

Zeitschrift: Jahresbericht / Akademischer Alpen-Club Zürich
Herausgeber: Akademischer Alpen-Club Zürich
Band: 102-103 (1997-1998)

Artikel: Walking on the wild side
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-972401>

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Walking on the Wild Side

Tragedy nullifies triumph in the world of hard-core alpinism.

For those who don't know, and in Zürich there are many, Basel is a small town down the river in the direction of the Big Canton (Germany). Baslers can generally be credited with a few percent more joie de vivre than their counterparts from further east, but share a pathological hatred of anything related to Zürich which, to the uninitiated outsider, seems mostly to stem from an inferiority complex. Zürchers match this treatment only with a rabid indifference. For me, successfully hiding my Zürich connections behind Scottish-accented Hochdeutsch, Basel is a pleasant enough place to be whiling away another postdoc within shouting distance of the greatest concentration of weekend-accessible rock, snow and ice on the planet.



Bruce Normand.

For John Hawkins, Basel had become an important transit camp on the way to this El Dorado. John was an Irishman from Cork, one of whose distinguishing features was a decent mastery of German, albeit with a sächsische twang. This had led his employer to post him to Mannheim, a point eminently close enough to the Alps for practical purposes, and a mutual friend in Dublin had alerted him to my existence. One of my early impressions of John, gained on the regular Chamonix commute, was that it was really quite hard to stop him talking about Vera, his girlfriend and definite devotion. One way was to move him to mountains, at which point it became hard to stop him talking about Les Droites, NE Spur. He'd been helicoptered off that route last year after a storm and a shoulder dislocation, an experience which had left a deep mark. His desire to go back and do it properly burned so brightly that, as I didn't hesitate to rub in, it bordered on obsession. ...

"It'll be the Droites so then?" I never succeeded in working out the function of the "so" in this turn of phrase, but it seemed to be a bona fide Irish English construction. John leaned back from my kitchen table and ran his hand through his long and tousled fair hair. He was up to his elbows in guidebooks, since I'd managed to avoid an e-mail conclusion before he'd left work, but he knew which route he was planning. The weather forecast was OK, it hadn't snowed in a while and it was mid-July. Still, two weeks earlier I'd seen more snow than rock on a marathon Weisshorn traverse with Andi, and was wrestling with the idea that perhaps August really was the season. You never know till you go. "OK."

We were at Argentière for the first cable car, but an imbecile ahead stalling the ticket queue for 5 minutes meant that it left half full. In stark contrast to the Midi in summer, the next cars were deserted. Up at Grands Montets, the North Face of the Dru was still looking rather white. I'd never been up here without skis. We roped up and jogged off down the hill, passing teams of normal-routers. An hour later we'd had our fill of the Droites North Face, sweeping 1300 m up above us and bounded on the left by our route, which was first an imposing rock buttress and later a steep, discontinuous and snowy ridge. We were approaching the lowest point of the buttress and so were two other teams, who must have been ahead of the imbecile, and there was a third party on the route. So much for early season.

The first pair, a French guide called Fred, who spoke German with his client Joachim, were middle-aged and equipped only with mountain boots for the lower rock (to V). They put up little opposition when we climbed past, and soon I was leading into the first V move with one of a pair from Neuchâtel behind. Right behind. At least he managed not to clip my gear, but I was forced to speculate on his confidence in me. We moved together through some easier ground, already pleasantly warm in T-shirts but starting to curse the heavy packs. We pulled in behind a trio of French military cadets, one of whom, Nicolas, was doing all their leading and looking quite powerful. On John's assurance, I followed their line into a steep, stiff section, failed to find the moves, burned out my arms and was left hanging from gear and cursing. Many failed tries later, I had to leave my pack to solve the problem, and strain my worthless arms yet more by hauling it. ...

The next section was loose, and we repassed Fred. Team Romandie was hung up in a wide but low-angle crack (IV) which had frightened their leader. John jammed through, and I trailed a rope for them. Meanwhile, the inventive Fred had found the traditional solution elsewhere, and came up behind us. I launched into a section of thin V which John said I'd need to aid; there were reasonable foot placements, and this time I couldn't see the problem. From a belay beside the French, watching as Nicolas swore from somewhere up and left, John's prior knowledge took him right and we were back in the lead. ...

The other morning two straightforward crossing pitches and I was on my way up a mixed slope. The ice was soft and the snow mushy, but when I ran out of rope 3 m from regaining the ridge there were useful screw-placements. John pulled up ahead over some big blocks, and Fred appeared below, inquiring as to conditions. "Not so great", was my reply. "We belayed further up on your right" – a veiled direction out of the fall line. ...

We headed into another traverse, which was meant to bring us under the obvious gully/chimney with the crux exit. All the faint gulleys had chimneys, or none did. I took us too far across, and John set about retrieving the right gully on the basis of visible fixed gear, while Fred caught up with us again. My pitch turned from snow to good, styrofoam ice, then I ran out of rope 10 m below a corner flanked by an ice-plastered, cracked slab, which in someone's imagination must have been a chimney. Fred belayed at its base, and John climbed there, looked uncertain, then decided to bring me up. Fred was happy to let us take the first crack and see what happened; John was equally happy to give me back the sharp end.

I led a long, rising traverse on the N side, unsure where we were supposed to regain the ridge. I brought us to a notch from which the summit

slopes were visible, but still we couldn't tell if we were meant to be on the ridge or below it. Patchy clouds were blowing by. John looked at both options, twice, then made the rock-climber's choice, the ridge. Slow progress and more cursing told me that the fun still wasn't over, and sure enough a last, brutal crack with large but wide-spaced holds greeted me. After due extrication, I found John in another notch, from which a single, moderate move put me on a low-angle ridge to the top. A full wallow up the last 100 m was alleviated by some old prints, and I flopped over the top like a sack of potatoes, capable only of hauling in the slack rope as John joined me.

There wasn't much sense of triumph – we hadn't conquered the mountain, it had let us up it – or even satisfaction. That would come later, when it sank in that we'd both just climbed the hardest alpine route of our lives. Right now, I felt more like I'd been beaten up, and John just wore a bemused version of his trademark crooked smile. He'd exorcised his ghost, or maybe he hadn't until we were down. We traded a handshake, inhaled the last of the marzipan and looked at the cloud shadows crossing the forbidding North face of Grandes Jorasses. Fred appeared below, bypassing the last ridge section. "We'd best be getting down so then?" ...

Epilogue: In August we'd climbed Les Anneaux Magiques on the Brouillard Pillar, then the 1961 Route on the Freney Pillar. Not unlike Les Droites, I'd led the elegant part of that, freeing the first pitch of the crux at borderline 6c and hauling the packs. John had done the heavy lifting, leading the 7a pitch on pure aid where we couldn't haul packs, and electing to haul me up, gasping and hypothermic, in his wake. We'd bivouacked 100 m from the summit of Mont-Blanc to watch the sunrise from the top of Europe. Soon afterwards we'd climbed the North Ridge of Dent Blanche, but then on the North Face of the Petit Dru I'd pulled off another unfrozen block which broke my hand. John had wrapped it up, supervised the retreat, delivered me to hospital and come back for me two days later. I went back to work, the weather turned sour, and John was laid off in a restructuring, so returned to Ireland and to Vera. In late September and October he was back in the Basle transit camp, climbing with a sequence of partners and planning a winter of travel in the USA to ski and climb.

On a grey autumn day in late October, I returned from two weeks of work and travel in Iberia. On the kitchen counter was an open bag of pasta, and on the table a note – "weather's been rotten, gone to Cham for a look". – and a copy of Jonathan Livingston Seagull. I went over to the office. A postcard of Langkofel was on the desk, on the back the same scrawling script, and on my terminal hung a miniature Post-It note: "Vera Quinlan called. It's important." I switched on the computer and typed "mail". In the centre of the window flashed the words:

The following appears in today's "Irish Times":

"Cork man dies in fall in French Alps

A CORK man in his 20s and a 32-year-old climbing colleague from Britain have died in a fall in the French Alps, according to local police. The men fell to their deaths at the weekend while trying to ascend the north face of 3,842-metre Aiguille du Midi peak in the Mont-Blanc range ..."

The satisfaction is gone, only a void remains.

Bruce Normand

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