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CHRIS BONINGTON



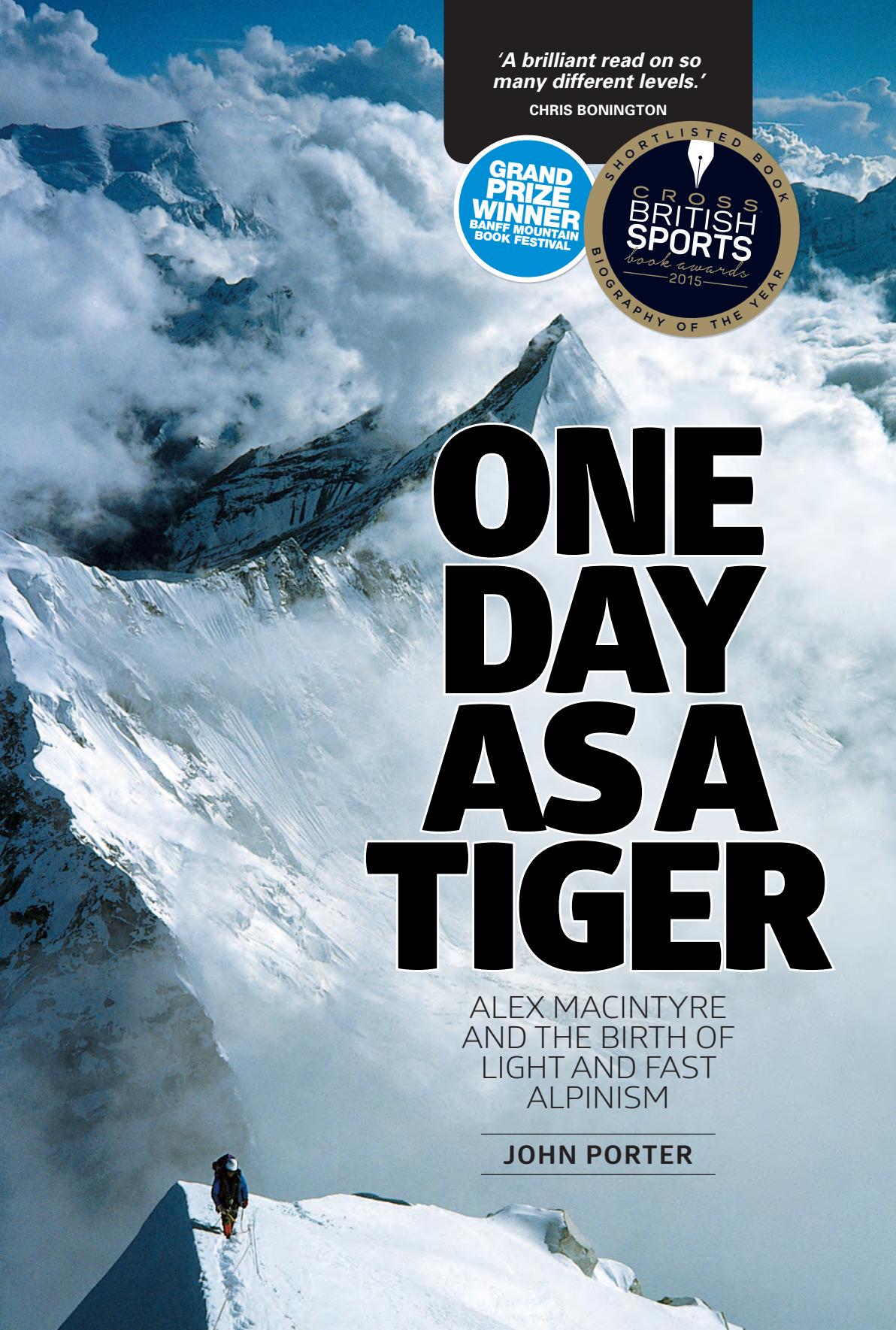
# ONE DAY AS A TIGER

ALEX MACINTYRE  
AND THE BIRTH OF  
LIGHT AND FAST  
ALPINISM

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JOHN PORTER

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John Porter

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## STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

A steady breeze flows down from unseen peaks, easing the discomfort of the strong sunlight and noonday heat. The wind ripples through fields of ripening barley and peas, the long stems flexing and rebounding in harmony. The intense greens of the fields seem to shine with an internal light. Mountains of dull brown deeply scored by *nullahs* tilt up from the edge of the plain like rusting sheets of corrugated iron. Their flanks rise from the fertile valley in to an arid landscape of spiny scrub trees and rocky towers towards the snows of the Hindu Kush.

We are camped where four valleys meet on the plain of Zebak. This is the entrance to the Wakhan Corridor in the far north-east of Afghanistan. It is just past midday on an August afternoon in 1977. I doze in a state of semi-exhaustion and deep contentment. This is a magical place, filled with dazzling light and verdant growth in the middle of a desert.

It isn't much of a camp. The gales of the previous night have nearly destroyed our single tent. It is torn down one side, exposing an assortment of clothes and gear scattered inside. We make no effort to stitch the tent or pick up the mess or wash the pots. At this moment, nothing seems to matter. A hoopoe flits towards the river, the splash of colour on its wings accentuated by the blinding sun. All is calm. Being alive, still existing, is all that matters.

Alex is visible through the ripped side of the tent, dozing on top of his sleeping bag. His exposed ribs and wasted arms and legs speak of weeks of hard effort and not enough food. His face is framed by a mop of hair, part vagrant part rock-star, like Marc Bolan with a stubbly beard. A battered copy of *The Magus* by John Fowles lies tipped on its side next to him. A half drunk cup of tea has upended onto my sleeping bag.

It doesn't matter. The sun dries things within minutes. The world around us is a slow cycle of time and colour. The only sounds are the rush of the distant river, the wind in the grain and the occasional call of a bird of prey circling high above. We have enough to eat. Within a few days, the expedition will come to an end and new journeys will begin.

But for the moment, we are still in Afghanistan, miles from our friends and with no idea as yet how we will get home. We have to find our way

back to Kabul by truck. Maybe six days? Then the big question: will the Russians let us cross the Amu Darya to retrace our train journey across the Soviet Union? The Poles smuggled us here with false papers, so going back is a problem. If they grant us permission in Kabul, maybe ten more days to get to Warsaw, then three days to England. It is only time and we have plenty of that. I drift off again.

As if from a dream, the distant sound of engines gathers strength. Beyond the fields, at the base of the hills to the north, lies a rough road that links Faizabad with the upper reaches of the Wakhan and then on to the smuggling route into Soviet Asia across the Amu Darya. Could this be Wojciech Kurtyka – known as Voytek – and the rest of our expedition returning from the Mandaras valley? Voytek has been gone two days. I make a quick calculation – no, that is not enough time to get there and back. We follow the plume of dust rising from the road half a mile away as it grows in size to reveal a military jeep and a lorry half full of soldiers heading west.

The vehicles stop at the nearest point on the road to us, about a quarter of a mile away. Three men get out and set out at a fast march across the fields in our direction. We have camped far enough from the road to give ourselves a chance to run if required. A threatening encounter at Bandikan a week ago is still fresh in our memory. We have no official permission to be here, which in the eyes of bandits is as good as not being here at all. We have no choice now but to wait and see what unfolds. In any case, these men are clearly military. We can tell by the height and sweep of their peaked caps that two of them are officers. By his braids one appears to be a colonel. Perhaps a cell in a military camp won't be too bad.

As the men approach Alex sits up to have a better look. We can see clearly that Voytek is not with them.

'What do you think? Are these guys going to arrest us, shoot us or are they just stopping by for a brew?'

'Hopefully just checking us out, but maybe they will do all three.'

I stand up to greet them, while Alex does his best to bring order to our possessions. First priority, get our British passports ready to wave if required. Being '*Inglestani!* London!' has proven to be one of our strongest cards during our entire illicit time in this region.

The colonel covers the last yards with grace and authority.

'Hello, where are you from?'

Around forty years old and with 1950s movie-star looks, he is clearly the senior man here. His Horse Guards moustache dates from the era of the British Army's fatal retreat from Kabul. It suddenly occurs to me to

question how the English military of past centuries developed the fashion for moustaches.

*'Inglestani! London,'* I reply like an obedient dog.

*'Ah, where in London do you live? I love the West End. I did my masters at the London School of Economics.'*

I am about to relax and mumble something about actually being from Cumbria when to my horror I see that the junior officer and his driver are rifling through the contents of the tent and that Alex is powerless to stop them. The next question from the colonel takes me totally by surprise.

*'How much do you want for your tent, for your equipment, anything else you want to sell?'*

I look around, and then turn back to him in astonishment. The tent is clearly in ruins. The sleeping bags and clothing are patched and filthy with sweat and grime. Everything else including our stove and nesting pots are battered and barely usable. Only the pile of nuts, pitons, ice axes and crampons, already used before this expedition, retain something of their original condition.

The activity of barter in Afghanistan is highly complex, and potentially dangerous. On the first day of the walk-in, a village elder tried to buy Alex's boots. Alex explained that his boots were worth more than the village bull. For the local people, that suddenly made us seem incredibly wealthy. Everything is relative. This entire trip from the time we arrived in Warsaw to this very moment had been a masterpiece of turning pennies into goods to barter and the resulting dollars into summits. The Poles have taken a huge risk smuggling us across the Soviet Union to get us here. Now I must find an answer to this man's offer to trade that will not insult him and, perhaps, save us the need for any further explanations. My boy scout's sense of honour comes to my rescue.

*'I'm afraid we are not in any position to sell our equipment. You see it all belongs to the High Mountain Club of Poland, which makes it all the property of the Peoples' Republic of Poland. It has been loaned to us and is in our care.'*

Now it is the colonel's turn to stare incredulously at me. There is a short pause.

*'Ah well,'* he says, *'in that case we must be on our way. It is so hard to find good equipment for use in the mountains. That is a pity.'*

And with that, they turn and begin to leave, but then the movie-star colonel stops and turns round.

*'Oh, I must tell you that all your Polish and English friends are well and*

send their regards. We met them two days ago and they, quite happily, sold us equipment. I guess that must have been their private property? *Insha-Allah*, they will find you in one or two days at the most. In the meantime, I'll make sure you are sent some trout and bread from the village – it looks like you could do with some food. Goodbye. And may Allah protect you.'

The men float away. Alex and I stand in the sweltering sun and breathe freely again. Life is direct and immediate. No one needs to know where we are, who we are. We are no longer sure ourselves. We are just travellers in the middle of a story from another world. When the engines start and the convoy heads out, we laugh until near to tears and only stop when two men from the village arrive with a massive trout and some cold *naan*. Ramadan has clearly finished. We offer the men a handful of small denomination Afghanis and ask them to join us. We brew tea, fry the trout and watch shadows move down into the valley as though the mountain is the gnomon on a sundial. We finish our simple meal and the men leave, their curiosity diminished by the chill mountain air that fills the valley each evening.

Waking midway through the night, I see through the tear in the tent a dazzling array of stars illuminating the black sky. The Milky Way seems like all that is good and safe in life. I remember childhood nights spent secretly with my small homemade telescope on the roof in Massachusetts while my parents slept. The sky is so incredibly clear above me now, I can see nebulae, and areas where opaque clouds of gas obscure what lies behind, like the impenetrable darkness that looms in the soul even when it is most content.



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## PUBLIC IMAGE

In the middle of the afternoon on 15 October 1982, Alex MacIntyre and the French/Italian climber René Ghilini reached a steep rock band at around 7,200 metres on the south face of Annapurna. The south face is one of the great walls of the Himalaya, a complex assortment of buttresses and steep couloirs three miles wide and a mile and a half high. Of the fourteen peaks over 8,000 metres, Annapurna has claimed the most lives for each attempt. Alex and René were trying a new route, a diagonal line starting from the right side of the face that would eventually lead them to the central summit. If successful, it would be the fourth route on the face. The three main buttresses had already been climbed by large 'national' expeditions. In 1970, a British team led by Chris Bonington climbed what was then the most difficult route on an eight-thousander. It went directly up the far left buttress to the highest of Annapurna's three summits. The Poles climbed the central buttress in May 1981 and the Japanese the right pillar in October 1981. All three of these expeditions comprised many members and climbing the mountain took months with fixed ropes and permanent camps. Alex and René planned to climb the face in three days with two more in descent, just the two of them. If they failed on this attempt, they would be back to try again.

Together they surveyed the possibilities for climbing the thirty-metre wall that now blocked their progress. From base camp it seemed inconsequential, the width of a pencil set against a two-storey house. A tempting snow ramp led left, perhaps all the way to open snow slopes on the other side, but after sixty metres, the ramp narrowed to a thin smear of ice and then there was just a sweep of compact rock. It was impossible. They retreated to a crevasse at the start of the ramp and prepared to bivouac. Climbing safely down the 800-metre couloir to the foot of the face, they would have to start at dawn, while the mountain was still frozen. Brewing drinks, they discussed what equipment they would need to get past this band of rock on the next attempt.

It was after dawn by the time they started down. They were slowed by the initial difficult descent into the couloir. The sun reached the top of the face and slowly descended in a yellow veil toward them, growing stronger. At around 10 a.m., the two men were about halfway down the couloir. From below, where I sat watching them, they were two tiny specks in a sea

of snow and rock. Then, in a moment, fate rushed to meet Alex in the form of a fist-sized stone accelerating from half a mile above. It smashed into his helmet with the accuracy of a sniper's bullet. He crumpled then fell the remaining 400 metres down the couloir.

René clung to his ice axes, stunned for a moment, and then called Alex's name. When there was no response, he descended as quickly as possible in a semi self arrest, kicking his crampons into the softening snow while jabbing his axes above his head in a controlled fall. When he reached Alex's lifeless body, he understood death had been almost certainly instantaneous. There was nothing he could do. He forced himself to be calm, to control his own shock and continue his retreat alone. He placed the body in a recess just above a crevasse and marked the spot with Alex's ice axes holding him to the face. Then he raced the remaining four hours toward base camp on the opposite side of the glacier.

I met him halfway across. I had been watching from the lateral moraine just above base camp and seen the accident through the lens of my camera. All we could do that day was return to the tents; it was too late to go up. That night, René told me the story, about being stopped by the rock step, the conversations they had during the bivvy the night before, how they hoped I would have recovered and with extra equipment we would return and succeed. The evening before, as they descended, I thought my luck had changed. Feeling fit again after a bout of diarrhoea, I hoped we could still climb the face together. Now this. The evening before, as I watched them prepare to bivouac through my zoom lens, a sudden burst of intense red filled the viewfinder. My heart missed a beat but then I realised what I had seen. It was Alex shaking out the bivvy tent.

The morning after the accident, René and I started to pack up to return to the face and recover the body, but cloud descended before we set off and it began to snow lightly. A storm was brewing. We waited another day in a state of uncertainty. Our liaison officer said he would leave immediately to get news back to Kathmandu. I thought of his mother Jean, and Sarah, his girlfriend, and the need to speak to them. We could stay and try to recover Alex's body, but what would that achieve? It was clear Annapurna would be Alex's tomb.

There is now a memorial stone for Alex at Annapurna base camp with an inscription that reads: 'Better to live one day as a tiger than to live for a thousand years as a sheep.'<sup>1</sup> Had René and Alex managed to overcome the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Better to live one day as a tiger than to live for a lifetime as a sheep' was chosen by Alex's mother Jean for the memorial stone which she erected, accompanied by his sister Libby, his girlfriend Sarah Richard and his good friend Terry Mooney, the season after his death. Some years later it was smashed by an avalanche. In November 2012, I walked in with Pete and Diane Clark to replace it. The south face and

short section that stopped them, there would have been few difficulties between them and the top. In 1984 two Spaniards, Nil Bohigas and Enric Lucas, climbed the line Alex and René had tried. It was a brilliant ascent, but their success was testimony to Alex's vision. Luck had been with them. A narrow runnel of ice led steeply up and over the buttress that had stopped Alex and René.

Alex was 28 when he died, so young his life was little more than a preface, but a preface to what? Alex thought he knew. Just before we left Kathmandu to go to Annapurna, he completed an article for the *Karrimor Technical Guide* for 1983 – Karrimor then being among the leading outdoor brands. I have a picture of Alex sifting through the many sheets he had written by headtorch during a power cut at the Lhotse Hotel. He was doing a final 'cut and paste' of the article, which meant just that, cutting bits out and sticking them at a more appropriate place in the text, or writing a new paragraph by hand and gluing it over the old one.

With uncanny foresight the equal of anything in H. G. Wells, he predicted changes in modern mountaineering and a revolution in worldwide communications. Here is the first of his predictions, right at the beginning of the article: 'As we pack our gear for our attempt on Annapurna south face, we do so in the sure knowledge that one day, in the not too distant future, some lad will be packing half as much or less and setting off to climb the wall in a time beyond our comprehension, backed by a methodology and an understanding of the environment that we do not have today. Our lightweight sacks will be like dinosaurs. The Himalaya will, for a few at least, become an alpine playground, while the waiting millions watch!'

In 2013, the Swiss alpinist Ueli Steck soloed a significantly more difficult line to the right of the British buttress directly to the summit on the south face, up and down in twenty-eight hours. Steck, dubbed the Swiss Machine, sets speed records on routes almost every time he steps on a mountain and millions really do watch films of these ascents on YouTube and television. Such an ascent would have been impossible in 1982 with the equipment of the day. And Steck has achieved the highest standards of modern athletic fitness. There are no Olympic events for climbers, but he is the only gold medallist when it comes to soloing eight-thousanders. Even by the generally very high standards of modern mountaineering, active climbers today find Steck's achievements amazing.

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the enclosing cirque of peaks still towered high and serene above the sanctuary but the development of hotels complete with internet connectivity throughout the region shocked me; Alex would have welcomed it. In 1982, there was only one lodge on the walk-in, and that was the Captain's Lodge at Chamlang. Otherwise, we camped or stayed in shepherd's huts.

The gap between a very good climber and an exceptional climber like Steck is much greater today than it was in the 1970s and 1980s. Back then climbers soloed routes in the Alps to improve their skills and efficiency. It was training to learn to move fast on similar ground in the Himalaya. Setting a speed record wasn't part of the equation. Now speed has become almost a separate sport within mountaineering. It puts the experience into a new dimension. There is little to reflect on when writing about a two and a half hour ascent of the Eigerwand. Stopwatches and sponsors dilute the mystique. And yet what does Steck himself say about his achievement? 'I am not a better climber than Anderl Heckmair.'<sup>2</sup> This is just a different style in a different era.'

The other remarkable prediction in the article foreshadows the coming of the internet. 'One day, in the not too distant future, we may be sitting in our base camp trying to choose between *Dallas* and some lad soloing Makalu's west face live, while trying to keep in touch with the progress of other expeditions by the press of a button. But perhaps by then, René, John and I will have jobs as commentators! Yours, Alex.'

You might say that in writing this book I am proving him right.

When Alex had finished cutting and pasting his article that September day in 1982, he shoved it into an envelope, addressed it to Karrimor's owner Mike Parsons and walked a mile into town through the monsoon rains, along teeming, muddy streets to the post office. Fortunately, the letter reached Mike some weeks later.

Alex MacIntyre's short but brilliant climbing career spanned barely a decade, from early 1972 until the autumn of 1982. By the end of that decade, he was known internationally for his audacious ascents in the Alps, the Andes and the Himalaya. Reinhold Messner described Alex as 'the purest exponent of the lightweight style now climbing in Himalaya.' Around the same time, Alex said of Reinhold Messner, 'he had some interesting projects until he took up peak-bagging and became more interested in number-crunching.'<sup>3</sup>

This impertinent response was recorded in an interview with Ken Wilson for *Mountain* magazine in 1982 during the summer before Alex's death. Wilson purged it from the final printed version fearing Messner would take offence. But the comment was typical of Alex – provocative,

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2 The Eiger Nordwand was first climbed in July 1938 by Anderl Heckmair, Ludwig Vörg, Heinrich Harrer and Fritz Kasperek. The Germans, Heckmair and Vörg, caught up with the Austrians who started a day earlier. Heckmair led the team up the final pitches in appalling weather.

3 By this he meant the race to become the first to climb all fourteen peaks over 8,000 metres. Messner was the first; it has now been achieved by over thirty people and the number grows annually.

some might say offensive given the great man's contribution to mountaineering, and yet, in truth, one way of looking at the facts. Alex, after all, had graduated with a top honours degree in law. There was no malice intended in his comment. Alex respected Messner. He considered his traverse of Nanga Parbat a model for the lightweight style:

'Reinhold is very fit when he arrives and does not, by my standards, do a lot of acclimatisation. He is an athlete and his approach is to take the peak very fast, spending an absolute minimum period of time at altitude ... but [the approach] only works where there are few technicalities. Once you have technical problems, you need to arrive at them fully acclimatised, strong, and with enough supplies to be able to spend a few days on them. Good acclimatisation and the weight of your gear thus become critical.'

Like Messner, Alex had a desire to conceive bold projects above and beyond the ordinary. Ueli Steck continues that tradition today with a different mindset and for far greater commercial reward. Alex lived in a time when equipment was relatively primitive compared to today. Scientific training regimes for high altitude had yet to be fully developed. To reach the base of the biggest mountains took weeks not hours. Would Alex have been like Ueli Steck had he lived today? Possibly. The only certainty is that the best mountaineers of any age would always agree that 'when the chance is there, take it.'

Alex had a nickname in university – Dirty Alex. It was not entirely fair. We were all a pretty grubby bunch, but it stuck. His dishevelled appearance contrasted sharply with his bold good looks, constructed around inquisitive, intelligent and somewhat mocking eyes. He was certainly not, as has been suggested, a product of the flower power generation. Like many sportsmen of the 1970s, Alex styled his appearance with a mix of punk and glam rock. His appearance was both a statement and a challenge to draw out any ambivalence others might have from first impressions. Like most climbers in the 1970s, he smoked pot occasionally and used to joke that drinking was good 'brain training' for the Himalaya. But Alex was not a late-night boozer like many leading stars of those days, including the mercurial genius John Syrett and the American Henry Barber, who enjoyed legendary pub crawls.

Alex's vision of the possible was backed up with an unnerving intellect and a wicked perversity to provoke and toy with other people's emotions. He was also a pragmatist. His approach to lightweight alpinism was well thought through; his aspirations were matched by his own designs for equipment that was often developed.

‘Alex was in many ways unique,’ said Maria Coffey, the author of *Fragile Edge* and other books about the psychological and emotional implications of climbing. ‘He stood out from everyone else. He definitely had a glimmer.’ Maria knew Alex as well as anyone, having been his landlady for a year and a half while she was teaching in Manchester and Alex was working for the British Mountaineering Council. After Alex’s death, Maria said those climbers who knew of her friendship with Alex would often ask about him. ‘Mark Twight and Tomaz Humar were in awe of him. His uniqueness sprang from his karma and charisma, generated from a sense of purpose, not just ambition.’

I climbed with Humar a few times at Paklenica on the Dalmatian coast of Croatia. Alex was indeed one of his heroes. Tomaz was like Alex in many ways, enthusiastic, bold and brash and scoffed when warned he might share the same fate. Tomaz, like many climbers, had a spiritual connection with the mountains. For Tomaz, it was manifested through his Catholic faith and the mystical connection of his nation, Slovenia, to its highest mountain – Triglav – on which it was founded. In Alex, it was harder to detect but it was there. Alex had a true love for the mountains and an imagination that allowed him to seek out new approaches. But he was also an enigma. Even good friends today say they really knew very little about Alex.

‘He was hard work much of the time when we first started climbing together,’ said John Powell, his roommate and early climbing companion at university. ‘He didn’t have much to say about things. He spent most of his time weighing things up but, eventually, when he did make a comment, it was usually pretty accurate. When, just occasionally, he was well off the mark, he would never admit defeat in an argument. He would resort to sarcasm when required as a way of wearing you down.’

By the time he got to the south face of Annapurna, he had taken the idea of lightweight to extremes. He and Ghilini carried only one ice screw, two rock pegs, one rope and the sheath of another to use for abseiling, light sleeping bags, a bivvy tent, and food and gas for four days. Some have suggested that Alex broke his own rules going this light on such a massive face where the technical difficulties were unknown.

Style is a balancing act between the audacious and the acceptable. Alex’s wiry stature hid an immensely strong will, but he hated heavy loads. He never planned to carry more than eighteen kilos to the base of any unclimbed route on an 8,000-metre peak. On Annapurna, he tried to get this down to less than that. In theory, by going light, your speed increased and thus reduced your exposure to danger. It was a simple theory; in speed lay safety. But the desire to make first ascents of great, unclimbed

routes on the highest peaks was an ambition fraught with exposure to incalculable dangers. Very few climbers have got away without sustained good fortune if they continued to climb at the highest standard. Many had the sense to retire, or at least climb on lower peaks where the risks were more manageable.

‘Good acclimatisation and the weight of your gear thus become critical,’ Alex had proclaimed as the golden rules of high-altitude climbing. These two elements were among the keys to any successful expedition. But what else was needed? The right team, of course, unless you were soloing. For exponents of lightweight style, that usually meant just two members, and never more than four. Roger Baxter-Jones, one of the leading and strongest British alpinists of the 1970s and 1980s, summed up the essential dynamics of teamwork on a Himalayan climb:

1. Come back
2. Come back friends
3. Get to the top

Roger, with Alex and Doug Scott, achieved all three goals while making the first ascent of the giant south-west face of Shisha Pangma in the purest style possible, but the climb tested their friendship to breaking point. The hardest of the three dictates is to come back friends. Other members of the team not capable of the climb were discarded at an early stage of the expedition and there was considerable resentment from those members left behind.

The final and least predictable requirement for success in the big mountains was – and still is – good luck. Alex knew full well he could not control objective dangers and so set out to manage his own luck by developing his concept of lightweight style. Safety came through speed, and speed was gained by stripping out much of the traditional safety net: camps, support, spare food and fuel, equipment and so forth – what Alex described as ‘the umbilical cord’. And the need to reduce weight wasn’t just about paring back on the amount of stuff. Lightweight style required lightweight gear and that meant new designs and new materials.

In the 1970s and 1980s Himalayan climbing was still an adventure pursued by very few people, but in the lower ranges of North America and Europe, alpine climbing was a fast growing sport, becoming socially acceptable and even fashionable. The growth in participation drove a growth in demand for equipment that would not only reduce the risks but also make the experience more enjoyable. There are very few people, even

among the most hardened mountaineers, who actually find pleasure in carrying huge weights of gear in lumpy rucksacks.

Established companies and innovative new businesses set up and run by climbers responded to these new markets with lighter and better-designed products. The development of new equipment required investment in expensive research and technology. Specialist manufacturers worldwide vied to produce the best aluminum karabiners, hollow ice axes, lightweight crampons, high-altitude tents, waterproof nylon clothing and plastic boots, and they provided products to leading climbers to test. Anyone climbing in the 1960s and 1970s will remember the moment they clipped their steel karabiners for the last time, replaced pegs and knotted slings with lightweight nuts and tapes and condemned their uncomfortable canvas rucksacks – like carrying a potato sack – to the attic.

Alex had good contacts with many equipment manufacturers. In those days, they were mainly climbers and, therefore, likely to be friends. Through strength of personality, Alex often convinced them to develop new equipment made from the latest lightweight fabrics for clothing, rucksacks and tents that might be used on one expedition only and so would never be of commercial value unless modified. Necessity really was the mother of invention. Most climbers had little money and lived on thin air. Obtaining free equipment in exchange for bright suggestions on innovative and saleable products was an essential part of almost every Himalayan expedition. From the manufacturer's point of view, the development of lightweight equipment was often somewhere between an act of faith and a sign of friendship.

The right people and good gear meant nothing unless you were properly acclimatised for high-altitude climbing. Alex was clear that for most climbers this could only be achieved as the culmination of years, if not decades, of time spent in the mountains. He believed that good performance at high altitude was not simply a matter of the body physically adapting. The mind also had to adapt. It had to learn to accept everything encountered on the mountain as perfectly normal, including extreme danger. This, he argued, could only be achieved after thousands of hours of living in that environment. There were no short cuts to mountain success. You needed to be 'time served'. He hounded one teammate on Shisha Pangma until he agreed to drop all thoughts of going onto the mountain with the rest of them.

'Fundamentally, Nick has not logged enough hours slogging through Scottish bogs in winter blizzards, lumbering through the frantic, non-stop twenty-four-hour exhaustion of the Alps ... like a pack of pursued



wolves with a badly wounded mate, the experienced climbers smelt the inevitable.’

Climbers have long debated whether mountaineering is a lifestyle or a sport. In the 1950s, it was more of a lifestyle, in part because there was little chance of making a living from it and, in part, because it demanded so much of your life to serve a full apprenticeship. Alex certainly served a full apprenticeship. Before the widespread popularity of climbing walls, sport climbing<sup>4</sup> and commercial mountain tourism, the formula for an apprenticeship in Britain more or less followed the sequence set out below. (For North America, replace the Alps with Rockies, Sierras, Cascades or Tetons.)

1. Walk in the hills and dales – observe mad people climbing rocks.
2. Read books about climbing, get inspired.
3. Decide you are also mad, and find someone with whom to go climb a rock.
4. Climb ice in winter, get thoroughly miserable and thoroughly hooked.
5. Go to the Alps in summer, learn to function in thin air, to move fast.
6. Climb in the Alps in winter, have miserable epics and taste the joy of hard fought success.

If, after five to ten years, you were still alive and climbing, you graduated to the Greater Ranges. That was where being ‘time served’ mattered most. (Scottish climbers had the only possible variation allowed in this classical apprenticeship. In the Scottish version, Step 5 was seen as a requirement before you attempted Step 4 in the Scottish hills. Anyone who has spent a few weeks climbing in full winter conditions in Scotland will have some sympathy for this view.)

After his ascent of Shisha Pangma, Alex was asked in an interview if the time was coming when climbers might go straight from Scottish training to the big problem faces of the Himalaya. He responded: ‘I am not sure about that. I wrote an article for a Japanese magazine recently where I pointed out the advantages that British climbers enjoy, having been able to learn their trade through five or six alpine seasons. There are an awful lot of tricks of the trade you can perfect only on alpine terrain. Himalayan trips are still pretty cumbersome and I can’t really see anyone going there and operating safely without having a good alpine training somewhere. We might get

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4 The advent of sport-climbing destinations around the world, from Spain to Thailand, has made rock-climbing a massive holiday market. It is made relatively safe by having fixed-bolt protection and sometimes ‘pre-clipped runners’ for the rope in place. If you fall you generally do not hurt yourself. For the best rock athletes, the hardest climbs may take weeks of effort and dozens of falls before success. The only difference with indoor wall climbing is that it is just that, indoors.

a lad who misses out the summer alpine season, does some good routes in winter, then goes to Alaska, then goes straight to the Himalayan twenty-thousanders. If he is intelligent, talks to the right people, does his homework, not so much to be influenced but to acquire tips for staying alive, then yes, I can see that sort of person developing in the future.'

This balanced and thoughtful response is typical of Alex's lawyer's training. It is clear, but also leaves the question hanging and for the unaware could easily be misinterpreted. His answer is really 'no'. There is no replacement for the full alpine apprenticeship, but you might accelerate it by having nasty winter and 6,000-metre peak experiences. Some very good British climbers with little experience at altitude tried to advance straight to the Himalaya, but returned humbled. Most had nothing worse than some bad experiences with altitude sickness. Ueli Steck's phenomenal solo ascents in the Alps and the Himalaya were the result of thousands of hours of hard training and climbing. His ascent of the south face of Annapurna was his third attempt, so he knew a lot about the terrain. Professional mountaineers climb day in day out to achieve in a few years what used to take a decade.

Until around 1980, Alex had no particular ambition to be famous or known outside of his own circle of friends. He showed little interest in writing reports and articles for magazines. It was part of his vision for himself, to be one of the lads and to be a purely amateur climber, uncontaminated by outside pressures. His attitude and ambition would change.

Upheaval in the world's post-war political makeup was still some way off, however. It is difficult today to picture countries divided into the 'free world' and the 'communist bloc' but it is relevant to Alex's story on several levels. The 1970s generation more than half-expected that one side or the other would push the button and civilisation would end in a series of big bangs. Taking possibly fatal risks did not seem such a bad gamble. That was a view shared by some, including Ken Wilson, the editor of *Mountain* magazine. Wilson believed having adventures in the high mountains was a means of escape from both the real and perceived threats of the cold war.

Alex also had a dark and fatalistic side that revealed itself – only occasionally – in his morbid fear of rock fall. Anyone who has climbed big mountains knows the feeling of instinctively cringing beneath your rucksack, like a tortoise withdrawing into its shell, when the air fills with the whine and whoosh of falling rocks. Your heart stops as stones explode around you. But in my years climbing with Alex, I noticed that in him it was something deeper, so much so that I wonder if he had a premonition about his fate.



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45 Relaxing in Huaraz, Peru. Alan Rouse (left) and Brian Hall in conversation, while Alex looks on.  
46 Luxury transport to base camp at Laguna Peron from Huaraz, courtesy of the Mount Everest Foundation.





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- 47 Alex soloing on the lower slopes of the south face of Nevado III.  
48 Alex at first light after our all-night sing-song without food or sleeping bags.  
49 Seeking a way through the snow flutes on Nevado III.











74

72 The horrendous icefall on Hiunchuli, just before the serac collapse.

73 The rock band at 7,400 metres on Annapurna that stopped Alex and René. *Photo: René Ghilini.*

74 Alex descends into the crevasse on Annapurna where he and René shared their last bivouac.  
*Photo: René Ghilini.*