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PETER GILLMAN

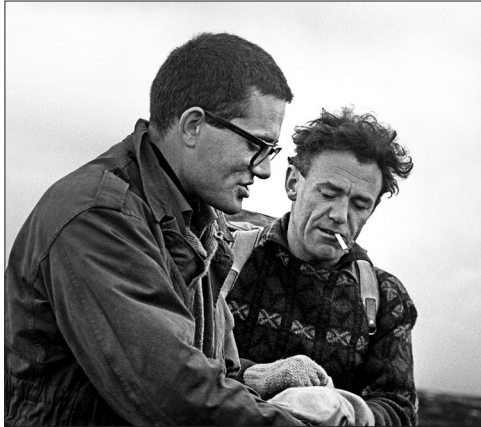
## ‘The past is a foreign country . . .’

It certainly feels like a foreign country when I think back to it, if not another planet. I remember traversing a frozen landscape where cold and wind reigned. Tom and John were ahead of me on the path that led to the glistening western flank of Quinag. It was March 1969 and Tom had his eye on yet another new route. This one followed a gully that rose from the crest of a tongue of scree and culminated in an overhang festooned with candelabras of ice. I edged up the steps Tom had carved with his axe, balancing on my crampons and reassuring myself that I was in good hands. Then Tom launched himself on to the candelabra pitch, slivers of ice dislodged by his axe showering down. I saw his crampons slithering and heard him call down: ‘I think we’ll have to give the mountain best.’ But he pressed on and disappeared beyond the overhang.

Typically for a Patey foray, it was already late in the day; barely an hour remained before nightfall, giving me the opportunity, in the hallowed journalistic phrase, to make my excuses and leave. John stayed to follow Tom up his new route, while I tip-toed back down the gully and across the glen, head braced against the wind, to the point where Tom had parked his battered Skoda. Tom and John arrived just as the last of the light disappeared, their faces burnished by the cold and wind, telling of the hurricane that assaulted them on the top, threatening to lift them off their feet as they searched for the line of descent. They called the route *The Windpipe*, to evoke the weather encountered on the top. We headed back to Ullapool, though my guess is we stopped for a dram of Glen Morangie on the way; that detail eludes me 40 years on.

So what was I, a neophyte journalist of modest climbing abilities, doing in such extreme circumstances? Much of the responsibility lies, as so often, with John Cleare. I was working regularly for *The Sunday Times* magazine, then a power in the land of journalism for the quality of its writing and photography, and in partnership with John had proposed an article about Scottish winter climbing, hoping to convey its delights to a lay readership. It was John who devised our itinerary, insisting that we spend time with Tom and report on his drive to snatch as many new routes in the uncharted far north-west as he could in the time left over from attending to his duties as an Ullapool GP.

I recall a tousled figure with unkempt climbing equipment and a voracious determination not to waste a moment. Since Tom had no climbing partners in or near Ullapool, he justified his readiness to climb solo by



117. Top: John Cleare and Tom Patey – Tarbet, Sound of Handa, Sutherland, November 1966. (John Cleare)

118. Below: First ascent of *The Windpipe* (VS, II), west face of Quinag, northern Highlands, led by Tom Patey. John Cleare brings up third man Peter Gillman, March 1959. (John Cleare)

claiming that it was no more dangerous than climbing with a rope, since the rope was likely to break in any leader fall. I felt the argument was specious but accepted it as a pragmatic attempt to justify a course of action for which he had no viable alternative. He told me that he felt the finest mountaineering route anywhere was the Heckmair route on the north face of the Eiger; he admired the way it probed for the line of least resistance even on such an outlandish mountaineering challenge. More of the infamous *Nordwand* later.

I was in awe of figures such as Tom – not the ideal mode for a journalist, I admit, particularly as I often felt tongue-tied in his presence. But I managed to ask enough questions to elicit the necessary quotes. Otherwise I was content to tag along to wherever Tom and John had decided we should spend the day. Thus I

was present on the day Tom made the girdle traverse of Creag Meagaidh, at that time ranked as one of the ‘Last Great Problems’ of the Scottish winter (*The Crab Crawl*, 2400m IV, 4). After another delayed start, Tom and John embarked on the route at midday, together with Jim McArtney, Mary Ann Hudson and Allen Fyffe.

John believed that the attempt was being made for his benefit, to enable him to take photographs for our article, but Tom had other ideas.



119. Creag Meagaidh, Central Highlands: Jim McArtney and Mary Ann Hudson (leading) working on the first crux pitch of *Crab Crawl* (IV,4). Tom Patey had already gone ahead solo to complete his classic girdle of the entire cliff. (John Cleare)

Having posed briefly for John’s cameras shortly after the start, he told the others he would push on a little to see what lay around the next corner. He never looked back, completing the route solo, although he had enough of a conscience to acknowledge Jim’s dismay when he realised he was going to be left behind. I meanwhile was watching the proceedings from below the crag, only too aware that – just as on Quinag

– this excursion was way beyond my abilities. My absence enabled Tom to create a joke for his subsequent article, *Creag Meagaidh Crab Crawl*:

*Peter Gillman, John’s Press Colleague, announced that he had all the necessary material for his article, and that he ought to be getting along. Since this was the first time he had been within conversation range and had not yet started to climb, we were impressed by his talent for improvisation.*

None of this was true, but I did not mind; as journalists also like to say, never let the facts get in the way of a good story. Hamish MacInnes once confided that his own role in Tom’s mythmaking was often precisely reversed. Tom recorded that Hamish would telephone and leave a message instructing him, for example, to be at the Skye ferry in three hours time in order to launch a winter assault on the Cuillin ridge. In truth, Hamish told me, it was Tom who would call him with impossible demands. It was easy to forgive Tom, because he was such a superbly witty and sardonic writer.

I should add that I was not always a passive spectator. In that same week I went foraging with Tom and John for new routes on Sgorr Ruadh. When we reached the crag he generously pointed out an unclimbed gully and offered it to John and myself, while he searched out something more testing. This time it was John’s turn to feel torn, for he agreed to lead me up it although he would rather have been climbing with Tom. Thus it was





120. Eiger North Face 1966. Left: Douglass Haston and John Harlin II. Right: Neophyte photo-journalist Chris Bonington snaps Mick Burke. (Peter Gillman)

that my one new winter route – *Easy Gully*, 180m II - was inscribed in the guidebooks.

I entered this world of climbing celebrities by being – to cite yet another journalistic aphorism – in the right place at the right time. I was in the second year of my career as a journalist when John Harlin II persuaded the *Daily Telegraph's* weekly colour magazine to help fund his attempt to climb the *Eiger Direct* in the winter of 1965/66. I was a junior staffer on the magazine having been made redundant from my previous job on a glossy London magazine a year after leaving Oxford. Harlin's deal with the *Telegraph* followed an unsuccessful attempt by John Cleare, the Svengali of media spectacles such as the Old Man of Hoy, to win coverage from the BBC. Accordingly John and I set off for Leysin to meet Harlin and prepare an article for the *Telegraph* magazine on the build-up to the climb. Sadly for John, he was later jettisoned from the venture, to be replaced as 'official' photographer by Chris Bonington.

In February 1966 I found myself in Kleine Scheidegg with Harlin, Bonington, Layton Kor, Douglass Haston, Don Whillans and Mick Burke. I had never before reported any news story and I had been climbing for just two years, making the customary weekend forays to Snowdonia in a Renault Dauphine or Austin A35, with HVS the limit of my abilities if not yet my ambitions.

I knew of Bonington and Whillans, of course, from their exploits on the

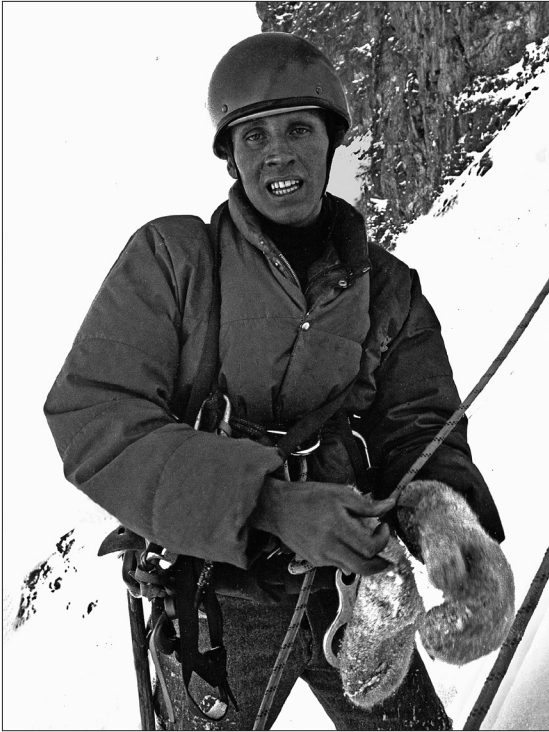


121. Eigerwanderers (l to r): Peter Gillman, Douglass Haston, Roland Votteler, Rolf Rozenzopf, Sigi Hupfauer, Günter Schnaid, Jörg Lehne, Peter Haag, Layton Kor, Chris Bonington.

self-same Eiger; and from Whillans' already legendary partnership with Joe Brown. Chris I recall as being unfailingly friendly and helpful towards this 24-year-old journalist who was abruptly part of the Eiger team, despite the contempt with which the mountaineering world views most journalists.

It was a critical time for Chris as he attempted to devise a way of earning a living from mountaineering in the wake of his abortive careers as army officer and margarine salesman. He had turned down Harlin's invitation to join the climbing team but had somehow parlayed that into the commission to take photographs for the *Telegraph*. Even so the boundaries between roles were rapidly blurred. Chris became so determined to live up to Robert Capa's key dictum – if your pictures aren't good enough, you're not close enough – that he made one of the crucial leads of the ascent, the ice gully beside the newly-named Central Pillar that opened up the route.

Don Whillans was supposedly Chris's photographic assistant but managed to spend most of his time – and a large slice of the *Telegraph's* money – at ease in the restaurant at the Kleine Scheidegg hotel, where my principal memory is of him imbibing pitchers of beer as he sat with his feet up next to the bar. The scene did not strike me as incongruous at the time, although later I reinterpreted it as a metaphor for the growing ambiguities of the Don's climbing career. Before long Chris replaced Don with Mick Burke, who was working at Harlin's climbing school at Leysin. It was Mick who accompanied Chris to the summit via the West Flank in time to greet



122. Dougal Haston on the First Band icefield on the Eiger north face *Direct* route during the filming of the BBC documentary *Last Blue Mountain*, March 1968. (John Cleare)

the victorious team, helping Chris to capture stunning images of their ice-crusted faces as they subsided in the snow. I remember Mick as friendly, open, no-nonsense, never inhibited about speaking his mind.

Dougal Haston was the enigma. I was drawn to him at first, this taciturn figure who seemed immensely confident and self-possessed. We had both studied philosophy and had earnest conversations about our university courses. He gave glimpses of his inner steel and his certainty about his goals in life, namely to climb the hardest routes by the purest means. His resolve was revealed to me most dramatically during the agonised radio conversations that took place after Harlin fell to his death while jumaring up the fixed ropes below the Spider.

The assumption among the group below the face, who included Bonington, Burke and Kor, was that the attempt should be abandoned. Since I had witnessed Harlin's death, I shared that feeling, although it was not my decision to make. It was Haston, then at the Spider, who argued pivotally that to renounce the climb would be to waste the monumental effort expended thus far – buttressing this argument to the effect that this is what Harlin himself would have wanted, and that the climb could become his memorial. There was an element of *realpolitik* in Haston's reasoning, since he figured that a significant coterie of the rival German team was equally determined to continue. In the event, the conjoining

of the two national groups and their arrival on the summit provided the perfect redemptive narrative, which I can appreciate now, even if I was less attuned to such constructs at the time.

I came to know Haston more closely the following winter, when I accompanied him, Burke, Martin Boysen and Pete Crew to Patagonia for an attempt on Cerro Torre. By now I had been sacked from my job at the *Telegraph* following a spectacular row with its notoriously psychopathic editor, John Anstey. (I readily concede that while losing one's first job may be regarded as unfortunate, losing the second undoubtedly ranks as carelessness). I was then, perforce, a freelance, writing for the *Sunday Times* magazine and newspaper, and Mick and Dougal asked me to enquire whether the paper would back their attempt. Dougal and I were taken to lunch at the Savoy – this was still the glorious era of boundless Fleet Street expenses – where Dougal produced a blurred photograph of Cerro Torre. The news editor wrote the headline in an instant: 'The Worst Mountain In the World'. The *Sunday Times* agreed to pay £1500 into the expedition coffers, a sufficient sum in those days to make all the difference, and I was paid a magnificent £60 a week.

The British Cerro Torre Expedition of 1967/68 lasted 10 weeks and most of that time, both for myself and the climbers, was spent at base camp below Cerro Torre's glacier while the Patagonian weather surpassed itself in the ferocity of the storms lashing the FitzRoy massif. One of my abiding memories is of the wind roaring through the trees like an express train; another is of the ground reverberating as séracs toppled into the lake above the camp. Not only did this inactivity present a writing challenge, I also had a challenging time conveying my admittedly spare dispatches to London. In that pre-technology era, I had to walk for six hours to the road-head and then embark on a three-day round trip in a borrowed pick-up to the nearest postal office, where my dispatches were telegraphed to London at hideous expense. These excursions became more important towards the end of the trip, as the expedition ran out of both money and food, and I was dispatched to ask the *Sunday Times* – via another horrifyingly expensive telephone call – to wire more of the former in order to acquire supplies of the latter.

It was thus at these intimate quarters that I had further insights into the personality of Dougal Haston. His determined selfishness was revealed in such matters as the nightly bridge school, where he resolved to exclude me from the proceedings. None of the others were prepared to stand up for me and I did not make a fuss as I already felt in an awkward position: as a supposedly objective journalist, was I of this expedition or not? I tried to steer clear of the group dynamics, particularly when they fractured as the expedition petered out in the unrelenting Patagonia weather. I was nonetheless the principal accused in a kangaroo court that investigated the disappearance of a tin of peaches after the empty can was found buried near my sleeping bag. It was evident to me that the culprit was the Argentine climber who had been assigned to our group, Jose Luis Fonrouge; but

I had a sticky time persuading my four colleagues of my innocence.

Of the others, I remember Mick being frank and jovial as usual. Pete Crew, so his team-mates intimated, was apparently out of his depth, having failed to adapt his sublime rock-climbing skills to the vagaries of mixed climbing in so hostile an environment. Martin Boysen listened to BBC World Service, singing along to the classical melodies that rose and fell on the ether. He suffered his customary wretched luck when he sprained an ankle in a juvenile game of jumping over the base camp stream, compelling him to languish in base camp with me while the remaining climbers, following a further bout of storms, made their final attempt. His frustration almost boiled over at times but was eased when his colleagues stomped back into camp one nightfall. They reported that the expedition's fixed ropes, so painstakingly put in place a month earlier, had been shredded by the wind and the attempt was officially at an end.

By this time I'd had enough of the BCTE. My excuse was that I had to get back to Buenos Aires to file my report on the end of the expedition. But once the homing urge took hold I hardly stopped moving until I reached London a few days later.

Of the four, I stayed in touch with Dougal for a time; I think I was intrigued at seeing his inner character so starkly revealed and was inclined to forgive it as the ruthlessness leading climbers required to achieve their aims. Our relationship effectively ended when he sent me a letter steeped in anger over an article I had written lamenting the death of Dave Condict, the school friend who had introduced me to climbing just as I left Oxford. Dougal told me it was sentimental and self-indulgent, and this time I felt I had seen enough of the recesses of his soul.

By contrast I established a friendship with Mick Burke that went beyond mountaineering, particularly as I observed his determination to establish a career as photographer and cameraman. It was these ambitions that, sadly, lured him into extreme danger on the summit ridge of Everest in 1975, when he went on alone – after Martin Boysen turned back because of problems with his oxygen apparatus – to fulfil his ambition of recording the first movie film at the summit of Everest. Even more poignantly, he almost certainly achieved his goal before, most likely, walking through a cornice on the descent.

I saw nothing of Peter Crew after Cerro Torre, either as a climber or in his new guise as an archaeologist. I thought my relationship with Martin Boysen had ended in the same way until he wrote a generous letter complimenting *The Wildest Dream*, the biography of George Mallory I wrote with my wife – in which he also revealed that for him to write a letter to anyone was a rare event.

Forty years on, I still look and wonder if the youthful, ingenuous figure in John Cleare's marvellous photographs can really be me. But my continuing love affair with Scottish mountaineering has remained a tangible legacy. I am now well into the bus-pass generation, but Scotland's call remains strong as ever and I'm planning for Glencoe as I write. After long

abstinence, I have decided to try to add the 'new' Munros to my tally, having completed the original list shortly before it was revised. It was John who pointed me to the top of my first Munro, Cairn Gorm, when we were preparing an article about a winter survival course based at Glenmore Lodge shortly before the Eiger Direct affair in 1965/66. We were back in Scotland the following year, when I met Tom Patey for the first time and had the privilege of him escorting me up my first winter climb, *Aladdin's Couloir* on Coire an t-Sneachda. He took his responsibilities seriously too. I slipped and was about to make an ice-axe brake when he held me on the rope.

I believe that was also the day when I was introduced to the delights of Rowanlea, the hotel in Carrbridge where, after a day on the hill, Tom would produce the accordion he carried in the Skoda and entertain us with his singing. His ballads, with their gallows humour and their irreverence towards the celebs of the climbing world, had a wit and invention to rival Burns. Closing time had no meaning at Rowanlea; when the hour came and went, landlord Jimmy Ross would simply dim the lights and lock the door. Drinking and singing would continue into the wee small hours.

Finally it would occur to Tom that he had to be in Ullapool for morning surgery. He'd gulp a handful of amphetamines and hit the road, leaving himself just enough time to change his shirt and don a tie and so present the face of respectability to his patients.

I was delighted to hear the recordings of Tom at a ceilidh at the Clachaig, retrieved by Dennis Gray from Bill Brooker and re-mastered by Paul Cherry (reviewed on page 398). The timbre of Tom's voice had been distorted in my memory, assuming a rasp that it did not have in reality; I had also forgotten how Tom had difficulty articulating his Rs when he sang. But the lyrics shone out, taking me back to Carrbridge and from there out on to the snow-covered hills that provided such thrilling encounters for a young man in his 20s. Each time I return to Scotland those sensations flood back, providing a window to some of my most precious memories.



123. Peter Gillman (*Seth Gillman*)