

The Old Man and the legend



Britain's finest sea stack. The *Bonington/Patey/Baillie* (480 feet, 5.9) climbs the crack system facing the camera.

BY PAUL PRITCHARD

Regular columnist Greg Child is taking a sabbatical this issue. Filling his shoes is the British climber and adventurer Paul Pritchard.

The snow fell in hypnotic waves. We squinted as the windshield wipers beat frantically to give us some inkling as to which direction the road would turn next. The wheels spun on the snowy and steep mountain pass and the car slithered to a halt in a deep drift. It was almost midsummer in the Scottish Highlands.

Climbing Scotland's crumbling classic with Middendorf

What were we doing here when we could have stayed at home in Wales? Suliman, my companion on this journey, began to blubber and said his feet were frozen. I reminded him that we must press north — John Middendorf was visiting from America and was waiting for us to climb the Old Man of Hoy, a crumbling sea stack off the coast of the Orkney Islands.

In Britain, Middendorf is a legend. His Great Trango climb captured the imagination of the whole climbing community. You see, the British don't have big cliffs, not *really* big cliffs, so to us the big waller is a strange species: a hard, armored technician who smokes lots of pot and hangs, ghetto blaster pumping out '60s tunes, on a golden wall in the Californian sun. *Yosemite Climber*, that's what we've based our image of you Yanks on. I was into big walling too, in my unrefined, British, "have a go" way, and if I went climbing with Middendorf perhaps some of his skill would rub off on me. So, I'd said yes, yes, and thrice yes before bothering to check the forecast.

We got the car moving again and headed further into the wilderness. We'd arranged to meet Deucey, as his friends call him, at the port of Scrabster for the midday ferry to the Orkney Islands. It was 6 a.m. and we had a good six-hour drive ahead of us. The snow stopped and we sped through glens and over moors. All was going *well until the car* sputtered and died. Out of diesel. My Turkish friend berated me for not keeping my eye on the fuel consumption. I retaliated, saying that it was his car and he was driving and he should have had his eye on his

Photo: Paul Pritchard

fuel gauge. A fight nearly broke out. Then I spotted a farm on the horizon. We trudged through the snow and banged on the door. No answer. We banged again. A window opened upstairs and a red-faced man in a night gown appeared.

"Excuse us, but we seem to have run out of fuel. Do you think you could spare us some of your red diesel?"

The farmer replied with some incomprehensible gruntings and disappeared. Then the door opened, and two large, jolly brothers came to our aid. They talked in a strong Gaelic dialect, and as far as we could gather, were discussing our language. We nodded and said yes a lot, a little embarrassed about being English, and with the illegal non-taxed red in the tank, we sped off. If we could average 80 mph we might just make it.

On the quay side in the drizzle sat Deucey. He had brought his mother, brother, and fiancée on a family holiday and had, somehow, managed to steer them away from visiting castles and towards this masochistic venture. They insisted that they were having a good time, though, and were glad to have come. The ship was about to leave, so we dragged our kit aboard and embarked for the island of Hoy.

Deucey asked an old Scot if the weather was always like this. "In the Highlands," he said, "we have nine months of winter and three months of bad weather." At least the midges hadn't hatched yet.

No photographs or stories can prepare you for the sight of the Old Man, standing like a Rameses, arms folded, guarding the entrance to the Scapa Flow, soaking up the patches of sunshine that the scudding clouds allow it in front of the quiet, dark mass of Saint Johns Head. At roughly 1200 feet high, Saint Johns Head is the largest piece of steep rock in the UK. The ship sailed so close to the towering cliffs that we could trace the lines of the famous routes, and Deucey was impressed that we actually had some decent-sized walls in Britain.

The following day dawned to rain and sea spray, which lashed against the windows of the hut we had acquired. Deucey and his fiancée, Casey, hung in a portledge from the rafters with sad looks on their faces. Today was Deucey's only chance of climbing the Old Man, but in this weather it was an impossibility. After waiting as long as he could, he reluctantly packed his bags. I felt sad, too. My only chance to climb with the great man was slipping away, like fingers from a lichen-covered

hold, in the horizontal rain. We said our good-byes, made those vague, often futile plans for the future, and off they trudged into the mist.

Suliman and I passed the time playing backgammon and chatting with two women who also had designs on the Old Man. With any luck we'd get it tomorrow. But around mid-afternoon an eerie peace descended, and we opened the bothy door to see that the wind had stopped and the rain had reverted back to a mild drizzle. I was keen to get moving. If we were fast we could bag the route that evening. Suliman grumbled and packed his gear.

After an hour of wading through a landscape of peat bog and rolling mist we arrived at the overlook. There was the Old Man, at close quarters in a Jules Verne setting of dripping vegetation and a surging, swelling North Atlantic. Arctic skuas swooped, unfriendly, out of the cloud and a million sea birds squawked. Primeval. Suliman and I milled around, slightly unsure. The women were ahead of us. We could see them, tiny dots at the foot of the column. Then Suliman spoke ... "We must go."

"Go! But we've come all this way. We could at least give it a try."

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Mark Richey on pitch 38 of Shaving's East Wall. Images by John Bouchard

"You misunderstand me, Paul. I mean we must go and climb this monster."

We descended the treacherous grass slopes towards the base of the stack, winding our way down sloping, muddy footholds, clinging onto the wet foliage. We were halfway down when we came across three figures perched on a rock. Deucey, Casey, and brother Roxy. Deucey raised his hands and smirked. After he had left us, a local told him of how the weather was "clearing up," even though it continued to rain. He had always wanted to climb the Old Man, ever since as a youngster he had read Royal Robbins' account of the route, and he couldn't give it up easily.

Suliman and I were delighted. We skipped down to the start and uncoiled the ropes while being observed by a posse of seals. From below, the tower seemed to rock to and fro, and I felt giddy on the first, poorly protected pitch. Deucey came up third with his "Action Man," a small doll that he carries for luck. The next pitch was the Big One. I had broken my back in Scotland the previous year, so begged off. Deucey's excuse was that he was, at the present, a business man and hadn't been climbing all year. Suliman wasted no time and fought his way up the soft, sandy squeeze, hot

on the heels of the English women. Deucey lowered a loop of rope to the ground and hauled up cigarettes before we each seconded the greasy grovel.

The original *Bonington/Patey/Baillie* ascends the landward face of the stack, and on this day it offered some respite from the cold blasts coming off the sea. The big-wall legend got the next lead, a pitch where the wet lichen had given the surface of the smooth sandstone the feel of used engine oil. As he followed, Suliman offered foreign epithets whenever his feet skated on the slippery rock.

Deucey likened the Old Man to another great rock monolith: Standing Rock in Utah's Monument Basin. The slenderness of the tower, the isolation, the soft rock, and the craziness of scheming to climb here all compare. But the greatest similarity is perhaps between the desert and the sea — both are vast, hollow expanses that reflect your thoughts and give your imagination space to wander.

On the higher pitches our feet went numb but we were lucky not to encounter any fulmar chicks, which have the nasty habit of vomiting on you — with great accuracy — from any distance. They are a most serious threat when sea-cliff climbing in Britain and can hit you square

in the face with a kind of evil fish soup.

The final corner was a joy and almost dry. We gave it to Deucey, as we wanted him to have the summit experience. On top in the wind and gathering darkness, we posed for pictures amidst a troupe of puffins, who bobbed up and down and eyed us inquisitively. We didn't stay long in the closing light. On the rappels Deucey was shocked to see Suliman unclip from the belay and do a traditional Turkish dance on a narrow, slimy ledge. He was just happy and couldn't stop himself.

We met up with Casey, who had waited patiently in the rain, and crossed the moors in midnight darkness, chattering excitedly about more sea-cliff adventures. And there, in almost total blackness, we said goodbye to Deucey and Casey. It was a farewell made better than the one before, with success and a dream in the bag.

Paul Pritchard has put up new routes on Baffin Island's Mount Asgard, the Central Tower of Paine in Patagonia, El Capitan, and climbed Pakistan's Trango Tower. He lives in North Wales and has just published his first book, Deep Play, a treatise on the '80s punk climbing scene in Britain.

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