

# Letters

**Austin answers criticism of new Langdale guide, and explains reasons for omitting Matheson's routes. "I do not see crags as impressive backcloths where ruthless men can construct their climbs"**

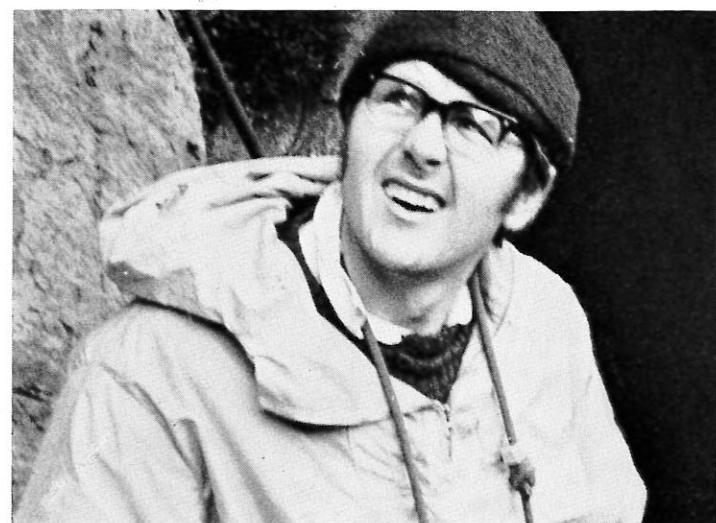


Photo: Roper

Austin – Defender of the Faith or harsh dictator?

## Austin's Answer

Dear Sir,  
Taking the points made by Rob Matheson in your last issue in the order raised, the reasoning underlying the decisions made was as follows.

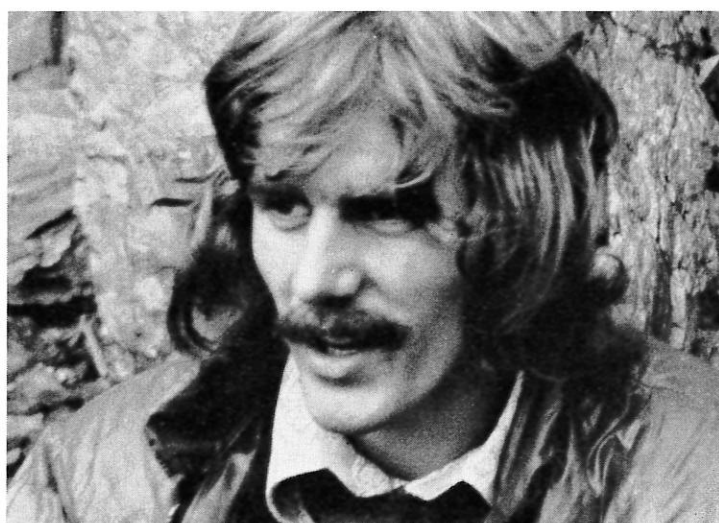
It was felt that the first two pitches of *The Sun* were merely a method of extending the main pitch into a full length route. They actually climbed the same features as the parent route a few feet to the side. A discussion with Tony Barley confirmed this opinion, and we decided to drop them.

I may point out here that the same criteria were used on my routes and on routes by other F.R.C.C. members. Last summer, for instance, I did a route to the right of *F Route* on Gimmer. I mentioned to Valentine that I was thinking of including two lower pitches to give it some length. The reply was immediate and to the point. The route is now a direct finish to *Whit's End*.

With regard to honesty and *Ragman's Trumpet*, I am aware that attempts had been made on this crack and that Pete Livesey got a considerable way up, but stories of an earlier ascent are untrue. I am satisfied that Rod Valentine was the first man to reach the ledge above the right wall of Stoney Buttress by climbing the big wall crack. As to whether the later line was "greatly superior", it really doesn't matter. I believe the first line on a new wall or buttress must be a natural one. Direct routes, 'eliminate' type routes, various hybrids and so on can come later. Essentially a great mountaineering line like this must follow the easiest way.

One may wish that this fine corner was the only way, or that that line of jugs over there was somewhere else, but one can't ignore the fact of their existence. The correct solution to a rock problem must be the easy one. The finish produced by Pete Livesey is a very fine one, but it isn't even direct; it is well to one side of the crack. Any criticism on this score would have been better directed at (say) *Gillette*, where the later finish was at least direct.

*Cruel Sister* was omitted from the guide because I did not believe it had been climbed. I cannot see how a party can claim to have been successful when, having failed on the crux, they have simply gone round to the top of the cliff, hung a sling down over it and then swarmed up from below. Surely rock climbing is a challenge, and superb lines like this rib throw down their challenge to succeeding generations of climbers, until eventually along comes someone who can do the climb. I do not see crags as an impressive back-cloth where ruthless men can construct their climbs. However, this put me in a difficult situation. Obviously, I found it hard to reconcile my belief that climbing is basically a 'hands-and-feet' job with routes such as *Cruel Sister*, *Peccadillo* and *Kaisergerbirge*, and I seriously thought that I ought to leave the job to someone else on the grounds that I was out of touch with the modern climber. But when I saw the truly remarkable competence of the very talented young climbers now at work in my own area, and particularly when I saw the enormous amount of effort and thought that



Matheson – a climber wronged or embittered critic?

they were putting into making such free ascents as the *Left Wall of Cenotaph*, or the *Central Wall at Kilnsey*, I realized that it wasn't me who was out of touch.

Incidentally, I would point out that the locals do not regard me as a particularly 'pure' climber. The modern viewpoint is illustrated by a remark that floated in from the background when I was holding a runner in order to clip into it: "If it's not aid, what are you holding it for?"

Bringing in *Pendulum* does not improve the case. *Pendulum* was already an old route (1952/53 vintage) when the last guide was written (1965), and it was even then too old for any decision or pronouncement to be made. I can therefore see no reason why the existence of *Pendulum* should be made an excuse for indiscriminate sling-hanging and so on.

With regard to my statements on *Cruel Sister*: when I said that I had used tension and all I knew to get on to that rib, Matheson misconstrued it if he thought I meant pitons. In fact, the first ascent of *Arcturus* was an attempt on this rib. I tried to traverse right, just above the overhang, from the holly tree stance on *Arcturus*. This failed, so I tried it again with the rope through a runner in the crack which eventually became the next pitch of *Arcturus*. Again I failed. No pitons were used. I regard skyhooks as tools of the aid man – as the Americans do. My enquiry as to why Matheson hadn't used a peg merely meant that I saw no merit in using a skyhook as opposed to a peg. At that time, I assumed (quite reasonably, I think) that the

peg and sling I could see had been put in from below. It wasn't until that evening that Dave Miller told me the tale of the sling.

Regarding the absence of *Risus* and *Fallen Angel*: new routes were being done all that summer, and it was obvious that we would have to fix a deadline, which we did. These two routes (and several others) were recorded after the deadline. It would have been possible to include them in an addendum, but I was against this. As guidebooks appear every five years, I felt there was no great need for an addendum, and I believe the climbing is better served if descriptions are checked before being used.

Our ascent of *Paladin* was made using the aid described by Matheson, with one slight change – we did not see that there was any difference between an aid peg and a protection peg on the first one. To reach over a bulge, place a peg, clip into it and then climb up until one's waist is level with the peg struck me as begging the issue. The amount of free climbing in such a place must depend on factors such as the keenness of the second, the distress shown by the leader, and just what the party, any party, means by 'take in'. We found a second peg, complete with knotted sling, under the big overhang. It wasn't mentioned in the description, but we didn't know of anyone else who had been up there, so we clipped in and noted it down. Over the overhang we used a nut instead of a peg.

Matheson later said he had climbed it free. Once again I was reluctant to alter the

**"Matheson . . . most of his climbs have used aid" states critic. "Austin and Valentine conducting witch hunt against climbers." "Does the F.R.C.C. have a guidebook policy? If so, what is it?"**

description without checking it, but I placed a note in the list of first ascents mentioning the improvement.

Matheson is incorrect in calling *Swordblade* "Barley's fine route" (in fact he called it a *fine line* – our error, Ed.). It was a scruffy little route, unpleasant and with less than 60ft. of independent climbing. In Tony Barley's opinion it was a "poor route – and probably over-aided". *Aragon* was included on the insistence of its progenitor, and as I had not even been up to look at it, and as it was climbed before the deadline, I was in a poor position to argue for its omission.

As far as the routes on East Raven are concerned, I am solely to blame for their inclusion. Valentine wanted to "scrap 'em all", but I felt there was a place for this sort of climb on Raven.

As for *Nadir*, Syrett was of the same opinion as Matheson. He wanted to scrap it, but the break through the wall is a natural one, and a good one, and there isn't really a handy climb to graft it on to. It has to stand on its own, even if the rest of it is pretty poor.

The first time I heard of the *Green Groove* finish to Pluto was in Matheson's letter. Turning now to *The Graduate*: last summer, Matheson sent me a description of this route which I considered used far too much aid for such a short climb. I intended to scrap it. Matheson insisted that it was a fine climb and that all the aid was justified. Then we remembered that Les Brown had done a climb in this area. Sure enough it turned out to have been the same climb, with about the same amount of aid as Matheson had used. Les had decided that it was too short and needed too much aid, so he didn't record it. The fact that the aid has now been reduced to one peg only reinforces the correctness of the original decision.

*Peccadillo* certainly repulsed Valentine and Fearnough, but they did no worse than the party that made the first ascent. The sling that Valentine just failed to reach was not the one the first-ascent team reached. They had made use of a longer one and left a shorter one. This, of course, is one reason why we are reluctant to use descriptions that have not been checked, and why we have guidebook writers at all. It also raises another point about routes which need permanent slings, namely that the difficulty encountered can vary with the length of sling left

by the previous party. The possibilities in this respect are endless!

Turning to the point about diagrams: we decided, as a policy, not to overcrowd diagrams and to omit new routes if, by including them, we would run the risk of reducing the usefulness of the diagrams. Discerning readers will have noticed that there is a revised diagram of Raven Crag, showing fewer routes.

Regarding the grade of new climbs, I can hardly be blamed for the lack of new lower grade routes. And as for the missing 30%, if it is 30%, I think this is probably accounted for in the points already raised and thus needs no more explanation. Finally, regarding the closing half-column of his letter, I feel that Matheson does not expect a reply.

Yours, etc.,  
Allan Austin (Bradford)

## Examining Matheson's Talents

from John Harwood

Dear Sir,  
In his letter in *Mountain 28* Matheson raised two basic points: firstly, the crediting of climbs to the right party and, secondly, the arbitrary omission of climbs by guide writers. With regard to the first, I can't understand why *Sally Free and Easy* was not included in the guide as such. It includes probably the best pitch recently climbed in Langdale Valley (the 2nd of *Ragman's Trumpet*) and is a tribute to all that is best in modern climbing, being steep, continuous and free. Thus far, in the absence of sensational revelations, I am in complete agreement with Matheson. However, when it comes to the omission of a number of named routes, I must side with the guidebook writers. Austin has been a thorn in the side of many a climber in the past, when his caustic Yorkshire tongue has dismissed their best efforts as 'aid routes' or 'variations'. It seems to me that he may have been ten years ahead of his time – as far as his principles are concerned and, fortunately, his (usually) high ethical standards have rubbed off on the next generation – Ken Wood and John Syrett, to name but two. Most people who climb new routes, and like climbing them, resort to aid at times – I've certainly not been blameless in this – but with dwindling lines and multiplying aids it is clear that almost any piece of rock

can now be ascended. Whilst admitting Matheson's obvious climbing skill, it must be pointed out that most of his climbs have used aid in one form or another. Glaring examples include *Blitz* (excessive aid), *Holocaust* (a nut hammered into the only hole – what happens when the wire breaks?) and *Cruel Sister*. *Cruel Sister*, *Peccadillo* and *Kaisergerbirge Wall* were all presumably omitted because the use of slings placed by abseil. The dictionary says that to climb is to "ascend, using the hands and feet"; the idea of going to the top of the cliff first is therefore farcical, to say the least.

Matheson equates *Pendulum* with *Cruel Sister*, but times have changed a lot since 1953. After all, who would condemn Brown for climbing *Cenotaph* with aid? The object nowadays should surely be to climb new routes free; if that is impossible, they should be left for the next man. I hope these comments stir Matheson to go right out and give us a new climb worthy of his obvious talents.  
Yours,  
John Harwood (Leeds)

## What is the Fell and Rock policy?

from Roger Grimshaw

Dear Sir,  
In *Mountain 28* Colin Read makes an impassioned plea for understanding for the poor guide writer who faces criticism from those of apparently lesser intellect. In the light of this Matheson's letter on the same issue may seem to smack of self-interest or sour grapes. However in *Mountain 25* Read himself criticized Roper before publication of the *Buttermere* guide, for strictures apparently less severe than those of Austin. There are climbers with no axe to grind, either in terms of new routes or early repetitions, who feel that the *Fell and Rock*, and Austin and Valentine in particular, are not only being inconsistent, but are conducting a witch hunt against climbers who use aid – specifically Matheson and Livesey. Certainly it is right to have an ethical code and no one could dispute with the F.R.C.C. for adopting a purist attitude. However the inconsistencies of Austin's argument leave a nasty taste in the mouth. Austin top-roped *Wall of Horrors*, later found protectable, on the grounds that it could not be protected. He also used pegs on



Photo: Roper

John Wilkinson – F.R.C.C. Guidebook Editor.

*Man of Straw* (for protection) and *Rainmaker* (for aid) – pegs which are not now needed. Clearly he thought his actions justified and ethical. In the Langdale guide, routes using aid are included (*Pendulum* on *Deer Bield* and *If on Gimmer*), and routes which are little more than variations are included as separate entities: *Virgo* on *Neckband* for example is merely a direct start to *Nectar*. Does the F.R.C.C. have a guidebook policy? If so, what is it? Relatively few climbers are likely to repeat difficult XS climbs, but if the routes exist climbers have a right to be made aware of them. They can exercise their own judgement in determining worth, enjoyment, etc. Acknowledgement for new climbs and variations is part of the climbing game (otherwise why bother with a historical list) and as such should be made public.

Most of us appreciate the labours undertaken in the preparation of a climbing guide, but the Fell and Rock writers have chosen to enter the public arena and, no matter how monolithic the club, they must expect criticism from those who disagree. The F.R.C.C. has a virtual monopoly in Lakeland; this should not be abused. Hopefully someone may choose to step down from an ivory crag and outline club policy. This is no Watergate, but a word would be welcome.  
Yours, etc.  
Roger Grimshaw (Ulverston)



**"Immature hardman of today requires self-gratification and ego-massage." American Safety Committee Chairman denounces McNaught Davis article. Roberts speculates on likely Everest route.**

**The Three-Tiered Extreme Grade**

from Ed Moore

Dear Editor,  
Recent proposals to grade extremes into MXS, XS and HXS emphasizes the desperate need to rationalize the English grading system into coherent, meaningful standards remaining consistent for a considerable time.  
With the increase in climbing standards (or is it aid?), it may be desirable to eliminate the lowest grades; but we must remember that guides are more for the novice than the competent hardman, who can still surely select from the listing within the grade routes of greater difficulty – if not, a refresher course in the three R's is required.  
The apparent justification for gradings other than VS, HVS and XS seems founded on a neurotic insecurity existing in the immature hardman of today, who requires the self-gratification and ego-massage which comes from being able to explain in the bar, to girl-friends etc., the routes done.  
Really, this and the increasing competitiveness in climbing should be contained at the level of the individual's satisfaction in doing his own thing, easy or hard, and in such a way that he can readily differentiate between easy and hard without further use of redundant superlatives. Finally, over-guidance, specification, and minute detailing of routes inevitably detracts from the intrinsic quality of the climb and its creator. Grading is a subjective appraisal based on long qualified experience and as such cannot by its nature be too precise.  
Yours faithfully,  
Ed Moore (Walton-le-Dale)

**Climbing and Safety**

from the Chairman of the American Alpine Climbing Club Safety Committee

Dear Sir,  
I am writing with regard to Ian McNaught-Davis's commentary on safety, in *Mountain 26*. Ridiculous as it is to maintain that climbing should be made free of risks, it is more ridiculous to advocate that inexperienced people should learn to climb in bad weather, with poor equipment and a clothes line for a rope. The dangers of climbing are inherent and will remain so, despite any technical developments. Ambitious projects almost always involve danger. It seems likely that future generations will prove as ambitious as past ones and will throw caution to the winds in attempting to execute bold new projects, even if they had the misfortune to learn climbing at a mountain centre rather than in a catch-as-catch-can way.  
Safety considerations play a central role in climbing. They enable one to control and evaluate the level of risk involved. With proper care they will allow a large and interesting range of possibilities for the climber in terms of the nature and degree of risks taken. Even if one regards climbing simply as a testing ground for nerve and body, safety matters are important. What test of nerve can there be if one has no true appreciation of the actual risks involved? Perhaps some zest may be derived from climbing by thinking of it as a highly exciting and dangerous sport. But the idea of a considerable number of people being killed or maimed, simply in order that we may enjoy the luxury of feeling adventurous and brave ourselves,

is neither humane nor pleasant. Exposing the biases and excesses of various groups associated with mountain safety is worthwhile. However, climbing is more than just the courting of risk. Among other things it involves a controlled and informed approach to mountain hazards, and here the various safety groups are helpful. The actual level of risk is difficult to assess, but it appears to be considerable among active young climbers.  
This assertion is supported by the fact that the annual death rate due to violent causes among American Alpine Club members over a twenty-year span was 3.8 times that for all males in the United States. And this cannot be explained away on the basis of the age distribution of the club members: eighty percent of the deaths were caused by climbing accidents.  
In view of this, due caution seems in order, and attempts to reduce the toll should be supported. A return to the Good Old Days of plimsolls and clothes lines does not seem called for.  
Yours,  
Peter L. Renz (Seattle)

**The best route on the South West Face of Everest**

from James Roberts

Dear Sir,  
Doug Scott's suggestion in *Mountain 26* that the Rock Band might be attempted by the gully or chimney lines on the left (West) tucked in below the West Ridge, is not original, although he may have a point when he writes that the line is worth a closer examination. After consultation with the Japanese who had been on the face both in 1969 and 1970, all the preliminary planning of the International Expedition in 1971 was based on the use of this western route. The left-hand of the two V chimneys seems to run up into the West Ridge itself, and this was an important factor in the selection of the West Ridge as a second route – it seemed not impossible that climbers on the ridge might be able to assist those on the face. The Japanese even described one of the chimneys (I think the left one, but I am not now certain) as looking 'quite easy'.

The vertical height of the Rock Band is lowest on the left and highest on the right. Also, as Doug points out, the difficult climbing starts at a lower altitude on the left.

When Whillans and Haston arrived on the scene at the beginning of May 1971 there was, of course, no longer a party on the West Ridge and the left-hand chimneys looked the opposite of quite easy. They knew that the support effort maintaining them on the face could not continue much longer, so they took the line of least resistance and traversed towards the right-hand edge of the Rock Band. The height of Camp 6 is about equal to the top of the left-hand portion of the band but, although the traverse had improved their height, the difficulties of the band were still above them.

Now that we know that there is no very favourable line up the true face on the right, it seems worth having a closer look at the left. I must say however that I don't think the left-hand route was ever seriously considered on the 1972 British Expedition for the reason (I presumed) that Dougal had already rejected it as a possible line. Certainly he and Don had been emphatically against it the year before.

'International conflict' is still being mentioned as a reason for past failures, but in 1971 (if not in the Spring of 1972) the true causes were the exceptionally bad weather, an unnecessary death and a very high rate of serious illness. On I.H.E. 1971, international conflict lost the expedition only one climber capable of reaching the summit by a difficult route, Michel Vaucher, and far from being a blow to morale it roused a sort of 'Dunkirk spirit' among those left still fit enough to climb.

Scott, philosophizing about the reasons for failures in the past, tends to downgrade the importance of good weather. Probably both the 1971 and post-monsoon 1972 expeditions would have got nearer to the summit had they been favoured by more normal weather conditions. And, given that the Spring season is more favourable than the Autumn for Everest (but not only for that reason), of the two expeditions that of 1971, given just a little less bad luck, probably contained the better ingredients for success.  
Yours, etc.,  
James Roberts (Kathmandu)

# New Books

**Nunn scans Canadian and British Alpine Journals. Gray: "it is time women invaded the closed cloisters of South Audley Street."**

**The Canadian Alpine Journal 1973**

Edited by Andrew Gruft  
**Alpine Club of Canada**

This large-format and heavily illustrated journal concentrates on activities, laying heavy stress on exploratory climbing and new routes and including some impressionistic and introspective *Ascent*-style writing, not surprisingly on Yosemite.

Its range is continent-wide, with occasional excursions south, though writing styles and the easy flow of ideas pull it together into a stimulating memorial to an active climbing world. In reality there may be many sub-groups at work in Canadian climbing, but a lot of them get their say here, including the Easterners and Quebecois, the Arcticians and the great snow and rubble trappers of the Rockies, and rockmen of every degree. U.K. expatriates get their oar in too, though here my reviewer's brief is shaky, as I run a certain risk in discussing the outpourings of my contemporaries. Fortunately they seem to talk a lot of sense, and to fit into the editorial tolerances rather well, which saves me a lot of trouble. The occasional rasp into verse is allowed, alongside some quite acceptable photography. People do some queer things in the articles: parachuting on to the Penny Icebergs in Baffin, trying to decide who went all the way up some "Complete North Arête", and referring to two unfortunate super-numeraries on Doug Scott's Asgard trip as "Nottsman" (Anglo-Irish and Yorkshire/Lancashire half-breeds).

A good salvo and useful philosophy emanate from the honourable Editor. Perhaps, with all that space in Canada, he can afford it, but he welcomes the advent of the masses into climbing, because he rejects the *élitism* of high priests such as Chouinard *et al*. Of course, whatever the temptations to think otherwise, he is right about values: "the only reasonable argument is that climbers should not do things that adversely affect other climbers' enjoyment of the mountains". In going on to regard moralizing as a "reactionary trend", and in detecting lack of imagination in those who persist in frequenting crowded places but also persist in complaining, he pursues an eminently defensible line which hits at the

shallowness of many of our pet arguments. Finally, business interests get their usual and often deserved drubbing, particularly at the super-bureaucratic level. It appears that they must take much of the blame for deterioration in some areas, as they also take the responsibility for paying for most of the advertising which keeps the whole circus rolling – and in our society where does one go from there?  
Paul Nunn

**The Alpine Journal 1973**

Edited by Edward Pyatt  
**£2.50 (soft cover) £3.50 (hard)**

Being a "record of mountain adventure and scientific observation", the austere *Alpine Journal* ought not to be compared with glossy 'mags'. It makes or breaks on the breadth, quality and authority of its articles.

The traditional gourmet fare is maintained in the 1973 edition, with topics ranging from the British back-yard to the Himalaya, from altitude sickness to Etna, from philosophy of climbing to social engineering. It is a diet for Renaissance men still foolish enough to tangle with mountains. Travellers' tales provide bread and butter, with a globe-trotting ubiquity now expected of this journal, reflecting the antiquity of the club and the experience of empire. Not that the foreigner is prevented from having his say, there being at least eight articles written by non-British contributors, and a total contribution much greater than that from abroad.

The most notable feature of the current edition is its healthy pluralism, which appears outstanding even in an unusually broadminded journal. A vast multiplicity of viewpoints, replete with contradictions, is presented, to the great benefit of the journal's continuing authority. This pleasing open-mindedness may be more apparent when a few examples are quoted. Surveys of various areas of the world are a regular feature of the journal. Some of these surveys (e.g. Corsica) encourage the visitor, while others almost seek to keep him away (e.g. Nelson's Mountains). In another vein there are celebrations both of eventful non-ascents and of traditional 'success' stories. Among the writers, apart from the numerous imported contributors, even the old are allowed a say now

and again. Nor is there any attempt to make bigger mountain experience seem qualitatively better than outcropping or the intermediate games. This tolerance, which is displayed in a sympathetic article on the Jura as well as in others on Outcrops, is best summed up by Dennis Gray in his article on the future of climbing in Britain: "If a man wants to be solely an amphibious climber, a rock hopper or a snow and ice gymnast, that is his business". As to the 'technical' content, there seems to be concern for issues rather than particular climbs, with more about the environment and less about the individuals involved.

An article on the A.C. archives seemed a little dry, and the British notes lacked highlights or any insight into Scotland; but in such an ambitious journal these are trivial matters. How can one carp in the face of genuine attempts to find a viable viewpoint on climbing developments, without there being any tendency to fall into simple unified views of climbing ethics or aesthetics? In this respect, Dennis Gray's article and Francis Keenleyside's *The Heart of the Matter* are quite outstanding. Both push the reader towards a sophisticated view of the likely future developments in a sport which is inherently and necessarily 'useless'. On the topic of climbing competitions, for example, Dennis Gray's pluralism leads him to feel that "everyone will have to weigh in the balance for himself whether it is a good thing or a bad thing and whether he wishes to take part". He attempts to resolve the paradox between his liberal view and his distrust of changing values in mountaineering by criticizing the Mountain Schools for producing a "whole generation and type of climber so removed in values as to change the whole basis of this country's climbing". Searches for a philosophy always seem to involve pitfalls. Is not this generation of aliens already within the gates – with Mr. Gray as their official spokesman in relation to older entrenched

positions, no matter how uncomfortable that might be? Certainly Mr. Gray takes the progressive view: "... it is time women invaded the closed cloisters of South Audley Street ... and we aliens might cheer not only at that prospect, but at the idea of women playing more than an occasional decorative role in this great old journal too. That would only be the beginning of change in our creaking, beloved ancient institutions, together with an end to the peculiarly ambiguous view of leadership expressed in Trevor Braham's article on *The Himalaya – Winds of Change*."  
Paul Nunn

**NEW GUIDES**

**Chair Ladder**

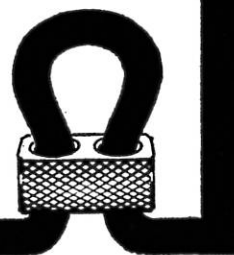
by R. Gook and M. White  
**Published privately: 40p**  
As stop-gaps go this is good enough, but it really only adds a few more routes and rationalizes a few outdated gradings. What a pity that the Climbers' Club couldn't manage the simple task of revising Stevenson's admirable guide! Frustrated devotees would then not have been forced to take matters into their own hands. The numerical pitch gradings seem fair, but the star ratings are rather overdone (deduct one star in most cases). Personally I was sorry to see that *Overhanging Chimney* is downgraded and dismissed, while that pathetic route *Seal Slab* apparently continues to mesmerize everyone. *The Mitre* receives belated (but exaggerated) recognition, and *Bishop's Rib* is sensibly downgraded. *Chair Ladder* remains a great place for the middle-grade climber, with a day or two of interest for the wandering hot shot.  
Ken Wilson

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