

1<sup>st</sup> prize, Prose

# Learning the ropes

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*Moving to Ayrshire from south of the border eight years ago made the highlands, islands and list of unclimbed Munros mercifully more accessible, as did an earlier escape from the responsibility for a variety of local authority cultural services.*

“Get off your knees, you’re climbing it, not making love to it.”

Those below sniggered. Nearby sheep grazed, oozing disdain and a pungent aroma of damp wool. It was a strange exhortation for our geography teacher, “Ichabod”, to bark at a fifteen year old boy.

Ichabod had a way with words and an approach to life and learning that meant those who fell within his sphere listened to what he said. With a squash ball sewn into the sleeve of his gown, he struck recalcitrant, unsuspecting grammar school boys as he guarded his classroom door: yet, he was an inspiring teacher. To accommodate his idiosyncrasies, the school had allocated him a double-sized room for the long shallow zinc trough that dominated one wall. This curious fixture exemplified his teaching philosophy: to understand geography you have to see it.

There was a tap at one end, and a drain hole at the other. It was filled at the tap end with sand. At the beginning of term the tap was opened to release a gentle trickle. Over the course of the term, this was how we learned about the fluvial processes of erosion, deposition, the formation of deltas and even saw the occasional oxbow lake.

Mountains and glaciation on the other hand were more of a challenge, the school kitchen freezers being out of bounds. As a result, regular slideshows, rain-soaked field trips and his infamous “expeditions” did more than just fill the gap. It was on one such expedition that I was subjected to his ribald command. Echoing down the disciplined school corridors where Ichabod usually held sway it might have been considered strange. Amidst the windswept mountains of Snowdonia the admonition veered toward the bizarre side of surreal. Connected to the continuity of life by something that looked as substantial as a pyjama cord, I was thirty feet above the ground, perched on a chapel-sized crag at the edge of a field somewhere near Capel Curig. In the early 1970s you didn’t find yourself outside your comfort zone: you were simply scared. No matter how perverse they sounded, Ichabod’s words were always worth considering. So, I listened.

Under overcast skies, and with a penetrating chill in the summer air, this was my introduction to climbing: genuine climbing, that involved vertical rock and the defiance of gravity. A dozen bedraggled boys stood, shivering and smelling of fear, being given a taste of real adventure by Hubert Wilton Jones, better known by pupils and parents alike as Ichabod, or simply “Bod.” In tougher, more modern schools he would simply have been known as “slap head.” Those who dared enquire about the derivation of his curious nickname were educated about an Old Testament character.

“The glory hath departed” you were told as he drew his palm across the flesh of his polished crown. “See, you do religious studies with me too.”

Apart from a prayer for safe deliverance however, scripture and RE were distant distractions as our canvas plimsolls absorbed early-morning dew from the grass. This outdoor lesson didn't coincide with Ascensiontide: no-one rose effortlessly to the skies. Instead, one by one, with the illusion of safety from that thread above, we teetered, thrutched and thrashed our individual ways to the top. Fingers, numbed with cold, searched in vain for the huge holds Bod insisted we grasp. All I could find were pencil-wide flakes of fragile slate as fingernails scrabbled for purchase. Similarly, lichen-streaked sloping ledges bore no resemblance to the doorsteps he assured me I could use. Without further use of either knee, fuelled by a cocktail of fear and bravado, I gradually ascended, avoiding the embarrassment of being spread-eagled in the centre of the crag, unable to move up or down.

A foot here. Breathe. A finger there. Breathe. Pull on that. Breathe. Twist. Reach. Lean. Look up. Look down. Remember to breathe. When rock no longer reared up in front of me, I realised the danger of being subjected to the ridicule of those below was at an end. I flopped into the welcoming embrace of long wet grass at the top of the crag. With a cruel twist, while prostrate in grateful supplication, I then learned that the ordeal was only halfway through.

Getting to the top of this small crag was one thing, getting down was another. The gentle grassy slope to one side was out of bounds: learning to abseil was next on the timetable. That same rope now had to pass between my legs, over my shoulder and round my back. Bod was of the classical era, before the advent of lightweight devices that kept a swiftly running rope well away from more delicate parts of your anatomy.

“Lean out from the rock and walk backwards down it” Bod bellowed to me and a thousand sheep.

Yeah.

“It's friction: basic physics,” I was informed as gravity took control. I felt the rope tightening, trying to incise a groove as it travelled round different parts of my body. “Don't the science lot teach you anything?” If this went wrong, that initial advice would be redundant for a variety of reasons, of which death was only one. Suffice to say, adrenalin-pumped but sore, a patch of wet turf could not have been more welcome.

“Can we do it again sir?”

For some, clinging to precipitous grey Welsh slate proved a paralysing experience; teenage testosterone terrified into abeyance by verticality and exposure. At school I was academically average, an occasional wing forward for the second XV, and last-minute twelfth man for the second XI: I lived closest to the cricket pitch. My only talent was stamina for cross-country running. But, in the Welsh mountains, I found an emerging confidence. Some shied away from exposure; I was drawn to it: excited, exhilarated. That rope didn't just lead to a sense of relief at the top of a wet Welsh crag, it opened up a route to future riches, the way-points of which were often marked by Bod's aphorisms and unique guidance.

Every few years Bod chose a group of boys to go on a series of “school expeditions.” On an Easter trip youth hostelling in the Lake District we followed in his wake to the tops of a few misty hills and were introduced to the regime of hostel tasks. The way I butter bread still bears the stamp of that experience.

“What have the corners done wrong?” Bod enquired as I worked on the packed lunch production line.

After being squeezed into the back of a long wheel-based Land Rover Defender, our teacher’s pride and joy and transport of choice for his expeditions, we camped amongst the Galloway hills. When they discovered us, we discovered midges. My complaint about their persistent attention elicited one of Bod’s typically unsympathetic responses.

“I’m not surprised, flies go after bad meat.”

Each year the group got smaller as enthusiasm waned and his assessment of our ability got tougher. By surviving his annual cull, I enjoyed the delights of Snowdonia by doing something more than walking and escaping the emptiness of the school’s post O-level timetable.

The group got even smaller in the 6<sup>th</sup> form. Just a handful of us were invited to spend ten days on Skye. Now I was bitten, in more ways than one, as I renewed my acquaintance with midges.

Skye was the pinnacle of Ichabod’s expeditions, one only a favoured few enjoyed. They were planned with military precision and meticulous detail. Ration boxes had lists of contents that were signed by those who packed them.

“If something’s missing, you’ll know who to blame” wasn’t just Bod’s advice, it was a threat. Matches, taken from their fragile boxes, were placed in Kodak film canisters, a small piece of sandpaper glued to the inside of the lid.

“It’s easier to keep dry than get dry,” was, and continues to be, sage advice.

From Sligachan to Glen Brittle, from the Quirang to the Old Man of Storr, that expedition in 1973 stretched our horizons, and I climbed my first Munro: Bruach na Frithe.

“If I get a rope do you fancy doing something more vertical?” asked a friend and fellow Ichabod expeditionary as soon as school became a thing of the past.

Given my response to the earlier carnal advice, the question was neither strange nor unexpected. To my mother, who was in the room as we planned a supposed walking trip to Scotland, it was a bolt from the blue. I could tell she was mentally listing objections, most prominent of which was, “do you know what you’re doing?”

At a climbing shop the next day we were initiated into the mysteries of 9mm and 11mm kernmantel, moacs and hexentrics, sit-harnesses and screw-gate karabiners. Hard-earned holiday wages financed my initial climbing gear and unlocked enthusiasm and excitement for future years. Then, a university grant funded more, including crampons and an ice-axe that are still in use today. The seed sown and nurtured by Bod above a Welsh field was healthy and growing.

Youthful enthusiasm, naïveté or, was it a case of what you didn't know wouldn't worry you? That's the top, let's get there: simple. Although they were still an alien concept, by the time my Munro count reached double figures I'd already reached the top of a handful on the Cuillin Ridge (including the Inn Pinn at least twice), done The Ben twice (both via the Carn Mor Dearg arête), and traversed Aonach Eagach.

A lifetime's expedition was well under way.

And so to the present day, striding towards the Cuillin ridge again. The circularity was obvious, the memory and influence of an unseen mentor was palpable, unmistakable.

After arriving at Sligachan the evening before, I'd followed the burn upstream to find the place where the growing seedling had been nurtured. I found the spot, a small hollow by a pool on the Allt Daraich that, over forty years ago, accommodated a handful of tents, two teachers and half a dozen schoolboys who meddled with ancient primus stoves during the last week of the summer term. In the distance, pinnacles, teeth and the iconic, jagged skyline looked down just as they had in 1973. Then, to a seventeen year-old, the Cuillin was an alien world of unpronounceable names, reached only by ferry, at the end of an interminable drive north from Yorkshire. Sitting on the slope above our campsite, scoffing reheated stew, tinned peas and watery Smash off metal plates, we had stared across the glen at the ramparts of the ridge and prepared to set foot on its slopes.

The next morning, under mercifully benign and sympathetic skies, and without an honour-guard of midges, I took the final steps in a Munro odyssey that started four decades earlier. As I neared the top of Am Basteir, my final Munro, the finger-scouring gabbro transformed into damp Welsh slate. Worries about exposure and an awkward move were pushed aside: one anxiety remained.

Whether on a gritstone edge, a Lakeland buttress or an alpine aiguille, I'm consumed with guilt of Catholic proportions if I use a knee to surmount even the most challenging move. I feel obliged to obey Ichabod's command. So, the echo of his admonition first scolded, then guided, before finally inspiring me up the final few feet.

A forty six year-old lesson had finally come to an end.

Do they make teachers like that anymore?