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DENIS GREENALD

## Johnnie Lees: A Memoir

(Plates 46, 47)

Since Johnnie's death I have been reading his early log books and reliving the adventures of a lifetime's friendship. We were first cousins, and the fact that our mothers were not just sisters but best friends too, ensured that from the earliest days there was close family contact. At first this was sporadic, on our grandfather's farm near Halifax in Yorkshire, with other cousins, and in Chingford, Essex, where the Lees then lived. In 1939 John's father was transferred to Hexham-on-Tyne. Travel to the West Riding, where all our relations lived, became much easier. They were also nearer to the Lake District, and John's log starts in 1940 significantly, with a postcard of Helvellyn. It was captioned 'My first real mountain' and he climbed it with his father, a keen fell walker. This year also marked the start of our cycling partnership. During the holidays we met at Piercebridge-on-Tees, staying overnight and returning together to Hexham or Bradford. Soon we were doing the trip in a day and all our holidays were spent touring in the Dales or Northumberland.

Each August there were longer expeditions, when we worked at a student forestry camp in the depths of Aberdeenshire, all part of the war effort. The work itself was dreary and monotonous, but we had enormous fun, especially in getting there by bike and staying at Youth Hostels. We loved the hut near Rhynie we used as our base. John wrote of his last trip there, just after VJ day, on his own after a delay for his RAF interview. "I was pleased to see the old 'Buck'," he wrote. "I had been able to see [it] for the last ten miles on my right, and to see that grand little mountain and friend of ours, Tap o'Noth, with Blackstripes down below and the forestry road winding down past it into the white mist in the valley bottom."

For the next two years we saw little of each other, except when our leave coincided, though at the end of that stint we managed a week's fell walking in the Lakes, taking in the Langdales, Gable and Scafell. "Pavey Ark by means of a grand little gully which even called for a bit of 'rocking'" Johnnie wrote, recalling also a retreat from Broad Stand. "After shedding rucsacs we followed nail scratches down to the left which led to a narrow cleft in the side of the face – presumably *Fat Man's Agony*. Half an hour or more of reconnoitring, during which we found ourselves on a tricky rock climb ... convinced us that it was too 'dicey' with Bergens and without ropes."

This was in September 1947. John, already a corporal PT instructor, decided to sign on in the RAF and was posted to Hendon. By a happy coincidence I had a place at the LSE and through the college's mountaineering club we started climbing at Harrison's in the summer of 1948. It was a turning point; we were hooked and the outcrop became our Mecca. This was the time when Nea Morin, the discoverer and undisputed authority on the rocks, held court. She and her two brothers, her children Denise and Ian, together with Hilary Longley-Cook – an Alpine Club member – were to be found there most weekends, demonstrating, encouraging, cajoling the would-be tigers. It was the friendliest of climbing schools. The routes were short, steep, slippery and hard, the competition fierce, but good-natured and relaxed. Friendships made there were to last a lifetime, especially amongst the group which called itself, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, 'The Bar Room Mountaineers'. And John – or JRL as we then called him – was undoubtedly our outstanding member by his energy, enthusiasm and sheer appetite for rock climbing. Technically, too, he was just that bit better than the rest of the local experts, with a phenomenal knowledge of the climbs and the minutiae of the holds. Undeterred by the 'NL' symbols in the guide book, he proceeded to lead these routes and create variations in a restless search for new lines. A year after starting, he circulated his typescript 'Some New Additions' to E C Pyatt's *Sandstone Climbs in SE England*.

With our new-found friends we climbed at a frenetic pace for the next two years, weekends at Harrison's interspaced with longer trips to North Wales, the Lakes and Scotland, repeating classic routes and getting used to mountaineering in all seasons. And then there was gritstone. The Lees family had finally come home to Yorkshire and were living at Otley. Almscliffe near Harrogate, and the Cow and Calf at Ilkley, were only a bike ride away. Caley Crags and Chevin Buttress were within walking distance of their house in Station Road. The latter crag in particular we made our own, top-roping and eventually leading its steep, serious lines.

This pattern continued in 1950, with skiing in Glencoe thrown in for good measure, and excursions to Oxted chalk quarry for Alpine training. The season was a vintage one for British climbers and just about everybody seemed to be in Chamonix. The BRMC were there *en masse*, about a dozen camping on the Blaitière *alpage*, whilst JRL, Geoff Millwood, Gwen Guntrip and myself annexed the Baraque Forestière, on the lower path from Montanvers. From these bases climbs were made in all directions, but we four concentrated on the cirque around the Nantillons glacier. The climax was a traverse of the Grépon, with ten in the party. Gwen remembers the descent particularly:

"After about twenty minutes my broken crampon packed in again, the boot lace having rotted through ... there was no time to fiddle again, so off with it, and onward by slithers and hops, now held firmly from behind by JRL, equipped with axe and crampons and an excellent good temper. We

reached the rock of the rognon just as it was dark and slithered down, with two feeble torches between us. I doubt whether I should ever have seen a hand or foothold, had it not been for the untiring generosity with which Johnnie shared his torch glimmers."

That year he had joined both the Climbers' Club and the RAF Mountaineering Association, and on his return from the Alps was immediately involved in a RAF College Mountaineering Club meet in Glen Coe. The other instructors were Wing Commander Tony Smyth, Chairman of RAFMA, and Flight Lt Gordon Parrish. Also present was Prof T Graham Brown, a Vice-President of their Club, and at that time Hon Editor of the Alpine Journal, who was keenly interested in mountain rescue. Clearly he hit it off with JRL and, after the meet, invited him and Parrish to spend some time on his boat on Loch Etive, to explore the now well-known Trilleachan slabs on his 'mystery mountain'. They were joined by Dan Stewart, a leading member of the Edinburgh University Mountaineering Club, who later found himself strategically drafted to Kinloss when his time came for National Service.

For some time there had been concern in the RAFMA committee regarding the lack of mountaineering expertise in the rescue service, and ways of involving RAFMA in training programs were being considered. These concerns were given impetus in March 1951, when the crash of a Lancaster on Beinn Eighe cast serious doubts on the ability of the local team to work in severe winter conditions on high, inaccessible mountain crags. Top brass, in the shape of the President of RAFMA, Sir Ralph Cochrane, who was also Vice-Chief of the Air Staff, took action and his staff convened a conference of interested parties. Recommendations for the recruitment and training of NCOs and airmen volunteers were agreed, and, at the same time, Mike Holton, a founder member of RAFMA now working in the Civil Service, was seconded to the Air Ministry to write a training manual.

Thus, in October 1951, Sgt Lees instructed on the first RAF Mountain Rescue Course, and in the following January was posted to Valley, in Anglesey, as NCO in full-time charge of the MR team. This first year was a busy one, with training courses in Wales and Scotland, taking part in rescues and visits to London for RAFMA and Air Ministry meetings. Interspersed with all this was recreational climbing managed during periods of leave. Indeed, personal and professional life merged into a seamless whole, with amateur friends such as Bill Trench and Geoff Roberts often giving a hand on courses. His personal standard moved up a notch, membership of the CC giving access to the club's huts, the chance to climb with many of the best rock climbers of the time, and to lead Hard VS climbs in the Llanberis Pass and on Clogwyn d'ur Arddu.

It was also the year when he met Gwen Moffat, the most experienced of the post-war women climbers and an original member of the Alpine Climbing Group founded later that year. Their relationship got off to a

happy start, Gwen finding her climbing feet again three years after the birth of her daughter, respecting Johnnie's technical ability and careful style. He was delighted at finding an attractive girl-friend capable of following and even leading through on hard routes. It seemed a perfect partnership, full of promise and potential. He wrote that 20 April was "definitely a day to remember, walking over the Pass, rather warm, with Gwen, and Sheena on my back. Crackstone Rib. Moffat soon in bare feet. ... absolutely bubbling over with delight at climbing again, and soon talked me into giving her the lead."

With their new relationship, and the constant demands of the team, there was no opportunity to fit in an Alpine season in 1952. The year finished with the traditional New Year's Eve ascent of Snowdon in blizzard conditions, a warm-up for the winter mountain rescue course in the Cairngorms in February 1953. David Dattner, the widely respected officer heading the Kinloss team, was in charge of the course. Lees was Chief Instructor. In March, Lees himself was posted to Kinloss and shortly after, Dan Stewart, now an Education Officer, replaced Dattner. This was the start of a formidable partnership which was to last for the next two years, Scotland becoming the preferred venue for training courses.

In the summer of 1953 Johnnie was back in Chamonix, climbing with Bill Trench and Dennis Kemp, partners in many of his Welsh rock climbs of the previous year. They started with the NNE arête of the Aiguille de l'M, and the Charmoz-Grépon traverse, then went up to the Leschaux refuge. From this base they climbed a short route on the Pointe Cupelin, before embarking on two longer climbs. The first of these was a traverse of Mt Mallet, the Aiguille de Rochefort and Dent du Géant to the Torino. Approaching the Dent, they had a good view of the south face and saw two climbers high up on the TD route, later meeting them on the summit. They were Arthur Dolphin and his Belgian partner, shortly before the former was tragically killed, soloing down the easy but exposed rocks below the foot of the Dent. It was late afternoon when they reached the Torino hut but instead of staying there, they now charged down the Géant glacier and back to the Leschaux by 9pm. Next day, they made a trip to Chamonix for reprovisioning and a slide show given by Kemp, an accomplished professional photographer. Then they returned to the hut, having acquired an experienced French climber to make up a four for the Old Brenva. The next day they were at the Col de la Fourche, in deteriorating conditions. They decided to go to Col Moore to have a look. They looked and went on, with some argument, and reached the ice wall beneath the summit plateau by midday. They forced this and continued to the top in poor visibility. There the team met "a party of Dutch and one odd Italian, whom we took care of," and by the time they reached the Vallot hut at 2pm blizzard conditions had set in. Next day, in foul weather, they nursed him down to the Grands Mulets and eventually on to Montenvers. Here they left him and slogged back to the Leschaux hut at dusk, in heavy rain.

JRL was now an accomplished alpinist – this was his third season – and a strong contender for a place on the RAFMA Himalayan Expedition planned for 1955. It was led by the veteran Wing Commander Tony Smyth, and besides Lees and Stewart included John Sims, Donald Bennet, Jack Emerson and Mike Holton, all of whom had climbed together previously, either in mountain rescue teams or the association. Despite initial difficulties due to exceptionally heavy snow, this was a successful venture with several first ascents of 6000m peaks in the Kulti Himal. Johnnie played an important part.

Returning to Britain he was posted to Valley again, where he was to remain for the next five years, creating the best-known mountain rescue team in England and Wales, and exerting great influence on the young men in his charge. The incident for which he will always be remembered, and which captured the imagination of the public at the time, was the dramatic rescue of Major Hugh Robertson from a ledge on Amphitheatre Buttress, on a dark winter's night in January 1958. The climber had come off while leading an ice-covered pitch, fracturing his skull in the process. Help was sent for and the Valley team reached the site in three hours to find the injured man delirious. Time was precious and urgent action needed if the man's life was to be saved. A stretcher rescue would be difficult and time consuming, but Johnnie knew of a continental device, the *tragsitz*, which enabled a casualty to be carried on the rescuer's back. He immediately improvised one from the ropes and slings available and, with the injured man thrashing about in delirium, was lowered some 200ft to the bottom of the cliff. Vic Bray, responsible at the anchor for controlling the descent, has vivid recollections of the nightmare scene, the difficulty in communicating and the constant anxiety that the knots joining the 120ft ropes might snag. The exhausted team still had an arduous two-mile stretcher carry across ill-defined boggy tracks to reach the ambulance at the road head in Cwm Eigiau; they remained with the casualty during the journey to Bangor and later kept vigil at the hospital. Robertson recovered from his injuries and later showed his gratitude by purchasing a commercial *tragsitz* in Austria and donating it to the Valley team. For his crucial role in the rescue, Johnnie was awarded the George Medal, the only time this decoration has been given to a British climber. It was richly deserved, demonstrating as it did his mastery of mountain craft and mountain terrain in severe conditions, his quick thinking and initiative, his courage in taking the most dangerous and arduous role, and his confidence in the ability of the men he had trained. He rarely spoke of it, except to correct a detail or misconception, but remained quietly modest, insisting that it was a team effort.

He and Gwen Moffat had married in 1956, and continued to climb at a high level both in Britain and in the Alps, though their partnership there was often dogged by adverse conditions. Their best routes were an epic ascent of the Breithorn Younggrat in 1957 and, in the Dauphiné in 1959, the Aiguille de Dibona – Direct with Stofer variation – and a traverse of the

Meije. The romance and the strains of their climbs and life together are described, with at times heartbreaking candour, in Gwen's three mountain books. The first of these, *Space Below my Feet*, published in 1961, rightly became a classic. Johnnie celebrated it, with dry humour, by a new route on Craig y Wrysgan, in the Moelwyns, *Space Below MY Feet* (HVS 5a). With him was Derek Walker, one of the many young men who had been inspired by Johnnie and introduced to climbing when a member of the Valley team. It was in an area he knew well, having used it for MR training exercises and when researching the first Moelwynion guidebook, which was published in 1962.

The same year, he left the RAF and worked for a short time with Ron James at Ogwen Cottage, at that time an independent Outdoor Centre, with its own rescue team which Johnnie had helped to train. Indeed, many rescues had been joint efforts, in the course of which they both became alarmed at the number of incidents involving badly led or inadequately equipped school parties. Together with others in the field, they began to press for some form of training in basic mountain craft and navigational skills for leaders of groups. These ideas were later developed by Sir Jack Longland and led to the formation in 1964 of the Mountain Training Board and the Mountain Leadership Certificate of the BMC, notable milestones in the history of accident prevention.

His next moves were to more conventional Outward Bound schools in the Lake District and Scotland, as a climbing instructor. But the transition to civilian life was not proving easy. Freelance guiding might have offered a career, since both he and Gwen had qualified as mountain guides in the mid-1950s, she being the first woman in Britain to have this distinction. Private clients, however, were difficult to find with the explosion of demand in this field yet to occur. Financial security came eventually in 1966 with his appointment as Warden Service Officer for the Peak Planning Board, and they moved to Derbyshire. Sadly, it did not resolve the tensions in their marriage, and they divorced in 1971. Four years later Johnnie married Dorothy Pleasance, a colleague at work, and settled down to a more peaceful but no less busy life. In this new career he continued to insist on the same high standards in training and safety as formerly, and in his spare time was much in demand on voluntary committees. From 1974 to 1977 he was Chairman of the BMC Safety Committee and served on that body's Peak Area Committee, becoming Secretary in 1992. He was also heavily involved with the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, being Chief Assessor for the Peak area.

His contact with the active climbing scene continued, and he was hut custodian for the Climbers' Club, at both Helyg and Cwm Glas Mawr, in the 1970s. He loved to attend the annual reunions of the Valley teams of the 1950s and in 1993 became the first President of the RAF Mountain Rescue Association formed fifty years after the service was founded. His

contribution to guiding was recognised by the British Association of Mountain Guides when he was made an Honoured Guide.

Even after retirement in 1985 he continued to climb at a high standard. Ron James remembers doing *Vector* with him about this time, and *Dream of White Horses* considerably later. My own last climb with him was more modest. A family wedding had brought us to Glasgow, and afterwards we had a nostalgic drive along Loch Lomond side to stay with our old friends Don and Val Aldridge in Perthshire. The next day we climbed on Craig y Barns, a small crag above Dunkeld, in the autumn sunshine. The route was about VDiff; we both failed on the crux, but found an alternative line, delicate, but with plenty of holds; a good, old-fashioned climb like the climbers themselves. This was in 1996, some two years after Dorothy's death. Their relationship had been warm and companionable, full of good-humoured banter, and he missed her terribly. They had no children, but Johnnie had always kept in touch with Sheena, Gwen's daughter, to whom he had been a loving and conscientious stepfather. Grown-up and living an independent life, she was a comfort to him now.

Despite his reputation as a hard man, Johnnie was a very caring person. He cared passionately for the mountain environment and for the safety of the people who ventured into it. His wrath and indignation was reserved for the incompetence, or ignorance, of those who should have known better. He came into rescue work largely by accident, but once involved his commitment was total. To risk one's life for others – surely there is no finer epitaph.

Johnnie Lees GM BEM, 1927-2002

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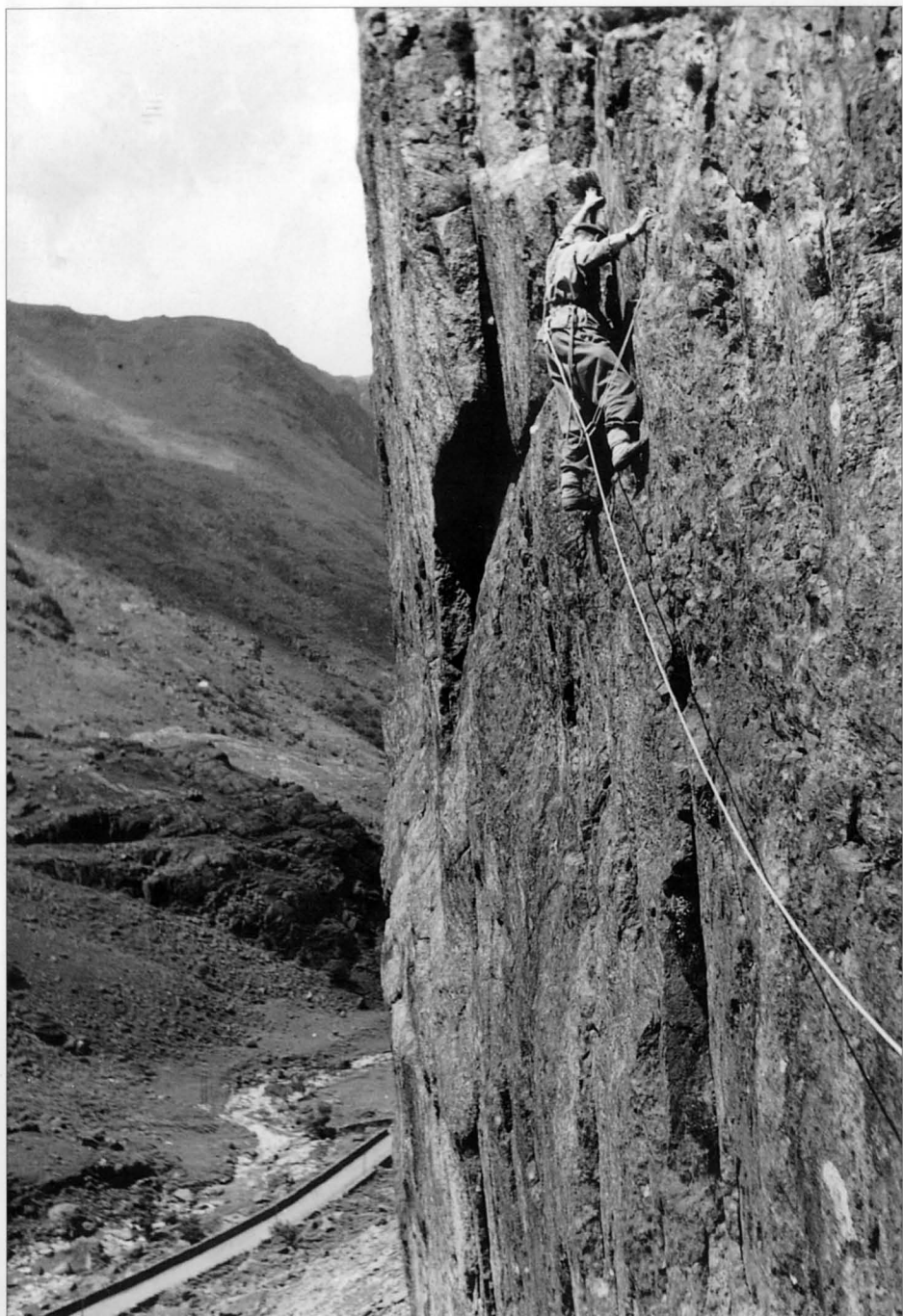


45. Dave Wilkinson on the summit ridge of The Spear in the North Lemons; the Courtauld glacier appears below. (*Geoff Cohen*) (p57)



46. Johnnie Lees with Vic Bray during a reunion at RAF Valley in 1993. (*Derek Walker*) (p209)





47. Johnnie Lees on Kaisergerbirge Wall in the early 1950s. (*Ray Tanter*) (p209)