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Scottish Winters 2004-2005 & 2005-2006

Five climbs stand out from the last two winter seasons – a technical test piece in the Northern Corries, a bolt-protected climb in the Southern Highlands, a major addition to Pinnacle Buttress on Creag Meagaidh, a stylish and very fast repeat on the Shelter Stone and the first winter ascent of a long sought-after line in the far north-west. These climbs are strikingly different in style, and highlight the variety of climbing styles in the increasingly popular sport of Scottish winter climbing.

Dave Macleod's winter ascent of *The Hurting* in Coire an t-Sneachda in February 2005 was something special. This 35m-high crack line slices through the prominent steep triangular wall on the right side of Fiacail Buttress and was first climbed in 1991 as a summer E4 6a. The winter ascent was graded a hefty XI,11, making it by far the most difficult winter pitch ever led in Scotland. MacLeod's lead was brilliant, and the resulting route is highly technical and very bold. In rock climbing terms think E9 or E10.

After inspecting the route on abseil, Dave almost flashed the route on his first attempt, but fell off three moves from the top. Scott Muir then top roped the climb, and pointed out to Dave that he had gone the wrong way at the top. Dave returned three days later to settle the score. It was a cold, windy day and recent heavy snow meant the cracks were verglassed. Dave abseiled down to see where Scott had gone at the top, chopped the verglas out of the crucial gear placements and then led the route. Dave later said the climb was like taking the cruxes of *Happy Tyroleans*, *The Demon*, *The Duel* and *Logical Progression* (considered by many to be Scotland's hardest technical winter routes), making them harder and stacking them on top of each other and then adding groundfall potential. He also suggested that his route may be the 'hardest single-pitch traditional mixed route in the world'.

With his ascents of *The Cathedral* (X,11) last season and now *The Hurting*, Dave has created another facet of Scottish Winter that previously didn't exist. Many climbers will continue to pursue the mountaineering approach, and derive great pleasure from making their ascents ground up and on sight, whilst others will now be drawn to shorter and more difficult climbs that require some degree of pre-inspection for success. A key element to this new style is that the routes do not depend on pre-placed gear and the bold and serious element that is synonymous with Scottish winter climbing is preserved.

Whilst Dave Macleod's ascent of *The Hurting* attracted universal praise, the creation of Scotland's first bolt-protected winter sports route earlier in the season created a storm of controversy. *Crossroads* (M6) was added to the Upper Tier on Beinn Udlaidh in the Southern Highlands in December 2004, when it was equipped and then led by Scott Muir. From a traditional standpoint, placing bolts to protect a Scottish winter climb is the ultimate sin, and the route brought howls of protest.

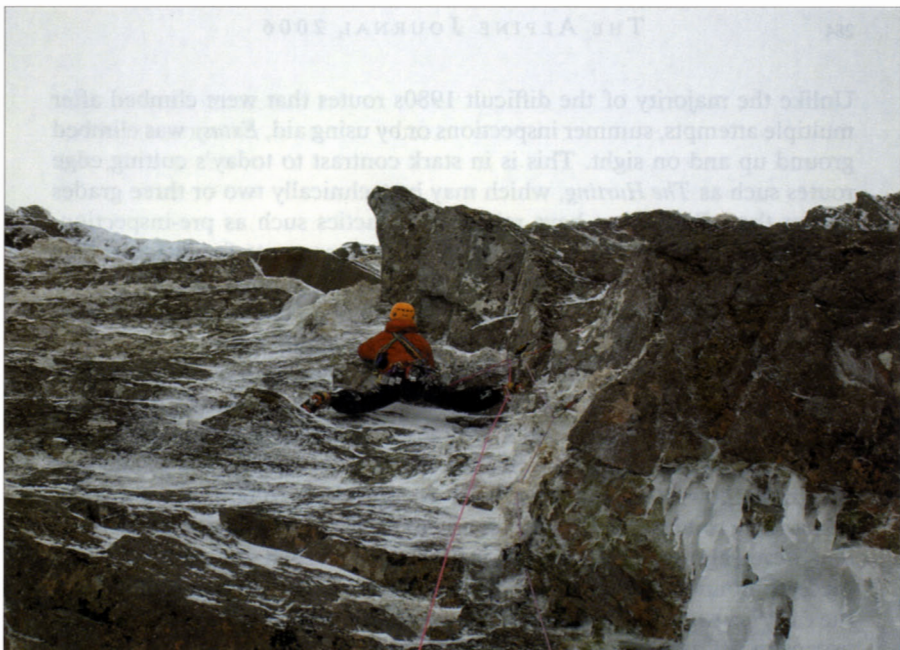
In other parts of the world bolts are often used to protect mixed routes, but in Scotland there has always been a strong desire to maximise the adventure and uncertainty when climbing on our relatively small crags. As a result, Scottish winter climbers tend to have excellent on-sight mountaineering skills, whilst the technical difficulty of our hardest climbs are several notches easier than the top-end mixed and dry tool climbs in North America and on the Continent. Scott, who has extensive experience of climbing Continental mixed routes, argues that for Scottish climbing to catch up we need to start developing bolt-protected sports-style winter routes.

Scott Muir is a man of conviction and showed great courage in going against established tradition by placing bolts in Beinn Udlaidh. From a diversity perspective it seems perfectly reasonable to create bolt-protected winter routes for those that want to climb them, but there are a number of important issues that need to be taken into account. Firstly there are the arguments about damage to the environment and stealing opportunities from future generations, but the greatest concern is that bolts will erode the on-sight ethic that many believe to be inherent to Scottish winter climbing.

The future of *Crossroads* then lay with other climbers. If the route became popular and attracted repeat ascents it would have paved the way for other bolt-protected winter routes throughout the Highlands. Alternatively, if the bolts were removed and not replaced, the climb would cease to exist, and would be remembered as an interesting diversion in the long and varied history of Scottish climbing. In the event, the bolts were removed later that summer. No other bolt-protected routes have been developed since, and the traditional Scottish ethic of placing gear as you go has been preserved, for the time being at least.

The third stand-out route was climbed in early March 2005 during the International Winter Meet. These meets are held every other year at Glenmore Lodge and are jointly hosted by the BMC and MC of S. Last year more than 40 guests from 25 different countries were hosted by 30 British climbers and the event coincided with the finest winter climbing conditions of the season. Dozens of excellent routes were climbed during the meet, but the clear stand-out route was the first ascent of *Extasy* (VIII, 8) on Creag Meagaidh by Dave Hesleden and Bruno Sourzac from France. This put to bed one of Scotland's last great problems – the huge 300m unclimbed wall between *Smith's Gully* and *The Fly*.

Dave had tried this line 11 years earlier, but had ground to a halt after the first pitch. Since then the climb had been talked about by several activists,



151. Bruno Sourzac on the first ascent of *Extasy* (VIII, 8), Creag Meagaidh.
(Dave Hesleden)

with some saying that the blank nature of the rock meant that it would not be possible to protect without using bolts. Hesleden and Sourzac had no intention of using bolts, of course, and it was no surprise to hear that the seven-pitch climb was very steep on typically bold Meagaidh mixed terrain, and that five of the seven pitches merited a technical grade of 8. These statistics alone suggest that *Extasy* is the most difficult and sustained Scottish first ascent ever to be climbed on sight, and in my view is arguably the most important new route since Brian Davison's ascent of *Mort* on Lochnagar five years before. Hesleden and Sourzac are no strangers to top end mixed climbing. Dave is renowned for his skill climbing thin ice and Bruno is one of the world's finest mountaineers. As chief instructor at ENSA in Chamonix, he is the guide that trains the guides, and three days before, on the first day of the meet, he had demonstrated his consummate skill by leading *Cornucopia* (VII, 9) as his first ever Scottish winter route.

My enthusiasm for this ascent contrasts strongly with other commentators who maintain that standards of traditionally climbed winter routes have not advanced since the 1980s, and *Extasy* has been singled out for particular criticism. The challenge is that the technical difficulties on *Extasy* were well within the capabilities of many climbers operating in the 1980s and the climb was simply overlooked at the time. With five pitches of sustained grade 8 with only token protection, I don't believe this claim is true; but it wasn't the technical difficulty of *Extasy* that caught the popular imagination.

Unlike the majority of the difficult 1980s routes that were climbed after multiple attempts, summer inspections or by using aid, *Extasy* was climbed ground up and on sight. This is in stark contrast to today's cutting edge routes such as *The Hurting*, which may be technically two or three grades harder than *Extasy*, but have relied upon tactics such as pre-inspection, abseiling the route and cleaning out gear placements for success. The majority of winter climbers can relate to routes climbed in perfect style such as *Extasy*, because this is exactly how they go climbing – walk up to the bottom of the crag, get the gear out and climb the route.

New routes are often used as the gauge for progress in mountaineering, however sometimes second ascents are made in such outstanding style that they take on special significance. Guy Robertson and Pete Benson's repeat of *The Steeple* (IX, 9) on the Shelter Stone Crag was such a climb, and illustrates how standards have also advanced on long and technically demanding routes. The first winter ascent of *The Steeple* fell to Alan Mullin and Steve Paget in a 24-hour push in November 1999. It was an outstanding piece of mountaineering but the climb was marred by two points of aid and the early season nature of the ascent was severely criticised. A clean second ascent in full winter conditions therefore stood out as one of the great prizes of Scottish winter climbing. After a series of blizzards in early March 2006 the high Cairngorms crags were draped in fresh snow, which prompted Robertson and Benson to have a look.

'Conditions were generally superb,' Guy told me. 'There was good snow-ice in places and the turf was like toffee. There was lots of snow and every crack, niche and crevice was utterly bloated with the stuff. Overall it felt very wintry.' Robertson and Benson completed the route in an astonishing 12 hours and finished just as light was fading. They started up the gully and 'fine corner' of the original line of *Postern*, then went right to the Terrace and up the summer crux of *Needle*. They continued up *The Steeple* 'layback cracks', climbed the big *Steeple Corner* in a single pitch and finished up the '5a wall cracks'. The 250m-long route had two pitches each of 7, 8 and 9 and the *Steeple Corner* was led in a single 45m pitch by Benson. The 5a wall cracks provided the second crux and the only flaw to the ascent was when Robertson dangled momentarily from an axe leash round his neck when his right tool ripped whilst he was pulling onto the slab above the final crack. Fortunately the left tool held. 'What a feeling,' Guy enthused, 'locked off in the final corner, the last gear out of sight, pummelling desperately at a foot and a half of rime ice, the wind howling like a Banshee in my face and 1000ft of air snapping at my feet! I was completely blown away by this route, and I doubt I'll experience the like again. The length, difficulty, variety and majesty of the big Shelter Stone routes are simply unparalleled!'

There are many new route possibilities in the Northern Highlands, but a winter ascent of *Pobble*, a summer VS on Lord Reay's Seat on Foinaven, was a clear target. The 160m-high route takes a series of chimneys up the centre of the crag, and had been eyed up by several winter teams over the

years. Foinaven lies in the remote far north and does not hold winter conditions well, but it can be a very difficult mountain to reach when the roads are covered in snow. Malcolm Bass and Simon Yearsley had tried the route in November 2004 but had found mounds of graupel below the crag with a totally black buttress above. 'This time the forecast proved too much of a mid-week temptation,' Simon explained. 'Conditions were predicted to be ideal with heavy snow fall, then continuous snow showers during the day to top up the snow cover on the crag which is east-facing and quickly stripped by the morning sun.'

After an epic drive, involving blocked roads and disintegrating snow chains, they left the car at 5.30am, cycled along the approach track and then used snow shoes for the ascent to the crag. They started climbing by 10am, reached the summit at 9pm and finally made it back to the road by 3.30am after 22 hours on the move. 'The route packs a real punch,' Simon explained, 'with a superb mix of strenuous yet helpful chimneys, and technical delicate slabs, finishing on the very summit of Lord Reay's Seat.' Overall the route came in at a sustained VII, 7, with one pitch of technical 6 and five pitches of technical 7. In common with other Yearsley-Bass ascents, this route was the result of imaginative planning and dogged persistence, and the style of their ascent drew many favourable comments from a cross-section of Scottish winter activists. It just goes to show that it's not always cutting edge technical ascents that provide the greatest inspiration.