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HAMISH NICOL AND MICHAEL WARD

## Tom Bourdillon 1924–1956

(Plates 6–8, 28)

*Hamish Nicol writes:*

In 1956 I had not intended to climb in the Alps because it was my final year at medical school, but Tom managed to persuade me. So on 25 July Tom, Dick Viney, Mary my future wife, and I left London by car late in the evening and drove to Lydd airport. In those days it was usual to fly from Lydd to Le Touquet in a box-shaped aeroplane which could carry two cars, thus saving a bit of time on the channel crossing. It was too dark and late to find anywhere to stay at the airport so we simply laid our sleeping-bags and groundsheets on the grass outside the perimeter fence and were soon asleep. The journey across France, which included a stop in Paris, took two days; and the car, a black Ford Consul with a top speed of 65mph, reached Visp on the 27th. En route we had paused at Lausanne to swim in the Lake of Geneva and here Tom had the misfortune to drop his spectacles in the water; they could not be found.

Tom wanted to warm up in the Balschiederthal, at that time a rarely visited valley to the north of Visp, so we stopped in the village of Balschied a few miles from Visp, taking great care to camp at the extremest edge of a hayfield so that no crops could possibly be damaged. The farmer, however, cannot have been very impressed, because we all woke up at 3am in about three inches of water. He had simply gone for a nocturnal ramble, picked up and placed a stone carefully in his irrigation channel in order to flood our part of the field, and he had done this deliberately. The stone was found, removed, the water dispersed and we settled back in our tents for what was left of the night. Roger Chorley and John Tyson had by this time joined us and, on the morning of Saturday 28 July, Tom, Dick, Roger and John left Balschied for the Balschiederthal hut which was reputed to be a five-hour walk. They must have been quite glad to leave the village which had given us such a cold reception. Mary had to catch a train to Milan on Sunday, so it was not until Sunday afternoon that I set off alone up the path to the hut, without a guidebook and without a map. I had no real idea how far it was and when I saw a likely-looking hut far away to the right, I crossed over to it – and was nearly swept away fording a mountain torrent on the way. ‘This can’t be right,’ I thought, but by this time it was too late to go back. I spent an uncomfortable night on the floor of a hay barn and on the morning of Monday 30 July arrived at the hut proper. Four Swiss were in residence. They said that two climbers had failed to return on Sunday night and the other two had gone out to look for them. At 12 noon Roger and John returned. They had searched the west side of the Jagihorn without success. That afternoon, Roger, John and I, with the



3. Entrance to the Western Cwm. Wilfrid Noyce crosses the bridge over the big crevasse. (Alfred Gregory)



5. The Lhotse Face Sherpas, standing: Ang Tsering, Ang Norbu, Kancha, Angtharkay, Ang Dawa II; squatting: Annullu, Phu Dorji, Pasang. With Wilfrid Noyce. (Alfred Gregory)



*Left*  
4. Nawang Gombu crossing the big crevasse. (Alfred Gregory)

*Facing page, below*  
6. Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans at the South Col. (Alfred Gregory)



hut warden and a friend of his, explored the glacier on the east side of the Jagihorn, dreading what we might find there. We found Tom and Dick lying roped together at the foot of their climb. They were dead. They had set off on Sunday to make what they hoped would be a second ascent of the E face of the Jagihorn. I suppose a loose hold gave way and that was it. Tom was never one to choose easy training climbs.

The whole of the next week was a nightmare of grief, interrupted by long-distance telephone calls, visits to the British Consul in Geneva, car journeys to Geneva and back. Alfred Tissiere came over from his home in Lausanne and was a great help. I can remember little of it in sequence or in detail. Like an automaton I did what had to be done. They were buried simply in Visp cemetery after a short service of which I could see and hear nothing because my eyes were tight shut. It seemed to be the only thing to do, the only way I could attempt to blot out the awfulness of that dreadful day. Even now, nearly 40 years later, I am unable to speak about it or confront it without emotion.

The inscription on the tombstone was apt and it read: 'They were most rightly reputed valiant, who, though they perfectly apprehended both what is dangerous and what is easy, are never the more thereby diverted from adventuring.' That was Tom and Dick all over.

I had seen death before, and many times since, but this was utterly different. This was two close admired friends wrenched from life at a very young age. I did not climb again for five years, and came back to it slowly, at a much lower standard, in 1961.

I first met Tom in 1949, at Oxford University. He was already an important man in the Oxford University Mountaineering Club and became its president in 1950. I was a not so young freshman, who had spent two years in the army, and one at Edinburgh University where I learned a lot about mountaineering and little else that was useful. Tom had come up in 1948 and he shook his contemporaries by a daring lead up *Hiatus* on Gimmer crag in December 1948. This was a Very Severe and was finished in darkness, and nothing quite like it had been seen at Oxford since before the war. In September 1949 he had led the *Great Slab* route on Clogwyn du'r Arddu so that, when I first climbed with him in Langdale in 1949, he already had a big reputation. We had left Oxford on 5 December by a train which arrived in Ambleside too late to catch the last bus up to Dungeon Ghyll. So we had to spend the night in the youth hostel in Ambleside and take the first bus the next day. Tom, being the meet leader, had travelled north a day earlier and had spent the first day in the grocer's shop at Chapel Stile laying in provisions for the week. These consisted of oatmeal, bread and jam in roughly equal proportions. Half-way through the week it snowed heavily one night, and next day Tom announced that he and I must have a go at *Gimmer Crack*. The conditions were appalling but Tom was most persuasive. He said it was necessary to 'give the mountain a chance'. There was absolutely no point, he said, in always climbing under ideal conditions of dry rock. We must go out when there was a good chance of failure.



*Facing page*

7. The first assault. Returning from the first ascent of the South Summit, Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon creep back to camp across the South Col. (*Alfred Gregory*)

*Above*

8. Evans and Bourdillon (L) exhausted after their summit attempt. (*Alfred Gregory*)

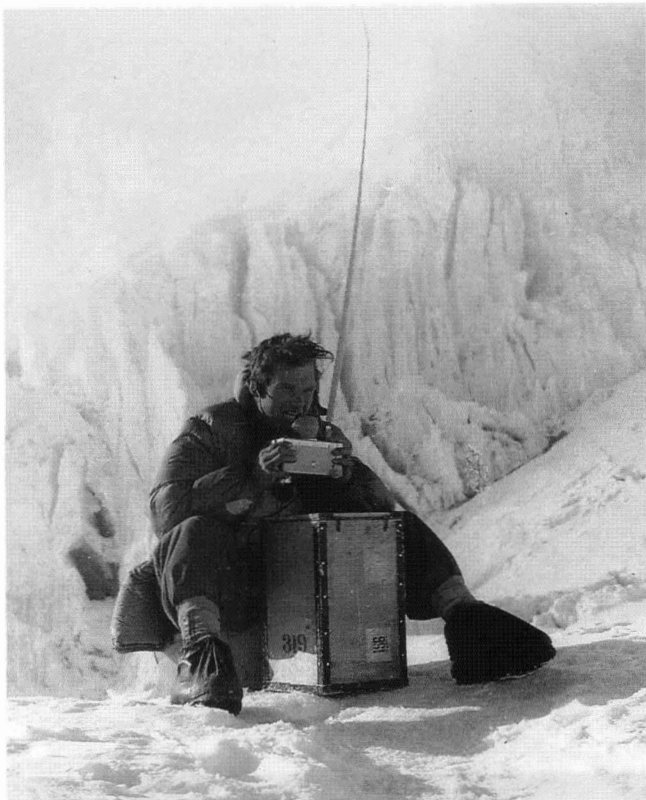


Well we failed all right. The fun did not really start until after Tom had led the first pitch. The second pitch is a very thin traverse across a steep wall, and it was necessary to protect this first with a most complicated running belay using my 12ft sling. The pitch defeated Tom but not without a considerable struggle. It then took him an hour to retrieve my sling, which had cost me 8/6d and was far too expensive to leave behind. After all, eight shillings was two days' pay for an army private in those days.

That summer, the summer of 1950, I was invited to join Tom with his friends in the Alps. This came as a great surprise to me, for I had only had one season in the Alps in 1949 in tricouni-nailed boots and using hemp ropes, and doing very ordinary climbs. In 1950 Viking hawser-laid nylon rope became available in Great Britain for the first time, as did Vibram-soled boots, and this soon led to a rise in expectations and standards. Tom had big ambitions which he kept very much to himself, for he knew that we both needed a lot of practice. At that time nobody in Britain knew anything about 'artificial climbing' which had been practised since the 1930s by Continental climbers in the Dolomites. For some reason the technique had never caught on in the UK, but Tom was soon to change all that. Artificial climbing is the art of using pitons and light aluminium ladders to scale holdless rock and he decided to set up a climbing school in his back garden at Quainton, Bucks. I was his first pupil and our lessons started in June 1950. First he selected a suitable tree with a big strong overhanging branch and into this inserted U-shaped wrought iron bars. If the bars were not quite of the desired shape he simply bent them with his bare hands. Not many people are able to do this, and I was certainly impressed. We used number one nylon and home-made aluminium steps for the ladders or *étriers* and four of these were produced in Tom's workshop in Quainton. I have a telling picture of Jennifer Bourdillon lying on the grass and surveying our antics. I wonder what she made of it.

Tom was six feet in height and weighed over 14 stone. He had a hesitant but ready smile which played often about his lips. Whenever I go to RLH, the Wayfarers' hut in Langdale, I can see him standing there by the hut door, smiling. He did not lose his temper, was patient and thoughtful for others, yet immensely strong and determined. By profession he was a research physicist, but he was interested in all sorts of things and loved arguing with Dick Viney about politics, philosophy, astronomy or just the weather. He was a passionate family man and worshipped his wife Jennifer and his two children.

On 12 July 1950 Tom and I arrived at Chamonix by train and two days later climbed the W face of the Aiguille Purtscheller. This was a very short *Très Difficile* rock climb and was in fact the first TD climbed by a British party in the Western Alps. Its importance lay in the fact that it allowed British climbers to realise that they too could do climbs of this standard. Two days later Dick Viney and John Saxby joined us at Montenvers and on 22 July the four of us climbed the Ryan-Lochmatter ridge of the Aiguille Plan. Tom allowed the Saxby/Nicol rope to go first, so this was my first big alpine lead. On 25 July Tom and I bivouacked at the foot of the N face of the Aiguille Dru and next day climbed it in 8½ hours. Although a very modest achievement by present-day standards, this was the climb which demonstrated that British



*Left*  
28. Tom Bourdillon talking into a 'walkie-talkie' set on Everest in 1953. The sets were used between camp and camp up to 24,000ft. (Alfred Gregory) (p62)

29. Below Wilfrid Noyce (R) and Robin Smith on the W face of Pik Garmo in the Pamirs just before their fatal accident on 24 July 1962. (p67)



climbers had at last recovered from the effects of the war. Chris Bonington, in his recent much acclaimed TV series 'The Climbers', implies that the post-war Golden Age of alpinism began in 1955; but of course it began much earlier than that, and Tom played his part in its earliest beginnings.

We were very much amateurs, rarely bothering to carry a camera or record what we were doing. Later, the great advances were all made by post-war professionals, by Joe Brown and Don Whillans and later still by Chris Bonington and his friends. After one further climb, Tom had to return to England to his job and to his family. I did not climb with him again until 1955 when we did the N ridge of the Peigne, the E ridge of the Crocodile, the first British ascent of the W face of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey, and, finally, the E face of the Capucin, Bonatti's famous test piece. It was our last climb together. We did set off to attempt the W face of the Dru after a lot more rain and snow had fallen. But the rocks were slippery and covered in verglas and I chickened out. It was perhaps a cowardly decision by me which Tom accepted without argument. He was like that.

What Tom achieved in the great years of 1951, 1952 and 1953 in the Himalaya and, in particular, on Mount Everest I shall leave to others to describe, because they were there.

*Michael Ward writes:*

In the summer of 1951 when Bill Murray and I were discussing possible members of our Everest reconnaissance party, Tom Bourdillon was one of the first names that came to mind. His simple purpose and passion was to raise the standard of British climbing to that of our European counterparts. The group from Oxford of which he was a member had started the post-war renaissance of British climbing in 1950 by doing routes such as the N face of the Dru and others of similar difficulty. Tom had proposed the formation of a group of British mountaineers similar to the Groupe de Haute Montagne. This was to be called the Alpine Climbing Group in contradistinction to the Alpine Club, most of whose members, in purely climbing terms, seemed an irrelevance to mainstream European mountaineering at that time. I shared his dim view of British post-war achievement, which was reinforced by the patronising and dismissive attitude taken by the Joint Himalayan Committee of the Alpine Club and Royal Geographical Society towards the photographic and cartographic evidence that I had obtained of a route up the unvisited Nepalese side of Everest. When I told Tom about this he, in his rather hesitant manner, said that his father, Dr R B Bourdillon, wished to meet me – and thus the Medical Research Council and Griffith Pugh were involved in the Everest story.

Tom's interest was in climbing hard routes and steep peaks, and his approach to the Khumbu Icefall was that, like all difficult routes, given enough time and effort, it would 'go'. His main regret during the 1951 Reconnaissance expedition was that he did not get enough to eat.

On the 1952 Cho Oyu expedition Tom was a member of Griffith Pugh's physiology party on the Menlung La, which solved the high-altitude problem of Everest by using a high enough flow rate in the open-circuit sets to provide

an adequate boost to climbing rate. However, Tom was also impressed by the boost given by using 100% oxygen, as provided by the closed-circuit oxygen apparatus. At the end of the field investigations he and Ray Colledge climbed Pangbuk, 20,000ft, and the view from the top helped sort out the tangled mass of peaks around the Tolam Bau glacier, south of the Menlung La but north of the Tesi Lapcha – an area explored by members of the 1952 Cho Oyu party.

When Shipton was sacked as leader of the proposed 1953 expedition, Tom was incensed and also wished to leave the team. His letter to me about the conduct of the Joint Himalayan Committee was forthright, succinct and uncompromising. It was only Shipton himself who was finally able to persuade Tom to retract his resignation and join the 1953 party.

During the preparations for Everest Tom was responsible for the oxygen sets. The open-circuit was a modified commercial design, but Tom and his father themselves designed and built the closed-circuit sets. These, though giving a greater boost, were heavier and less reliable. If the set broke down, the climber, at 'sea-level' at one moment, would suddenly become comatose. In fact Tom did collapse dramatically on the South Col when he and Charles Evans, the first assault team, were setting out to descend, the day after their attempt. Tom was naturally extremely disappointed that he had been unable to provide an oxygen set effective enough to get him and Charles to the summit. But, in hindsight, too much was asked of an apparatus known to be experimental.

After 1953, the Joint Himalayan Committee, our *bête noire*, was disbanded and replaced by the Mount Everest Foundation, with Articles of Association drawn up by Lord Tangle, the President of the Alpine Club over this period. This organisation has stood the test of time, and Tom's brainchild, the Alpine Climbing Group, has been a considerable catalyst for British mountaineers.

We owe a lot to Tom Bourdillon.