
SIMON RICHARDSON

Scottish Winter Climbing: the last 50 years

Eagle Ridge to The Hurting

Step-cutting to dry tooling

The Scottish hills have always had a mountaineering significance out of proportion to their physical scale. I use the word hills deliberately, because in summer most of the Highlands are little more than grassy rolling upland that seem far removed from serious mountaineering. In winter, however, they take on a different character, and the combination of snow, wind and rain coupled with limited daylight creates a serious and challenging climbing environment. If the mountains were 300m lower, or situated a couple of degrees further south, the interplay of altitude and weather would not create the winter climbing conditions the Highlands are so famous for. Conversely, if the mountains were higher and positioned a little further north, they would not be exposed to the continuous cycle of freeze-thaw that gives rise to the almost unique Scottish snow-ice conditions that are such a delight to climb.

The Victorians were first to recognise the value of Scotland as a winter playground, and quickly made ascents of the great structural features such as Tower Ridge (IV,3 1894) on Ben Nevis and the North-East Ridge (III 1895) of Aonach Beag. Even more impressive was Naismith's winter ascent of North-East Buttress (IV,4) in 1896, followed a few years later by Raeburn's ascents of Green Gully (IV,3) in 1906. These climbs set standards that were comparable with the Alps and were not surpassed in Scotland for more than 40 years. The aftermath of the First World War and the mild weather in the 1920s limited winter climbing activity, and it was not until the 1930s that Bill Murray and his colleagues resurrected the Scottish winter game. They did not significantly push the technical envelope, although *Shelf Route* (IV,6 1937) and *Deep-Cut Chimney* (IV,4 1939) in Glen Coe were certainly as difficult as anything climbed before. More importantly, they viewed all summer routes as potential winter targets – a vision that was to prove 50 years ahead of its time.

The First Grade V Routes

We start this retrospective in the 1950s with the first significant technical advance since Raeburn and Naismith. The first Grade V in Scotland was climbed by an 18-year-old Tom Patey in December 1950 with the first winter ascent of *Douglas-Gibson Gully* (V,4) on Lochnagar, partnered by G Leslie.

The ascent of this long-standing problem catapulted both Patey and Lochnagar onto the Scottish scene. Patey was to play a major role in the development of mixed climbing in the 1950s and Lochnagar reigned supreme with a series of long and demanding routes such as *Eagle Ridge* (VI,6 1955) and *Parallel Buttress* (VI,6 1956). Bill Brooker was the other key player, and he partnered Patey on these ascents as well as the remote Mitre Ridge (V,5 1953) on Beinn a'Bhuird, and established the technically difficult *Route 1* (V,6 1956) on the Black Spout Pinnacle on Lochnagar. Further north in the Cairngorms, the Loch Avon Basin saw two important ascents with *Scorpion* (V,5 1953) and *Sticil Face* (V,6 1954). Fifty years on, all these routes are still highly respected and their ascents are greatly prized.

Across in the West a similar breakthrough was happening in Glen Coe. Hamish MacInnes had a breathtaking few days in February 1953 with a youthful Chris Bonington that resulted in first winter ascents of *Agag's Groove* (VII,6) and *Crowberry Ridge Direct* (VII,7). These routes are more equivalent to modern snowed-up rock routes than classic ice or mixed climbs, but their ascent of the classic *Raven's Gully* (V,5) was more traditional in character.

The ice-climbing advance eventually came when East and West met up in 1957 on Ben Nevis for the first ascent of *Zero Gully* (V,4) in the form of the immensely strong team of MacInnes, Patey and Graeme Nicol. *Zero* had been a target for more than 20 years (Bell had nearly climbed it with Allan in the 1930s, but took to the icy rocks of the neighbouring *Slav Route* instead), and was a huge psychological breakthrough. The lower 100m of the gully is a vertical corner choked with ice overhangs. MacInnes and Patey shared leads, with Patey using tension from ice pitons and MacInnes front pointing between ice pegs.

Opposite page top

74. Mitre Ridge, Garbh Choire, Beinn a'Bhuird. This great 200m-high feature is one of the most impressive rock formations in the Cairngorms, and its 16km approach means that an ascent by any route is a major undertaking. The classic winter line of Mitre Ridge (V,6), which takes a right to left line of weakness crossing the crest, was first climbed in winter by Patey and Brooker in April 1953. The *Cumming-Crofton Route* climbed by Dick Renshaw and Greg Strange in December 1977 takes the hanging corner right of the crest. Simon Richardson and Roger Webb climbed the true line up the crest itself in February 1995 to give *The Cardinal* (VIII,8). (Simon Richardson)

Opposite page right

75. John Ashbridge climbing *Parallel Buttress* (VI,6), Lochnagar. This 280m-long route was first climbed in winter by Tom Patey, Bill Brooker and Jerry Smith in March 1956 and is still very much respected today. Climbed with nailed boots and a single axe it was a remarkable ascent, and years ahead of its time. (Simon Richardson)



Whilst mixed climbing was a natural extension of rock climbing, ascending steep ice in the 1950s was a difficult physical exercise that demanded great skill and stamina cutting steps at the limit of one's balance. There was a marked contrast between East and West Coast climbing techniques. For example, when Jimmy Marshall and Patey traversed Observatory Buttress and Orion Face in January 1959, Marshall wore crampons and Patey used nails. Marshall put his crampon technique to good effect when he grabbed the coveted *Parallel Gully B* (V,5 1958) from under the noses of the locals on Lochnagar.

The next big challenge to fall was *Point Five Gully* on the Ben. Again there was huge competition for the line, but much to the upset of the Scots it was climbed by a Glasgow University team spearheaded by ex pat Englishman Ian Clough. Clough applied a clinical approach to this notorious route, and sieged it with fixed ropes over five days. The furore surrounding this event overshadowed the first ascent of the more difficult *Minus Two Gully* (V,5) by Marshall – a step-cutting tour de force. Equally impressive was *Tower Face of the Còmb* (VI,6 1959) by Robin Smith and Dick Holt. Unrepeated for more than 25 years, this was a forerunner to the modern mixed routes on the Ben. Equally impressive in its boldness and execution was the *Smith-Holt Route* (V,5 1959) – the first climb to venture onto the Orion Face.

The stage was now set for the famous week in February 1960 when Smith and Marshall teamed up at the CIC Hut on the Ben. They repeated *Point Five Gully* in good style and then went on to add five new routes including *Smith's Route* (V,5), *Observatory Buttress* (V,5), *Pigott's Route* (V,6) and the outstanding *Orion Direct* (V,5). Smith and Marshall both wrote compelling accounts of their climbs that were to inspire successive generations of winter climbers. That week was the pinnacle of the step-cutting era and brought Scottish winter climbing into the greater climbing consciousness. On a wider scale, these standards were comparable with rest of the world, and in the Alps only the *Cornuau-Davaille* (ED1 1955) on the north face of Les Droites could really compare.

After this high point, the remainder of the 1960s was a period of consolidation. Patey devoted his attention to the development of Creag Meagaidh, culminating in his remarkable solo of *The Crab Crawl* (IV,4 1969), a 2400m-long girdle traverse of the cliff. Marshall added the excellent *Vanishing Gully* (V,5 1961) to the Ben and the difficult *Route 2* (VI,6 1962) to Lochnagar. The outstanding ascent of the 1960s, however, was the first winter ascent of *Pinnacle Face* (VI,7) on Lochnagar by Grassick, Light and Nicol. This winter ascent of a difficult VS rock climb was a 12-hour mixed epic on powder-covered icy rock and was the 'swansong of the tricouni tricksters'. It was not repeated until 1974 by a new generation of climbers with a new armoury of tools and techniques.



76. Approaching the great North-East Corrie of Lochnagar. In the late 1950s Lochnagar held the greatest concentration of difficult mixed routes in Scotland. This tradition has been maintained, and the Tough-Brown Face on Lochnagar is home to some of the most challenging mixed climbs in the country, such as *Diedre of Sorrows* (VIII,8) and *Mort* (IX,9). (Niall Ritchie)

The Curved Axe Revolution

By the mid 1960s, routes such as *Point Five* and *Zero* were being climbed in fast times owing to the development of crampons and front point technique. This eliminated the need to cut footholds, but much time was still spent cutting handholds. Patey and MacInnes were exponents of front pointing with the aid of two axes, relying on driving in straight picks for balance, but this proved dangerous as they readily pulled out. John Cunningham experimented with ice daggers that could be driven into the ice above the head allowing the climber to move up very quickly for a couple of moves. Cunningham teamed up with Bill March to climb *The Chancer* (V,6) on Hell's Lum in 1970. This had a short section of vertical ice, but using ice daggers was a stressful and strenuous technique that was too precarious for sustained climbing at high angles.

The technological advance came later that season when Yvon Chouinard visited from the USA. Chouinard had been experimenting with a curved pick tool to allow fast movement across long ice slopes in the High Sierra. He showed his tools to Cunningham at Glenmore Lodge and MacInnes in Glen Coe, and then proved their effectiveness by climbing the difficult *Direct Finish* (VI,6) to Raven's Gully with Doug Tompkins. MacInnes had also been experimenting with dropped pick tools, but without success, but after talking to Chouinard he increased the angle of his pick and made the Terradactyl – the first of the dropped pick tools.



77. *Left*

Albatross (VI,5) on Indicator Wall, Ben Nevis (climber unknown). First climbed by Mick Geddes and Con Higgins in January 1978, it was typical of the new high-standard ice routes climbed in the late 1970s following the onset of the curved axe revolution. Thirty years on, *Albatross* remains one of the most prized thin-face routes on Ben Nevis. (Simon Richardson)

Ben Nevis Rules Supreme

Mike Geddes was the first to apply the curved axe technique to Ben Nevis, with quick repeats of *Smith's Route* and *Point Five Gully* in March 1971. Later that month, Terradactyls were used by Hamish MacInnes, Kenny Spence and Allen Fyffe on a winter ascent of *Astronomy* (VI,5). In April, Geddes climbed the prominent icefall of *Hadrian's Wall Direct* (V,5) and the following winter made the long-awaited second ascents of *Minus Two Gully* and *Orion Direct* with fellow student Al Rouse. They climbed the latter route with sacks full of their weekend gear so they could rush back down the Tourist Track and start the long hitch back to Cambridge that night.

Conditions on the Minus Face during the winter of 1972 were excellent, and several teams used the new tools to good effect. Stevie Docherty and Norrie Muir added *Left-Hand Route* (VI,6) to Minus Two Buttress, soon to be joined by a winter ascent of the neighbouring *Right-Hand Route* (VI,6) by Al Rouse and Rab Carrington. These ascents were only slightly steeper than the Smith-Marshall masterpieces of *Smith's Route* and *Orion Direct*, but they were more serious with long run outs on thin ice.

The 1973 season was quiet, but the big event the following year was *Minus One Gully* (VI,6) by Ken Crocket and Colin Stead. This was the last of the major Nevis gullies to be climbed in winter and had seen many previous

attempts which had failed below the great chockstone. Doug Lang and Neil Quinn recorded two excellent routes with *Left Edge Route* (V,5) on Observatory Buttress, and the outstanding *Slav Route* (VI,5) which has become one of the great classics on the Orion Face. The pace now began to hot up. In December 1976, Con Higgins and Alan Kimber were quick off the mark with *Astral Highway* (VI,5), a steep left-hand exit above the Basin on Orion Face. The route of the winter, however, was *Minus One Buttress* (VII,6) by Norrie Muir and Arthur Paul. This superlative line has rarely been in condition since and was a cleverly timed ascent with good snow-ice on the final tower. It received a second ascent a few days later but there have been very few complete repeats.

During the 1978 season, modern winter climbing on Ben Nevis came of age. Excellent conditions prompted a high level of activity, which resulted in a series of outstanding thin face routes. In January, Geddes and Higgins ventured onto the steepest part of Indicator Wall with the serious and sustained *Albatross* (VI,5), and the following day Muir and Paul climbed the now classic *Psychedelic Wall* (VI,5) a little to the right. Good conditions persisted throughout February, and competition for the major lines was intense. Geddes and Rouse just beat Gordon Smith to the excellent *Route II* (VI,6), the first winter climb to venture onto the front face of Carn Dearg Buttress. Smith repeated the route with a difficult direct start (VI,6) three days later with Ian Sykes. Spurred on by Geddes' interest in the area of blank icy slabs to the left of Point Five Gully, Smith then succeeded on the serious *Pointless* (VII,6) with Nick Banks after several failed attempts. Geddes returned with Con Higgins at the end of the winter to add a companion route, *Galactic Hitchhiker* (VI,5), one of the finest thin face routes on the mountain.

British climbers, well practised on Ben Nevis ice, applied their skills with great effect in the Alps and elsewhere throughout the 1970s. Perhaps the best example was the *Colton-MacIntyre Route* on the north face of the Grandes Jorasses (ED3, 1976). This very narrow couloir, totally Scottish in character and similar to Minus One Gully in technical difficulty, was undoubtedly the hardest ice climb in the Alps at the time. Another example was the application of Nevis-style thin face climbing to the north face of the Pelerins (ED2) by Rab Carrington and Al Rouse in February 1975.

By 1978, 45 new winter routes had been added to Ben Nevis in the space of eight hectic years. The leading activists were now venturing out of the main gully and corner lines onto thinner ice on the steep faces in between. Their routes were not significantly steeper than anything climbed before but demonstrated what was possible if front-point technique was applied seriously to thin face routes. In March 1979, there was a further leap in technical difficulty. On the steep right flank of Carn Dearg Buttress, Mick Fowler and Victor Saunders took advantage of the excellent icy conditions to climb *The Shield Direct* (VII,7), a stupendous line up a series of soaring chimneys, which combined steep ice with several technical mixed pitches.

Return to Mixed Climbing

Throughout the 1970s, the curved axe revolution concentrated winter activity on climbing ice, mainly on Ben Nevis, but towards the end of the decade the focus began to slowly turn back towards mixed climbing. The *Cumming-Crofton Route* (VI,6) on Beinn a'Bhuird by Greg Strange and Dick Renshaw in 1977 and *Vertigo Wall* on Dubh Loch by Andy Nisbet and Alf Robertson the following season were early examples. Despite a planned bivouac, the latter ascent was flawed with eight points of aid, but nevertheless it was a bold advance onto a route of awe-inspiring steepness. Nisbet returned to the route in 1987 and climbed the route free at VII,7.

The following year Nisbet was again testing the limits with the ascent of *The Link Face* (VII,7), a VS on the Black Spout Pinnacle on Lochnagar. Always innovative, he was wearing 'trampons', an Aberdeen experiment of filed down crampons with nails welded on. They proved to be excellent on snowed-up rock, but hopeless for the thin veneer of ice that covered the route, which meant that John Anderson, his conventionally crampon-shod partner, led the major difficulties.

The winter of 1980 saw a race between rival Edinburgh and Aberdeen teams to pick the major Cairngorm plums. In January, conditions on Creag an Dubh Loch were exceptionally icy. The Edinburgh team of Rab Anderson and Rob Milne were there first, and climbed the long sought after *White Elephant* (VII,6) on the Central Slabs. They were later overheard in a pub talking about the exceptional amount of ice on *Goliath*. Word got back to Nisbet who climbed the route four days later with Neil Morrison. On their way out, they met Anderson with Murray Hamilton walking in to attempt the same route. It didn't go all Nisbet's way that winter, however, as later in the season he was beaten to the prestigious first ascent of *The Citadel* (VII,8) on the Shelter Stone by Hamilton and Kenny Spence.

The Development of Torquing

Anderson believes that Scottish climbing was going through a remarkable transformation during this period: 'During the front point revolution of the 1970s, everyone thought the future lay in ice. After a while it was realised that you could only take ice so far. Gordon Smith hinted at the next step with climbs like *Route II Direct* on The Ben, but the real pioneers of modern mixed climbing were Andy Nisbet in Aberdeen, and Hamilton and Spence from Edinburgh.'

Hard mixed climbing in the early 1980s was a rather different game to now. For example, the crux pitches on *The Citadel* were originally ascended on powder-covered rock wearing thin gloves. In 1981 Nisbet began to experiment with mixed climbing techniques on Carn Etchachan above Loch Avon. It was a poor winter with little snow and ice but the deep cracks of the Northern Cairngorm granite proved ideal for jamming ice axe picks. It was another three years, however, before the term 'torquing' was coined for this technique. 'Colin MacLean made a winter attempt on *The Outlands*

on the Tough-Brown Face of Lochnagar with Arthur Paul,' Nisbet told me. 'He came back raving about laybacking up cracks by torquing their axes. People had used axes in cracks before, but this was the first time it had been done move after move. Colin was so excited that he persuaded me to go up and try *Nymph* the next weekend.' The route turned out to be an eye-opener with MacLean leading the crux pitch, a 30m vertical corner, entirely on torques. The technique had been proven and a whole new spectrum of difficulty was now open.

Nisbet and MacLean formed a formidable partnership in the winter of 1985. In January they visited Glen Coe to try one of the great problems of the day – *Unicorn*, the classic summer E1 corner-line in Stob Coire nan Lochan. 'Climbing in Glen Coe felt like going into bandit country,' Nisbet remarked. 'There was a strong rivalry between the Creagh Dhu and Etchachan clubs at the time, and when we arrived at the Kingshouse, Ian Nicolson guessed which route we were going for and said there was no snow on it. We went up anyway, found it covered in hoar frost, and climbed it on our first attempt. On the way home we dived into the Kingshouse, told Nicolson, and then ran out of the bar before we were lynched!'

Whilst the West Coast climbers gnashed their teeth that one of their best winter lines had been poached by Aberdonians, Nisbet and MacLean were already working at their next project – a winter ascent of *The Needle* on the 250m-high Shelter Stone. 'It took two weeks of continuous effort,' Nisbet recalled. 'We worked out the best winter line, waited on weather then climbed the first two pitches as a recce to the winter start. We then sat out more bad weather before climbing the route with a bivouac in mid February.' Although it wasn't realised at the time, *The Needle* (VIII,8) was one of the most difficult winter climbs in the world, with a technical difficulty 10 years in advance of anything achieved in the Alps. Twenty-five years after the celebrated Smith-Marshall week on Ben Nevis, Scottish standards were again leading the world.

Later in 1985, Nisbet started working at Glenmore Lodge where he met Andy Cunningham. Although Cunningham was new to high standard mixed climbing, he was quick to learn, and the two Andys formed one of the most effective partnerships in the history of Scottish mountaineering. Over the next three winters they added over 25 outstanding Grade V routes all over the Cairngorms and Northern Highlands. These included *Salmon Leap* (V,5) on Liathach, the bold *Vishnu* (VII,6) on the East Wall of Coire Mhic Fhearchair and the demanding *Postern Direct* (VII,8) on the Shelter Stone. It was their routes in the Northern Corries however, which were to have a profound influence on the shape of modern mixed climbing. *Fallout Corner* (VI,7) and *The Migrant* (VI,7) in Coire an Lochain are now both recognised as modern classics, and receive many ascents each winter.

Cairngorms pioneer and historian Greg Strange doesn't mince his words when talking about the significance of these routes: 'Above all else, Nisbet should be remembered for his continued push for the recognition of technical

mixed climbing. In 1981 when he did his first Carn Etchachan routes, people were concerned that they weren't really winter ascents at all, as they just had a dusting of snow and were climbed on frozen turf. Now of course, it is recognised that these are the ideal conditions to do this type of climbing, and the routes are at their best. Through his development of modern mixed, Nisbet opened up a new form of climbing.'

Exploration and Consolidation

Throughout the 1990s two main themes emerged. Firstly, there was exploration of other venues away from the well-known winter cliffs in the Central Highlands and Cairngorms. The North-West, in particular, attracted an increasing number of pioneering teams who soon realised that there were hundreds of little-known cliffs that came into winter condition far more often than previously thought. More remote crags in the Central Highlands were also thoroughly explored such as the Aonachs and Ben Alder. The crags of Aonach Mor quickly became some of the most popular winter climbs in Scotland with the opening of the Nevis Range ski area in 1990.

Secondly, the confidence created by this exploration gave climbers the impetus to move away from the surety of following a summer route and move on to harder winter-only lines. At best, these take steep, wet and vegetated terrain that invokes shudders in summer but, when frozen, provides winter climbs of the highest quality. Routes such as *Messiah* (VII,7) on the Bridge of Orchy Crags, *Neanderthal* (VII,7) in Glen Coe and *Salmonella* (VII,8) on Aonach Beag are typical of this genre, and have all become modern classics. In the Cairngorms other teams followed Nisbet's lead, and all summer routes at HVS and below became winter targets – very much following Murray's vision from more than 50 years earlier. A key development here was the series of mixed climbs in the Northern Corries. A 'cragging' atmosphere existed most weekends, and routes such as *The Hoarmaster* (V,7) and *Deep Throat* (V,6) introduced many winter climbers to mixed climbing and revealed the huge potential that Nisbet had discovered 10 years earlier.

At first sight, technical standards appear to have remained static throughout this period, and the big Grade VIII routes of the 1980s were not superseded in difficulty. Undoubtedly the 1990s were a time of consolidation when a new generation of climbers was learning the new mixed techniques. There was also little incentive to repeat routes when so much new route potential existed elsewhere. But slowly the Grade VIII routes saw second ascents in good style. The one or two aid and rest points that were accepted on hard climbs in the 1980s as the norm were shunned by a generation influenced by a purer rock-climbing ethic, and by the turn of the century many of the big routes had been repeated and their aid points eliminated.

But, as always, the big influences came from those operating at the cutting edge and pushing the boundaries. Alan Mullin, a young and forceful climber active in the late 1990s, made one of the greatest impacts. Mullin burst into



78. *Left*

No 4 Buttress, Core an Lochain, Northern Corries. This superb buttress is one of the most popular venues in the winter climbing playground of the Northern Corries. The prominent corner is the line of *Savage Slit* (V,6). *Fallout Corner* (VI,7) takes the hanging groove to the right. (Niall Ritchie)

the scene with a repeat of *The Needle* on the Shelter Stone and then went on to climb the neighbouring *Steeple* at Grade IX together with a series of other difficult climbs. Unfortunately many of these climbs were flawed because they climbed routes very early in the season in quasi-winter condition, or they required aid, but the effect on the winter scene was electric. Mullin had arrived on the scene with very little climbing experience, and other climbers soon realised that they could push their own standards too. Within a couple of seasons, average standards had jumped a level, and Grade VII, which was previously held to be the preserve of the elite, quickly became accessible to many.

State of the Art

Winter climbing has now become a mainstream sport, its growth fuelled by a number of factors. Information is freely available from the comprehensive guidebooks from the Scottish Mountaineering Club and accurate and detailed magazine reporting. The Internet provides real time data on weather, climbing conditions and avalanche forecasts. The grading system was extended and enlarged in the early 1990s to include a technical grade, and the interplay between this and the overall grade gives a clue as to the overall seriousness of the climb. Access to the North-West is easier via better roads funded by the European Union, and clothing is lighter and more effective. Crampons and axes have improved too, but curiously these hardware advances have favoured pure ice climbing and dry tooling more



79. *Left*
Halvor Hagen climbing
The Hoarmaster (V,6),
Coire an Lochain,
Northern Corries. This
route is typical of the
Northern Corries mixed
routes climbed in the late
1980s and nowadays sees
ascents most weekends.
(Simon Richardson)

than the varied nature of Scottish ice and mixed. As dry tooling took off in the late 1990s and mixed climbing standards rocketed across the world, several climbers attempted to create pre-protected climbs of similar levels of high technical difficulty in Scotland. Typically these developments have not caught on, mainly because of a fierce desire to maintain the Scottish ground-up style. This ethic is driven more by practicality than tradition, because the ancient rocks that comprise the Highlands support on-sight climbing and leader placed protection, whilst the younger rocks in the mixed climbing area in the Alps and North America are made of poorer quality rock that typically require bolts to make them climbable.

Dave MacLeod, undoubtedly the finest Scottish climber of the current generation, has shown an abseil inspection approach can result in climbs such as *The Hurting* (XI,11 in 2005) which have a difficulty comparable to the hardest mixed climbs abroad. But for the majority, climbing winter routes ground-up remains the preferred approach. First ascents of Grade VIII climbs are now regularly climbed in fine style, and on-sight standards are almost certainly on a par with the hardest winter climbs anywhere. More importantly perhaps, there is a growing self-confidence that it is the ground-up style that sets Scottish winter climbing apart and makes it unique. At the beginning of the 21st century, Scotland can proudly lay claim to the most ethically pure form of mountaineering in the world, and I am sure it will stay that way for many years to come.