

145. Mike Gill, Wally Romanes, Mike Ward, and Barry Bishop (L–R) on summit of Ama Dablam, March 13, 1961 (*Courtesy of Mike Gill*)

4000-4500m with frequent trips to higher altitude to boost acclimatisation – but spending most of the time below 5000m.[7]

Milledge also suggested that the work done on the distinctive breathing differences between Sherpas and the scientists shed important light on human physiological variation in those native to low altitude vs. those native to high altitude.[7] The finding that the Sherpas have a much lower ventilatory (breathing) response to hypoxia led Milledge and a colleague to conduct an in-depth study of this (and other) phenomena in the Khumbu just a few years later.[11] These important physiological findings would be integral to shaping acclimatisation strategy and climbing tactics for high altitude mountaineering in the following decades.

The 1960-61 Himalayan Scientific and Mountaineering Expedition was unique. Not only did Griffith Pugh and his scientific colleagues complete some of the most important research ever undertaken at high altitude, but a few of the mountaineers in the group successfully climbed a difficult virgin peak in a bold and imaginative style. For scientists and mountaineers alike, this expedition most certainly set a high standard for all others to follow.

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Mallory on The Ben

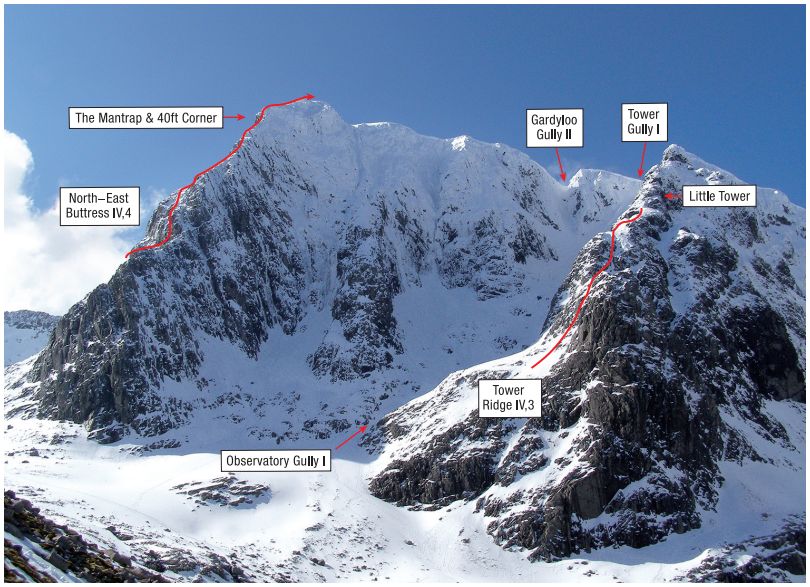
At Easter 1906, during his first year at Magdalene College, Cambridge, George Mallory went climbing on Ben Nevis. He had two companions: Graham Irving, the schoolmaster who introduced him to climbing at Winchester; and Guy Leach, another former Winchester pupil who was at New College, Oxford. The three men spent 10 days in Fort William, where they lodged at St Andrew's Choir School. They went on to the Ben five times, during which, apart from a distant sighting of a couple in Allt a' Mhuillin glen, they had the mountain to themselves. The Ben was in full winter condition and they climbed five routes, culminating in the second winter ascent of North-east Buttress, first climbed by Naismith and others 10 years before.

The Ben Nevis excursion is significant in the Mallory story, since it was his first full climbing trip in the British Isles. (He was aged 19 at the time; Leach was 20, Irving 29.) Yet it has, until now, escaped the notice of Mallory biographers, including this one. In *The Wildest Dream*, written with my wife Leni, we asserted that Mallory's first British climbing was undertaken in Snowdonia in September 1907, in the company of Geoffrey Keynes and Hugh Wilson. Mallory's five days on the Ben, which predate the Snowdonia trip by 17 months, have come to light thanks to the resurfacing of the Book of Minutes of the Winchester Ice Club. The club was formed by Irving at Winchester in 1904 and the minutes were used to record its visits to the Alps. The 1904 and 1905 accounts include written contributions by Mallory himself. Irving wrote the entire account of the 1906 Ben Nevis expedition, filling 57 pages of Volume Two (there are six volumes in all).

For a long time the whereabouts of the minutes was a mystery. They had been purchased from a dealer in 1967 by a US collector, Wilbur Smith, who had them rebound and planned to publish them. But the project foundered and Smith died in 1988. In 2009, a firm of solicitors found the bound volumes in their archives, and passed them to the Alpine Club Library.

Irving's record of the Ben Nevis trip thus fills a gap in the roster of Mallory's climbs. His account is revealing in other ways. Mallory's energy and enthusiasm shine through, speaking of the character that was to be demonstrated on Everest two decades on. There is also an ingenuous quality about Irving's description of their visit to 'the greatest of our British mountains' that is both appealing and surprising, for he appears unaware of the activities of Scottish Mountaineering Club members in the preceding decade.

The SMC was founded in 1889 and started publishing its journal in



146. Orion Face and Tower Ridge, Ben Nevis, showing routes where George Mallory, Graham Irving and Guy Leach were active in 1906. (*Andy Nisbet*)

1890. The 1902 edition comprised a Ben Nevis Guide, edited by William Inglis Clark. The decade from 1896 brought intense activity on the Ben, with climbers of the stature of Clark, Harold Raeburn, Willie Naismith and the Rev A E Robertson advancing snow-and-ice standards to new levels. Yet Irving appeared ignorant of any of this, or of the existing names of the Ben's features and routes. He overcame this lacuna by coining his own terms for both the features and climbs. Identifying their modern names required assiduous detective work, in which I was valuably assisted by Ken Crocket, SMC member and co-author of the definitive history *Ben Nevis: Britain's Highest Mountain* (Crocket & Richardson, SMT, 2009), who also provided details about the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*; Robin Campbell of the SMC; the Fort William guide and guidebook writer Alan Kimber; and AC stalwart John Cleare. At the end of this process we were confident that we had cracked Irving's code.

As Irving records, he and Leach arrived at Fort William railway station on the morning of Tuesday 3 April, 'well sated by an ample breakfast of ham and eggs' served on the train. They were met by their host, Mr Thompson, schoolmaster and organist at the Choir School in Fassifern Road. Mallory – 'in his eccentricity' – journeyed by sea from his family home in Birkenhead to Clydeside, arriving by train that evening. 'The expectations of those who met him were doomed to disappointment, as he had enjoyed the smoothest of passages and his health was in no way impaired,' Irving wrote. Once at the Choir School they met Mrs Thompson who 'amply performed all the duties of landlady and attendant, with the assistance of several daughters and a small Aberdeen terrier. The cooking was quite adequate and the rooms most comfortable.'

During their 10 days at Fort William, the three climbers were blessed with good weather. The sky was mostly sunny, fresh snow fell just once, and the approach to the Ben was 'comparatively dry'. In his preamble to the climbing accounts, Irving describes the northern aspect of the Ben. 'Here is a long precipitous face, extending perhaps for a mile and a half and averaging about 1500 feet in height: from it vast buttresses of rock stand out and afford unbounded scope to the climber for satisfying his ravenous appetite.'

Irving identifies two features by their current names: the North-east Ridge, 'the most huge of all the projecting buttresses'; and Tower Ridge, rising in the centre of the face. Both were named on the six-inch OS edition published in 1902 which has to be the map Irving refers to in his account. However Irving was clearly not equipped with the 1902 *SMCJ* Ben Nevis guide, which included the OS map marked with an additional 25 features and routes. He thus coined names for two features, the 'Zmutt Ridge' and the 'Intermediate Ridge', whose identities were the subject of some of our detective work. Irving noted that the snowline began around 2,000 feet and that the snow was up to 30 feet deep around the summit. 'Every gully or corner was filled with snow and the rocks of the Tower and N E Ridges were thickly plastered over with a coating of ice.'

The three went on to the Ben for the first time on 4 April. They set out at 9.45am to attempt Tower Ridge, first climbed in winter conditions by Norman Collie and two companions in 1894 and graded until recently at III. At 12.45 they reached the foot of a 'vast snowfield' at 2800 feet, as measured on their aneroid barometer. After stopping 35 minutes for lunch they resumed climbing, roping up at 'the foot of a snow couloir which run upwards in a S E direction'. They cut steps to a notch at 3400 feet above the first prominent peak in the ridge. They followed the crest of the ridge until they reached 'the foot of a steep mass of rock which appeared to be the Tower: as this was completely wrapt in a thick coating of ice, further advance that way was soon seen to be hopeless.'

This was almost certainly the pillar known as the Little Tower. They attempted a detour but finished on a secondary ridge that led them back to the Tower. 'All attempts to discover a route by which this ice-covered mass could be turned were fruitless: not an inch of rock was visible.' At 5pm they headed down, Mallory clearing out the steps they had cut as he led the descent, secured by Irving on an ice-axe belay. It took them two hours to reach the notch and a further hour to descend to the glen. They returned to the choir school at 10.30 to be greeted by an 'anxious landlady at the gate – no search party however had yet been organised.'

The three had an 'off day' on 5 April which they spent rowing across Loch Linnhe 'through tremendous waves' to Loch Eil, returning to Fort William in time for tea. They were back on the Ben on 6 April, this time following a line to the left of the Tower. 'The snow was good and not too steep for good nails: so progress was fairly rapid. When some fresh snow



147. George Mallory (1886-1924): a youthful outing on Ben Nevis helped shape Mallory's taste for adventure.
(*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

was reached, often with very hard stuff below it, G.H.L.M took up the running and with his usual energy kicked some ample steps.'

Although they did not know its name, it is most likely that they were in Observatory Gully, and after an hour they reached the juncture where it divides between Tower Gully and Gardyloo Gully. Both were marked on the 1902 *SMCJ* map and both had their first winter ascents in 1897 – achieved, what's more, by three Alpine Club members, led by none other than Walter Haskett Smith. Once again, Irving was clearly unaware of any of this. He considered the left-hand gully (Gardyloo Gully, Grade II) 'very steep and almost impossible' and so they followed the right-hand gully (Tower Gully, Grade I).

After they roped up, Irving took the lead, cutting steps across 'a very steep slope which lay above a small rock face' that reminded him of the Ice Wall on the Grand Combin. He eventually reached the heavily-corniced crest of the ridge, making a steep traverse until he could haul himself on to the summit plateau. He brought up Mallory and Leach and they reached the summit at 3.20. 'In such perfect weather the view was wonderful and, as this was the first ascent, the party was deeply impressed.' They descended via the path to the north-west, undertaking several long glissades, and reached their lodging at 5.50.

On 7 April, preferring 'a gentle day's climbing elsewhere', they climbed the neighbouring peak of Stob Bàn (3274ft). They followed the corniced main arête to the summit which they reached at 1.30pm. They had intended to return via Mullach nan Coirean (3077ft) but lost their way in cloud. Abandoning their plan, they glissaded back to Glen Nevis, marvelling at 'that wonderful dark purple hue in which the hills at the top of the Glen were dressed in the late afternoon'.

On Sunday 8 April, after attending 'divine service', they took a rowing boat on to Loch Linnhe and into the Caledonian Canal. They returned to the Ben on 9 April, where – 'with a long day in view' – they hired a wagonette to cover the first two and a half miles along the road. They first

climbed Carn Mor Dearg (4002ft) then glissaded back to the glen where they decided to attempt 'one of the ridges W of the Tower' which they dubbed the 'Intermediate' Ridge. This was almost certainly North Trident Buttress, first climbed by Harold Raeburn and three others in 1904 and now rated Grade III.

What is curious about Irving's description is that he did not report the same level of difficulty the party met on the two other Grade III routes they climbed – perhaps because snow conditions had ironed out some of the problems. The party roped up at 2pm with Irving taking the lead. The toughest pitch proved to be 'an uncomfortably steep and narrow rock-chimney choked by a jammed stone at the top.'

Halfway up the pitch Irving removed his rucksack and dropped it, assuming that Mallory would catch it. Mallory assumed in turn that it was attached to Irving's rope and it fell past him. The rucksack, which contained a large plate camera, sweater, cake and honey, 'sped down the snow and bounding nimbly from rock to rock vanished into the distant unknown.' Irving eventually levered himself past the chockstone, and the party reached the plateau at 6.25. After a brew of cocoa they pressed on to the summit in time to witness a transcendental sunset.

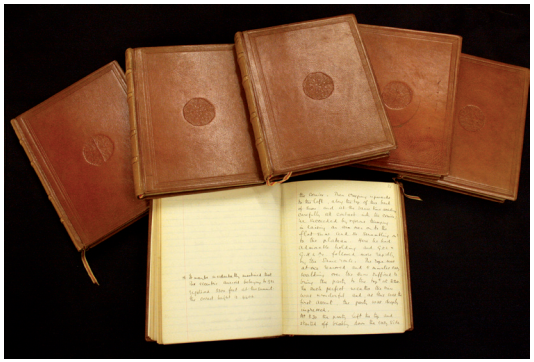
On 10 April they opted for an easy day, selecting a feature they called the East Zmutt Ridge, one of a pair of ridges that they named after the Zmutt Ridge on the Matterhorn. They most likely climbed *Ledge Route* on Number Five Gully Buttress, first ascended in 1895 and rated Grade II. From Irving's account it was the easiest route they climbed. They also retrieved Irving's rucksack, discovering to their amazement that the camera was almost undamaged – although there was 'general sorrow' at the loss of the honey and cake.

They took another rest day on 11 April, again venturing on to Loch Linnhe. This time they headed with the tide towards the sea, enjoying a copious lunch, and then returning with the tide in the afternoon, 'with a brief halt for tea on the W shore'.

12 April brought their final climb and their toughest objective. This was North-east Buttress, first climbed in winter conditions by William Naismith and four others at Easter 1896. It was recorded in the *SMCJ* that year, and is now rated Grade IV. In 1906, that remained its only winter ascent. Irving wrote that the North-east Arête of Ben Nevis, 'which had hitherto defied all [our] ideas of climbing by its forbidding aspect, was at last put to the test. The task thus imposed upon the Club was of the severest possible nature.'

They left their lodgings at 8.30 and started up the route at midday, leaving their stove at its foot and taking 'one piece of cake and one sandwich per head'. They roped up with Irving in the lead and reached the crest of the arête at 3.30pm. From there they made arduous progress, rendered more testing when Irving dropped his ice-axe while clearing a rocky projection of ice.

As Ben Nevis habitués will know, the two crucial pitches – the vertical





148. The six volumes of the Book of Minutes of The [Winchester] Ice Club, now held in the Alpine Club Library, which include a hitherto forgotten account of what is believed to be George Mallory's first full climbing trip in the British Isles. (*Peter Gillman*)

wall known as the Mantrap, and a 40-foot corner – occur near the near the top of the route. Irving was most likely describing the Mantrap when he wrote how 'what seemed an impassable wall loomed in front and threatened to bar progress completely.' Irving overcame it via a steep couloir that led to a 'still steeper broad ice-chimney which became quite vertical at the top' – probably, the 40-foot corner. Irving wrote: 'Again and again it seemed that the leader must be baffled despite his vigorous efforts' but after a 75-minute struggle he reached the top.

Progress from that point was less demanding and they were at the summit at 8.25 as the last light faded. Their ascent of the route had taken eight hours, compared to the seven required by Naismith and his party. They were back at Fort William at 10.30, where Mrs Thompson served 'a hearty supper', consumed 'with that intense feeling of satisfaction which is the constant companion of success'.

On 13 April the weather broke, bringing rain in Fort William and snow on the tops. Even so, Mallory returned to the Ben to search for the stove and the lost ice-axe. He found the former but not the latter, returning from his round trip in just under four hours.

'The whole party,' Irving concludes, 'left Fort William by the afternoon train, hoping to arrive at their respective destinations early on the following morning, but owing to the vagaries of the Good Friday train service, and the stupidity of the Glasgow porters, they were compelled to spend the night in Edinburgh; and it is perhaps not unworthy of record that the Castle Temperance Hotel, Prince's Street, displayed an admirable combination of cheapness and comfort. Thus ended the first visit of the Ice Club to Ben Nevis.'

So also ended George Mallory's first British climbing expedition. Although Irving mostly took the lead, it was an episode in which Mallory's determination and taste for adventure were being shaped. There was a pioneering element to the enterprise which Mallory must have savoured, together with a collective tenacity and reluctance to be thwarted. As for Mallory's character, there was a further revealing moment on the first day, when the three men missed the bridge across the River Nevis. While Irving and Leach retraced their steps for half a mile, Mallory, 'with his

usual agility effected a crossing by large boulders'. Irving's minutes also evoke nostalgia for an innovative period of mountaineering. Those who inspect them in the AC library are likely to savour the spirit of the age they describe, together with the glimpses of Mallory provided by his mentor, Graham Irving.

With the party's routes identified, one puzzle remains: why was Irving unaware of the previous activity on the Ben? He was a member of the Alpine Club and so, I had presumed, would have had access to the SMC journals at the AC library. However, scrutiny of the *Alpine Journals* of the time reveals that this was apparently not so. The *AJ* lists those clubs that donated copies of their journals and while they included the Alpine clubs of France and Italy, and even of Russia and Holland, the SMC was not among them. Nor, with one brief exception in 1895, did the *AJ* record any climbing by its members on Ben Nevis. Nonetheless, it still appears remiss of Irving to have done no further research – unless he preferred to remain ignorant and thus have the thrill of climbing as if on virgin ground.

Mallory continued to climb with Irving, notably in 1911, when they spent two weeks in the Alps, together with Harry Tyndale, another Ice Club alumnus who was married to Irving's sister Oriane. After Mallory's death in 1924, Irving wrote of him as 'an ever-young and singularly lovable personality'. Irving continued at Winchester until his retirement in 1937. A prominent AC member and a prolific writer, he died in 1969.

As for Guy Leach, the least experienced climber of the three on the Ben, he became a schoolmaster – as did Mallory – after leaving Oxford. And like Mallory, he served in the First World War, in Egypt and France, rising to the rank of Captain and winning the Military Cross. He died in Hampshire in 1957, aged 72.

** For the full story of how the Ice Club minutes were retrieved, I am indebted to AC archivist Glyn Hughes. The minutes appeared in the catalogue of H M Fletcher, a book dealer in Cecil Court, in 1967. Wilbur Smith, the American collector who bought them, was a banker and mountaineer then working in Beirut. He had the minutes rebound and, some 20 years later, proposed publishing them in a facsimile edition. He signed a contract with a London publisher; Irving's son Robert, music director of the New York City Ballet, provided an appreciation of his father; and Roger Chorley, AC president, wrote a foreword. The plan was to print 500 copies and to start printing once there were 300 orders. They went as far as producing a flyer, intending to distribute several thousand copies in the UK and USA.*

At that point the plan disintegrated. Smith had a row with the publishers, complaining that they had failed to distribute the flyers. As the proposed publication date approached, only 24 firm orders had been placed, and the project was abandoned. Smith died a year or so later, in 1988. The minutes finally reached the Alpine Club after a firm of London solicitors found them while clearing out their archives. The solicitors called the ACL in July 2009 and their offer of the minutes was accepted with gratitude.