



— DAVID CHAMBRE —
INTRODUCTION BY JEAN-BAPTISTE TRIBOUT

THE 9th GRADE

150 YEARS
OF FREE CLIMBING

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01

THE
TIME
OF
ADVENTURE

CLIMBING,

THAT IS, ASCENDING STEEP OR EVEN VERTICAL TERRAIN USING JUST YOUR HANDS AND FEET, IS PROBABLY AN ACTIVITY AS ANCIENT AS HUMANITY ITSELF. GATHERING FOOD, HUNTING, SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS QUESTS AND, MORE MUNDANELY, THE NEED FOR PROTECTION FROM WILD ANIMALS, BAD WEATHER AND HOSTILE GROUPS HAVE, SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL, LED PEOPLE TO SEEK OUT HIGH PLACES THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO REACH. FROM FUNERAL SITES PERCHED HIGH UP CLIFFS IN AFRICA, SUCH AS THOSE OF BANDIAGARA, TO THE ANASAZI AMERINDIANS AND THE GATHERERS OF SWALLOWS' NESTS OR HONEY IN ASIA, THE BOLDNESS WHICH DROVE THESE PIONEERS AND THE CLOSE RELATIONSHIP THEY HAD DEVELOPED WITH THE ROCKS IS STILL ASTONISHING.

PAGE 14:
RUDOLF FERHMANN ON THE THREE FINGERS TOWER,
ELBSANDSTEINGEBIRGE, 1917.

PAGE 16:
LEFT: OWEN GLYNNE JONES ON DERBYSHIRE,
GRITSTONE, 1888.

CENTRE: JAMES W. PUTTRELL (1868-1939), GRITSTONE
PIONEER, 1885.

RIGHT: BOULDERING SESSION, FEET LEADING! MOSE-
DALE, LAKE DISTRICT, UK, 1890.



EARLY BRITISH CLIMBERS RELAXING AT A GRITSTONE
CRAG.

Free climbing was defined 30 years ago in our book *Le 8ème degré (The 8th Grade)* in words which still apply: 'When the climber uses only their hands and feet on the unevenness of the rock to progress. The protection points are only there for the climber's safety in case of a fall but they are not used as an aid to progress and stopping or resting on them is forbidden. It is up to the climber to make the most of what the rock offers. The term 'forbidden' indicates that free climbing does not mean climbing without rules. There are rules and they should be obeyed. From being just a physical activity, in this way, free climbing has acquired the status of a sport'.

The birth of rock-climbing as a leisure and sporting activity goes back to the late 19th century, originating in Europe in various locations far apart from each other. In those 'heroic' times equipment was rudimentary and often cobbled together, so rock-climbing was a dangerous passion attracting bold, adventurous people.

THE ENGLISH GENTLEMAN ALWAYS CLIMBS FIRST. CLIMB WHEN YOU'RE READY.

The British had been visiting the Alps throughout the 19th century and it was during the Victorian period that rock-climbing first became popular. In the north-west of England, then still a wild and unfrequented region, the new middle and upper classes discovered the pleasure of outdoor activities during their summer holidays. The Lake District and the Peak District (both National Parks today) were the birthplace of British rock-climbing. Though at first this was simply a matter of clambering about on the outcrops, some of these adventurers, most of them young, soon became much bolder. From 1880, the number of climbs (naturally they were all first ascents) gradually increased, with or without a rope. That said, the almost complete absence of protection made it very dangerous for the leader, even when roped.

At the same time and in the same place, a charismatic character emerged: Oscar Eckenstein. Looking like a cross between an old sea-dog and an Old Testament prophet he was a man of many talents and an adventurous explorer. In 1902 he led the first serious expedition attempting to climb K2, the second highest mountain in the world, accompanied by his friend, the occultist Aleister Crowley who was also a bold climber on the chalk cliffs of the Sussex coast. Eckenstein was the inventor of crampons and the modern short ice axe. Extremely strong (he could do one-arm pull-ups), he was one of the founders of bouldering, a form of rock-climbing requiring balance and a command of footholds and grips on boulders a few metres high and in this respect was several decades ahead of his time. The volcanic rocks of the Lake District and Wales were ideal for this type of climbing.

W. P. Haskett-Smith was an undergraduate at Oxford University who first visited the Lake District in 1881 with some university friends. Being athletic, he enjoyed climbing the rocks in the vicinity without any equipment, notably without ropes. He must have enjoyed the sport because he returned year after year, tackling increasingly daring climbs in which there was no room for error. His moment of glory came in 1886 with *Napes Needle*, a sharply pointed arrow-shaped rock which had defeated so many attempts that some compared his eventual conquest of it to that of the Matterhorn two decades earlier. In the end, without any artificial aid and without any belaying, Haskett-Smith reached the summit, where his photograph was taken in the traditional manner. As a result he was hailed as the founder of British rock-climbing, 'by fair means', a reasonable description since it really was free climbing with bare hands.

A few years later, the technical level was raised further by a London professor, Owen Glynn Jones. Having all the qualities of a modern climber, strength, agility and daring, he preferred to focus more on the intrinsic difficulty of a route than on the conquest of a new peak. In this respect he was similar to Eckenstein but he was very different when it came to talking about it. For 'OG', climbing was a perfect opportunity to publicise himself, while Eckenstein, like his friend Crowley, saw it mainly as an inner, personal achievement. In 1897 OG set his heart on a wide crack some 20 metres high, the *Kern Knotts Crack*. In order to climb it free, he chose to practise it on a top-rope. This new technique enabled him to master it very quickly. It is interesting that even then, some people were already condemning these practices as unfair, because they deviated from tradition. Today the crack is rated MVS (Mild Very Severe), the equivalent of a good French 5. Owen Glynn Jones was the inventor of this English adjectival grading system and he published one of the first rock-climbing guidebooks to this region which did much to popularise this new sport.

In 1885, James W. Puttrell was the first climber to venture on to the Peak District gritstone cliff of Wharncliffe Edge on the outskirts of Sheffield. On these cliffs, seldom more than 15m high, he developed 'outcrop climbing', in contrast to the objectives of Victorian climbers. Because it was easily reached by public transport, Wharncliffe was probably the most popular crag in the world on the eve of the 20th century with already over 100 routes. Progressing with limited safety measures and sometimes even on his own, he explored the most obvious cracks, free climbing our present day fifth grades and was also a pioneer of caving. He subsequently spread his wings, climbing in Wales, the Lake District, Scotland and as far as the Alps. Today he is recognised as one of the founding fathers of climbing as a sport.

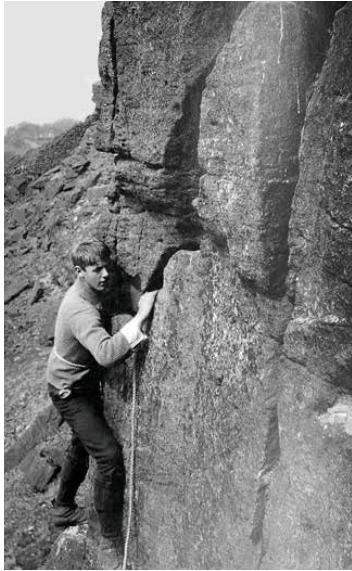
The other great legend of the period was Siegfried Herford. His was another meteoric rise, brutally brought short by the First World War. Born in 1891, he was a disturbed child who would probably be described as hyperactive today but he was extremely good at science; studying physics and mathematics at Manchester University and becoming one of the first engineers specialising in aeronautics. At the age of 20, with his friends John Laycock and Stanley Jeffcoat, he 'reinvented' gritstone climbing, leaving the cracks and venturing onto the much more dangerous slabs. Like Paul



ABOVE LEFT: PINNACLE RIDGE ON AMPHITHEATER BUTTRESS, CRAIG YR YSFA, WALES, UK, 1905.

ABOVE RIGHT: THE FAMOUS NAPES NEEDLE, LAKE DISTRICT, PICTURED HERE IN 1961. HIS FIRST ASCENT IN 1886 BY WALTER PARRY HASKETT SMITH WAS A MILESTONE FOR CLIMBING IN BRITAIN.

BELOW, FROM LEFT: WALTER PARRY HASKETT SMITH (1859–1946), ONE OF THE FATHERS OF ROCK-CLIMBING. / JAMES W. PUTTRELL (1868–1939). / OWEN GLYNN JONES (1867–1899). / OSKAR ECKENSTEIN (1859–1921).



ABOVE LEFT: SIEGFRIED HERFORD (1891–1916)
ON CASTLE NAZE, GRITSTONE, UK.

ABOVE RIGHT: SIEGFRIED HERFORD, DURING THE FIRST
ASCENT OF *THE GREAT FLAKE*, LAKE DISTRICT, 1914.

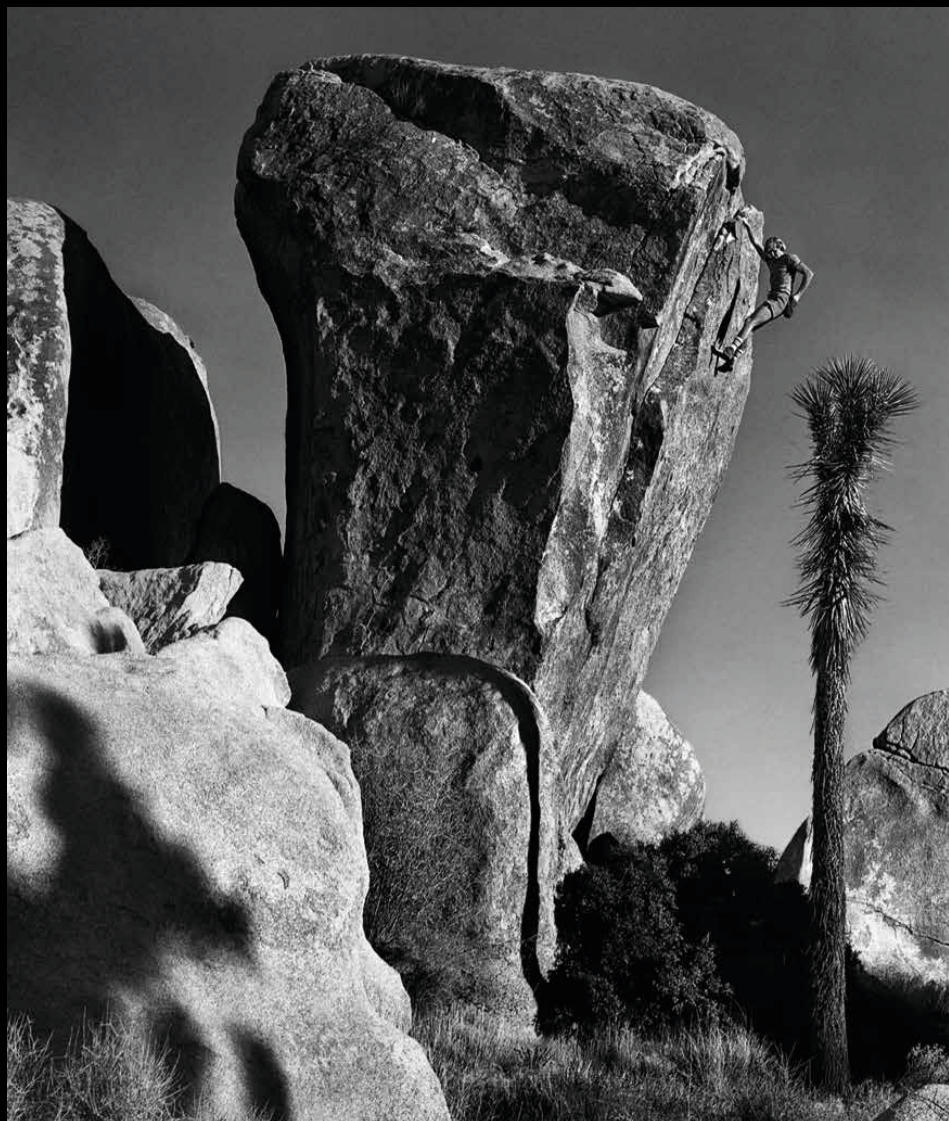
BELOW LEFT: SIEGFRIED HERFORD AND GEORGE
MALLORY AT PEN Y PASS, 1912.

BELOW RIGHT: SIEGFRIED HERFORD CLIMBING *THE*
MANTELshelf, SCAFELL PINNACLE, 1914.

Preuss, the practice of down-climbing, which seemed to him a guarantee of safety in the event of it being impossible to move forward, would be carried out with just a piece of rope round the waist or, often, even solo.

A remarkable photograph taken in 1912 by the famous mountaineer Geoffrey Winthrop Young shows the young man, Herford, accompanied by George Leigh Mallory, who 12 years later would be part of the greatest mystery in the history of climbing when he and Andrew Irvine vanished near the summit of Mount Everest. The pinnacle of Herford's career was the *Flake Crack* on Scafell, the second-highest 'mountain' in England, in the Lake District which, today, still has a local grade of E1 5b, equivalent to a modern F6a; this was comparable to the maximum difficulties found in Saxon Switzerland at that time and by Paul Preuss in the Dolomites (see further on). Then in July 1914, the First World War began and Herford, in the uniform of the Royal Fusiliers, was killed by a shell in 1916.

In 1913, John Laycock wrote *Some Gritstone Climbs*, a rock-climbing guidebook focusing on the best climbs in the Peak District. In it, he described for the first time the incredible potential of climbing on gritstone which would be the cradle of the best British climbers of the 20th century and the local city of Sheffield became the spiritual capital of British rock-climbing. Thus, one of the strongest rock-climbing traditions was born which, with its strict ethics, continues today under the name of 'trad' (traditional). In contrast with more ruggedly mountainous countries, in the United Kingdom it is normal to start with rock-climbing and then to move on to mountaineering.



02

THE
BIRTH
OF A
SPORT

MEANWHILE, ON A SMALL ISLAND...

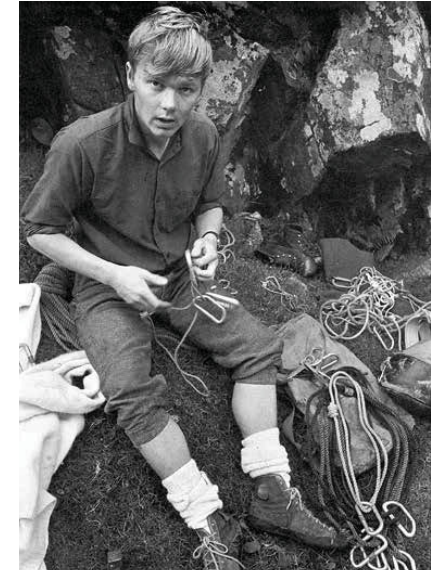
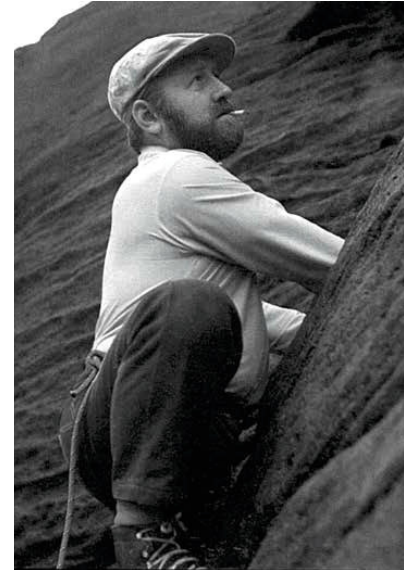
The British, living up to their legendary originality, also invented a rating scale with two parts which is anything but clear and simple, however it is perfectly adapted to their philosophy of boldness, systematically associated with technical difficulty (see appendix). It is hard to compare it to other scales because its progression is intentionally very close towards the top and a similar rating can reflect varying difficulties.

In *Unjustifiable Risk?*, a history of British climbing and mountaineering, Simon Thompson gave a clear summary of the social evolution which has also taken place in other Western countries: 'Before the First World War and even in the years between the wars, most top level climbers were middle-class if not upper-class, for whom climbing was a pleasant pastime but little more. After 1945, this tradition of pure amateurism declined. Greater specialisation has made the world of climbing less varied and perhaps in some ways less interesting but there is no doubt that it has contributed to raising its technical level. One of the most ironic aspects of the emergence of working class people in the world of climbing is that as top climbers, many of them became professionals and worked less at conventional jobs than the more prosperous classes whom they succeeded.'

In the early 1950s, the most famous climber was undoubtedly the young Joe Brown, a trained plumber. Bold and visionary, especially in relation to climbing cracks of variable widths, he was also one of those pioneers using nuts or chocks, wedge-shaped metal pieces with wire or rope attached which enabled belaying in cracks instead of using pitons. This resulted in a faster, cleaner kind of climbing. From the Peak District to Wales, Joe Brown made some immortal classic climbs such as *Right Eliminate*, *Cemetery Gates* (E1 5b, 1951) and *Cenotaph Corner* (E1 5b, 1952). He often climbed in a roped party with Don Whillans, three years younger than him. More solid and stockier, Whillans also expanded the range of difficulties on gritstone for example, in 1958 with his first ascent of *Goliath* (Burbage South, E4 6a, the equivalent of a F6c).

Nicknamed 'The Baron', Joe Brown was, like Royal Robbins on the other side of the Atlantic, a methodical, reserved leader who had a very long career, making more than 600 first ascents over five decades. Whillans, on the other hand, known as 'The Villain' (the title of his biography), was famous for his exuberance, like many climbers enjoying a drink in the pub after a hard day's climbing. He died in 1985. In many ways he is reminiscent of Warren Harding and the opposite of his contemporary Royal Robbins.

In 1962, Pete Crew, a brilliant climber of 20 years old, made a big impression by being the first to climb *Great Wall* (E4 6a) on Cloggy in Snowdonia; a climb on which Joe Brown himself had given up on two attempts, restricted by his decision to use no more than two pitons per pitch. In the 1960s, a new generation was taking over, discovering

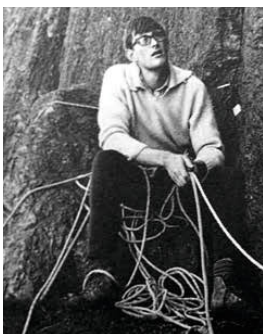


LEFT: DON WHILLANS (1933–1985), 'THE VILLAIN'.
RIGHT: PETER CREW.

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PAGE 54.

ABOVE: JOE BROWN.
BELOW: JOE BROWN DURING THE 60s AT CLOGWYN
DU'R ARDDU.

new places to climb, notably on the pleasant English, Scottish and Welsh coasts. For example Gogarth on Holyhead Mountain on the island of Anglesey, a huge headland overlooking the Irish Sea, was explored by Martin Boysen and Baz Ingle in 1964. Just traversing under the crag above the sea is an adventure in its own right, surrounded by seagulls and seals. Boysen was probably the most gifted climber of that period, setting new standards in the Lake District and Wales with ascents such as *Nexus* (E2 5b, on Dinas Mot, 1963), *The Medlar* (E4 6a, 1964), *The Skull* (E4 6a, 1966) and *Capital Punishment* (E4 5c, on Ogwen's Suicide Wall, 1971).



ABOVE LEFT: GOGARTH, NORTH WALES.
BELOW LEFT: MARTIN BOYSEN.
RIGHT: *A DREAM OF WHITE HORSES*, GOGARTH, 1968.



The cliffs of Gogarth experienced a golden age in the late 1960s with gems such as *Citadel* (E5 6b) by Jack Street/Geoff Birtles and *A Dream of White Horses* 1968, HVS 5a, by Ed Drummond and Dave Pearce. In 1979, Drummond climbed Nelson's Column in London as a protest against apartheid in South Africa and in 1971, still at Gogarth, Alan Rouse raised the bar climbing *Positron* (E5 6a), today's equivalent to a 5.11d or a F7a grade: 'The final pitch is extremely impressive, requiring total commitment after the crux move', to quote the description in the 1977 Gogarth guidebook. Arriving in one piece at the top of each of these pitches was an adventure in itself and this achievement was followed by free-climbing and even solo first ascents.

What all these legendary British climbers from the 1950s to the 1970s had in common was that they were better than anyone else at being able to transfer the technical skills acquired on their 'little' lumps of rock and ice onto the highest mountains of the world. For instance, in 1955 Joe Brown was the first to climb the 8,586m Kangchenjunga, the third highest summit on earth and the following year he climbed the challenging Muztagh Tower in the Karakoram range. From the Central Pillar of the Fréney (Mont Blanc, 1961) to the South Face of Annapurna (1970), the likes of Chris Bonington, Whillans (with his illustrious companions Dougal Haston and Doug Scott) were among the great climbers of the day. Whillans also designed the eponymous sit-harness used by many young free climbers in the 1980s and still in use today. Martin Boysen took part in the great climbing expeditions of the time, including Trango Tower and the South West Face of Everest (1975). As for Alan Rouse, an

outstanding and determined mountaineer, he died in the tragic summer of 1986 on the slopes of K2, the second highest mountain of the world, having been the first British mountaineer to reach its summit.



In the rest of Europe, except perhaps in the new German Democratic Republic, a country about which there is less information for obvious reasons, climbing mostly took place with artificial aid though some maestros made ascents with dubious protection. Georges Livanos, known as 'Le Grec', is well-known both for his climbing exploits and his inimitable literary style: his book *Au-delà de la verticale* is a classic and he has set records from the Dolomites to the Calanques of Marseilles. His masterpiece remains his 1951 route on the Su Alto peak, at the heart of the enormous North West Face of the Civetta in the Dolomites.

ABOVE: ALAN ROUSE [1951-1986].
BELOW: SONIA AND GEORGES LIVANOS [1923-2004].

DEEP GORGES

At the heart of the Alpes de Haute-Provence, the cliffs of the Verdon Gorge are beautiful to look at but they also command respect because of their height of up to 300m and their isolation. Discovered by climbers in 1966, the first routes were the obvious ones, the great cracks of the Escales cliff: *La Demande* in 1968, the *Eperon Sublime* and *Luna-Bong* in 1970. Guy Hérán, François Guillot and Joël Coqueugniot were soon joined by Bernard Gorgeon and his friends: Jacques Nosley, Jacques Keller and the guide Pepsi.

A native of Marseilles, François Guillot was the most talented. He learned his skills in the nearby Calanques, that 'sea and mountain' paradise which earlier on had produced legends such as Gaston Rébuffat and Georges Livanos. In the post-war years, this enormous white limestone massif rising from the Mediterranean became the most active climbing centre in the South of France. There, climbers experimented on the vertical rock and all the techniques which subsequently were so successful in the Verdon. In the Calanques or in Chamonix (the first repeat of the *Directe américaine aux Drus*), Guillot and his companions tackled the most difficult itineraries in record times and matched in free-climbing the level achieved by Messner in the Dolomites at the same time. Guillot's career has been long and varied and included the rescue of German climbers in the Drus in 1966 plus expeditions to the West Pillar of Makalu in Nepal and FitzRoy in Patagonia) and today he is still an active and accomplished modern free climber.

In the early 1970s climbers were attracted by the big aid-climbing walls such as the *Paroi Rouge*, the *Mousson*, the *Castapiagne Rouge*. The legend of the Verdon was born: stark shapes and perfect verticality, everything contributed to the international reputation of the gorge. At first it was the terrifying cracks which made the headlines



CLAUDE CASSIN AND FRANÇOIS GUILLOT, VERDON, 1968.

PAGE 69:

ABOVE LEFT: FRANÇOIS GUILLOT.

CENTRE LEFT: CHRISTIAN GUYOMAR (1948–2011), FREE-CLIMBING ON LES DEUX AIGUILLES, ONLY PROTECTED WITH SKYHOOKS.

ABOVE LEFT: RON FAWCETT FREEING *LE TRIOMPHE D'ÉROS*, MOUNTAIN COVER, 1978.

RIGHT: L'ESCALES, CROWN OF THE VERDON GORGES.

