
Alps



116. Simon Pierce, *Gran Paradiso, cloud passing over*, 2006, watercolour,
51 x 67.5cm

DAVE WYNNE-JONES

4000m

Climbing The Highest Mountains of The Alps

At the outset I must make a distinction between climbing the '4000m peaks' and climbing the highest mountains of the Alps. There is a curious list of eighty-two '4000m peaks' produced by the Club 4000 based on a UIAA source but with a suggestion that the expanded list may rise to 120 or more. Many of these are not mountains. Some, such as the Aiguilles de Diable on Mont Blanc du Tacul, are no more than gendarmes on a ridge. Others like the Grande Rocheuse or Aiguille de Jardin on the Jardin Ridge of the Aiguille Verte could be classified as subsidiary tops by a Munroist, but the more far-fetched like Mont Brouillard or Pic Luigi Amedeo are truly hard to find on the bulk of Mont Blanc upon which they feature as insignificant excrescences. When I walked past the Balmenhorn I had decided that certain '4000m peaks' were unworthy of the name. The Diable and Jardin Ridges are fine routes in their own right and do not need any spurious claim to 4000m peak status. With all due respect to Karl Blodig and others, there is a quality of obsession that can blind one to the realities of climbing mountains. Indeed, if Blodig were alive today he would probably be agonising over the fact that his total only reached 76. I chose not to let that happen. Instead I found myself climbing with companions who had adopted the list of fifty-two 4000m independent mountains compiled by Robin Collomb. The irony is that I never set out to do any such thing.

My first 4000m mountain was Mont Blanc, often the case, I believe: go to Chamonix often enough and the biggest beast on the block becomes an inevitable target. In 1981, fit and acclimatised after three weeks of climbing, three of us halved the guidebook time from the Goûter refuge to the summit, at least in part because we were travelling so light we had to move fast just to keep warm. Freezing for hours on the summit, waiting for dawn, had little attraction; neither did forcing our way back against the queues of later climbers. On impulse we headed off down indistinct snow slopes on what we believed to be the traverse to the Aiguille du Midi. It wasn't, and all three of us very nearly disappeared into the biggest hidden crevasse I have ever seen before we got back on track. After that, we didn't have an appetite for Mont Maudit or Mont Blanc du Tacul. Our final summit of that trip was also 4000m but chosen only because it had been seen to dominate the Vallée Blanche from most of the routes we had previously climbed. The Dent du Géant turned out to be the only Alpine route I have done encased in a duvet jacket and our hands still froze to the fixed ropes – ethics don't survive when survival is at stake. These were not auspicious beginnings, but I wasn't aware of having made a beginning at all.



117. Dent de Géant – ‘turned out be the only Alpine route I have done encased in a duvet jacket’. (*Dave Wynne-Jones*)

The following year found me bivouacking on the Moine ridge of the Aiguille Verte by a complete error of judgement, while in 1983 an ill-fated excursion to the Ecrins included a traverse of the Barre des Ecrins before loose rock and poor snow conditions sent us scuttling back to Chamonix. For the rest of the decade, despite repeated visits to Chamonix, the nearest I came to another 4000m summit was in 1986 when Rick Ayres and I finished the Frontier ridge of Mont Maudit by traversing off to descend to the Vallée Blanche without ever reaching the summit. No, 4000m peaks were not really on the agenda, not only because of my various climbing partners’ priorities but also because of my own focus on routes in general, rather than peaks, and Rébuffat’s 100 best routes in particular.

All that changed in 1990. I’d been climbing with Denis Mitchell and we both had a yen for pastures new. His ex-wife, the much-married Marian, Elmes as she was then, Parsons as she is now, was a fellow member of the Chester Mountaineering Club who had recently joined the Alpine Club. It was she who encouraged us to attend an AC meet based in Randa. Mountaineering around Zermatt is virtually impossible without climbing 4000m mountains; the place is stiff with them and our first season included the Zinalrothorn, Alphubel-Täschhorn-Dom traverse, and Bishorn-Weisshorn traverse. When Denis went home I teamed up with Charlie Kenwright for the Ober Gabelhorn and Dave Penlington for the Fletschhorn-Lagginhorn traverse. These were all cracking routes and dispelled any lingering doubts I might have had about these big mountains being boring snow plods. No doubt, the voie normale on the Lagginhorn is a tedious loose slog in ascent, so why do it when the fine ridges of the Fletschhorn-Lagginhorn traverse are there for the taking?

The following year the AC meet was again in Randa. Now a member, I was teamed up with Dick Murton for the Lenzspitze – Nadelhorn traverse, even though I'd passed out on reaching the Mischabel hut the afternoon before with what must have been a mixture of altitude and heat exhaustion. This was followed by the Dent Blanche via the loose cliffs of the infrequently climbed Wandflue, then the Dent d'Hérens when steep, delicate ice-climbing on the ascent of the north-west face was followed by a race back down through moving séracs to regain the relative safety of the Tiefmattengletscher. After Dick went back to work, unsettled weather set in so I joined Mike Pinney and Jeff Harris for an ascent of the Lauteraarhorn following a marathon walk-in from the Grimsel Pass. Mike had correctly read the local weather patterns to find a fine option.

One of the advantages of the AC meets was the fertility of ideas growing amongst the group as to alternatives when conditions were less than ideal. Another was the sense of others looking out for you. I can recall several tense evenings as the shadows lengthened with still no sign of an expected team's return, yet no real disaster until Rick Eastwood's death in 2007.

Of course any visit to Zermatt is overshadowed by the presence of the Matterhorn but I had no interest in joining the queues on the Hörnli: at least one AC team had taken 20 hours on the route! That was before Mike Pinney approached me with a cunning plan. This involved taking two days to traverse over the Theodule Pass, descend below the south face of the Matterhorn, then back up around the Tête du Lion to access the Carrel bivouac hut, climb the Italian ridge and traverse the mountain back to Zermatt.

Rising for the climb, we were disappointed to find a lightning storm lighting up the darkness over Monte Rosa and heading in our direction. We delayed for a day but with minimal supplies were forced to scrounge stale bread and discarded scraps that sparsely littered the shelves of the hut. Later that day the weather cleared up enough for us to scout the route as far as the crest of the ridge. It was very different from the guidebook description so was time well spent. Returning, we found Daphne Pritchard and Dick Sykes had arrived. Dick thoughtfully demolished half a kilo of cheese, later ensuring that not a soul in the hut got any sleep as he shared his terrifying dreams with us. That night Mike and I were first out of the hut and, despite someone stealing my head-torch, managed a rapid ascent of the superb Italian ridge. I particularly remember leaning way out backwards to grasp the icy rungs of the precariously placed Echelle Jordan. We didn't linger on the summit as the crowds were already forming characteristic bottlenecks on the Hörnli. In descent however, it was possible to take alternative lines with the advantage of height to identify them and we skipped around the bouchons to reach the Hörnli hut in just seven hours from the Carrel.

That was Mike's last route of the season but I was taking full advantage of the long summer break that teaching affords. Another advantage of the AC meets at that time was the involvement of families that guaranteed

social support for climbing couples and an exciting extended family for the children. I had brought my family out with me so, with time to do the reading for the terms ahead on rest days, there was nothing to draw me home. I was also realising that long traverses were not only very enjoyable but didn't half total up some summits. I joined Bob Elmes and Mike Pearson for the Nadelgrat traverse from the Dürrenhorn to the Nadelhorn, and on the descent recovered a pair of gaiters from the guardian at the Mischabel hut that I'd left there weeks before: he opened the store door on a roomful of abandoned kit and told me to find them.

Mike and Bob then became enthusiastic about the Rochefort-Grandes Jorasses traverse, so we all adjourned to Chamonix. Unfortunately, after traversing the Rochefort arête over the Dôme to the Aiguille de Rochefort, the weather closed in and we were left with no choice but to reverse the route to the Torino hut whereupon the weather promptly cleared up. With a logic only mountaineers can aspire to, we descended to the valley by moonlight and spent much of the next day asleep. Unfortunately that moonlight had worked an unexpected effect on at least one of the traverse addicts who hatched the lunatic plan of traversing from the Aiguille du Midi over Mont Blanc, the Aiguille de Bionnassay and the Dômes de Miage by the light of the full moon that same night.

As the sun set, we left the ice cave on the Midi arête. Crossing towards Mont Blanc du Tacul, we found the snow reassuringly crunchy. Impatient with the tug of the rope, I was tempted to solo the route. Tyndall writes of the delights of 'going alone' and what was a little more lunacy in the mixture? We agreed to wait for each other at the Vallot hut. Toiling up the initial slopes of Mont Blanc du Tacul I regretted leaving my ski pole behind, then suddenly there was a ski pole at the side of the track. It's impossible to regard such things as anything less than good omens, though I was soon to wonder about that as I ran across the barely wedged ice blocks that bridged a giant crevasse.

My head-torch was only necessary when the way led into shadows, as Mont Blanc du Tacul, then Mont Maudit were gained. Reaching the summit of Mont Blanc itself, I had enough in reserve to make the enjoyable scramble out to Mont Blanc de Courmayeur for the views down into a moonlit Val Veni, before descending the Bosses ridge. There, stepping carefully along the narrow crest, I still found moments to pause and gaze at the silvered ridges and cloud-filled valleys spreading like ripples outwards over the map of Europe while distant head-torches found their way out of the Refuge les Grands Mulets far below.

At the Vallot hut the fug and squalor was something of a shock after the cold purity of moonlight, but I duly waited, warming up, until Mike and Bob arrived. We decided it was worth going on over the Bionnassay to the Dômes de Miage but I'd had enough of the hut so left while they were still resting. The notorious east arête of the Bionnassay was as thin as its reputation suggests, but I confidently tackled it à cheval until a sudden sense of foreboding stopped me in mid-shuffle. Carefully leaning out, I

118.

Denis Mitchell on the
summit ridge of the
Aiguille Blanche de
Peuterey.

(Dave Wynne-Jones)



became aware that the arête that I was cheerfully straddling was holed right through at several points. I inched gingerly back to safe ground, climbed back up to the Dôme du Goûter and joined Mike and Bob to descend the voie normale – end of season!

Having skied for years, in 1990 I took my first hesitant steps, or rather turns, ski-touring, and realised that making ascents on ski would be one way of removing the more obstinately glacial of these mountains from the catalogue of drudgery. Not only do you move a lot faster with the kick-glide of the ski ascent, but routes that took hours to ascend can be descended in a matter of minutes on ski, with a great deal more fun to be had on the way.

Thus, in 1992, began a series of Easter ski-mountaineering trips that accelerated my tally of summits. On the first, bad weather in the Oberland drove our small team round to Saas Fee where Denis and I climbed the Weissmies, mostly on ski, in blowing spindrift and arctic temperatures. Switching to the Britannia hut, we climbed the Strahlhorn and Allalinhorn entirely on ski and skied to the shoulder of the Rimpfischhorn for the short climb up a couloir and rib to the summit. Then of course there were the challenges of speed and control in the descents. Leslie Stephen is prob-



119.

Jeff Harris tackling the mixed summit ridge of the Gross Fiescherhorn in ski-touring boots. (*Dave Wynne-Jones*)

ably the first to rhapsodise about the Alps in winter but this trip fairly confirmed my impressions that these mountains look just stunning in their winter raiment without the black ice and stonefall that can turn them ugly in summer.

That said, there was plenty of snow when Denis and I arrived at the AC meet in Chamonix that summer and the Whymper couloir on the Aiguille Verte was our first route of the season, closely followed by the north-west face of the Aiguille de Bion-

nassay. Climbing such routes one is aware of little beyond the pool of light cast by the head-torch for all those hours of climbing in the dark. It is the descents that offer moments when the mountains suddenly impress upon us their magnificent otherness, at least on the Bionnassay where the scary arête had become a broad thoroughfare linking the mountain to the Dôme de Goûter. On the Aiguille Verte it was a more hurried affair as we raced the sun to descend the south-facing Whymper couloir without avalanche.

Thinking to capitalise on the conditions, Denis was keen to go for the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey. Crossing the lower Frêney glacier from the Monzino hut, I had my first inkling of the seriousness of what we were taking on. If you can tiptoe in big boots and crampons, we did, with bated breath, through the poised séracs. The Schneider couloir proved nearly as worrying, with no snow but rounded gritty ledges sloping in all the wrong directions. Beyond the Brèche des Dames Anglaises, the flanks of the ridge were a frustratingly loose collection of rubble ribs; sustained unpleasantness until we gained the rocky summit ridge above Pointe Gugliermina. On reaching snow we plumbed the depths again, postholing to all of the summits, just in case we missed the highest, then down to the Col de Peuterey. The plan had been to complete the Peuterey arête but the Grand Pilier d'Angle ahead looked to be just black ice, raked with stonefall. Temperatures had obviously risen. We made a game attempt to get up it but the bombardment of rock and ice turned us around. It was too late in the

day to set out on the abseils down the Rochers Gruber so we bivouacked at the col.

Waking stiff and cold, we soon warmed up on the abseils, often running backwards and forwards across the rock at the rope's end looking for the next abseil point. Descending the Frêne glacier, we were fortunate that huge avalanches from the Frêne face had largely filled in the crevasses so that we had much more confidence to leap from their raised upper edges to the lower ones, safe in the knowledge that if we missed we were not going to disappear into the bowels of the glacier. When we finally regained the valley and campsite I was absolutely convinced it had been the only route on a 4000m mountain that I had thoroughly disliked. It would have left a lingering bad aftertaste to go home after that experience so I convinced Denis to tackle a TD+ rock route in the Aiguilles Rouges. It went perfectly and we departed well satisfied.

The next AC meet in 1993 was in Grindelwald. It was there, on the Jungfrau, that I had my only fall on any 4000m peak. Moving together in descent from the summit cloud cap, I slipped somewhere between belay posts on the ridge down to the Rottalsattel and slid off into the blowing snow. A combination of self-arrest and the rope coming tight stopped the slip and I was soon able to carefully move on. Below the cloud it was another world and when Ralph Atkinson reached me at the saddle he was unaware that anything untoward had happened. We had a much better day on the morrow when the Mönch provided superb views for the length of its elegant ESE arête. On the Schreckhorn, the peak held no terrors for Mike Pinney or me as we turned in a guidebook time for this classic route. As the weather turned unsettled Andrea Stimson and I headed for Zermatt for a walk in the snow – the traverse from Nordend to the Breithorn, the longest and finest of my alpine traverses.

Andrea had been suffering from the trauma of dealing with the deaths of two members of her expedition to Peru. She wanted some climbing in her comfort zone and the AC meet looked to be a good prospect. The weather had got her down as much as me so she jumped at the chance to decamp to Zermatt. On the first day we gained the Silbersattel from the Monte Rosa hut and climbed out along the fine snow ridge to the summit of Nordend, then back to gain the Dufourspitze from the saddle. Unfortunately the indicated route was a concave ice slope in a tremendously exposed position. We worked our way back along the flank of Dufourspitze until we found technical, ice-filled grooves and cracks that led up in a couple of pitches to the summit ridge, but I'd been travelling light again. Too light in an icy wind, and on the summit I reeled with incipient hypothermia. Despite a big hug from Andrea it was still hard work getting to the Signalkuppe for the night. Next day we traversed all the way to the Mezzalama hut, descending the Lisjoch to climb Pyramide Vincent before taking in Liskamm and Castor en route. The final day we climbed back up to Pollux then down to the Rossi e Volante bivouac hut, up the Roccia Nera and over all the summits of the Breithorn.



120. Mont Blanc from near the Vallot hut. (*Dave Wynne-Jones*)

That was my last big summer season. Easter 1995 I climbed the Gran Paradiso, having the dubious distinction of carrying my skis up and down in the vain hope that conditions would become skiable. Moving round to the Oberland, I made solo ski ascents of the Aletschhorn and Finsteraarhorn. In 1996 I managed an ascent of the Grand Combin during a brief summer visit to Chamonix with Pam Caswell in which we were stormed off Les Droites within 50m of the summit. From then on it was the odd flying visit to the Alps, mostly in winter. Over the next few years, I only made ski ascents of the Gross Grünhorn and Gross Fiescherhorn, but managed to climb in Tanzania, Kenya, Jordan, Morocco, Peru, the Caucasus, Alaska, Hindu Kush, Picos de Europa, Ecuador, the Pyrenees and Iran. My interests had shifted and proved that while climbing the 4000m mountains had been a great way to get a handle on the Alps, it had never been an obsession.

Then in 2002 I turned 50. I had been harassed out of my job into early retirement and had put my head back together by taking an MA in creative writing. Now it was time to set some priorities, settle some unfinished business, and, with only three 4000m peaks left to climb, this was an obvious target. That summer Yvonne Holland and I climbed Piz Bernina amongst several other peaks in an early season raid on the range before moving on to Courmayeur and failing in poor conditions on the Grandes Jorasses. Through the tunnel to Chamonix, we set off for the Couvert hut but were caught by a nasty electric storm on the via ferrata that led up from the Mer de Glace to the hut. Yvonne went back. I went on. Arriving at the hut I asked the guardian what conditions were like on Les Droites. 'I don't know. No one has climbed it yet this season.' That night I left very early.

Before dawn I was at the foot of the initial couloir on the voie normale. I spent an hour, as the light strengthened, trying to overcome the bergschrund and get established in the couloir above the soft snow of its upper lip. Teetering over from the lower lip of the bergschrund, I tunnelled into the upper lip like a cornice, before back and footing my way up the shifting snow until at last I got some purchase with my axe. From then on it was straightforward: a steep snow couloir, a broad mixed ridge. No tracks, but there was a certain logic to the line that could not have been entirely down to my memory of 1996, unearthing slings from the snow just where they were needed. It felt just like swimming, that last 50m, up and along the snowed-up crest, with latterly the chance of a long swallow dive down the north face into the Argentière basin, before I gained the rock perch at the summit. There is an intensity about soloing that whets the appetite but it was my last alpine route that year. Later that summer I was to climb Pik Lenin, again soloing on summit day, and in November to make the first ascent of the south face of Pokharkan in Nepal. Opportunism was distracting me from my unfinished business.

In the next five years I climbed and skied in Kyrgyzstan, the Yukon, Xinjiang and Sechuan but only once returned to the Alps when I made my third ascent of Mont Blanc, with Adele Long. After heavy snowfall it was the only route in condition as guided parties had broken trail on the first fine day following the snow. For me it was an opportunity for the first time to take photos of the summit in daylight.

Then in 2007 there was an AC meet in Courmayeur. Gethin Howells, a youngster of half my age who had been with me and Adele on the AC ski-mountaineering expedition to Kyrgyzstan that year, joined me to warm up on the north face of the Tour Ronde and, with Martin Ghillie, on the Rochefort Arête. This is the only other 4000m-route that I have completed twice, largely because I didn't get any good pictures the first time. We had dearly wanted to make the traverse of the Rochefort and Grandes Jorasses but the word from those who had been on the summit ridge of the Grandes Jorasses was that there was a lot of ice so I didn't fancy the crux rock-climbing around Pointe Young in those conditions. Instead, Gethin and I set out from the Boccalette hut on the voie normale. It was a weekend and the weather was good so we didn't have the route to ourselves. This meant some delays on the rocks of the Rocher du Reposoir but I could often find an alternative line when there was a hold-up and we made good time. When we summited I think Gethin was more emotional than I was, especially when I told the guide who had more or less kept pace with us all the way that this was my last 4000m mountain. 'Oh, but you have done so well,' he replied. The nuances of language that can put us in our place!

Climbing these mountains has been a way of getting to grips with the Alps, and I shall be always grateful for the experience of these high wild peaks and the friendship of those people who shared that experience both on and off the mountains. Mike Pinney and Jeff Harris also completed in 2007 with the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey that had eluded them for



121. Job done – Dave Wynne-Jones (right) and Gethin Howells on Dave's final 4000m summit (Grandes Jorasses) with the first (Mont Blanc) in the background.
(Dave Wynne-Jones)

years, although since they were helicoptered off after being hit by stonefall on the re-ascent of Pic Eccles, Jeff's daughter, Jenny, did wonder whether it counted. Thankfully that was the only accident to those I climbed with and I put that down in no small measure to the good sense and wealth of pooled experience that characterised AC meets. Other friends are still on the 4000m trail.

So what now? Put simply, I go on climbing. There are enough routes to do on these and other mountains both in the Alps and elsewhere to keep me occupied for several lifetimes. There is something I noticed in the Dolomites last year, though: I'd had enough of the hustle of relentless commercialism after just three weeks. Perhaps that is why I have been increasingly drawn to more remote mountains. In 2007 I not only finished my 4000m summits but also made eight first ascents in Kyrgyzstan, India and China. There is no doubt that you can get a lot more climbing done in a month in the Alps than in the same time spent in the greater ranges but there is something very special about climbing where no one has climbed before, where you have not only the route but even the range to yourselves. It's all a question of balance.

Finally I make no apologies for the roll-call of climbing partners in this account, most of whom were AC members. It is our partners who make our climbing possible.