

156. John Innerdale, *Lingshi Dzong, Bhutan,* watercolour 17 x 14cm, 1991.

Peter back from their abortive attempt on Peak 5567, which was part of the exploration around the Pubukang glacier from Camp III. Here we came across footprints of blue sheep, bear, pugs of snow leopard and large prints of a biped that Singye says are 'Mountain gorilla or Yeti'. I photograph these, placing my ice axe beside them to give true scale. They are massive.

After a relaxing walk out we are reunited with the trekkers for a week of relaxation, some celebration, visits to important monasteries and spectacular *dzongs*. Eventually we journey across the kingdom to Bumthang to enjoy the annual 'Black Hat' Buddhist Festival of Dancing, yet another chance to paint and absorb the beauty, peace and harmony of the Kingdom of the Thunder Dragon.

Later, on our return to Paro, we visit the Minister for Home Affairs and put before him a list of the mountains the expedition has climbed together with proposals for the names of each peak, hitherto shown as altitude points on the simple map we had of the region. These are translated into Bhutanese, are accepted and now form part of the updated survey of the country.

**Note:** An account of the climbs accomplished as part of this expedition appeared in *AJ* Vol 97, 'Exploring in the Hidden Kingdom', by Peter Mould.

TERRY GIFFORD

# Noyce's Cambridge Mountaineering Poets

FR Leavis dominated my formative years at Cambridge and his stringent approach to criticism effectively delayed my publishing, if not actually writing poetry, for decades. When so few writers, and even fewer poets, could be admitted to the Leavis canon, how could any contemporary young scribbler hope to write 'literature'? Of course, for such intimidating delays the literary world should be, not only grateful, but more relieved than it could imagine. My early poetry was an extended recovery of the long-stifled expressions of adolescence. But, having broken through several glass cornices, assailed the mountains of the mind and glimpsed the real cliffs of fall, no-man-fathomed, and wanting to deal with that steep as far as is personally possible (i.e. up to HVS), I'm an advocate of mountaineering poetry. Either seeking control of language at the edge, or being playful with the dangerous sublime of forms, mountaineering poetry claims a space for man's 'mounting spirit in his bone-house', to continue the Gerard Manley Hopkins metaphors. It is to poetry that we turn to understand the pull of mountains, sometimes in the guise of prose. And it is the editors of the glossy magazines and journals who are scared stiff by the stuff, bold mountaineering gatekeepers that they are. But no such fear in that most astute of literary mountaineers, the Kingsman, Wilfrid Noyce, whose anthology, *The Climber's Fireside Book* (Heinemann) published posthumously in 1964, I'd like to revisit to consider the eight Cambridge mountaineering poets he included there.

If you're still with me, I'd better come clean. None of my books of mountaineering poetry has been short-listed by the Boardman Tasker judges. I was not a student of Leavis's at Downing in the 1950s, but I was taught in the early 1960s by recent students of Leavis who'd got jobs at the Cambridge Grammar School for Boys (notably by Frank Glover Smith, later of Sussex University, who let us Sixth Formers doing English listen in the lunch-hour to the first records by one Bob Dylan – not altogether irrelevant here). Then I went to Sheffield to train to be a teacher because, first, it was a real place like those where most of the working people of England lived and, second, it was close to crags.

The Boy Scout leaders who ran a troop up Newmarket Road in Cambridge had taken us to the Lakes and hired Des Oliver to take us climbing on Glaciated Slab in Combe Ghyll. To these two inspirational forces - Leavis disciples and Scout leaders - at work outside the university for the children of college servants like me, I am only now learning to be truly grateful. By such wonderfully strange and generously given routes

does a grandchild of the Fens (my father was the first generation to move from the orchards of Cottenham to the big city) and son of the spade (my dad was Head Gardener at King's, 1961-86) come to be drawn to comment on the sensibility witnessed by a part of the mountain poetry included within a forgotten anthology. You need to know where the sensibility of the commentator is located.

At first glance Noyce's anthology appears to be a wholly romantic one. This is no surprise, since he had little else from which to choose in the early 1960s and the literature of the sport is, as we know, rooted in Romanticism. Noyce includes a sonnet by Keats that takes mountain mist as a metaphor for the 'vague' state of human self-knowledge. The potentialities of 'Thought and mental might' remain 'challenged', as we now might say, by 'mist and Crag'. Indeed, such vagueness, to use Keats's term, in the poetic expression of a sense of connection between human sensibility and the mountain environment is what has commonly come to characterise the Romantic movement of which Keats was a part. But after this sonnet Noyce can't resist adding three unlinked couplets by Keats that are the opposite of vague. Noyce says, 'Rare as they are, some of Keats's "mountain" lines are among his most evocative':

> Crag jutting forth to crag, and rocks that seemed
> Ever as if just rising from a sleep … (*Fireside Book*: p 40)

Clearly Noyce is really seeking a sharply accurate representation in which language works hard to jolt the imagination of the reader into a new perception of the reality and meaning of mountains that transcends the vagueness associated with the Romantics. In 1964 what was not available to Noyce was the Rock and Ice backlash against the whole university-educated, middle-class, romantic establishment of mountaineering that had its literary expression in the anti-establishment, under-stated humour of Tom Patey. But what Noyce did have available to him was a poetic movement towards enlightened realism that made possible a disciplined imaginative enquiry into the work of the eight mountaineering poets from Cambridge included in his anthology. The work of Michael Roberts (Trinity), Christopher Isherwood (Corpus Christi) and Noyce himself (King's), is linked by the best of the post-Romantic poetry of Geoffrey Winthrop Young (Trinity) back through some observant lines of Tennyson (Trinity) to the parodist Romantic Byron (Trinity) and the founding father of rock-climbing poetry, William Wordsworth (St John's). To be fair, the journey out of Romantic mountain poetry that Noyce was seeking had its contributions from the Oxford-educated poets W H Auden and William Bell. Ironically, the final poem in the anthology by Geoffrey Sutton (Peterhouse, CUMC President 1953-4) from the 1960 *Climbers' Club Journal* is a throwback to romanticism. In 'Exequy' Sutton claims that the deaths of Bob Downes (Clare) on Masherbrum and George Fraser (King's) on Ama Dablam in 1957 are transcended by the sparks of their lives from their



knights' lances against death's windmill. Romantic heroism as the poetic fallback position in grief is hard to kill. But the line out of that kind of easy palliative which Noyce sought in the poetry in his anthology has come to provide a more reliable and lasting guide to the writing of mountaineering poetry than anything that followed it had to offer - the emotional evasion and linguistic repression of what I call 'the literary Rock and Ice era'. Patey's songs were never intended to be anything other than lightweight. Unless I've missed something, we had to wait until the climbing poetry of David Craig (Downing) in *Native Stones* (1987) to find a mountaineering poetry that continues where Noyce's search left off.

So that's my thesis and here's how the evidence unfolds in my reading of it. In 1783 the young Bill Wordsworth was with a gang of local farmers' lads, including one called Birkett, who were climbing to a raven's nest on Yewdale Crags, Coniston when the leader got cragfast and had to be rescued (Thompson, *Wordsworth's Hawkshead*, Oxford University Press, 1970: p 211 et seq). The churchwarden paid four pence for an egg or a dead chick, so rock-climbing for the kids of Wordsworth's time had modest economic and farming conservation rewards as well as aesthetic ones when informing the rock-climbing section of the Prelude Book I. As 'a plunderer then/ In the high places' of what we now construct as 'the Lake District' Wordsworth's bird-nesting gave him the sharp experience of detail that only rock-climbers can fully appreciate:

> Oh, when I have hung
> Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
> And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
> But ill sustain'd, and almost, as it seem'd,
> Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
> Shouldering the naked crag … (1805 edition, line 341ff)

It doesn't require one who knows the secrets of finger-locks in half-inch fissures to feel the exhilaration of that iambic rhythm and alliteration that sustains an emphasis on the 'ill-sustain'd' danger and delight of such a situation. Bob Dylan's exhilarating wordplay can't match it for conveying a real experience.

But Noyce chooses the ecstatic, visionary Snowdon passage from the *Prelude*, followed by the apparently contrasting gloomy evocation of the Simplon Pass. He chooses a building rhythm of thought and experience: 'Among all Wordsworth's mountain poetry, his vision on Snowdon in the *Prelude* seems to me supreme; the more striking after the pedestrian start' (p 23). Stalking a summit sunrise, it's actually moon-power upon the mountain that Wordsworth finds. Its contrasts of 'silent light' and 'dark abyss' give him a sense of 'Nature's mind', the dynamics of which are evoked in such struggling, inadequate phrases as 'interchangeable supremacy' and 'mutual domination'. This is the unity in difference that makes the paradox of danger and delight possible in the notion of the sublime. Wordsworth



157. Wilfrid Noyce (1917-62): 'disciplined, imaginative enquiry' into the work of his fellow Cambridge mountaineering poets. (*Alpine Club Photo Library*)

is aware that this is dangerous physical and mental territory and struggles with the imaginative discipline of poetic language and form to reach into it. Seen from the 'gloomy Pass' of the Simplon, the same 'interchangeable' creative-destructive dynamic ('Of woods decaying, never to be decayed') emerges as a poetry of more explicit unity that anticipates James Lovelock's Gaia theory. Postmodernist literary criticism fails to express contradictions as powerful as this. But the historically post-modern mountaineering poet knows the paradox that Wordsworth knows: 'that all/ The terrors, all the early miseries […] should ever have made up/ The calm existence that is mine when I/ Am worthy of myself' (1805 edition, line 355ff).

I'm going to gallop along here because I want to get to the now neglected Michael Roberts. But one ought to recognise in passing that the voice of Patey is gleefully, to use Byron's own word, anticipated in the passage from Byron that Noyce has wittily given the title 'The Romantic' (p 26). Having it both ways, as usual, Byron parodies and celebrates the 'altar [of] high places', knowing that so-called civilisation below is 'circumscribe[d]' in its forms of worship, but probably preferring them. This is an energised and necessary stage in the journey towards a post-romantic mountaineering poetry that Noyce is charting here. Tennyson's typical contribution



is to be simply smitten by the Alps, at a safe distance, in what Noyce titles 'The Dawn from Milan', but in a vividly descriptive, tightly rhymed, two stanzas (p 49 et seq).

In many ways the poetry of Geoffrey Winthrop Young, which I think of as romantic in sensibility, is actually Victorian: plainer in speech than the Romantics, using short lyric rhyming forms and full of loss and nostalgia, as though wanting to recapture the Romantic vision and failing. His best-known climbing poem is probably 'The Cragsman':

> In this short span
> between my finger-tips on the smooth edge
> and these tense feet cramped to the crystal ledge
> I hold the life of man.

(*Collected Poems*, London: Methuen, 1936: p 129)

But Noyce's line of thought, if I'm right, leads him to choose two poems that are dependent upon the reader knowing that most of Winthrop Young's mountaineering life was achieved without the leg he lost in the First World War. (He famously re-climbed the Matterhorn with an artificial leg.) So the choice of 'After the Battle on Monte San Gabriele, 1917' that appears to be more about the general use of limbs 'lent by life' than mountaineering itself, has its poignancy in the idea that 'life may halve the loan' (p 110). 'Be then content/ to live new music by their altered measure' has a resonance for readers of *The Climber's Fireside Book*, for whom Winthrop Young would be a figure famous for his fabled Pen y Pass Easter climbing parties and as the founder of the BMC. In Noyce's time he says that the most quoted poem of Young's is the second one he includes, which also alludes to the two halves of Young's mountain days. 'I have not lost the magic of long days', says the poet, because 'I dream my feet upon the starry ways;/ my heart rests in the hill' (p 111). In our own time perhaps the most quoted poem of Young's is 'High Hills', which Noyce also includes. There is a reaching back for Wordsworth's sense of a 'larger rhythm and line,/ moving between the eternal mode and mine' (p 123), but the images are abstract and there is a more forceful presence of 'the circles of our discontent'.

Noyce dates this poem as published in 1938. What was not widely known until the publication of Alan Hankinson's biography (*Geoffrey Winthrop Young: Poet, Educator, Mountaineer*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995) was the fact that Young worked secretly with liberals in Germany during this period to try to counter the momentum of Hitler's politics. So some of the 'brief ills' of which this poet was aware in 1938 turned out not to be so brief. Indeed, Noyce's comment on the co-written work of his next Cambridge poet indicates Noyce's willingness to include political satire in *The Climber's Fireside Book*. *'The Ascent of F6'* was a strangely prophetic play', wrote Noyce (p 157). In 1936 Auden and Isherwood characterised, not the Germans, but 'the finest flower of English Mountaineering' as those who would sacrifice their lives to make the first ascent of F6 for the

glory of the nation. Auden and Isherwood highlighted the class function within Britain of national expeditions, against which the Rock and Ice era would later offer an alternative. The characters Mr and Mrs A in the play are clearly the parents of the future Rock and Ice generation. Mr A is given the following quatrain:

Cut out the photos and pin them to the wall,
Cut out the map and follow the details of it all,
Follow the progress of this mountain mission,
Day by day let it inspire our lowly condition. (p 159)

It is clear from the last line that Auden and Isherwood make no attempt to create an individual voice for Mr A, such is their confidence in their middle-class literary audience. Their intervention in the class war is thus less than convincing and was, indeed, only a modish passing phase. Much more integrity, to use a phrase familiar to such readers of Dr Leavis as might still live, could be claimed for the poetry of Michael Roberts on several fronts.

Michael Roberts read Mathematics at Trinity and became a science teacher at the Royal Grammar School in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, but is best known as the editor of the first *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936), a definitive retrospective on Modernism from the 1930s. He published three collections of poetry which has been called 'austere', but which Leavis might have called 'serious'. His alpine exploits are reflected in the mountaineering classic of his wife: Janet Adam Smith's *Mountain Holidays* (1946). Noyce includes four poems by Roberts, one of which, 'Everest 1948', marks the closure of Tibet, the later closure of Nepal and the tension in the Himalayan regions following Partition. In engaging with the politics of the mountain environment in this poem Roberts achieves more than the Punch and Judy knockabout comedy of F6. Precise images carry allegorical weight as the poem balances the 20 years that led to the first ascent of Everest with the 'new clouds/ that cover India and Pakistan'. A tone combining simplicity and symbolism echoes that of Roberts' mentor, T S Eliot. Above and within all these tensions, which connect the highs and lows of human endeavour in all cultures, stands the 'Mother of all snows, Chomolungma, Everest'. Quite simply, 'The time is not propitious'.

The complexity of the mountaineering experience and its contexts expressed in the apparent simplicity of the poetry could hardly be carried further than in the poetry of Michael Roberts. For other readers his poem 'La Meije 1937' might be his major achievement, his honesty and humility undercutting the breathtaking challenges for both mountaineer and poet:

A man should use every nerve and muscle,
A man should puzzle out the hardest questions,
A man should find words for the thoughts that no one knows.
(p 167)



What this poem 'finds words for' are a complex mixture of contradictory thoughts – beauty and death, stillness and clattering noise, pride and self-doubt, arrogance and humility. Mountaineers tend to despise the tourists, but this poem ends by admitting that in the hamlets above La Grave the English mountaineers were 'the intruders' upon a life of quiet dignity and grace. For others the celebratory lyric 'St Gervais' might be all encompassing - the trams and slums of Newcastle are not excluded from the memory of 'Coming out of the mountains/ singing'. For others again, the sweep of vivid images in 'The Secret Springs' might evoke the complexity of contrary forces of which 'mossy walls', 'water on brant and slape', 'the green glacier-ice', 'history' and 'the huge/ Slow movement of a nation's mind' are all apart and a part. There is much more here than the cold mind and portentous images of Modernist poetry, with which Roberts is associated through his *Faber Book of Modern Verse*.

It seems to me that the poetic journey charted by this group of poems in Noyce's anthology, that happen to be by Cambridge poets, bring him to a desire for humility and integrity within the larger tensions engaged by the mountaineering experience. His preference is for a plain language and an inspirational image that would outflank the vagueness and self-indulgence associated with the weaknesses of Romantic poetry. The poem of his own that he chooses to include is 'A Prayer for Everest, 1953 (Written before the mountain)'. It is in his characteristic short lines and whilst including storm, cold and fatigue, the poem is a prayer that friendship will overcome his weaknesses, even to the point that 'no envy bleed,/ when – for I know my heart -/ others succeed' (p 221), as indeed, they did.

By 1960 Noyce could look backwards and forwards to quite different eras of mountaineering literature and culture. He himself was part of a kind of boldness in climbing unthinkable to earlier generations. In fact, he was thought by his contemporaries to be accident-prone (Perrin, *Menlove*, London: Gollancz, 1985: p 148) and he died in his fourth serious accident (on the Anglo-Russian expedition to the Pamirs in 1962). He was taught to climb by his cousins Guy and Colin Kirkus, then by Menlove Edwards, whom he met in the Climbers' Club hut Helyg. Next day (and their first out together) they came across Winthrop Young, 'driving forth the legions of the Easter party to the rocks', as he remembered in *Mountains and Men* (London: Bles, 1947 p 21). In that same book he wrote a sentence that anticipates the very kind of climbing poetry that was to come later: 'The thing, then, that we cannot watch, of everyday, is our body fitting itself to this world surrounding' (*Mountains and Men*, London: Bles, 1947: p 148). This exactly describes the achievement of Cambridge mountaineering poet David Craig's poem 'Into Rock' in *Native Stones* (Secker & Warburg, 1987: p 6). To my mind this poem is one of the best to be written thus far about the rock-climbing experience.

In *Scholar Mountaineers* Noyce speculated that one day mountain writing 'will no longer be a sideline of men normally engaged in other spheres, but an occupation itself fully satisfying' (London: Dobson, 1950: p 20). And what kind of mountaineering poetry, one wonders, would such a new era produce?