

The Climber as Visionary:
Rock climbing in the Peak District

A lecture given to The Alpine Club, January 1999

I want to start this lecture at a very odd point, and take us back in time, back to the year 1722 ...

[Illustration of Daniel Defoe's carriage]

... the very year that Bach published book one of *The Well Tempered Clavier*, the same year that Daniel Defoe's made his famous trip to the Peak District as part of a *Tour round the Whole Island of Great Britain*. Which is how, in my new book, I introduce a whole new era in the Peak.

That piece of music absolutely encapsulates that new age of enlightenment, a whole new way of seeing the world. Bach, a musical visionary: the musical spirit combined with a rational, almost scientific mind of awesome genius. That piece, the first *Prelude, in C Major*, of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the start, in a sense, of all modern music. Bach has at last cracked the problem of the circle of fifths, and everything is linked together into one whole harmonic system for the first time.

A perfect balance is achieved at last between emotion and reason.

And into this new world, in this [very same] year of 1722, comes a man like Defoe, our first great novelist: but he was so much more than just a novelist: a true visionary in every sense. This writer of science fiction, making trips to the moon, who at different points of his life was a spy for both the Whigs and Tories, a political pamphleteer, an expert on business and economics, who was a bankrupt; and also our first great travel writer.

[Illustration of Daniel Defoe and his 'acquaintance']

His is an entirely new way of looking at the world, a whole new vision of the world – with this exploratory, scientific mind (and a terrific sense of humour, too), a true representative of this new age of enlightenment, the age of Reason. The very beginning of the modern scientific and industrial age.

One thing which has drawn him to the Peak is Hobbes famous list of its 'seven wonders'. He took with him a 'gentleman of his acquaintance who was a walking library and a moveable map'.

[Illustration of High Tor at Matlock]

The first major landmark they came was the Derwent, that raging fury of a river etc ... Defoe was more interested in a landmark in the background ... which he went to have a look at.

[Closer shot of High Tor at Matlock]

He is one of the very first people to talk about a crag as such, perhaps the very first. It's really a new idea. He sees High Tor as one of the Wonders of the Peak which should have been included in Hobbes' famous list of seven. He actually says it was the greatest wonder he saw. The new calculating mind. Twice as high as our Monument in London.

[Illustration of Daniel Defoe's carriage above Chatsworth House]

[Illustration of Chatsworth House]

Incongruity. A palace, almost like Buckingham Palace. Not like the Elizabethan mansion it replaced. A statement of power, of the new Augustan Age of the Whigs. An age of commerce, and science, of surveying, changing the world, scientific/economic man as god — certainly the Duke was. Not just the Monarch's deputy, but a man who could move mountains, literally.

[Illustration of Edensor]

.... And whole villages.

This artificial landscape of Capability Brown, which Defoe did not see. Idyllic victorian England. An enlightened age, of visionaries.

Science gave us an entirely new mobility and a new freedom, it carved great railways through the eastern edges, and enabled the industrial working man to return at last to his roots, to get out of the city, and back to the hills.

So, as the age of reason and classicism moves into the age of romanticism, which was a sort of invention of industrial townsfolk who created in their paintings and literature a whole fantasy landscape

[Illustration of Hen Cloud]

... people started to climb. Climbing as a product of a new scientific and industrial world, which eventually paradoxically has given us new freedom and confidence, and stripped away all primitive superstitions about climbing. At first the highest most obvious mountains: Mont Blanc etc. But then the crags, like the obvious mini-mountain peak of Hen Cloud. Once the

stronghold of the old god Hern the Hunter, now forgotten. Now the abode of man the technician and adventurer.

This was a whole new crazy idea, often dressed up as being in the service of science.

[Illustration of the Crazy Pinnacle, Tegness Quarry]

A crazy new idea, on a crazy pinnacle. For that is what they called this, above Grindleford Station. Quarried. Once solely of economic value, now of sporting value, a playground for crazy new adventures.

In this sport of rock climbing, the spontaneous joy of movement of the simian animal within us is combined with all the precision of the scientist.

The poetry of movement is combined with precise technique and a coolly calculating scientific mindset. The rational animal of Aristotle, perhaps, at last reaching his perfect fulfillment. (I'm biased!!)

First climbed by Puttrel in 1880s.

[Illustration of the climb *Puttrel's Progress* at Wharnccliffe]

Yes, a progress of sorts. I suppose I actually have what is known as a Whig view of history – history seen as an evolution, history as progress. Nothing is static. New visions, new ideas, new sports, and new variations on our own sport. Like deep water soloing.

[Illustration of Thor's Cave]

Climbing as an entirely natural product of an industrial and, now, a technological age. One could almost argue that the sport in its mature form is *post-industrial*.

I see climbing, then, as something which springs out of a certain level of scientific, industrial, and social progress – out of a certain level, in other words, of civilization. An activity which has come, primarily and initially, from crazy townspeople.

All this by way of an introduction! Let me now focus more specifically on the climbing visionary ...

[Illustration of the climb *Meshuga* at Black Rocks, Cromford]

... with another Crazy Pinnacle.

Again, there is not time today to develop a detailed thesis, but for me there are two very distinct types of vision.

First, there is the vision of the first ascensionist. The creative leap of seeing a new possibility. To see that what looks completely impossible, is in fact possible. Like the front of the Promontory at Black Rocks which people had looked at for years as an impossible possibility. A sort of crazy leap of faith, by a madman – *meshuga*, the name of the climb means a crazy man! The madman in this case being Seb Grieve in November 1997.

[Illustration of the climb *Appointment with Fear* at Wimberry]

But this madness is balanced absolutely by reason – a very, very precise, calculating, almost scientific sense of judgement.

A gift of judgement given only to a few, like Seb Grieve and Joe Brown and Johnny Dawes, and now perhaps Leo Houlding ... and Sam Whittaker, to name but five, on the aptly named *Appointment with Fear*

[Illustration of the climb *Avoiding the Strangers* at Bamford Edge]

The vision: this ability to see a line and *know* you can do it.

An idea, almost a fantasy, becomes a reality.

I have never seen anything quite like it. This perfect balance of craziness and rational judgement: being *just* in control; exploding upwards in a display of pure will, physicality and skill, combined with all the perfection of Bach.

Of course, there have always been such people ...

[Illustration of the climb *The Left Unconquerable* at Stanage]

... Let's move back to a remarkable day in 1945, at the very end of the war, to VJ day itself. When Tom Probert led *The Left Unconquerable*. It was in effect a solo, making the route about E3 5b on our modern grading system.

Albert Shutt, who held the ropes, and seconded it with extreme difficulty, told me Tom was a 'A fool, but a competent fool'. But doesn't that just sum up, rather neatly, in just two words, the whole inspired *lunacy* of our sport? The rational madman. Like Nietzsche's jesting, laughing scientist – playing the fool. Entering into a wonderful, crazy game with nature.

The scheming canniness of the planning, the laughing spontaneity, the crazy 'go for it' of the execution. The 'positive face' of the modern American climbing manuals. Even when you're gripped, trying to sing, or even put a

manic grin on your face, or shouting to yourself like Seb Grieve, to overcome your doubt and fear. The spirit of Johnny Dawes ...

[Illustration of Joe Brown on *The Right Unconquerable*]

... or Joe Brown (seen here repeating one of his many great classics, *The Right Unconquerable* at Stanage), who, when he burst upon the scene in 1948, climbed with a visionary intensity, unlike anything that had ever beensseen in British climbing before ...

[Joe Brown]

... the ‘great liberating chapter,’ as Jim Perrin has put it, ‘in climbing’s history’. ‘The salient point’ – I’m still quoting Jim Perrin – ‘is laughter, which is never far from his face.’

[Arthur Birtwistle]

This is the spirit also of Arthur Birtwistle, the great pioneer of *Diagonal* and *Drainpipe Crack*, of *Pulpit Ridge* and *Gomorrhah*, *Moneylender’s Crack* and *Priscilla Ridge* – who is absolutely brimming with laughter, (once you get to know him). How much we can learn about the essence of climbing from these people!

I’ll tell you in a minute what he had to say about sport climbing ...

[*Body Machine* on Raven Tor]

... I don’t wish for a moment to demean Fliss Butlers’s enormous ability – she is after all a friend of mine – this is simply one of the few sports climbing shots that I have –

But the *grim* demeanour of so much modern sport climbing is something I cannot fathom, those dismal topos with little vertical lines, these *ridiculously* named lines of bolts to nowhere, these scowling faces and skinheads with crashmats, this entirely humourless and morgue-like scene:

Talking of which: what a terribly *bad* advertisement for the whole sport of climbing those grim, pathside, hang-dog antics in the Wye Valley are! – In places like The Cornice and The Nook. How must this appear to the non-climber going for a pleasant Sunday afternoon stroll! What a truly dismal scene it is, in *its fullest sense*, suitable only for the tone deaf and the colour blind. What a long way we are now from the world of Bach – in this new world, which has all the subtlety of Oasis!

Götterfunken! 'O Freunde, not these sounds! Let's strike up more cheerful ones, more full of joy!' The banter of Birchens or Stange any day for me!

[Arthur Birtwistle again]

I remember, now, how Arthur Birtwistle dissolved into uncontrollable mirth when he told me how he had seen, just beside a path in the Manifold valley, climbers, all trussed up, hanging in slings, on a little overhanging crag, patting the rock, in effect *pretending* to climb, and he said, laughing and laughing, quite helpless with laughter: *what for?*

[Body Machine again]

No, I don't want to be rude to Fliss! ...

[Edwardian climber on *The Matterhorn Ridge*, Winnat's Pass, with an ice axe]

But *please*, don't let's take ourselves too seriously! Being visionary means, for me, at least, in the very simplest sense: keeping a childlike sense of wonder, the spirit that plays naively, with a completely uncynical freshness, and has an openness to the whole natural world as it is given to us. This is a spirit of play and laughter ...

[*The White Edge*, Ilam Rock]

... which is combined with a *deep respect* for everything that is *greater* than ourselves. Which leads me now into the second sense of vision I want to talk about...

But first I just want to say *very* briefly what I think climbing is *not* about ...

It is *not* about this solipsistic, egotistical business of simply getting to the top, of getting to summits or getting up routes, at any price, and then ticking them off in a guidebook. Cutting ourselves off from the world around us, and cutting ourselves off from the past.

This is the layman's idea of *conquering*, which is rooted in a whole rather dubious tradition of acquisition, possession, and consumerism. Which is a result, to put it very, very briefly!!, of that old, but very serious confusion between having and being, which has been so beautifully and simply spelt out by Eric Fromm.

[*Valkyrie* on Froggatt Pinnacle]

This sport has *never* been *simply* about getting to the top; it's always been about so much more than this. It is the whole story of a climb, of a climbing day, even how it fits into a climbing life...

[shot of Johnny Dawes soloing at Bamford Edge]

So let me now grandly spell out what I think climbing *is* all about. I think it is first and foremost about the *joy* of climbing *well* – to use Gaston Rebuffat's perfect phrase. This beautiful physical ballet in space, so perfectly exemplified by a genius like Johnny Dawes, scampering all over the crags and savouring their full music with all the relaxed mastery of a concert pianist.

[Climber on the crux of *Golden Yardstick*, Wild Cat Tor]

And then it is about the *beauty of nature* ... first and foremost of the rock itself – this beautiful substance ... which, hopefully, we may appreciate ...

And then it is about the *beauty of nature* ... first and foremost of the rock itself – this beautiful substance, such as seen here on Golden Yardstick on Wildcat Tor, seen looking suitably golden in the evening light ... which, hopefully, we may appreciate ...

[Climber soloing at Harboro Rocks]

... nearly as well as Stone Age man may have done around his caves, here, at Harboro in the southern Peak. But of course ...

[*Via Vita*, Ravensdale]

... it's also of the beauty of the *whole* landscape, (such as Ravensdale here, now a nature reserve) which adds so much to the great climbs, such as *Via Vita* here or ...

[*Sloth* at the Roaches]

... *Sloth* at the Roaches ... which adds so much to the whole climbing day ...

But then, again, thirdly or fourthly!, it's about the whole history of climbing that is embedded in these rocks. Most of the great characters have English climbing have left their names here, from Stanley Jeffcoat and Harry Kelly, Fred Pigott and Morley Wood, Ivan Waller and Harry Kelly, Joe Brown and Don Whillans, John Allen and Steve Bancroft, to Johnny Woodward and Johnny Dawes, Simon Nadin and Nick Dixon ... they're all here, all the big names ...

[Tittesworth at sunset]

But then there's an awareness, too, that this is but a very small part of a much *larger* history, which is entrenched in this landscape. Up there, a representative cross-section of the whole of climbing history. But all around, this much larger history

We cannot, as curious, sentient, enthusiastic beings, NOT have an interest in the whole history of this rocky landscape, which leads us back to the moon goddess, Anu, who gave her name to these rocks in the first place: Anu's Rocks, the ghost of which name survives in the farm of Ann Roach just behind. And ...

[Ramshaw Rocks at dusk]

... just near Ann Roach, Ramshaw Rocks, named after the local horned god, the Derbyshire Ram, and the Baldstones named after the Norse god of light, Baal. And later, how those jibbering, superstitious monks of the nearby Dieulacres Abbey called Anu, Black Annis, and Baal, Beelzebub.

[The comet Hale Bopp over Minninglow]

Let us respect all these myths and legends of the ancients, the Celts and the Norse, and try to understand. They knew a great deal more than most of us do about the movement of the stars and the wanderers, the planets. Discuss purpose of Nine Stones Circle near Robin Hood's Stride

Do not let us mock with the shrill, modern, reductionist cry, heard all too often these days, falsely in the name of science, that there are no gods! that there is no other world ... greater than our own. When it is now calculated that there are thousands of planets with life, many of which will be a lot more intelligent than our own. And, if the whole universe out there is not an other world, much greater than our own, what is it? Instead, let us try to understand. In place of cynicism, let us have a respect both for the ancients and for the whole, much greater, world around us.

[Rainster by moonlight]

... And so we move on to the second, much less obvious, sense of the climbing visionary, which is all to do with the broader vision of our place, as climbers, within the broader picture. And this is a kind of vision as well, and probably more important.

I would say grandly that the visionary climber's view is one that has an awareness and respect for the whole order of nature, the whole cosmos, *no less!* In the same way that so-called primitive man most definitely had it. A respect not just for the rock; but an awareness that the rock, indeed our

whole world, is linked to the stars and to the whole natural world in between. This is the Celtic vision, for want of a better epithet. As above, so below.

Yes life – and ourselves – has come out of the stars: we are children of the universe, animated stardust. Nor would the Celts have been surprised to learn that this carboniferous rock, this limestone, had once been made up of living things. They knew that already. That everything is interrelated. That was the way they saw the world too.

[shot of the rockclimb *Phoenix*]

It is a grand vision, but it also entails a certain humbleness ... an awareness of our rather small place within a much larger, broader picture.

My Peak book is a plea against narrowness, a plea for a broader vision; an appeal for the full richness of the climbing experience, and how we are embedded in a whole culture and a whole history.

I subtitled my book ‘a personal perspective of the Peak’; it is an appeal ...

[black and white photo of a climber in the 20s struggling with an overhang]

... to all true climbers to develop their own sense of perspective, an awareness of this broader picture stretching back in time, without which we would not exist as climbers.

The broadest-minded climbers will be interested in all these other stories, all those other histories that are already engrained, or are ongoing, in the climbing landscape.

[*Valkyrie*, Roaches, long shot]

The broadest-minded climber is interested in how all these aspects link together and form a whole – a whole history.

[Peter Harding just beyond the crux of *Valkyrie*]

Here is the pioneer of this climb, Peter Harding, repeating it fifty years later. And here ...

[Harding on *Elliott's Buttress*]

... he is again, on a previous pioneer's climb, *Elliott's Buttress*.

How all these stories link with one another!

[Frank Elliott at the age of 87]

And here is Frank Elliott telling me, just as I am leaving his home in Kent, exactly this: it's the whole story which matters: don't make too much of my achievements in the Peak, he said, I have had a very full life. In the Alps and in Antarctica, *and* in my work as an engineer.

[*Sirplum* in Cheedale]

Within the larger history of many storylines, the creative and adventurous climber, wants to weave his own individual storyline. Through climbing, and other creative activities, we can make a kind of story of our lives. Just look at Chris Bonington's, or Joe Brown's, or Paul Pritchard's, or or Adam Wainwright's curriculum ascensi, for example: those are story-lines and a half! (I nearly said Joe Simpson's curriculum ascensi, but I think his would be better described as a curriculum *DE*censi!)

[John Lumb soloing on Rob's Rocks, Chew Valley]

My book on the Peak was shortlisted for the Boardman Tasker Award in November, and had I won, I would have referred to a Buddhist saying quoted by Peter Boardman himself in the very last chapter of his last book:

'Fashion your life from a chain of deeds, as a garland is fashioned from a chain of flowers.' So that everything starts to become linked together, like Bach's great musical circle of fifths, into one harmonious creation.

[*Boulder Climb*, Robin Hood's Stride]

Storylines, storylines, like long and complex melodies, all in harmony and cutting through time, moving through the whole gamut, contrapuntally, like a Bach fugue.