

# The North Face of Mount Geikie

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*"I am sure you have given me all the heaviest stuff,"  
said Frodo. "I pity snails, and all that carry their homes  
on their backs."*

T. R. R. TOLKIEN, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

I APOLOGIZE, dear reader, for the rather ordinary article which this sentence introduces. How I had hoped to write something that would be more entertaining than the typical account of a climb with its all too predictable pattern. The introduction, in which the names of the members of the party, the name and side of the peak climbed, a sentence or two in praise of the peak and/or of the party, a bit of history and often some humorous yarn are skillfully woven into the fabric of the story, e.g. "We were . . . climbers who had come . . . to attempt a great alpine face,"<sup>1</sup> "a challenge on ice and rock,"<sup>2</sup> (located) "in one of the more remote valleys of that sub-arctic rain forest called the Canadian Rockies."<sup>3</sup> "In Jasper National Park"<sup>4</sup> "a tower of rock dominates the main chain of the Canadian Rockies"<sup>5</sup> (rising) "on its north side a full 4000 feet above its base."<sup>6</sup> "The size is so great that your perspective view completely hides the details of the route and the nature of rock and ice."<sup>7</sup>

The body, consisting of a guide book description of the route sprinkled with hair-raising adventures and occasionally some poetic insight or philosophical comment, e.g. "A short traverse right and moderate climbing took us to an easy chimney, which we followed for two pitches to third class rock"<sup>8</sup> . . . "My hand hold turned to slush . . ."<sup>9</sup> "Here is where, if

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1. Arthur Gran, "The East Face of Mount Chephren," *A.A.J.*, 1966, 15:1, p. 41.
  2. Henry Abrons, "A New Route on the Wickersham Wall," *A.A.J.*, 1964, 14:1, p. 47.
  3. Henry Abrons, "The Northwest Ridge of North Twin," *A.A.J.*, 1966, 15:1, p. 30.
  4. Yvon Chouinard, "The North Wall of Mount Edith Cavell," *A.A.J.*, 1962, 13:1, p. 53.
  5. Arthur Gran, "The West Face of Mount Brussels," *A.A.J.*, 1965, 14:2, p. 326.
  6. Yvon Chouinard, "The North Wall of Mount Edith Cavell," *A.A.J.*, 1962, 13:1, p. 53.
  7. John Harlin, "The Eigerwand," *A.A.J.*, 1963, 13:2, p. 362.
  8. John Hudson, "Mount Moran—West Face of the South Buttress," *A.A.J.*, 1963, 13:2, p. 418.
  9. Henry Abrons, "The Northwest Ridge of North Twin," *A.A.J.*, 1966, 15:1, p. 31

Royal were not so eminently qualified for this kind of climbing, there would be but one decision—to go down . . . while those ballerinas, hope and confidence dance in the shadow of a stone roof . . .<sup>10</sup> “we can . . . learn to face with a calm spirit the chilling specter of inevitable death.”<sup>11</sup>

And the conclusion consisting of an appropriate aesthetic experience, e.g. “We were”<sup>12</sup> “happy as pagans”<sup>13</sup> (and) “feeling very spiritually rich indeed as . . .”<sup>14</sup> (we realized that it is) “the simple and grand things of nature which are really the best—better even than Mozart . . .”<sup>15</sup> (They turn) “satisfaction to pure joy.”<sup>16</sup>

How I had hoped to spare you all this, dear reader! Originally I planned to write a play, perhaps titled “Geikie’s Grisly Face, A Farce in Three Acts.” Only one and one half acts were written, however. Then I thought of trying to write a series of short, intense, descriptive scenes—“flashes of reality.” That failed, as did an attempt to use a philosophical framework in an article tentatively titled “Peak Experiences and the New Existentialism.” Another idea was to attempt to write an apparently simple narrative which would actually contain subtle references to the works of Joyce, Musil, Kafka and Proust.

But no, time is running out, has run out. This article is already overdue. How I wish I had followed my better judgment and had not attempted writing this article, had not followed Royal’s suggestion!

One day last summer, near the middle of August, I found myself in a similar mood. Then too, I regretted following a suggestion of Royal’s. That time his suggestion had been that we try the north face of Mount Geikie together.

As I reach the end of the pitch, Royal called up, in a voice completely lacking in the justifiable irony which he must have felt, “Nice going, John.” I was fuming and cursing at myself, completely disgusted. I had had enough. From now on Royal would lead and I would carry the pack. Perhaps I would crawl into it and let him drag me up like so much baggage.

Before this pitch I had been able to convince myself that the climb was a team effort. I was in good mountain shape and had carried my share of the equipment into the Ramparts with less trouble than Royal. We had

10. John Harlin, “Petit Dru, West Face Direttissima,” *A.A.J.*, 1966, 15:1, p. 81.

11. Royal Robbins, “The North America Wall,” *A.A.J.*, 1965, 14:2, p. 336.

12. Royal Robbins, “The Salathé Wall, El Capitan,” *A.A.J.*, 1963, 13:2, p. 336.

13. Royal Robbins, “The North America Wall,” *A.A.J.*, 1965, 14:2, p. 338.

14. Royal Robbins, “The Salathé Wall, El Capitan,” *A.A.J.*, 1963, 13:2, p. 336.

15. Royal Robbins, “The North Wall of Sentinel Rock,” *Summit*, March, 1963, p. 11.

16. John Harlin, “The Eigerwand,” *A.A.J.*, 1963, 13:2, p. 374.

not been able to rent horses for the day that we wished to pack in and so, thinking of Frodo and of snails, we crawled into our packs. The weight had been kept down somewhat by the use of nuts and of light-weight food, both of which I regarded with some scepticism. This slight advantage, however, was offset by another factor. Royal much to my secret glee, but feigned sympathy and regret, left his camera at a "watering hole" at one point. By the time its absence was noted Royal had to retreat five miles to retrieve it and during this interval I was able to relay both packs quite a distance up the trail.

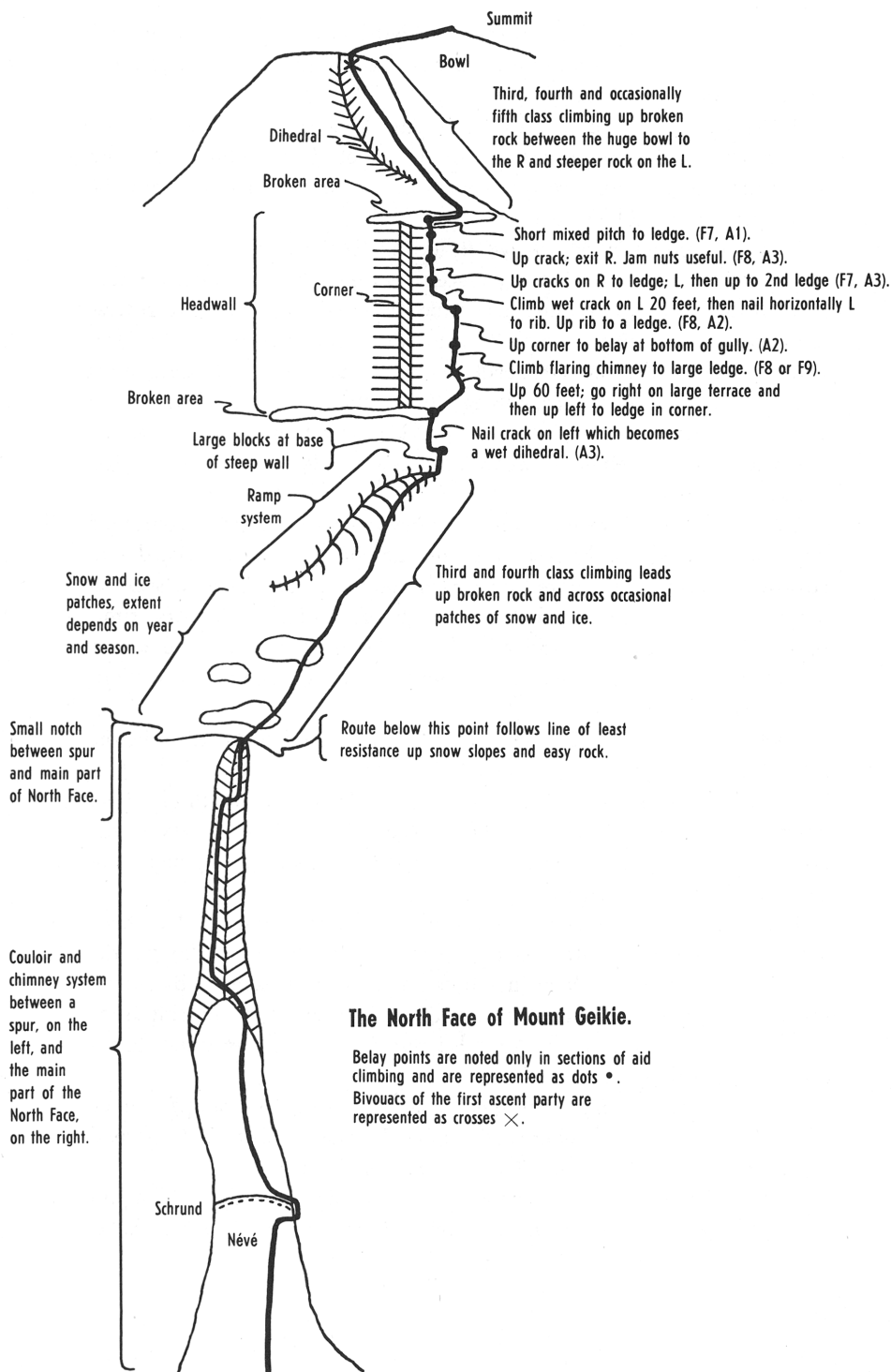
That night we camped at Moat Lake, hoping to start the climb the next day. However, after a late start, indecision over the weather and indecision over where to start the route, we spent the next night on a boulder near the base of the face. After much discussion we had decided to climb a prominent buttress which forms the left (east) side of the face. This route looked safer than a route directly up the center, and though perhaps a rationalization of this fact, looked more aesthetic as well. A further advantage was that a small hanging glacier, to the left of the center of the face, provided a relatively easy way to gain altitude quickly.

Even during the first day of the climb I felt as if I were generally pulling my own weight. Royal's slightly exaggerated respect for snow slopes, coupled with the shortness of his ice hammer, let me feel comparatively confident. My hesitation, and at times downright reluctance, on the third class I was able to ascribe to the weight of the pack or the clumsiness of my double boots. Royal got the two difficult pitches of the day and he partially convinced me that, as he said, "I'm sure you could have done as well, John."

"Yes, perhaps I could have," I thought. "Just because I haven't done any aid in a year, and never was terribly good anyhow, doesn't mean I won't perform well when the time comes. Yes, and so what if I couldn't climb that jam crack even coming up second. I'm just not used to the boots."

However, the second pitch I led on the second day, the pitch I had just reached the top of when I began my present digression, proved the extent of my "bad faith." After much oscillatory motion in both horizontal and vertical directions, hesitations, rationalizations, recriminations . . . I surmounted the last fifteen feet and gained a ledge. Luckily we did not have a watch so that I was spared knowing how much time I wasted.

The next pitch proved to be the crux of the climb and was admirably led by Royal. A crack, perhaps averaging three inches wide, and a small



inside corner led up the center of a buttress. Due to careful free climbing and cleverly placed pins and nuts for aid, this became a pathway to the top of the headwall.

At first, as I watched Royal on this pitch, I was really tense and was all "psyched up" to catch a possible fall. He climbed slowly but calmly and as I watch his progress I relaxed somewhat. It seemed that somehow he could get up, would get up.

"Hey, nice going Royal. Wow! Beautiful! Too much!"

The only trouble was that our success seemed a bit too certain. From here on Royal did the leading. I was too disgusted with myself to reverse my previous resolution, despite Royal's encouraging comment: "You did that pitch faster than I." I reminded him that he had been leading and I following, and resumed my sulking. Each time he ran out the rope I put on the albatross-like pack and struggled after him. By the time we found a place to spend our second night, just below the summit ridge, I was exhausted.

The nearly perfect weather we had enjoyed up to this point continued while we cleaned our bivouac site and ate dinner. As we sacked out, however, a strong wind came up which yanked at our bivouac sack all night. I had down pants and slept all night; Royal had a bit worse time. In the morning the sky was still clear. We had breakfast and a few minutes later had scrambled to the summit. The views in all directions were perfect.

"Hey, wow! Look at Robson! What a great place to be early in the morning!"

It was such a beautiful day that it was truly difficult to think of an obscene comment to enter in the register. Thankfully, however, the obstacle was overcome. After I had noted a dissenting opinion, put forth by Royal, we started down.

The descent is long and time-consuming. Even though I had been down the west face only about a week before and even though the rappels were set up, we were not back in camp until sunset. By now I was in good spirits. Though Royal's later description of my "nursing him" down the snow slopes is exaggerated, I was feeling more essential than I had the day before.

The following two days were spent slogging out of the swampy "Valley of the Mosquito" and driving south to Banff. The evening of the second day found us in the Alpine Club of Canada's Clubhouse.

Oh yes, the aesthetic experiences: As we walked out of the Tonquin Valley in the "children's hour" the light shimmered on Amethyst Lake,

the sinking sun poured light down between the clouds and the peaks while deer lept gracefully through the enchanted forest.

And: Later, in Banff, as I drank a bottle of Calgary Stock Ale (won from Royal who had been foolish enough to bet that I could not finish a large salad I had prepared), looked longingly at a girl who looked longingly at a banana (both on a poster obtained from a supermarket), and listened to Dylan ("Oh mama, can this really be the end . . .") I was very happy indeed.

*Summary of Statistics.*

AREA: Canadian Rockies.

NEW ROUTE: North Face of Mount Geikie, August 13 to 15, 1967, by John R. Hudson and Royal S. Robbins.

TECHNICAL DATA: Height of face: 4000 feet. NCCS V, F8 or 9, A3. 10 runners, 40 nuts and 60 pitons. Iron list: 3 knifeblades, 10 assorted horizontals, 3 stubby angles, 3  $\frac{3}{4}$ " angles, 3 1" angles, 2  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " angles, 1 2" angle, 15 assorted climbing nuts.

