
History

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Confessions of a Parvenu

When I was growing up as a climber on the gritstone outcrops of the north of England and in the Lake District during the late 1940s and early 1950s, most of my companions and myself viewed the Alpine Club through jaundiced eyes. Our working-class backgrounds were far removed from the mainly public school and Oxbridge types who then dominated South Audley Street. We were inconsistent about this, for among our heroes were Eric Shipton and H W Tilman and we read and digested *Upon That Mountain* by the former whom we decided must be a good egg – for us the highest accolade. Other good eggs included John Steinbeck for writing *Cannery Row* and Alastair Borthwick for the wonderful *Always A Little Further*. But I never dreamt that one day I might become a player, albeit a minor one, mixing with the movers and shakers of this venerable institution which was, in essence, an ‘upper house’ typically stuffed with break-your-fingers, hatchet-wielding, devastatingly erudite and articulate old gentlemen. Many of them were political masterminds who earned a gilded living in parliament or at the bar, and if they put the knife into you when they felt you had become too tiresome, their breeding and good manners ensured that they would always try to give you a decent burial.

In 1961, returning from my first expedition to the Himalaya, I was ‘persuaded’ by Ian McNaught-Davis and Chris Bonington to become Secretary of the Alpine Climbing Group. This was to be my entrée into the field of climbing bureaucracy. However, this was a minor feature in the ACG where the emphasis was always on action. Committee meetings were always held late at night at a pub in a climbing area, fuelled by copious amounts of ale; and if you had not climbed an extreme that day you were made to feel very inadequate by the rest of the committee, who invariably had. You dared not miss a meeting in case the criteria governing membership was changed in your absence, for the ACG had in those days ‘active members’, ‘retired members’ and ‘deceased members’. Like the Papacy, you were in for life and even beyond the grave. To stay on the active list you had to be as keen as mustard, and many hours of argument ensued as to how this should be interpreted. If a committee member missed a season and did not climb a *grande course* or two a year, he was in real danger, if he failed to attend a committee meeting, of finding himself demoted to the retired list. Thankfully, even the hardest of our hard-liners would not have placed anyone on the deceased list without some concrete evidence of their demise.

Shortly after I became Secretary, Wilf Noyce became President of the ACG and John Emery the Honorary Treasurer. Both were Oxbridge and

also members of the AC. Wilf was killed the following year, along with Robin Smith, in the Pamirs and John the year after on the Weisshorn. The deceased member list of the ACG unfortunately bore witness to the high risk nature of our sport. To say I liked both of them would be an understatement, and John in particular made an abiding impression on me with his humility, gentleness and unfailing good humour. Despite the severe frostbite injuries he had suffered in 1957 during the epic retreat from Haramosh, memorably described by Ralph Barker in *The Last Blue Mountain*, he continued to climb to high standards. Although ACG committee colleagues like 'Bonehead' (Sir Chris Bonington) and 'Mac' (Ian McNaught-Davis) later became pillars of the climbing establishment, in those now far-off days they were – like myself – numbered among the enemies at the gates.

The ACG committee of that era organised a regular programme of meets, started a bulletin and encouraged the younger generation of alpinists to join, which they did in some numbers. For those still building their experience, a further category was introduced for 'aspirant members'. We tried to make the ACG as inclusive as possible and were keen to involve the tartan tigers of Edinburgh – Robin Smith, Dougal Haston and the great Jimmy Marshall – at our clan gatherings. I knew Dougal well by this time, Robin less so, mainly from a storm-thwarted attempt on the South Face of the Fou in 1960 when four of us, Joe Brown, Smith, Haston and myself, didn't get very far on this 'last great problem'. But on the strength of our association I sent Robin an application form to join the ACG. For some reason this irked him, and he sent it back covered with obscenities, as well as accusing me of 'talking bullshit'. I then sent him a long narrow piece of paper headed 'A Suitable Paper for Writing to a Narrow-minded Scotsman' which, in its turn, was also covered in expletives, including a couple in Gaelic gleaned via my mother's family. This tickled Robin's sense of humour, and he then outsmarted me by immediately signing up.

It was during our struggles to produce the ACG journal, faced with editing, raising the necessary finance and managing its distribution, that we felt the need of a sugar daddy. Also, there was the lack of English language guidebooks to the Alps, for most ACG members could not read French, German or Italian and many of us had epics as a consequence. We also had difficulties in getting adequate insurance for mountaineering in the Alps and Greater Ranges and were unable to gain access to Alpine huts owing to the absence of a reciprocal rights agreement with the European clubs. Something had to be done, and discreet soundings were taken among the mandarins of South Audley Street. I was surprised by the immediate, positive and helpful response emanating from that quarter, particularly from the Officers. However, both sides had their 'immoderates' and I received a critical letter from one of ours who opposed any type of merger noting that: 'The English upper classes have only managed to maintain their privileged position by embracing into their midst anything or anyone which threatens them.'

I think in the end what brought the AC and the ACG together were the difficulties surrounding the production of English guidebooks to the Alps, for in order to improve on the situation, both sides had to learn to work with one another. Ted Wrangham had managed a first-class production for the ACG when, with the help of other ACG members, he had edited *Selected Climbs to the Mont Blanc Range* (Allen & Unwin, 1957). But a hiatus occurred until Wilf Noyce became guidebook editor for the AC and then, of course, he turned to the ACG for authors and illustrators. In 1961 John Neill edited a guidebook to the Pennine Alps, but after that Noyce's death caused a further hold-up until Ted Wrangham took over as series editor. First off the press after this was a Dolomite book in 1963, edited by Pete Crew, followed by John Brailsford's classic Dauphiné volume. These selected guides were published by the AC, although the compilers were mainly ACG members. Crew was the bulletin editor of that period and Brailsford followed on from me as the Secretary. British mountaineers owe Noyce and Wrangham and these three editors a debt of gratitude for this initiative that has led on to the present range of more comprehensive Alpine guidebooks.

Pete Crew was in my experience the most meteoric figure in recent climbing history. He came from Elsecar, near Barnsley, and he was like myself solidly working class. He won a scholarship to Oxbridge but walked out before the end of his first year and after that concentrated on climbing. He was a whirlwind of action, making his mark in North Wales, the Lakes and in the Alps, as well as in the guidebook and mountain literature fields. For one so young he had an amazing knowledge of climbs and climbing history, but on occasion he was inclined to impatience, being keen to get things done. Perhaps because of this he had a reputation for bluntness. In the terrible winter of 1962-1963 I used to meet him on Wednesday afternoons – me bunking off from my work – to go climbing on limestone in the Peak and afterwards we would work on the bulletin and other ACG projects. He was not the best rock climber I have been with, but no one in that era had more determination or push. One Wednesday, after climbing, he invited me to visit his new enterprise. With another ACG member, Peter Hutchinson, he had set up a company manufacturing down equipment. They were working in a chicken hut at Broadbottom, near Hyde. On the day of my visit it was freezing, but they didn't have any heating at all. There were just the two of them involved, stuffing down, making up duvets and sleeping bags, and the feathers were everywhere, sticking to the walls, floor and ceiling of the hut. As Crew gave me a demonstration of how to make a duvet, Hutchinson, in his fingerless gloves, serenaded us on a violin. I came away convinced that I had just seen the most eccentric enterprise of my life, and though Crew dropped out soon afterwards, the company turned into Mountain Equipment and was soon manufacturing the most highly-desired down equipment then available.

Later Crew returned to academia where his talent soon made a mark, and although he continued to climb it was not with the same intensity.

At our last meeting he was leading a colleague up *Wrinkle*, a classic VDiff on Carreg Wastad, a climb that twenty years ago would have been too boring to contemplate. He seemed relaxed, laughing and joking, apparently no longer the restless spirit he had been when young. It was obvious from his conversation that he was not interested any more in taking part in the administration of climbing or in any of the ethical debates of the day. His place in climbing history is assured from the many outstanding routes he pioneered in Wales and the Lakes.

In 1964 I met some of the personalities then involved with the Alpine Club including the late T S Blakeney, then secretary of the Mount Everest Foundation. I was organising an expedition to Gauri Sankar and despite his formidable reputation, I found him helpful and totally supportive. It began to dawn on me that most of these old chaps in the AC were not 'agin us' as some of us had believed, and in fact the majority wanted us to succeed in our endeavours. And I began to appreciate just how fortunate we were to have the support of a body like the MEF, and how crucial a role the AC played within that organisation. In 1965 I moved to live in Scotland, to be succeeded by John Brailsford as the ACG's Secretary.

Later, John with Terry Sullivan and John Alexander started a series of meetings with Emlyn Jones and Anthony Rawlinson representing the AC, and after some difficult horse-trading the deed was done, and the ACG merged with the Alpine Club in 1967 on a five-year trial basis. This was approved by both sets of members and the marriage proved to be bliss, and thus a permanent union was sealed in 1972. I remember meeting Anthony Rawlinson in the winter of 1967 and enquiring how difficult the negotiations had been for their side. 'Your chap Brailsford is a real hard-bargainer,' he said, 'we could do with more like him in the Treasury.' I told him: 'They're all like that from Sheffield.' Certain of my friends were critical of these actions, including Don Whillans and Tom Patey, but both were eventually won over by the promise of the benefit to British climbing which accrued from the merger. The AC gained from an influx of young, dynamic mountaineers, while the ACG was provided with the administrative support it so badly needed.

In the winter of 1965 I climbed with Tom Patey on several occasions, most memorably in Applecross and around Ullapool. The evenings were filled with music, Patey playing his squeeze-box and me plonking away on my tenor banjo. During one of these sessions at Ullapool, Tom began work, with minor contributions from me, on the 'Alpine Club Song'. His lyrics are now the stuff of legend and doubtless will become, sooner or later, the stuff of a PhD thesis. By three in the morning the deed was done. 'With three cheers for the old AC' ringing out just as a bottle of Glenmorangie was finished. But we both agreed that the original version was too disrespectful – and possibly libellous – to be published. This was kept under lock and key until last year when I presented it to the present AC Secretary

Glyn Hughes. He is, I believe, keeping it in a safe place, and anyone doubting the authenticity of this story could I am sure ask to see the document. The manuscript is written in Tom's own spidery handwriting on notepaper from his surgery. Tom reworked the original parody into the more diplomatic version that appeared in his posthumous collection of writings.

Lecturing to the Alpine Club has always been a formidable task and in the 1950s and 1960s you were faced with row upon row of legendary figures, and thus there was a pressure placed on the speaker which I hadn't experienced before. I had done a lecture at Preston Guildhall in front of an audience of two thousand just before addressing the AC, but the tension I experienced beforehand resulted in my worst performance ever. This took place during the winter of 1966 when Eric Shipton was AC President. Before my talk I was invited to attend a gathering of the Alpine Dining Club in the Red Lion. This took place in an upstairs room and I sat next to Eric. The gathering that night was the *crème de la crème*, with perhaps the top twenty grandees of the Club present: Somervell, Goodfellow, Busk and so forth, dripping with knighthoods, CBEs and OBEs.

My talk that evening was based on an expedition and journey made from Mexico City to climb in Yosemite. This latter part of my trip intrigued Shipton, and as he primed me with alcohol he pumped me for details and stories. I should have refused the drink for I have a tendency to incoherence under its influence. I began to feel very exposed in such heavyweight company, and wished I was wearing my flat cap and had my faithful whippet on a leash seated at my feet to comfort me. Shipton was a fascinating conversationalist, even though he spoke slowly and quietly, and talked to me in a friendly and open manner.

Once back at South Audley Street I realised I was drunk, and dreaded the fate that awaited me. Before I started, Shipton as President had to make the usual announcements, including to my surprise the longstanding AC ritual of announcing the deaths of members that had occurred since the last meeting. He invited anyone present to speak of their memories of the deceased. In 1974 the same thing happened to Kurt Diemberger, as he was waiting to start his lecture 'Summits and Secrets'. I had taken him to the Club that night and he turned and whispered to me: '*Zis is the most macabre thing I haf ever heard!*' In 1966, there was a hushed silence after Shipton's plea, but no one spoke until finally an octogenarian seated in a middle row was helped to his feet. In a high, reedy voice he declared: 'I never climbed with old Bunty Smith, but my brother did, and he said he was a bounder!' And then he sat down. The muffled 'tut-tuts' were audible around the room. It was obvious that though one might not like all one's fellow-members of the AC, good form demanded that one should only speak badly about them while they were still alive and able to defend themselves.

My lecture was terrible, the room was revolving and the only thing that stopped me falling over was the lectern, to which I clung as though it was a

jug. Slides appeared on the screen and I couldn't remember where they were. Alpamayo became 'a mountain' and El Capitan 'a rock face', my words blurted out staccato. No doubt this reinforced the impression that Yorkshire climbers were monosyllabic and held no finer feelings. My situation was not helped by some fat old gent in the front row wearing grey spats, who fell asleep ten minutes into my talk and began snoring loudly. My lecture became a battle to make myself heard, and I was helplessly relieved when the last transparency arrived. I learned my lesson that night and before every lecture I've given since, I've made sure I remained sober.

I was with Tom Patey one winter's evening towards the end of the 1960s when he lectured to the Club. He felt he needed a chaperone, someone who knew the form, and so I was invited to accompany him, our rendezvous being on Ben Nevis where he was climbing with Joe Brown and I with friends from the Edinburgh Squirrels, McKeith, Knight and Bathgate. Then we headed south in Tom's Skoda with me at the wheel, determined to do a rock route on the way. Chris Bonington was then living close to nature, in a wonderful old cottage in Eskdale, so after a quick climb on a small roadside crag, we decided to visit him. Wendy, Chris's wife, the Joan Baez of the Lakes, was ill and that night was her folk club evening in Workington. No problem. The travelling minstrels volunteered to help and Tom and I stood in for Wendy with some success, or at least Patey did, playing his accordion, so much so that we were late the next day setting forth for London. West Cumberland hospitality is of the best and we ended up back at a member's house, singing and playing the night away. Reaching London in the rush hour, Tom insisted on changing into his doctor's grey suit while he was driving. His shirt got tangled over his head and we narrowly missed a shiny new BMW as it merged with our lane of traffic.

Arriving at the AC we rang the doorbell. The Club's formidable housekeeper, the indomitable Mrs Lewis answered the door. She could have doubled for Big Daddy and sported a beard which many alpinists might have envied. 'What do you want?' she demanded. 'To come in?' Tom replied with some surprise. 'Are you members?' she rasped. 'Yes we are,' I insisted. The lady moved closer and then peered at us with deep suspicion. 'We've had a lot of your sort around here recently, claiming to be members, trying to get in,' she told us. 'You can't be members, you're too young.' And with that, she slammed the huge front door in our faces. 'What an amazing woman,' Tom declared, lost in admiration, before we slunk off into the Audley Arms from where we were rescued later that evening by Anthony Rawlinson.

I have a confession to make about the lecture that night given by Tom, talking about his recent new routes in the Mont Blanc range. This was illustrated in part by transparencies Tom had borrowed from his friends that he felt looked like his new climbs, simply because he didn't have many slides of his own. To illustrate a new route on the Plan he used some of my pictures taken in the *dièdre* on the North Face of the Peigne, just projected

back to front. Nobody in the audience noticed, or if they did they were too polite to say anything.

In 1968 I was invited to join the AC committee. The President was Charles Evans who had succeeded Eric Shipton. With my naïve reforming zeal I soon ran into difficulties. I suggested boldly that we sell the lease on South Audley Street and move the Club to Manchester. I also suggested that the Annual Dinner should be held in informal dress in a climbing area and that we should let suitably qualified women join the Club. I was politely but firmly fobbed off, yet invited at the end of the meeting to tea the next day with Howard Somervell. He took me to a café in the Shepherd's Market and we talked for hours. I had read his book *After Everest* as an adolescent, and I was in awe of this great man. After two expeditions to Everest in the 1920s he had forsaken a secure middle-class existence as a surgeon in Britain to live in southern India, where he spent a lifetime working among its poor. He was known at the time as the 'Schweitzer of India'. The summer before we met, after climbing in the Indian Himalaya, I had journeyed south through the subcontinent to Sri Lanka while carrying out a fourteen-week study tour. I understood a little of what Somervell's work might have entailed in setting up and working at mission hospitals in the 1920s.

'Take it a step at a time,' he advised me. 'You'll get nowhere by charging in like an elephant. Reform in an organisation like the AC takes time. Support what you believe are good and necessary reforms but leave the initiatives and presentation to the President and the Officers.' As it turned out, this proved good advice. After all, I was only a parvenu. I feel I must point out that Charles Evans was sympathetic to moves such as the need to change the AC's single-sex constitution. So too was Colin Taylor, and more surprisingly to me Fred Pigott, then a Vice-President. Fred never failed to amaze me. When Mo Anthoine's application for membership came before the committee, his Alpine record of ascents was outstanding but some reservation was expressed by one of our number about his being a bit of a loose cannon. This obviously annoyed Fred who turned to me and demanded: 'You know him Gray, is he a good chap?' I gulped. 'Oh yes,' I stuttered. 'If he's a good chap, let's have him, and Mr President, please move on!' Pigott only rarely spoke and you never knew what he was thinking, but you would not have picked an argument with him. And so Mo was in, and we moved on.

Colin Taylor was a progressive figure, ably complemented by his wife Jane. They were subsequently to translate Gaston Rébuffat's *The Mont Blanc Massif. The Hundred Finest Routes*. Colin also became the bulletin editor of the ACG. During this period I organised several ACG/AC meets. One, at the Bob Downes Hut in the Peak District, was made memorable by Jane's singing, in her broad Geordie accent, of 'The Lambton Worm'. ('*Whisht! lads, haad yor gobs, / Aa'll tell ye aall an aaful story, / Whisht! lads, haad yor gobs, / An' Aal tell ye 'bout the worm.*') I was amazed at how good a singer she was. Tom Patey and Eric Beard, our usual entertainers, were upstaged.

Colin's death on the Obergabelhorn in 1974 was a tragic loss for British climbing. He held everybody's ear, and was trusted and liked by all. Later reforms might have been achieved sooner if he had not died prematurely.

Heeding Somervell's advice, I decided to concentrate on practical initiatives and offered to organise a joint AC/ACG symposium in Manchester, highlighting cutting-edge developments in the Alps, Andes and the Himalaya. This was held on a mid-week evening at the Holdsworth Hall and the highlight of the event was a very young speaker, Alan Rouse, whose talk, entitled 'Two's a Crowd', extolling the challenge of Alpine solo climbing, brought a resounding cheer from the 400-plus audience. This was partly because he appeared on stage with one leg heavily plastered from an injury sustained while soloing the previous weekend.

I was also able to indulge my enthusiasm for what Ken Wilson, then editing *Mountain*, dubbed a 'fondness for extra-mural education', by including an art and photographic exhibition in conjunction with the conference. One of the paintings by a well-known Welsh activist – a fine acrylic, depicting rock boots, entitled 'Jesus Christ' – made headlines when an excitable young reporter from one of the tabloids accused the artist of committing blasphemy. After the meeting I organised a reception at a hotel near Piccadilly, with beer and sandwiches laid on for the speakers, helpers and the AC/ACG officers present. Fred Pigott, AC Vice-President, was major-domo and made a speech of thanks to all those who had taken part. I had made the booking arrangements on the telephone and had never been near the hotel before that evening. I was mortified to discover it was a centre for prostitution. The bars were full of young and not so young ladies of the night. Stuttering, I began to apologise to Fred for my *faux pas*, but he stopped with me a wink. 'Don't worry Dennis. You'll have a job to embarrass me. I didn't grow up in a bloody seminary, you know!' I had been rather flummoxed by Fred before that moment, but from then on, despite our age difference, he and I became good friends.

After a spell abroad and then becoming involved professionally with the BMC as its first ever paid officer, I was invited back onto the AC committee in 1973. By then David Cox was President and Mike Baker the active hard-working Secretary. Change was in the air and attempts were underway to alter the Club's single-sex constitution. I was surprised to learn that this reform was being opposed by some high-profile members, including one of my own heroes, Bill Tilman. At the first attempt to push through this change the reformers were outgunned, partly because they needed a two-thirds majority of those present and voting to succeed.

In 1974 Jack Longland followed David as President and it was obvious that he intended to make this reform a major feature of his term of office. He was one of the most skilled climbing politicians of his era, as we found out at the BMC during the mountain training dispute. He was a determined operator once the die was cast. Jack always liked to work by gathering

around him a group of like-minded supporters and then, when the action started, getting them to put the boot in while he appeared to be above the pettiness of the fray. I should hasten to add that I believe his record showed him to be a reforming and progressive figure and a force for good. Thus I was flattered but surprised to be summoned by him one evening to discuss future tactics over 'the women in membership of the AC' issue at the Audley Arms. I was under threat of dire consequences if information about this slipped out.

I arrived at the appointed hour to find Anthony Rawlinson, David Cox and Jack waiting in the bar. Longland was in an aggressive mood and dismissed the opposition as a crowd of 'misogynists', but then he turned for advice to Rawlinson who was by then one of the most senior civil servants in the country. With clinical good sense, Tony summed up how best he thought we should proceed: 'Put forward the motion for change, unanimously backed up by the committee, and at the meeting invite heavyweights like Evans, Hunt and David to speak in support of the proposal.' Afterwards, we committee members were required to go out and lobby members. It was crucial to our cause to make sure that our supporters turn out in strength, which was hardly a problem for me since I knew that nobody in the ACG was opposed to having women members in the Alpine Club.

The evening in question, in May 1974, was one of those historic occasions that are part of the theatre of being a member of the Alpine Club. Before a room packed to its limits, there was a sudden expectant hush as the President and the officers appeared through a side door, making an impressive entrance. Jack Longland then addressed the meeting and spoke of how the committee felt unanimously that there was a need to reform the Club by changing the constitution to allow women into membership. Mike Baker, the Hon Secretary, then read out the motion detailing the necessary alteration to the rules to achieve this, previously circulated in advance.

After the announcement there was a collective drawing of breath, then a pause, after which a real ding-dong battle started, with those for and against weighing into the debate. Tilman, in particular, spoke with humour, and he had everyone laughing out loud, and although I felt he was misguided, after his interjection I better understood his point of view. Ken Wilson was at his committed best and attempted to make everyone feel that unless they supported the motion the end of the world was nigh.

In the end, after the heavyweights had finished with their counter-punching, a vote was taken and this time around it was no contest. The pro lobby won hands down with a comfortable majority. At last, after more than a century, women could join the Alpine Club. Despite this long-planned victory, Longland was worried that a schism might develop, and later alerted the committee to the news that Tilman was threatening to resign over the issue. All of us viewed Bill with great respect, and even for climbing personalities of Jack's stature he was a legendary figure. There was only

one thing to be done and that was 'to offer him an honorary membership'. Thankfully, Tilman graciously accepted the olive branch and the matter was thus settled in a way that resulted in no broken bones.

There have been many changes in the subsequent twenty-five years, including the move to the new headquarters and the reorganisation of the Library, perhaps the best of its kind in the world. Alan Blackshaw ably began the modernisation of the *Alpine Journal* and there has been a diminution of the formality at some of the Club's functions. The membership has become more socially inclusive, mirroring society in general, bringing together Lords, Ladies and labourers. It is a regret to me that I took no part in these latter developments, being otherwise engaged with BMC affairs, and then afterwards travelling abroad to work and play but I do have the fondest memories of my own involvement. To have met so many important personalities is a debt I cannot repay. Perhaps I should finish by quoting the words of Tom Patey, the best advice I can give to any future *parvenu*: 'So let's all join the Alpine Club, the Alpine Club, the Alpine Club / Let's all join the Alpine Club, the jolly old AC!'