
NICHOLAS HURNDALL SMITH

A Mount Kenya Ascent

Two Alpine Club members with strong links to Kenya and east African climbing, Ian Howell and John Temple, died in the last year, having offered the benefit of their deep experience to a group of members organising an expedition to Mount Kenya in February 2019. This is an account from that expedition, including the installation of a memorial plaque by the Mountain Club of Kenya for Ian Howell on the bivouac shelter he carried up the mountain in 13 solo ascents for the benefit of all climbers.

Crawling inside the tiny bivouac hut, a line from the black comedy gangster film *In Bruges* popped into my head: ‘Nooks and crannies, yes! Perhaps this would be more accurate. Nooks and crannies, rather than alcoves.’ This was not a practical location for an assassin, but there were lots of nooks and crannies to stow our kit. We were at Baillie’s bivy on the south-east face of Mount Kenya, not to be confused with Ian Howell’s hut on the summit, and after six pitches through thickening swirling mist Nigel Bassam and I were grateful to find it. We had heard the bivy was seldom used and possibly full of ice, but also that four SAS men had squeezed into it at some point in the last year or so. For two, we decided, it would do just fine. One would have the luxury of lying down, the other sitting up against a rock with his feet on a block of ice. It had no door, and a strong draft whistled between its roof and the dry-stone walls supporting it. At 5,000m, perched on the south-east face of Nelion, this was where we would rest our heads for the night.

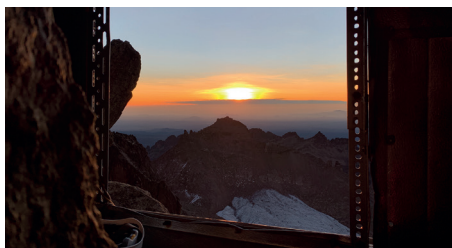
In May 2018, I got a phone call on the way to my book club where we were due to discuss Felice Benuzzi’s *No Picnic on Mount Kenya*, a favourite of mine. For those who don’t know this classic, it tells the tale of Italian prisoners of war escaping from their 1940s British camp in Nanyuki to climb the mountain with secretly hand-made gear, before returning to the camp, simply with the aim of reaffirming their humanity. On the phone was the AC’s Richard Nadin, inviting me to co-lead an expedition to Kenya in February 2019. Delighted by the coincidence, I needed no time to consider. The more I read in the following months about the mountain, the more my delight at the prospect increased. I read of Mackinder’s remarkable first ascent in 1899 with tribal tensions and a caravan of 170 men, including 96 naked Kikuyu, of the entrancing beauty and contrast of the landscape at different altitudes, and of Shipton and Tilman’s exploits in 1929-30. I shared Shipton’s worries prior to his first trip, as I too badly injured my ankle in the weeks before, not by falling from a cliff into a tree as he did, but by turning it while running.



Walking towards Mount Kenya via the Chogoria Route. (*Nicholas Hurndall Smith*)



The Baillie bivy, used far less frequently following the construction of the Howell hut. (*Nicholas Hurndall Smith*)



Sunrise from the Baillie bivy over Point Lenana, a popular objective for trekkers. (*Nicholas Hurndall Smith*)

The day of Baillie's bivy hadn't started well. I had woken at 1.30am at the American Camp, on the south-western side of the mountain, with rain drumming on the tent, which was filling rapidly with water. Already there was a 2cm pond around my inflatable mat. I lay there like a mummy, cursing my choice of pitch and shouting at the rain to stop. Eventually, as it died away, I slept again. This was an excuse for a leisurely morning and a hearty breakfast in the warming sun, admiring views of the mountain with its dusting of fresh snow, with any attempt on it far from my mind as my kit dried out. The American Camp is 'one of the loveliest spots I know, it is,' Richard commented. We chatted about the lack of animals we had seen, with the exception of the faithful rock hyrax, distant relative of the elephant, and the receding glaciers. After my recent traverse of the Weisshorn in the Alps, I liked the fact that the Tyndall glacier, with its huge hanging séracs, seemed the most enduring.

As morning passed, Nigel and I slowly resolved to make a start on the mountain after all, and we set off before noon. I was keen to get started, as I knew the niggling feeling of intimidation, which Mount Kenya had instilled in me, would only increase if and when victorious parties from our group of nine returned to camp before us. We had spent a few days over the walk-in via the Chogoria route, climbed Point Lenana, which at 4985m is the third-highest peak on Mount Kenya and the highest point non-technical climbers can reach, and had a good look at the start of the route. We felt ready to have a crack.

After two hours heading up through giant groundsel and contouring around the scree-filled flanks of the mountain to the bottom of the south-east face, we found the starting point, close to the skeleton of a leopard, which we'd been told was nearby but didn't find. Passing two chaps from the Mountain Club of Kenya who had decided to bail, we made quick progress up the first six pitches, climbing Mackinder's Chimney and One O'Clock Gully to Baillie's bivy. Being underway certainly felt good and so did some hot food but the night was endless, with little warmth or sleep. Nigel needed a dose of ibuprofen to alleviate an alarming bout of heavy breathing.

'I just need to tough it out,' he said. I started reading the abseil instructions in case he got worse, but just like last night, when marooned on my sleeping mat, the thought of getting up in the cold dark was horrible. I gave him all the pills I had, which seemed to help. Eventually, from my sitting position by the open doorway, I was rewarded with a beautiful sunrise over Point Lenana and after some breakfast we continued.

We crossed the ridge and, taking the lead, I found myself on increasingly difficult ground as I led us off route, too high and close to the ridge's crest. Here the maxim 'crest is best' does not apply; we should have been climbing easy ground lower down to the left. Lured right by a couple of pegs, I found myself pulling on in-situ gear, before making a belay and listening to Nigel's grunted protests about my choice of line. As he followed 'Smith's Variation', below us appeared Julian Wright, of recent Diamond Couloir fame, and Robyn, making easy work of the correct route, after an early start that morning from our base camp. We began to wonder whether it had been worth the ordeal in Baillie's bivy if, as they pointed out, the rest of our party was hot on their heels.

We tried hard to keep close to them, to spot the route after the steep crux pitch of De Graaf's Variation, but they soon disappeared, as you would expect from a local guide. Mount Kenya is a complicated mountain, and every line of the route description seemed to refer to numerous plausible options made more complicated by the occasional piece of abandoned gear. Shipton himself wrote, 'I know no mountain in the Alps, with the possible exception of Mont Blanc, that presents such a superb complexity of ridges and faces as the twin peaks of Mount Kenya.'

We were blessed with calm and sunny weather and had deliberately left Baillie's late, having read that the crux can be icy, but in fact the rock was dry, superbly grippy and a joy to climb. After 35m of steep, well-protect-



The view back to the summit of Nelion from Batian. (*Nicholas Hurndall Smith*)

ed corner climbing, we reached a ledge from which we spotted the amphitheatre to our right. Here the air opened up beneath our feet as we stepped across to the base of a scree gully. This in turn led to increasingly easy scrambling up the final rocky steps beneath Nelion. Behind us, we caught a fleeting glimpse of Kilimanjaro, which Benuzzi called a 'huge white panetone-shaped mountain', suspended above the clouds.

At 11am on the summit of Nelion (5188m), we met our friends Julian and Robyn enjoying a brief rest next to the Howell hut before their descent. Views back west over the Chogoria Route stretched away below us. Beyond Nelion was Batian. This was the peak on which we had our sights, the true summit of Mount Kenya. An eagle soared far below in the Mackinder valley. My resolve weakened, as the final climb did not look straightforward. Julian pointed out the easiest line and Nigel seemed confident so I pushed my doubts to the back of my mind. Robyn gave me some water as we were in short supply, and we scrambled down to a ledge to abseil 30m into the Gate of the Mists, which separates the twin peaks of Mount Kenya.

Giving little thought to the advice to leave a rope here, we pulled ours down and crossed the Gate, filled with snow. Turning a gendarme on its right, we re-joined the ridge via a pitch of mixed climbing, feeling thankful for the light ice axe we had brought for the purpose. Then, moving together, I took the lead and we discovered the final section was a joy. Beautiful steep granite in a wonderful exposed position led straight up to the summit ridge of Batian, the best climbing on the whole mountain. I felt a surge of relief and satisfaction, as nothing to that point had felt certain, and was delighted by Nigel's comment that 'I stormed up it.' Now at 5,199m, we embraced

and beamed across at the summit of Nelion only 11m below us, hoping to see members of our party there, but in vain. We had the mountain to ourselves. Beyond Batian was its west ridge, and I thought of Shipton and Tilman's first ascent of this in 1930, their first climb together and Tilman's first serious mountaineering exploit, one which involved Shipton standing on his shoulders more than once in order to make progress.

Kilimanjaro was no longer visible and the weather looked to be worsening, so we did not tarry long. A few short abseils brought us back down to the Gate of the Mists. I had spotted faint tracks leading up steep snow on the left. We made a good belay, and I started to edge gingerly up around the corner, cutting steps as I went but my light axe made little impression on the hard ice. We had decided to climb without crampons or big boots, and as I edged up I began to regret we had left our one ice screw at base camp. My plan was not a good one: to solo up bullet-hard ice covered in a thin layer of sugary snow with no gear or crampons, kicking or cutting steps as I went, and then to make a belay and lower my axe down for Nigel to follow. Modern alpinists are no longer in the habit of cutting steps, now we are blessed with modern gear. I could only think of Brocherel and Ollier, the Courmayeur guides who had cut steps for Mackinder up the Diamond glacier to the summit in 1899, allegedly at the arduous rate of 130ft in three hours. He had praised them as 'woodmen as well as icemen'. I was sure they would have stormed up this. A woodman I most certainly was not, and as I wondered how I was going to cut the next step, using the axe from which I was hanging, with my two feet on 2 cm foot holds, I turned my attention to the air beneath my feet and Shipton's Camp nearly 1,000m below. I convinced myself quickly that this was a two-axe job and that it might be sensible to turn back before I was committed to an ice climb in my walking boots. Gingerly, I went into reverse. Back at the Gate of the Mists, feeling relieved, I knew I had failed Nigel, who always refers to me as the 'ice specialist' of our team. It had not occurred to us that we might not be able to get back up onto Nelion. Felice Benuzzi would have been better equipped than us, with his hand-made crampons. We looked down at the Darwin glacier below at the foot of the Diamond Couloir, and could just make out our tents beyond, calling to us from the American Camp.

It was over to Nigel to attempt to rock climb out of our predicament. The rock specialist he most certainly is. He disappeared behind a very unpromising corner and began to emit grunting noises, as he forced his way up a steep layback, his determination augmented by the knowledge that he had left his rucksack with all his gear on top of Nelion. Eventually the huffing and puffing died down and Nigel declared himself safe. I had hoped he might go further, but once I saw the corner he had climbed I understood. It rose steeply with no purchase for the feet and when I had done the strenuous moves, I realised we were not out of the woods. Nigel seemed keen to send me down and across right, but my thoughts were only upward, and I could see one bouldery move, which might lead to easier ground. Handing him my rucksack with a nervous smirk, I swung my right foot up and over a



Left: Nigel Bassam and the author at the Howell hut with the memorial plaque brought up by the Mountain Club of Kenya. (*Nicholas Hurndall Smith*)



Right: Ian Howell at Mount Kenya. (*John Cleare*)

featureless round edge, with only a blank smear for my left foot. This was quite a move to undertake at this altitude, I thought, and at least HVS. I scrabbled higher for a hold and was rewarded. Kicking some ice away with my left foot, I returned into balance, and bingo! From here, it was a few more metres of easy climbing back to the abseil point, and then on again, relieved, to the summit of Nelion, three hours after we had left it.

On Nelion, we met Fish and Émmanuel of the Mountain Club of Kenya. They had been behind Julian and Robyn and were concerned that Richard and Neil had not yet joined them. We sat for a while, and used this as an opportunity to admire the hut built by Kenya pioneer and Alpine Club member Ian Howell. Ian had carried the material up over 13 solo ascents in 1970 and his death in November had been a shock to us all as he had been involved in helping us with plans. Not only had Fish and Émmanuel carried up a plaque, which was to be screwed onto the hut in his memory, but Richard was carrying some of his ashes, to be cast to the four winds. I headed across to the top of the final pitch and there, below, were Neil and Richard, happy to find they were close to Nelion, where they would sleep that night. 'Pin' Howell had been the first to climb the Diamond Buttress. 'He was a wonderful man, he was,' as Richard Nadin said.

With 14 equipped abseils ahead of us leading to the base of the route, we accepted gratefully some melted snow from Fish, and forged on down in the hope we might get back before dark. We quickly passed the crux sections and soon found ourselves back at Baillie's bivy, where we retrieved the gear we had left in its nooks and crannies. As we continued, it began to snow heavily and we slowed a little to take more care but we found the abseil points efficiently, with the help of Nigel's eagle eyes, and after just over two hours were back at the base of the route. We reached camp as the last light faded just in time for dinner.

'You're late,' Andrew said, smiling, as we poked our heads into the mess tent.

I have always thought that the best and most memorable climbs are the ones where success is uncertain. The recce we had done had only served to

make the route look harder than I expected. We had worked well as a team and suffered none of the constant dangers experienced by our predecessors. I had been particularly struck by the death of the explorer Dr George Kolb, who was killed in 1899 by a charging rhinoceros in the alpine zone. Perhaps he had it coming, as he had tried to shoot it first. The glacier named after him has also perished. Back in my tent, I settled down for what was sure to be a night of dreamy insomnia. We had had Batian to ourselves and stood on the shoulders of the giants who had preceded us. I heard Richard's words, like an echo: 'Ian Howell was only five foot five, he was'.

Alpine Club Library Report 2018

At the AC Library we are never not busy; this year has been no exception. After 13 years, I retired as chair of the Library Council at the Library AGM in September, so this is my last ACL report. Philip Meredith was elected the new chair; he is professor of earth sciences at University College London and has already worked hard as a Library trustee so knows the Library well. Jerry Lovatt has retired as keeper of the artefacts. Nigel Buckley has been appointed in this post.

Jerry remains as a trustee; he had served ACL for 26 years so this now brings his service to a prodigious 27 years and counting. Sue Hare now lives in the French Alps and has retired as a trustee but will remain online as the all-important sales manager for the photographs. Neil Cox joined the Library team as our new hon treasurer and has become a trustee. Trevor Campbell-Davis, hon treasurer of the AC, has become a trustee so we will have plenty of financial knowledge. The RGS has appointed Robin Ashcroft as their trustee and we welcome Robin. Barbara Grigor-Taylor and Kimball Morrison, BMC appointee, both long-term trustees are staying, so the Library Council will have good continuity for Library knowledge and investment management.

John Fairley, keeper of the Paintings, has made improvements to the library facilities. Peter Payne and Philip completed work to re-jig shelving in the basement; our rolling stacks are really wonderful. Also, the AC has fitted new and more fire-detection devices. John has improved the hanging display system for paintings in the lecture room. In the main Library, the visitors' desk is fully functional and shows John's new catalogue of our paintings, with each entry having a small size image of each item. Work is in hand extending this to include the artefacts in the collections. Peter Rowland has photographed 60% of our artefacts at high resolution; more to follow. Peter Payne has scanned 1,000 slides by our member, Harish Kapadia.

Nigel, our new professional Librarian, has brought us excellent database know-how to cataloguing the library and is working with David Lund, chair of the AC's IT group, to implement the first stage of using Koha in place of our ageing AdLib catalogue software. Koha can incorporate images in each Library record, and can be extended to cross-reference to all types of item in the Library. This improved search facility will mean that if, say, we look up Mummery, we will find not only relevant books or archives, but also his



Some of the Library team: Trevor Campbell-Davis, Kimball Morrison, Barbara Grigor-Taylor, Neil Cox, Nigel Buckley, Philip Meredith, Hywel Lloyd and John Fairley.

ice axe and his photographs. This is a large project, likely to take several years to implement fully. The next stage is to include our 240 artefacts where images will be really useful. Of course, many tests and trials must be completed before we move away from AdLib completely.

For insurance purposes, Barbara has led, with assistance from Gordon Turner and Janet Leith, a complete clean-down and inventory of all the book shelves, checking bookplates for ownership; this will confirm recent counts and re-valuation of the book collection: we reckon 30,000 books plus thousands of journals and tracts: over £1m in total.

We are very appreciative of all the members who are donating second-hand books to the Library; the collections gain better and more copies of valued books and the sales of surplus books are an extremely valuable contribution to Library funds. Barbara periodically circulates lists of these to members via email, or by hard copy when requested. Over the last five years, this has generated over £14,000 for the Library, greatly helping conservation of the library stock. Duplicate books have also been donated to other club and school libraries. We can state we have never 'pulped' any book; there is always a new grateful owner who can read interesting mountain stories.

The opportunity arose for the AC Library to participate in the London Book Fair in May, during which 15 prestigious libraries opened their doors to provide a mini-exhibition and lecture, for the public to attend. The AC Library does have a charitable obligation to the public and Barbara planned an exhibition of the treasures of the Alpine Club, billed as 'The Summit of Knowledge, the Pinnacle of Alpine Collections'. This was officially advertised and the press took interest. We had to consider the security of the AC collections, and this necessitated the hiring of lockable glass cases but the minimum period of hire was four weeks; therefore, a programme of three



Visitors from Nagano in the Japanese Alps on their visit to the Club.

further dates were organized for AC members to attend. Unfortunately, this was fixed at very short notice and a number of members responded to say they could not make it. Nevertheless, many members did attend, and enjoyed the event. We hope that this can be done again, but with much more notice.

Nigel and Barbara are working with St Paul's School for Girls on a project for their students; they are studying *The White Spider* and are becoming expert about the Eiger north face. Dong Soo Kim from Korea came to see literature on UK Climbers; he is translating many English language mountain books for Korean climbers.

We received a delegation from Nagano in the Japanese Alps who wanted to learn more about an Anglican vicar, Rev Walter Weston, who had been to Japan on three, four-year tours in the 1890s and the early 1900s as a missionary. Fortunately they brought an interpreter, who was very good. We made some presentations to them including slides by Nigel; it was rather strange because each speaker had to wait after each sentence, as it was translated into the other language. Barbara showed books from the collections, written by Weston in 1896, 1918 and 1925 about his trips to the Japanese Alps. Glyn had been digging, and located manuscripts, and Bernie printed a photo. Both Weston and his wife were alpinists; he had joined the AC and his wife joined the Ladies Alpine Club. Our visitors were fascinated to see the original membership application form submitted to the AC by Rev Weston. Below are some photos of the event, including the customary exchange of gifts. An excellent event; the AC is now invited to the Alps in Japan for a celebration of Weston's life.

Discussions have focused on attempts to formulate an AC-ACL custodial agreement, as an earlier text drafted in 2003 has never been confirmed. For



Tatsuya Imai and John Porter.



Peter Payne and Janet Johnson at the exhibition of her latest work.

terms of reference, ACL has used two letters of 1989 between George Band, AC president, and Mike Westmacott, ACL chair. Discussions this year with AC officers agreed that something much more up-to-date was required.

The basis of the AC-ACL relationship is that the AC appoints five of seven ACL trustees as well as the hon librarian, the hon archivist, and the keepers of the artefacts, the photographs and the paintings. Essentially, the AC ultimately controls the Library. It has therefore not been easy to establish how ACL trustees, including those from RGS and BMC, can be empowered to operate an agreement which controls the future of the Library.

However, we have now taken a major step forward in updating the Library structure to meet the original intentions when it was set up in 1971, by the appointment of ACL members. The AC Committee has nominated the first tranche of ACL members, which includes all the keepers and the hon archivist. They will all become full members of the Library in early 2019. We hope that this development will overcome a longstanding anomaly whereby the Library was responsible for the custody of the AC/ACL collections, but the keepers had responsibility only to the AC Committee. This should ensure both a simpler custodial agreement and seamless future custody of all the collections.

In around 2006, it seemed that no significant part of the AC collections was insured; this was at a time of tight finances, not helped by the bank crashes of 2008. But this did concern the trustees who have personal obligations to the charity commissioners and thus the public. The AC was persuaded to insure the books for around £1m and this included some undefined items of fine art. The trustees decided they had to insure the three Ruskin paintings donated to the Library for £0.5m. The Library paid this premium from their funds.

More recently we have begun to worry about being underinsured and the underwriters were pressing for fully itemised lists of what they were insuring. An insurance sub-committee was formed, chaired by John Dempster, which asked two questions: what is the current value of the historic collec-



William Mitchell and Ingram Lloyd at the launch of William's new book on Gabriel Loppé.

tions and who owns what? An estimate of the current value came to around £6m. Now, the keepers have the task of finally itemizing and valuing each item, either individually or by groups; a huge task for everyone.

On the issue of ownership, the Library was formed in 1858 and members have donated items ever since. In 1971, the Library became a charity. In brief terms, this means families of donors do not pay inheritance tax on items donated, these items are held in perpetuity for the benefit of people interested in mountains, the Library pays highly discounted business rates and funding bodies prefer to give grants to registered charities. The question is: which items are to be held in perpetuity? The Library officers took on the task to list what was owned by the Library and we have now completed 'Ownership of the AC Historic Collections'. From this, the insurance premiums payable by the Library are now also calculated.

John Fairley has organized several exhibitions of paintings in the lecture room. Zoe Dickey showed modern canvases that capture the spirit of landscape. Our member Janet Johnson gave a new exhibition of her latest Alpine paintings and member William Mitchell, from the John Mitchell Gallery off Bond Street, gave a lecture on Gabriel Loppé (1825-1913), the artist who was the first French AC member. The AC collections have three of his paintings, which were on show for that evening. William launched his book, the first in English, about Loppé, his life and work.

Peter Rowland and Bernie worked hard with the photos and now have some 6,000 scanned and catalogued. Peter has persuaded our members, who are both excellent mountaineers and photographers, to provide views for this year's AC calendar. All of us must thank the whole Library team for all their efforts to make this year so successful. They care for, catalogue,



The honorary librarian Barbara Grigor-Taylor checking captions for the mini-exhibition held for the London Book fair with some of the Club's featured artefacts.

conserve and arrange access for every item in these historic collections.

Finally, it is for me to say how stimulating it has been working with such marvellous colleagues: always something to learn; someone to meet; an event to make work.

Hywel Lloyd

Boardman Tasker 2018

The Boardman Tasker Award proved as popular as ever in 2018, with 38 entries from eight countries: UK, USA, Canada, Italy, Ireland, South Africa, Austria and Switzerland. This continues the recent high number of submissions from publishers, this being the fourth year in a row we have had more than thirty entries. The 2018 Judges were Peter Gillman, Kate Moorehead and Roger Hubank. Peter and Roger are both past winner of the BT Award. They produced a shortlist of seven books: *Tides*, by Nick Bullock (Vertebrate Publishing); *The Eight Mountains*, by Paolo Cognetti (Harvill Secker); Ed Douglas and John Beatty, *Kinder Scout: The People's Mountain* (Vertebrate Publishing); Christopher Ransmayr, *The Flying Mountain* (Seagull), translated by Simon Pare; David Roberts, *Limits of the Known* (W W Norton); Doug Scott, *The Ogre* (Vertebrate Publishing); Junko Tabei and Helen Rolfe, *Honouring High Places* (Rocky Mountain Books).

The Award was as usual presented at the Kendal festival. Stephen Venables interviewed four of the authors, Nick Bullock, Ed Douglas, Helen Rolfe and Doug Scott and translator Simon Pare, and there were films from John Beatty, David Roberts and Paolo Cognetti. Readings were taken from all seven books and were warmly received by a large audience.

Chair of the judges, Peter Gillman, gave an extensive speech outlining the merits of the shortlisted books and announced the winner for 2018: David Roberts for *Limits of the Known*. This book is an enthralling examination, part history, part memoir of the motivations of mountaineers and other explorers, related by a veteran author and climber.

To quote Peter Gillman: 'We found his writing clear and compelling, with a rich vocabulary and arrestive, figurative language. It is literary in the best sense of the word, at least as we defined it: elegant and lucid, rather than flowery and quasi-poetic.' David was a hugely popular winner, but sadly could not be present to receive the award due to serious health issues. A film of his acceptance speech was greeted with tumultuous applause. Full details of all submissions, film from and of the events including text of Peter Gillman's speech are available at www.boardmantasker.com.

Steve Dean