

the Park Service has restricted airdrops in the parks) some 35 miles from Kantishna over McGonagall Pass and up the heavily crevassed Muldrow Glacier to the 2750 level, a 2375m gain in elevation. Other mushers cross the Brooks Range in spring and sortie into the Wrangells and lesser peaks frequently.

For Outsiders, a mountain trip to Alaska is often the costly culmination of several years' training in other ranges, so a major climb consistent with the *rite de passage* that an Alaskan expedition represents is chosen, some peak or place either well known, revered for its obscurity, or representing a major new demonstration of *grande alpinisme* in the great ranges. The limited geographic information available to Outsiders also tends to constrict their climbing creativity to a few well-known areas now heavily travelled. The result is a crisis of wilderness consciousness, an effort to ply 'trade routes' in a land held sacred precisely because of its condition of uncertainty. It is a demonstration of a curious 'uniqueness paradox' of mountaineering in Alaska: because of its unique frontier social milieu and relatively virgin climbing environment, mountaineers are drawn in large numbers; and, as a consequence of their concentration in limited areas, their presence erodes the very atmosphere that drew them there in the first place. The American character and mountaineering experience is founded on the exploration of wilderness, and the subsequent creation of new frontiers in technique and the spirit to replace those passed by. A dramatic shift in individual attitude about the act of climbing in an area of wilderness is now urgently necessary to preserve the interaction of innocence, uncertainty, and discovery that characterizes the expansive wilderness expedition experience in a place like Alaska.

At present, any number of pressures on the exquisite Alaskan alpine terrain exist, from the population increases encouraged by the most recent 'black-gold rush' surrounding the Alaskan Pipeline and the concomitant environmental threats, to the loss of the traditional wilderness state of Alaskan mountaineering. The tactics being introduced in response are ones that encourage small, self-sufficient parties, that artificially limit the technological and resource assistance available to them, and recognize the essential historical background of Sourdough ease and ardour that has shaped the course and spirit of Alaskan climbing.

## Shots from the backwoods

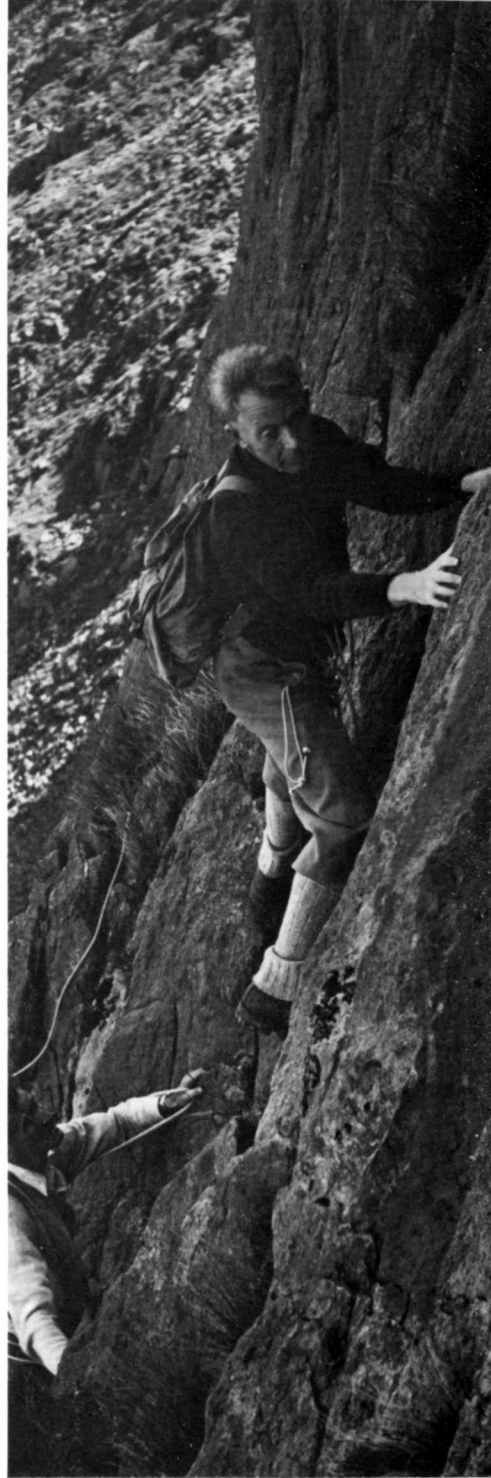
C. Douglas Milner

It is very comfortable in the backwoods, and those of us who have been there for some time . . . in my own case about 50 years . . . are looking for younger entrants. In the main, present recruiting is confined to veteran mountaineers of great distinction, pioneers of the past who have survived with the help of a great deal of skill and a little bit of luck to the point where they can speak, as John Hunt did, in a recent charming paper, of the Age of Non-commitment. Not even the hardest of our hard men, or their eloquent chroniclers, would deny to these splendid relics of the past, an honourable retirement. To suggest that John is a relic not only savours of *lèse majesté*, but is plain silly when I think I am older than he, yet I did say splendid, the last thing we indigenous backwoodsmen could claim to be.

To attract these younger entrants, a case must be made for non-commitment,



36 Indigenous backwoodsman walking uphill, E. H. Marriott on the Jäggrat (This and next 3 photos: C. D. Milner)



37 Backwoodsman emeritus walking uphill, Charles Evans on Lliwedd

which I define as competent mediocrity. It will not be easy. Recently a (fairly) young prophet of the new testament of mountaineering urged the need for 'total commitment'. Not a very original thought, though valid for the top 20. Mummery put the same argument better, about 80 years ago, and 40 years ago Pierre Allain repeated it in his laconic phrase '*s'employer au fond*'. Modern climbing is tough stuff, far beyond the array of aids from pitons, nuts and bolts and beyond the standards needed to attract the not inconsiderable rewards of commercial sponsorships and television spectaculars. Allain also spoke of '*les derniers chevaliers de l'aventure*', and today the chevaliers have been joined by a few *paysans* (in the colloquial meaning of the word). These splendid figures can be seen through powerful telescopes set up on the fringe of the woods. We admire their prowess, without a trace of envy or a wish to emulate them. It is their cup of tea.

What, then, is ours? We are a lot of fuddy-duddies, not only in the AC but most other clubs as well. It must be true, for the great Mac the Telly has said so. Mac is himself in the AC, so I am reminded that the King of Persia said all men are liars. In parallel thinking, is Mac a fuddy-duddy? Heaven forbid! We are mainly, though not exclusively, middle class. We follow Godley in that 'our one desire and ruling passion is for personal safety'. We are distinguished in our climbing by timidity and lack of enterprise. We selfishly climb merely for pleasure and have chauvinistic doubts as to its value in character-building or adventure-training.

We are resistant to the admen's compelling appeals to buy masses of over-priced and often unnecessary equipment. We contribute to the begging bowls held out by our brilliant young men, collecting funds for another holiday in distant ranges, just as we reluctantly yield to the High St collectors for a home for lost dogs or some obscure religious sect.

Yet we are moderately useful in any club. We pay our subs (most of us at least, but see Treasurer's report on the 1978 accounts), provide captive audiences for the boys, handle the dull detail of administration and sometimes put at least a temporary brake on the wilder innovations.

We do what we can to maintain tradition. To be fair, the modern pioneers can claim the same with some validity. New mountains to climb and later new routes upon them were of the essence of club activity a century ago. But for the last 50 years, the vast range of classics has been far more important to most climbers. As to the Alps, what could be a more accurate contention than this '... we can now, I fear, expect nothing altogether free from the taint of staleness. For us the familiar hunting grounds exist no longer as they once existed. It only remains for us to dally awhile with the best recollections of now degraded mountains'. That was written in 1868. Degradation continues.

Difficulty and novelty are not the only truths in any sport. Admittedly some rock-climbs, especially here in Britain, are sadly worn. But all snow and ice routes, and mixed ridges in alpine districts are renewed every season, so we cheerfully admit that 'we may not do much climbing, but a great deal of walking uphill'. It is good to see from some captions in Ken Wilson's superb book on classic rock, that everything in Britain up to hard severe is now classed as 'lower grade' and so can be included in our addiction to walking uphill.

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Before the last war, mountaineering was happily not respectable, it was an eccentricity. In one northern city, at least, the more sensitive of us hid the ropes



38 *A minor ridge in a major district, Aiguille de la Bérangère from Dômes de Mtage*

inside our sacks, lest one of the locals should ask 'are ta bahn ter 'ang thi'sen lad?' Nowadays it is not only respectable . . . especially since the ascent of Everest . . . but is credited with virtues it does not possess and is degraded into a spectator sport though not quite as appalling as association football (I don't think our hard men kiss each other . . . at least not yet). Television with its emphasis on the ultimate

rather than the type, is a Bad Thing for all but armchair mountaineers. The commentaries are often intolerable. The most embarrassing result for us, as mere alpine travellers, is the adulation of our non-climbing friends, who visualize us as banging in pitons, elevating ourselves on jumars, or dangling on *étriers*. Not that we have any objection to these several malpractices, but they are (to coin a phrase) quite another ball game.

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Subject to the Editor's authority, I intend to continue this rambling paper by following that excellent maxim for after-dinner speakers to 'speak upon any subject at any given distance from that subject'.

At the moment, it is that point about timidity. In Ken Wilson's book I see young moderns on Ash Tree Slab, with 2 runners on. We did it without, 50 years ago. I am reminded of the usual line . . . 'you are timid . . . we are careful'.

Now to my next shot. This extraordinary idea that the 'working class' are (as Nye Bevan once said) the masters now. Rubbish. I will not try to generalize from insufficient data, but it is relevant to note that our current supremo, our bearded wonder, the Bonington no less, is obviously 'middle class'. Of course, these crude political divisions were coined by dear old Karl Marx and have had no relevance to mountaineering in the present century, or even earlier. I really prefer his kinsman, Groucho. With subs at the present level I echo his *cri de coeur* . . . 'Why should I pay all that money to join a Club that lets in chaps like me'. It was different in some other sports. I remember my father, who was a rowing man, telling me that in the early 1900s no manual worker was eligible for membership of his club.

Our present Editor recently commented in a book review that the working-class climber did not emerge after the war, as a 'shining product of the new socialism' but existed before the war.

May I amplify this by saying *long* before the last war. Practical mountaineering from its earliest days has depended upon the manual worker. What else were the peasants, the chamois hunters, the builders of chalets, who with their muscle cut the steps, carried the loads of wood, and built the alpine huts?

J. H. Doughty once pointed out that the distance of Britain from the Alps was the accident that gave Victorian climbing a certain social bias. So it is today with skiing, yet every child in an alpine village is an adept. When local clubs were formed in Britain anyone could do some climbing, if he wished. In the wider context of the central and eastern alps, there was no question of class. Young lads from Munich could go on their bicycles to the Wetterstein or the Kaisergebirge more easily than their counterparts in Manchester or Liverpool could get to Wales or the Lakes.

No one has a more impressive record of promoting equal opportunity, in mountaineering and in education than Jack Longland, and his blistering indictment of the urban gorillas who disgrace our name in Chamonix and at home was all the more impressive. But I think even he slipped up when, with the best of intentions, he contrasted the CUMC president George Band with Joe Brown, plumber, as an example of a social mix. Not only stunning Cantabs, but any ex-president of any UMC is probably acceptable as a Club member. In the northern hut-owning clubs at the least, a qualified craftsman be he plumber, electrician or whatever, would not only be elected with enthusiasm, but find himself shot on to the Hut Committee before his feet could touch the ground. What was even more

hilarious recently (in the *Guardian* . . . not the yellow press) was the comment that George, son of a Methodist Minister, was thus 'of humble birth'. How silly can journalists get?

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Before shooting off any more counterblasts to the propaganda in favour of dedicated professionalism and the supposed triumph of the workers, care is needed.

There is the vivid memory of the gallant and explosive Colonel Strutt, who discharged volleys in all directions between the wars. Many of us who were quite active in those days, though not members of the Club (I had a guideless qualification of sorts but could not raise the sub: £3 a year, I think it was) looked forward to reading his next glorious outburst. If I recall rightly he was against crampons, pitons, N walls, the proletariat in general and the German lumpenproletariat in particular . . . and finally, against medals.

Most of us used crampons, did not object to pitons, tackled a few N walls and if not exactly proles were even more hard up. May I give a few examples: Jack Longland, undergraduate (7 weeks in the Alps on £25); Colin Kirkus, insurance clerk; Alan Hargreaves, articled clerk; and lastly Bill Murray, Ian Charleson, Eric Byrom, Ken Tarbuck (and me) as spineless underpaid bank clerks.

As to medals, Mussolini was perhaps wrong, but nowadays we have a few Ks and Cs and, at the end of the line, the Duke of E's Gold. Is there much difference?

Such was the force of Strutt's personality that it was mainly left to mountaineers outside the Club to criticize. Sandy Wedderburn amiably commented in a review of the *AJ* that 'he seemed to be speaking from some comfortable crevasse well down the glacier of time'. As Editor of the *Wayfarers Journal* 1939 I published Colin Kirkus's paper 'Ethics of Ironmongery' and a few footnotes from Geoffrey Young, Leo Amery and foreign journals did something to counter the thunderous silence from AC members.

So my shots are intended mainly for defence. I am an old man, but my opinions are not of recent origin . . . I held them when in my 20s, and put a point of view in the *Fell & Rock Journal* of 1936. I repeat some of them, not because I wish to take up the expensive space of the *AJ* with autobiography, but in the confidence that many members share my views, and in the hope that they might think it worth showing this paper, if not to their sons, perhaps to their grandsons. Now for the sermon and relevant texts.

Mountaineering is not real life and it is not . . . or should not be . . . religion. Let us get our perspectives right. Even Mummery, the original advocate of risk taking, qualified his contention by limiting its practice to 'young men, at a time before the responsibilities of life have laid firm hold upon them and who may fairly claim some latitude in matters of this sort'. It was to a far more important call than that of the mountains that a man once replied 'I have married a wife and I cannot come'. Frankly I see little to respect in any man who leaves a widow and young children, because he has continued at the level of risk which suited him. Of course, there is the personal problem of where to set the border line. Non-climbers might say that to climb at all is unjustifiable. Among ourselves we may feel that is taking the thing to extremes.

Yet we read in the *AJ* of many concessions to those personal responsibilities. Men who climbed guideless, thought it right to climb with guides. Another case was that of the couple, with children, who were both climbers. To ensure that they did

not go together, they climbed on separate ropes—influenced possibly by the aphorism of Oscar Wilde: ‘To lose one parent, Mr Worthing, may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both, looks like carelessness’.

Another method, and here I speak personally, is to establish the parameters of our skill, then in actual climbing keep a hefty reserve within them.

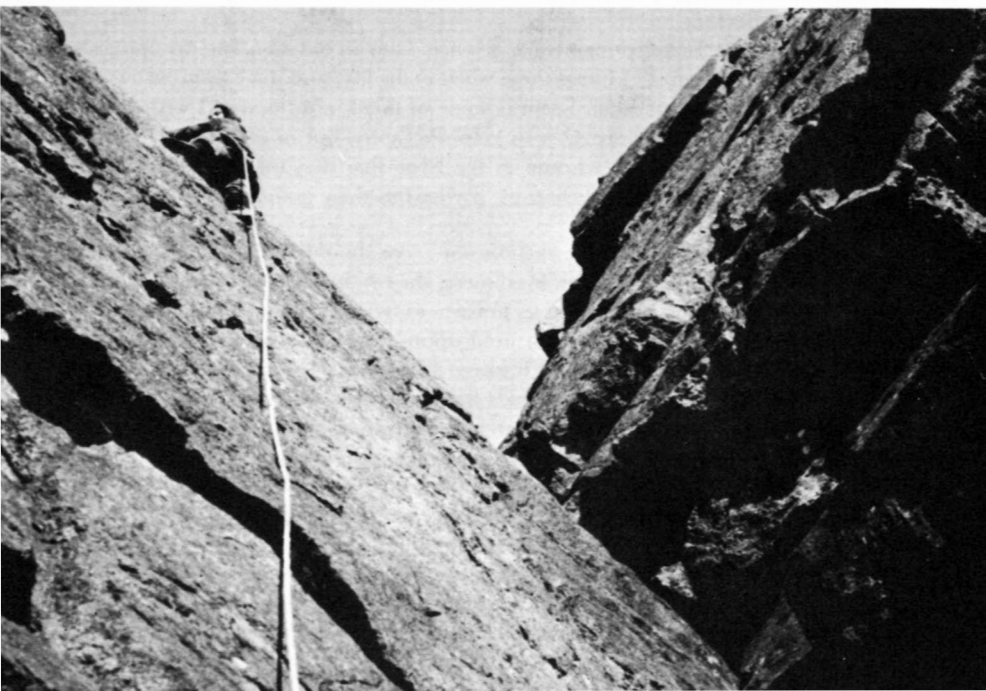
In that context, climbs can be chosen for their quality, which is not always related to their difficulty, length or altitude. In the Alps, for example, I have managed a few 4000m peaks, but what I really have enjoyed are those in the 3000/3500 class. I have had a few 1 o’clock starts and an occasional 18-hour day, but never liked either. When I look back and think of the vast number of climbs in the Alps I have not done, I wish for another 50 years!

I have digressed. In contrast to the new testaments currently being written, let us see what can be found, here and there in the old book . . . I mean the *AJ*. Together with a few ‘gems of purest ray serene’ from other sources.

Leslie Stephen laid it on the line when he said ‘when history comes to pronounce upon men of the time, it won’t put mountaineering on a level with patriotism or even with excellence in the fine arts’.

John Ruskin, even by contemporary standards, was a rather odd character. He could have been a good climber but for his idea that trampling high altitude snow was some kind of desecration. A view still held, I am told, by some Himalayan peoples. But one of his comments is as valid today as it was a century ago. ‘No blame ought to attach to the alpine tourist for incurring danger. There is usually sufficient cause, and real reward, for difficult work. Therefore, gentlemen . . . *as much danger as you care to face*. But, if it please you, *not so much talk of it*. The real

39 Indigenous backwoodswoman walking uphill, Brenda Ritchie on Sron na Ciche, Skye



ground for reprehension of alpine climbing is that, with less cause, it excites more vanity than any other athletic sport.'

A. D. Godley was perhaps the prototype of the voluntary backwoodsman, and put our case with his incomparable wit and style. In 1905 he claimed to 'appear as a member of that not altogether respectable class of persons who ascend hills merely for pleasure . . . they are smatterers and general readers in an age of specialism'.

Twenty years later he outlined the problem for the potential alpinist who can only 'observe with dismay that among dukes, captains of industry and other millionaires the percentage of mountaineers is practically negligible. Should he enquire of the ranks of trade unionism the response will be even less encouraging. In the absence of encouragement from the classes which still possess prestige and the masses which have recently acquired power he is driven to the conclusion that mountaineering is confined to the bourgeoisie and that is a class to which no young man in these days can wish to belong.'

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At this point the Editor tells me that I am running out of allotted space, so I can only commend to all my readers, further search in the *AJ* of past years. Like claret, it gains in quality and mellowness as the years go by.

For my last shot . . . positively the last . . . a quotation relevant to Adventure Training, being promoted by our educators, and bidding fair to become almost as much a racket as Educational Cruises or School Parties going Abroad. This is what Peter Fleming, a fine soldier and valorous explorer had to say:

'For . . . and this is where clubland gets its values wrong . . . adventure is really a soft option . . . adventure has always been a selfish business. Men who set out to find it may, like men who go and get married, feel reasonably confident that a successful issue to their project will be of service to the world. But their desire to benefit the community is never their principal motive . . . they do it because they want to. It suits them. So it requires far less courage to be an explorer than to be a chartered accountant. The courage which enables you to face the prospect of sitting on a high stool in a smoky town and adding up figures over a period of years is definitely a higher as well as a more useful sort of courage than any which the explorer may be called upon to display.'

But it need not be quite as bad as that. With the 5-day week even embryo chartered accountants can get 2 days in our own hills, and perhaps 3 weeks a year in the 'staleness' of the Alps, dallying awhile with the best recollections of now degraded mountains.

To revert to the question of taking children on the hills, it must not be thought that I have any objection. In fact, I have done a good deal of it, subject to 2 reservations. First, I have supposed such travels to be merely undertaken in a holiday humour without the pompous undertones of educative value. Second, and more important, I have limited the numbers to 2 . . . my own sons.

Of course, if I had acquired a Mountain Leadership Certificate, I might have thought I could safely take 20. But I doubt it.

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And so, farewell. Think it over, young men, and if, as I hope, some of you join us in the backwoods, you can help us to sing to that grand old German hymn tune known nowadays as the Internationale;

'Let writers scoff and hard men sneer,  
We'll keep the white flag flying here'.