

CAIRNGORM CLIMBING – A CONTRIBUTION

ANDREW NISBET

Aberdeen's climbers have always held their own special regard for the Cairngorms, a love of the remote corries untouched by civilisation, but a love not always shared by those from the rest of Scotland. The visiting climber tends to see only the protracted approach walk, the unspectacular scenery and finds an awkward style of rock climbing which has been accused of offering little technical interest. The grassy ledges offend the purity of the climb and the perpetual cold wind from the tops chills their enthusiasm. In winter the cliffs are plastered with crusty powder or hoar frost, forcing the methodical clearing of holds and vegetation; it's a slow and cold business, with little of the physical pleasure of blasting up a steep ice pitch on front points, but requiring craft, patience and a certain dedication to unfold the secrets of each pitch.

I can see their point. I think of past days in the Cairngorms with a warmhearted feeling, a friendly affection; not the vertical excitement of Glencoe rock, the dramatic peak scenery of Torridon or a route snatched from the teeth of a Ben Nevis storm. Somehow the memories are sunbathing on the sands of the Dubh Loch, watching the evening light fade at Loch Avon or peeping out from the Smith-Winram howff at swirling clouds in the corrie below. The Cairngorm addict has the dedication to his mountains to require more than just the short term rush of adrenalin.

But now I detect a hint of change. The hermitic existence of the serious Cairngorm climber is slowly being eroded. It's not so much that the Cairngormer is losing his addiction but more that the outsiders are waking up. Development and publicity are packing the popular climbing centres. "Hard Rock", "Mountain" magazine and motorways from the South are turning Glencoe into a climber's Blackpool, while only the Cairngorms and the North-West can offer the escape which many Scottish climbers seek. But equally important in attracting the new visitor has been the development of modern-style routes, clean rock, steep and hard, sufficient to satisfy the rock gymnast while retaining the mountain wilderness setting. Ever since the early sixties the rock climbing standards have been creeping up as local climbers gradually adopted new equipment and a new psychological approach. And as the standard rises, so does the quality of the routes. Most notable was the development of Creag an Dubh Loch, but the traditional Scottish reluctance to publicise kept visitors to a minimum.

Winter climbing, however, has progressed in a different way. The standard of buttress climbing in the fifties was so high that almost all the summer routes had ascents in winter and no real rise in difficulty was seen

until the mid seventies. Ice climbing standards had been rising, but much more slowly than on the icier cliffs in the West of Scotland, so the ice routes in the Cairngorms, less spectacular than their Nevis counterparts, had attracted little attention in the outside world. With the advent and subsequent consolidation of front pointing techniques in the seventies, suddenly many climbers were repeating the hardest routes and it was only a matter of time before standards took off again. And so they have, with a new generation of climbers trained only in front pointing and a new climatic trend producing an icier winter every year (1980 being the iciest of all). The new spectacular routes will bring the publicity to attract the visitor. Already the visitor from other parts of Scotland is noticeably more common and soon the hordes from down South will follow. The change in rock climbers happened earlier, but the process looks similar; the development of hard routes on Creag an Dubh Loch and the Shelter Stone Crag in the late sixties and early seventies, the subsequent generation of publicity in the seventies and now the attraction of national and even international visitors. Publicity is more voracious these days. This year's hard winter routes on the Dubh Loch will be splashed across the popular magazines. The final stage of a mass invasion may be on us in only a year or two. Sad, you may think, but it doesn't dismay me too much. The increase in the number of climbers seems small compared with the proliferation of hillwalkers and will be a minor factor in environmental damage caused by the rising population in the hills. The increased activity is leading to more competition, more information and more discussion, encouraging a more intense approach to the sport; not to everyone's taste but I find it exciting. I make no claims as a rock climber, but in winter I've been involved in a few of the new desperate routes, although usually on the blunt end of the rope, I must admit; the sort of route that has led to the controversial call for an extra grade six at the top, but which I personally think is premature.

These new climbs are on steep, smooth faces, usually on thin ice with a little vegetation where the angle allows. Crack climbing with axes torqued or simply slotted into icy cracks is allowing VS rock pitches to be climbed free in winter, and an air of confidence in crampons on ice down to verglas thickness has given the necessary psychological boost to attempt pitches which look unreasonable. Where before you looked for holds or drools of ice, the odd tuft of grass or invisible crack may be enough. Crypt, on the Tough-Brown face of Lochnagar is such an example.

Despite its quality as a rock climb, Crypt has always been discussed as a realistic possibility for a winter route. The big corner system often collects a high-angled snow drift in powdery conditions and the white streak catches one's eye. "Wouldn't it be great if it thawed and froze a couple of times?" But it always seemed to disappear after any thaw. The cliff held its usual big accumulation of hoar frost plastering every surface.

But unlike the previous few winters, there was a thin and fairly general plating of ice underneath. How it got there remains a mystery. As far as I knew temperatures had been well below freezing ever since the powder arrived. Maybe an unsuspected temperature inversion had allowed some local thawing and freezing. It certainly goes to prove that you can never be sure of conditions without actually putting your nose against the rock. I'd been severely caught out by these unusual conditions the weekend before, on a first ascent of Link Face on the Black Spout Pinnacle with John Anderson. Equipped with tricouni plates for snow covered rock instead of crampons, the ice had been a major shock and had forced me to prussick the route behind John. I should say what an achievement it was for him to lead almost all of what is one of the hardest routes around. It scared me stupid (and probably him too!) watching him lead an unprotected crux above a terrible belay, something which had been haunting me all week (and did for the rest of the winter). However, I knew conditions were ripe for a chance of success on Crypt, though nothing like the idealised nevé-banked corners that everyone seemed to be waiting for. Poor John had suffered bad frostbite on the Link and was out of the game for several weeks but I had managed to interest Aberdeen's other ice monkey, Brian Sprunt, as a suitable leader for the crux. In a moment of weakness on the Monday morning after the Link I had let slip the secret of unexpected good conditions and admitted an interest in Crypt. Such information should have been kept well guarded because I had underestimated the efficiency of the climbing grapevine, so that by Thursday two rival pairs had already been to investigate Crypt. Inexplicably they both came back saying conditions were rubbish. I'd probably have believed them too if I hadn't been there myself the previous weekend.

The weather on the Friday night was anything but pleasant. The fierce wind that made road conditions so marginal on the final miles across the moor to the Loch Muick car park howled unabated as the alarm rang at six. The sprinkling of snow that had crept through cracks in the door and lay on our sleeping bags did nothing to encourage a quick rise. Neither did a blast of spindrift that greeted a peep out of the door. This always the crucial moment in winter but fortunately the will was just strong enough to nip out and collect pans of snow for a brew. Even so, it was near eight before we set off up the path and there was an air of pessimism. The rising sun reflected streaks of spindrift trekking endlessly southwards across the total snow cover of this exceptional February. But this hostile and impressive panorama did little to inspire us as gale-driven ice particles lashed our faces, while only the knowledge that the corrie can be in shelter when the rest of the mountain is stormbound kept us going over the maelstrom of the final col.

From the col the cliff looked identical to the weekend before, as one would expect in such cold weather, though ominously the corrie was

ravaged by whirlwinds of spindrift. In this wind the extreme cold would become a significant factor. Even though the route is only 280 feet long, it is so continuously steep that every move is difficult and the main central corner pitch might take several hours, quite an ordeal for the incarcerated belayer. A quick scratch at the summer start showed that the rocks were bare of ice; fortunately perhaps, as this must have been why our rivals were discouraged. But we had more confidence in conditions so Brian set off up an easy looking ramp on the left, hoping to cut back on to the summer line. But the ramp sloped outwards and the wall above pushed him out on to the slope into a peculiar crab-like position so it was awkward even looking back right let alone climbing that way. So we made the excuse that at least we were gaining height going left and perhaps we could use the rope to tension back right from higher up. This strategy ended with a terrible belay miles to the left of where we were supposed to be with only a few extra feet of height gained. Now the horizontal tension traverse is discouraged by gravity so that at some point while following this pitch I had to find a way right. But by now I was very cold, my confidence was at a low ebb after the previous weekend and the only runner on the pitch was a long way to the left. I found standing around on verglassed sloping rock with no handholds was inducing a rising panic so I too was compulsively drawn left to safer ground away from the route.

Clearing the snow to my right I uncovered a useful lump of grass which allowed me to swing my feet on to a hopeful pile of snow. Much to my delight it turned out to be a big flat-topped flake with a perfect crack above (actually on a summer route called Sylph). A peg at full stretch gave a solid runner and an acrobatic move with a jammed terrodactyl allowed the placement of an even higher one for a tension traverse across the blank wall into Crypt. But crampons give little or no friction on rock and as soon as I got more than three feet to the right my feet just slipped and I ended up dangling under the peg feeling stupid. Finally by clipping ten foot of slings into my harness, I found I could free both arms and just hook a terrodactyl round an edge away to the right and pull myself round far enough to clear some snow. At last I found some of the ice we'd been expecting. A tiny chipped foot hold in the ice allowed the most delicate of step ups into a depression where I could unclip the sling. I was lucky. If the sling had been an inch shorter I could never have got round that corner. It was quite a moment standing on two points on a half inch by one inch patch of ice and having to let go off that sling, watching it swing back round the corner. It was very much a point of no return but I needed to let go of the sling before I could find out if the next move was possible or not. It was, but only just and I was left a little shaken at the base of the "perfect layback crack", back on the summer route at last, after more than 4 hrs and still below the big bulge which leads into the main corner and which would definitely be the crux. The layback crack looked most

unattractive so I continued round another edge below the main corner. Here a wet, overhanging and leaning section blocks entry in summer, hence the alternative layback route. There was ice in abundance, at least half an inch thick, but the corner leaned out so much that I ran out of strength just standing underneath it. After a hurried retreat a now frozen Brian called for an end to the day and a totally demoralised Andrew reluctantly agreed. It had taken a whole day for the first 120 feet. By now the wind had died down so we could relax on the walk back and we vowed to give the pub a miss that night to make an early return in the morning.

It didn't take long to convince Brian that my failure was purely psychological and that he would like to have a try the next day. So we lit a warm log fire and as we slowly suffocated in choking black smoke, we managed to generate an air of enthusiasm.

The next day dawned perfection, cloudless, windless and cold. A 4.30 rise and away before six proved our revitalised spirit. Feeling much more optimistic and relieved of leading the crux, I raced up the first pitch and belayed securely at the tension point. Just as he unclipped from the tension sling, Brian's foot slipped and he spent ten minutes of desperate effort to avoid falling off. But Brian, who tends to get demoralised standing at belays, is unstoppable once he's climbing (unless he falls off) so he moved undismayed into the main corner. Planting a rather psychological ice screw in a clod of frozen earth and cutting two big footholds to allow a comfortable bridging position, he uncovered a secondary crack on the right wall of the corner. Excruciatingly strenuous bridging gained the critical ten feet, during which he miraculously placed a peg runner at a place where I could barely stay in contact with the rock. The final grass overhang was a close thing on failing arms but the corner had been entered and, though still quite steep, was filled with a six inch wide ribbon of ice in the back. Pausing only to comment (to everyone within five miles) on the pleasant anatomical features of three female climbers who were passing below, he quickly reached the next overhang, where the ice disappeared behind a cornice-like formation. Being Brian and somewhat impetuous, he decided to climb round it instead of laboriously chopping it down and found himself dangling from one adze in the snow with only a bare rock rib for his feet – the crampon scratch marks will probably astonish summer climbers. Despite repeated shouts of impending doom, much scraping of crampons and clattering of gear, the adze remained secure despite pulling his whole weight up on it. The route was beaten for sure. The 4 hrs taken to lead that 140 foot pitch was quick considering the sustained difficulty but it took me another one and a half to pull up on the rope often enough to follow. We soloed back down the lower part of Tough-Brown Traverse and made the first aid box just as darkness fell. 14 hours total for 280 ft, but only one point of aid!

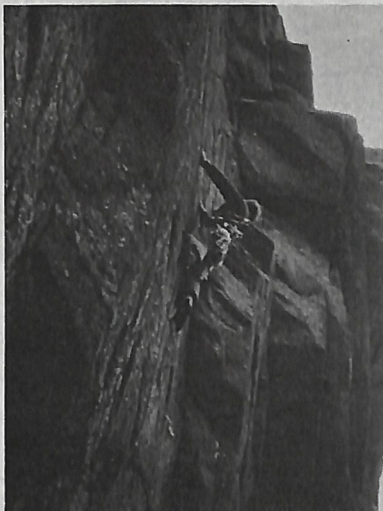
To me the corries of Beinn a'Bhuird represent the most traditional

style of Cairngorm climbing. There are no huts, car parks, tourists or roads and the huge approach walk discourages the one day visit. The only accommodation is the howff, draughty and barely watertight, as close to nature as you might wish. Few people would visit Beinn a'Bhuird for the quality of climbing alone. Most of the routes are short, rather messy and the rock near the top of the cliffs tends to have a gritty surface. The attractions therefore lie elsewhere, in the peace and beauty of the remote corries, where one is almost certain to be the only climber on the cliff. Possibly Coire an Dubh Lochain is the most picturesque, a near perfect coire bowl with a loch nestling in the bottom and snow lying till August. I've seen the loch snow filled in July. Even when one arrives at the Smith-Winram boulder howff at the foot of the dividing ridge between the two coires, Coire an Dubh Lochain remains hidden in an upper bowl, waiting till the next morning when it basks in the first sunlight. But even here, in one of the most perfect corrie settings, the climbing is indifferent. Who cares, you may ask? I think some people must, for the number of climbers on Beinn a'Bhuird has remained constant while other cliffs continue to rise in popularity. Though I confess I too tend to favour the bigger cliffs of Lochnagar, Creag an Dubh Loch and the Shelter Stone, I always reserve a long weekend to stay in the Smith-Winram howff, centrally placed between Coire an Dubh Lochain and the most remote coire of all, the Garbh Coire.

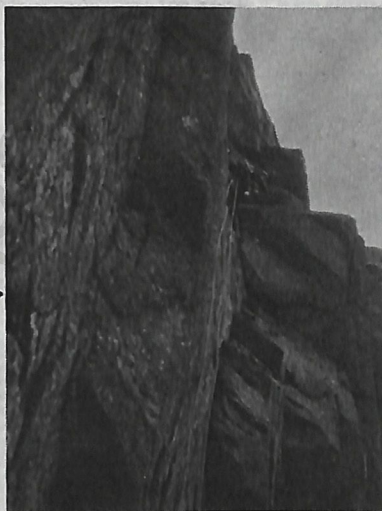
The Mitre Ridge in the Garbh Coire has recently become the exception to the classic mountaineering image of Beinn a'Bhuird with the discovery of several fine technical HVS's. The rock on the West face of the Mitre Ridge is very steep and looks improbable from a distance. But a close inspection reveals a surprising number of small, rounded flakes, unusual for Cairngorm granite. It always surprises me that each Cairngorm cliff has its own characteristic rock formation. My earliest encounter with the West face of the Mitre Ridge was a very nervous excursion on to J.H.B. Bell's finish to the classic Mitre Ridge, technically easy but possibly the most exposed position I'd experienced at the time. I still have a vivid memory of trying not to look down but catching a glance just at the wrong moment. And when the only route on the steepest part of the face, Slochd Wall, has a grade of HVS and A3, the obvious conclusion for an impressionable novice is that this must be the hardest route in the Cairngorms. Somehow the description conjured up a picture of continuous layers of overhangs interspaced with vertical walls, and a mixture of awe and dread stayed with me right up to a successful ascent of the route. Though the image was wildly exaggerated, the distant view of the line from the plateau approach was impressive enough to forestall a previous attempt. A long smooth vertical corner interrupted by an ominous roof forms the line. Only when you reach the first belay do you realise that the angle is significantly under vertical and you see a generous scattering of

SLOCHD WALL

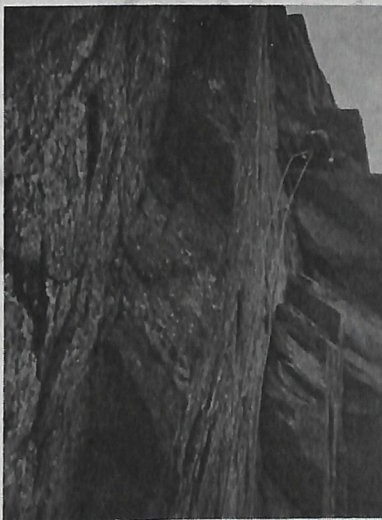
Climber: Brian Lawrie



← *Start of crux pitch (first pitch). The crack of The Primate can be seen on the top skyline just right of centre.*



About to enter crux corner.



← *Entering crux corner.*

West Face of Mitre Ridge. The Slochd Wall is the face in the centre which rises highest in the picture. The band of overhangs half way up is the crux of The Primate (the crack can be seen curving just above the overhangs. Slochd Wall route follows corners on the left of the face passing the main overhangs immediately at their left side.



The crux of The Primate.



The crux of The Primate.



small flat holds. The climb, the first free ascent, was memorably enjoyable. The first pitch following the big corner, was technically hard (HVS, though close to extreme) and a bold lead by Brian Lawrie but somehow the route had all the quality we expected with none of the epic nature. A biting cold day mellowed and the long walk back to the car was leisurely and relaxed.

To the right of the corner of Slochid Wall is a big horizontal roof. One wouldn't give it a second look were the eye not drawn to a very prominent wide crack splitting the roof. From below it was impossible to judge the width of the crack but it looked, and proved to be, just the wrong width – too wide to fist jam but too narrow to chimney. The challenge was irresistible and I was back with John Anderson a fortnight later, just before the weather deteriorated into the worst summer I can remember. Despite the awkward width of the crack a well-situated but extremely loose chockstone and an obscure hidden hold were the key. It's a dawdle when you know how, but it took a day and a half's effort to find the hidden hold, and I'm not going to give away any secrets because the route drops a grade if you know in advance where the hold is. And if for any reason, spiteful or natural, the chockstone disappears, it's going to be even more desperate dangling half way over the roof searching for this hidden hold. We called it *The Primate*, in accordance with the ecclesiastical names of the routes hereabouts and the apelike manoeuvres involved in climbing it. Both these routes are excellent and an ascent of the two in a day would be superb; but somehow *Beinn a'Bhuird* climbing is not that competitive.

The first taste of real winter competition hit the Aberdeen scene this past winter. There has always been a strong element of competition in climbing but until now it's always been local, with other Scottish climbers shunning the new challenges in the Cairngorms. Following a lucky(?) visit to *Creag an Dubh Loch* by two Edinburgh climbers, the best icy conditions on the cliff for many years (since 1972) were discovered in advance of Aberdeen knowledge and the first complete ascent of *Pink Elephant* was bagged. Fortunately the spies were out and hurried arrangements were made for an immediate midweek visit. The only problem was to convince a non-climbing boss of the urgency of the situation. Like the rest of the *Etchachan Club*, I knew of the cliff's potential in icy conditions and indeed had watched it expectantly for many years. But somehow it always had been disappointing, either powder covered or stripped immediately bare by even a small thaw. The biggest plum of all was *Goliath*, a route made famous, and justifiably so, by its inclusion in "*Hard Rock*". It was well known, even to some outside Aberdeen, even including some Englishmen, that in 1972 the route had been iced from top to bottom, but this was before front pointing was established and there's no way you could cut steps up it. The critical piece of ice forms down a steep groove left of the summer crux. Nicknamed "*the Goliath icicle*" even

though it's not an icicle, it never seemed to quite reach the bottom. But right from the first snowfall in early November the ice increased on the cliff. The temperature must just have been warm enough to keep the springs open but cold enough to freeze the water as it trickled down the grooves. The Etchachan Club had been watching the route in vain for so many years that their concentration had slipped just a little and suitable conditions arrived unnoticed. Hence the Edinburgh lads were there first and the sudden discovery of good conditions was greeted with an almost panic-like scramble for the cliff before word got round and the hordes arrived the following weekend. My boss showed a surprising understanding and a Wednesday visit with Neil Morrison was successfully negotiated.

The weather was near perfect as forecast, so it was a relief to find the Loch Muick car park free of competitors. I felt apprehensive at tackling a route like Goliath so early in the winter so was keeping an open mind about conditions. The first view of the cliff was disappointing. The huge sheets of ice which had covered the Central Slabs last April were conspicuously absent and the Central Gully Wall looked bare, although Goliath was still out of sight. The thaw on Sunday had removed the ice from the bottom of Pink Elephant and we assumed Goliath would be the same. As we trudged up the Central Gully towards the route I confessed to the hope that the ice wouldn't be there. I didn't feel like the anticipated 150 foot pitch on thin ice with no runners. But as soon as I saw it I knew there was enough ice. It was one of those special moments that will probably be remembered for the rest of my life. The sight of these monstrous overlapping slabs and huge corners plated with ice was breathtaking and awesome.

Instantly intimidated, I tried to rationalise the situation. "That ice is only 70 degrees, maybe 80 degrees for a couple of bulges. I shouldn't be on my arms for long. I ought to be able to climb it even if there aren't any runners." But it didn't really work. Even when I walked round to the side to convince myself of the angle, it just seemed to look steeper. But the sense of obligation at being first arrivals in such superb conditions prevailed. From that moment on everything came right. As soon as I was on the ice my confidence returned and I could relax a little. Suddenly the ice wasn't so steep and though it had a tendency to dinner-plate, I was able to climb slowly and carefully so there was never a chance of a slip. Runners hardly seemed necessary but a horizontal crack appeared behind a nest of icicles just at the steepest point. After this pitch we rejoined the summer route. The disadvantage of climbing a fine and popular rock climb is that there's no grass to sink an axe into. Nor was there much ice, except filling the cracks, so they would take terrodactyls but not runners. A series of tool jamming moves took me under a bulge where I found myself rapidly running out of both ice and strength. I could see the ice sloping away from me on a smooth slab to the right. This was the crux, a move

where I would finally have to take a gamble and alarmingly far away from the last good runner. My ice axe slotted into a crack over the top but though I couldn't tell if it would take my weight, I knew I couldn't spare any energy in pulling over. I leaned back on it, swung my feet up high and hauled over the bulge aiming for the ice. The terrodactyl struck first time and I abandoned my footholds, launching out over space on to the slab. A quick pull up, pray that my foot would hold for a second and then I had made it on to a comforting ledge below the final pitch. The whole of the final slab was coated with ice between a quarter and half an inch thick except for a bare ten foot radius around us but I remembered a thin horizontal crack which gives a series of tiny footholds in summer. Now it took a razorblade for aid and then half an inch of a terrodactyl pick before I could swing across to a welcome tuft of grass. The summer route goes straight up here, following a series of deep jamming cracks but they were glazed with ice and looked evil. Also it was nearly dark and I felt we were running out of time. I wasn't going to miss out on this route after so much effort so I headed downwards across the blank slab trusting my feet alone on the thin ice. An ice screw in a clump of grass encouraged me onwards and I rounded a blind corner suddenly seeing the easy ground only a few feet away but across the thinnest ice of all. I was to get my reward for being bold and spotted a perfect crack under the ice. It was over, the rest was no problem, even by the light of headtorches.

The six miles back to the car floated euphorically past to a final sweet conclusion. The opposition had arrived from Edinburgh, only a day too late. But they got their revenge by scooping a winter Mousetrap three days later.

How will winter climbing progress? Some take a pessimistic view, claiming it's reaching an impasse. You can see their point. There's a limit to where ice will form, and without at least a little the top grade rock climbs are impossible. It's maybe significant that none of the summer extremes have been climbed in winter. I have more faith. I admit it's soon going to be much harder to find new routes, but there are lots of cliffs in Scotland; and judging by the skill we've seen from recent international visitors, standards can go much higher yet.

Footnote – At the time of going to print, news has come of the successful ascent of the North Face of the Eiger by Andrew Nisbet and John Anderson. The route was that taken on the first successful ascent between 21st – 24th July 1938 by Andreas Heckmair, Ludwig Vorg, Fritz Kasperek and Heinrich Harrer. – Editor.