# POST-WAR WINTER MOUNTAINEERING IN SCOTLAND

By T. W. PATEY

'A CLIMBER who is strong and sure of himself, should . . . prefer winter ascents because these more than any others give him a chance of measuring his strength against mountains in severe conditions. They force him to battle without respite, completely on his own, day after day, and with no possibility of reprovisioning'(!). So wrote the mighty Gervasutti (others might have expressed it less literally). His conception of winter mountaineering finds a faint echo in recent deeds north of the border.

Winter mountaineering as currently defined in Scotland, only began as late as the 'thirties. With the exception of the three classic ridges of Ben Nevis, routes made by the early pioneers were almost entirely of the gully variety. The highlight of the gully climb was the Ice Pitch, followed by some good old-fashioned fun at the cornice. Such a climb was remarkably lacking in variety.

Broadly speaking the tendency was to regard the Scottish winter cliffs as a training ground for Alpine mountaineering. Consequently the early climbers employed a technique that had been perfected in the Alps—a technique that envisaged so called 'ideal conditions' of hard compact snow or Alpine névé, admirable conditions for step cutting and belaying. Except in the gullies which soon accumulate consolidated snow, these conditions occur perhaps once or twice in the course of a Scottish winter. Thus the annual pilgrimage to Nevis, like the Quest for the Holy Grail, was apt to be frustrating.

The renaissance of the 'thirties was mainly the work of an enthusiastic group of Glasgow J.M.C.S. climbers, W. H. Murray, W. M. Mackenzie and others. Independent parties led by Macphee and Bell shared in the new developments. Concentrating particularly on Glencoe, they worked out a series of fine new winter routes, unique in their conception and fulfilment. Buttresses, ridges and faces offered more open, varied and interesting lines than the conventional gully climbs. Accurate route finding, based on a shrewd assessment of prevailing conditions, was an all-important factor on these climbs. All snow conditions were regarded as climbing conditions. It merely became a question of adapting the technique to meet the prevailing conditions—névé, powder snow, verglaced rocks, frozen vegetation, etc., etc.

Scottish winter climbing is unique in many ways. Above all, it moulds for itself a technique which is as different from that employed on an average Alpine snow climb as chalk is from cheese. The present-day formula that any summer rock climb (providing it is suitably plastered in ice) makes a good winter climb, speaks for itself. It has been responsible for routes of the calibre of the Orion Face on Ben Nevis—a climb, involving a greater degree of difficulty and technical skill than could be contemplated in the Alps, where the overall scale of a route and its potential objective danger are the more important factors.

The salient features of this new vigorous technique may bear repetition. Few climbers now pin much faith on the ice-axe belay—one-time symbol of impregnability. One could quote many incidents in the past when the axe has been uprooted or splintered under the impact of a falling leader, even when the correct waist belay technique was employed by the second. On a face route, where in any case there is seldom adequate snow for an axe belay, it is always worth the trouble to excavate a natural rock belay, or at the worst a crack for a piton belay. Pitons are now standard equipment for winter climbing, although artificial technique in itself has had only a minor part to play in recent developments.

Most recent ice routes involve long periods of one-armed cutting, where a handhold is consistently required for balance. In those circumstances the ordinary Alpine axe is as cumbersome as a sledge hammer. The leader usually wields a short hand-axe (shaft length 20–25 in.) or, occasionally, a modified slater's pick. A few, like Hamish MacInnes, dispense altogether with an axe, and use a marteau-piolet. Hamish's own implement is known, appropriately, as 'the Message'.

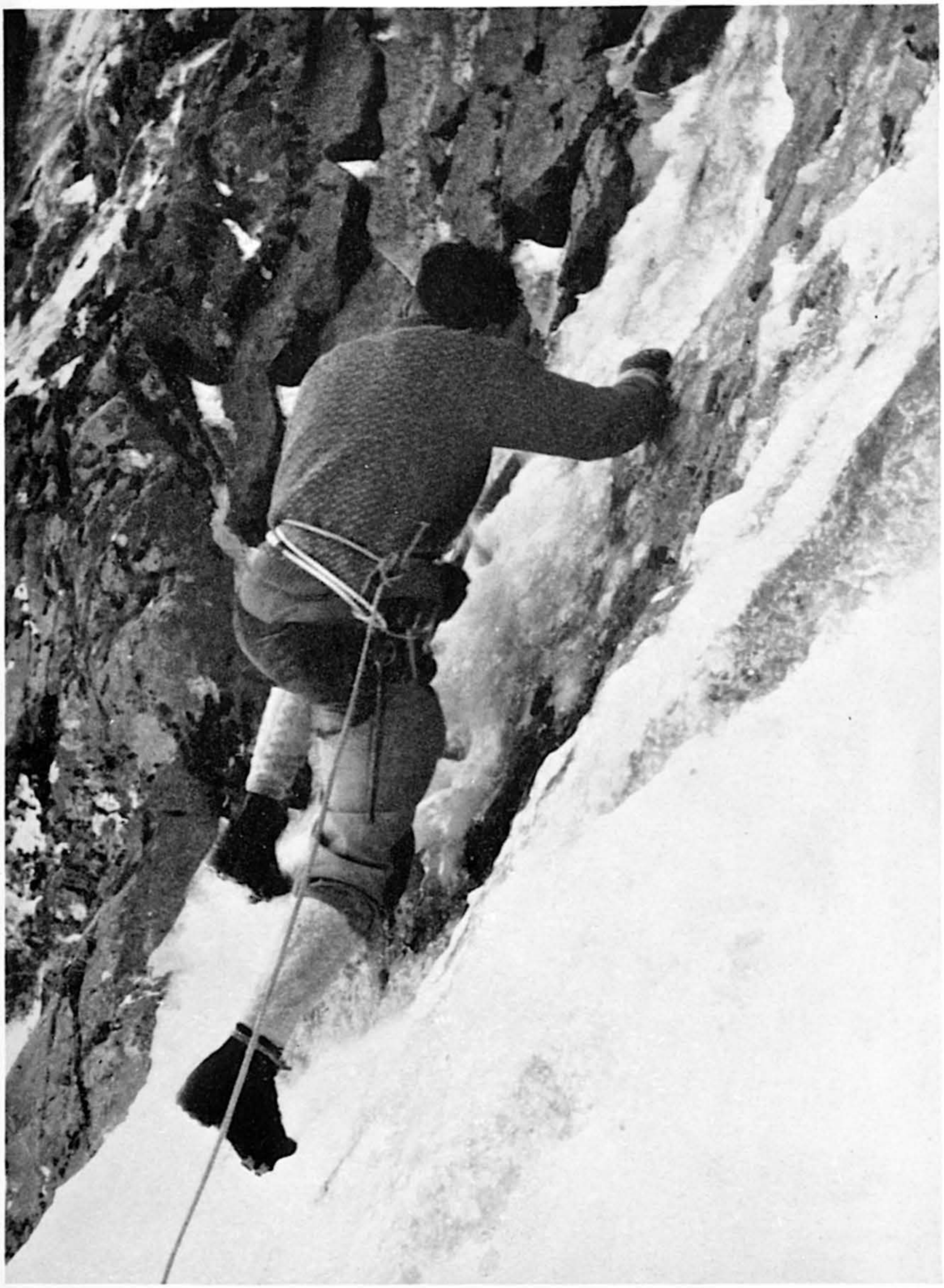
Along with the advances in technique and the vast amount of activity in recent years, has gone a noticeable improvement in the speed and competence of the average winter party. I cannot recall off-hand a single serious incident in the last ten years befalling an experienced Scottish party on a Scottish winter climb.

Pre-war classics, such as the Tower Ridge, where climbers of Alpine repute have been benighted, are now frequently accounted for in remarkably fast time. Recently Len Lovat and Tom Weir, starting out without record-breaking ambitions, disposed of the three Nevis ridges in the course of a single winter's day—up Observatory Ridge, down Tower Ridge and finally up the North-east Buttress. To spend a season away from the front is to find oneself automatically relegated to the ranks of the 'dead-beats'.

I shall pick up the threads of the story in the late 'forties. The earlier instalments are so well described in Bill Murray's two books on Scottish

*Photo, J. R. Marshall*]

HADRIAN'S WALL, BEN NEVIS.



*Photo, J. R. Marshall*]

T. W. Patey on 1st Pitch, Hadrian's Wall.

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Mountaineering as to render further comment superfluous. Suffice it to recall that those early routes inspired everything that followed; Garrick's shelf on the Crowberry Ridge is the prototype of the modern ice climb.

The immediate post-war revival was dominated by two separate schools of climbing, in Aberdeen and Glasgow, who deployed their forces on Lochnager and Glencoe respectively. Neither adhered to any orthodox faith. Few of the contemporary tigers were versed in Alpine technique, and they adapted their technique to meet the needs of the situation.

*Glencoe*

Glasgow were represented by two factions—the Creag Dhu Club and a further heterogeneous group comprising members of S.M.C., Glasgow J.M.C.S. and G.U.M. Club.

In the Ravens Gully campaign, which extended over several seasons, the major contestants were the Creag Dhu. Ravens Gully, the dark rift alongside the North Buttress of the Buachaille was a formidable adversary. Although a mere 350 ft., it carries six to eight major ice pitches and positively bristles with severity. On one occasion MacInnes got to within striking distance of the cornice when his rope froze through a succession of karabiners, condemning him to a miserable night 'en face nord'—literally hoist with his own petard. His 'rescue' by some well-meaning onlookers deprived him of the first ascent.

This was only delayed however, for in 1953 Hamish and Chris Bonington won through after a six-hour tussle. On this occasion, to quote the scanty information available, 'the chockstone on Pitch 5 was lassoed thereby allowing pendulum action and saving hours of effort'.

Ravens was not repeated until last winter when John Cunningham, one of the original protagonists, and Jimmy Marshall completed the climb in three hours 'without hurrying'.

The Crowberry Ridge by Abraham's Direct route, and Agag's Groove also yielded to MacInnes. Crampons had been demonstrated effectively on exposed iced rock, although MacInnes had been forced to remove his boots on the Crowberry crux. Clachaig Gully was later added to the Creag Dhu collection, although they were fortunate in finding genuine winter conditions in such a low lying gully. Deep Gash Gully on Aonach Dubh (1957) was the only subsequent climb to rival the 1951 routes for sheer technical brilliance. The gulf between the Creag Dhu and the S.M.C. has narrowed appreciably. The S.M.C., benefiting from an infusion of young blood, is again one of the most active clubs in the country. It has achieved this without sacrificing its traditional principles of a sound preliminary grounding in conventional snow technique. In contradistinction, the transient ebullience of the

Creag Dhu 'gnomies' has given way to a more serious calculating approach.

The first post-war sorties by the S.M.C. produced two fine ice routes in Twisting Gully and the Red Gully of Sgor nan Ulaidh: Bill Murray and Douglas Scott respectively carrying on the traditions of the 'thirties. With the arrival of Len Lovat and later Jimmy Marshall the remaining major problems capitulated in rapid succession. Scabbard Chimney on Stob Coire nan Lochan, led by Lovat, is reputedly as hard an ice climb as any in Glencoe. These parties carried their investigations further afield to Stob Coire nam Berth and Stob Coire nan Lochan—crags that generally carry more snow than the Bucchaille and offer more natural winter lines.

Glencoe was the birthplace of modern Scottish ice climbing and as such is unlikely to suffer neglect. Nevertheless the recent spate of activity has proved that its virtues as a winter playground are inferior to those of Ben Nevis, Lochnagar and Creag Meaghaidh. Snow conditions in Glencoe are very variable and it is not unusual to find the Buachaille stripped of snow in mid-February.

*Lochnagar and the Cairngorms*

The climbs in the North-east Corrie of Lochnagar set the tempo for Scottish winter climbing throughout the period 1950–6. Initially there was but one solitary winter climb and the rock climbing possibilities were by no means fully explored. Now, every major ridge, gully and buttress has been climbed in winter, a total of thirty routes, each 600–700 ft. in height. On all these climbs the unrelenting angle and considerable exposure merit deep respect. Local parties were largely responsible for the pioneering. A hard core of ice addicts from Aberdeen took up residence in the Corrie from November to May. Often the winter ascent followed within months of the first summer ascent and in a few cases actually preceded it. Unlike the Creag Dhu the Aberdonians favoured tricouni-nailed boots for all-round mountaineering (the tricounis *v.* crampons controversy still persists in Scottish climbing circles: dependent on conditions, both have their merits and demerits).

In 1950 'Goggs' Leslie and I selected the Douglas Gully of Lochnagar as the scene for our first encounter with steep ice. It proved to be a most unsuitable choice: the Gully was in excellent shape, but we were not. In fact, the last 200 ft. of seventy-degree snow/ice took us seven hours and we finished in darkness by tunnelling the cornice; the only apparent solution, as the edge projected far out over the gully.

The Douglas Gully as events proved scarcely deserved the notoriety our ascent earned for it. On subsequent winter ascents of Eagle Ridge and Parallel Buttress we encountered more sustained difficulty, but were better equipped to deal with it, having served our apprenticeship.

Bill Brooker, Jerry Smith and Mike Taylor, all local Aberdeen climbers, led the way in winter exploration. Indeed, the Aberdeen group held a monopoly in the North-east Corrie till 1957, when Jimmy Marshall and a raiding Edinburgh party scored a notable triumph on Parallel Gully 'B'. On the first summer ascent of this route our party had encountered at least three V.S. pitches and its winter aspect is far from encouraging.

As the North-eastern Corrie neared saturation point, the search for new routes widened to include every corrie in the Cairngorms area. Access to these remote corries was a problem on a winter weekend, and skis often proved an invaluable asset.

Upwards of sixty new winters routes were discovered in the course of a few years and exploration is still continuing. It is hoped that the forthcoming S.M.C. Climbing Guide for the Cairngorms area will clarify the situation.

The 900-ft. Labyrinth of Creag an Dubh Loch is among the finest Scottish ice routes, and its first ascent by Ronnie Sellars and Jerry Smith in 1959 followed several unsuccessful attempts. Further afield the remote Mitre Ridge of Beinn a Bhuird gave Bill Brooker and myself a rousing tussle with deep powder snow on as late a date as May 12.

Unfortunately Braemar, the poor man's Courmayeur, is a difficult place to reach in mid-winter. The direct route from the south via the Devil's Elbow is often closed by deep snow for several months and the local Tigers still lack competition.

*Creag Meaghaidh*

The full potentialities of Corrie Ardair as a winter climbing ground have yet to be realised.

The Centre Post excited a lot of attention in the 'thirties and Bell's route skirting the main ice-fall at mid-height has yet to be bettered. For some obscure reason, the other two Posts and the 1,200-ft. Pinnacle Buttress attracted no custom. When Tennent and Slesser climbed the great couloir of the South Post in 1956 there was no record of a previous attempt.

Yet Creag Meaghaidh is no more inaccessible from Edinburgh than Ben Nevis, and the Loch Laggan road is seldom blocked. It will be surprising if this winter's activities do not finally dispel the aura of mystery from Corrie Ardair.

The opening salvos of what may prove to be a long campaign were fired last winter by the Edinburgh musketeers. The Pinnacle Buttress gave Marshall, Stenhouse and Haston a route typical of all that is best in Scottish winter mountaineering—complicated route finding, magnificent situations, and every variety of obstacle. A long ice runnel on the left flank of the Buttress climbed by Tiso and Marshall was named

Smith's Gully, after their fellow climber had met with defeat—an ironic tribute by Marshall.

*The North-west Highlands*

The problem of reaching those remote outposts in mid-winter has deterred all but those who do not have to turn an honest penny. In any case, the scope is not, as one might suppose, unlimited. Only a few crags such as the Coire Mhic Fhearchair of Beinn Eighe accumulate snow and ice as do Ben Nevis and the Cairngorms. The Cuillins are particularly disappointing; and the climber's dream of a winter traverse of the Main Ridge has not been realised.

*Ben Nevis*

The Ben is the home of Scottish 'Alpinisme'. Here the rude forefathers of the S.M.C. . . .

> 'Did assault the shoots
> and won their way by unheard of routes'
>
> (S.M.C. Song)

Here, too, in January 1959 was conceived, after an unduly protracted labour, the first five-day climb in the history of British mountaineering.

In 1939 Ben Nevis was still to the forefront in Scottish winter developments. Green Gully, a product of that era, is still regarded as a most formidable ice climb. Its neighbour, Comb Gully, reputedly the hardest pre-war ice course, occupying ten hours on the first ascent, has recently succumbed in under an hour. Stop Press reports say that Dougal Haston has reduced the time to twenty minutes!

For a long time after 1939 there was a lot of traffic on the established routes but little or no original exploration. Meanwhile, on Lochnagar and Glencoe, winter activity far outstripped that on the Ben. The C.I.C. log book records several cursory inspections of Zero and Point Five Gullies, but few serious attempts to force an issue. An atmosphere of impregnability had surrounded these two gullies for some time and the amount of undeserved publicity they enjoyed served only to divert attention from numerous easier unclimbed alternatives.

The turning point came on a memorable weekend in February, 1957, when near-perfect conditions gave us the opportunity we had been waiting for. A large party foregathered at the C.I.C. hut. Hamish MacInnes, temporarily unattached, suggested that Graeme Nicol and I should join him on his seventh attempt. As he pointed out, the gully was virtually his property; since most of his property was in the gully we could but agree.

The weather had improved overnight and Zero Gully was plastered with excellent snow/ice. I led the first 350 ft. occasionally inserting an overhead ice-piton as a safeguard against a momentary loss of balance.

*Photo, J. R. Marshall*]

NUMBER 2 GULLY BUTTRESS, BEN NEVIS.

It was exhilarating climbing on reliable snow although the extreme angle and long run-outs did not encourage any liberties. Hamish now assumed the lead and fought his way up the last big pitch—the great ice-fall barring the way to the upper snow trough. The last 600 ft. were quite straightforward, and a race developed: Nicol arrived last, carrying the sackful of Hamish's ironmongery. Zero Gully had yielded in only five hours—a tribute to the exceptional conditions we encountered.

Two days before the Zero Gully episode, Len Lovat, Nicol and I chanced upon an even more valuable discovery. Bill Murray had persuaded us to have a look at the far side of the North-east Buttress which faces the Carn Mor Dearg arête. The result was the Cresta climb, the first of a series of long, mixed routes on this, the forgotten face of Ben Nevis. The later routes, all led by Ian Clough and his fellow climbers of R.A.F., Kinloss, are probably finer than Cresta, which has now become a thoroughfare. Slalom and Frostbite hold the joint distinction of being the longest natural ice routes in Britain, and offer 2,000 ft. of complicated route finding. None of these climbs is desperate by modern standards and their former anonymity is all the more difficult to explain. The summer aspect of the cliff is depressing, and the recorded routes follow 'the line of most vegetation'. Yet it is often just such a crag that offers the best winter lines. In winter mountaineering one learns to set new values on long established routes.

The winter revival on the Ben has continued with unrelenting vigour up to the time of writing. There are two distinct fields for exploration. One has led to the exploitation of the Last Great Problems (i.e. the training climbs of the next generation). The other has accounted for a host of no less worthy routes, which the average climber can savour without risking annihilation. Raeburn's Buttress, Number Two Gully Buttress, the North Face of Castle Ridge, the Italian Staircase climbs all come into this category.

However, it is difficult to resist the lure of notoriety. The Saga of Point Five Gully was a case in point. Once Zero had been climbed it was inevitable that Point Five should come under siege, and when Joe Brown fell off the second pitch, its reputation was firmly established. The Creag Dhu were next on the scene. In appalling conditions, Cunningham and Noon got as far as the third pitch; here a miniature Niagara erupted through a hole in the ice and Prudence won the day. MacInnes's first solo attempt was typically unorthodox. He descended the top 600 ft. of the gully, 'yo-yo fashion' on a lifeline of nylon ropes borrowed from his unsuspecting rivals. His subsequent re-ascent proved the upper section to be climbable—already a well-known fact. At Easter, 1958, when a ribbon of clear water ice delineated the route, he returned to the attack with Ian 'Dangle' Clough. They planned their ascent on the principle of 'a pitch a day': consequently, when we

spotted them on the second pitch, they were already on their second day's climbing. Here Fate took a hand, and prolonged blizzards made the recovery of the fixed ropes a feat in itself!

In January, 1959, these tactics finally prevailed, and Clough, Alexander, Shaw and Pipes emerged triumphant at the end of a seven-day operation. Every night they recuperated in the C.I.C. hut—a disqualification in the opinion of a Puritan minority (who alleged, furthermore, that a rest day had allowed the party to replenish their stocks from a Fort William blacksmith's). Whether Point Five can be climbed in a day, using conventional technique, remains to be seen.

A week later the Orion Face of Ben Nevis, 'the Scottish Nordwand' was climbed on the first attempt by Robin Smith and R. K. Holt. This pair had already made a very hard ascent of the Comb Buttress by the Tower Face Route, and they tackled the Orion Face by the line of the Long Climb (Summer grading, V. S. Rubbers), finding the rocks plated with ice throughout. This twelve-hour climb was perhaps the finest performance of the season. It could only be rivalled by Jimmy Marshall's remarkable lead of Minus Two Gully, probably the most severe winter route on record.

On a lighter theme Marshall and I completed a first winter girdle of the Main Face crossing all the established routes at mid-height. This was not such a *tour de force* as one might suppose; there is a natural traversing line most of the way and the difficulties are not extreme. We started from Observatory Gully and finished five hours later on the Carn Mor Dearg arête.

What of the future? The summer months in Scotland are now the off-season—a period when hungry Tigers sharpen their claws for the winter onslaught. Hence this essentially *personal* diary of recent events may well be outdated by the time it goes to print. The scope for original winter exploration in Scotland is still enormous.

Of one thing I am certain. This vigorous offshoot from the parent stem is a healthy one: it will flourish and bear fruit. Its principles are founded on the best traditions of British Mountaineering, and it teaches virtues which are the essence of successful Alpine and Himalayan climbing—speed, resourcefulness and, above all accurate route finding. Nevertheless I would recoil from describing Scottish winter climbing merely in terms of training for (so called) Greater Mountaineering. That would be heresy: the Scottish brand of winter mountaineering is unique!

*Postscript*

The above notes were submitted too late for publication in the May issue. Since they were written another season has passed and a few more 'citadels' have fallen.

The season of 1959–60 was remarkable if only for a spectacular

campaign on Nevis by J. R. Marshall and R. C. Smith. In the course of a week they succeeded (I quote Marshall) 'in cleaning up all the outstanding problems in the Ben'. It had been anticipated that Point Five Gully would yield more easily in favourable conditions, but few could have forecast that a mere seven hours would be sufficient for success. No artificial aids apart from the two ice-axes were used. Marshall writes with typical audacity—'We included Point Five as a gesture—it's a fine climb but a wee-bit old fashioned now'.

As if the Orion Face Direct were not sufficient in itself, there is now the 'Direttissimo'. This 1,600-ft. route, probably the most formidable route of its kind in Scotland (familiar phrase), starts at the foot of Zero Gully. It goes via ice grooves to the bottom left corner of the basin. As distinct from its precursor, the new route continues directly up the face overlooking the basin by way of a buttress on the right of the Second Slab Rib. Eight hours were required for the first winter ascent.

Marshall and Smith also accounted for the following routes—all of them led for the first time in winter—the Great Chimney on the East Flank of Tower Ridge, Minus Three Gully on the North-east Buttress (incidentally this numerical classification is becoming so complicated that any further additions will be calculated to the nearest second decimal point), the Comb by Piggot's Route, and a new route on Observatory Buttress.

The half-dozen or so parties who have led Gardiloo Buttress in summer will be somewhat nonplussed to hear of a winter ascent. In the current Nevis Guide, the summer climb ranks second to Sassenach for difficulty—perhaps a generous assessment but not a recommendation for crampons. Smith and Marshall attacked the Buttress by its central ice-fall, taking six hours for 400 ft. of climbing.

The final event of the year was an impudent raid on Zero Gully by Robin Smith's party, which commenced at the criminally late hour of 2 p.m. and ended, very properly, at 3 a.m., after the party had run out of daylight quite early on.

It was a lean year for most other climbers. Clough is reported to have led Compression Crack on Raeburn's Buttress sometime in January. Our own modest contribution was the North Post of Creag Meaghaidh. J. H. Deacon (Climber's Club), George McLeod and I were joined on that occasion by Pierre Danalet, a guide of Les Diablerets. The spectacle of a Swiss Guide on a Scottish ice climb was both interesting and instructive. Let it be said that he acquitted himself with honour.

MacInnes was rampant in the Cuillins. Unhappily his plans for 'shooting' a winter traverse of the Ridge came to naught owing to lack of snow. It is reported unofficially that plans were made to transplant snow from Coire Lagain to the Ridge in rucksacks, for distribution at suitable points so that a false photographic record of the prevailing conditions might be obtained.