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JOHN HUNT AND DAVID COX  
**Wilfred Noyce 1917–1962:  
Some Personal Memories**

*(Plates 5 and 29)*

The present generation of brilliant young alpinists did not know Wilfrid Noyce, but in our time he was among the foremost climbers of the period just before and following the Second World War. For those who knew him it is difficult to believe that it is 30 years since his tragic death in the Pamirs in 1962: by now he would have been 75. One cannot picture him as ever becoming elderly. His exploits, both in the Alps and in the greater ranges, and indeed on Welsh and Lakeland rock, are well known, and we do not propose to do more than allude to them. 'Exploits' is in fact the last thing Wilf would have called them himself; he did not think in that way. When, for example, he climbed a peak of 7120m, Pauhunri, from Darjeeling and back in just over a fortnight of wartime leave, this was simply because he wanted to make the maximum use of a fleeting opportunity. He took with him just one outstanding Sherpa, Anghtharkay – few other people would have been able to keep up with him or would have acclimatised to that height so quickly.

Wilf had an impressive school and university career. A recent letter from Paul Simmonds, a contemporary colleague at Charterhouse, makes it clear that, although in no way assertive, he soon emerged as a natural leader who was the obvious choice to be head of his house and head of the school. He was a fine scholar and a good all round athlete, but the qualities which are particularly emphasised in this letter are 'his austerity towards himself, his moral courage and his lack of fear'. From Charterhouse he won an open scholarship to King's College, Cambridge, where he achieved First Class Honours in both parts of the Cambridge Tripos.

Wilf was a cousin of Colin Kirkus, by whom he was introduced to British rock climbing as a boy. At King's he was exceptionally fortunate in that the generosity of one of its Fellows, A C Pigou, who was a great lover of mountains, made it possible for him to climb for two meteoric seasons with two great guides, Armand Charlet in 1937 and Hans Brantschen in 1938, each of whom must have been delighted to have such a client. At home he was already climbing intensively with Menlove Edwards, the leading British rock climber of the later 1930s. It might be thought that he was extremely lucky to find himself climbing in this sort of company, but the fact was that his talents were altogether exceptional and that other people spotted this very quickly.

What exactly were these talents? Perhaps one would put first his superb sense of balance. Wilf moved easily, and seemingly without effort, when climbing on all but the most difficult rock; it was very rare indeed to see him struggle. He seemed quite unaware of exposure and would stand with his



3. Entrance to the Western Cwm. Wilfrid Noyce crosses the bridge over the big crevasse. (Alfred Gregory)



5. The Lhotse Face Sherpas, standing: Ang Tsering, Ang Norbu, Kancha, Angtharkay, Ang Dawa II; squatting: Annullu, Phu Dorji, Pasang. With Wilfrid Noyce. (Alfred Gregory)



*Left*  
4. Nawang Gombu crossing the big crevasse. (Alfred Gregory)

*Facing page, below*  
6. Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans at the South Col. (Alfred Gregory)



hands in his pockets on narrow, sloping ledges where other people would have been eagerly looking for a handhold, or wanting to drive in a peg for a bit of security. Among memories of his poise and effortless ease, one of us recalls Wilf, in nailed boots, reposing in quiet reflection on small holds halfway up the North West route on Pillar Rock; and, again in boots, moving in smooth and easy rhythm up Eagle Front in Birkness Combe.

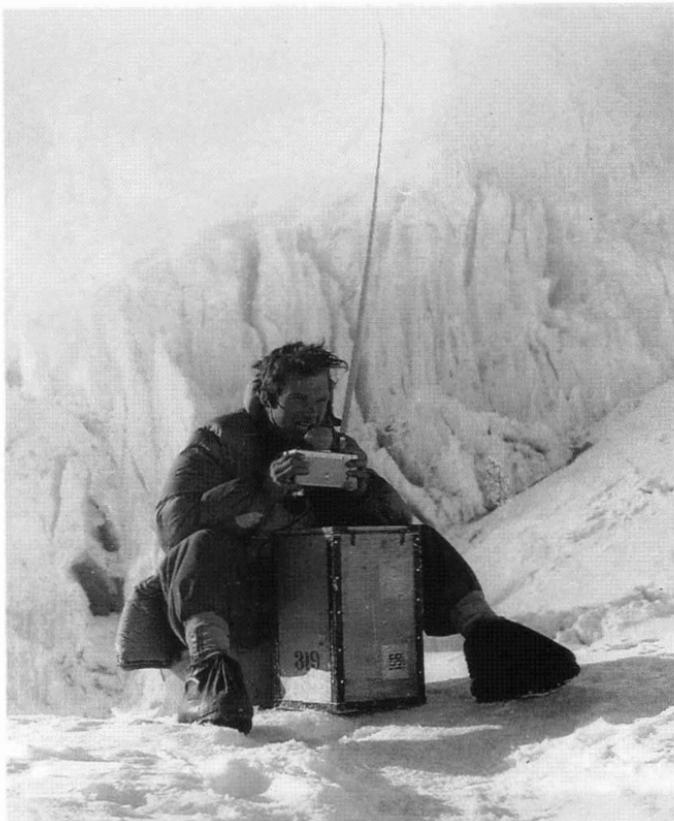
But security was a matter to which he appeared to attach too little importance. Both of us had occasion to remonstrate at different times about the need to put on the rope on crevassed glaciers. We remember him, too, unaware of the limitations of us lesser mortals, dancing blithely, unroped, across the first of the great avalanche-scoured ice couloirs between the Old Brenva ridge and the foot of the Sentinelle on Mont Blanc one starlight night in 1955, when the security of the other three members of our party was essential. A failure to fix a belay after a long run-out on the East Buttress of Scafell in 1938 may well have been responsible for the seriousness of the accident in which Menlove Edwards saved his life.

Someone who dealt with all normal difficulties so easily was a prime example of the natural climber, as opposed to the sort whose technique is only acquired by conscious effort and through experience. Geoff Sutton, in an obituary notice in the 1963 *Climbers' Club Journal*,<sup>1</sup> made the point that a natural climber loves movement and that Wilf was an outstanding instance of this; also that it was probably for this reason that the more laborious techniques of artificial climbing made no appeal to him: they would have 'removed the wings from his heels'. This is perhaps another way of saying that Wilf, however talented he was as a rock climber and mountaineer, was above all a lover of the hills and of movement among them. In Wales, for example, after a full day's climbing, he seldom failed to find time for a considerable evening walk over the tops.

Early in the war he joined one of us as an instructor on a course for officers and troopers of an armoured brigade at Helyg, which in happier times had been Wilf's base for his great climbs with Menlove Edwards. The programme, which included some rock climbing, consisted mainly of exercises which neither of us had associated with Snowdonia. Yet Wilf played his part with great enthusiasm. It was typical of him that at the end of each day during that fortnight he set off, after a strenuous programme of work, to walk and climb on his own.

His resources of stamina were indeed phenomenal. We recall his lead in August 1955 up the seemingly endless steep and exposed face which leads from the Sentinelle ridge to the summit of Mont Blanc, kicking small toeholds for the rest of us, hour after hour. On completing that great route and descending via the Grands Mulets to the Plan de l'Aiguille, his companions were only too glad to complete the descent to Chamonix in the *téléférique*: not so Wilf. Apparently as fresh as when he had left our bivouac some 14 hours earlier, he hastened down on the path.

That double traverse, the Croix du Mont Blanc, had begun at Les Contamines several days beforehand with Michael Ward making up the party. We were overtaken by darkness and dense mist during the long climb up to the



*Left*  
28. Tom Bourdillon talking into a 'walkie-talkie' set on Everest in 1953. The sets were used between camp and camp up to 24,000ft. (Alfred Gregory) (p62)

29. Below Wilfrid Noyce (R) and Robin Smith on the W face of Pik Garmo in the Pamirs just before their fatal accident on 24 July 1962. (p67)



Durier hut, groping our way through the enormous crevasses in the Glacier de Miage with visibility only a few yards ahead. It was Wilf, with his uncanny intuitive sense and undiminished stamina, who guided us to the empty, unlit hut that night.

While acknowledging his great successes, it is perhaps as well to recall that, like the rest of us, he also experienced failures on his climbs. There was, for instance, our attempt in 1956 to follow a direct route up the E face of the Requin, an allegedly new climb described by Vallot. We have a telling photo of Wilf standing on a ledge halfway up the face at a point marked by twin pitons, above which even Wilf could discern no prospect of progress. We suspected that the would-be pioneers had retreated from this point, recording a route which at that time was non-existent. For ourselves, we were content to traverse across to the excellent Meyer-Dibona ridge on the right of that face. Incidentally, it was practically dark by the time we got to the top, and the three of us spent a very cold and seemingly endless night standing huddled on a tiny ledge to which we had just had time to abseil before it became totally black.

On another of our encounters with Mont Blanc, in 1954, we were forced to bow to the elements just beneath the summit ridge after climbing the frontier ridge from the refuge on the Col de la Fourche; all hell prevailed on the crest above us, and there was nothing for it but to reverse our route. On both occasions Wilf was totally serene. Before we turned back for the refuge, as we stood in our steps with our noses pressed against the slope, he pronounced that it was time for breakfast.

So far, we have not said much of Wilf as a person, except in the context of mountaineering. After the war, he became a master at Malvern College where he taught modern languages, and then in 1950 he moved to his old school, Charterhouse, for a further ten years. In 1960, two years before he died, he took the bold step of giving up his job in order to write full time. He had already written quite a number of books, mostly about his climbs and the expeditions of which he had been a member. Many passages in these books are vivid and moving, reminding us that there was also a strong streak of the poet in him. But it is clear that he was aiming to move into a wider literary field than was offered simply by descriptive writing about mountaineering. For example, he was becoming more and more interested in analysing the motives, not only for climbing but also for many other kinds of adventurous activities. He was also keenly interested in Italian literature and Italian culture generally.

It was one of the slightly paradoxical things about Wilf that someone so seemingly self-sufficient was such a splendid companion, and, indeed, that he put companionship very high among the things he enjoyed in the mountains. He was an ideal man with whom to share a tent. If one wanted to talk, he was an excellent (and very widely read) conversationalist; if one wanted just to lie in one's sleeping-bag and doze, he was equally happy. He was essentially a gentle, modest person, yet someone whom everyone respected and whose views, always quietly expressed, carried the more weight because of that.

While there were times when he appeared almost absent-minded, preoccupied with his own thoughts, he was also practical and efficient when these qualities were needed. It is hard to imagine him quarrelling with anybody, or ever losing his temper. He was, in fact, one of those rare human beings who, without being in any way aware of it, are a constant influence on other people, and always for the good.

It would be difficult to exaggerate Wilf's contribution to our success on Everest in 1953. There is no doubt that he would have been capable of going to the top. Yet he made no complaint about the supporting role which he was asked to play; he did express the hope that, should the two planned 'assaults' fail, he might be given his chance. He performed his allotted task of escorting some of our high-altitude Sherpas up the Lhotse Face superbly well. None of us, watchers at that anxious time at our camp in the Western Cwm, will ever forget our excitement as he, with Annullu, climbed the upper part of the Geneva Spur on one of those critical days in the second part of May. We raised a cheer as their blue anoraks blended with the sky, framed by the rim of the South Col. It marked a psychological breakthrough. It heartened us all and gave our Sherpas the courage to complete the carry of stores to the camp site on the Col.

Wilf was wearing the same blue anorak as he lay, nine years later, closely bound to Robin Smith in the tight coils of their rope, on a little shelf some 2000ft up the W face of Pik Garmo in the Pamirs, after a fall of 4000ft. For those of us who found them there, it was a moment of indescribable pathos. Yet it seemed to symbolise a new-found friendship between these two men. They were, in age, a generation apart. Each had attained high academic distinction; both were brilliant mountaineers. There they lay, in death united.

From some notes found in his effects at Base Camp, it was clear that Wilf had hesitated about joining the expedition. At that time, when the Cold War still prevailed, what decided him to accept was not only the idea of climbing in the Pamirs, which of course attracted him, but also the idealistic thought that the common ground of mountains and the love of climbing might prove to be 'a bridge perhaps, even in a small way, of the gap separating East and West over all other fields of thought'.

Wilfred Noyce's death was both an immense sadness to his friends and a blow to British mountaineering which will not be forgotten.

#### REFERENCE

- 1 Geoff Sutton: Obituary of Wilfrid Noyce, *Climbers' Club Journal*, Vol XIV, No 1, 1963, p 104.