Anniversary

Andy Parkin *Chogolisa*
Acrylic on canvas
From K2 base camp at 5200m, 1996

DOUG SCOTT

Resisting the Appeasers

An' though the rules of the road have been lodged
It's only people's games that you got to dodge
But it's alright, Ma, it's life, and life only

Bob Dylan

All over the planet there is a battle raging between maintaining diversity and losing out to encroaching uniformity. Communities everywhere are struggling to maintain their cultural integrity in the face of economic globalisation as great nature itself loses its biodiversity through thoughtlessness or just plain greed. Evidence of this is all over, from the Amazon Basin right up onto the Great Plateau of Tibet and in all the valleys of the Himalaya and mountain ranges everywhere. This phenomena affects everyone including members of the Alpine Club; in fact especially Alpine climbers.

The rules of the road where climbing is concerned have always been, amongst other aspects, that there should be some uncertainty as to the outcome of the climb and that there would be associated risks to overcome. As it was stated in the Tyrol Declaration (2002) 'without danger and uncertainty climbing loses its defining element – adventure'.

The 'people's games' that have to be watched are those that would dumb down climbing from an adventure sport into an activity devoid of uncertainty and hazard when it comes to personal responsibility for protecting one's life.

Such people include Jürg von Känel who in *Die Alpen*, the journal of the Swiss Alpine Club (April 1998), defined and promoted the concept of '*Plaisir* Climbing' with evangelical vigour. 'What people want,' he says (and has helped achieve), 'is bolts at regular distance...and the bolts should be set in a way that virtually excludes the risk of injuries in case of a fall.... they should be easy to clip.... Also for smaller people...' The bolts are usually fixed by abseil on a regular grid pattern and the main justification seems to be that such 'climber friendly' crags attract the great mass of climbers who enjoy 'carefree climbing in nature' – by moving indoor climbing outdoors.

Plaisir crags have proliferated with the active support of the SAC responding to the demands of hut wardens and guides who benefit financially from the consequent increase in business. Despite this, von Känel laments the fact that '*plaisir* climbing... is not getting that much of a voice'. Could it be there is not a lot one can say about it since such climbing is so predictable and unmemorable? We are only fully conscious when out there

on a limb, making judgements, being resourceful and creative whilst taking on responsibility for our own lives. This doesn't happen on *plaisir* crags. *Plaisir* crags, in fact, have many of the elements of urban life: repetitive monotony and uniformity, making the crags more or less the same in France, Spain, Switzerland...safe, predictable, and totally unadventurous. It's the same bland pap in the USA, Russia, Britain or wherever.

We have, of course, been here before. In a wake-up call in the 1998 *Alpine Journal*, Ken Wilson warned of the drift to a 'theme park' emasculation of climbing and called on the UIAA to campaign for the outlawing of the power drill. Thank goodness there were no cordless drills back in the 1960s (for there has to be a degree of self-examination here). There is no telling what damage I might have done in my then quest to climb all of the overhangs around the world. I certainly cannot claim, as does Reinhold Messner, that I have never inserted a bolt. It soon struck me as I bolted directly up towards Kilnsey Main Overhang that all I was doing was making my mark via the use of bolts – not as a 'climber'. It was completely unadventurous and also very boring, literally, doing that by hand, and I quickly gave up. When I used too many pegs on two new routes on Gogarth I was soon brought into line through peer pressure – derisive remarks in the pub and scorn poured upon me in the pages of *Mountain Craft* in the summer of 1967.

I should have been listening to that stalwart of 1930s Scottish climbing Jock Nimlin who, writing in the *SMC Journal* in May 1958 (not that long before my affair with the drill), underscored the principle that if one failed in an attempt on a new route one retreated and left an open field for a more determined attempt.

Nimlin went on: 'It is by accepting the hills on their own terms... that climbers find their deepest satisfaction. There is surely an inner conviction that these principles represent an absolute value; and one seems to detect in the half-apologetic, half-defiant claims of the pitonist a sense of transgression... The whole concept of free climbing is based on increasing standards of performance with no foreseeable limits, whereas piton-climbing imposes a definite limit and offers a future strictly related to the development rate of appliances.' How those 'appliances' have spread. Over the last 30 years continental Europe has embraced the bolt on most accessible crags, not always to the extent of the Swiss *plaisir* crags but enough to make traditional protection redundant. This has the knock-on effect of rendering young climbers unable to climb on anything but *plaisir* or sport crags since the art of self-protection has not been mastered. Unless, that is, the bolts go higher. Inexorably, drilling and bolting is spreading to high mountain rock, including the great Alpine classic rock routes – so much so that routes may bear little of their original character. Not only is the risk of falling lessened but route-finding becomes just a matter of following a line of shiny brackets; retreat from a sudden storm, just a matter of using the lower-offs.

AC members who guide in the Alps as well as amateur climbers have kept the Club up to speed on the changes they have witnessed over the last two decades – Pat Littlejohn and Roger Payne in particular. To their consternation, every few months crags in Switzerland that they had adopted for instructing beginners in traditional methods of climbing would suddenly become fitted out with bolts and brackets. In Roger's opinion 'It is true to say that all easily accessible climbing areas that are good for beginners have been retro-bolted.'

> You never understood that it ain't no good
> You shouldn't let other people get your kicks for you
> *Like a Rolling Stone*, Bob Dylan

One man who certainly hasn't understood is Bruno Durrer who, when medical commissioner with the UIAA, stated that 'the absolute freedom of climbing consists of choosing to climb wherever you want and with whatever technical help one considers as necessary... the adrenalin seeking climbers have the freedom of ignoring all fixed belays or bolts'.

In the European Alps, opined Durrer, 'most mountain regions live off tourism and have a vital interest in offering safe routes'. Furthermore, 'most mountain rescuers in the Alps' wanted a 'moderate number of safe belays' on the classic routes. It is as if Durrer has forgotten what climbing is all about in terms of commitment. How can there be commitment if there is protection every metre and a way off already provided? He seems to have no idea or respect for the basic tenets of climbing, implying that climbers wishing resourcefully and creatively to fix their own protection are elitist and/or adrenaline junkies. There are many like him who seem to have lost the plot completely.

As for rescuers, those of the climbing fraternity who go to the help of others in Britain have never sought to dumb down the mountain but have always stressed the need for the climber to lift himself up to meet the demands of the mountain. According to Durrer, rescuers on the continent are pushing for the partial bolting of Alpine routes, ie up in the high mountains. The routes may be made safer, but not the climbers if they are subsequently at a loss when it comes to protecting themselves on anything but prepared rock. Only by mastering the art of self-protection can a climber become a climber in the full sense of the word, and a safe climber. There can only be absolute freedom in this sphere when a climber can fix his own protection to protect his own life and in such a way that the second can remove that protection easily for use again and again.

After its first hundred years the Alpine Club more or less came to terms with the use of artificial aids, namely the peg. It was noted by Jack Longland in the centenary edition of the *AJ* that the AC had generally lost its pre-eminence to the continentals who were uninhibited in the use of pitons

and artificial techniques. Prominent amongst the critics of aid climbing was, of course, Colonel Strutt and his opinions lived on until at least 1955. AC president Sir Edwin Herbert noted in his valedictory address that 'traditions are good things and.... If you look at the things traditionally frowned on by the Club, you will find that they are just those things which make the full realisation of mountain joys impossible – national aggrandisement, self-display, publicity hunting, a neurotic search for danger for the sake of danger, attempts by artificial means to alter the conditions imposed by nature and all the rest. These things are silly and therefore unbecoming.'

In 1957 Arnold Lunn was able to point out in his *Century of Mountaineering* that the peg did not bring exploration and uncertainty to an end, rather it widened the scope of both. A distinction was made between a peg driven into cracks and boring holes into blank rocks, 'so long as one confines oneself to driving pitons into cracks that exist there is still a place for genuine route finding.' Those climbers using pitons were at least credited with having some regard and sensitivity for the nature of the mountainside and they were still bound by the geography of the crag and could not just go anywhere. It was also noted that the peg, unlike the bolt, was more easily removed leaving little trace for future parties. However, as climbing became more popular, cracks were enlarged by the removal and replacement of pegs and scarring became a valid issue. Eventually this problem was addressed by the development of 'clean' climbing gear such as wires, chocks and Friends.

Now, 50 years later, are those of us who question the drill again contributing to impeding the progress of British climbing? The Club does have a tradition of being conservative in its concern for the founding essence of mountaineering. Guideless climbing, the use of crampons and artificial aids were all initially condemned 'by the high priests of Alpine orthodoxy' and these delaying actions of the old guard probably did no harm. Certainly Alpine Club objections to the peg contributed in no small way to the continuing traditional style of climbing in the British Isles so much admired by climbers around the climbing world.

For most Club members progress is personal to them, progressing on to harder, more remote, longer existing climbs in the Alps and then to the greater ranges. (And then, to keep it going despite the merciless passage of time, even up the Breithorn in a storm in celebration of the AC's 150th anniversary.) For the most committed of AC members, new routes were and always will be the goal and in ever more adventurous setting and style. One has only to browse recent *AJ*s to read of our members Fowler, Cave, Parkin, Yates, Littlejohn and others, plus friends like Ian Parnell, Kenton Kool and Nick Bullock pushing the extremes of world alpinism and creating esoteric gems all the way from Tierra del Fuego to Tibet and beyond.

These pacesetters have positively influenced the course of pure alpinism through their actions, far from the madding crowds and regular haunts of men. Later the rest will follow, awestruck at the courage and imagination

of the pioneers. So it was with Mummery's route up the Zmutt Ridge of the Matterhorn – to most admirers of that great peak a symbol of natural wonder and for others a symbol of man's striving in the physical world. More than 100 years later we can marvel at this route and the style in which it was done. But the Zmutt's survival has been a close run thing. Only recently stanchions were to be fixed on difficult passages and a hut built at the base of the climb, primarily for the benefit of local guides. Perhaps it was Divine Intervention that caused an avalanche to destroy and remove all trace of the hut, carrying down the stockpiled metal spikes to boot!

Members of the AC have been effective in combating aberrations such as this proposed dumbing down of the Zmutt. Without vigilance, aided by the writers and journalists in our Club, such aberrations would become the norm if climbing were to be left to the profit motive, market forces and misguided civic concern over safety. Our members were able to show the basic contradiction – on the one hand the Swiss advocated the admirable cache 'leave no trace' when it comes to travelling through their mountains and yet they themselves were littering their mountains with ropes and ladders, devaluing the climbs originally put up by the very pioneers that the Swiss acknowledge brought mountain tourism to their towns and villages in the first place. Our president and our *AJ* editor have played no small part in reminding our friends in Zermatt that the finest memorial to the greats of the Golden Age would be to leave the great routes as the Victorians found them.

Thankfully we Brits are not alone in questioning the use of the drill. Over the past two years I have been lucky enough to travel to Norway, Bulgaria, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland and France as well as further afield to Australia and New Zealand. Everywhere I have come across climbers full of admiration for British climbing, yet somewhat incredulous that we not only drew a line on bolts but also more or less held to it. British climbing is so obviously an inspiration to adventurous climbers worldwide and especially in those countries where the bolt predominates. In Bulgaria, climbers there tell me the only way out they can see is to create bolt-free mountain ranges and this process is under way. This is also an answer being talked of in Sweden, Australia, New Zealand and apparently in South Africa where Greg Moseley tells me they have clearly defined areas for sport climbing. The South Africans were not amused when two Swiss arrived and bolted up three of their great classics at Wolfberg; so much so that the South African Mountain Club wrote to continental clubs requesting their members to respect South African rock and only resort to drilling after consultation with the climbers' representatives.

Roger Payne has pointed out that there is still, in fact, plenty of climbable rock in Switzerland, albeit it in the high country, that is still free from fixed equipment. He has drawn members' attention to *Keep Wild! Climbs* (edited by Daniel Sibernagel and Christoph Blum, 2006), a guidebook to climbs untouched by the drill, sponsored by Mountain Wilderness. According to

the promotion, 'Clean climbing is the fairest and most honourable way to move in the rocks'... and: 'The climbing guide *Keep Wild! Climbs* of Mountain Wilderness gives a voice to adventure and brings to the mountain world a little originality.'

Roger has been vocal in supporting the idea that the Alpine environment, and climbing in particular, would be well served by a major, symbolic act. Such is the negative impact of mass tourism and the decline in responsible wilderness management, especially in the Mont Blanc range, that an environmental and economic crisis is on the cards. Roger and others are advocating the removal of all fixed ropes and clutter from the Dent du Géant. Re-establishing this magnificent peak as a formidable mountaineering challenge and one of the hardest 4000m summits in the Alps would send an important and symbolic message that the current trend of the urbanisation of the Alps can be reversed.

France, of course, is the home of sport climbing. So it is encouraging to hear from Bernard Amy that young French climbers are asking why it was that their predecessors brought the progress of climbing to a halt. Excessive use of the drill, the young ones complain, has denied them crags where they can familiarise themselves with the 'mobile' protection necessary to push out the frontiers of free climbing.

In Norway, the home of deep ecology, it is somewhat disappointing to find that many classic climbs have been retro-bolted. Apparently this came about after the climbing federation bureaucrats accepted government funding on the understanding that they would increase the number of climbers. To these officials the best way to make crags more user friendly was to have them equipped with bolts and there does not seem to have been any great outcry or direct action taken against this; however, in questioning the retro-bolting, the Norwegians have gone into interesting territory. Nils Faarland tells me they have deepened the question to its essence, 'daring to comment on joy... speaking of a quality of life, which is archetypal... not related to modernity's shallow fun or high sensation seeking'... but rooted in untouched nature and the 'natural rhythms of the planet' rather than nature subsumed into mechanistic systems.

Somewhere here there is a connection between the Norwegian tradition of *Friluftsliv* – of identification with free nature – and with traditional approaches and attitudes to rock climbing. This is why Nils has alerted me to it – to challenge the 'values and lifestyles imposed by modernity'. He says that although *Friluftsliv*, or joyous satisfaction, might result from great effort, as in a climb, it is an experience of tranquillity. This tranquillity is not a passive attitude. It inspires serendipity and the confidence to act in accord with personal values, including when the initiative might be against mainstream thinking. Put simply, finding one's own way, protecting one's own life will engender greater satisfaction 'and deep joy' than a climb marked out by a line of brackets where protection is arranged by others.

On the scale of world events the devaluing of climbing is insignificant, yet to know about one thing thoroughly leads to understanding many other things. In particular, what has happened to our pastime is in many ways symptomatic of the huge changes in the wider world and seemingly beyond the individual. Ever since mankind first bit the fruit of knowledge his potential in the material world has increased at the expense of his mental and spiritual life. He has limited his freedom by dependence on mass technology. The analogy with the introduction of mass bolting in climbing is obvious.

The key thing in all this, as far as the AC is concerned, is to ensure that at least here in Britain we stand firm against the bolt. We must resist the appeasers in climbing, whether they be those who make a living from guiding or instructing and who would benefit from user-friendly crags or older, over-weight amateurs, losing their bottle. Whilst climbing outside Salzburg a few months ago on a 1000ft limestone buttress festooned with bolts and also chipped holes, questions were naturally asked regarding the origins of such. 'It wasn't always like this,' said the old guard in the party, 'it all happened so quickly, soon after bolts and chains were put in for lower-offs then belays and suddenly, with the cordless drill, bolts appeared everywhere, quite beyond our control.'

The conclusion from this is obvious: that to fit out British mountain rock with lower-offs from bolts and chains, as is being proposed for instance at Sergeant Crag Slab in the Lake District, may well be the thin end of a very wide wedge. We must hold true to our own free climbing ethic for only then can we campaign with any credibility against the dumbing down of great routes and training crags in Europe and beyond. And remember, as Thomas Jefferson said: 'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.'