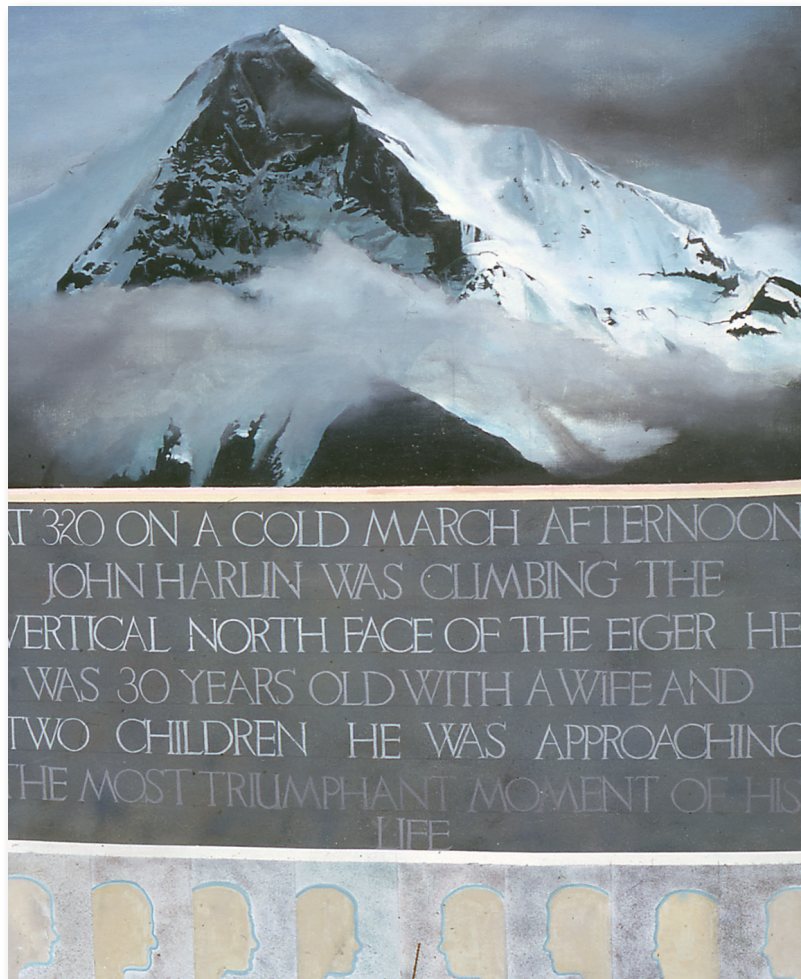

Area Notes



John Harlin

Rob Fairley, 1969. (Acrylic on board. 150cm x 120cm. Destroyed.)

LINDSAY GRIFFIN

Alps & Dolomites 2015

For a variety of reasons – weather, politics and, in the case of Nepal, earthquakes – significantly fewer major new lines than normal were completed in the world’s mountains during 2015. This was also true in the Alps, where dry conditions and, during the summer, incredibly warm temperatures, confined most to objectively safe rock. Although there were a number of new additions to the Mont Blanc range, there appear to have been no leading first ascents.

On 18 August 1983, three of the top alpinists of that time, Eric Bellin, Jean-Marc Boivin and Martial Moioli started up the compact granite face to the right of the initial corner system of the *American Route* on the south face of the Fou, emerging at the summit the following night under a full moon. Their route, *Balade au Clair de Lune*, is mixed free and aid, and has seen few repeats. There are several fine but often poorly protected pitches of free climbing up to 6c, and at least one demanding aid pitch of A3/A4 (hooks and copperheads) above the point where the line crosses the famous Diagonal Crack.

Ascents of the south face have declined in recent years due to the danger of access during the summer months. Climbers now either choose spring to approach on ski or the more lengthy option of traversing the main ridge of the Aiguilles from the Aiguille du Midi and abseiling to the base of the route. Fabien Dugit and Cedric Lachat made several attempts in the spring to climb *Balade*, before deciding to try a free ascent, in one day, from the Requin hut. Leaving at 3.30am they moved remarkably fast, negotiating the second pitch at 7b+ (with poor peg protection), the third at 6b+ (but very, very run-out) and the crux fifth pitch at 8b. They then found the upper wall more straightforward, with former A2 pitches well protected by Friends. The last section was a fine, widening crack, which required Friends 4 and 5 and was felt to be around 7c+. They reached the top at 8.30pm, coincidentally in full moonlight.

On 8 January AC members put up the first of three short technical mixed routes above the Vallée Blanche. Earlier in the winter Nick Bullock had attempted a line on the west face of the Tour Ronde, very close to an unnamed rock route climbed in 1975 by René Corompt and Pierre de Galbert (TD, V+) but known to have been done (by an unknown party) at least a couple of years previously. Bullock climbed three pitches before retreating and then teamed up with Matt Helliker around a week later for a complete ascent. The line is an obvious winter dry tooling objective, which follows a groove with very loose rock that needs to be well frozen to make the climb safe. The seven-pitch line was named *Night Fever* (250m, M8),



Matt Helliker on the M8 third pitch of *Night Fever*, on the west face of Tour Ronde. (Nick Bullock)



Helliker, right, and Nick Bullock after the demanding descent. Patrick Gabarrou had been so concerned for their safety in a gathering storm he alerted mountain rescue: an unnecessary but much appreciated gesture. (Nick Bullock)

the pair finishing in the dark, strong winds and whiteout conditions. Patrick Gabarrou spotted their headtorches high on the climb, and given the conditions, chose to alert the rescue service. It was not needed, and Bullock later commented it was good find that one of his heroes was 'caring'.

On 18 February Helliker teamed up with regular partner Jon Bracey for a new winter line on the north-east face of the Pyramid du Tacul. After an easy ski to the base, the pair followed a line based around the grooves and corners of the 1984 Domenech-Remy-Remy rock route, *Le Ronfleur Paradoxal* (D+, V). Thin ice and hard, steep mixed gave excellent sustained but well-protected climbing, and the 250m, six-pitch route M7 was named *Mastabas*. Future ascensionists will need to be patient to allow the ice to form well enough in the grooves; the pair had studied the line for a few years, waiting for the right conditions to materialise.



Jon Bracey on the first piece of *Mastabas*, on the Pyramide du Tacul. (Matt Helliker)

The final mixed route for Helliker came on 13 March, again with Bracey but this time on the third pillar of the east face of Mont Maudit. Here, Helliker had identified a winter line between *Filo di Arianna* (Faré-Grassi-Longhi, 1984) and the *East Pillar Grassi-Meneghin* (350m, TD+, VI+). The line involved four pitches up a lower angled buttress to a snowfield (also crossed by *Filo di Arianna*), followed by another four up the steep headwall forming the left flank of the east pillar. As the lower section appeared to be broken, the pair waited for reasonable snow cover. This worked, as the lower buttress gave good mixed climbing in icy cracks and corners up to M5+, and the upper dry buttress fine steep climbing in rock shoes up to 6b. At the start, and in the sun, the two were able to climb the top section in bare hands, but when the sun disappeared there was a lot of gloves-on, gloves-off, and violent body shaking before they reached the top. The route has been named *Zephyr* (400m, M5+ 6b).

'The Lonely Pillar' in *AJ* 2015 details Simon Richardson's 20-year love affair with the Greuvettaz Cirque above the Comino bivouac hut. In the summer of 2015 he was back, this time with Roger Webb, and on 25 September completed a new route on the south-west face of Punta 2825m on Mont Vert du Greuvettaz. This lies roughly midway between the routes climbed on Puntas 2810m and 2873m, climbed in 2012 with Tom Prentice. The line was 11 pitches with an overall grade of D and a first pitch crux of about 5+. From the summit they traversed the connecting ridge to Punta 2810m and abseiled the bolted line of the 2010 *Carletto Route* (TD, 6b).

On 15 July Vincent Fournier and Jeff Mercier climbed *Efareb* on the south face of the Aiguille d'Argentière. This climbs the Tour Jaune, right of the Couloir en Y. The total height of the route from bergschrund to summit is 1,200m but it is hard to say how much of it is new, maybe only seven pitches that reach and climb the hanging corner between the 1968 *Bellin-Ravanel Route* and *Élévation*.

Further west, in the Écrins massif, two new routes are worthy of mention. In mid October a local guide, climbing the *Goulotte Grassi* on the Ailefroide, noticed that the long *dièdre* in the lower part of the north face of the Pic Sans Nom (3913m), right of the *Raie des Fesses*, was chocked with ice. The rock immediately to the left of this *dièdre* is taken by the classic 1950 *George-Russenberger Route* (ED2), which high on the face finishes up the north-west arête. The observation prompted local activists Benjamin Brochard, Fred Degoulet and Jonathan Joly to set off on 19 October from Pré de Madame Carlé for the three-hour approach to the face.

The initial climbing proved hard and difficult to protect and after five pitches they had to bivouac. They had planned for one night on the face, but next day climbed 10 hours and 11 difficult mixed pitches before having to stop again. On the third day they completed another 13 pitches to join the *brèche*, and given the lateness of the day and the long descent ahead, chose to forego the summit and descend directly to the south. They named their 1,000m climb *Le Prestige des Écrins* (M6+ AI5 6a). However, their ascent proved somewhat controversial, as only the first 500m are new and they lie very close to the *George-Russenberger*.

Motivated by the ascent reported above, Pierre Sauget enlisted Alexandre Michel and Stefano Morino to try a line on the north face of Ailefroide Orientale (3847m) that he had spotted the previous year. The route climbs the left flank of the north-west spur, left of the drainage falling from the Brèche du Glacier Noir. The climbing turned out to be very varied, sustained but never desperate, and with all the qualities to make the route a future classic. The team left Pré de Madame Carlé at 2am on 26 October and were back in the village of Ailefroide 20 hours later, naming their line *Winter is Coming* (700m, of which 550m is new, F5, M5+, 80°).

In 2002 Patrick Gabarrou climbed a hard new rock route on the south face of the Matterhorn, which reached the crest of the Furggen Ridge just left of the summit of Picco Muzio, the c4190m tower below the shoulder. *Padrepio, prega per Tutti* (ED3, 7a 6c obl) was completed with



Jon Bracey on the east face of Mont Maudit, during the first ascent of *Zephyr* (400m, M5+, 6b). (Matt Helliker)

Cesare Ravaschietto after three previous forays with different partners. In the intervening 13 years, with seven different partners, Gabarrou worked on forcing an independent finish, left of the Furggen nose, exiting directly onto the summit. This was finally completed on 6 August, 10 days after his 65th birthday, with his old friend Pierre Gourdin. However, this upper section was climbed in stages, either traversing in from the Furggen Ridge, or abseiling from above. The complete line has been christened *Padre Pio, Echelle vers le Ciel* (1300m, 7a) but still needs an integral ascent.

Still proving that there are new lines left to climb on the north face of the Eiger, the all-star team of Simon Gietl, Robert Jasper and Roger Scháli (Italian-German-Swiss) completed a hard line that Jasper and Scháli had been attempting since 2009. The new route climbs through the Rote Fluh and up the *Czechoslovakian Pillar*, left of the *Ghilini-Piola Direttissima*. Protected by a mix of bolts and traditional gear (including pegs), it crosses *La Vida es Silbar* and *Paciencia* to exit onto the west flank at c3700m. On 11 August, the team finally redpointed all 33 pitches to create the most technically difficult rock route on the Eiger: *Odysee* (1400m, 8a+).

The Arnold-Steck speed ascents, on the high-profile walls of the Alps, continue. On 22 April Swiss Dani Arnold climbed the *Schmid Route* on the north face of the Matterhorn in just 1h 46m, 10 minutes faster than the previous record established in 2009 by Ueli Steck. However, Steck was to 'retaliate'. On 16 November he climbed the *1938 Route* on the north face of the Eiger



Smile for the camera. Matt Helliker on *Zephyr*, east face of Mont Maudit. (Jon Bracey)

Already reported in *AJ* 2014, this is the amazing 55m crux pitch of *Chancer*, on the north-west face of Tour Ronde, which Matt Helliker climbed at M6. (Jon Bracey)



in 2h 22m, six minutes faster than Arnold's 2011 time, which was the fastest on record. Steck's time was 25 minutes faster than his own 2008 record, but he used different tactics. That year there were no tracks on the face and Steck climbed the route free. At the time of his 2015 ascent the track was in place (in fact Steck had climbed the route one week previously with a partner in 3h 46m, possibly the fastest time for a roped pair), and he elected to use any means available for increasing his speed, such as pulling on pegs and using in situ fixed rope.

Arguably, Steck's most notable Alpine event of the year was a continuous self-propelled traverse of all the 82 4,000m peaks of the Alps, as designated in the UIAA list. He climbed the majority with various partners, including his wife, but around 30 were solos. Speed is always paramount in Steck's mind: during a cycle link between two venues, Steck was overjoyed to hit 90kph while descending the Grimsel Pass road with his brother (and fortunately very little traffic). Steck completed the traverse in 62 days from 11 June to 11 August, but this is not a record; Diego Giovannini and Franco Nicolini covered the same ground in 60 days during 2008.

British national and Italian resident Tom Ballard became the first person to solo all six classic north faces of the Alps during a single winter season. He used the *Colton-MacIntyre* to make the ascent of the Grandes Jorasses north face, and climbed each of four of the six faces comfortably in one day.

On Piz Badile's *Cassin Route*, always notoriously difficult to climb in winter, he found difficulties up to M7 and spent a night in a snowhole at the second Cassin bivouac. He also made one bivouac while climbing the *Comici Route* on the north face of the Cima Grande, the first of the six completed during the winter season. Although he had climbed the north face of the Eiger before, including solos and new lines, he had never previously attempted the *1938 Route*. However, it could be argued that he had passed that way before: as a foetus in his mother's womb when she climbed the route, almost six months pregnant, in 1988. Ballard, the son of the late Alison Hargreaves and who is based in the Dolomites, put up several hard new routes in the Catinaccio region during the summer, up to IX-, VIII obl.

In the Bregaglia-Masino, on the big granite walls above the Val di Mello where there is a strong no-bolts ethic, two new routes were established on the famous Scoglio delle Matamorfofi. In 2014 Daniele Bianchi, Pietro Biasini and Mirko Masè spotted a series of grassy cracks and then proceeded to clean them, ground up, to create a seven-pitch line with a wildly overhanging crux sixth pitch. By November 2015, when the lower cracks were dry after a long, hot autumn, Biasini was gone, killed the previous February in Norway during the annual Rjukan festival when an icefall collapsed. The two remaining climbers returned and freed all seven pitches to create *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* (215m, X- or 8a+). In the April prior to

this successful climb Simone Pedferri had completed the first ascent of *Io non ho Paura* (225m, 8b+, 7b obl) with Alberto Marazzi, a line immediately to the right of the celebrated, wonderful classic *Luna Nascente*.

On the great east face of Monte Qualido (2707m) Paolo Marazzi, Luca Schiera and Matteo de Zaiacomò opened the 18-pitch route, *King of the Bongo* (c800m, 7c+). They began working on the route in 2014 and finished with a continuous two-day ascent in July 2015. No bolts were placed and the crux, ninth pitch, which was a traverse below a roof, required skyhook protection.

A notable event for female rock climbers was the third (and fourth) overall and first female ascent of *Die Unendliche Geschichte* on the seventh Kirchlispitze on the Rätikon. This technical 420m 8b+ put up at the start of the 1990s by Beat Kammerlander, was for some years considered one of the three hardest alpine sport climbs in the world and had to wait until 1995 for a second ascent. Unlike Kammerlander's nearby masterpiece *Silbergeier*, also one of the three, *Die Unendliche Geschichte* has remained neglected. Nina Caprez and Barbara Zangerl, climbing as a team, both redpointed the entire route.

There were interesting winter ascents and big new routes in the Dolomites, where traditional ethics can still prevail. On 10 January, Alessandro Rudatis and Ruggero Zardini made the first winter ascent of the 1993 Igor Koller route, *40 Anni per il Falier* (380m, FFA 2010, 7c+) on the south face of the Marmolada. They were able to travel light, as this nine-pitch route finishes on a halfway ledge from where the route is normally abseiled. It is not clear whether the Italian pair completed the route free.

Two days before Christmas, Nicolas Tondini and Emanuele Pellizzari made the first winter ascent of the Kurt Astner-Christoph Heinz route, *Rondo Veneziano* (470m, IX or 7c) on the south face of the Torre Venezia, Civetta group. The route requires some commitment, as above the long traverse at mid-height it becomes impossible to abseil the climb. On the day in question the alarm went at around 2.30am for Tondini and 3am for Pellizzari (the latter told his wife he was going out with the dog and would be back for dinner). The pair started walking around 5am and began the climb at 8am. They reached the summit at 4pm, having made an on-sight ascent, and were down in a pizzeria at 6.30pm when Pellizzari's wife phoned him, a trifle upset that he was late.

In August a significant new route was added to the big, north-west face of the Civetta (3220m), when Italians Martin Dejori, Marta Mozzati, Titus Prinöth, Giorgio Travaglia and Alex Walpoth completed *Via Degli Studenti* (1000m, VIII- A0). The route first climbs the 500m pillar right of the 1967 Messner route *Friends*, then crosses the Messner route to tackle the most overhanging section of the face. This required a few simple aid moves and rests before reaching an exposed bivouac. Next day the team joined the classic *Solleder* route for two pitches, then continued direct to the top where the *Solleder* moves right. No bolts were placed, although a few were carried, and sections that required the leader to use aid or rests were freed by the seconds. However, a free ascent remains for a future party, and the authors have no plans to return.

On 27 August, Much Mayr eventually made the first free ascent of the *Carillo-Gallego-Gomez-Lozano* route on the north face of the Cima Grande. This 1977 aid extravaganza from a well-known team of Spanish climbers had been pretty much ignored until it caught the eye of Italian Mauro 'Bubu' Bole in 2003. At that period Bubu was making free ascents of some of the great aid routes on the walls of the Lavaredo, and after making the second ascent of the *Spanish Route*, solo, he eventually climbed it at 8a+ with three points of aid through the gigantic roof on pitch three. Climbing with Guido Unterwurzacher, Mayr freed this section at a declared 8b+, though Unterwurzacher thought it might easily be 8c.

For historical reasons a notable ascent was that of Hansjörg Auer, who made the first free solo of the famous *Mephisto*, left of the Livanos Pillar on the west face of the Sass dla Crusc (or Heiligkreuzkofel). This route was put up in 1979 by two of the best Austrian rock climbers of the time, Luggi Rieser, who now goes under the name of Swami Prem Darshano after his religious conversion, and Reinhard Schiestl. The latter's lead of the crux pitch, without bolts, is now considered the first confirmed 'alpine' VIII-/VIII in Europe. In 1968, while making the first ascent of the central pillar some way to the right, a certain Reinhold Messner climbed an off-vertical wall above an ankle-snapping ledge on slightly friable rock to bring in undoubtedly the first 'alpine' VII in Europe. This pitch had only been repeated on a top rope until the mid 1990s, and even today opinions vary on the grade: from VII through to VIII-.

Auer had climbed *Mephisto* with a partner shortly before his lone ascent and despite feeling the crux was not simple, suddenly became highly motivated for the solo. He was full of praise for the authors: 'What they did back then with the gear of that era was quite simply incredible, visionary, and a masterpiece of hard free climbing in the mountains.'

The perennial Italian activist Rolando Lacher and partners (including his son) climbed *50 Anni son Volati*, *25 Regalati* on the east face of Monte Fabbion (2672m) in the Brenta Dolomites. The 215m route, while only six pitches long, is demanding throughout and the top pitch overhangs by 10m. Characteristically, Lacher climbed ground-up using a mix of spaced bolts and trad gear to provide his normal run-out climbing. The last (and crux) pitch is 8a+ and the route has obligatory 7b moves. The route name needs some explanation: Lacher celebrated his 50th birthday in 2015, 25 years after he miraculously survived a 50m ground fall.

Finally, in the Far Eastern Alps, one of the most notable ascents was that of *Optimist*, a winter route on the west face of the Schneefenerkopf (2875m) in Austria's Wetterstein region. The protagonists were Germans Joachim Feger and Michael Wohleben, who opted to place no bolts on their new line, though the last four pitches are common with a bolted summer climb. Protection was difficult throughout due to the typically poor rock of this massif. The 1,300m route, rated M6, was completed over two days in February with a bivouac at around half height.