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## Rock Climbers in Action in Snowdonia - forty years on.

A fond recollection by Steve Dean.

“Our bible was ‘Rock Climbers in Action in Snowdonia’ which we used to borrow alternately from Birkenhead Library so that no-one else could get it, and Alan used to speculate about how hard these climbs really were.”

**Nick Parry** (recalling early schoolboy climbing days with the late Al Rouse.)

Forty years on, it is clear that 1966 was quite a year for British climbing. The growth in the sport’s popularity was well under way and that year saw the publication of Chris Bonington’s instant modern classic “I Chose to Climb”, the Eiger Direct was climbed in a blaze of publicity that quickly pushed a young Dougal Haston onto the world stage, Chris Bonington, Rusty Baillie and Tom Patey climbed the excellent East Face of the Old Man of Hoy (a year before the legendary television broadcast) and the rapid exploration of the sea cliffs on Anglesey put the name of Gogarth on the lips of all serious climbers. An exciting time of cultural and social change, 1966 also saw the Beatles release their finest album Revolver, Bob Dylan released the wonderful Blonde on Blonde and a young American guitarist settled in London and recorded his first single “Hey Joe”. Truly Jimi Hendrix seemed like something from outer space and typified an exciting era. That year also saw the publication of the first really modern book about climbing in Britain, “Rock Climbers in Action in Snowdonia” by John Cleare and Tony Smythe. At last something had appeared in print that in words and pictures really managed to convey just how rock climbing felt. The book changed the whole way we looked at the sport and in its brisk and businesslike format was a wonderfully cool piece of work capturing the era beautifully.

It is now the fortieth anniversary of what turned out to be a hugely influential and much loved book and the time seems right for an affectionate reappraisal both of the photographic aspect and the text. Perhaps a little unfairly, given the quality of Tony Smythe’s well thought out prose, the book is perhaps best known for the superb quality of John Cleare’s near-iconic black and white photographs. The book contains thirty nine plates all of which serve to capture something both of the nature of hard climbing and the mysterious nature of Snowdonia itself. At the time that the book was produced, John was working in London as a fashion and advertising photographer and climbing regularly in Wales at weekends. A contract was agreed with the publishers Secker & Warburg in late 1964 for an advance of £60 and work on the book commenced. The publishing director at Secker & Warburg was Robin Collomb, and to quote John Cleare “...that book was Robin’s initial inspiration. Having seen some of my pictures around, he invited me out to lunch and suggested I did the book. His idea was that it be the first of a series, to later cover The Lakes, Scotland and the Alps, but just before “Snowdonia” was published he moved on from Secker & Warburg, and that was the end of an intriguing project.” John was already a very experienced climber, but the production of many of the photographs required considerable persistence and effort.

The scope of the photographs is of great interest, ranging from the famous images of Cenotaph Corner, Cemetery Gates, Hangover and The Thing in the Llanberis Pass, to

dark atmospheric shots of the then modern routes on Clogwyn du'r Arddu and bright sunny shots of Tremadoc. In addition there were various illustrations of climbs situated elsewhere in Snowdonia, my own favourite being a superb image of the wall of Mur y Niwl in bright sunshine. Perhaps the finest of the photographs is that of Pete Crew on the Great Wall of Cloggy, Welsh Gothic at its finest and an image to whet any appetite. Many of John's illustrations in the book have become famous, and rightly so, they were the finest examples of the art at that time and were hugely dramatic.

John's own account of the project tells us of how he drove up from London to Snowdonia over thirty times in the period through the (often wet) summer of 1965 to try and get all the necessary photographic work done. Despite the often poor weather, he was fortunate in being able to enlist the help of a number of the top performers of the day including Pete Crew, Baz Ingle, Rusty Baillie, Martin Boysen, Dave Alcock and Dave Potts. John recalled how he often used an abseil rope to get in close to the action and wide angle lenses to enhance the perspective. Although not unusual today, no one had really tried to photograph climbing in this way before and the results were often wonderfully dramatic. John's work vividly captured the feel of hard climbing; the sweat on the fingers and the dry mouth as a hard or bold move was executed. Nothing like this had been seen before and the quality of the photographs were the foundation of John's reputation as a master of mountaineering photography.

When John got the project under way he initially approached Al Alvarez (many years later the author of 'Feeding the Rat') to produce the text. Such was the demand on Al for his writing skills, that he was unable to take on the work. As a result John approached an old school friend and regular climbing partner Tony Smythe to put pen to paper. At the time Tony had recently returned from Alaska and had worked for some time at Plas y Brenin. John's choice turned out to be an astute one, Tony Smythe knew the nature and character of Snowdonia very well and whilst not one of the elite climbers of the period was a very able extreme leader who knew his way around.

The text Tony produced is to my mind something of an understated gem that perfectly balances John's excellent photographs. In less than 40,000 words Tony manages to combine the traditional and contemporary aspects of Welsh climbing and his text retains a strong sense of awe and mystery about Snowdonia itself. It includes interesting accounts of early days in Ogwen, personal experiences on the hard climbs of the day (the high prestige still attached to the likes of Cenotaph Corner, The Grooves and Vector for instance is made quite clear) and something of the legend and awe attached to the heroes of the day. It is for instance fascinating to read the sections about Joe Brown and Don Whillans written in 1965, and to realise just what a vast influence they and their exploits had on British climbing at that time. Tony's text also conveys the sense of increasing pace and modernity creeping into the sport as traditions, even those of the fifties, were being rapidly eroded. Along with the traditional flavour of some of the text, there is a sense also of urgency and rapid travel in cool new cars like Mini Coopers, to a background of music by The Beatles and the Rolling Stones. A new modern age had arrived and this was a period largely dominated in Wales by the climbers of the Manchester/Sheffield based Alpha Club. Some of the Club's members featured in John Cleare's photographs but despite the pre-eminence of this youthful group, there was still huge respect for Joe Brown at that time. (Joe was all of thirty five when the book was being written and had barely begun his extensive exploration on Anglesey.)

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Here is Tony writing about The Master, forty years ago:

*"The interesting thing is that Brown himself is not the least bit aggressive. He never raises his voice, and seems to do more listening than talking, except when he occasionally starts reminiscing or theorising, which causes an attentive silence to fall. I have always had the feeling that Brown has no need to be dynamic, conspicuous, and so on when he climbs, as most other 'hard' men are, because he has such an affinity with rock. I once watched a man breaking flint with a hammer into little pieces were to be used in old-fashioned matchlock guns. Every piece, after a few taps, finished up exactly the right size and shape, and it turned out that the man had been doing this work all his life. He was a craftsman, a man who not only produced good work, but understood the material with which he worked, all its foibles, its occasional refusal to behave as expected, its bouts of stubbornness. There was hardly any possibility of his getting upset, and there was certainly no need for an elaborate workshop and expensive tools. In some ways he reminded me of Joe Brown, who understands his own medium with the same timeless instinct and lack of pretence. It seems fitting, perhaps inevitable, that Brown, too, should have a very ordinary background and have been at one time a manual worker, a plumber. I can't imagine someone from higher up in the social order or from the professional classes having the same ingrained skill and almost earthy understanding."*

Tony's text captures climbing in Wales, just before the exploration and wide interest in the sea cliffs of Anglesey. The main theatres of activity were still the Llanberis Pass, Clogwyn du'r Arddu and the cliffs of Tremadoc, and with the wonderful gift of hindsight it is clear just how traditional the scene still was. Great changes were soon to come, the likes of Positron and Right Wall were not far away, and the forthcoming advances in vision, nerve and athleticism were to be quite revolutionary within a British context. What the book demonstrates is how Welsh climbing felt before the boom in interest and the increases in general ability that arrived in the late sixties.

These days Tony, who is the son of the great Alpine and Himalayan explorer Frank Smythe, lives in Staveley, just north of Kendal. He is still frequently out in the hills walking and mountain biking, and remains a very fit man. Talking to Tony about the book, I was struck by his modest diffidence, amounting to almost slight embarrassment about it all. When I indicated just what an influence the book has had on so many climbers of a certain age, Tony seemed genuinely surprised and pleased that the work he and John put in was so well regarded to this day. In truth I have always felt that the book captured the spirit and rhythm of the time perfectly and remains a hugely enjoyable read. Tony is particularly good when writing about Cloggy (he later contributed a fine essay about Vember for 'Hard Rock') and because he had genuinely struggled with some of the top routes of the day, is able to give good, honest insights into just what the experience of hard climbing felt like at that time. One has to remember just how new and revealing this type of writing was, and it came across as dynamic and refreshing to many readers. Like Tony, John is still very active in the hills "as photographers don't really retire!" He still climbs as frequently as possible, is a keen ski mountaineer, and has recently taken up long distance mountain biking.

The legacy of '**Rock Climbers in Action.....**' has proved to be strong one. The superb photographic work of the likes of Ray Wood, Dave Simmonite and Cubby Cuthbertson lean strongly on the work of John Cleare all those years ago. Gradually more written work appeared about Welsh climbing; biographies of Brown and Whillans, **The Black Cliff, Welsh Rock**, biographies of Menlove Edwards, Kirkus and Herford to name but a few. Despite the passing years, the book is held in great affection by many climbers not least for capturing a

particular period so clearly and with such charm. I have met people who can recite pieces of text (honestly!) and its cult status has endured because the book was not produced in great numbers (for many years it was rumoured that there were only 1,000 copies but that is not true.) The book originally retailed at £1-75 (about the price in 1996 of eighteen pints of bitter!) these days copies very rarely crop up on used book lists, it seems that most people who bought the book want to keep it, such is its quality. Very occasionally a second hand copy comes on the market and there are rumours of up to £250 being paid. Like *'The Black Cliff' and 'High Peak'*, it remains one of the most sought after, and scarce, British mountain books of the modern era. In the USA, copies in good condition have fetched \$500.

As I indicated earlier, to climbers of a certain age the book is held in huge affection. I once sat around a campfire in the Alps, listening to people who not only knew the order of the photographs but could also recite the captions almost word for word! (This event was very funny and clearly demonstrated under the influence of cheap wine that male obsession can veer seriously near to mild forms of mental illness!) I have also met Rock Climbers in Action tickers, trying to knock off all the routes in the photographs. The inclusion of The Thing, Erosion Direct, Pellagra and Cloggy's Great Wall has always ensured that that would be no easy task while much of Carpet Slab is simply no longer available, having fallen down in 1986.

While still at school in South London in 1967, I took a copy of the book down from a shelf in Brixton Library. I turned the pages, saw John's photographs and can genuinely say that I was hooked---like many others I wanted to be out there on those routes and be a part of that world. Just revisiting the book both in terms of photographs and text brings back wonderful memories of great days on the crags of mysterious Snowdonia. Forty years down the road, it is full marks to John and Tony, for creating a gem of a book that has brought huge pleasure to so many of us and inspired many a pushy and unforgettable lead! Wales was never to be like this again---the rush across Anglesey to the vertical adventures of Gogarth was soon to sweep over the mainstream and more people then began to look further afield to Europe, the USA and elsewhere but all that is another story.