COLIN WELLS

Two Lives

Alastair Borthwick was only briefly, it seems, a climber, yet his classic book, *Always a Little Further*, uniquely chronicled an emerging class of climbing irregulars unlikely to cross the threshold of the Alpine Club in the 1930s. Alice 'Jammy' Cross most certainly was a climber – the first woman to lead Scafell's Central Buttress – and met a great many more as 'landlady' of the Old Dungeon Ghyll, Langdale. Neither Borthwick nor Cross was a member of the AC, but both were very much a part of our shared past.

Alastair Borthwick OBE 1913 - 2003

In the period between the wars, when most climbing literature was typified by expedition books recounting travels to high and exotic places by the well-to-do, Alastair Borthwick's classic account of domestic mountain adventures, *Always a Little Further*, proved little short of groundbreaking. Published in 1939, it vividly captured the beginning of the 'grass-roots' movement into the Scottish hills by the working-class and unemployed of Glasgow and Clydebank. Originally inspired by the 'Wandervogel' movement blossoming in Germany's Weimar Republic, a wave of enthusiasm for hiking and climbing had spread across northern Europe by the early 1930s, resulting, among other things, in the establishment of national Youth Hostels Associations. In Scotland, the developments were tempered by the advent of mass unemployment in the Clydebank shipyards which resulted in a substantial body of men and women with time on their hands, mountains on their doorstep, and very little money. The latter did not stop the resourceful Glaswegians, who hitch-hiked north in their hundreds to camp, climb and walk in the hitherto privileged domain of the West Highlands, dossing in caves or 'howffs' and forming informal climbing clubs such as the 'Creagh Dhu.'

While other writers of the period such as Bill Murray and Jim Bell chose to record the activities of the mountaineering elite and concentrated on the climbing itself, Borthwick alone chronicled the personalities of the new breed of impecunious egalitarian climber, and 'gangrels of all sorts'. This would have been sufficient in itself to establish *Always a Little Further* as a valuable document portraying a period of major social change, but Borthwick's entertainingly humorous style and irrepressible *joie de vivre* ensured that it became much more than that. Descriptions of encounters with tramps, tinkers and hawkers, naïve beginner's escapades on the Bens and crags of Skye and Argyll and hilarious hitch-hiking accounts (such as

a memorable journey to Ben Nevis in the back of a lorry accompanied by a flock of dead sheep) made it a classic of its genre. Borthwick first offered the manuscript to Fabers, who initially demurred, unsure of the unusual subject matter. Fortunately, TS Eliot, then one of the publisher's directors, insisted on its publication. It has never been out of print since.

Borthwick was born in 1913 in Rutherglen, Lanarkshire and brought up in the Ayrshire seaside town of Troon before moving to Glasgow in his teens. Leaving Glasgow High School aged 16, he became a 'telephone boy' with the *Glasgow Evening Herald*, taking down copy from roving correspondents. Borthwick soon moved on to a busier role with the *Glasgow Weekly Herald*, a publication that employed just five staff to fill 28 pages. As a consequence he found himself promoted to writer and editor of the Women's Page, Children's Page, Film Reviews, Reader's Letters, Reader's Queries (often writing the queries too), Crossword Compiler, as well as making a regular contribution to the front page. The paper also ran an 'Open Air Page', and it was as a result of his involvement with this that Borthwick discovered the burgeoning outdoor recreation scene developing in the city – and a love of rock climbing. 'I became an addict,' he remembered. 'Most of my experiences ended up in the paper and I later used most of this material to write *Always a Little Further*.' Initially ambitious, Borthwick secured a job as reporter with the *Daily Mirror* in 1935 but, perhaps pining for the open air of the Highlands, found he didn't take to the life of a Fleet Street hack. He was not surprised when the *Mirror* sacked him a year later. It would prove a blessing, encouraging him to move into areas more suited to his easy-going informality, such as radio broadcasting. While interviewing at the BBC in 1934 Borthwick had casually mentioned to the producer James Fergusson that he had been climbing at the weekend. Intrigued, Fergusson commissioned a 15-minute radio talk on the subject and Borthwick revealed an innate talent for broadcasting. 'I saw him in the studio treating the microphone like an old friend, chatting away, waving his arms about, and I knew this was how it was done,' said Fergusson admiringly. Borthwick was more circumspect about his ability to sound friendly and relaxed in an era characterised by starchy formality. 'It just seemed the natural way to speak,' he said. 'I couldn't understand why everybody didn't do it.' It was the start of a long association with radio and TV; his first broadcast was in 1934 and his last was in 1995.

Other interesting jobs came Borthwick's way but his most exciting and demanding employment arrived with the advent of war. As an Intelligence Officer assigned to the 5th Seaforth Highlanders, Borthwick was to see more action than most. Beginning in 1942 at the battle of El Alamein, Borthwick and his fellow Seaforths would eventually travel 3000 battle-weary miles across North Africa and Europe. Following the defeat of Rommel, they would take part in the conquest of Sicily, help invade Italy, move on to the invasion of Normandy and then secure the canal zone of Holland, before their highly mobile war culminated with a series of vicious

battles on German soil following the crossing of the Rhine. Narrowly escaping anti-personnel mines and heavy shelling in North Africa, ambushes by tanks in Sicily, snipers and close-quarter combat in northern Europe, Borthwick appeared to have led a charmed life. Luckily, he was able to record his extraordinary experiences for posterity just before the cessation of hostilities. The Seaforths' Colonel traded him permission to attend no more parades once shooting had ceased, in return for a battalion history. 'I found myself in a position writers dream about,' he remembered. 'I'd just had the experience of a lifetime, and had six clear months to write it.' The result, *Sans Peur* (the Seaforths' motto), later published as *Battalion*, related the saga of how a group of naïve civilians evolved into an efficient, battle-scarred fighting unit. When it was republished by Ken Wilson in 1994 it received glowing reviews. Borthwick himself simply described the book as 'telling what it was like to live in a tightly-knit family and fight a war'.

Following demobilisation Borthwick felt a need for a change of direction. With his wife Anne he left Glasgow for the Isle of Jura in 1945, unwittingly preceding George Orwell to the island by three years. Borthwick pursued a combined broadcasting and smallholding existence, presenting the BBC's 'Scottish Survey', a series examining the country's assets and liabilities following the war. 'I always believed the ideal life was to write a thousand words in the morning and catch a salmon in the afternoon,' he would explain, regarding his unusual life. The Borthwicks stayed on Jura for seven years before moving to Islay. Journalism took a back seat while Borthwick was co-opted by the Secretary of State for Scotland, Tom Johnson, to organise a 'Festival of Heavy Engineering' at Glasgow's Kelvin Hall as part of Scotland's share of the 1951 Festival of Britain celebrations. Basil Spence was his architect and, although deemed an architectural and presentational success, the attraction was poorly attended. 'No woman on earth would cross the road to a Festival of Heavy Engineering,' Borthwick would ruefully observe. It ensured him an OBE however.

With the advent of television, Borthwick's broadcasting career appeared to have stalled. 'I was a script man in an age of live TV,' he explained. But with the invention of the autocue, and the increasing necessity to script complicated documentary features, Borthwick found himself in demand once more. Grampian TV frequently used his services from the 1960s onwards and Borthwick wrote nearly 150 half-hour shows on an amazingly eclectic range of subjects. 'Bonny Prince Charlie one week, Lola Montez the next and Senator Joe McCarthy to follow – viewers never knew what would happen next!'

The Borthwicks lived for the last thirty years in Ayrshire, finally settling on a hill farm near the village of Barr before living for the last five years in a nursing home at Beith. Asked how he thought he might be remembered, Borthwick said he considered himself as a journeyman writer, 'fit to turn out a decent job on most subjects as required'. He felt he would be satisfied if people thought 'He never broke a deadline, and was always printable.'

Alice 'Jammy' Cross 1911 - 2004

In the late 1990s, with all the technical paraphernalia of the modern mountaineer, I found myself facing a defining moment during an ascent of *Steep Gill*, Scafell. A bulge of verglassed rock prodded me accusingly in the chest while my ice axes were planted awkwardly on thin ice smears coating sloping rock, with only a tooth and a half of each pick biting. I had to commit. I had to hang out over the frightening drop and trust. But trust what? My rope hung heavy and runnerless for 100 feet. There was nothing to stop a slip, which meant a fall of well over 200 feet, and no security beyond holding your nerve and keeping your balance. I was, quite frankly, petrified. When I finally and thankfully reached a sanctuary belay I marvelled at the courage and skill of the early pioneers of this route. Among them had been a young woman who had coolly led up the route with vastly less sophisticated equipment than mine, sixty years previously. Her name was Alice 'Jammy' Nelson.

Nelson hailed from a working-class family in Kendal and was introduced to the mountains through the Girl Guides. Unlike most of her peers, however, she was not prepared to restrict her activities merely to rambles and reef knots. When she began scaling cliffs her parents were horrified and tried to discourage her. This proved difficult in someone as independently minded as Alice. As a schoolgirl she acquired the nickname 'Jammy' (a corruption of the French *jamais*) thanks to a reputation as a wilful pupil who could occasionally be stubborn. Nevertheless, her family strictly forbade Nelson to rock climb until she reached the age of majority. Once she turned 21, however, there was no stopping her.

Nelson had begun a job as a clerical worker at Kendal's 'K' Shoes factory and it was here she met Sid Cross, one of 'K's cobblers and an enthusiastic young climber. From the mid-1930s until the Second World War Cross and Nelson turned themselves into a skilled and formidable climbing partnership. It was a highly unusual combination in more ways than one. For a start the pair were both working-class climbers in a pre-war mountaineering milieu dominated by male, middle-class professionals. But even more remarkable for the time was the existence of a woman climber who took both a co-equal role in leading hard technically demanding climbs and in pioneering new ones. Nelson and Cross ranged widely over the Lake District, bicycling to Langdale and then hiking over mountain passes to camp. The duo climbed most of the classic winter gully lines in the mountains over the next few winters – and then began breaking out to create new, hard climbs of their own.

One of the most impressive of these occurred during the winter of 1937/38 when they climbed Langdale's *Bowfell Buttress* in full winter conditions. This climb, described in the current guidebook as, 'a technical mixed climb, probably the best of its grade south of the border', and justifiably graded VI, 6, is characterised by tricky crack climbing and delicate moves on

sloping, thinly-iced rock. Sid Cross remembered tackling the crux pitch using Jammy's long-handled ice axe as a foothold while torqueing his own axe higher up in a crack. Later on in the climb he displayed even more prescient technical skills when he used a Scout knife, which he carried on climbs for splicing hemp rope, as an ice-dagger. It is obvious from the repertoire of improvised techniques that Cross and Nelson must have found the climb taxing. Despite this, Sid later recalled that for him and Jammy the most memorable moment was 'topping out under the most perfect winter evening with a pure duck egg blue sky'. The fun and beauty of climbing was the impetus behind these ascents, rather than the competitive drive which was galvanising Alpine climbing on the Continent at this time.

Nevertheless, the winter ascent of *Bowfell Buttress* is especially significant in two ways. It was a futuristic route which pushed the technical difficulty of British winter climbing to extreme levels. Secondly, the co-equal role of a woman is remarkable on a route of this difficulty during the late 1930s; it seems likely that with the ascent of *Bowfell Buttress*, Alice Nelson became the first woman in the world to climb Grade VI. Given that she was just as adept on pure rock (she became the first woman to lead Scafell's *Central Buttress* in 1939 – then regarded as one of the hardest rock climbs in the country), Nelson might arguably be described as the best all-round British female mountaineer of the inter-war years.

This was emphasised by the another of her major achievements; the second ascent of *Steep Gill*, on Scafell (Grade V) in the winter of 1938/9 – the climb I later found so serious and frightening. *Steep Gill* is today regarded as the most difficult and serious of the traditional Lakeland gully climbs, with sparse protection on the crux section and unthinkable consequences in the event of a fall. Nevertheless Jammy recalled the climb as 'fun' and in fact had more to say about the tricky descent, which included an iced-up *Broad Stand*. Jammy actually jumped down the impasse, such was her confidence. The reason for the hurry was the need to get down to Langdale before the daylight disappeared completely, in order to be able to cycle back to Kendal that evening to be ready for work the next morning. Walking 12 miles, ascending 3000 feet, completing a Grade V climb and cycling 20 miles would be a considerable test for any modern triathlete. Doing it for 'fun' and still being at work at 'K' Shoes the next day suggests astonishing levels of fitness and enthusiasm. Neither could the performance of the Lakeland climbers be said to result merely from familiarity with their native fells. On a visit to Ben Nevis in 1937 Cross and Nelson not only completed the pre-war testpiece *Tower Ridge* after overtaking a party of well-known Scottish climbers who later retreated, but also climbed the crux *Great Tower* pitch direct, the first time this was done in winter. A measure of the difficulty of the conditions was that, after overcoming a cornice in the dark, Nelson suffered frostbite to her toes. (Their legacy in Scotland also included the rock climb *Shackle Route* in Glencoe, a route named ironically after the Edwardian Lakeland climber George Bower had advised Sid not to climb

with a woman, since he considered them 'shackles'.) Undeterred, Sid officially 'shackled' himself to Jammy in 1939.

The war, and the later arrival of children curtailed the Crosses' climbing activities as they strove to make a living. Entering into partnership with Albert and Ruth Hargreaves, they first co-managed a hotel in Boot, Eskdale, winning an entry in the very first Egon Ronay *Good Food Guide*. In 1949 the two couples acquired Langdale's famous *Old Dungeon Ghyll* hotel and Sid and Jammy moved over to manage it. Not long after, Albert Hargreaves was killed in an avalanche while the friends were all skiing in Austria, leaving Sid and Jammy to carry on shaping the distinctive character of the 'ODG' alone. They created the famous climbers' bar which became one of the key base camps for the post-war talent then exploring the Lakeland crags. Sid and Jammy became unofficial guardians to the gangs of unkempt and impecunious climbers, among them such luminaries as the young Don Whillans and Joe Brown and especially the 'Bradford Lads', who dossed in Wall End Barn next to the hotel. It was also during this period that Sid and Jammy became instrumental in setting up what was later to evolve into the Langdale Mountain Rescue team and pioneering the use of search dogs to locate casualties in the Lakeland mountains.

After retirement in the 1970 the couple spent many winters in adventurous travel across the wilder reaches of Europe in a converted Land Rover but their home near Ambleside remained a haven to visitors. Thanks to their popular tenureship of the *Old Dungeon Ghyll* their range of friends was prodigious – any visit would invariably be interrupted by a succession of friends dropping by for a chat, and telephone calls from others too distant to call by in person. Sid predeceased Jammy by six years and with her passing, one of the last surviving links to a pioneering era in British climbing has been broken.