

A STANCE ON PARNASSUS

by Gavin Anderson

OUR FIRST STOP WAS THE KINGSHOUSE. Bearing in mind the nature of our excursion we opted for the lounge bar, *terra incognita* for us, and were surprised to see so many gentlemen in tweeds sipping their malts. Gentlemen they may have been, but we had to elbow our way to the bar. Feudal privileges die hard. Bonnie Prince Charlie had not fought in vain.

That first night we camped at the head of Glen Etive, optimistically laying out our sleeping bags on the spot where W.H. Murray had laid his before lighting a pipe. Following protocol we breakfasted on kippers. Neither of us had sampled them for years so the taste and texture came as a surprise. Thus fortified we headed out, skipping the pantomime of one of us forgetting our boots, so there was no annoying double-back to the city.

Rod and I were retired, and in need of something to do. Some climbers spice the basic plot by adding a little bit extra, such as climbing the Grand Capucin then parapenting off its summit or ascending Everest in a wheelbarrow, and so on, and so on. With all these extras came possible damage to health and limb, or a rapid termination of the experiment.

Our scheme offered no such unpleasantness. We would follow in the footsteps of the first ascenders of three classic climbs and investigate how far the nature of the climb reflected the personality of the climber, rather like the art historian identifying an artistic masterpiece by the brush strokes or how the hands are painted.

We parked near the foot of Clachaig Gully, listening to the musical tinklings of the waterfall. It was a fabulous spring morning, and we were engulfed by the perfume and colours of the plant life decorating the gully's walls. As I never normally write such giddy prose, I assume we were under the spell of the maestro, and could sense the tread of the fearless MacAlpine, the mysterious Marskell, and the forgetful Dunn following us. The climbing was enjoyable without being necky. We clunked our way up on the unaccustomed big holds. The landmark pitches were interesting but held no terrors. The Great Cave pitch? Modern protection made it safe. The famed Jericho Wall was rock solid. Had WHM oversold the product? I think not. The unknown always holds nameless terrors, and moreover he had had no harness or rock slippers, nor any Camalots – better than Valium for stopping the shakes.

The climb went on and on. Clouds masked the sun, and the rock formerly glowing was now as brick-red as Bolton. Without warning, without any anticipatory slackening, the climb stopped and we found ourselves hard by the starting point of the Aonach Eagach.

It was early in the day, and the sun had reappeared. So far we had stuck to the text, but now broke ranks and skipped over the Aonach Eagach,

which I know WHM had done. The first stage in our pilgrimage was over.

Did the climb reflect the man's character? The hanging garden is an instance, echoing Murray's occasional Rococo flourishes, and the finale over the rugged Aonach Eagach speaks to the bold cragsman he really was.

There were no kilts at the bar, but it was even tougher getting served. The words 'Excuse me!' once again failed to elicit any response. They were a rougher crowd, and there was a vague hint of menace in the air. We said *slàinte* to WHM and to the realm of the gentleman climber.

Our next subject lived by the sweat of his brow. I had seen Don Whillans twice in my life: once watering the plants at the Biolay campsite in Chamonix, and once at kicking-out time leaving the Padarn, freighted with a six-pack under each arm to cover any dry spells. Both iconic moments.

We were going to attempt *Centurion* on Ben Nevis in tribute to Whillans. The climb provides a classic example of familiarity breeding contempt. For a long time the route was considered the *ne plus ultra* of hard climbs in my Edinburgh circle. When the Editor of the *Journal* told me it was 'an easy, easy climb,' I put it down to an early example of sand-bagging. I had already fallen off the greasy first pitch so I approached with trepidation. First of all it was Impossible; then Desperate; and now an Easy Day Out. After we had done the climb, we were told that was the received opinion.

Whatever!

The rock was perfect, endowed with just enough holds to make it hard, but not too much so. The dreaded second pitch succumbed to aggressive laybacking and jamming. Finding a none-too-desperate crux at either end of pleasant climbing, seemed proof of a benevolent deity smiling on us. Everything was golden. At the top we descended a snowed-up Number 5 Gully. Happily the snow was as soft as Mister Softee ice-cream, and we could churn great buckets in it, with a spot of bum-slithering helping us to the bottom. We exchanged notes and agreed: *Centurion* is the portrait in stone of a formidable, direct, uncompromising man.

There was an unusual sequel to the day. Rod and I were drinking a pint in a Fort William bar and going over the events of the day. The other customers were discussing the Scotland-England match. As we supped our Double Diamond, one of the punters started singing: 'If you hate the English bastards clap your hands!' Obviously a popular refrain, for soon everyone was joining in, stamping feet and banging beer glasses.

They must have been badly out of tune, for a music-lover stood up and flung his pot at the singers. It smashed on the table, spraying beer and glass in the choirmaster's lap. Pandemonium broke out: glasses soared through the air; punches were traded that rarely met their target, as the punchers spun round in a giddy ballet that would have wrung applause at Covent Garden, falling to the deck, tripping up other combatants and

generally adding to the mayhem. Bar stools were used for defence and offence. Heads were nudded. It was a classic Wild West moment.

Someone was blocking the light in the doorway. It was a wee lassie, all of five feet and a bit, dressed in a policewoman's uniform. Like a prim primary-school teacher, she clapped her hands just the once and this amazing lass then said: 'Right lads, time to get hame to the missus.' There was silence; sheepishly without a whisper of protest, glass crunching underfoot, the warriors stumbled home. As we drove north we couldn't help thinking the young policewoman had made us non-combatants contemptible.

We had toasted our farewell to Whillans amongst the shambles of the damaged pub. To every man his own memorial. If Bob Dylan could win the Nobel Literature Prize for his corny not-very-literary lyrics, so Whillans can scrape onto the list by his off-the-cuff comments. In his dismissal of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* as 'A load of f***ing fairies,' you are about as far from Murray's German Romanticism as you can get. Don had a way of putting down boosters with an impromptu aphorism that sticks in the mind of those stung, remaining in the folk memory of any Anglophone climber. Hearing them for the hundredth time, I believe them all. Some dullards say they were fabricated in a post-alcoholic haze. I refuse to accept that – but then I believe Marie Antoinette made that mistake about the cakes.

Fionn Loch. If your favourite artist is Landseer and your literary avatar is Sir Walter Scott, then a glorious Heaven upon Earth awaits you here. This was some time ago, and I'll never go back. I suspect like many other Shangri-Las it has been spoilt by the well-intentioned destroying what they came to worship.

We were off to follow the masters, Smith and Haston, on their first ascent. A magnificent route given the crappy name of *Gob*.

After a straightforward first pitch, the climax is reached: a long, sensational traverse under an overhanging roof; technically not desperate, but the exposure is gripping, like climbing the inside of Hagia Sophia, terror creating a maelstrom in your bowels. But holds and runners are plentiful. You finish, gasping with breathless relief, coil the ropes and settle down to enjoy the Pre-Raphaelite colours – Scotland at its best. At the same time you are wondering whether Smith and Haston were speaking to each other when they created this masterpiece. They had a rough friendship, but then they were both prima donnas. And there were plenty of those to go round on the climbing circuit, some too good to make you a cup of tea.

And now the understudy, Dougal Haston. Years ago I saw him at Traprain Law, attempting to solo the overhang clad in winklepickers and drainpipes. His mates were taking no notice. To get their attention, he swarmed boldly onto the overhang. Unfortunately winklepickers are not rock-shoes, and he lost contact with the rock, scrabbled for a second, then

off he came. He fell quite a distance, badly injuring his shoulder. What impressed me was his refusal to show any pain, particularly to us bumbles milling around the foot of the crag.

Haston was a puzzle. Beyond the fact that the line is daring, *Gob* tells us nothing about the man. His written output was extensive: a novel, an autobiography, numerous diary entries – enough to allow a judgment. Even a couple of articles in the *SMC Journal*. His frequent whooping into the night, and crampons scarting, suggest borrowings from Smith. His novel, *Calculated Risk*, follows an eerie parallel to his own life, even giving uncanny pointers towards his death. His *pensées* are gloomy, introspective, not exactly beach reading. As for his novel, the critics' reviews span the whole gamut from, 'Well, it's his first try,' to 'Rubbish!' Being thus condemned is unfair. Haston can summon up a sentence or two. But his writing is hollow, without inner warmth, reminiscent of Aleister Crowley.

The most telling revelations about his inner life are contained in his journals. They sign off with the valedictory 'Thus spake DH,' which can be taken as the poor man's Nietzsche, or just plain weird. He became a competent writer, serious and strenuous like his climbs. Searching for humour in his *oeuvre* bears little fruit. There is the occasional nugget: 'Clough was my partner; porridge the breakfast.' If that is your sort of thing.

But is that the whole story? His 'Nightshift in Zero'¹ is as good as anything Smith wrote, without the baroque flourishes. Descriptions of the ups and downs of high-altitude climbing are illuminating, while his portrayal of his colleagues' frailties leaves no room for argument. The rubbishing of his novel might owe more to anger at Haston hogging the lead on Annapurna than detached appraisal.

Friends talk about his love for children, and dandling babies on his knees, and how towards the end of his life he visited the Pentlands, a mellow softening of the arteries. Bob Culp, a Colorado guide, told me he had rarely come across such a pleasant personality. The demons had been chased away.

I studied Carnmore Crag for a long time, searching for any clues to Dougal's character. But there was nothing; both the cliff and the man were totally elusive.

Then I realised I had found the word. The weather had set in, sheets of rain spattered loch and cliff in gathering fury. We were going home. We had had a good week, but now it was shoulder the sacks, hoods up and best foot forward through the rain. I turned to say goodbye to our once-friendly cliff. It was dark, unyielding, moody and morose.

The two foregoing subjects would hardly merit a belay stance on Parnassus. That leaves two contenders for the throne, Smith and Murray. Smith was a philosophy student who according to the legend never

¹ Published in *Edinburgh University MC Journal*, 1961–62.

submitted a written piece of work, but was so venerated by his professors that they were prepared to let him slide through on the strength of his other qualities. I don't believe it either. Legends tend to accrue around charismatic figures.

His writing was diverse: at times a student rag mag, or a Yank gangster comic, then suddenly breaking out as the poor man's W.H. Murray, as if he were trying to create a separate persona. The style is very descriptive, and if you believe communication is the chief function of pen and ink he gets ten out of ten. There is a fondness for adjectives you think wildly inappropriate, for example 'vulturous mists'. But finish the sentence – '... wheeled slowly around us.' – and recall your last miserable day on the Grey Corries, and you see he's got it spot-on.

There are plenty more like that. Sometimes contrived, a word-technician playing chess with the language, occasionally sounding like any student straining after the *mot juste*. He was only 23 when he died, an age when many writers are still churning out juvenilia. Glimpses of what might have been shine through the various texts like the sparkling stones embedded in the flanks of the Fiescherwand.

Smith gets the silver award. He was a prodigy, whose talents were not restricted to climbing. Marked down as a climbing yobbo by certain groups; marked up as the favoured son of the university's philosophy department. This wobbling on the Richter scale hints at an unsettled personality, unsure of what he wanted to be, unsure of who he was. The episode of the pontoon school at Jacksonville sounds implausible. I believe he was there, but I see him sitting in the soggy background ruminating over a Wittgenstein Proposition. The unelaborated talk of chasing the birds on Saturday sounds like nerdish hankering to be one of the lads. In the early 1960s recognition of his genius was almost mandatory. A lot of his writing was experimental. His best such as 'Walkering in the Alps' marks him as a serious mountain writer. It is a straightforward account without the fizz of 'The Bat and the Wicked'.

And now we come to the saintly Murray. There is no hint of skulduggery in his make-up. No need to count the spoons when he leaves. At one point he sampled the life of a monk in an immersion course at Buckfast Abbey, which sounded like an SAS boot camp in cowl and robe. It would have been Scotland's loss if he had turned monastic. Fortunately for us he dug in his heels over Papal Infallibility, and returned to secular life as a bank clerk, swapping a hair shirt for the marginally more comfortable stiff collar and business suit.

The one time I met him was at the Club Dinner. I was the JMCS Edinburgh representative and his hand was in the row of hands to be shaken. I always feel this is a little bit like running the gauntlet and was too nervous to speak, so we just stared at each other, he wondering who they had pulled off the street, I kicking myself in furious embarrassment.

Like many of us I hadn't opened my Murray in years, and now

approached it as one would a sermon, bracing myself for spiritual uplift but low expectation of pleasure. I had vague memories of his tales following a pattern, namely the evening before spent boozing and plotting with the lads over foaming tankards. Next, off we go, Dunn forgets his boots, swift return to Glasgow. Off again. The climb: Mackenzie or author heroically leading the slippery slope. 'Good show!' through rime-encrusted lips. The summit a final coda rhapsodising on the scenery; as a bonus a spectacular sunset, with God coming in useful here.

Much to my surprise it was nothing like that. The writing was fresh and alive, the climbing portions easily pictured and dramatic, unlike the modern stuff that reads like a treatise on trigonometry and is about as exciting. You are worried he will fall off *Garrick's Shelf*, your toes tingle in their tricounis, you hold your breath, then feel relief as he clinches the pitch, a hundred-foot runnerless horror above a notional belay.

His adventures make you wish you experienced the golden age of mountaineering – though not its unpleasant sequel, fighting the Africa Korps in the desert, then three chilly years in POW camps, writing your memoirs on toilet paper. Escapism was the only exit; hence the Technicolor sunsets and the baying of stags on autumnal Ladhar Bheinn. The Gestapo destroyed his manuscript, and Murray's comments about the face of soulless evil are bone-chilling. He rewrote it from memory. My guess is that the second version is more polished than the original. We shall never know.

Naturally some of his writing is dated: 'The competitive spirit is happily completely foreign to Scottish mountaineering.' Why was he never on first-name terms with his stout-hearted companions? They may have been awe-inspiring risk-takers, but despite throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the fray they don't get much to say. His writing is rarely static. No pitch is so long the reader yawns; the second man has no time for frostbitten toes. These are climbs, not projects. You can be gripped on the Ben, ravished by Ladhar Bheinn, knackered on Rannoch Moor, but you are always *there*. Whole generations can blame Murray for their obsession, hidden between the pages of wholesome home-readers such as *Ivanhoe* and *The Mill on the Floss*, and off they go in their nailed boots to adventure and unforgettable sunsets. The routes reflect the man. *Clachaig Gully* with its long floral passages is the man to a fault, a mountaineer's mountain-climb landing you on top of the hill with easy access to the finest ridge in Britain. His word paintings put him on a par with Turner and Rossetti. Let the Master take his belay stance on Mount Parnassus.