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Valedictory Address

Read before the Alpine Club on 4 December 1995

In more than one Valedictory Address that I have listened to, the President has started by referring to his predecessors' performances. I have re-read only one of them, and that was so much better than anything I could compose, and said so many things about the Club that I wanted to say myself, that I have not dared to look at any others. What you are going to get is some personal reminiscence, coupled with random comments on the changing scene in the climbing world over the past 45 years or so.

I suppose that my first climbing adventures were boyhood scrambles on the limestone and the rotten red sandstone behind the beaches of Torquay. The motivation was probably just excess energy, but also it tested one's ingenuity, exploring and solving the problem of getting from A to B on the rocks where adults feared to tread. Every now and then I frightened myself; not pleasant at the time, but cathartic in its effects and no doubt some spur to repeat the experience more safely.

There were no climbing books at home. My father was a sailor rather than a landsman, and while I was growing up he was in any case crippled and unable to walk more than a few yards at a time. But Dartmoor was nearby and he would drive the family there for picnics; we wandered and explored, clambered on the tors and looked vainly for flint arrowheads or snakes. I was not conscious of love for the hills as such, but they became the natural place to go to escape from urban life. There was, however, no thought of mountaineering.

The Second World War made escape more difficult, but there was enough excitement without teenagers having to go and look for it. I can't remember any of my contemporaries even mentioning climbing, though things were obviously different in many other families and in many other schools.

At the end of the war I was in Burma and, after 18 months without leave, I made for the hills, in Kulu. It was the natural place to go, and I intended to do some trekking. My plans were unfortunately cut short by a cable summoning me to England. It is interesting to recall the journey, involving buses, a day in a third-class carriage crowded with Punjabi peasants with baggage and livestock, a day in a first-class carriage as befitted an officer in the Indian Army, and a three-day flight in a lumbering flying boat.

Then there was Oxford, with a hundred undergraduate clubs touting for members. Having had an easy war, I suppose I wanted something

adventurous. I rather fancied gliding, but that looked as if it would be very expensive. A new friend said 'Come along to the Mountaineering Club'. So I went, and that was that.

Not that I was immediately hooked. My first climbs with real climbers were on the buttresses of a railway bridge within easy cycling distance of Oxford. Though very far from being a star, I found myself to be quite good at that sort of thing, and was flattered to be told that I really ought to join the meet at Brackenclose in December 1947.

The meet nearly aborted my climbing career. It started well. Two of us took the train to Keswick, bus to Seatoller, and then walked over Sty Head Pass down into Wasdale on a sunny day with snow on the upper slopes. Two real climbers were on the snows above us, cutting steps with real ice axes. It was exciting, and romantically beautiful. The next day I was taken up my first climb, Napes Needle, wearing floppy tennis shoes. The rock was cold, but not really damp, except where the snow slush persisted. My leader was Lykke Olsen, a tough Dane who could have pulled me up hand over fist if need be. He didn't have to, but I was very glad to have someone above me on the descent. The following days were wet. My memory is a blur of rain, cold, greasy rock, darkness, sodden clothes and boots, mud and the dirt emitted by malfunctioning Primuses. We were driven out of the hut each morning by the single-minded meet leader, in our still-wet clothes, and not expected to be back much before dark, if then. I was quite thankful to leave after ten days, and did not contemplate another OUMC meet.

But I had reckoned without my companions. Ignorant of the consequences, I went next term to the first evening meeting, and was immediately exchanging memories. Anthony Rawlinson, in particular, gleefully recalled the delights of reaching up into a stream of water in some dark gully, and our satisfaction in fighting our way up the chimney beyond. I began to savour, in retrospect, the fun we had had together, the boot-nails grating solidly on the rock, or hooked into an incut; the physical well-being in spite of cold and damp; the pleasures of relaxation after an energetic day. Although I had myself led only one easy climb, there was also the satisfying thrill of danger confronted and overcome. We are now told that this is something to do with the after-effects of adrenalin, and of endomorphines, but I prefer to think that the explanation is more broadly that it nourishes an essential part of our nature. We need challenges. Perhaps we even need danger, at least when we are young. Be that as it may, the main thing that induced me to join the North Wales meet during the next vacation was the friends I had made.

I won't bore you further with a blow-by-blow account of my initiation, but for a moment I want to consider the state of mountaineering in this country in the immediate post-war years. For the majority of climbers there had been a six-year moratorium. Some had spent years in prison camps and some, like Colin Kirkus, had died. Little or no progress had

been made in climbing standards or technical matters during the war, apart from the development of nylon ropes, generally available from about 1948, and vibram soles, which arrived at about the same time and were greeted with great suspicion by many members of this club. The war was followed by a number of years during which petrol was rationed and foreign travel inhibited by currency controls. Food was still rationed, some of it as late as 1952, though, as I remember it, the quality rather than the quantity of food for hungry climbers was affected. I once ran a winter meet at the CIC hut largely on unrationed venison, porridge and black treacle, with disastrous effects on some of us.

In the OUMC of 1947, a V Diff leader was someone to be greatly admired and hopefully emulated on a fine day, if there was one. There were, of course, people climbing to a much higher standard, but they were few. There was no more than a handful of British guides and scarcely any training courses or professional instructors. It was difficult to learn, other than by going out with friends and a guidebook, and progressing from the easier to the harder climbs. In a university club, we were luckier than most. The Alpine Club ran a couple of training meets in the Alps, and others of the established clubs at least provided the facilities for meets in this country, though most did little for beginners. Jerry Wright's Mountaineering Association, however, introduced many to the sport. The infant BMC did not, so far as I know, attempt or achieve very much in this area. Progress was slow, and the development of individual capabilities also slow. There was thought to be much virtue in a long apprenticeship. Safety techniques, though improving, seem now to have been somewhat primitive.

Development began to accelerate by the 1950s. The return to the Alps made us conscious of the high standards maintained by some Continental climbers who had managed to continue climbing during the war. At Oxford, the arrival of Tom Bourdillon, and then Hamish Nicol, led to a step increase in standards, when some of us realised that Very Severe rather than Very Difficult was a reasonable objective. At the same time, the gritstone school – Joe and Don and others (no surnames are necessary) – began to make its presence felt. There was a lot of good-natured rivalry, though one still heard some people saying, mistakenly, that climbing was not a competitive sport.

We were heavily conditioned by the past; Geoffrey Young's *Mountain Craft* was our Bible. In the Alps, at least, it was a question of repeating the classic routes, guideless of course as guides were impossibly expensive, and of first British ascents rather than new routes. Techniques, equipment and ambitions were essentially pre-war. The main exception was the exploration by British climbers of the methods of artificial climbing developed on the Continent. Most of us invested in hammers, pitons and étriers, and surmounted the odd pitch by artificial means. Just a few took it more seriously – Nicol and Bourdillon on the East Face of the Capucin, for instance, though this was a bit later. These techniques did not attract me

very much, probably because I was no good at them. I well remember struggling on an overhanging pitch in North Wales, ahead of Tom Bourdillon, as the rain teemed down outside of us. I transferred my weight with great difficulty to an étrier; unfortunately, the étrier was clipped only to my waist, not to the piton. But there were still plenty of marvellous and challenging free routes to be done in the Alps, and in those days not too many people to be expected on them.

Then, quite unforeseen, came the chance for me to go to Everest. I wrote about this in the 1993 *Alpine Journal* and won't go into it again, and will only repeat that I was extraordinarily lucky. After the ascent, it was Eric Shipton who said 'Thank goodness, we can now get on with some real climbing.' Perhaps he thought that, once the glare of publicity had faded, obsession with the giant peaks would also fade and that climbing and mountain exploration would remain very much a minority sport. Ang Nyima, one of our Sherpas, said 'Now, Everest is finished'. How wrong they both were! Even before television became universal, the event stimulated interest in climbing and was, I think, responsible for many youngsters taking it up. Also, the first ascent, and the publicity that greeted it, opened doors for climbers in general. I am not referring to the opportunity of support by the Mount Everest Foundation, though that has helped many, but to the perception that the world beyond Britain and the Alps was open to them.

Not that things changed all that quickly. One by one, the 8000-metre peaks were climbed, mostly by large expeditions using siege tactics. A notable exception to the usual pattern was Hamish MacInnes' and Johnny Cunningham's trip to Everest in the autumn of 1953 aiming, it seems, to show that a couple of redoubtable Creagh Dhu members could do without the massive bandobast of the traditional expedition. Unfortunately for them, we managed to get up the mountain in the spring, so they changed their objective to Pumori. When they dismissed their sole Sherpa, he took pity on their poverty and gave them his knife, fork and spoon. At that time, the climbing world was still relatively small. The ACG was founded, largely to bring together those doing first British ascents in the Alps. But there had been a notable jump in rock-climbing standards at home, and this was soon to be transferred to the Alps where British parties started to do a few new routes, the best known being perhaps the Brown–Whillans route on the West Face of the Blaitière.

After the excitement of Everest, I continued, of course, to climb in much the same way, with the same old friends and with new ones. Then there was marriage, and the great pleasure of finding that Sally also wanted to climb, though the last person she wanted to be taught by was me. Just as the stream of new entrants to the British climbing scene was becoming a flood, we had the chance to live and work in the USA, where climbing, in the early sixties, was still a sport for a few eccentrics at variance with the comfort-loving and safety-first attitude of much of American society. We were lucky enough to be asked to join a lightweight expedition to a com-

pletely untouched range of granite peaks in Northern Alaska, the Arrigetch. 'Lightweight' means, of course, that you carry a pack which is just about as heavy as you can get off the ground. Anyway, it was a great experience to climb in the US; we made many friends and enjoyed uncrowded crags and deserted peaks.

Coming back to Britain two years later, it was a bit of a shock to meet so many people in Wales and in the Alps. What had been responsible for the change? Apart from Everest, the factors that have changed the climbing scene so profoundly have mostly not originated within the sport itself: first I would put the broadening of education to include outdoor activities other than the team games which once had a monopoly. This has necessarily led to more professionalism and to increasing emphasis on safety; there is all the difference in the world between climbing with a group of friends and taking responsibility for a school party. Perhaps more significantly, it has also led to the acceptance by society of climbing as an activity practised by 'normal' people.

Concurrently, the other major factor has been rising standards of living. More people can afford to climb, more people have more leisure time, and more people are mobile. Roger Chorley, in his Valedictory Address, drew attention to the fact that Alpine climbing only took off when the railways had shortened and cheapened the journey to the Alps, and that cheap air travel had now done the same for the Greater Ranges. Nearer home, the increase in numbers of climbers has brought commercial opportunities and commercialism, though by no means on the scale that has hit many other sports. As far as I know, Chris has not yet had to pay a transfer fee in order to put together a climbing team.

Last among the extraneous factors, and interacting with the others, I would put the media, which pervade life today to an extent never before experienced.

At the same time, there have been major technical developments within the sport. When Sally and I climbed near New York, we were the first to use nuts, then primitive hexagonals with the thread reamed out. Two years later, there were purpose-made chocks, which have had a very significant effect on rock-climbing standards. A bit later still, ice climbing was revolutionised by the invention of drop-head ice axes and rigid crampons. Commercial interest has facilitated the development of better and better equipment.

Now, what has all this done to mountaineering? To find the most extreme developments, we should look at what has happened to rock climbing. Rock climbing is not mountaineering, but to most of us it is inseparable from it, and developments in rock climbing have spread and are spreading into big mountains. Many of us recently heard Paul Pritchard talking about his alpine-style ascent of the Slovene route on Trango Tower, while there was an American team on a neighbouring route, painstakingly bolting or otherwise equipping it, sometimes from above, with the object of climbing

it from the ground later on. They spent sixty days in this activity – an extraordinary thing to do, in my opinion, and remarkably boring to any but the participants. But perhaps we should not be too scathing. After all, we spent over fifty days getting up and down the yak route on Everest.

Well, that's one of the modern developments. But, more fundamentally, we have the increase in numbers, coupled with advances in technique and equipment, media attention, and a continued competitive spirit among the lead climbers. One might have thought that virgin rock would have run out years ago, but every issue of every climbing magazine has pages of new routes – none of them, unfortunately, climbable by me. Some of these are trivial variations, of course, but I am sure that many of them will give years of pleasure to those who are good enough to follow the pioneers.

A more dubious development, which seems even sinister to some of us, has been brought about by the acceptance of rock climbing as an activity for 'normal' people, rather than for the abnormally adventurous. The consequent emphasis on safety, together with commercial exploitation, has led to the equipment of rock routes with ironmongery, so that a climb becomes simply a gymnastic activity, with less risk attached to it than a somersault in the gym. Of course, this is much the same activity as has always been enjoyed by any second with a competent leader doing a climb within his or her powers. People get a lot of fun out of it. Equipping climbs in the Alps has a long history, and not many of us reject the reassurance of a fixed rope or a well-placed piton. But what I find sinister is the threat that this kind of climbing will become the norm, as Etienne Gross, editor of *Les Alpes*, implied in his recent correspondence with Doug Scott – and the consequent threat that more and more good climbs will become fully equipped, enabling so-called guides to take so-called climbers up them in comfort and safety, but greatly reducing the enjoyment of others.

Also worrying is the intention of the UIAA to have competitive rock climbing accepted as an Olympic sport. The Olympic movement seems to me to have departed so much from the ideals of Baron de Coubertin, that association with it brings advantage only to those who make money out of it. It is probably a vain hope, but I would rather that climbing were kept out of that excessively competitive and highly publicised world. We must hope that the virus of organised competitive climbing does not spread unchecked into the hills.

Turning now to mountains rather than crags, the rock-climbing developments have of course spread – but patchily, many areas being so far little affected. The chief changes in the Alps have been the revolution in ice climbing already referred to, accompanied by the much greater popularity of winter climbing, and the increase in numbers, with streams of climbers on any well known route. As for the Greater Ranges, climbing in them is still regarded by the general public as an activity for the more than usually adventurous, though a lot has changed particularly as regards the 8000-metre peaks. Organisations now exist to smooth the path of the

climber, at least as far as base camp. Clothing and equipment have greatly improved, the physiology of high altitude is much better understood and the feasibility of helicopter rescue has reduced the risk somewhat. But there is still great scope for exploratory mountaineering and pioneering new routes, and there is still great risk on the big peaks, as we have been cruelly reminded this year. This club and its members are more and more interested in ranges beyond the Alps. There should be enough opportunities for traditional mountaineers there for a few more years.

There is one other major development, not so far mentioned, which is a consequence of increasing numbers and of the higher public profile of mountaineering. I refer to the restrictions now sometimes put on climbers for various reasons – often political or environmental, but also, in some countries, designed to maximise foreign exchange earnings or to preserve unclimbed peaks for their own nationals. We may understand the reasons for such restrictions, and can only hope that, as time goes by, they may be found less compelling by the governments and peoples in question. We may also hope that some of the excesses of environmentalists may eventually be found unacceptable: for instance, the actions of the influential Green movement in Germany, which has for the time being succeeded in banning climbers from crags in some Länder, and the threatened extension of such bans now mooted in the Council of Europe.

In this changing world, what is the position of the Club? Years ago, we had a debate on 'The Role of the Alpine Club'. Charles Evans was President, and remarked mischievously that perhaps the Club didn't need a role. I happen to think that we have one, whether we like it or not. We have one so long as we are respected as the inheritors of great traditions, and so long as we continue to exemplify and renew those traditions. I have been made very conscious over the past three years that we are respected, both at home and abroad, but happily we have no formal role or duties. We do not have to be democratic in the sense that the BMC must be, nor do we have to represent anyone but ourselves. The other side of the same coin is that we cannot lay down 'policies' that will be implemented in British or world mountaineering. We have to educate and persuade. Our influence is manifested in our Journal, and in the service provided to mountaineers by the Library, but more especially through those of our members who, in the BMC, in the Guides' Association, in education and in other spheres – even the media – do so much for fellow mountaineers. The Objects of the Club are, as you know, the promotion of good fellowship among mountaineers, of mountain climbing and mountain exploration throughout the world, and of better knowledge of the mountains through literature, science and art. Our members continue to promote those objects in the wider world.

So, in a sense, Charles Evans was right after all. It is not so much the Club but individuals who have roles. But our members are members because of all we have in common: a love of the hills, a love of mountaineering and of adventure. We have a commitment to mountains and to the best traditions

of mountaineering. We must carry on and develop those traditions. We must continue to be a Club of active climbers. It is important that we recognise, as we now do, the extraordinary achievements, and the skill and hardihood, of today's leading climbers. It is important that we do not hastily condemn new methods, nor what we take to be others' motivations. We used once to have the reputation of being stuffy and censorious, but I hope that is now safely behind us. Tolerance is more than ever necessary in a changing world where – and here I take another side-swipe at the media – conflicts of opinion are seized upon and attitudes deliberately polarised. Tolerance certainly does not mean that we should weakly acquiesce in developments that do harm to the hills and to mountaineering as we know it. It does mean that, with malice towards none, we should continue to promote what we see as the best practices in the sport, and that we should seek to infect others with our own enthusiasms and ideals.

This would be a solemn and pompous note on which to end. Rather, I would leave with you a story about our member Ivor Richards, poet, professor and pioneer of the North Ridge of the Dent Blanche. When he and Dorothy Pilley, his wife, were 'getting on', and she had been seriously lamed by a car accident, they went to climb Mount Washington, which they had done many times before. They decided to descend by a trail they didn't know. Being slow, they were benighted; they came to no harm, and met a search party low on the mountain early next morning.

'Do you know,' said Ivor to me afterwards, 'It was just like all those years ago in the Alps, when we didn't know whether we were in the right place or whether the route would be too much for us – just the same exciting feeling.'

That is the sort of enthusiasm that I think we all share.