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Scottish Winter 2018-19



Andy Inglis climbing the first pitch of *The Chance!* (VIII,8) on Beinn a'Bhuird.
(Guy Robertson)

Last winter was a long one: good routes were climbed as early as October and as late as May. Even so, major thaws in the key months of November, December and February meant little opportunity for reliable conditions to form. The weather cooled down in March, but by then many climbers had lost patience; on Ben Nevis there wasn't enough base snow for even the most reliable gullies to form ice.

The most difficult new route was *The Forge* (X,10) on An Teallach by Guy Robertson and Greg Boswell. This discontinuous crack-line up the middle of the awe-inspiring vertical wall above *Hayfork Gully* was one of the most sought after winter objectives in the country. The route was climbed in two pitches with Boswell leading the long first pitch, which proved to be the crux. Boswell described the climbing as 'very technical, super physical with multiple boulder-problem-style cruxy sections along the way'. Often there were only 'minuscule hooks and no foot placements'. The pitch was likened in style to *The Hurting* (XI,11) in Coire an t-Sneachda.

There were three impressive additions to Beinn Eighe. On 30 January, Murdoch Jamieson and Guy Robertson added an excellent winter-only line to the Far East Wall of Beinn Eighe. *One Man's Mountain* (VII/VIII,8) takes the prominent left-facing corner right of *Vishnu*. Two days later, Jamieson returned with Uisdean Hawthorn to make the first winter ascent of *Heavy Flak* (VIII,8), a summer E1 on the Eastern Ramparts. The third addition was equally challenging but in a more adventurous location. Martin Moran and Robin Thomas made the first ascent of *Scarred for Life* (VIII,9), a line loosely based on the summer line of *Scarface* (E1), on the rarely visited north face of Sgurr Ban.

In March, Guy Robertson and Andy Inglis pulled off one of the finest new routes of the season when they made a first winter ascent based on *The Chancel* on Beinn a'Bhuird. This five-pitch E1 on the west face of Mitre Ridge was first climbed in summer 1978 and graded E1 5b. Robertson and Inglis made a reconnaissance trip the week before, and the eventual ascent required many hours of trail breaking through deep snow.

It would be a mistake to judge the winter purely by new routes. In many ways the most significant event was the third ascent of *Anubis* (XII,12) on Ben Nevis by Greg Boswell. The first winter ascent of this overhanging summer E8 on The Comb was made by Dave MacLeod in February 2010 and is widely regarded as the most difficult winter route on Ben Nevis. Together with Boswell's route *Banana Wall* in the Northern Corries, it is the only route in Scotland that merits a Grade XII rating. The heavy snowfall at the end of January turned Ben Nevis as white as a Christmas cake, and Boswell was quick to take the rare opportunity to attempt this severely overhanging line when it was completely frosted. Boswell first tried the route with Helen Rennard on 30 January and returned three days later to make a successful ascent with Robbie Phillips. Boswell's ascent of *Anubis* makes him the only climber to have climbed two Scottish Grade XIIs.

Perhaps the most pleasing aspect of the winter was the emerging generation of younger Scottish winter climbers eager to tackle the more testing routes. Jamie Skelton and Matt Glenn hit the headlines when they made the second winter ascent of *Feast of The East* (VIII,9) on the Eastern Ramparts on Beinn Eighe in March. It transpired that despite the poor winter the pair had enjoyed a very successful season with ascents of *Ventricle* (VII,8), *Darth Vader* (VII,7), *Sioux Wall* (VIII,8) and the second ascent of *Shape-shifter* (VIII,8) on Lurcher's Crag. In addition, Skelton made ascents of



Murdoch Jamieson climbing the third pitch of *Heavy Flak* (VIII,8) on Beinn Eighe's Eastern Ramparts during the first winter ascent. (*Uisdean Hawthorn*)

Daddy Longlegs (VIII,9) with Jack Morris, and the hard test-pieces of *The Needle* (VIII,8) and *Centurion* (VIII,8) with Tim Miller. With enthusiasm, energy and talent like this, the future of Scottish winter climbing looks bright.

The season was overshadowed by a terrible accident on Ben Hope on 5 February that took the lives of Steve Perry and Andy Nisbet. The exact details will never be known but it seems likely that they fell from the upper section of a new route they were climbing on the west face. This tragedy took the wind out of everyone's sails. Andy Nisbet had such a positive impact on Scottish winter climbing, continuously innovating and taking a great interest in everyone else's activities, that it seemed the game would never feel the same again.

Nisbet's winter record is without comparison. By the mid 1990s he had made first ascents of over a quarter of the 600 or so Scottish routes graded V or over, with a distinct bias towards the higher grades. In total, he is thought to have climbed over one thousand new winter routes. One has to look to the records of Fred Beckey in North America, or Patrick Gabarrou in the Alps to find climbers whose influence has been as long lasting and profound.



Murdoch Jamieson on the first ascent of *One Man's Mountain* on the Far East Wall of Beinn Eighe. (Guy Robertson)

Andy Nisbet was born in 1953 in Aberdeen. His parents had a keen interest in the hills and took him hillwalking from an early age and by the age of 19 he had complete all the Munros. He studied biochemistry at Aberdeen University where he began regular rock climbing on the local sea cliffs. The following year he attended rock and winter climbing courses at Glenmore Lodge and was soon regularly climbing Grade IVs on Lochnagar.

In 1977 Nisbet made the first winter ascent of *Dagger* on Creag an 'Choire Etchachan, his first grade V new route. Breakthrough into the big time came the following December when he made the first winter ascent of *Vertigo Wall* (VII,7) on Creag an Dubh Loch with Alfie Robertson. Although their ascent was flawed, relying on several points of aid, this intimidating and very steep Tom Patey VS, high on Central Gully Wall, was regarded as one of the last great problems of the time.

The winter of 1980 saw a race between rival Edinburgh and Aberdeen teams to pick the major Cairngorm plums. In January, conditions on Creag an Dubh Loch were exceptionally icy. The Edinburgh team of Rab Anderson and Rob Milne were there first, climbing the long-sought after *White*



Above: Andy Nisbet exploring on Beinn Eighe. (Simon Richardson)



Right: Andy Nisbet making the first ascent of *Pension Plan* (V,7) on Beinn Eighe in March 2007. (Dave McGimpsey)

Elephant (VII,6) on the Central Slabs. They were later overheard in a pub talking about the exceptional amount of ice on *Goliath*. Word got back to Andy who climbed the steep grade VII route four days later with Neil Morrison. It didn't go all Nisbet's way that winter however, as later in the season he was beaten to the prestigious first ascent of *The Citadel* (VII,8) on the Shelter Stone by Murray Hamilton and Kenny Spence, when he crashed his car leaving Aberdeen.

Hard mixed climbing in the early 1980s was a rather different game to now. The crux pitches on the big Shelter Stone routes were originally ascended on powder-covered rock wearing thin gloves. In 1981, Nisbet began to experiment with mixed climbing techniques on Carn Etchachan above Loch Avon. It was a poor winter with little snow and ice, but the deep cracks of the Northern Cairngorm granite proved ideal for jamming ice axe picks. It was another three years before the term 'torquing' was coined for this technique when Colin MacLean nearly succeeded on the very steep layback crack of *The Outlands* on Lochnagar.

Nisbet and MacLean formed a formidable partnership during the winter



of 1985. That January they visited Glen Coe and came away with one of the great problems of the day: a winter ascent of *Unicorn* (VIII,8), the striking summer E1 corner-line in Stob Coire nan Lochan. As west coast climbers gnashed their teeth at Aberdonians poaching one of their best winter lines, Nisbet and MacLean were already working on their next project: a winter ascent of *The Needle* (VIII,8) on the Shelter Stone. After two weeks of continuous effort, the route was eventually climbed with a bivouac. Even though it was climbed nearly thirty-five years ago, *The Needle* is still one of the most sought after high-standard winter routes in Scotland and has only seen a dozen or so repeats. Back in the mid 1980s it was probably the most difficult mixed climb in the world. *No Siesta* on the Grandes Jorasses, a similar breakthrough for the Alps at the time, was not climbed until 1986.

Later that year, Nisbet started working at Glenmore Lodge where he met Andy Cunningham. Although Cunningham was new to high-standard mixed climbing, he was quick to learn and the two Andys formed one of the most effective partnerships in the history of Scottish mountaineering. Over the next three winters they added over 25 outstanding grade V routes

all over the Cairngorms and Northern Highlands. Their additions in the Northern Corries had a profound influence on the shape of Scottish mixed climbing. *Fallout Corner* (VI,7) and *The Migrant* (VI,7) helped popularise mixed climbing in the Northern Corries. Today, both routes are recognised as modern classics, and receive many ascents each winter.

Andy moved on to become the most prolific explorer of the Northern and Western Highlands. Working with Martin Moran, who sadly lost his life in the Garhwal last summer, from a base in Loch Carron in the 1990s, Andy had a superb opportunity for investigating some of the less well-known corners of the Highlands. The transition from chasing the hardest ascents to pure exploration was a natural progression and resulted in hundreds of new routes with strong partners such as Jonathan Preston, Dave McGimpsey, Sandy Allan and latterly Steve Perry.

Nisbet's knowledge of the Scottish mountains became unparalleled. He was new routes editor of the *Scottish Mountaineering Journal* for 30 years, authored three editions of the Cairngorms guide, two volumes for the Northern Highlands, compiled the popular *Scottish Rock Climbs* and *Scottish Winter Climbs* volumes, and wrote major sections in several other Scottish guidebooks. His quiet manner, bushy red beard, unbounded enthusiasm and unfailing optimism became synonymous with Scottish mountaineering. Despite being a well-known figure, Andy was warm, humorous, humble and always intensely interested in what others were up to. He was president of the SMC from 2010 to 2012 and was awarded the Scottish Award for Excellence in Mountain Culture in 2014.

Although Nisbet will be forever associated with winter climbing, he was also an accomplished rock climber. During the summer, he would explore the hills looking for new winter lines, adding many rock climbs in the process. The exact number is unknown, but it is likely to exceed his winter tally, and he was almost certainly the most prolific explorer of mountain rock climbs in the Highlands. Overseas he made ascents of alpine classics such as the north faces of the Matterhorn and Eiger and added a difficult new winter ED2 on the Col du Peigne. Further afield he made the first ascent of north-west ridge of Rooster Comb in Alaska, and in 1985 attempted the north-east ridge of Everest which was unclimbed at the time. His greatest achievements in the Himalaya were the first ascents of Nanda Kot's south face in 1995 and Nilkanth's west ridge in 2000.

The loss of Andy Nisbet leaves a gaping hole that will be impossible to fill. Undoubtedly, his greatest legacy was inventing the Scottish mixed climbing game that we play today. As climbing historian Greg Strange put it: 'Above all else, Andy should be remembered for his continued pushing for the recognition of technical mixed climbing. In 1981 when he did his first Carn Etchachan routes, people were concerned that they weren't really winter ascents at all, as they just had a dusting of snow and were climbed on frozen turf. Now, of course, it is recognised that these are the ideal conditions to climb this terrain. Through the development of modern mixed, Andy opened up an entirely new form of climbing.'