



Craig Cau, Cader Idris

DON SARGENT

Above: Craig Cau, with Pencoed Pillar and Great Gully to the left.

Five forty-five Saturday morning and the alarm rings. Another fitful night in the Cader Idris car park ends. I try to pretend I don't feel tired. The mirror tells a different story. I force-feed myself a big bowl of muesli; just enough calories to get me to the top of the hill I reckon.

Six-twenty am and on to my back leaps ye olde rucksack replete with the obligatory 60lbs armament of climbing hardware and 500ft of rope. I stagger and sway for a few moments to find equilibrium, ye olde spine — already shortened by the trauma of this damn sport — creaking and groaning under the load. Then I set out on my beloved slog up the mountain.

It is late September and this is my sixth weekend this summer on the relatively uncharted mountainside of Craig Cau. But miscellaneous bits of me that I didn't know existed until they had become injured, to say little of my shock-pounded knees and back, were screaming that it should be my last. Weekends on the mountain were debilitating. Every Monday morning I would have to slip stealthily into the office dodging colleagues as best I could without appearing any more detached than usual. For a while I would try to conceal from them my dirt-encrusted hands, scagged with cuts and grazes and torturing cracks under each fingernail, try to avoid their eyes in mine, inflamed as they were by conjunctivitis from wind-borne dust, and try, so gallantly I think, to clear away the grey clouds of tiredness and guide them through complex decisions of

Opposite: Martin Crocker making the first ascent of 'Blame It On The Gods', Pencoed Pillar.

An insight into the summer's explorations on Craig Cau, Cader Idris in Mid-Wales by Martin Crocker

earth-shattering local significance. (I was hardly a role model for the Health Inspector profession).

My relationship with the mountain had always been destined for more than a weekend hit. It evolved with each new discovery demanding a return visit, whetting the appetite of inspiration to keep one going, as they say, through week upon week encaged in two dimensions, suffocated by paperwork and mauled by verbosity. Inevitably, I learnt to reconcile my beloved slog up the mountain into stages. Spiritually it helped. The iron gate near the forest line signified the completion of Stage One. Lyn Cau meant that Stage Two had passed, but not usually before the summer sun had started to compound the sweat and toil. Stage Three, unquestionably the crux, could mean anything between clawing ignominiously up one of the great 1,000ft grass ramps rising to the summit of Cau, or balancing precariously up wobbling sods of vegetation to the top of a crag. This vertical bilberry and heather terrain took a lot of getting used to.

Only upon reaching Lyn Cau is the full splendour of Craig Cau unveiled from its curling arms that cradle the stream of Nant Cadair which

guides one to the lake's shores. Herein lies the classical mountain prospect; craggy peak looming over circular lake in glacial cwm. The scene even came complete with a large roche moutonnée in front of the lake, which the kids love to run up and slide down, shrieking and shouting with the joy of being there. By May, all vestiges of winter had disappeared from the mountain. Now, in September, the bracken-clad slopes had turned to copper, lapping richly against the steely grey buttresses and arêtes, abstractly interrelated save for being loosely arranged in four enormous inclined layers of volcanic vomit. This luxuriant tapestry, like most great works of art, ensnared one's attention; at least for as long as the stoniness of the path would permit before one stumbled and fell.

Arriving so early at the lake, alone, would be the sensation one needed to flip into the physical action world of three dimensions. The immediate delusion of freedom was powerful and compelling. The place is a sort of spiritual frontier. However, according to folklore, if the chair of Idris (a make-believe (?) giant) lay in the cwm to the north, then whose chair was this great cwm? One morning, I thought I found the answer when I came across a solitary tent, whose occupant (no giant but a modern day druid perhaps) was engaged in wooing the silence with a chant of sinister Celtic dialect. Uncannily, as the man preached at the lakeside, ripples would radiate across the surface of the lake, disrupting its inky stillness. It was sufficient that we tolerated each other's presence in passing.

On this weekend I was returning to the Bird

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Above: The Lower Tier of Craig Cau; Great Gully on the left, 'Idris Corner' E2, on the right.

of Time wall to do battle with a striking crack line which I had gifted John Sumner but which he had rejected — muttering some lame excuse or other (the poor old sod was more injured than I). With John happier hanging from a rope with his camera and Steve Cameron trying desperately to take root in the gully, the crack passed uncharacteristically smoothly (for a crack) as *Jackknife* E2 5b — the sort of line that Whillans, or Brown even, should have climbed 40 years ago (perhaps they did?) This had been part of the mountain that we had got stuck into earliest in the season. First, I encountered what I believe to be the best E4 in Mid-Wales. *Dawn Patrol* takes the intricate face just left of the arête and supplies a 150ft pitch on immaculate rock that required no cleaning. The arête (left of Jackknife) proved a much sterner proposition with the arguable pleasure of some big run outs, the experience, I hope, being adequately reflected in its name; *La Merci Dieu* E6 6a/6b. A substantial repertoire of new climbs was assembled in this locality. The disjointed crack left of Bird fell to John and Jill Sumner, with Steve, as *Melting Clock* E3 6a and John Harwood and I gloated over a simply stunning arête some way to the right, called *Bleed The Soul* E5 6a. Also noteworthy is the dog-legged, classic crack of *Stressed Out* E1 5b, ascended with Don Sargeant (take a Hex 10), and, indubitably Mid-Wales's hardest high altitude pitch, *Highlands Fling* E6 6c, maybe. The name of the latter derives from partner Alex's Scottish dance skills that were used to entrance and disable a plague of overzealous midges. Also, hereabouts, I had the misfortune of dropping one of my 5.10 Moccasys which despite all the ledges (and the sticky stealth rubber) cavorted glee-

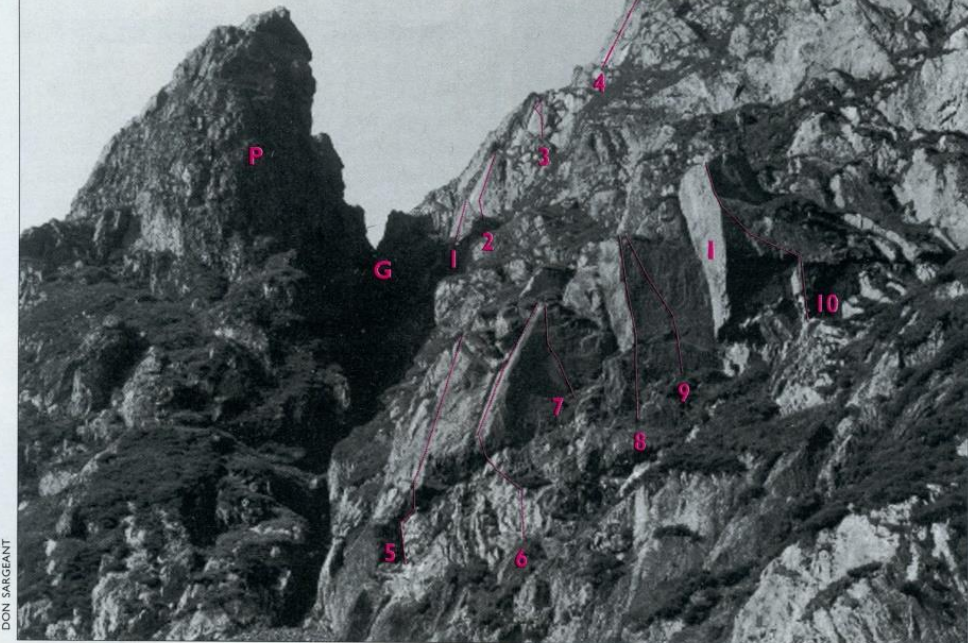
fully down the hillside eventually tumbling out of sight. Its finder, in decades to come, will hopefully recall the wry historical context and, no doubt, take pains to reunite boot with foot. An unlikely salvage, I suppose, given the vastness of the face. Indeed, it took quite a while to adapt one's senses to the scale of the mountainside. One day, on approaching the lake, I noticed what was clearly a line of chalk up the face next to Bird of Time. Paranoia prevailed and for a while I feared that it was the mark of the so elusive—does-he-actually-exist (?) Terry Taylor, who I understood from John had snatched a few lines in Mid-Wales. (But, as you know, it's all 'territorially' correct up there; John Sumner would not, for example, dream of new routeing in the Arenigs because they are outside his guidebook's jurisdiction.) Anyway this line of 'chalk' turned out to be a 15ft wide strip of hard white quartzitic rock 80ft high that paid for its deceit by becoming *Lightfoot* E3 5c, a technical delight for the thinking man or woman.

Such is the enormity of the face (about 1,000ft from lake to summit) that tricks of perspective are commonplace. Buttresses and walls not catching the attention at first often only reveal their true persona on closer investigation. Many prove to be 100 or 150ft high and often lusty with unclimbed lines. No more so was this phenomenon true than on Idris Corner Crag, a 140ft crag comprising a Cenotaph-like feature and four fantastic arêtes on full view to any lakeside prospector. When John Harwood and I made the first ascents of the second and fourth arêtes in 1992, we disbelieved how myopic social circles and fashion could neglect lines like these which, had they been 40 miles further north, would surely have been climbed in Snowdonia's heyday. We

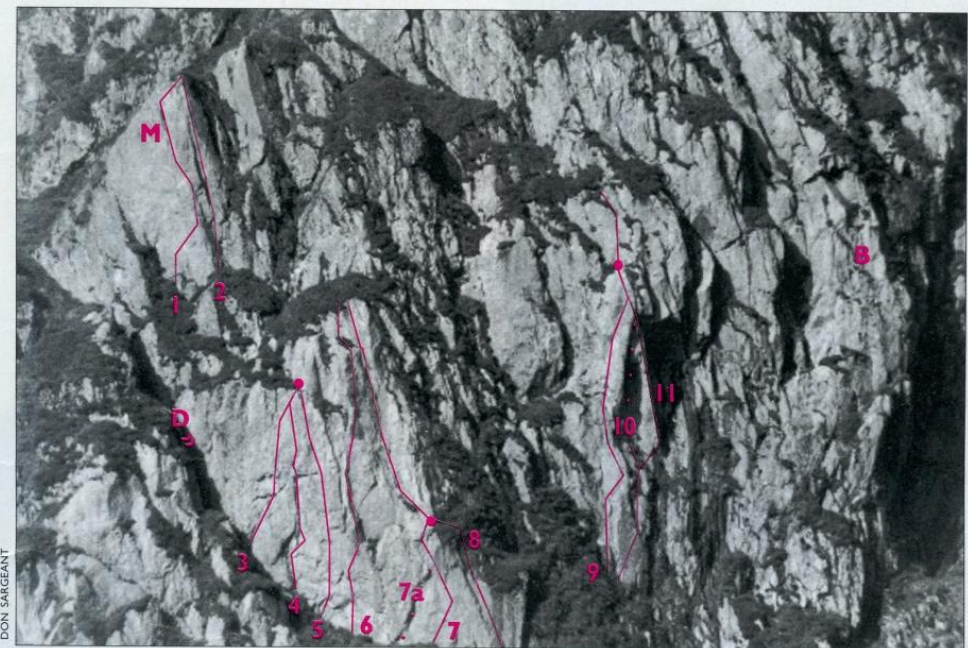
didn't break our hearts over this, mind you.

As well as the two arêtes, we climbed *Brass Butterfly* E6 6b which, in 1992, was an absolute gem of a find and remarkably similar to its celebrated brother on the Cromlech. From that time, despite observing only deathly blankness left of Brass Butterfly, I had hosted the frivolous idea of taking on the crag's third, and finest, arête. I harboured this itch of uncertainty for some four years before it demanded urgent treatment. In mid-season 1996 when I successfully climbed the arête, having prised Don from his camera and lashed him down on the ground unawares. The outcome is a superb E7 6b right-angled arête of dream Rhyolite, brought to sanity with a couple of moderately hopeless pegs, and an array of completely hopeless small RPs, all placed on lead. The name, mouthful, but symptomatic of many a working man's mid-life crisis is *Time Is The Fire (In Which We Burn)*, it may also mean something to Trekkies. Now all that remains inviolate is the sheer and unprotectable, 100ft right-hand wall of Idris Corner. (The scent couldn't be clearer, but none of the head-pointing crap, please.)

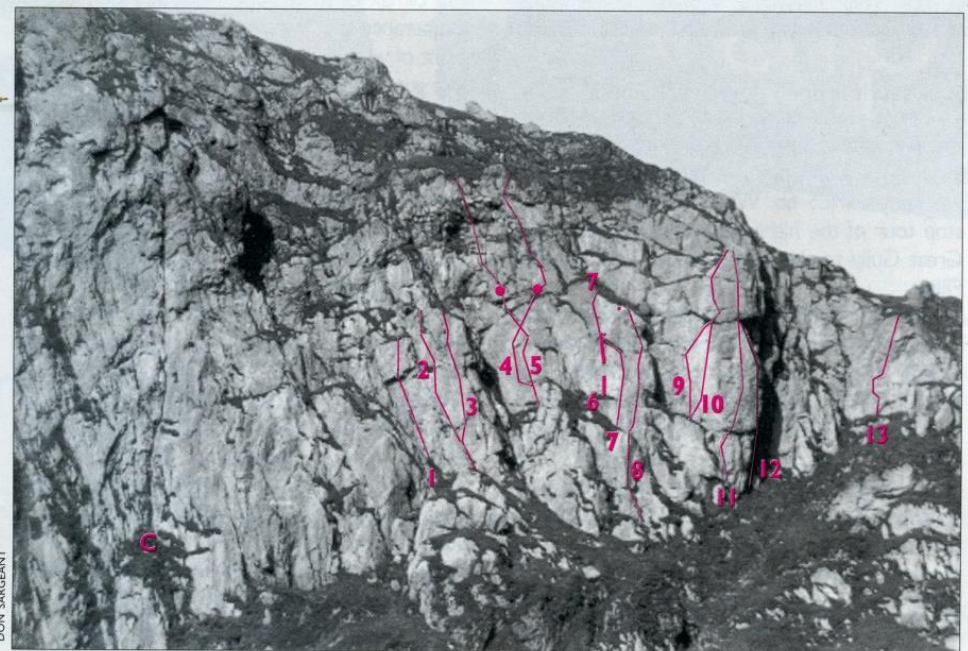
Our attention then switched to a 70 to 120ft buttress up and to the right of Idris Corner Crag, dubbed nostalgically Sounds of the Sixties Buttress. A quick brush-up here and there and, over one reasonably busy weekend, the kind some partners 'relish' before I never see them again, a crop of several routes in the E3 to E6 range emerged from the rockwork. At the right-hand end, a really fine Mot-like (read, compact and scantily geared) scoop was balanced-up at E3 5c, *The Bed Room*, whilst perhaps the biggest hit is the distinctive twin groove system which felt like



Left: White Lady Walls and Idris Corner Crag. 1. Markova E3 5c, 6a (Crocker, Sumner). 2. Face To Face E5 6a, 6a (Crocker, Sargeant). 3. Come Rain Or Shine E5 6b (Crocker). 4. Alone In The World E3 5c (Crocker solo). 5. Leander With Waterwings E5 6a (Crocker, Sargeant). 6. Across The Hellisport E6 6a/b (Crocker, Harwood). 7. Suicidal Wall E4 5c (Crocker, Sargeant). 8. Time Is The Fire (In Which We Burn) E7 6b (Crocker, Sargeant). 9. Brass Butterfly E6 6b (Crocker, Harwood). 10. Artrageous E5 6a (Crocker, Harwood). **P** Pencoed Pillar. **G** Great Gully. **I** Idris Corner.



Left: Sounds Of The Sixties Buttress. 1. Prestissimo E4 6b (Crocker). 2. Hologram E5 6a (Crocker, Sargeant). 3. Wheels On Fire E3 6a (Crocker, Sargeant). 4. God Of Hellfire E5 6a (Crocker, Sargeant). 5. Chills And Fever E6 6b (Crocker). 6. Sounds Of The Sixties E6 6a/b (Crocker). 7. Zabbadack E5 6a (Crocker solo). 7a. Go-Now! E4 6a (Crocker solo). 8. The (Heart) Beat Room E3 5c (Crocker, Sargeant). 9. Dreams And Reality Collide E5 6a (Crocker, Sargeant). 10. The Lorryman E5/6 6b (Crocker). 11. Jin-Go-La-Ba E5 6a (Crocker, Cameron). **M** The Metronome. **D** Descent Gully V Diff. **B** Battered Caravanserai.



Left: Bird of Time Buttress. 1. Dancing Kukaracha E4 6b (Crocker, Cameron). 2. Dorsong E1 5b (Crocker, Sargeant). 3. Highlands Fling E6 6c (Crocker). 4. Solo Engagement E3 6a, 5c (Crocker solo). 5. Tumbling Five Ten E4 6b, 5c (Crocker, Cameron). 6. A Cure For Stress E5 6a/b (Crocker). 7. Stressed-Out E1 5b (Crocker, Sargeant). 8. The Suffering E4 6a (Crocker). 9. Melting Clock E3 6a (Summers, Cameron). 10. Lightfoot E3 5c (Crocker, Harwood). 11. Dawn Patrol E4 6a (Crocker, Harwood). 12. La Merci Dieu E6 6a/b (Crocker, Harwood). 13. Life-Surfer E5 6a (Crocker, Cameron). **C** Crack of Cau.
NB: Bleed The Soul 80m right of 13.



Above: Martin Crocker on 'Jackknife'.

E6 on lead, *Sounds Of The Sixties*. I later returned to mop up a few shorter solos, principally the pocket-gem of *Zabadack* E5 6a, a conceptual delicacy on a gloriously textured, pristine grey slab. Overlying this buttress is a pyramidal feature with the shape of a Metronome (the classical pianist's drum machine, though few would care to admit it). Keeping time centrally in the pyramid is a left-slanting crack, cleaving its main face and so steep as to deserve a sprightly approach, hence *Prestissimo* E4 6b. Even better is the grooved arête in the leading edge of the Metronome which is *Hologram* E5 6a, a perfect but scary line thrillingly projected into the thin air of the cwm. Finally, on this part of the mountain, but a little to the right, allocate time to check out the pair of arêtes and intervening towering hourglass groove. This is the ad-

venturous architecture for three high-calibre E5s that few could forget in a hurry, especially the effects of the all-out-body-pumping-beast-groove of *The Lorryman* E5 6b. Which leaves our whistle-stop tour of the highlights with a bypass around Great Gully to the showpiece of Cau, Pencoed Pillar.

Sold on the Mid-Wales guidebook cover photo I had visited Pencoed Pillar four years earlier for *Darker Angel* and *Messiah* but, peculiarly, I had missed out on a series of clean and sunny walls on the opposite side of Great Gully. Now you may already be surmising that there will be one or two new routes on these faces, well actually there are six to be precise, in addition to the probings, 20 years earlier, of the Bentham and Shaw partnership who appear from the pattern of their routes to have been driven by the same madness as me. The climbs on the walls around their White Lady

offer 80° face work, often on incredible eroded pocket formations. *Face to Face* is a beautiful E5 'slab' intrinsically bold, while *Alone In The World* is an excellent and varied E3 5c, which I soloed out of necessity (because not even mortality can come between John Sumner and his customary refuelling in the pub). When John was not in the pub (he'll scowl at me for this), he was doing a good job on the pocketed buttresses to the south just below the Minnford ridge walkers, fathering two trump climbs in the process. *Missing Friends* is an outstanding two pitch E1 up an airy pillar, and *Thumb Wall* is an HVS arête festooned with sinking pockets. Each of the routes has a story to tell.

The main objectives, however, lay on Pencoed Pillar. For the uninitiated, let me tell you that the gully face is an absolute joy on which to climb — if you like *dimbing*. I didn't have to look too hard for excuses to get the team back into the highly charged atmosphere of the place. After all, these were the sorts of kicks that one needed in the '90s. For, here, the space of the third dimension is undeniable.

The first objective was conquered in the rain on the over-arching principles of (a) adventure: you take what you get and go for it and (b) time management: live every free moment as if it were your last. (It seems to me, the less time you have the more you get in the way of adventure.) The result *Holy Cau* E3 5c but grade caveat applies, navigates a sensual path through the demonic hanging fangs and interwoven slabs right of *Messiah* and, categorically, is the best pitch of its grade on the mountain. In common with *Darker Angel*, an abseil approach is advised. On a slightly less moist day, I climbed *Preacher-Man* E5 6a, 6a, with John, which bisects *Darker Angel*, tackling the roof above its corner stance by means of a frightening grapple with a hollow flake drooping over the lip. On our ascent, the flake kindly stayed in place. Now only one big feature remained unclimbed on the Pillar, its skyline arête. Having waited for the right photographic conditions and having worked a little magic to enable Don to 'hold' my ropes while he took pictures 500ft away, the route really lived up to be the climax of the season. Such was our level of exuberance that we were both reluctant, to the point of wilting arms, to bring the climb to a close. We guessed we should just *Blame It On The Gods* E5 6a, 6a.

I left the mountain, September-gone, on the high of an E6 seeded in the shattered wastes of Great Gully. I was too washed out to run down that evening and, besides, it was a Sunday and all the gear had to go down with me. Naturally, on the way back, just as on every other occasion, I would end up walking backwards, gaze transfixed to the mountain, noting for next year new discoveries as the dwindling light provoked shy features from the shadows. We had left the mountain with a new identity. Individually the climbs were immaterial but together in this wild natural arena they were orchestrating themselves as one great expedition. It was this sense of completeness and synergy that I felt when I relinquished the chair of Cau for winter and flipped back over into the world of two dimensions, satisfied for the time being.