

Climate of Change

by Andy Stewart

The present – Shelf Benches – Summer 2006.

A voice drifts up from below. ‘These crags didn’t used to be as green as this’. I suppose Les should know; he’s been climbing since the 50s. I eye the crux, uncertain about the next move. My arms are beginning to tire; the rock is green and the moves harder than anticipated. Chalk doesn’t help, but I can’t help dipping nevertheless; it’s like a nervous twitch, usually amusing, but not at this particular moment.

‘All that soot kept the lichen off’. He sounds almost wistful about a previous age of air pollution. I make the move, hands slipping slightly, half scared of falling off, the other half scared of losing face.

The Past – The Alps – Summer 2003.

All night long rocks rained down onto the glacier below us. It never got cold that night, even when the sun went down. I woke several times to see Brian sitting up like a meerkat, peering over the parapet of our bivvy at the line of tomorrow’s approach walk. It was lit up sporadically by sparks accompanied by echoing booms and rumbles.

‘Are you sure we’ll be all right doing this route tomorrow?’ He sounded justifiably doubtful.

‘Yes, no worries,’ I said, mindful of Mike’s advice: ‘There’s no point in worrying until you really have to’. ‘If you think I’m going back down you can think again’, I thought to myself. The combined frustration of two previous forays added weight to my determination to succeed this time. Giving up was not an option, not after I’d flogged up the glacier last night to check the crossing onto the rognon. Running the gauntlet of a bowling alley was a small price to pay for a classic alpine route.

We did our route the next day despite Brian’s misgivings. From the crest of the Charmoz-Grépon ridge I had ample opportunity to study our descent route from numerous vantage points. The winding trail of footprints was raked by rockfalls for much of the day. Worse still was the serac barrier marked with an exclamation mark on the topo. I watched two dots run along the path beneath it, no doubt cacking their pants. It felt safe up here. The granite was warm and its texture felt dependable, comforting even. Gliders floated upwards on the late afternoon thermals, wings straining in the turbulent air.

The route followed a classic ridge line, picking its way intricately around gendarmes via smeary slabs, over pinnacles à cheval, descending to

the couloir between the Charmoz and Grépon Aiguilles. The Mummery Crack needed to be negotiated first though; sack off, and a fair bit of huffing and puffing; the odd bolt making up for the lack of nails and tweeds. I take my hat off to Mr Mummery. Then more twists and turns, through holes, along narrow ledges; my feet screaming to be released from rock shoes that were by now a couple of sizes smaller than they needed to be.

On our way down we crossed the bergschrund back onto the lower Nantillon glacier from the blunt arête to its side, to avoid the jumble of steep ice above. I was still licking my wounds after sliding down the last few metres of ice to where the rock began, grating skin off my knuckles and knees. I was annoyed with myself for my carelessness and looking forward to climbing back into my soft, warm pit. A sudden exploding ‘crack’ above startled me out of my reverie. Through the fading light we looked up to see a huge block of ice hurtling towards us over the rim of the icefall. It looked to be the size of a Tranny van; we thought it was over. However clichéd it sounds we both froze momentarily, suddenly aware of our fleeting, fragile presence in these mountains. I was holding the rope, standing in a hollow. Brian was hanging off his axe with his bendy boots flexing. There seemed little point in doing anything. Motionless like the ice we were climbing across. With a dull crump the block of ice disappeared into a crevasse above us. I felt the shock through the soles of my boots. Relieved, but with nerves frayed and jangling, we headed down to a final stumbling around in the dark looking for our bivvy site.

While the Alps were beginning to fall apart that torrid August, 15,000 people quietly died across France, most of them old and unaccustomed to 40-degree heat. They had survived the war, but this was different. As we flew out of Geneva we were unaware of this unfolding national tragedy. I looked out of the plane window at trees, golden brown, in premature desiccated autumn glory.

The Future?

The rockfalls on the Dru are just a foretaste of what is to come. Routes like the Bonatti Pillar and the American Direct have been some of the first to disappear as the permafrost glue, holding together these inspiring spires, begins to melt. Some years may be ‘normal’, but the trend in temperature is inexorably upwards. The extent to which we choose to pin this on natural processes or anthropogenic ones (that’s us in plain English, or US if you’d prefer), is still open to debate. Glacial retreat will continue as ablation losses continue to exceed accumulation gains. Surges triggered by massive quantities of meltwater are occurring in Greenland. The chances are that we will get more summers like 2003, which was the hottest for 200 years, and

led to the closure of Mont Blanc. If the subject interests you read Joe Simpson's article 'Melting Mountains'*

Who knows what the future will bring? The odds are that for the younger members of the Club (those below 50!) times of great change lie ahead. Some of the changes may well be destructive and catastrophic. Glacial areas are sensitive barometers of climate change, and as such experience early effects of climate change in a dramatic way. I've been touched by these events, and it has made a strong impression on me.

We can only speculate about what might happen in the next decade? Maybe we will look back at the times of calm before the storm and wonder how we could possibly have ignored the warning signs, carrying on, business as usual, in an ecologically unsustainable fashion, putting our freedom and lifestyles before the welfare of future generations. As the quote goes: 'The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function'.

So here's some fiction mixed with the odd fact: at home things were different. We rubbed our hands together with glee as winters started to get colder and longer again. The Gulf Stream was slowing and it seemed to be cancelling out global warming. Winters were just like the 1970s and before, such a relief after the soaring temperatures of 2011. There was a renaissance



*Left – Brian on the Nantillon Glacier.
Right – Andy on the Charmoz Ridge.*



*Photo Andy Stewart
Photo Brian Roberts*

in winter climbing. Everyone was into it for a time. Ben Nevis developed its own mini-glacier as the corries filled and the snow remained unmelted through the cooler summers. The CIC hut had to be moved to a new location 500m lower down the Allt a'Mhuilinn.

The last time the Gulf Stream shut off was 12,700 years ago when the Loch Lomond stadial brought freezing temperatures and tundra-like conditions to Britain for over a thousand years. It occurred after a warm period when ice sheets covering North America and North-West Europe had all but melted, sending vast quantities of fresh water into the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans.

The trouble was that our climate was being given only a temporary reprieve, and all that trapped energy nearer the Equator was wreaking utter havoc. Hurricanes pushing outside the Tropics as far north as New York; New Orleans abandoned; deserts extending into southern Europe. Searing summer heat wafted over from a roasting Africa. The British Isles hitherto cushioned from the worst excesses of climate change, balanced on the divide between frigid air from the north and heat from the south, began to experience new alarming weather phenomena. Now the ice tools hang over the mantelpiece collecting dust.



Left – The Aiguille de Midi.



Right – The Petites Jorasses and the Frontier Ridge.

Photo Andy Stewart

Photo Andy Stewart

The Carbon Laws came as a belated attempt to reign in energy consumption in Britain, arriving on the back of public hysteria in southern England after the drought of 2020. The National Water Grid had been talked about, but the infrastructure was not in place. Desalination plants powered by offshore wind energy were springing up along the south coast as fast as China had been building coal-fired power stations back in 2006. The new legislation made cheap air travel a thing of the past. Aviation fuel was taxed at the same rate as petrol, and then the carbon credits system meant in effect fuel rationing. Dwindling oil supplies, instability in the Middle East and climate change were cited as the reasons for austerity measures that hit at the heart of our personal freedom.

It has become difficult to go on big trips. The world is a shrivelled oyster compared to those heady days when we could go anywhere we wanted, within reason. Reason now hems us in. We had our cake and we ate it. We knew it was coming, but most of us thought it was someone else's problem. The media spouted on about it endlessly, the Government talked the talk, and we all carried on as usual, apart from a few Greens who were too few to make a difference anyway. The magnitude of the problem made it too easy to ignore. Even the most popular solutions like carbon offsets were really just a way of consuming our way out of feeling guilty without addressing the cause.

Let's hope it remains fiction.

* www.wordwright.com.au/paul/blog/2005_11_01_cliff_steps.html