

**PAUL PRITCHARD**

# DEEP PLAY

**Climbing the world's most  
dangerous routes**

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**FOREWORD BY JOHN MIDDENDORF**

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*Winner – Boardman Tasker Prize*



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**PAUL PRITCHARD**

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The purpose of the ladders is to convey the searchers to the niches.  
Those whom these entice no longer climb simply to get clear of the ground.

— Samuel Beckett





## CHAPTER ONE

### FIRE-STARTER



I was born on top of the quarry. It was the best place to mess about a kid could ever want. I never had to go to my mates' houses to play, 'cos they would always come here if I said let's go in the quarry. It was a glowing green hole in the moors. It was my Grand Canyon, my Amazon, my centre of the earth and my one million years BC. I had seen Tyrannosaurus fighting with Stegosaurus, flying saucers with deathrays, and even a ghost – a yellow custardy thing. That ghost gave me such bad dreams that I shat in my bed when it drifted across our best room towards me.

If you leaned out of our bathroom window, the cliff went sheer down to the scrappers' yard and me and my mates used to push bits of our garden wall over the edge so the rocks would land and crash on the pile of dead cars and corrugated tin below. We'd count one ... two ... three ... f ... always a little too fast. But then the scrapper would come up and him and my old man would shout at each other. Another good one was to stand and pee over the edge and see if you could see it reach the bottom by leaning out more and more, but you had to have good balance for that. There was one tree that tilted out right over the drop and we would climb it, up into the thin top branches and look straight down a hundred feet.

We could get the whole tree moving like mad if a few of us started swaying. We even made a death swing out over the cliff, but that disappeared one day.

In the dry summer I sometimes nicked a box of Swan Vestas, we always had matches on us, and we would set the grass on fire on top of the cliff. It always got out of control really fast. We tried to put them out, the fires, but we all secretly wanted the whole moor to burn 'cos when it got too big we'd all laugh and betcha whether the fire engines would come or not. When we heard the sirens we'd all get dead excited and run off, but not too far, so we could hide behind a wall and see the fire brigade beating at the grass. But once we got caught after we'd burnt a derelict hospital down and the pig said the arsonist always returns to the scene of the crime. Me, Lloyd and Cooksy were bricking it but they couldn't prove anything. It's just it was the same ones who caught us after we'd tied the elastic across the road and it had twanged their aerial, so they were suspicious.

But down inside the quarry it was all shady and cool and we would get goose bumps as we sat and chewed the white roots of the couch grass which tasted of summer. Heather tickled the backs of our grass-stained legs and we sprinted off, with our hands and feet, up ledgy rocks. To the top of Cleveland's Edge we would go, a thin finger of rock miles high sticking out into the quarry, only three feet wide at the end. We would play tig on it, and if you didn't stand right on the end you were a big girl's blouse. But the ramp up the front was the best dare. We knew a kid had fallen off the top and died but that didn't stop us. The whole gang of us would swarm up, sometimes standing on each other's shoulders to reach the next shelf. In summer the rocks were dusty, but in winter they were green and slippery – and you'd always have soaked keks before you got to the bottom, from the long grass and heather. Once, trying to get onto a ledge that all the others were on, with the rocks all sloping the wrong way, they started lobbing matches at me. I shouted, "Quit it. Quit it!" and after we got on top I hated them. I got my own back another day though, when I set a plastic bag on fire and dropped zippers, that's what we called the dripping plastic, on Sucks' kid brother while he was stuck on a ledge. He hadn't done anything to me but he was the easiest to pick on – even Sucks kicked him in all the time.

My dad used to tell me stories of when he was in the army. Of Egypt, the Pyramids and Petra. Down in the quarry the towers of rock became great sitting Ramases and Sphinx, the mill-wheels spare parts for Egyptian chariots. The slag heaps became burial mounds which I excavated in search of treasure and mummified bodies. I had my tool kit in a canvas satchel, with trowels and brushes for clearing the dirt off potential precious objects, and a ball of string. During one excavation, at the entrance of a definite burial chamber, we found

a stack of nude books which we all gathered round, pointing at the pictures and giggling confusedly. We hid them and came back most evenings for kind of club meetings, but when we came back one day someone had nicked them.

My old man didn't like me going to school. He said I would learn more walking on the moors with him. He never really went to school when he was a kid and he said he was better for it. So we'd go off in the early morning with the shotguns along the edge of the hole, shooting at whatever we saw. Besides rabbits, hares and pigeons, we shot blackbirds, peewits, geese and even, once, a fox. We ate everything but the fox tasted horrible. The worst time was when he went mad at me 'cos I looked inside the barrel of the shotgun when it was loaded. "What the bloodyhellfire," he shouted, pulling the 12-bore out of my hands. Once, on top of Cleveland's Edge we saw a family of owls, a mother and three babies. We just sat and watched them. We didn't want to shoot them. They were the best things I'd ever seen. After that I got really into watching the birds and didn't want to shoot them any more. A bit later I remember crying when he shot a kestrel. I held it in my hand and it was so soft and still warm. Its blood trickled down my hand.

It was the same kestrel whose eggs I once nicked when me and my brother still had our big collection. It took us ages to work out how to get to the nest. We'd known where it was for ages, miles up the cliff, but only a stupid get would climb down there. But then we nicked some bailing twine from Locker's barn and I was lowered over the edge. It was all grass and loose rocks and the twine dug into my kidneys. At the nest I was mesmerised, the eggs were so perfect. I put them both in separate pockets and scrambled back up with the gang pulling from above. Later we made pinprick holes in each end of the eggs and blew them into a saucer. Then we proudly set them in their right place in the collection, in their bed of sawdust between the thrush egg and the crow's egg.

In the winter-time we lived in Spain. It was great 'cos it meant that I didn't have to go to school. I laughed about all the others back at home in school and here was our Dave and Trace and me doing what we wanted every day, playing on the beach or fishing or adventuring. We lived eleven storeys up in some apartments, right above the cemetery. Sometimes we'd be having our dinner and there'd be a funeral going on down below. Once me and our Dave went exploring in there and saw these dirty hunchbacked men digging up all the graves. There were coffins and piles of bones everywhere. We started to go nearer for a closer look but this grave-digger saw us and picked up a skull and ran at us with it. We started legging it and my heart was beating dead fast and then this skull came bouncing past me. We told our mum and she told us not to go in there again.

Me and our Dave used to fight a lot but he was six years older than me so I always got paggered. But he tormented me so much that I'd get my own back on him by stealing his spends. He got really angry with me once 'cos I had told on him for drawing pictures of people with no clothes on and when mum and dad went out he picked me up and dangled me by the ankles over the balcony. I stopped shouting and wriggling and just went quiet as I stared down for hundreds of feet. He dragged me back over but I didn't cry, I just looked at him, and he said that if I told I would get it.

Back home we had pigs and hens and rabbits, too, and my dad showed us how to slaughter them. My sister wouldn't get involved, but me and our Dave loved it. We killed the rabbits by chopping them on the back of the neck but they didn't always die straight away. The hens were easier, you just twisted their necks and sometimes they would run around with their heads flopping around. Once a year we had to kill our pigs and to save money my dad didn't take them to the slaughter-house. One Sunday morning, dead early, we went up to the pen. The farmer had told dad that if you draw a line with a magic marker between the pig's ears and eyes and hit it spot on with a pick-axe, the thing will die in a second. So my dad crept up to it and whacked the pick into its head, but it went mad and started screaming. It tore the axe out of his hand and ran about the pen. Its howling was like a baby. It was horrible. My dad picked me up and ran out of the pen with me and told me to get the gun. He was worried 'cos he said the bloody neighbours might call the bloody police. I ran like mad back up the steps with the 12-bore and the cartridges. Pinky, that's the name our Trace gave the pig, was still screeching and the axe handle was waving around in the air. My dad loaded the gun, aimed it and fired. He's a good shot, my dad. Pinky shut up straight away and fell on its face and my dad was pleased 'cos he'd shot it right in the heart. We tied a rope around its head and lifted it into a bath for cutting up. As me and our Dave pulled on the rope, dad chopped at Pinky's neck with his Bowie knife and we went flying backwards as its head came off. Our Trace didn't like eating bacon for breakfast after that.

Most of Bolton's joyriders dumped their night's fun in the quarry, too, and we would always be first there to strip off all the useful scrap. Even the windscreens and seats we got for our dens, but we never found a suitcase of dosh in the boot. If they hadn't already been burnt we would set them on fire and run off to hide nearby and watch the black smoke rising. Running through the quarry I cut my knee open on glass. It didn't hurt, but I still cried. The blood tasted of metal. Suddenly I hated the quarry and wanted my mum to wash the cut. Back home in the cool cave of our dining room it took a while for my eyes to get used to the darkness. She put a sticking

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plaster on my cleaned up knee, ruffled my hair, and got back to top and tailing gooseberries. I limped back out into the heat, proud of my wound, to eat slugs and horse muck for 10p dares off my mates.

We found a brand new shiny rope on the floor behind Cleveland's, and some other stuff, but we just took the rope and sneaked off up our secret path. We made a massive death slide in Bluebell forest which should have been ace but the stupid rope stretched and you hit the ground.

I always saw climbers on the walls. They were just part of the quarry, up there for ages, not moving and shouting signals to each other. It was then that I found out how to make petrol bombs and I loved throwing them off the top of the cliff. There was one time I did something really daft and threw one down at a bunch of climbers. The milk bottle smashed on the cliff face and fire showered down on them. They started pointing and shouting and I ran for it with my heart beating dead fast.

We went back with the stretchy rope and tied it to the top of the cliff face. Then we threw the rest off and went round to the bottom. We swarmed up the rope one at a time, trying to be like the climbers, but it cut into our hands. Then one of the climbers came over with a proper helmet on and everything and said he'd take us up a route. We weren't sure what a route was but he tied the rope around our waists with a proper climber's knot and showed us how to use the cracks and that with our hands and feet. It was loads easier than trying to grab the rope.



We had to leave the big old house when mum and dad split up and go into a flat on the main road in town, above a hairdressers. But I still waggged off school and went up over the moors to the quarry. I took new mates with me though. I'd lost touch with my old ones. Cooksy had moved to another town and Lloydly had killed himself joyriding. He got drunk on cider and nicked a car and when the pigs came after him he hit a tree going dead fast. I can't drive. We'd take cider and drink it as fast as we could and lie in the warm heather 'till late, our mothers wondering where we were. Three days a week the gun club would come to the quarry. Grown Lancashire men dressed as American cops, shades and bomber jackets. They'd chew gum and shoot automatic pistols at cardboard cut-outs of people. When they stopped to change cartridges we'd shout "Waaaaankeeeers" ... and leg it.

We saw a man chasing a woman around the slag heaps and we crawled over to the edge. They lay down behind Cleveland's Edge, amidst the tin cans

and whirlpools of crisp packets, and she pulled up her skirt. We watched them doing it for a while, biting our collars to stop the giggles, but shy too, in front of each other, with longing. Then Judd shouted something and we rolled on our backs laughing so much that we couldn't breathe. I saw our house at the end of the quarry with strangers in the garden, and stopped smiling. We walked back along Scout Road, the lovers' lane from where you can see the whole of Manchester, Jodrell Bank space telescope and right across to the Snowdon mountains, where we played spot the used johnny, and where we once saw a car rocking to and fro with a pair of bare feet at the window. I didn't want to go back there. I went to town instead 'cos that's where my new mates hung out. We did loads of shoplifting. We'd nick anything for a laugh and sometimes have to run out of Woolys or somewhere being chased by security, and we'd turn our jackets inside out and our hats around as a disguise. We moved on to half bottles of Bells and hung around the town centre, drunk. We acted like stupid buggers when we were drunk. "When all the lights are flashin' we're goin' Paki bashin'" a bunch of skins were singing. They were old lads, maybe eighteen. I shouted something to them, I don't remember what, and they ran over and swiped me round the head with a bike chain. When I went down they all put the boot in and I woke up in some woods, bruised and all covered in dry blood. I told my mum I'd fallen out of a tree. She always pretended to believe me.

I didn't like the secondary school. I'd never really been to school that much before 'cos we always lived in Spain in the winter and my mum would teach me the stuff I needed to know. The white kids called me Paki because of my tanned skin. They were just jealous. But I did have my mates and we'd wag off together and go and play space invaders or go robbing. So I don't know why I jumped down the stairs. I just looked down the well, four storeys from Mr Wooley's Physics lab, like a spiral tunnel, and slid over. I didn't want to kill myself – more like I did it to live, to prove I could do it. I knew I could do anything and I'd jumped off loads of things for dares. But that wasn't for a dare. Something gripped me as I stared over the edge. Something drew me over and I knew I wouldn't hurt myself. A teacher saw me as I was clambering over the rail and moved to stop me, so I just let go and dropped. I saw his face recede into the distance. The banisters echoed as I bounced between them and my hands ripped as I clutched at them. I remember seeing Wingnut on my way past and trying to shout to him, but my breath was taken. I remember hitting a big grey radiator down in the pool changing area and seeing the red floor tiles for a second, but nothing else. I woke up in hospital. At first I couldn't move. My body was rigid and aching. I trembled. My hands were all torn and

bandaged, like after I'd jumped I'd regretted it and was trying to stop myself. I think I do that a lot, throw myself into things and then wish I hadn't. It's hard to believe I didn't break anything and I was back at the school in a few days, but I kept having these breakdowns where I'd start crying and shaking. But everyone wanted to be my mate then and they even put metal studs on all the banisters in the school, like a special memorial to me.

I wasn't good at games and when we had to go on cross-country I'd always throw up, or we'd sneak off to Judd's house, which was on the circuit, and smoke a fag. We got caned for that when they caught us. But then they had this new scheme where we could go rock climbing with Mr Wooley instead of getting killed trying to play rugby. I thought it was great. I hadn't been up to the quarry for ages and every week we did a different climb from the guidebook. I wanted to do every climb in that book, each with its own name and grade, either jamming or chimneying or laybacking. Some of the lads hated it, getting scared and dirty and the midges and everything, but I wanted it to go on loads longer. I loved the taste of that dust from the rock, just like when I was a kid, and I knew these holes like the back of my hand. Now I was sitting on ledges that I could never get to before.

I went and bought a pair of proper rock boots and started traversing around the walls after school. Sometimes I met climbers who would take me up a route on Cleveland's Edge, the climbers called it The Prow, and sometimes I brought my sleeping bag and kipped on top of the crag. I went and looked over the garden wall of our old house, I had to, and they had pulled up the fruit bushes and chopped down the orchard to make a lawn. The giant oak I swung in with my farm mates had been chopped down, and one of those new estates had been built. It made me feel hollow inside, but it was easier to let go of now that they had made it ugly and all the nooks and crannies of adventure had been demolished.



On a summer's day, just before they sent me on the Youth Training Scheme, I was sat in the familiar heather, picking hardened chalk from behind my fingernails with a piece of grass, when I noticed a thin man bobbing along the top of the crag with a sack on his back. He stopped, peered over the edge and then climbed down a smooth overhanging face. I flicked through the guidebook and stopped at the right page: The Grader, E3! I didn't know this sort of climber existed. I saw him another time, with some friends, climbing up and down a leaning wall again and again, with the sack on

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like last time. I kept my distance, like I was scared of these superclimbers, but they called me over and explained to me that they were training and the bag was full of rocks. John, Tony and Monksy said if I did the same I'd get better, too. That was it. I quit the scheme after fighting with the caretaker of the technical college I was at. He broke my nose with his broom handle. I spent all my time in the quarry, traversing there and back and trying all the problems the superclimbers had shown me. Before long I was going up and down The Grader, too, with my other dole mate, Phil, and a bag of rocks.

At sixteen I was in the Black Dog with the hard guys, nursing tired, bloody hands and supping bitter. Monksy was telling a story of when they were all bouldering, years ago mind, and some kid lobbed a petrol bomb over the crag, right at them. They didn't find him but if they had, they would have given him a right good hiding.



#### THE SLATE BOOM

North Wales climbing was revitalised by the developments in the Llanberis slate quarries in the early eighties. Many of the routes had long run-outs with marginal protection, calling for great skill, coolness and tenacity. These photos illustrate three of the finest slate climbs: **Rainbow of Recalcitrance** E6 6b on Rainbow Slab (*right*); the author making the critical moves to reach the bolt and sling on **Raped by Affection** E7 6c (*left, top*) and leading the first ascent of **I Ran the Bath** E7 6c with Nick Harms belaying (*left, below*). **Photos:** Iwan Jones (*right*) and Tony Kay.

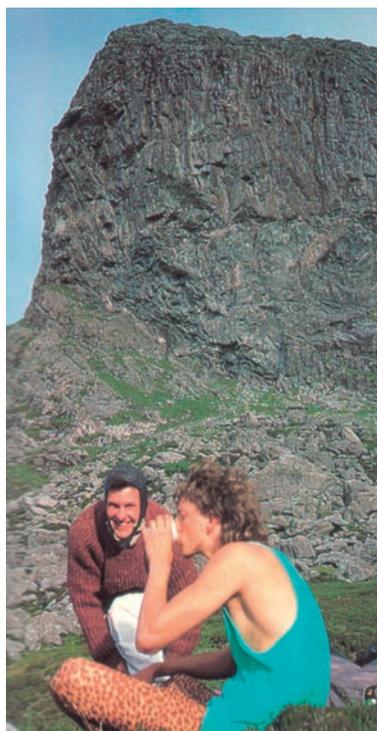


#### THE ANGLESEY SEA CLIFFS

The slate boom was matched by an equally intense period of new routing on the North Wales sea cliffs, most notably on the Left-Hand Red Wall of South Stack (*above, top left*) and in Wen Zawn of Craig Gogarth (*above, right*).

South Stack's Red Walls had been comprehensively developed, except for the blankest headwall in the Left-Hand Zawn. Here Pritchard's leads of **Enchanted Broccoli Garden E7 6b** (*first ascent photo – left, below*) and the very serious **The Super Calebrese E8 6b**, (*above, top left – a repeat showing the author leading the critical second pitch with Andy Popp belaying*) marked a distinct rise in wall standards in the area. **Photos:** Ben Winteringham (*above, left*), Tony Kay – Pritchard Collection (*below, left*).

On the overhanging back wall of Wen Zawn the Dawes/Smith creation **Conan the Librarian E6 6b**, captured the headlines in 1986. Paul Pritchard and Nick Dixon then added **The Unrideable Donkey E7 6b**, to the left of Conan (*above, right – with Pritchard on pitch 1*). Later Pritchard nearly died here when he fell to the zawn bed from **Games Climbers Play**. **Photo:** Tony Kay – Pritchard Collection.

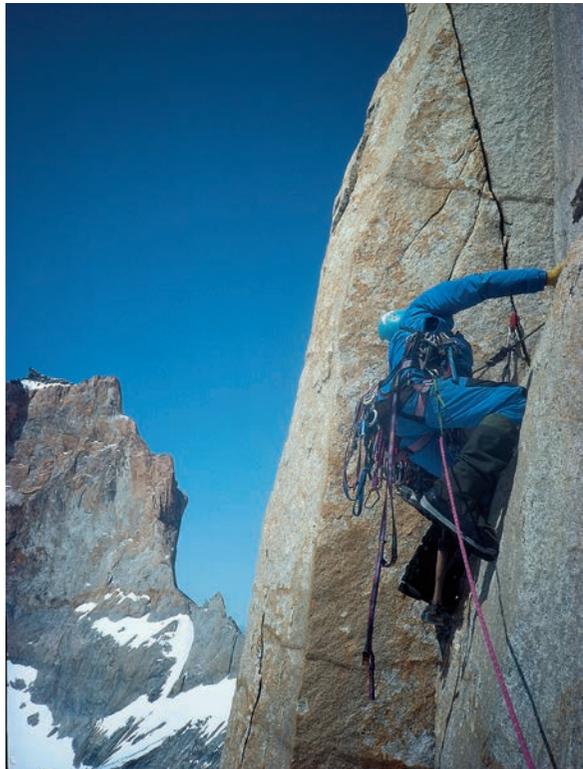


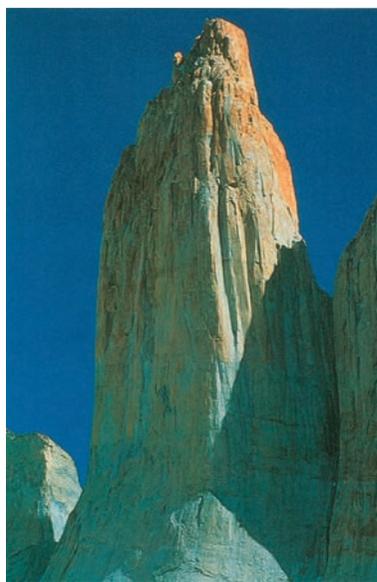
#### SRON ULLADALE

The 200-metre overhanging end wall of Sron Ulladale on the Isle of Harris was first breached by Doug Scott's three aid climbs in 1969, 1971 and 1972. Paul Pritchard and Johnny Dawes forced the first free climb up the face in 1987 (E7 6b – based on the original line of **The Scoop**) and later added **Knuckle Sandwich** E7 6c and, with Ben Moon, **Moskill Grooves** E6 6b.

These climbs triggered a full scale assault on the cliff with over fourteen major new routes pioneered in the period up the late nineties (many found by Crispin Waddy and his friends), leaving Sron Ulladale, at the time, as one of the main venues for very hard on-sight traditional climbing in Europe. Sron Ulladale was most recently in the climbing news when Dave MacLeod and Tim Emmett climbed a new five pitch route – **The Usual Suspects** E9 7a – live on TV in August 2010.

Scenes during the 1987 first free ascent of **The Scoop** – the original route (1969) on the face. Johnny Dawes and Paul Pritchard enjoy a midge-free moment below the cliff (*below, right*). The overhanging Scoop section is on the left. Pritchard leading the first pitch (6b) (*above, left*), Dawes hanging out (*below, left*) and Dawes on the final Flying Groove (6th) pitch (*above, right*). **Photos:** Alun Hughes.





#### CENTRAL TOWER OF PAINE

Paul Pritchard, Noel Craine, Sean Smith and Simon Yates added a fifth climb on the East/North-East flank (*above, top right*) in 1991/92. These cliffs were first climbed in 1974 by the obvious diedre-line in the sunlit area. Three lines were then added to the face to the left (*see topo p81*). The British team took a line up the right of the shadowy face, based on an impending diedre (the Great Scoop), followed by a chimney (the Coffin). Above these, at the 29th pitch, deteriorating conditions, plus food and fuel shortages forced a retreat from the face. Five days later, Smith and Pritchard, after a night of jumaring, pushed the route to the summit block. The pair managed to remove the bulk of the fixed equipment during their descent. The slab apron below the face was pointlessly equipped with over sixty bolts by Spanish climbers during an earlier attempt.

The Great Scoop proved the hardest part of the Paine climb. It had two long pitches, the first led by Pritchard, with a major fall, the second (*opposite, far left*) by Craine. "It had a stack of loose filing cabinets slotted into the top of it. I was belayed directly below, in the path of any keyed blocks he chose to unlock. To pass the blocks Noel first had to expand them with a pin, a delicate manoeuvre, and then aid up on micronuts. I had nowhere to run. He would say to himself, 'I'm weightless. I have no mass.' Using that meditation, even the most dreadful RURP placement could be forced into offering some support."

*Opposite, below right*: Simon Yates climbing up to the foot of the Coffin pitch using a crack in the wall of the approach groove (5.6, A2+).  
**Photos:** Sean Smith.

*Above, top left*: At the Portaledge Camp at Christmas – Yates abseiling. The climbing involved exploiting the short spells of good weather between the regular Patagonian storms, all from this rugged but serviceable hanging campsite. **Photo:** Sean Smith.

High on the face a pendulum gained a crack system which led to less steep terrain a few pitches below the summit. At this critical point (*above, bottom*) a major thaw soon had the rocks streaming with meltwater, forcing a return to the valley. After a morale-boosting session in the fleshpots of Puerto Natales Pritchard and Smith felt 'rejuvenated' enough to return (*top, centre*) to the mountain, jumar 1,000m to the high point, and tackle the final difficulties (*opposite, top right*). After ten hours of climbing (including a fall) they finally gained the summit area but, with time pressing, did not climb the final icy seven-metre obelisk. **Photos:** Noel Craine (*bottom*) and Sean Smith.

