

THE GRADE IV QUEST

STUART STRONACH

The winter of 1993-94 was a good one. For once, there was plenty of snow, and routes that hadn't been in a climbable condition for half a decade saw regular ascents.

My winter season began early, with the first snows in November. Nigel Eastmond and I had decided that this would be the year that we would crack grade IV, so why wait to warm up? Our first objective would be Look C Gully in Coire Fee, Glen Clova (or should that be Glen Doll?). Look C is a classic, given grade III, III/IV or IV,4 depending on which guide you read, and has an article to itself in 'Cold Climbs'. The time gained by an early start was negated by atrocious driving conditions with snowy roads the whole way. At the car park, Nigel realised he had placed his house keys on the roof of the car before leaving Aberdeen, and had left them there. Fortunately, it was so cold that they had frozen to the snow on the roof and were still there in Glen Clova! Wandering up into the coire, we were perturbed to find blood smeared all over the path, beside sledge tracks. We agreed it must have been a shot stag being taken to the road, but we couldn't help wondering if some dramatic mountain rescue operation had unfolded recently along our path.

So much for the approach. At the base of the climb, we geared up and Nigel rattled from side to side looking for the best place to start. He eventually selected a slabby, icy groove, and scabbled his way up to a large snowy bay thirty feet up. He was moaning that the ice was very thin, and the next bit looked more like a waterfall than an ice climb. I followed up and joined him at the bay for a conference. He was right. It hadn't been cold enough for long enough, and the climb wasn't in condition. I had been feeling apprehensive about the climb anyway (first route of the season, hardest climb yet attempted and all that!), and suggested we try B Gully, a grade II round to the right. Nigel agreed and off we went. Climbing solo, we stopped half way up B Gully for lunch. The snow was unconsolidated and not very deep, and just above us was a twenty foot step that usually banks out later in the season. I wandered off up it, first bridging up a 'V' groove, then swinging round onto one of the icy walls and front pointing up to the top. Nice. I was perhaps a hundred feet above this when there was a shout from Nigel. He had been front pointing up the wall, near the top, when the ice had sheared off at crampon level, leaving him hanging by his axes! A top rope was hastily lowered down, and he completed the pitch with great relief. Just above my high point was the main pitch of the gully, an easy angled fifty foot ice pitch. However, once again, the ice had not formed, and I retreated, disappointed, from ten feet up. The guide book did mention a dogleg traverse line to avoid the step, so off we went. Climb completed with no further incident, we descended to the car. First failure of the season.

The next attempt at something hard was made two days after Christmas. Hal Taylor and I felt the urge to work off some of the excesses of the festive season. However, it had been snowing a lot, and all the roads to the hills were blocked. There was an alternative though: Clachnaben had lots of summer climbing routes on its summit tor, but as far as I knew, no one had done anything on it in winter. We reckoned the road must be open at least as far as Glen Dye lodge, so off we went. Arriving at the tor, I immediately broke out the axes and crampons and launched myself at the rocks, expecting to be able to solo several of the easier summer lines. No chance! It was not as easy as I had imagined. We roped up and I led off up A Gully, or as it's now called, No. 1 Gully (research done for the new North East Outcrops guide published in March '94 unearthed some of the original names given to the routes. At the time, we were working off of the names given in the 1984 guide). Half way up this, I came to a halt. No amount of heaving, twisting or contorting could get me up the next section, and I had to lower off. A quick abseil to retrieve the gear, and we were off to find something else. We did manage to solo South West Gully, a moderate grassy summer scramble. By finishing artificially up a ledge system on the right, we felt it was worth grade II. At least we had climbed something! We then turned our attention to Divot Groove (or Eagle Buttress). Once again, I could get nowhere. This was becoming frustrating.

Finally, I examined the start of Shrew Rib (or Platform Climb). This looked more promising. Quickly, we roped up and I set off. Climbing up the steep, jaggy nose of the rib, first on the right side, then on the left, I gained a level section after about thirty feet, and brought Hal up. Above us was the rib of the summer climb, and a slabby groove on its right. I followed this to its end, where I was presented with a choice. A hand traverse on a good flake looked as if it might lead back left to the summer line, while an ascending traverse below an overhang headed right. I elected to follow the right hand line, because I wasn't sure what lay round the rib at the end of the hand traverse, while the right hand line at least took better holds. Shuffling round for twenty feet or so, I came to an S-shaped crack. The crack itself looked reasonable enough, but it was undercut at its base, and proved awkward to gain. At the top of the crack was a large ledge, so I belayed and Hal followed again. Now we were almost at the top. All that lay between us and level ground was a short, smooth wall, just on the friendly side of vertical. It looked desperate. There was no protection on it, but the ledge was big enough to land on and stop, rather than dropping further. The first attempt got about half way up it before gravity won and I jumped/fell off (i.e. I knew I was going and decided to pre-empt the inevitable). The second try was more successful. Horribly precarious, balancing on front points placed on rounded horizontal cracks, I teetered up. Success! Hal followed and we congratulated ourselves on a first winter ascent. But at what grade? We both felt that the crux was too short and safe for the climb to be anything other than grade III,

but with the newly introduced technical grading system, we felt a technical grade was appropriate to be added despite the climb being sub-grade IV. Our final opinion: grade III, 5. This climb is now recorded as a first winter ascent in the SMCJ 1994. Next year we want to go back for a bash at Cairngorm Club Crack! However, still no grade IV!

I didn't get out again until February. This time, I was with Simon Lock, a long serving member of the Tiso staff, and one of my regular summer partners. We went to Coire an t-Sneachda, on Cairngorm, with our eyes on Aladdin's Mirror Direct (grade IV, 4) and Pygmy Ridge (grade IV, 5). The weather looked superb, with clear skies, sunshine and low temperatures. However, when we got out of the car, we were nearly blown away. There was some wind! Arriving at the base of Aladdin's Mirror Direct, a thirty foot vertical frozen waterfall, I was very intimidated by its appearance. Even worse, the wind was causing regular spindrift avalanches to whistle down it. Even Simon agreed it was out of the question. We shifted our sights to the buttress immediately on the left, which wasn't in our guide book, but which I cleverly remembered to be called Wavelength, a grade III/IV. This was climbed without incident. It was never easy, but never desperate, and we felt pleased with ourselves. Unfortunately, it turned out that I wasn't as clever as I thought I was. We had just done Terms of Endearment, a grade III. Was I ever going to get onto something harder?

Less than a week later, I was back at the foot of Aladdin's Mirror Direct, this time with Mark Atkins. Mark is an Etchachan Club member, and a lot better a climber than me. We had set off for Lochnagar, only to find the Glen Muick road covered with fresh snow. We felt this would mean too high an avalanche risk on the 'Gar, so we turned round and headed to the northern coires.

"Shall we just solo this?" asked Mark, gesturing at the icefall.

"You're joking", I replied. "I've never even led something like this before!".

"Well then, off you go."

This was it. My bluff had been called. A second party chose this moment to arrive, so there was no time to lose if we were to avoid a wait. With heart somewhere in the vicinity of my sinuses, I started up the slab of ice that lay below the main wall. As the angle started to increase, I placed an ice screw. This was the first time I had used one, but I didn't feel it should be as loose in its placement as it was. Too psyched to worry about it, I launched onto the steep bit. The ice was really chewed up from other climbers ascents, but the axe placements felt solid enough, and I had nice sharp new crampons for front pointing. There was still spindrift coming down, but in much smaller quantities than my previous visit to the coire. The hardest section was moving left from a shallow groove onto a pillar of ice near the top. I was really enjoying the climbing, but I was glad that the face was short enough to make the placing of protection more trouble than it was worth (hanging round off

one axe to place an ice screw is very strenuous). And then I was up. The angle eased off to a snow gully, and I found a belay to bring Mark up. He cruised it, naturally, and slagged me off for a useless ice screw placement!

Next came Pygmy Ridge. This is a short, three pitch mixed climb that starts half way up the headwall of the coire. We traversed across to it in two pitches, so Mark had first lead. Pygmy Ridge was first climbed by Raeburn just after the turn of the century, and was given grade III for a long time (except in a McInnes guide where it was a mere II). With the recent introduction of the split winter grades, it was upgraded to a more realistic IV, 5. Nevertheless, the section that I could see, up a thirty foot corner looked easy enough, so I was surprised that Mark took his time over it. Even at the top of the corner, where the angle looked to ease as he disappeared from sight, progress was slow. A second rope joined me at the belay.

“Did you just do the Mirror Direct?”, one of the climbers enquired as he arrived.

“Yes. How did you know?” I replied.

“Footfang crampons”, he said, pointing at my feet.

This must be the first time I have been recognised by the soles of my feet! (Footfang crampons have a distinctive red plate to stop snow build up, plainly visible when front pointing.)

Finally, Mark reached a stance and shouted to me to follow. I set off, and immediately found why Mark was slow. This corner was deceptively hard. About fifteen feet up, I was pulling up on an axe placement when the axe and rock parted company. As I was attached to the axe, I was unceremoniously deposited back at the base of the climb on rope stretch. This got me riled up and I quickly fought my way back up to my high point, and beyond (the axe held second time round). The climbing just didn't get any easier. A steep slab with a crack running directly towards Mark beckoned. The climbing was delicate as I learned the technique of torquing (jamming the axe into a crack in order to pull up on it), whilst feet were placed flat on sloping ledges. I was depending on my weight concentrated onto the points of my crampons providing enough friction to keep me on! If this is McInnes' idea of grade II, I'd hate to see one of his grade V's! I was totally drained, mentally and physically, by the time I reached Mark's belay, and would happily have abbed off to safety. Mark had other ideas and told me it was my lead. The ground immediately above was a vertical ten foot step with a crack leading to a ledge half way up. It took a mixture of strenuous pulling on axes, and delicate shuffling on snow covered rock, but I got up it and headed off on easier ground to a level section where I belayed. Mark made short work of the top pitch, and we descended Aladdin's Couloir to get back to the car park, with a short stop in a Glenmore Lodge course snow hole for a bite to eat.

So that was that. I had led my first grade IV, but had fallen off my second. I don't know if this is an improvement or not. Time will tell.

Two winters have passed since this article was written, and I have only been out once. This was another Christmas trip to Clachnaben at the end of 1995 with Simon. We both soloed the easy gully I had done with Hal two years before, expecting it to be a simple warm-up. Wrong! There was less snow than previously, and the top slabby groove felt a bit hard and serious, 100 feet up without a rope. We felt that a grade of III,4 was more realistic than the easy grade II climbed before. After this, we spent the rest of the day bouldering out the bottom 20 feet of several routes and enjoying the sunshine.

As I sit writing this, it is mid-March and another storm is raging outside the window. Although the climbing gear stayed in the car for the duration of the Achnashellach weekend meet, as temperatures rose and the snow vanished, perhaps the winter is not over yet....

