

**A Commentary:
The Fell & Rock Climbing Club Journals,
Vols. 1-5, Numbers 1-15, 1907-1921**

On the occasions when I stayed as a guest in our Club huts, well before I was elected to membership, I was fascinated to browse through the old copies of the Club's Journals in the book cases. I resolved to acquire a complete collection: a task finally completed many years later. Many others will have struggled with the same task. I confess I was off to a flying start with the purchase of a job lot, but with about a dozen gaps. These gaps needed resolution to fill, but eventually the set was complete.

This electronic edition brings the earliest, and naturally the most difficult to obtain, issues within the reach of all. And what delights the volumes contain! It would be foolish to attempt to guide the reader to all the gems. Indeed it would spoil his enjoyment, but nevertheless, it seems that some general signposting to some particularly interesting and important articles might be appreciated and useful. The choice is, however, subjective and personal, each reader must pan for personal gems and place their personal bookmarks. Perhaps this commentary may go some way to overcoming the frustrations of electronic browsing, even with the assistance of the various indexes. The screen copy can never replace the feel, the smell and the ease of handling of the original hard copy, but I hope it goes part way to being an acceptable substitute.

Working our way through the various issues, we can follow the development of the Club. Page 10 of issue 1 (hereafter written as eg. p10, N1), discusses *The Origin and Aims of Our Club*. An article on *The Climbs of the English Lake District*, (p29, N1) by Williamson, reprinted from "All The Year Round", edited by Charles Dickens, Jr, gives us a glimpse of the state of affairs some sixteen years before the birth of our Club. We are brought up-to-date by a sequel, p143, N2, by George Abraham. Fred Bottrill, of the eponymous Scafell slab, leads us on a more modest expedition with his account of the first ascent of *The Crescent Climb, Pavey Ark*, p81, N1. Protection techniques were discussed in *The Rope - As Used in Rock Climbing*, by Oliverson, p169, N2. We all would agree that "*the rope is the emblem of the union between members of the party*", but the details of belaying techniques are sketchy, going little beyond, "*a belay is anything upon which the rope can be hung in order to sustain weight*". Chubb writes on *The Right to Climb*, p160, N2, describing a failed bill by C P Trevelyan, which "*seeks to provide that no owner or occupier of uncultivated mountain or moorland shall be entitled to exclude any person from walking on such land for the purpose of recreation*". Well, it has taken 100 years, but achieved it we have! Over the same 100 years, magnetic variation has declined. The 18 degrees west of north, p134, N2, has fallen to a negligible half a degree in the Lake District of 2006.

The first colour picture in the Journal, a painting of Pillar Rock, by A Heaton Cooper, formed the frontispiece of N3. Climbing is well represented in this number, with articles by Solly, *Some Early Recollections* (p234), *The Abbey Ridge, Great Gable*, by Botterill

(p243) and Slingsby, *Reminiscences of a Few Days Climbing in the Fell Country*, (p253). The inadequate nature of belaying technique and equipment, were the causes of a fatality on Gable, p.281, in which the “rope broke with a loud snap”.

More reminiscences of *Early Lakeland Mountaineering*, from Seatree (p3), appear in N4. The photograph of Keswick between pages 20 & 21, reproduced on this disc, is particularly striking when compared with the much more built-up view of today. The article, *Camera Work Among the Rocks*, Burrell, p102, reminds us how lucky we are to have photographs of the early days: how much easier (and cheaper) is the digital camera. Articles on the Weisshorn (p47) and the Valais (p93) take us back to a different age in the Alps.

Oppenheimer gives an account of *Climbing in the Buttermere Valley* in N5, p166, whilst Ashley Abraham, records (p 184), the first traverse, in less than 17 hours, of the main Collin Ridge in Skye, by Shadbolt (of Chimney fame) and McLaren, a Club member. The death of Edward Whymper is noted on p251.

The Climbs on Scafell Pinnacle are described by Sansom and Herford in N6, p296, and Herford gives an account of his *Traverse of Scafell Crags* on p329. Moving abroad, *The Peak of Teneriffe* (p 306), was visited by Thorpe well before low-cost airlines. Field, recalls a tour of *The Vorarlberg* (p 354), in Austria, a country whose mountains are generally under represented in our Journal.

N 7 contains several accounts of mountaineering abroad, an activity to be sadly curtailed in the next few years, the Pyrenees (p 30), the Dolomites (p 48, Herford), Tuscany (p 59) and the Wellenkuppe, Zermatt (p 81). A curiosity is a note by Millican Dalton, the hermit of Borrowdale, *A Camping Holiday*, p 76. This number is particularly rich in interesting photographs, not least a portfolio of Club officers.

N8, published in late 1914, is noteworthy for two major articles: *The First Ascent of Napes Needle*, by the President, W P Haskett Smith (p 5), the classic, *Scafell Central Buttress*, by Sansom (p 17). Millican Dalton again appears with a curiosity, *Dove Nest, Glaramara* (p 78), a place where many of us have amused ourselves. That the war had started is noted by the Editor in his *Foreword* (p 3), written in a tone which strongly suggests that what was going to come was completely unanticipated. (An unfortunate page numbering error occurred in this issue. N8, being the second issue of Vol 3, should have been numbered continuing from the last page of N7. In fact it was restarted from 1. N9 also starts from page 1: it would have been difficult to do otherwise!. Subsequent issues are numbered continuously through the three issues comprising a Volume.)

N 9, 1915, titles itself, *War Issue: Mountaineering Adventures at Home and in the Lands of Our Allies*. The Editor notes (p 3), “*the absence of practically every member of the Club on war service at home or abroad has caused unusual difficulty and delay in obtaining material*”. The Journal begins with a series of letters from members *With The*

Colours, and the obituary of “*the first member to lay down his life in the war*”, Neville Fletcher, p15. Walter Weston, still today fondly remembered in Japan as the father of Japanese mountaineering, gives an account of *Two Climbs in the Japanese Alps*, p75. *Fighting on the Ortler Range*, Davies p 51, reminds us of a front of the war less well known in Britain, but the scene of bitter fighting. (Readers are directed to the relatively recent novel, *A Soldier of the Great War*, Mark Helprin, Hutchinson, 1992, for further insights).

N 10, contains obituaries for Oppenhiemer (p 64) and Herford (p 72). Of the latter, it seems remarkable that he did not receive the commission for which he applied. Many would agree with the judgement, “*he was the greatest rock climber England has yet produced*”. The former’s library of mountaineering books was offered for sale on p 79. One wonders where these particular books now reside. The issue ends with an apology from the Editor (p 77) for the delay in the production of the Journal, “*In these days of common stress, one need not indicate the cause*”. His wife adds, “*at this point my husband has completely broken down*”.

The obituaries continue in N 11, nine in all, including Laurence Slingsby (p 145), (youngest son of Cecil Slingsby), Jeffcoat (p 152) and Claude Worthington (p156). The portraits of smart young men, hardly older than boys, in uniform are almost too much to bear. Normal life is represented in a short note (p 117) by George Bower (G.S.B), on ropes and belays, in which the beginnings of the ideas on dynamic energy absorption are enunciated, “*The correct method is for the second to belay himself to the rocks with his own end of the leader’s rope, and to pass the latter over his shoulder, controlling it with his two hands. The shock of the leader’s fall is then taken up gradually, by the friction of the rope over the body of his companion, and, only when all the slack has thus been taken up does the strain come rigidly on the rock belay*”. In *Victory –and the Future*, p 159, William Palmer enters a debate about the role of climbing clubs should be in introducing and training the many novices who were expected to enter the sport after the war.

Major E B Lees is recorded on p234 of N 12 (1918) to be the last member of the Club known to have fallen in action. The debate about a suitable war memorial is engaged by the Editor (p229), in response to a letter from T C Ormiston-Chant (p 257) in which he proposes the publication of special *Pocket Editions*, “*giving useful information for all parts of the Lake District*”. George Abraham gives an insight to Edward Whymper in *Recollections of a Great Mountaineer and his Mountains*, (p167). If you have come across mention of the fox-hound Charmer’s grave (perhaps in Wainwright, the Southern Fells) on the slopes of the Old Man, you will be interested to read the events described in *Charmer 1911*, p 221.

The *Roll of Honour* (“*Dulce et docorium est pro partia mori*”) containing 19 names of the fallen is given on p 98 of N 13, about 28% of the members recorded as taking part in the war on the previous pages. An account is given of the lighting of a beacon, to mark *Peace Day*, on the summit of Scafell Pike (p 14), illustrated by interesting photographs. G M Trevelyan contributes a commentary on six photographs of the high-alpine warfare in Italy, p3. *New Climbs in Wasdale*, by Holland, p38, represents a welcome return to

rock climbing matters. The Editor, Chorley, writes of the defeat of a plan to construct a motor road over *Styhead Pass*, p 60. The beginning of a London section of the Club can be found on p108.

Fred Botterill's passing is marked with an obituary on p 221 of N 14, as is that of Canon Rawnsley (p223), a Friend of the Lake District before this was an official designation. A letter from George Seatree, *The Club's War Memorial*, p 213, mentions for the first time in the Journal the possibility of purchasing part of Great Gable. Ashley Abraham records in Lake District Fell walking, some marathon fell walking round, culminating in Eustace Thomas' record made on 29th May 1920 (at the age of 51!). On a personal note, Dorothy Pilley's short eulogy, *Rain in the Mountains*, p172, represents my only real link with the personalities of this era. Dorothy and her husband Richards were the landlords of a climbing friend of mine in Cambridge during the 1970's. After a one long discussion with her about mountaineering, she gave me one of the fill-in issues I needed to complete my set of FRCC journals from a huge collection of mountaineering literature stored in her garage.

N 15 marks the beginnings of the activities of the post-war generation. *More New Climbs Around Wasdale*, (p241), was the first of many contributions by H M Kelly. The past is recalled by Heskett Smith in *Wasdale Forty Years Ago*, p 301. Both past and future are the subject of *Mardale*, by Isacc Hinchcliffe, a Manchester City Councillor. Pictures of Mardale Head, the Church and The Dun Bull record the scene before the flooding of the valley for Manchester's water supply. It is fitting to end by mentioning two articles on CB: *The Great Central Buttress of Scafell*, CF Holland, p274 and *Scafell Central Buttress*, p 284, by Bentley Beetham. The former account of the first ascent has become a classic of mountaineering literature and in many ways marks the end of the era represented by the first 15 issues of the FRCC Journal. Holland states his article was "mainly written as a panegyric of Herford", of whom he writes, "He will live in my memory as the finest and bravest man I have ever known".

Roderick A Smith, 1 April 2006