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Scottish Winter 1998-99

The 1998/99 Scottish season will be remembered as the winter when the psychological barrier of the big 1980s routes was finally broken. For nearly 15 years, routes such as *Unicorn* in **Glen Coe**, and *Winter Needle* on the **Shelter Stone** were considered to be amongst the hardest winter undertakings in Scotland. Both routes were first climbed by the formidable team of Andy Nisbet and Colin Maclean and were a quantum leap forward in terms of sustained technical difficulty compared to anything that had been climbed before.

Winter Needle, a winter version of the classic Robin Smith summer E1, was originally climbed over two days with a planned bivouac in February 1985. At the beginning of the season, Alan Mullin and Steve Paget set off from the Cairngorm car park at midnight intending to climb the route in a single push and take a more direct line in the lower section. In a brilliantly executed ascent, they started climbing before dawn and finished the route 17 hours later, taking advantage of unusual early season wintry conditions to maximise the available daylight. Their ascent sent a shock wave through the winter climbing scene. Whilst some criticised the early season nature of the climb, others were inspired and the pace of the winter's activity hotted up as a direct result.

Unicorn, another classic summer E1 on **Stob Coire nan Lochan**, had seen several second ascent attempts in recent years. It was finally repeated by Al Powell and Rich Cross in February, but it was the ascent by Colin Smith and Mike Thompson a few days later that took everyone's breath away. Not only did they climb the route entirely free, eliminating the aid point and three rests used on the first ascent, they also climbed the true continuation finish and were back at their sacks before dark. Mullin and Paget's performance on the Shelter Stone was inspirational, but Smith and Thompson's ascent of *Unicorn* brought home the realisation that the big 1980s routes were not one-off ascents but likely to become the high standard test-pieces of the future.

Overall, it was a long winter with sustained periods of cold conditions, which resulted in one of the best seasons of the decade. Over 60 new routes graded V or over were climbed – nearly as many as during the exceptional 1986 season. Many of the 1986 additions were in the middle grades, however, whilst last year over 40 new routes were graded VI or over – a testament to the ever-increasing number of people climbing in the Scottish hills.

This report highlights some of the important ascents of the season. Full details can be found in the 1999 Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal.

Cairngorms

The first new route of the season went to Alan Mullin and Steve Paget who climbed *The Exorcist* (VII,8), the left-facing corner system high up on the Grey Buttress of **Hell's Lum**. A winter ascent of this excellent summer E1 had been

considered by several local activists, but Mullin and Paget stole a march on the competition by climbing the route within days of the first winter snows.

Big news on **Lochnagar** was the second ascent of *The Link Direct* (VIII, 7) by Jason Currie and Guy Robertson, who thought the route one of the finest in the Cairngorms. Also on Lochnagar, Chris Cartwright and Simon Richardson settled a long-standing score with the first ascent of *Redemption* (VIII, 7), the prominent fault-line on the Black Spout Wall of the Stack. The only other route on this very steep wall is Graeme Livingston and Mark Charlton's *Torquing Corpse*. This route has a near-mythical status with a reputation for very bold climbing, and twelve years on it is still unrepeated. *Redemption* proved to be another serious undertaking with a smooth hanging slab low down, and poorly protected icy cracks above. It shares its second pitch with *Torquing Corpse*, and continues up the fault through the headwall until near the top where a hand traverse on widely spaced tufts leads to the exit gully.

The best late season addition in the Cairngorms fell to Andy Nisbet and Alan Mullin who made a winter ascent of *Threadbare* on the **Shelter Stone**. This VS summer route, which takes a line of grooves on the right side of Raeburn's Buttress, was first climbed by Bill March and John Cunningham in the summer of 1979 using eight points of aid. The winter version started up the turf ramp of *Consolation Groove Winter* to gain the summer line. The vegetated cracks above proved ideal for modern mixed technique and all the aid was eliminated. The route weighed in at VII, 8, but even so it is probably easier in its winter form than in summer.

Northern Highlands

One of the highlights of the season was a complete ascent of the great soaring corner on **Quinag's** Barrel Buttress. This outstanding feature, which is one of the most compelling lines in the north-west, first attracted the pioneers Raeburn, Mackay and Ling way back in the summer of 1907. Unable to climb the corner directly, they avoided it by climbing the cracked right wall and rejoining the corner some 30m above. The exact line of their route was not discovered until the winter of 1994 when Roger Webb started to explore the cliff. Initial attempts to climb the corner were rebuffed at a similar point to Raeburn's party, and it was only on his sixth visit with Simon Steer that Webb succeeded on *Badazjoz* (V, 6), an easier-angled line to the left which rejoined the main corner higher up. A further visit the following January resulted in an ascent of the original line taken by the pioneers at VI, 7. Webb returned yet again in December with Neil Wilson, determined to climb the corner in its entirety. Powerful moves up the initial overhanging bulge were protected by an ice hook driven into a crack, and were followed by strenuous climbing up the off-width above. The climb was graded VII, 8, and is a fine addition to the pair's enviable collections of super-winter routes in the Far North, such as *Land and Freedom* (V, 7) on **Suilven** and *Fishmonger* (VI, 6) on **Foinaven**.

Torriddon saw three important new routes. Andy Nisbet visited **Beinn Eighe** with Brian Davison where they made the first ascent of *The Unknown Warrior* (VII, 7) on the Eastern Ramparts. The route starts close to the summer E1 line of *The Unknown Soldier*, traverses a little to the right along the Girdle ledge

before continuing up *Forgotten Warrior* (HVS) to exit up the icy gully of *Samurai*. Given the superb quality of the climbing, good protection and the readiness when the cliff comes into winter condition, this route deserves a repeat. Further right on the Triple Buttresses, Alan Mullin and Steve Paget made the first winter ascent of *Central Corner* (VII, 8). This was known to be a difficult problem, as Andy Nisbet, the cliff's most prolific winter pioneer, had made the first summer ascent at VS 4c in 1976 and had decided against a winter attempt. Mullin and Paget were not disappointed, for the route lived up to expectation with ice, snowed-up rock and frozen turf resulting in a sustained and technical mixed climb. The third major addition to the area was on **Beinn Alligin**, where Nisbet and Dave McGimpsey climbed *Wailing Wall* (VII, 7), the imposing fault-line to the right of the *Wall of the Outcry*. Well-frozen vegetation proved the key to this very steep route which has well protected technical sections with bold climbing in between.

Glen Coe

Arguably the biggest route of the winter went to Dave Cuthbertson and Rab Anderson when they succeeded on their long-standing project to make the first winter ascent of *The Duel* on **Stob Coire nan Lochan**. *The Duel* is graded E1 5a in summer and takes the well-defined ramp-line left of *Scabbard Chimney* on Summit Buttress. Cuthbertson and Anderson first tried the route in 1997 when they climbed the initial easy ramp but failed at the foot of 'the wall' pitch above. They tried the route four more times later that season without success.

They returned to the route in February. Anderson led the first pitch, and then Cuthbertson led the very sustained crux pitch up 'the wall' (technical 9). Anderson led through up the 'chimney-crack' pitch (technical 8) which has a short but vicious off-width protected by a Friend 6. A pitch of grade IV then led to easy ground leading to the top of the buttress. Overall the route was given a grade of (IX, 9) and is comparable in difficulty to the hardest Scottish winter climbs such as *Winter Needle*, *Guerdon Grooves* and *Centurion*. Of particular note is the style in which the route was climbed. The pair were determined to adopt a ground-up approach and climb the route free, and feel that a point of aid or two on the earlier attempts would have got them up the route. Summer knowledge undoubtedly helped on the chimney-crack pitch, but overall this was an outstanding performance climbed in the best traditions of Scottish winter climbing.

Soon after his *Unicorn* ascent, Colin Smith finished off a fine run of routes in Glen Coe with the superb *Fox's Paw* (VII, 7) on **Lost Valley Buttress**. Arriving at the base of the cliff with Innes Deans he spotted a narrow ice smear running down a shallow groove in the left wall of the *Neanderthal* corner. This was too good an opportunity to miss, so they traversed left out of the initial *Neanderthal* gully and climbed an overhanging groove to a hanging stance. A long reach around a roof led to the 30m-high smear which was only a metre wide and less than 10cm thick but had good rock protection on its right side. This gave a superb pitch to the top. The route was repeated the following day by Mark Garthwaite and Neil Gresham who confirmed it as one of the best winter finds in the Coe for several years.

Southern Highlands

A significant advance in Scottish winter climbing standards took place in February when Mark Garthwaite climbed Scotland's most difficult technical pitch. Garthwaite discovered a small west-facing crag near the summit of **Ben Vorlich** in Arrochar in 1998 and thought it would make a good venue for a winter sports route. The 25m-high mica schist crag overhangs 6m and is split by a vegetated crack-line. Garthwaite and Neil Gresham equipped the crack with pegs, wires and Friends on abseil, and then made several visits to work the climb on a top rope. On his fifth visit, Garthwaite succeeded in red-pointing the route, which he called *Logical Progression*. He was reluctant to give it a conventional Scottish winter grade, but thought it would be at least technical 10 if led on sight and lies somewhere in the M8 to M9 range in the North American mixed climbing scale. *Logical Progression* should not be considered a pure 'dry tooling' route however, as frozen turf is essential and the route's aspect and altitude means it readily hoars up. It does not lie on a roadside crag either, as the approach takes over two hours and involves more than 800m of ascent from the road.

In contrast to the traditional ground-up approach, *Logical Progression* was climbed in a style very different to any winter route climbed in Scotland before. Garthwaite made it clear that his motive was to explore how far winter technical standards could be taken by applying a modern rock-climbing approach. Whether this superb technical achievement is a logical progression for mainstream Scottish winter climbing remains to be seen, but clearly applying the technique and fitness acquired on routes such as this to traditional winter climbs can only move overall standards forward.