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## Scottish Winter 1999-2000

The 1999/2000 Scottish winter season was dominated by the ascents of three high standard mixed routes. The first winter ascents of *The Steeple* on the Shelter Stone, and Rolling Thunder and Mort on Lochnagar all demonstrated a leap in technical standards and are milestones in the evolution of Scottish winter climbing. In contrast to many top level mixed climbs on the Continent and in North America, where protection is pre-placed by abseiling the route beforehand, these advances were all achieved by preserving the Scottish ethic of attempting routes ground-up. To illustrate the skills, persistence and tactics required to succeed on today's cutting edge Scottish winter climbs, these three routes are described in detail below before highlighting a selection of noteworthy ascents in other areas. Route descriptions of all the routes described in this review can be found in the 2000 Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal.

### **The Steeple – The Ultimate Last Great Problem**

The season started with a bang in November when Alan Mullin and Steve Paget made the first winter ascent of *The Steeple* (IX,9) on the **Shelter Stone**. A winter ascent of *The Steeple* had been considered the ultimate last great Scottish winter climbing problem for over 20 years, but it was felt to be so futuristic that few people thought it a real possibility. The 250m route is graded E2 in summer and has seven pitches of sustained 5a and 5b climbing with one pitch of 5c. Clearly a winter ascent was not only going to involve very technical snowed-up rock climbing, it was also going to take a long time.

Having gained a good working knowledge of the cliff from two previous attempts over the last two seasons, Mullin and Paget calculated that an ascent would require at least 24 hours' climbing time. This would involve two bivouacs if the route were to be climbed in daylight. Clearly this was not an enticing prospect given the unpredictability of Scottish weather, so the pair decided the best tactic was to climb the route in a single push. Rather than lose two nights' sleep by starting very early in the morning, they deliberately chose to start in the middle of the day and climb through the night.

Alan Mullin set off up the first Steeple corner pitch at 1 pm on Saturday afternoon, and by the time Steve Paget had led the second corner pitch it was dark. They circumvented the summer 5c crux by following the slanting crack of *Postern* and the difficult *Bad Karma Variation* to *Winter Needle* which they had climbed the previous season. *The Steeple* layback cracks then led

to the foot of the main 40m Steeple Corner – a prominent feature of the route. The corner was climbed in two pitches and took nine hours. Two nuts were used for aid to start the second section of the corner, and by the time Paget had reached the good ledges at the top of the corner the pair had spent 15 hours climbing in darkness, and it was now becoming light. Unfortunately a warm front moved in early in the morning and the difficult final pitch was led in thawing conditions with bare walls and wet snow in the cracks. As planned they finished the route in just over 24 hours of climbing, and were back home that afternoon.

The overall statistics of the climb are impressive. The 250m route had three pitches graded 9, two of 8 and the remaining four graded 6 and 7. The route was given an overall grade of IX, 9 and Alan Mullin commented afterwards that it was equivalent to making ascents of four of the hardest Northern Corries test-pieces one after another. Without question it is the most sustained technical winter route climbed in Scotland to date.

### **Rolling Thunder - An Unprecedented Solo Ascent**

After *The Steeple* ascent a fierce debate raged about whether the Shelter Stone was in acceptable winter condition, but Mullin upped the ante a few weeks later by making an incredible on-sight solo first winter ascent of *Rolling Thunder* on **Lochnagar**. The rock climbs on the steep and vegetated overlapping slabs of the Tough-Brown Face are often wet and infrequently climbed. *Rolling Thunder*, a sustained four-pitch E1 5b between *Mort* and *Tough-Guy* was first climbed in the summer of 1982, and it is doubtful whether it has ever been repeated. The steep and vegetated nature of the cliff fascinated Mullin, and after a summer visit viewing the climbs from the below, he was convinced that *Rolling Thunder* was a winter possibility.

Mullin left the Loch Muick car park at 6am and broke trail through deep drifts for four hours to reach the North-East Corrie. Two other teams made it into the main coire that day, but they wisely chose to climb on the more accessible Central Buttress. The cliff was covered in fresh snow, piled high on ledges and the cracks were verglassed. Mullin back-roped the first 25m pitch, pulled up his 60m rope and then ran the next three pitches together, making a more direct version of the summer route in the process. It snowed so hard during the afternoon that *Parallel B* and *Raeburn's Gully* avalanched to either side of the Tough-Brown Face. He reached easy ground in a fierce storm, roped down in the dark and was back in his car driving home by 9pm.

The precarious nature of the climbing which involved long reaches for turf tufts and small moss clumps meant he took five falls. *Rolling Thunder* with the *Death by Misadventure Variation* was graded VIII, 8 and must be considered one of the most serious mixed routes in the country. Alan Mullin's ascent of *Rolling Thunder* was without precedent. For good reason, very few Scottish winter first ascents have been climbed solo. The most notable example is Tom Patey's *Crab Crawl* traverse across the cliffs of Creag

Meagaidh, and in a similar vein, Martin Moran traversed the three central Beinn Bhan coires in 1989. Both routes were outstanding achievements, but their length and Grade IV climbing meant they were logical solo undertakings. No one had ever climbed a Scottish grade VIII alone before, let alone make a solo first ascent of one.

### **Mort - A Challenge for the Next Generation?**

A month later, all eyes were once again on **Lochnagar** when Brian Davison, Andy Nisbet and Dave McGimpsey made the first winter ascent of *Mort* (IX, 9). The current SMC guide book to the cliff describes *Mort* as a challenge for the next generation, but it was the old guard in the shape of Davison and Nisbet who claimed the mountain's greatest winter prize.

*Mort*, which takes a prominent line through the centre of the damp and vegetated overlapping boiler-plate walls of the Tough-Brown Face, was first climbed in 1967 and is graded E1. Nowadays it sees no more than one or two ascents each summer and is thought to be at the upper end of its grade. As the most prominent line through the Tough-Brown Face it was an obvious, if futuristic winter challenge, and was first tried by Colin MacLean, Nisbet and Davison in January 1985. The date is significant as the only route of comparable difficulty at the time was *Guerdon Grooves* on Buachaille Etive Mor which had been climbed by Arthur Paul and Dave Cuthbertson the previous winter. MacLean led the first hard pitch, using two rest points above the big roof which is the summer crux, and reached the belay ledge after five hours. Nisbet and Davison were too cold to lead through, so MacLean continued in the lead but he reached a blank section about 15m from easy ground and retreated. Although they had failed, the attempt was an eye-opener and Nisbet and MacLean were quick to capitalise on their experience. Over the following weeks they made the first winter ascents of *Unicorn* in Glen Coe and *Winter Needle* on the Shelter Stone.

All three climbers returned to *Mort* during the following winters. Davison estimates that he visited Lochnagar 18 times with MacLean to try the route, but it was rarely in condition. In March 1992 Davison and Nisbet made an attempt which ended after Davison took a 20m fall over the crux roof, which he had just free climbed, landing at Nisbet's feet. As the number of people climbing high standard mixed routes has risen over recent years, it became clear that the route was not going to hold out forever. In December, just after his *Rolling Thunder* solo, Alan Mullin made a spirited attempt with Guy Robertson. Climbing on sight in difficult powder conditions, Mullin regained MacLean's 1985 highpoint, but was again stopped by the blank nature of the rock.

Just after New Year, Lochnagar was in superb condition. Most importantly for an ascent of *Mort*, there was a thin smear of ice above the blank section which had stopped MacLean and Mullin on their previous attempts. Early on Saturday 15 January, Nisbet climbed up to the first stance and

Davison led through on the critical second pitch. Onlookers were highly impressed as Davison pulled swiftly through the roof, and stepped left around a rib into a vertical groove. The only protection on this section was a warthog and a poor tied-off blade peg and Davison reached the belay ledge after two hours in the lead. On the third pitch, Nisbet took a couple of 5m falls at the blank section, before handing the lead to Davison who managed to place a poor peg and reach a small turf placement and the ice smear above. The ice was thin and almost vertical, but after 15m Davison reached the belay ledge. Nisbet and McGimpsey came up in the dark, and it was then a formality for Nisbet to lead the final pitch to easy ground.

Nisbet rated *Mort* as the most difficult Scottish winter route he has ever done. This is a significant assessment as Nisbet has been at the forefront of the sport for 20 years and has made first ascents of a quarter of Scotland's Grade V routes.

### The Cairngorms

It was the rapid succession of snow storms and freeze-thaws over the New Year period that brought Lochnagar into exceptional condition in January. Guy Robertson and Tim Rankin were first to appreciate the quality of the ice on the mountain when they made an ascent of *Pinnacle Grooves* just after New Year. Normally this route is a VII, 7 icy mixed climb, but it had been transformed into a continuous runnel of ice and was a straightforward grade V. A few days later Pete Benson and Finlay Bennet made the second ascent of *Trail of Tears* (VII, 8) on the Tough-Brown Face. This was one of the most sought-after repeats on the mountain and had seen a number of near misses over the last two seasons. Benson and Bennet found it in superb icy condition and continued up the Tough-Brown Ridge to the plateau. Nearby on the Douglas-Gibson Face of Shadow Buttress B, Simon Richardson and Chris Cartwright climbed the steep open corner to the left of *Eclipse*. This had been attempted by Aberdeen climbers in summer and winter since the 1950s, but the compact nature of the rock and total lack of protection had deterred all comers. On this occasion the exceptional conditions allowed *The Dark Side of the Moon* (VI, 6) to be climbed on thin ice all the way.

Another freeze-thaw cycle brought the cliff into even finer condition the following weekend. Whilst Davison, Nisbet and McGimpsey were climbing *Mort*, Benson and Bennet returned to the Tough-Brown Face to attempt the second ascent of *Diedre of Sorrows* (VIII, 8). First climbed by Dougie Dinwoodie and Andy Nisbet after a number of attempts in 1986, this route was considered to be the hardest mixed route in the country. The pair made good progress until the crux third pitch when Benson took a fall onto an in-place peg. This pulled out and he fell onto Bennet cutting his neck and breaking his helmet. Benson re-climbed to his highpoint and replaced the peg, but unsure of where the route went above, they decided to retreat.

The following day Andy Cave and Dave Hesleden started up the route, somewhat intrigued to see that a party had been on it the day before. As Cave led the third pitch, he clipped Benson's new peg but was surprised to see that there was no sign of further progress. Another couple of moves and Cave was on easier ground that led to the stance. On the final pitch, Hesleden was unable to find sufficient ice to climb the original finish, so he climbed the final 5b pitch of the summer route *Dirge* to reach easier ground. This new Direct Finish turned out to be the hardest pitch on the climb.

In the Northern Cairngorms Alasdair Coull and Sam Chinnery made the second complete ascent of *Winter Needle* (VIII, 8) on the Shelter Stone. *Winter Needle* was first climbed in winter by Andy Nisbet and Colin MacLean over two days in February 1985. They avoided the first two slab pitches by climbing the big left-facing corner left of *Clach Dhian Chimney*, and climbed the *Steeple* Layback Cracks to bypass the Crack for Thin Fingers pitch. Last season Alan Mullin and Steve Paget climbed *Bad Karma* (IX, 8), a series of variations on the Nisbet-MacLean line, in a single 17-hour push. Coull and Chinnery took the 1985 winter start and then followed the summer line in its entirety. They had a bivouac on the big ledge below the Steeple Corner and finished the route the next day. No aid was used and the overall grade was thought to be VIII, 8. Coull and Chinnery's superb ascent is unlikely to be the final chapter in the *Winter Needle* story however, as several teams now consider a one-day ascent of their line to be the next logical step.

### Central Highlands

In Glen Coe, Malcolm Bass and Simon Yearsley added the imposing *Dark Mass* (VI, 6) to Church Door Buttress on **Bidean**. This starts up the spur of *West Face Route*, crosses the traverse of *West Chimney Route*, continues up the imposing cracked wall above and swings round the right edge of the buttress in a sensational position to finish up a series of corners. Big news on **Buachaille Etive Mor** was the second complete ascent of *Raven's Edge* (VIII, 7) by Alasdair Coull and Sam Chinnery. This exposed line of hanging grooves and corners on the right edge of Raven's Gully was first climbed in winter by Brian Sprunt and Rick Allen in 1984. One of the highlights of the climb, the open-book corner on the third pitch, was avoided on the right, and Rab Anderson and Rob Milne climbed the complete route in March 1996. Chinnery and Coull made a smooth ascent and confirmed the route as one of the finest winter expeditions in Glen Coe.

On **Ben Nevis**, Simon Richardson and Chris Cartwright took advantage of a cold and snowy spell in mid-February to make the first winter ascent of *The Crack* (VIII, 8). This difficult eleven-pitch route takes the imposing series of offwidth cracks and chimneys up the vertical wall to the right of *The Shroud* and continues up the crest of Raeburn's and Baird's Buttress to reach the summit of Carn Dearg. The North Face of **Aonach Beag** was

particularly icy and at times there were queues to tick the modern classics of *King's Ransom* (VI, 6) and *Royal Pardon* (VI, 6). Roger Webb brought the cliff bang up to date by climbing the steep buttress to the left of *Royal Pardon* with Martin Hind. *Mean Streak* (VII, 6) takes a very steep and narrow ice runnel to gain easier ground and the final section of *King's Ransom*.

On **Creag Meagaidh** there was an early repeat of *Postman Pat* (VII, 7) on Great Buttress by Dave McGimpsey and Paul Thorburn. A few days later Andy Clarke and Nick Kekus climbed the shallow ice and mixed groove system to the left. *Born Slippy* (VII, 6) is the most significant addition to the mountain since *Postman Pat* was climbed by Mal Duff and Andy Perkins in February 1991.

### Northern Highlands

The finest addition to the Northern Highlands was the first ascent of *Genesis* (VII, 7) on **Beinn Bhan** by Andy Cave and Dave Hesleden. This prominent eight-pitch line which had been eyed by several North-West regulars in recent years, takes the overhanging fault to the left of *Die Riesenwand* on the huge Giant's Wall of Coire nan Fhamhair. The route avoids the lower overhanging section of the fault by traversing first left, then back right along exposed narrow turf ledges to reach the main chimney line. A steep hanging icicle was passed on the right, and a through-route was taken below a huge chockstone to gain a series of steep bulges which led to the end of the major difficulties on the fifth pitch. The climb weaves through some unlikely ground and is a worthy companion to the other three-star adventures on the wall such as *Gully of the Gods* and *Great Overhanging Gully*.

Nearby on **Beinn Eighe**, Guy Robertson and Jason Currie made the second ascent of *Blood, Sweat and Frozen Tears* (VII, 8). This was Robertson's third attempt on the route and its reputation as one of the finest technical mixed routes in the North-West was confirmed. Andy Nisbet and Dave McGimpsey made several good additions to An Teallach, but their best route was *Haystack* (VI, 7) which climbs the impressive left wall of *Hayfork Gully*. Nisbet had discovered this very steep 170m face several years ago but thought it impossible. Each time he returned it looked a little more hopeful, and in early January the pair plucked up the courage to try it. They were delighted to find it was possible to link together an unlikely line of zigzag ramps and hidden chimneys up the centre of the wall.

It would be a mistake to think that Scottish winter pioneering is all about climbing the hardest routes. Of the 150 new routes added during the season, the majority were in the middle grades. A good example of the adventurous nature of the climbing on offer was the enterprising visit by Roger Webb and Martin Hind to **A'Mhaighdean** near Carnmore where they climbed *A Ridge Too Far* (IV, 4) to the right of *Pillar Buttress*. Winter climbing in the Great Wilderness is not something to be undertaken lightly – after topping out on the most remote Munro in Scotland, the pair were then faced with a ten-hour walk back to their car.