield scene who had put back so much into our sport.

This year we have also lost two distinguished former presidents in John Hunt and Charles Evans, who were of course the leaders of the two expeditions to make the first ascents of Everest and Kangchenjunga. Their unique contributions to the Club, to climbing and to society as a whole have been well aired in this chamber.

But what of the Club itself? Firstly, let me say what a delight it has been to be your President and to work with the committee that you have elected. Our meetings have been lively, fun and I think productive. I believe we are in good shape. Our membership stands at 1180, a slight increase over the three years. A demographic survey, carried out by our member John Blacker, showed the average age to be 54 and that we have a life expectancy six years more than the average elsewhere. The average age of new members is 38 and there are eleven men to every woman in the Club as a whole. We, as many committees before us, have agonised over where the Club is

going and have come to a similar conclusion to that arrived at by others in the past – that we are and should remain essentially a club of like-minded people with a shared love of the mountains and reasonable competence to go amongst them, thus maintaining our modest membership qualification.

I'm very much aware of how much I owe to my predecessors who steered the Club through the difficult times of the move from South Audley Street to Charlotte Road. In this respect John Hunt showed a special vision, saying in his valedictory address back in 1959: 'On this matter of premises, I would only express the hope that if – or rather, when – an opportunity occurs to obtain a social base more accommodating, more in sympathy with the times in which we live, we will seize it.' I believe we have found that place. We owe George Band, and everyone else involved at that time, a debt of gratitude for their inspired choice. The move to Charlotte Road has also put the Club's finances onto a very solid base, with the rent we are getting from the upper two floors and with the way the entire area is obviously going up in value.

The one piece of unfinished business that I should love to see completed is finding a way to enable the Himalayan Index, into which my predecessor, Mike Westmacott, and his team have put in so much invaluable work, to reach a wider audience. Back in 1986 Roger Chorley commented: 'The Himalayan Index is one way that the Club can fulfil its traditional role of providing a lead in the mountaineering world.' I couldn't agree more. With the internet we have the opportunity to offer to all who are seeking information about the Himalaya this invaluable work of reference. We should take that opportunity without worrying about recovering the financial investment we have put into it.

In conclusion I would like to say how delighted I am to hand over this office to Doug Scott. Not only is he a good friend and an outstanding climber who has been at the forefront of exploratory mountaineering for the last thirty years, but also he has put a great deal back into our sport and, perhaps even more important, has quietly carried out a great deal of charitable work, building schools, bridges and even a monastery in Nepal.

I feel immensely privileged to have been your president. Apart from anything else, it's been fun. Jack Longland, with typical impish humour, concluded his address by commenting: 'For myself I echo the voice of a more distinguished President, that he was prouder of being elected to that office than of 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.'

Well, Ken still hasn't reached such lofty heights though he gave me a ten minute sermon yesterday when I was consulting him about my own address.

I believe that as a club we're in good shape. I think our most important role is to continue to be a club which all of us who seek adventure in the Alps and greater ranges will want to be part of, irrespective of the tangible benefits it might offer us. Our club is a fellowship that is strong, through the roots we have with the beginnings of our sport and the way we look to the future. We share a love for the hills and everything they give us.