

**BLACK SPOUT BUTTRESS (By Fair Means or Foul)**

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It was November, and the first snows of the winter had just settled on the hills. Eager for a winter route, after managing nothing the previous year, Nigel and I quickly packed the sacks and headed for Lochnagar. We were keen, and arrived at the Glen Muick car park before anyone else and marched as fast as our fitness would allow to the North-East Corrie. Nigel therefore arrived at the col above Foxes' Well 10 minutes ahead of me. The descent into the corrie was interesting. Six-foot deep fresh powder snow and no one ahead of us to break trail. Fortunately for me, Nigel had a telescopic ski pole with him and volunteered to lead off. What a helpful chap. Not far on, he realised his mistake and thrust the ski pole at me. We eventually made it to the first aid box after struggling, falling, rolling and wading through the drifts, and had a stop to eat and eye up the routes. We had done Shadow Buttress A three years' ago, Central Buttress two years' ago, and none of the gullies were in nick. This left us with Black Spout Buttress as about the only route in condition, within our limited capabilities, that we hadn't done before.

Nigel led up the snows to the base of the climb, where we geared up. It was decided democratically that he should lead the first pitch (I was still knackered and fancied a longer rest) so off he went. All went easy till he came to a chimney. This was full of unconsolidated snow, unfrozen turf and not much else. He decided to belay and let me try it. I got about three feet farther than he did before remembering about discretion and all that. I therefore pointed out that it was possible to avoid the lower section of the climb by traversing in from half-way up the Black Spout. Nigel needed no more encouragement and we quickly descended and headed up the gully. Again I trailed behind.

At the fork where the Left-Hand Branch of Black Spout heads off to the left (surprisingly enough), a steep traverse to the right leads onto the level section of the buttress halfway up. I found myself a comfortable seat and sent my willing partner onwards and upwards, with instructions to follow the crest and belay at the top of a short chimney. When my turn came, I was surprised to find him entrenched at the bottom of the chimney. "This won't go," he said, gesturing behind him. I reckoned he was just being a lightweight, so I took a turn in front. He was right. Looking for an alternative, I moved right round a nose of rock and came across a steep staircase of ledges covered with soft snow. A succession of delicate moves with no protection led to the top of the chimney. I continued to the base of a 15ft. wall which I recalled was the winter crux. I felt it was my duty to let Nigel savour its delights so I brought him up to me and pointed him ahead. He barely reached the first ledge up it when he decided that it really wasn't fair for him to have all the good leads, so it looked like it was up to me.

The first bit was all right, and I got a good nut in a crack at waist height. The problem was that the wall was a series of sloping ledges typical of Lochnagar granite, with few placements for axes and positive footholds. After humming, hawing and gibbering a bit, I went for it, utilising a small notch as a hold for my right axe, and a horizontal jam for my left one, my first attempt at the technique of torquing. It worked in as much that I didn't fall off and gained height, but (there's always a but) when I got myself into a position where I could go for an axe placement over the top of the wall, I found only a flat, blank slab with soft snow on top. I couldn't get any higher, which meant that I had to reverse all I had just climbed. I gibbered again and then went for it (down, not up), warning Nigel that I might fall off. I didn't, but I think that may have been luck.

We were now in an awkward position. We couldn't go up, but we could go down by abseiling into the Black Spout, which meant we wouldn't complete the climb. So, were there any alternatives? Obviously there were, or this would be a rather short story. I remembered that there was a rarely-climbed Grade II gully, Western Slant, immediately right of the buttress (it's not for nothing Nigel calls me Stuart the Guidebook!). I had a look and decided we could dodge the crux this way. A short descent into the gully bed brought me into deep, soft snow, where progress was inward instead of upward (not much use on a climb). I had to stay on the side wall of the gully until a break allowed me to regain the crest of the buttress above the winter crux but below the summer crux (avoided in winter). I brought Nigel up and he set off along the avoiding traverse line back into the head of the gully. After an aided slide across a verglassed ledge, he reached a corner crack which again proved deceptively difficult. He retreated and I found myself at the sharp end again. At the base of the corner crack, it was necessary to gain a standing position on a ledge three or four feet up the right-hand side. This was achieved by a combination move involving an arm jam, a layback and a bridge across the corner. Unusual, but great fun. A little higher, I took a belay and brought Nigel up. He continued out of the gully and on up the final slopes to the right of the buttress, with instructions to head left as soon as he could. After a while, I followed him up, shouting to him that he was no longer being belayed. I found him at the bottom of a slab of rock, looking perplexed. He finally selected a rising traverse line right across the slab, followed by a snow shuffle back left along a ledge above it. When he regained the crest, he brought me up, before disappearing again up a short rocky step that led to the top. Once he was safe, I headed up. However, Nigel was so pleased at getting to the top, he forgot to take in the rope as I ascended, meaning that I had to coil it as I climbed or risk getting it caught as it trailed below me. This meant I had to finish the climb almost one handed, which proved interesting.

We had made it though. Not by the guidebook line, missing out the lower buttress and avoiding the chimney and crux, but nevertheless starting at the

bottom and finishing at the top. Not a pure ascent because of the aided slide across the iced ledge, but a lot of fun anyway.

However, the day was a long way from over. When we got back to the car, it wouldn't start. A call to the AA (the public phone box at the Spittal is a lifesaver), an hour-and-a-half wait in sub-zero temperatures and a bit of mechanical wizardry and we were on our way again. And next time, Nigel wants to climb a gully.

