

THE HUNCHBACK OF NOTRE DAME

by Tim Pettifer

WHEN BILLY FELL OUT of *Longbow* at Dumbarton he was only halfway up, yet the ‘shocked silence’ as he hurtled down before breaking his arm and shoulder in four places was long enough for me to predict his future, which rapidly went downhill after he reached Inverclyde Hospital and ‘phoned his dad.

Billy did his best before the line went dead and his parents cancelled their first holiday in a decade, planned in the belief that Billy was now responsible enough to run the family joinery business. The next day I began climbing with a psychic, notorious for descending into ‘long stare silences’ when the going got tricky, and he claimed Billy’s accident was karma for asking the rescue service if he could have the jacket of an angler we had found drowned in the Leven just along from the ‘Rocks’. I am going to call their looks ‘a shaming silence’, and it is the same silence I encountered when I made a bad pass to the school rugby-team captain who went on to lead England in numerous victories against Scotland and even the All Blacks. I should have been proud to have known him, but every time I saw him make another great try I was ever more withdrawn and ever more silent.

Mountaineering is a high-risk sport and shamefully a very selfish one, and I shall not forget my great friend Alan’s mother looking out of the window when I appeared alone in Alan’s car. I could sense her ‘dreadful silence’ as I walked to the door before I could say he was alive – but only just, because he had gone over two crags and head-first into a jumble of granite boulders while skiing the gullies of the Cairngorms.

Unusually I have been able to earn a modest living in the mountaineering and skiing world without even being good at it. It’s been a jolly fine adventure, and better still I turned my back on all the bunkum of the creative industry and the cash-rich life of London; but now entering the beginning of the end of the twilight zone I have the additional advantage of hearing even less bunkum by just by taking out my hearing aids. So in ‘blissful silence’ and with time on my hands I have been considering why I gave up money and took on all the advantages of risk.

I don’t know why we are not considered dangerous loonies who are granted the freedom to wreck ourselves climbing but can’t legally take heroin. Because for me there is a cerebral moment that is very addictive and for which there can be serious consequences and a long period of cold turkey if it goes wrong. It is that exquisite, out-of-body, in-mind moment of absolute sweet concentration and complete withdrawal from everything in the universe, when it’s you and only you who exist. All extraneous matter has been removed and you can feel only one thing: the very simple pulse at the centre of all life.

In that wild and natural landscape you love so much, in that country that means so much, you know the moves you have to make and you are confident you can do them. The moment is now; let the dance begin. You are in the zone in the only place you ever want to be, born for just this moment. You do it well, you do it beautifully – nothing brutal, just timed strength at exactly the moments it's needed. The drug has been administered, you reached nirvana, and while your second comes up you imagine the next pitch and another equally dangerous fix – totally legal, utterly selfish, and completely useless unless you justifiably believe you are continuing our ascent from the primeval swamp, even as small tribes of humans ventured north, risking all to discover new land and adventure.

But that is the least interesting half of the story. As a 'gig economy' designer in that previous life working for ballet companies, I saw first-hand the dedication needed to create the ultimate combination of strength and beauty, unique to the great *danseurs nobles* (or to you and me the male ballet lead), summed up by Vilma Pitrinaite in the statement 'And in each man there are two who dance.'

Can I ask you a question? When we climb, are we not searching for the beauty that is in the challenge, the mountain and the route, and in the commitment to serve it well? Why else are we attracted to the natural visually stunning line, to the shape of the mountain, to the great dièdre, the cleaving chimney-line, a sea stack, the edge of a building, the sheer immensity of a face, the infinity of the crack line, the finely sculptured overhang and the long high ridge all the better for being longer than anything attempted before.

Vain to the last, some even like to look the part, even without a photographer to capture the moment, risking all, even alone and not needing to tell anyone what was discovered nor wanting reward or acknowledgment. That is a true seeker of beauty, and you will find it inside that quiet 'intimate silence' that comes after the selected challenge has been well met and is personal to you alone.

It is living art in the making: you are the paint brush and the paint on the canvas, the chisel and shape in the stone, the mould in the bronze, the prime object in the living art installation judged for the value of the beauty you created at that moment.

Meanwhile back on planet Earth, at the Theatre Royal in Glasgow, *Swan Lake* is coming to an end. The two *danseurs nobles*, the black and the white cobs, have all the grace and dramatic strength needed and have exceeded themselves; the ballerina, so simply dressed in classical white, has floated like a gossamer from the scene and the corps de ballet have carried her spirit away on the air. The curtain comes down and 1500 hearts have simultaneously stopped beating in a 'breathless silence'. Then in an explosion of seats going back and an uproar of cheering, whistles, shouts and deafening clapping the 'company' bow as they come upright and it's clear to see they know they 'pulled it off'.

In the sheer simplicity of minds in perfect control of the perfect body, is a great ballet any different from Alex Honnold's solo ascent of El Capitan? If he did the route a second or a third time would his hands and feet not touch the rock in exactly the same places, as do the feet of the *danseur noble* upon the stage and his hands where they support the ballerinas?

Swan Lake has taken us to a different place and we are inside a bubble as we walk back arm-in-arm through the busy Glasgow streets, wet from a sudden shower. As we pass slowly under an umbrella even the pavements are alive with colour, and people come and go, in and out of the dark from behind bright facades and cars, while buses and taxis are moving intently to mysterious assignments. We go into the bar of that old Glasgow restaurant and in the dry warmth there is a buzz of happy conversation, witty, chatty and of no real importance. The waiter we know so well nods to us, almost secretly. He is perfect at his job, never intruding but always there at the right moments. Eventually a table is available and we order Gewürztraminer and whatever seafood he politely suggests is best (and be assured that as Roganos was good enough for W.H. Murray it's more than good enough for the likes of us).

Time stands still, the waiter comes and goes, and towards the end of the meal I am given a compilation flash-stick of great bands including just a few popular hits she thinks are worthwhile. She is a musician and knows the music that will take me to the hills.

We make our farewells and I leave Glasgow in my small banger that hit the climbing world about the same time as Wild Country Zero Cams and has taken me on many weekends to the Islands and Highlands and a winter season ski instructing in Courmayeur, my only concession to TLC being fuel, and before it's even light I have reached Arrochar and am walking up A' Chrois.

I follow the steep path alongside the plantation and the burn, and pass close to where our great friend Ian came to grief. This was his training hill through many years as a mountain guide, and during my climbs with him in Scotland, the Alps, Svalbard and Greenland I could not imagine anyone more careful or more engaging to be with, yet he fell into a crevasse as big and as hungry as many on the Mer de Glace.

I have been going up and down these hills for half a century since I came to Scotland for six weeks as a freelance art director and never went back. I have just a simple rucksack with a drawstring closure, a nylon jacket, oatcakes, cheddar and a handful of caramel wafers, so nothing has changed much since the 1970s except that as I gain height I have a senior moment. I recall Creag Tharsuinn as a blank on the map and it is not often you find a new curiosity on your own turf. Better still, I recall that the guidebook describes a very tempting line up the centre of the crag, and when I get there I recall it's *Garrick's Route*.

I make a start and suddenly I taste the elixir that is the exclusive rite of the soloist. Somewhere about halfway I savour the situation and I look to

the north, then out over the Luss Hills to lovely Ben Lomond and sense that beyond there is Glasgow. I love these hills! They are Gemini! I am surrounded by all the joyous freedom of Scotland's mountains, yet just beyond the horizon there is a society pulsating with art, music, entertainment, food, drink, culture, history, commerce, laughter and sorrow. Of all the places I have lived and worked, Scotland is the country I love best.

I maybe had more fun than I should, and there were challenges I never tackled that I could. I never knew real financial security – who but the richest ever does? – but with pen and ice axe, boots and computer, skis and camera I got my family through and they learnt they never need be wage slaves. So my youngest taught the rich, the famous and their children how to ski and the oldest, a revolutionary to the last, has never given in to the GDP death-spiral and the consumer competitiveness that will destroy us all.

Garrick's has been a delightful 'reel' and it finishes all too soon like the last of half-a-dozen oysters. Without pause I walk towards A' Chrois, and at the summit I enjoy breathing the air and space that sits over its northernmost slopes. I then search out a nice couch in the grass to catch up on missed sleep in the lovely early warmth that is always a reward for cold bivvies. I wake up an hour later with a shoulder covered in dribble, all to be expected of a decrepit in his seventies, old enough to justify a power nap on the Cuillin and waking up to find a mini Mars bar in his mug.

I am now truly alive, and spontaneously decide on a day's soloing of routes I first climbed years ago. This takes me back to the days before the gear revolution championed by Mark Vallance, and as I had a session with him at the Foundry I will hear nothing bad about the guy, except he deprived climbing of the special joy of the long, unprotected run-out and the fun of being tied to a 'peeler' reaching terminal velocity. And back then even getting to the hills was exciting before the compulsory MOT test, and I recall the front wheel of our Standard 10 snapping off and going into Loch Tulla.

Ben Narnain is ahead and soon I go up and down and in and out of the strange rock formations at the summit, which recur from the Succoth Caves right across the 'Arrochar Alps' to the Brack, to Ben Ime, and under the North Peak of the Cobbler, with hibernating bats deep inside the subterranean universe.

Now after a few head jams and skirmishes with chimneys I saunter up to the summit happily covered in dirt and lichen, and eavesdrop a young tyro explaining to his girlfriend the height difference between the Munros and the Cobblers, and after I adjust my hearing aids he obligingly repeats the wonderful malapropism; and rather than spoil it for others I silently depart, thinking in a few years they will be chucking ice axes about like the best.

Recess Route is obviously the natural successor, and once again I am having a great time in and out of arrays of chimneys and caves, and before I remember to show some respect to the first ascensionist I am on the terrace, and there before me laid out like a banquet are three wonderful routes up a blank wall. I know it has many invisible crinkles and wrinkles turning an imposter into pleasant balance climbing and I have now discovered my Salomon walking boots have a bit of lateral stiffness so I take a chance on the *crème de la crème* over to the extreme left – and if you don't know what it is and you have never done it, that's your loss!

Without rock boots I am using my hands more than I should but learn to relax and trust my feet and go out from the niche right to the edge of maybe Scotland's most spectacular overhang. The exposure is magnificent, the moves are flowing, just needing concentration and confidence. Is there a Severe anywhere with such a satisfying finish on a mountain summit? Soon – all too soon – I am there, and without the crude interference of a belay to set up I sit there relishing my freedom. Kiss, baby, kiss!

Wandering down towards the Centre Peak I feel if I never do another route anywhere I will go into happy retirement, but hey ho, there before me is the 'blank' final pitch of *Punster's*, and why not let this old man have his day and if he falls that will be one less nuisance for the NHS?

It's easy until the step across the gap nearly turns me back, but my ego won't allow a retreat in front of a discerning audience. Very aptly looking down on me are two muscled athletes seeking exposure, preferably on front pages, and they are incrementally chocked, precision cammed, health and safety headed, micro-chipped processors of the improbable grade, viewing my scruffy abandonment, wondering if I am about to double the number of feet I have in the grave. Furthermore their burrowing curiosity reminds me that the fixator in my spine, the two plates in my shattered hip and the assortment of self-tapping pins all need tightening. So it is no surprise that the *danseur noble* sharply exits stage left, and in from the wings comes Quasimodo with his shoulders carrying the weight of huge exceptions, reminding me of my school rugby captain who liked to pass me the ball just as two opposing heavyweight forwards had me marked for an easy kill.

Still, I hold it all together hoping an emotionally supercharged Desdemona is waiting, and in the deep silence that comes from the intense concentration that is the special pleasure of going it alone I reach the top overdosed, with a mindset that Jackie Stewart, the Flying Scot and the three times FI champion ironically described as 'slow-motion calm and highly addictive'.

Onwards and downwards I go towards the Centre Peak, trying to look like the cool dude I never was. It would be cynical to say the audience were disappointed it turned out well, but then a toxic combination of over-confidence and polished rock on the simple ascent of the Centre Peak nearly ended the day. Mountain rescue reports would be more interesting if they delved deeper.

Mature vagrant unable to remember his name and address fell from the Centre Peak. Causes: dimmed faculties, limited mobility, failing health and age-denial. No map, compass, survival kit or spare food and inadequately dressed. The team members made a suitable donation.

As an 'artist' I am naturally allowed to live in my own moral universe so even though it would have been going in the wrong direction of travel I could have cut under *Ithuriel's Wall* and gone up *Ardgartan Arête*; or more easily I could have continued my go-it-alone foray by choosing the short scrambles from the little col up the South Peak; but instead I turned into a folly by risking soloing *Cupid's Groove* in vibrams. Not a big deal for some but a test piece for me.

The near miss on the Central Peak had driven away the disrespect that could have been my downfall and now alone with no distractions I went into a zone of deep, sweet concentration based on a well-known trusted mantra: 'Don't fall off.' So I may have tried too hard because each move was staccato, too calculating like a chess match building towards 'mate' in a long-fought game, and I slumped on the summit exhausted by the mental effort.

It was my worst mistake ever, even though my short concentration span lasted 30 milliseconds: the abject fear of mortality that is increasing in line with the number of boots I've worn out, beginning with dubbed leather, fell on me like a chest-crushing, suffocating avalanche.

Why did I do that? Why have I not become smartly Pringled for golf, safely clipped to the deck of a sailing barge? Or if fishing is good enough for Joe Brown, where are my waders?

Yeah! But no! I am truly happy because I am truly alive. All around is vibrant colour. The rock, the mountain, the glens, the short alpine grasses, the moss, the lichen; and somewhere a bellicose raven croaks and I remember the blackcock that were once on the Luss Hills, the mountain hares, the delicate cups of meadow pipits' nests and the fox's straight-line steps we followed on ski to the summit of Ben Ime. I recall family and friends, some that I lost too soon but who are now vividly in the here and now and I think about my 'working' labradors and spaniels and the mighty huskies hell-bent on reaching a horizon that was ever further away and the bicycles that carried me across countries, and the boats and kayaks that took me to the beautiful sands and machair of the Hebrides on adventures that were changed by the whim of encounters, letting chance reveal the mystery of infinity.

Closer at hand and a lot less cerebral I see The Brack and recall trying to get up *Great Central Groove* before the ice melted in the afternoon, and the delightful doss we found in the corrie, furnished with a rusted wood-burner, no doubt 'Clyde built' with steel saved from the Royal Yacht *Britannia*, and the walls of the cave that still echoed with voices – maybe MacInnes's and Cunningham's – debating the right to strike for a few extra days' climbing. I recall many climbs and ski descents in Scotland,

the Alps, Asia, the Arctic, and I cannot decide if I should curse or thank my Latin teacher, that lovely eccentric singing 'Jerusalem' loud and clear across the fells on that late summer evening high on Needle Ridge, over 60 years ago, when he introduced me to climbing.

Now on that rarely visited summit of the South Peak, immersed in the silence of isolation, the slow beauty of Jeff Buckley singing 'Lilac Wine', the opening track of the compilation, conjoined me to the charisma of the evening in Glasgow. So let's agree that at least my taste in music has improved, if not the choice of climbing partners!

After scrambling down the south ridge, on the walk out I remained a traditionalist and spurned the charitable comfort of the twists and turns of the 'new' path, proving there is no fool like an old fool. I stumbled down the 'pipeline', where partial rewilding has hidden its sharp-edged concrete foundations and its plumb-line steepness, and when I reached the bottom all I was hoping for was a kindly young arm to lean on and guide me across the road.

If Kilian Jornet had been my mentor I would have implemented a biometric, amino-filled, vitamin-boosted, superfast recovery plan, but there was still some fuel in my tank and it was still not too late for me to enjoy all that Scotland has to offer, so I headed for a fish supper in Oban and some 'ceilidh culture' in Aulay's Bar.

God's ain country or what?