

NILE DESPERANDUM

by Alec Keith

This article recalls some events from the mid-1990s. Readers used to leashless axes, double-digit winter grades, the internet, mobile 'phones, forecasting apps and GPS navigation will need to make some allowances.

RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT the average mountaineer knows 2.4 mountaineers called Al. I only know one. My Al and I share many things including an ethos that no corrie is too remote and no route too chossy, and, born of that ethos, an enduring passion for the Cairngorms. And as the counting man's stato-nerd, Al is the ideal companion for the collector of the obsolete. In the 1990s he was also a lithe and able climber, so at that time we didn't share many common objectives. But a capacity for weathering unpleasantness sometimes served as a substitute for my only modest technical ability.

For all his deceptive intelligence, Al had recently become a member of the club. Not The Club (of which he is also a member), but my club, membership of which is restricted to those who self-identify as having spent the worst 24 hours of their lives in my company. Al had made more than one involuntary application over the years and that he would succeed in gaining admission had never really been in doubt. But this isn't that story.

It was impossible to ignore the impact of *Cold Climbs* on people's winter ambitions at the time. Coffee-table inspiration by proxy, its honeypotting effects had removed the need for the traditional skills of craft and cunning, and its photography had denuded many routes of their previous mysteries. Though for the true iceman, climbing a Cold Climb wasn't very cool unless it was esoteric, or happened by accident. And while you're unlikely to end up in Garbh Choire Mòr by mistake there was no doubting the unusual attractions of *White Nile*, Rob Archbold's 'glistening candle of water-ice', occupying such an unlikely position high up in the snowiest corrie of the country's grandest mountain amphitheatre. The image of its frozen cascade defies explanation, seeming to drool fully formed from the cornice rim, the picture also much drooled over but the reality seldom visited, its unfashionable remoteness only adding to its allure.

I had only once seen even a partial splash of ice where *White Nile* was supposed to be. Early winter was clearly not the time to visit: no ice would have formed and there was so little daylight. Mid-season wasn't much better, with lots of unconsolidated fluff and an off-puttingly demanding walk-in. Late-season conditions tend to be more amenable and these corries are a joy to visit then, but the feared Braeriach cornices will be at their most intimidating, and with the route's aspect the ice will likely have deteriorated or already have fallen down. The climb's grade was also at

the upper end of my ability so it went on the 'to do' list but with little likelihood of consummation. The years passed, the route's unattainability continued, and contrarily my interest in it increased. Oddly no-one else in my climbing circles seemed at all attracted, let alone similarly fixated.

The winter of 1995 was proving slightly better than average for the times. By early March there had been some build-up of snow and ice on the hills. There was also a fair forecast for the Saturday though with the weather likely to break later in the day. Hoping to bounce him into it, I suggested the *White Nile* idea at short notice to Al, given that for him flexi-time was more a way of living than a way of working, and he proved to be pleasingly available.

We left Linn o' Dee on the Friday evening after work and walked up the familiar track in the dark, passing through the pine trees that whispered soothingly around and beyond Derry Lodge. We crossed the Luibeg burn, finding fresh snow on the path with old drifts beginning to lie more generally and holding a promising surface crust which was enough to bear our weight in places. Rounding the shoulder of Càrn a' Mhàim, we could sense the vast emptiness of the Lairig Ghru around us in the night and the bulk of the Devil's Point looming ahead. A gleam of light in the distance pinpointed the location of Corrour bothy, where a pair of climbers and a solo walker were already in occupation. We settled down on the lumpy peat floor not long after midnight and tried to sleep amidst the usual climbing pre-tensions about what tomorrow might bring.

Dawn gave us the best start we could have hoped for, chilly, crisp, no clouds and windless. Snow lay all around and the sun was catching the brilliantly white upper slopes of the surrounding high Cairngorms. We wandered round outside the bothy enjoying the morning light, amazed we were here with such good prospects for the day ahead. There was no need to be away early as it wasn't far to the corries. We set off and made our way steadily round the broad base-slopes of Cairn Toul into the lower reaches of the Garbh Coire and up past the old refuge.

The backdrop changed steadily as we gained height. To our right lay Coire Bhrochain, and in front rose the eye-catching spire of Sgòr an Lochain Uaine's jutting summit and its magnificent north-east ridge. Next we could see into Garbh Choire Dhàidh, whose cliffs looked unsurprisingly bare given their sunny aspect and slabby nature. All the other corries around us were very white though, holding snow in every crevice capable of doing so, with their lower slopes substantially banked out and their crags topped by cornices resembling multilayered meringues. Garbh Choire Mòr still lay some way above and ahead, but even from here we could see a reassuring run of whiteness down the line of *White Nile*.

Everything shimmered and glared at us in the reflecting sun as we moved up into the corrie, the brightness further intensified by the deep blue of the sky. The corrie floor was strewn with blocks of cornice debris, sized from vans down to microwave ovens. The snow underfoot grew deeper, we waded, we overheated, we panted, we slowed. We eyed *White Nile*

above – the route certainly looked white, perhaps not as candle-like as we'd imagined, and quite what it was made of remained unclear. To our surprise its cornice appeared to be the most modest in the whole corrie. Our excitement rose as we continued on and up.

(If we had been more observant, we would have spotted small patches of mist developing behind us which were beginning to scurry across the highest parts of Ben Macdui, and we might have considered the implications of its bare boulderfields from which the snow had been stripped. And we could have arrived at a different conclusion as to the wisdom of our plans for the day. But we weren't, so we didn't.)



On the first pitch of White Nile. Photo: Matthewson collection.

We reached *White Nile*, the true base of which was now buried deep beneath us. What until a few minutes ago had appeared as a straight run of continuous snow and ice now looked a bit broken and disjointed. It still seemed, however, to be the best and objectively the safest option around. An initial icefall rose above us, abutting steeply into a rock band fringed by hanging icicles. Happily the ice also trended amenably off leftwards, which offered Al a solid and satisfying first pitch and took us to a belay slightly to the side of the main line.

About 30 feet above and to our right rose a short, steep and shallow icy chimney from which we were separated by a high-angle glazed slope, and this was clearly the direct way. My probings revealed the glaze to be a veneer of friable ice concealing a pavlova of bottomless polystyrene. A couple of gentle axe placements later, and it had all disintegrated. Deflated, I retreated to the belay. The rock straight above us was, however, broken by snowy ledges mixed with grooves, corners, slabs and short walls, and up these I wove a way to rise around and then above the unreachable icy chimney and eventually back rightwards into the upper gully line. The cunning of my weaving was not matched by the level of care given to my runner placements, these gradually reining me in like a dog on an elasticated lead. Eventually I gave up the struggle and thrust my axes into the snow for an optimistic belay.

Somewhere far below Al began to follow. I relaxed: the route was almost in the bag, a fine and long-desired ascent, and soon we would be back at Corrou, unwinding and enjoying a cup of tea, and planning tomorrow's adventure in these corries But my dwam was rudely interrupted by something smacking me on the helmet. Investigation round the back of my neck revealed the missile to be a clod of snow. My first thought was that Al must be kicking lumps down on me, but then I remembered that he was still some way below, which meant that the stuff had fallen from above of its own volition. Alarmed by this, I also noticed how everything was rapidly changing around us: the sunshine had been replaced by mist while I had been occupied on the pitch below, and a few snowflakes began to flutter about the gully walls in a freshening breeze.

Al moved past and up into the murk, heading for what we had previously assumed would be the day's crux and for which we were equipped with two deadmen. This cornice was slightly disappointing by Braeriach standards, no cavernous superstructure sufficient to house one of those legendary luncheon parties. The rope ran out as Al reached its base, we employed dynamic belaying while he hacked a channel up it, and shortly after we regathered on the plateau. Our mood of self-congratulation was postponed in the face of a gale that was blowing spindrift everywhere; there was no horizon, and immediately it became hard to tell where was up. Our ropes writhed as we fought and failed to coil them.

We hadn't given much thought to getting off the hill. With the previously superb weather we had looked forward to a 15-minute stroll in the sun along the corrie rim to find the subtle ridge that leads down to the Corrie

of the Chokestone Gully. But the plateau rim takes a significant change of direction somewhere close to the exit of *Phoenix Gully*, and with the deteriorating conditions we were unclear where that point was. Nor were we likely to spot the top of our subtle ridge given almost zero visibility. Seeing it as my role to bolster team confidence, I took a bearing to find and follow the cornice edge, shouted 'This way!' into Al's hooded face, and strode off into the whiteness. Things then proceeded smoothly into chaos. Within moments an eyeball-rattling updraught revealed a huge and unexpected drop opening immediately in front of me, and I scuttled quickly back to safety. At least we now knew where the edge was.

We did a bit more shouting at each other, our half-formed words snatched away in the wind. All ways off the plateau were now highly challenging, so we eliminated those that involved going near cliffs. That left us with just the last resort, which was to go the long way round by Glen Geusachan. Resigned to the extra effort this would involve, we reset the compass and set off steadily across straightforward but blizzarded ground, relieved at least to be leaving the corrie rim behind.

And perhaps, somewhere in the spin-cycle of noise and uncertainty, the shades of Bill Murray and his acquaintance Mortimer would have been struggling past us in their own 'Cairngorm Blizzard', monochrome shadows flitting through the greyness, bearings written on pieces of cardboard stuffed in their mittens, throwing their rucksacks ahead for definition in the white-out, aiming their compasses off one another as they slowly made their way round to Braeriach. And they would rightly have raised a wry eyebrow at our antics.

After a couple of miles of this the angle changed and we began to drop down steeper snow of uncertain stability, which deposited us below the cloud base at the top of Glen Geusachan. The glen floor was a cheerless place, fresh snow sitting on top of everything, and in it we wallowed through tussocks and round drifted stream-bends, legs cramping, our rucksacks weighing on us more heavily by the minute. The light thickened as at last we passed wearily under the blunt nose of the Devil's Point, drawn to the dark speck of Corrour that now lay ahead. Soon there would be shelter, warmth, food, and rest. We reached the bothy door and fell inside. Job done, finally we could unwind. The two other climbers were back, the solo walker was gone. (But where to?) For all the slightly hysterical elation which came with safety regained, something immediately jarred in my mind as wrong. There were four of us in the bothy, but only three sleeping bags were to be seen.

It doesn't take long to search the one room of Corrour when there are only four people there.¹ Even so, it took several minutes to digest the unacceptable, that my sleeping bag was no longer in the bothy, and that it had been packed up and packed out during the time we'd been away. We had the long-awaited cup of tea (it didn't taste so good now) and

¹ And this was Corrour BC (Before Convenience) so there was no outhouse to check.



Lagged, cagged and bagged; the author on the floor at Corroul. Photo: Keith collection.

contemplated these new circumstances. It was dark, we were weary, the weather was grim and the roads were probably blocked, so walking out to Linn o' Dee held no purpose or appeal. Nor did staying in the bothy without a sleeping bag. But it seemed the least worst thing we could do.

Having previously believed that orange plastic survival bags were designed just for bivvy-bagging, it was novel to spend the night inside one. This proved to be an experience from which it was possible to extract only a limited amount of pleasure. My bedding consisted of the clothes I was wearing plus a selection of the others' spare jackets and fleeces topped off with a frosted rope for extra insulation. My plastic boots stayed on, and my sleeping mat was supplemented by rucksacks. Everything was damp. Thus lagged, cagged and bagged, I passed the night.

I am awake, but nobody else is. There is plenty of time to slump into a nocturnal malaise. Who comes to Corroul at this time of year, sees an untended sleeping bag and removes it with no thought for the safety of its owner? Is the liberation of my sleeping bag the first sign of the introduction of global communism by stealth? Or is it part of an overly zealous 'Keep Scotland tidy' initiative? Next, I view my companions enviously. Al sleeps soundly beside me, making occasional snuffling noises that in other circumstances might have been mildly endearing. I can sense his warmth. Would he share it with me? How close is my relationship with Al really? Would he object if I spooned him? Being a typically repressed Scottish male, I don't dare to find out the answer.

The hours passed tediously until eventually it became grey enough to justify waking the others. My body temperature and mood were not lifted

by breakfast, by a marginal improvement in the weather, nor by my companion's enthusiasm to climb again. A little later I found myself trudging in Al's wake through the remains of yesterday's prints back round to the foot of the slabby south face of the Devil's Point for a proverbial look. Unsurprisingly what we saw was a lot of snow and wind-scoured rock, so we immersed ourselves in *South-East Gully* where I could warm myself by burrowing. Meanwhile Al took up occasional (but rather safer) attention-seeking positions on small side-prominences like a Landseer stag, a silhouette against the backlit clouds rising between him and Beinn Bhrotain behind. It wasn't long till we topped out near the summit cairn. Like my memory of the previous night, this was not a place to linger. We dropped down to Corrour, gathered our remaining possessions and headed out for Linn o' Dee, pursued by mocking patches of blue sky. My rucksack now sported a pleasingly compact look.

It was to turn into a tale with a long tail. On getting home we learnt that it had been a harsh weekend elsewhere on the Scottish hills: three people had died on the Buachaille; a party of seven had been rescued in the Northern Cairngorms after an avalanche in Coire Laogh Mòr; and a pair of climbers were still missing, having not returned from the Northern Corries.

And after the unpleasantness of the sleeping bag, I found that I no longer trusted. Previously I had associated the Scottish mountain environment with virtues such as objective beauty, human integrity, spiritual freedom and simplicity; now I saw things with fresh eyes. If our mountains are to better reflect our society then they need to be subjected to less gentrification. What they need is more petty crime.

Eleven weeks later I was staying with Hamish and Gill Irvine in Aviemore on a wet and cheerless mid-May weekend. (It was always a precondition of entering the Irvine household that you accepted that such a visit could result in a number of possible outcomes, only a few of which might involve enjoyment.) That afternoon a call came in for Cairngorm MRT. The bodies of the missing climbers had been found, the unfortunate pair having been avalanched into and buried in one of the lochans in Coire an Lochain. I found myself going along in running shoes and crisp-packet waterproofs, an ill-equipped auxiliary stretcher-bearer resembling a casualty more than a rescuer, shivering on the shore while the climbers' bodies were slowly cut free from an ice floe on the loch. As night began to take hold, the team brought their burdens ashore. A few moments after everyone had returned to land, the ice floe detached itself from the shore, flipped over and broke up. It was macabre and miserable, the rain lashed down on us in the dark and the wind blew. The bodies were heavy with ice as we carried them down.