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The Alpine Journal and its Editors

Part IV: 1954-82^a



Francis Keenlyside with HM The Queen at the Club's centenary celebrations in 1957. (AC Photo Library).

F H Keenlyside (1954-61)

The sacking of T Graham Brown from the editorship of the *Alpine Journal* in 1954^b was largely the result of his having antagonised Geoffrey Winthrop Young but there had been other, more cogent grounds: the *Journal* was in a rut, backward looking and out of touch, criticisms that had also been aimed at the Club itself and which had led to the formation of the Alpine Climbing Group. As W H Murray observed:

I and several other members of the club who joined the recently formed Alpine Climbing Group were impelled to do so because it had become no longer possible within the AC to keep ourselves adequately informed about Alpine climbing developments ... The AJ has become the last place one looks to get news of routes and reconnaissances.¹

a. Parts I-III, written by T S Blakeney, appeared in AJs vols 79, 80 and 81.

b. P Foster & G Jones, 'Sacking the Editor', *Alpine Journal*, vol 119, pp262-77, 2015.

Reform was required and Francis Keenlyside was chosen to deliver it, although at first sight he was not obviously the person best qualified to do so. He had been elected to the Club six years earlier on the strength of a walking holiday in the Alps (and an ascent of the Great Pyramid) in 1938, a few minor climbs with guides in 1939 and two seasons immediately after the Second World War; his sentiments were pre-war, inclining more to those of Winthrop Young than Strutt's. For Keenlyside, mountaineering was a route to an 'aesthetic experience'; and he had his own doubts about his suitability. In a letter to Graham Brown, he wrote:

I had no wish to be editor, certainly no wish to succeed you but was persuaded in all the circumstances I should do so ... I am fully aware that my qualifications fall very far short of yours: the rather unflattering interest of the Committee seemed to be to secure an 'efficiency' expert available in London. And I am not even that.²

But the AC Committee, having identified its quarry, seemingly had no qualms about poaching him from the Climbers' Club whose journal he edited at the time.

Keenlyside set out his stall in an editorial note:

When the Alpine Club was founded mountaineering was the activity of a handful of unusual men in very few countries. Now it is the recreation of large numbers of men and women throughout the world. The task of maintaining contact with mountaineering development and achievement has consequently become vastly more difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless we feel that this task, so far as it lies in our powers, is imposed on the Alpine Journal.³

The period of his editorship coincided with an international explosion in Himalayan climbing and a resurgence of the British in the Alps. These developments are captured in his journals. There were reports from the leaders of the expeditions that made the first ascents of Nanga Parbat (Austro-Germans), K2 (Italians), Cho Oyu (Austrian), Kangchenjunga (British), Makalu (French), Lhotse and the second ascent of Everest (Swiss).

In the Alps, the second ascent of the west face of the Dru by Joe Brown and Don Whillans was reported in an article by Ron Moseley, a fellow member of the Rock and Ice; Hamish MacInnes described his ascent of the Bonatti Pillar, during which he suffered a fractured skull along with the second British ascent of the Walker Spur, following the trail of empty tubes of Smarties discarded by Robin Smith and Gunn Clark who were one bivouac ahead; and Chris Bonington contributed technical accounts of three climbs on the north faces of the Tre Cime di Lavaredo including the *Brandler-Hasse* on the Cima Grande, which on the first ascent had required fifteen bolts and about 200 pitons. Strutt would surely have been spinning in his grave while his ghost still haunted the Club.

A few years earlier Keenlyside had commissioned and published an article

on the techniques of artificial climbing which prompted Tom Peacocke to write the following:

*I would humbly suggest that the article ... is somewhat out of place in the Alpine Journal and would better grace the pages of an engineering journal. The methods ... are alien to the traditions of the Alpine Club and to British mountaineering generally.*⁴

To keep abreast of mountaineering worldwide, Keenlyside established a network of foreign correspondents whose regular reviews and updates appeared as Area Notes, which remain a feature of the *Journal* to this day. He also secured articles by leading Continental climbers, such as Kurt Diemberger, Gaston Rébuffat and André Roch, their contributions usually appearing in translation although several were published in their original French, including Monsieur Seylaz's six-page review of *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc* by Graham Brown and de Beer, published to mark the Club's centenary. (Was there no native English-speaker in the Club willing to write a review and risk a feud with TGB?)

The Club celebrated its centenary in 1957 and the *Journal's* content for that year was overwhelmingly retrospective, charting the history of mountaineering and the Club in contributions from, amongst others, Geoffrey Young, Arnold Lunn, Jack Longland and Tom Longstaff. In his article, 'Fifty Years Ago', Longstaff provided delicious vignettes of some of the senior members who had occupied the front row in the lecture hall at the turn of the century: Sir Edward Davidson, 'scarcely approachable in his majestic self-confidence'; Douglas Freshfield, 'very dangerous to cross swords with and never popular'; James Bryce, 'a more urbane, friendly and accomplished personality I am never likely to meet'; and Clinton Dent, whose 'malice was delicious without a trace of anger ... the most intriguing character I have ever known.'

Accounts of the centenary celebrations spilled over into the next number, filling half its pages. The reception held in the great hall of Lincoln's Inn and attended by the Queen and Prince Philip had been a glittering occasion. In a description perhaps more suited to *Vogue* than the *AJ*, readers were informed that the Queen wore 'a lovely, full-skirted dress of cream and gold brocade, diamond tiara, necklace and earrings of diamonds, and the star and blue sash of the Order of the Garter' and 'made a radiant picture, vivid, smiling and relaxed, clasping a charming bouquet of edelweiss, deep-blue trumpet gentians and other alpine flowers.'⁵ The dinner at the Dorchester Hotel commenced with turtle soup, 'allaying any fears of what was to come', and was accompanied by 'well-chosen' wines, inducing in the reporter 'a feeling of how appropriate it had all been to the occasion, and how well in keeping with the Club's own character: sufficient formality but without stiffness, and above all, a pleasantly relaxed atmosphere of ease, friendship

and good fellowship.⁶ Understandably, this was the *Journal* at its most parochial but by the time Keenlyside relinquished the editorship he had made considerable strides towards countering Bill Murray's criticism, delivering a *Journal* in which the reader could confidently expect to find information about new climbs and exploration in mountain ranges throughout the world.

A D M Cox (1962-7)

Medieval historian and Oxford don David Cox had started rock climbing as a schoolboy in the late 1920s on the tors of Dartmoor. Ten years later, he was operating at the highest level, repeating routes such as *Longland's* and *Kirkus' Great Slab* on Cloggy, and adding his own new route, *Sunset Crack*, on its East Buttress. His Alpine career had started slowly and was interrupted by the Second World War, during which he was engaged in mountain-warfare training in Britain and Lebanon but in the 1950s he enjoyed a series of successful seasons, often in the company of Sir John Hunt. In 1957 he had visited the Himalaya and with Wilfrid Noyce just failed to reach the summit of Machapuchare. The following year he contracted polio, which left him with permanently weakened arms and chest, terminating his climbing career.

Like Keenlyside, Cox's formative years had been spent in the shadow of Young and Strutt, the former, recalled Cox's contemporary and great friend Robin Hodgkin, held in 'profound but slightly satirical affection' and the latter considered 'absurdly chauvinist.' But Cox had sensed that a new era was in the offing – he had even placed a piton for a belay on his first ascent in 1935 of the *Climbers' Club Ordinary* on the Dewerstone – and 'the compromises between the old and the threatening new were veiled in jokes.'⁷ As editor he would display a natural sympathy for the young and the novel.

On assuming the editorship, Cox continued the task of keeping a finger on the pulse of mountaineering around the world. Set-piece, national expeditions to 8,000m peaks were giving way to smaller, cheaper expeditions, and interest in the mountains of South America as an alternative to the



David Cox, the Oxford don whose 'impulse was always towards a younger, more enterprising style.'
(AC Photo Library)

Himalaya grew. In a neat coincidence of generations, the veteran Eric Ship-ton described his travels in Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego in the same volume of the *Journal* as the thrusting Bonington provided an account of the first ascent of the Central Tower of Paine. Significant developments in alpinism were covered in articles from Bonington on the first ascent of the Central Pillar of Frêney, John Harlin on the first ascent of the direct route up the west face of the Dru and Peter Gillman on the epic winter ascent of the Eiger's *Harlin Route*.

The siege tactics employed and the danger tolerated during the latter were castigated in a letter to the *Journal*, raising once again the ghost of Strutt: it was a commercial stunt; the route was artificial, fixed ropes providing a 'handrail' down which climbers 'were able to descend at any time to the "almost hysterical atmosphere" of a well appointed hotel, which provided good meals, the comfort of a well heated room and a warm bed, a good wine-list, a dance band and the pleasures of female company';⁸ and following Harlin's death continuing the climb was unjustifiable. By contrast, Cox wrote in his review of *Eiger Direct*, by Gillman and Dougal Haston:

*one can only admire the planning of the climb and the skill and endurance by which it was achieved ... To a reviewer not of that generation, it seems that climbing is done for enjoyment; that there are many ways of enjoying it; that extreme climbing, if one is competent to do it, is one of them; and that very few people should mind if unorthodox means were used on a new route on the north face of the Eiger.*⁹

Cox's 'impulse was always towards a younger, more enterprising style.'¹⁰ He welcomed articles from young alpinists and allowed a more flippant tone. Here, for example, is Tony Smythe on expedition planning:

*Barrie Biven and I decided to go to Alaska one Sunday afternoon in January, 1962, when we were eating fish and chips in a café in Bristol. We had met for the first time only twenty minutes before, and twenty minutes later we parted, having arranged a rendezvous in Canada for the following April. Somewhere I read that if an expedition can't be organised on the back of an old envelope, it isn't going to be any fun; at that meeting, Barrie and I didn't seem to have even a pencil between us!*¹¹

And Mick Burke, recalling his precarious situation high up on the north face of the Matterhorn during a winter ascent with Haston:

*The problem was a 60-70ft. cliff composed of dry stone walling, but it was all leaning towards me. It looked dangerous to stand underneath let alone climb on it. Still who is afraid of these slight problems? (Anyone who is please get in contact – I'm forming a club). For a short while the cold weather disappeared and was followed by a hot spell. I was really sweating ... I was so frightened I can't remember that passage very well.*¹²

Like his predecessor, Cox enjoyed the support of two assistant editors: Tom Blakeney and Fred Dangar. Amongst Blakeney's papers stored in the British Library¹³ is correspondence with Cox illustrating some of the trials of an editor. Contributors required careful handling: 'what a pity it is that Odell, who is a nice chap in many ways, gets prickly so easily'; Longland 'writes well – though he is a tiresome chap to pin down'; and he tussled with Charles Evans over the obituary notice of his friend, Graham Brown: 'I have given a good deal of thought to the tiresome Graham Brown problem, the crucial question ... has all along been what weight should be attached to GB's wishes?'

There were other controversies to be tactfully resolved. In 1937 F Spencer Chapman had made an audacious first ascent of Chomolhari, situated on the border between Tibet and Bhutan, reaching the summit with an inexperienced Sherpa and enduring a lengthy and harrowing descent. At the time there had been whisperings of doubt as to whether Chapman had actually reached the summit, for amongst his contemporaries he had gained the reputation for a tendency to exaggerate his feats;^d 29 years later this doubt was expressed in two separate articles published in *Mountain World* and *Les Alpes*, provoking indignation on the part of Blakeney and Dangar who authored a refutation of this perceived calumny against a war-hero.^e Cox's emollient opinion was that it was 'a storm in a teacup'.

News of the first ascent of Everest from the north by the Chinese in 1960 had been greeted with scepticism and the expedition's photographic evidence was scrutinised in the pages of the *Journal*. In the absence of a view from the summit – the Chinese had arrived in darkness – much effort and ingenuity were applied to establishing the height and position from which the expedition's highest picture had been taken: probably at about 8,700m from a point on the north-east ridge a little above the Second Step. Yet in some minds there lingered the possibility that the photograph could have been taken from an aeroplane.

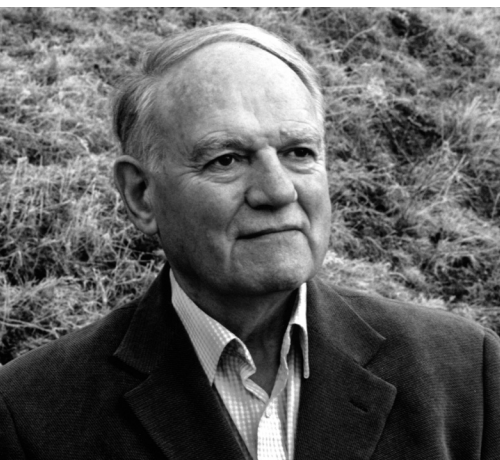
Then there was the perennial challenge of controlling the ever-rising cost of production of the *Journal*. By the end of 1966 Cox had decided to resign the editorship and the search for a successor began. 'If the Committee plumped for a young man on the Youth Must be Served principle,' opined Blakeney a trifle sniffily, 'then Blackshaw suggests himself.'

Alan Blackshaw (1968-70)

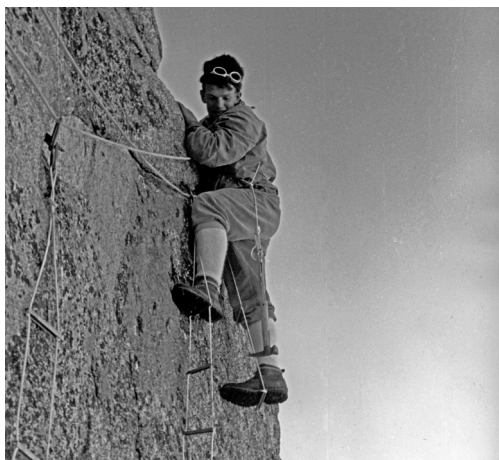
Blackshaw, then aged 35, was a product of the vibrant Oxford University Mountaineering Club of the early 1950s and a member of the ACG. A career civil servant possessing considerable energy and intellect, he was in the fast lane for promotion and had already risen to the rank of principal private secretary.

d. Jack Longland, who had been at Cambridge with him, contributed Chapman's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and in it wrote of his exploits: 'Remarkable as these were, they lost nothing in the telling.'

e. During the Second World War Chapman had spent three years operating behind enemy lines in Malaya and at one stage had been presumed dead. For his services he received the DSO and bar; the Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia Command, Lord Mountbatten, declared that he should have been awarded the Victoria Cross.



Alan Blackshaw, president of the Alpine Club 2002-04 and a formidable campaigner. (AC Photo Library)



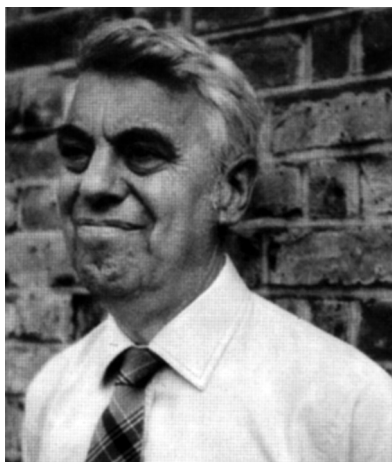
Alan Blackshaw leading an artificial pitch on the east ridge of the Dent du Crocodile, photographed by Roger Chorley on 20 July 1953. (AC Photo Library)

He was a natural campaigner – ‘causes and disputes were a speciality’ – and he would make important contributions in matters of land access, conservation and mountaineering administration, serving as president of the British Mountaineering Council, the UIAA and the Alpine Club. His tenure of the editorship was brief but in 1969 he introduced a major change to the *Journal*, making it a single-issue annual volume, an innovation first mooted during Graham Brown’s editorship and pressed for by Keenlyside. The long-standing practice of producing two issues per year had necessarily involved duplication of effort and cost, posing practical problems for the editor and financial pressure on the Club, and had become unsustainable. The new format with wider coverage was well received and sales of the *Journal* almost trebled, half of them abroad, requiring a reprint.^f

E C Pyatt (1971-82)

Ted Pyatt’s Alpine experience was modest, comprising two seasons in the Bernese Oberland immediately after the war, but he was immensely knowledgeable about mountains and mountaineering and he brought ‘boundless, almost relentless energy’ to the role.¹⁴ He was persuasive, too. Chris Russell recalls being induced to write his column, *100 Years Ago*, still a regular feature 50 years later, during a good meal accompanied by fine wine, and he assembled an expanded team of assistants, delegating masterfully. Pyatt’s editorial notes make clear the challenges he faced: ‘an annual publication of the present quality and proportions is a publishing proposition comparable

f. To stimulate sales the cover price had been reduced from 42s to 35s but rising costs of production necessitated a return to the original price in the following year.



Ted Pyatt, editor in the 1970s, was forced to deal with spiralling costs but managed to maintain the *Journal's* breadth of coverage.

with or even larger than, the average book,' making it impractical to compete for topical information with the burgeoning bimonthly magazines, especially Ken Wilson's *Mountain*, then in its heyday, and necessitated 'a change of basic style.'¹⁵

The 1970s were a period of extraordinary advances in mountaineering. The decade began with the ascent of the south face of Annapurna followed a few years later by the first ascent of the south-west face of Everest, both achieved by Bonington's large and hugely expensive expeditions which used traditional siege tactics but attained a new level of difficulty in high-altitude climbing. These climbs were duly reported in the *Journal*. But a new generation that embraced a different style – 'the struggle' – was emerging.

*We did not want to overcome a mountain with ease, we needed to struggle, needed to be at the edge of what was possible for us, needed an outcome that was uncertain.*¹⁶

That was the view of Joe Tasker, who with Peter Boardman, Alan Rouse, Alex MacIntyre and others led the way. They sought out difficulty, choosing audacious lines and attempting them often in adverse conditions without logistical support, and accepted greater risk, with the result that, as John Porter has observed, the generation 'nearly climbed itself into extinction.' Their exploits rarely reached the pages of the *AJ*, the zeitgeist of this generation finding expression in articles for *Mountain* magazine.

In 1975 the Ladies' Alpine Club merged with the AC bringing 150 new members to the Club. The *Journal's* subtitle was amended to recognise the incorporation of the journal of the LAC and in the following three numbers Pyatt published a series of articles by Cicely Williams, entitled 'The Feminine Share of Mountain Adventure'. Yet over the next few years the ladies contributed fewer than a handful of articles. Barbara Swindin's piece, 'Perpetual Second', offers a clue to their reticence:

Perhaps nowadays with the so-called liberation of women we should all be forcing ourselves forward to the sharp end of the rope, with its undoubted

excitements and rewards, but this might mean forgoing many of the pleasures gained from pushing oneself slightly beyond one's limits in the security of climbing with a far more competent companion.^{17g}

Pyatt, whose professional life was spent at the National Physical Laboratory undertaking and supervising research (his expertise was in electronics), accorded greater prominence to science in the *Journal* to reflect its rubric: 'a record of mountain adventure and scientific observation', more than doubling the number of scientific articles published by his three predecessors combined, and introducing a specific section, Scientific Notes, which regularly ran to three pages. Diverse subjects were covered: glaciology, geology, meteorology and medicine; graphs, formulae and equations became almost commonplace. Pyatt was also concerned about the future of the mountain environment and pleaded for relevant contributions, 'otherwise it will look as though the AC has nothing to say concerning matters of the moment';¹⁸ the only response was Ronald Clark's 1978 essay on the pollution of the Alps, illustrated ominously with pictures of traffic jams on the St Gotthard, a massive concrete dam in Valgrisanche, cranes and scaffolding in Breuil and ski lifts in Alpe d'Huez.

Pyatt's 12-year tenure of the editorship was second only to George Yeld's, which lasted 30 (1896-1926). They had not been easy years. The 1970s were a disastrous decade for the nation's prosperity: economic stagnation combined with rising inflation and rising unemployment, culminating in the notorious winter of discontent. Escalating costs of production of the *Journal* forced Pyatt to retrench: he cut the number of pages by about one fifth but by reducing the font size for large sections and insisting on brevity from his contributors he maintained the breadth of coverage, and he experimented with cheaper printing methods resulting in some decrease in quality. There were additional difficulties which he stated bluntly:

*I acknowledge with deep gratitude the dwindling numbers of contributors, whose efforts are reproduced herewith and the very considerable efforts they have made towards this production ... I acknowledge with quite different feelings all those who refused for not very obvious reasons to contribute, those who hurriedly put forward an utterly useless alternative to themselves and those who engaged to contribute and then disappeared beyond the range of all enquiry and entreaty; they make the Editor's task considerably more arduous than it needs to be.*¹⁹

Nevertheless, Pyatt's efforts had sustained the *Journal* during a period when there had been moments of serious doubt about its viability.

g. Swindin would go on to reach all but one of the 4,000m summits in the Alps.

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