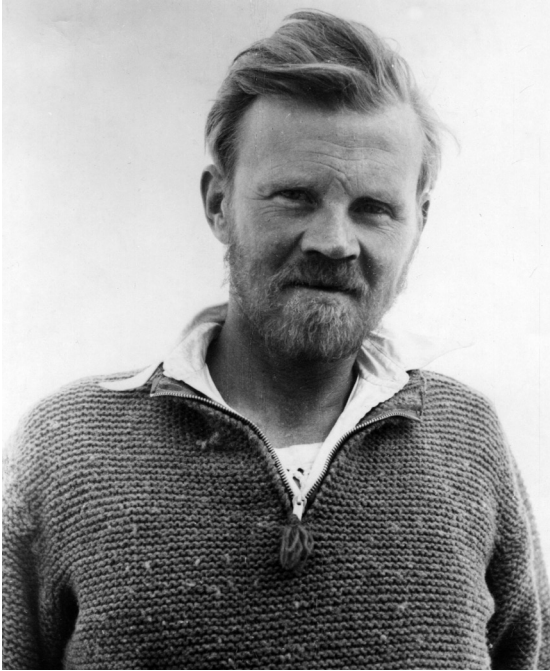

SIMON PIERSE

Letters from the Fish's Tail

The Life and Climbs of Wilfrid Noyce



Wilfrid Noyce (1917-62), photographed on Everest in 1953.

In its obituary, the *Himalayan Journal* described Wilfrid Noyce as ‘almost certainly the greatest British mountaineer of his time’.¹ This year, 2022, marks the 60th anniversary of his death and the 65th anniversary of the expedition that included Noyce to climb Machapuchhare, in Nepali ‘Fishtail’ or the ‘Fish’s Tail’.² Noyce died in tragic circumstances in 1962 during an Anglo-Soviet expedition to the Pamirs. Roped together with Robin Smith, in the briefest of unsecured manoeuvres, they slipped and fell to their deaths. The bodies were recovered and buried in a crevasse.

Noyce was just 44 years old but had already achieved a great deal, not only as a mountaineer but also as a scholar, author, poet and teacher. He was a loving husband and supportive father, which sometimes caused him

1. T Braham, ‘C W F Noyce, Obituary’, *Himalayan Journal*, vol 23, section 19.

2. Sometimes spelt Machhapuchhare. See W Noyce, *Climbing the Fish’s Tail*, Heinemann, London, 1958, p146.



All in the family. Wilfrid Noyce with Rosemary, Jeremy and Tenzing Norgay, Godalming, 1957.

interrogate his motives for climbing and to question whether it was fair and reasonable for a family man with two young sons to do so. In 1937, he had fallen on Scafell and owed his life to Menlove Edwards who roped down and managed to stop the bleeding. The 19-year-old Noyce underwent plastic surgery to rebuild his face. Noyce had another accident in 1946 when a violent gust of wind blew him from his holds on Great Gable and he fell 30ft, sustaining a broken leg. This accident, the third in nine years, 'acted very nearly as an obituary to his climbing' and caused him to question the path he had chosen.³ It 'was designed clearly to teach me,' he wrote, 'and perhaps that my lines have been all wrong, at any rate that I've got to give them up for a while ...'⁴ When Noyce accepted the offer of a teaching job at Malvern College later the same year he found a situation where he could

combine scholarship and modern languages with the opportunity to teach climbing and develop his career as an author and poet. He married Rosemary Davies in August 1950.

In a script for a radio broadcast recorded in February 1957, a few months before joining an expedition led by Lt Col J O M Roberts to climb Machapuchare, Noyce spoke of the impossibility of explaining 'difficulty' and 'danger' to his wife who had never climbed, however bravely she might face the idea of separation.⁵

I am leaving her for some months with our two boys, one aged four, the other two. It will be harder for her on her own to look after house and children; there will be more responsibility. Suppose they get ill? Or have an accident? Suppose there is a fire? And all because I am nailing myself to a bit of snow thousands of miles away.

*This thought makes me ask myself most seriously why I climb. Am I just being selfish, or do I get something out of it which makes even this separation worthwhile?*⁶

3. T Braham, op cit.

4. S Hawkins, *Far, Far the Distant Peak: The Life of Wilfrid Noyce, Mountaineer, Scholar, Poet*, Curbans Books, Cambridge, 2014, p130.

5. W Noyce, 'Why I Climb', BBC German Service, rec 24 February 1957.

6. Ibid.

The letters Noyce wrote during the Machapuchare expedition reveal both love and a sense of responsibility to Rosemary and their young family. The correspondence also shows how he was never quite free of the concerns of his literary career. Book reviews to consider, an article for the *Daily Herald* to write, and poetry to be composed – even in the shadow of the mountain that he was struggling to climb.

Action and reflection, far from being a conflict between two sides of Noyce's personality, were in fact, complementary and part of the same impulse. In the preface to a book of poems published by Noyce in 1960, Frances Cornford wrote of the 'fundamental impulse common to mountaineer and poet, this surprising feat is not the result of possessing a dual nature, but a harmonious one; though it is everlastingly true, as these poems bear witness, that nobody can be a whole human being who has not, at some time or other in life, suffered deeply and been lost.'⁷

Noyce's poetry is sometimes experimental, as in 'Breathless', written at 21,000ft on Everest, where every two-syllable line evokes a gasp for breath, at the same time forming a long trail of words downwards across the page like footprints in the snow. More often Noyce's poetry is lyrical; sometimes using details of nature observed on expeditions as the sounding board for inner feelings. In 'The Chough', seen at 28,000ft on Everest, the bird flies effortlessly to heights that man struggles to reach, mocking and encouraging in turn. In 'Before the Last Climb (written under Machapuchare, May 1957)', birds and flowers induce a quiet reverie:

*Mosses and primula soothe, where I am sitting.
Swallow and redstart flit on the tumbling stream.
All these call me to calm in the Abiding,
In sacred thought, not in ambitious dream.*

A striving to understand the poetic and adventurer instincts within his own personality is traceable in much of what Noyce published, whether it is in the eclectic research of *Scholar Mountaineers* (1950) or the more accessible *The Springs of Adventure* (1958). In *Why I Climb* (1957), Noyce identified collaboration as one of four key motivations. 'Climbing with one or two others you are no longer a single person, you are a "party", or, in bigger ranges, an "expedition". You move as one, fall as one; sometimes your very life depends upon your thinking as one.'⁸

*I have felt this same pleasure on the bigger climbs of the Himalaya ... and particularly in 1953 on Mount Everest. We felt that we were a team, and that the important thing was not "who" got to the top but that "we" got to the top.'*⁹

7. F Cornford, Foreword to *Poems* by Wilfrid Noyce, Heinemann, London, 1960, p12.

8. W Noyce, 'Why I Climb'.

9. Ibid.



Machapuchare, 1957. Standing, left to right: David Cox, Jimmy Roberts, Dikshya Man (liaison officer). Sitting, left to right: Dhanbahadur, Charles Wylie, Roger Chorley, Ang Nyima, Ang Tsering, Tashi.

Noyce recalled how he felt ‘no twinge of jealousy, only a great joy’ as his Sherpa pointed towards the distant figures of Hillary and Tenzing on the lower, south summit.¹⁰ Expedition leader John Hunt was in no doubt that Noyce could have reached the summit: ‘I know, from a quiet uncomplaining word to me at Base Camp on May 8th ... that he felt this, too. It was some comfort to us both that we were to have made a third attempt together, if such had been needed.’¹¹

South Col, the book Noyce wrote of his time on Everest, is one of the best Himalayan expedition books ever written. Noyce wrote of ‘being irresistibly tempted to try what may be impossible, and what a leader’s expedition book does not from its very nature do ... there may remain a further interest in what the members of the party, their untidy everyday individual selves, were seeing and feeling and thinking through all those months; in the closer expression of their fears and doubts and delights.’¹² The success of *South Col* gave Noyce the confidence he needed to further his writing career and give up teaching which he did in 1961. It makes his untimely death the following year all the more poignant.

10. Ibid.

11. J Hunt, ‘In Memoriam’, *Alpine Journal*, vol 67, pp389-91.

12. W Noyce, *South Col: One Man’s Adventure on the Ascent of Everest*, 1953 Heinemann, London, 1954, xvii.

On 22 May 1957, Noyce was at base camp beneath Machapuchare, having just returned from a strenuous stint above camp IV driving in pitons and fixing ropes. There was a stack of mail waiting for him from friends and family. He wrote to his wife, 'Romie', explaining that he had returned to get more rope, stakes and food, adding that:

*Another reason for 'reculer pour mieux sauter' has been the weather which was **bloody** (there's no other word) almost the whole time. Nearly always it was fine in the early morning. Then about 10.00am clouds were creeping up, and by 12.00 or 1.00pm it was snowing or hailing fine pea-sized hailstones with no cohesion whatever, which had to be bailed off the tents with anything that came to hand, till 7.00 or 8.00pm in the evening.¹³*

Wilfrid described how pleasant it was to be resting a day or two on a bank amongst primulas, 're-reading all your letters and looking at the splendid photos Mum sent.' Sucking penicillin lozenges to alleviate the symptoms of a gumboil which flared up about once a year, he wrote: 'It certainly is a difficult mountain, but a very safe one.'¹⁴

Much of the work has been fixing ropes, there are now 1,300 feet strung out, 100 between I & II, 700 between II & III, 500 between III & IV. I have taken a certain fierce pride in having led every bit of the route and cut all the steps and stuck in all the pitons. You remember the problem was to get onto the ridge. We managed that by going straight up the face above II, up a snow gully and then a steep snow ... where the fixed rope is, then left at the level top of a huge ice bulge which overhangs in the lower part, but [the] top makes a nice level III, before Chas lost his sleeping bag – it was blown off and went nearly right down to II.¹⁵

Roger Chorley had contracted polio on his way out to join the expedition and Jimmy Roberts had to take him down the mountain on an improvised sedan chair with carriers. It 'must have been a tough job,' Wilfrid wrote, 'and he is now having to do a month's quarantine at Pokhara mission. ... [Jimmy] really is a splendid person, and has never murmured at having to miss half the expedition taking Roger down. Unassuming, modest, humorous. Knows the Indians and Nepalis backwards.'¹⁶

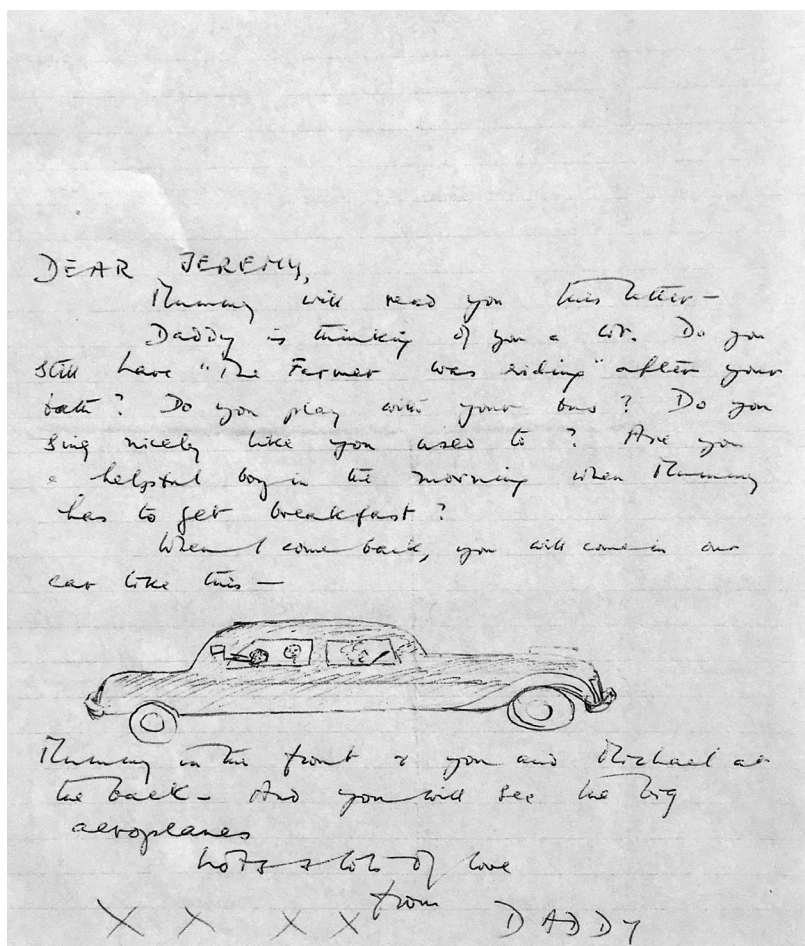
Affairs of home were never far from Noyce's mind. In his letters, he commented on news about the start of the spring term (Cricket Quarter) at Charterhouse. He had missed the candidates meeting to award places and lamented that the academic standard that year hadn't been better. Heine-mann had shortened the preface to one of his publications and reviews of *Snowdon Biography* had appeared in the British press. *The Times* wrote of the

13. W Noyce to R Noyce, 22 May 1957.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*



Letters home, to Jeremy, above, and Michael, opposite.

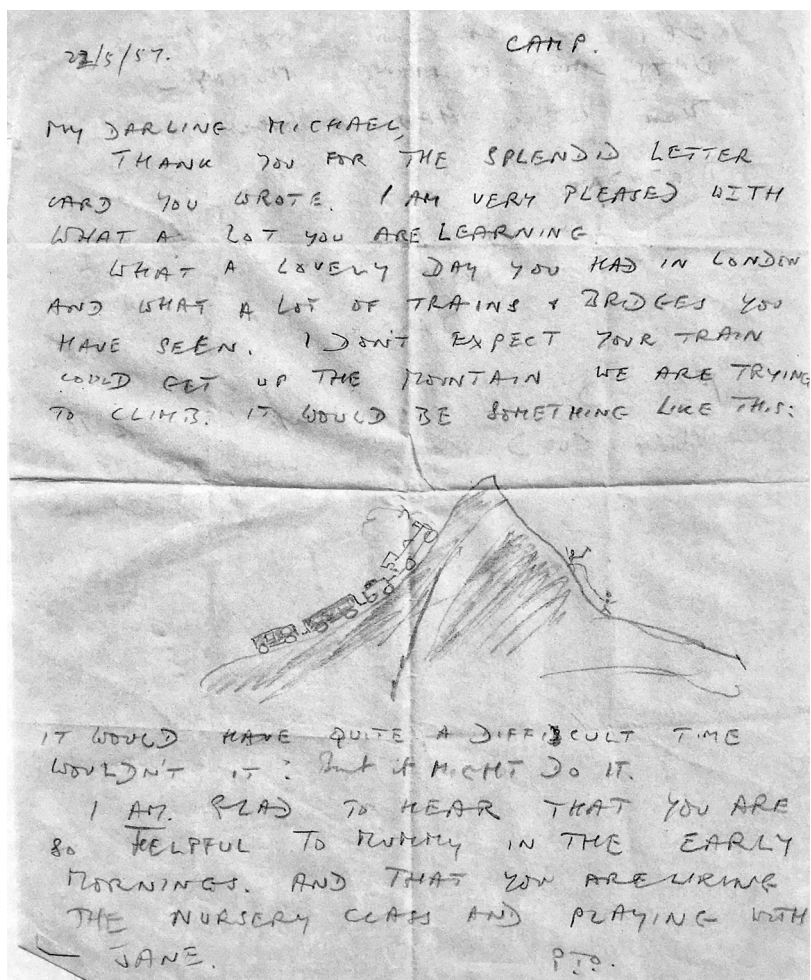
book's significance and how it was likely to replace 'the classic but outdated *Mountains of Snowdonia*'. The reviewer paid tribute to Noyce's contribution: 'a chapter on the literature [that] rescues much attractive writing from the limbo of climbing-club journals.'¹⁷ 'I have had *The Times* review in Thomas's letter,' Wilf wrote to Romie, 'and Jo Briggs, in a letter to David says it has had very good reviews. I hope so.'¹⁸

On the flight to India, Noyce had spent the time writing the first chapter to *The Springs of Adventure*, which would be published by John Murray the following year.¹⁹ There was also a poetry prize that Rosemary had written

17. 'Climbing High', review of *Snowdon Biography* by G Winthrop Young, G Sutton and W Noyce, *The Times*, 25 April 1957, p11.

18. W Noyce to R Noyce, 22 May 1957.

19. W Noyce to R Noyce, postmarked 6 April 1957.



about in one of her letters. The deadline was 6 July. 'If I am inspired here I will send', Wilf wrote. 'I don't think there's a chance in a million, but if not here, I will seek out when I get home – I don't think you could find anything in my study – there is a folder – but you are at liberty to try and choose.'²⁰

Rosemary had encouraged the boys to write to their father and Wilf enclosed notes addressed to each of them in turn. To his younger son, Jeremy, aged just two, he promised birthday presents on his return from Nepal and was hoping to see him at the airport.²¹ To Michael (aged four) he wrote of how impressed he was by the 'splendid letter card' Michael had written and thanking him for helping his mother in the early mornings.

20. W Noyce to R Noyce, 22 May 1957.

21. *Climbing the Fish's Tail* is dedicated to Jeremy.



The summit of Machapuchare (6993m), photographed during the 1957 expedition.

*What a lovely day you had in London and what a lot of trains and bridges you have seen. I don't expect your train could get up the mountain we are trying to climb – it would be something like this: [drawing]. It would have quite a difficult time, wouldn't it? But it might do it. ... Keep on crossing off the days and helping Mummy – then we'll have a lovely birthday! P.S. keep on writing I do think your letter is very good. Keep on writing!*²²

Noyce had cabled to Dehli to secure the return flight to London and was hoping to be at the airport in time to celebrate his son Michael's birthday. 'I could ramble on indefinitely among the primulas,' he concluded. 'It may be a fortnight or so before another [letter] gets off. I do hope the Indians lay off these stamps: I'll ask the parents in a letter card to let you know they have heard and am writing a note to Mum too.'²³

Charles Wylie wrote to Rosemary Noyce from base camp on 24 May 1957, praising Wilfrid's achievements on the mountain:

22. W Noyce to M Noyce, 22 May 1957.

23. W Noyce to R Noyce, 22 May 1957.

*Without exaggeration, he is the tower of strength of the expedition on the mountain. I have been astounded with his prowess as a mountaineer and his quite indestructible stamina. He has done literally all the work on the mountain so far – led every inch of the way, and most of it several times over, fixed all the ropes, cut all the steps ... If we get to the top it will be Wilf's climb entirely.*²⁴

Before the final attempt on the mountain, Noyce wrote a poem, addressing the mountain directly: 'I have long fought you and now, stayed at your feet, ask how I came here, why so prayed to bestride you, your cold hard body. Where was the use of it? ... I only know that tomorrow I shall be stepping up the patterned ridge, towards the rockhead crown; as if it were all, for one hour to be standing on a crested wave of the world. And then come down.'

Noyce's 'ambitious dream' was not to be realised. On the morning of 2 June, it was snowing hard. Just before 11am, they saw 'four or five columns of blue ice, like the claws of some great dragon ... it was the summit itself, perhaps a little under 150 feet above our heads.'²⁵ Climbing with David Cox, Noyce had almost reached the summit but was forced to turn back due to the bad weather.

Back at base camp on 8 June, it was with a sense of irritation rather than disappointment that Noyce considered whether or not they could be said to have climbed Machapuchare. *Climbing the Fish's Tail*, the title of the book he wrote about the expedition is intentionally ambiguous. To this day, Machapuchare has never officially been climbed to its summit.²⁶

The five years that followed the Machapuchare expedition were a time of fulfilment for Wilfrid Noyce. In 1960, he was invited to lead an Anglo-American expedition to the Karakoram where, with Jack Sadler, he made the first ascent of Trivor (7577m). The same year Heinemann published a volume of Noyce's poetry²⁷. And again in 1960, *Samson*, a book on the life and writings of Menlove Edwards²⁸, co-authored with Geoffrey Sutton, was published privately.

Wilfrid Noyce died on 24 July 1962, together with his climbing companion Robin Smith, after ascending Mount Garmo (6595m) in the Pamirs. They were members of Sir John Hunt's 18-man Anglo-Soviet expedition. In 2009, the climber's younger son Jeremy visited the site of Noyce's burial in Tajikistan where Russian mountaineers of the Sports Society Spartak had erected a memorial to Noyce and Smith overlooking the glacier where they were buried.

In Noyce's obituary, Trevor Braham paid tribute to the 'sensitive temperament of his character ... richly blended with courage, gentleness, modesty and integrity ... Nobody had more friends, or enjoyed friendships more,

24. C Wylie to R Noyce, 24 May 1957.

25. S Hawkins, op cit, p231.

26. To respect local opinion, the Nepali government does not grant permits to climb this especially sacred peak. New Zealander Bill Denz (1951-83) is believed to have made an illegal ascent in the early 1980s.

27. W Noyce, *Poems*, Heinemann, London, 1960.

28. G Sutton & W Noyce, *Samson: The Life and Writings of Menlove Edwards*, The Cloister Press, Stockport, 1960.



Memorial to Wilfrid Noyce and Robin Smith, Garmo valley, Tajikistan, September 2009.

although his quiet, almost hesitant, manner made him a difficult person to know well.²⁹ In the *Alpine Journal*, Sir John Hunt wrote movingly of his long friendship with Noyce. They had met in an army camp in Thetford in 1940 and were initially brought together by the mutual experience of surviving serious climbing accidents. Together they taught soldiers the basics of climbing in Snowdonia. Hunt's description of Wilf as a 'diffident, seemingly dreamy young officer, who was wont quietly to drift off on his own after a long day's training, ... content to commune with himself and with nature' is key to understanding Noyce's character.³⁰

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Jeremy and Michael Noyce for giving me permission to quote from family correspondence and to reproduce photographs from their father's archive.

29. T Braham, op cit.

30. J Hunt, op cit.