

24

Master of all trades

One could be forgiven for thinking that Australian climbers have a fixation on Mt Everest. Over the years until 1990, Australians had been members of nine Everest expeditions, while the other 13 of the world's 8000 m peaks had been attempted by only 15 expeditions with at least one Australian member. There are occasional references in the mountaineering literature to Australians' fixation on Everest and from time to time climbers have been heard to mutter something to the effect that 'when Australians finally get over their obsession with Everest, then you'll really see something in the Himalaya'.

Indeed, even the structure of this book has emphasised the role of Everest ascents and attempts in the history of Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya. Although it is convenient organisationally to consider the earlier climbs of the major players in Australian Everest expeditions as lead-ups to Everest, it should be reiterated that many of these trips were not designed specifically as training climbs for Everest but were undertaken as worthy objectives in their own right. In many cases, the climbers involved had, at the time, no more than a vague notion that one day they would like to have a go at Everest and certainly had no definite Everest commitments. For example, Jon Muir's expedition to Changabang in 1982 with the International Turkey Patrol (Chapter 19) and his trips to Gangotri in the mid-1980s (Chapter 20) were not simply training climbs for subsequent Everest attempts, and the expeditions to Dunagiri (Chapters 6 and 7) and Ama Dablam (Chapter 9) of which Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall were members were undertaken before they had even obtained a booking for their 1984 attempt on Everest.

Nevertheless, nearly all of the major Australian Himalayan mountaineers—Tim Macartney-Snape, Lincoln Hall, Greg Mortimer, Zac Zaharias, Jon Muir, Michael Rheinberger—have sooner or later been lured into attempting the world's highest peak. It seems to have an overpowering attraction that few mountaineers can resist. There is, however, one Australian climber of truly international standard with a long

string of Himalayan achievements who in the pre-1990 period had never been involved with an Everest attempt, or even climbed with any of these other Australian mountaineers on any of their pre-Everest expeditions. That climber is Greg Child and he is arguably the best all-round mountaineer Australia has ever produced. He has put up some of the most technically difficult rock routes in Australia, matched the best of the American hard men on the big walls of Yosemite and climbed with the cream of the international mountaineering community on some of the biggest and most spectacular Himalayan peaks. In the climbing business, Greg Child is a master of all trades.

Child's rise to prominence as Australia's most versatile climber began more than 15 years ago, as Chris Baxter, then editor of *Wild* magazine and one of the most insightful observers of the Australian climbing scene, recalled:

I first met Greg Child in the mid-1970s. He was still a schoolboy—barely emerged from the educational chrysalis and ready for flight, as it were. It was already apparent, however, that what this young Sydney climber lacked in stature he more than made up for in courage, determination and resourcefulness, and that he would go far in climbing. How far, no one could have foreseen.¹

Baxter seemed to foresee Child's greatness nearly 10 years earlier. In an article in the Melbourne University Mountaineering Club's journal, *Mountaineering '81*, on Australia's foremost climbers of the 1970s, Baxter wrote, 'There are those, and this writer is among them, who believe that Greg Child is the best and most promising all-around Australian climber...Child is seen as a "natural" climber, who apparently does very little training, is immensely strong, and almost totally unflappable.'²

As so many Sydney climbers have done, Child had his start in climbing in the neighbouring Blue Mountains. 'I started climbing mainly through Scouting (I joined the Boy Scouts out of a fascination for traipsing around the bush to look at reptiles) with Chris Peisker,' Child said:

It amazes me that we survived a self-taught climbing beginning. We had an old book called *Outdoor Senior Scouting*, which Peisker foisted on us. From this we learned knots and techniques. We even used hemp ropes. We had about a dozen pitons and half a dozen nuts (some of them machine nuts on rope) and a dozen karabiners between us and we went out and did climbs in the Blue Mountains. The first was the Three Sisters, in the early 1970s, when I was 13. Things progressed fairly well until I had a monstrous fall at Mt Piddington. Inexperience was the cause of that, or thinking that we were more experienced than we were.³

1 Baxter, C. 1990, 'Child's play', *Wild*, no. 37 (Winter), pp. 58–63.

2 Baxter, C. 1981, 'Australia's leading climbers', *Mountaineering '81*, (Melbourne University Mountaineering Club journal), vol. 1989, pp. 23–4.

3 G. Child in Baxter, 'Child's play'.

The fall Child referred to was a 25 m ground fall, one that in most circumstances would have been fatal. He was only sixteen at the time. Child's reaction to the fall demonstrated, however, a fierce tenacity that would later carry him through many tight situations on big mountains:

I can just remember lying on my back after the accident—smashed to pieces, facing about nine months of surgery, not being able to walk, and certainly being out of climbing for a long time—just looking up at the climb, thinking 'Damn, I've got to come back and do this', and being worried about how long I'd be out of climbing.⁴

By the late 1970s, Child had more than overcome his near-fatal fall; he had become one of Australia's most skilled rock climbers. He already had an array of impressive new free climbs and first free ascents to his credit—such as *Manic Depressive* (grade 25), *Los Endos* (22) and *Die Loaded* (24). He did not, however, stop there. When thoughts of climbing further afield entered his head, he did not follow the scores of Aussies to New Zealand, as the notion of climbing in the cold and snowy Southern Alps did not enthuse him. Rather, he headed for North America, for the vast granite walls of the Yosemite Valley.

At Yosemite, he found warm rock like that he excelled on back home, but on a scale not found anywhere in Australia. The Yosemite Valley is the mecca of big-wall climbing—a very different climbing game from rock climbing on one's local crag. Big-wall climbing is far more committing and requires stamina and endurance in addition to technical skills of the highest standard. The Yosemite walls are vertical, sometimes even overhanging, and average about 1000 m high. Climbing them usually requires many days, so the climbers must carry water, stoves, food and survival gear in addition to their climbing equipment and must often sleep in precarious positions from hanging belays. A significant amount of the climbing itself is 'aid climbing'—that is, the climber advances by stepping up into slings, or etriers, attached to pitons or other pieces of protection that the climber has placed above his head, sometimes behind flakes of dubious strength or in thin, shallow cracks. Aid climbing demands considerable strength and endurance, as well as unflinching technical ability to ensure reliable placement of protection. Perhaps more importantly, it requires mental stamina to keep pushing upward, toting heavy haul bags, day after day, sometimes making less than 100 m progress a day over difficult sections.

Child quickly took to the big walls of Yosemite and within a few years in the late 1970s, he had earned the respect of America's most experienced big-wall climbers. Perhaps his greatest achievement during that period was the second ascent of *El Capitan's Pacific Ocean Wall*—a test piece for the hardest of the Californian hard men. It had the reputation as the most difficult big-wall climb in North

4 Ibid.

America and one of its pitches was the hardest bit of aid climbing anywhere on El Capitan. On that unremittingly steep and demanding face, Child teamed with well-known Australian rock climber Kim Carrigan and Canadians Darryl Hatten and Eric Weinstein to hammer, tap, jumar, swing, pendulum and occasionally free climb their way to the top in a seven-day push during the summer of 1977. It was an ascent that established Child as one of the world's best climbers on rock walls of any scale.

With an extensive background in crag and big-wall climbing, Child first turned his attention to snow and ice in 1979 on a trip to the British Isles. He got his start on some moderately difficult routes in the classic ice gullies in Scotland, climbs on which many of Britain's most well-known high-altitude mountaineers first cut their alpine teeth. It was in Scotland that Child chanced to meet Doug Scott, one of the pillars of the substantial British Himalayan climbing community and the person who would eventually give Child his start in the Himalaya.

Scott was obviously impressed with Child from the start, as he later wrote:

Greg was a good lad. He was, for his age, remarkably self-contained and sure of himself, abrasive at times but with a twinkle in his eye and a huge disarming grin. I soon took to this warm-hearted Australian and thus our paths met and have continued to do so sporadically since on trips to the mountains.⁵

Several years later, in 1980, Scott remembered the warm-hearted Australian when he was organising a Himalayan expedition and invited Child to join him on the 1981 British expedition to the Gangotri region of India. At that time, Child's only experience on snow and ice was in the Scottish gullies in winter—challenging enough technically but hardly the complete alpine climbing experience that a season in the European Alps or New Zealand afforded. Like Pat Cullinan and his troops from Perth on their expedition to Gauri Shankar, Child would be attempting a difficult Himalayan mountain on his first alpine climbing trip. The difference, of course, was that, whereas none of Cullinan's team had any significant alpine climbing experience before attempting Gauri Shankar, Child would be climbing with some of Britain's most-accomplished Himalayan mountaineers.

Child's association with Scott—beginning with the meeting in Scotland and strengthened with the 1981 and subsequent Himalayan expeditions—was one of two important factors that led to the development of Child's Himalayan career, independent of the major strands of Australia's Himalayan mountaineering community. The other was his move to the west coast of the United States—not so much to climb there as to maintain a relationship with an American woman.

⁵ Scott, D. 1988, 'Forward', in G. Child, *Thin Air: Encounters in the Himalayas*, Patrick Stephens, Wellingborough, England.

Child explained:

I'd met my wife, Salley Oberlin, on a trip to Yosemite. After a while we couldn't keep the trans-Pacific relationship going—she'd visit Australia and I'd visit the USA—so to continue the relationship we had to get married. I got married not in order to live in the US and climb, despite what a few people probably thought, but so that Salley and I could continue to be with each other.⁶

By living in the United States, Child developed links with American climbers that would also lead to the Himalaya. Furthermore, in the early to mid 1980s, it was simply easier to get to the Himalaya by joining an American or British expedition than to try to mount an expedition from Australia, where Himalayan mountaineering was still an obscure activity and sponsorship was difficult to find.

In 1981, Child joined Scott, Don Whillans and Georges Bettembourg—three very experienced Himalayan mountaineers—on the trails towards the sacred mountains near the source of the Ganges River in the Indian Himalaya. The other four members of the team were Englishman Colin Downer, American Steve Sustad, New Zealander Merv English and another Australian rock climber, Rick White.

Even by 1981, White had become somewhat of a legend in Australian climbing circles. Although originally from Mt Gambier in South Australia, he was indelibly linked with the development of rock climbing in Queensland. He not only discovered and named Frog Buttress on Mt French in south-eastern Queensland—that state's most popular crag—he was a leading force in its development, putting up climbs at a standard as high as anywhere else in the country.

Like Child, White's first overseas climbing trip was to the Yosemite Valley, where in 1973 he became the first Australian to climb El Capitan. Later, with Child, on an earlier attempt on the Pacific Ocean wall, White led the notorious A5 crux sixth pitch before the pair was forced to retreat. He led the first Australian expedition to the Patagonian Andes in 1975 and five years later made one of the early ascents of Balls Pyramid (near Lord Howe Island), the world's largest sea-stack.

White was just as well known for his forceful personality as for his climbing prowess. His reputation as a tough and forthright character extended to business, where he established and operated the very successful outdoor equipment business Mountain Designs. As Chris Baxter put it, 'White has left a trail of bruised egos, stomped corns and paranoid and jealous rivals.'⁷ It should be added that White has done much for Australian Himalayan mountaineering through the years by sponsoring expeditions and climbers with equipment from his Mountain Designs line.

6 G. Child in Baxter, 'Child's play'.

7 Baxter, C. 1985, 'White knight?', *Wild*, no. 18 (Spring), pp. 22–7.

When it came to climbing in the Himalaya in the early 1980s, however, White, like Child, was very much a newcomer. And what Scott had settled on as an objective for the 1981 expedition was anything but a newcomer's mountain. He had his eye on Shivling, the strikingly beautiful sacred peak rising above the Gangotri Glacier near the headwaters of the holy Ganges River. It was the mountain whose South-West Pillar was attempted in 1985 and then climbed in 1986 by Australian expeditions involving Brigitte and Jon Muir (see Chapter 20).

In 1981, the attention of Scott's international group was focused on the East Pillar, described by Child as incorporating

every type of alpine climbing, with rock walls, narrow ridge crests, and ice smears plastering the final headwall. It was a magnificent sight, hard to stop staring at and hard to imagine in terms of difficulty. The scale was as if Yosemite Valley's El Capitan had been stacked upon itself twice, dumped on top of Northwest USA's Mt Rainier, then crowned with an icy cone.⁸

They attempted the pillar in alpine style, in a single push with no previously established camps on the mountain. It was thus a technically demanding and, at the same time, very committing attempt, the type of extreme Himalayan climbing for which Scott had a well-earned reputation.

The group split into two teams, with Scott leading the East Pillar group and the veteran Whillans joining a group attempting the less severe original route of ascent on the other side of the mountain. The East Pillar team was a fascinating group. In addition to Scott, it comprised the effervescent Bettembourg and the two Australians, Child and White, both of whom were highly skilled rock climbers and very competent on big walls, but very much neophytes in the rarefied atmosphere of the Himalaya.

On the first day of the attempt, the Australians received a stark reminder that they could not expect in the Himalaya the generally reliable weather of the sun-drenched walls of Yosemite. Child recalled:

A sudden ripping sound a thousand feet above makes us look up. Out of nowhere appear a pair of whirlwinds. Caused by the straining of wind through the turrets of the pillar, they tear at the ice and rock, scouring and feeding on the mountain like a living organism. They reach a frenetic pitch, then subside as suddenly as they appeared, dropping lumps of ice tinkling down the walls. I'd seen a tornado in Wyoming once, but a twister on a Himalayan peak is something entirely unexpected. Rick looks at me with eyes that seem to say 'What the hell have we got ourselves into?' Contemplating what would happen if we were caught in one, I remember the Whillans euphemism for catastrophic events: 'End of story,' he'd say.⁹

⁸ Child, G. 1988, *Thin Air: Encounters in the Himalayas*, Patrick Stephens, Wellingborough, England, ch. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

The four continued on, despite the problematical weather and battled on along an almost-horizontal ridge that led to the steeper section of the pillar. On the second night out, Child and White experienced another of the vagaries of Himalayan climbing: dealing with recalcitrant stoves at high altitude after a tiring day of climbing.

As Rick and I flop about exhausted in our tent we hear the patter of snowflakes on the roof. I scoop up a pot-full of snow to melt to water, light the Bluet gas stove, and settle back in my sleeping bag.

'Damn. The stove has gone out,' I say to Rick. I light it again, but it fizzles after a spurt of flame.

'The cartridge must be empty,' says Rick, unscrewing the old cartridge and replacing it with another. A brief hiss of gas escapes. We open the tent door to vent the gas out, then I light the stove.

'Wumph!'

A fireball fills the tent, hanging above our heads like a sun. Rick buries his face against the floor. I toss the blazing stove out the door, feel the lick of fire against my face, scream, then dive out of the tent onto the ridge. The stove sizzles in the snow and a smell of burned nylon and hair rises from the tent. Our eyebrows are cauterized from our faces. Snowflakes dropping in the quiet night sky are caught by the beams of Doug's and Georges' headlamps, as they peer toward us.

'What the hell is going on?' calls Doug.

'The tent! The tent!' I yell back.

'What about the tent?'

'Is it insured?'

The tent is a disaster. Its interior looks like the burned out cockpit of a crashed plane. The entire upper section of the inner tent is vaporized, leaving only the stitched seams suspended from the poles, and the reflective aluminium-coated fly-sheet, which deflected the fireball. Our mistake is a bad one, but remarkably, the tent is salvageable. As Doug and Georges survey the damage they look at each other, dumbfounded, yet not entirely unamused.¹⁰

Tornadoes and scorched tents notwithstanding, Scott, Bettembourg, Child and White pressed on. The fourth day found them on the East Pillar itself. The climbing was hard, perhaps even harder than they had expected. Much of it was severe rock climbing, sometimes aid climbing, at which the Australians excelled, with the occasional pitch of steep snow smeared over the rock or smooth ice packed into fissures or gullies. Slowly, they overcame each difficulty, often with a desperate struggle by the leader, but their progress was much slower than they had planned for.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Day nine and they were still far short of the summit ice cap. They were also short of food and consumed the last of their solid food that evening. A storm the next day delayed them further and on the eleventh day, they consumed the last of their food of any kind—a bit of sugarless tea—two days, as it would turn out, before they reached the summit.

It was yet another sobering experience for Child and White. They had heard about the ‘commitment’ needed for a big Himalayan climb, but they had not reckoned on starving. There they were, however, high on Shivling’s East Pillar, with no realistic descent route possible, so committed to continuing the climb to the top as the only feasible way of getting themselves off the mountain. When Child, realising the seriousness of their predicament, muttered something about starvation, the laconic Scott replied, ‘Well, you’ll never find enlightenment on a full stomach.’¹¹

On the twelfth day, they summoned their remaining strength and surmounted the headwall at the top of the pillar and much of the summit ice cap. On the morning of their thirteenth day since leaving base camp, and the fourth since they had eaten solid food, the four climbers plugged the final few steps to the top of Shivling and, shortly thereafter, began what they hoped would be a quick descent down the West Face.

Weakened by the lack of food, however, Child and White courted disaster again on the descent, as Child recalled vividly:

Rick starts down, 150 ft above me. I stop to wait for him.

On the flat bowl 800 ft below, Doug mentions to Georges what a good effort Rick and I have put in for our first Himalayan climb. He is cut short by Georges’ scream of ‘Merde!’ as he sees the horrible happen.

Rick, now 100 ft above me, places his foot in a step and something goes wrong. Perhaps it is the step crumbling beneath him, or perhaps his weak ankle gives out, but suddenly he is sliding, raking feverishly at the sugary snow with his alpine hammer. The pick fails to arrest him. He gains speed. I see this as a split second blur out of the corner of my eye.

‘Here I come!’ Rick yells. It is the understatement of our lives.

Fired by a surge of adrenalin, a flood of possibilities enter my mind. Plunge the shaft of my alpine hammer into the snow to hold Rick’s fall—no chance it’ll stop him; catch him as he slides past—he’s out of reach; cut the rope to save myself—no time; untie—less time; climb down the slope—impossible; jump off—suicide...

11 D. Scott, in *ibid.*, ch. 5.

The coil of rope beside me whips out as he slides past, looking like a harpooned whale plunging into the deep to drag the ship down with it. The chances for survival diminish as I watch the rope flick into the air. My mind casts out an apology to my wife Salley as I realize the folly of this final act, then in futility I plunge the shaft of my alpine hammer into the slope. The rope stretches against my waist, then propels me into the air. I suffer a final thought: ‘This is it.’

We bounce down the slope, tumbling for 700 ft, legs and arms flailing like rag dolls. I land on my back, feel the wind knocked out of me, bounce again, then feel razor sharp crystals of snow grind against my cheek as I slide face-first down the slope. We hurtle over a gaping bergschrund, then slowly come to a stop in the bowl.

It’s windless in the bowl, noiseless. The hiss of disturbed snow sliding down behind me sets my mind back into gear. I return from black silence as blood trickles out of my nose and onto my lips. I twitch my limbs—nothing broken—then get to my feet. Rick is lying ten feet away, feeling his ribs. He thinks a few are cracked, but otherwise we’re unscathed.¹²

Lucky to be alive, the pair picked themselves up, dusted themselves off and continued on down the West Face. Nearing the end of their thirteenth day on the mountain, and their fourth day without any food, Child and White thought that their dreams had come true when, on the final slopes of the West Face, they saw a figure waiting for them—presumably someone from the other party with some lifesaving food.

Child recalled:

As we grew closer, the figure takes on a familiar form—Whillans!

Whillans the phrase-maker, the clairvoyant, the sage—the bringer of food! Thoughts of what he might have brought—chocolate, biscuits, sardines—squeeze a last burst of energy from our legs. I hallucinate the sweet aroma of tea wafting through the air. By the time I reach him Doug has told him the tale of our thirteen-day climb, including an account of the exploding tent and our tumble down the mountain. Whillans sits calmly, like the all-knowing Buddha, and transfixes me with the same piercing glare he’d cast over the Indian boy at Delhi airport a month before. The meekest hint of a smile cracks his parched lips.

‘Well done, lads. You made it back,’ he says. Then, satisfied that all is well, he trots off down the Meru Glacier, beginning the four-mile hike back to Tapovan.’

‘Did he bring anything to eat?’ I ask.

‘Yeah. But he got hungry while he was waiting and ate it,’ Rick replies. But it’s the thought that counts.¹³

¹² Ibid., ch. 5.

¹³ Ibid.

Child was no doubt happy and considerably relieved to return to the more predictable world of Yosemite after his adventures on Shivling. His ascent, however, was a remarkable achievement, particularly considering the state of Australian Himalayan mountaineering in 1981. At that time, Australians had climbed only one 7000 m peak: Dunagiri. The Army Alpine Association (AAA) was taking its first tentative steps into the Himalaya with its ill-fated expedition to Ganesh IV. Michael Rheinberger was only beginning his long career in the Himalaya and Jon Muir and Greg Mortimer had yet to set foot in the world's greatest ranges. Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall were absorbed with Ama Dablam and Anyemaqin; Everest was still three years away for them. So Child and White's ascent of the East Pillar of Shivling was easily the most difficult Himalayan route that Australians had climbed, or even attempted, at that time. The International Turkey Patrol's ascent of Changabang, on a route of perhaps comparable difficulty, was a year away.

Back in Yosemite, Child picked up where he left off: doing week-long journeys up the vast walls of granite on routes of the highest standard. The lure of the Himalaya, however, was soon to prove too strong to resist. In 1983, Child was on his way to Pakistan to climb in the spectacular Karakoram Range. Again, Doug Scott was the architect of the expedition and it was a trip of typical Scott design with multiple objectives leading to an attempt on one of the world's great peaks. The team would start with the unclimbed Lobsang Spire, one of the many great rock monoliths looming among the ice giants of the Karakoram. It would be a climb of great technical difficulty but of only moderate altitude (5715 m). They would then tackle Broad Peak by the West Face, a route of only moderate difficulty but on a peak more than 8000 m high. Finally, with training on technically difficult and high mountains, they would go after K2—the world's second-highest peak—by a new route up a spur on the South Face.

In addition to Scott and Child, the climbing team included the veteran Whillans and English climbers Peter Thexton, Roger Baxter-Jones, Andy Parkin and Alan Rouse.

Frenchman Jean Afanasieff and American Stephen Sustad completed the group. It was a far more high-powered, and competitive, team than on Shivling. Rouse had moved rapidly, with ascents of Jannu and Nuptse, to the forefront of British mountaineering and Afanasieff was the first French climber to reach the summit of Everest.

Despite the serious objectives of the expedition and the very competitive make-up of the team, the trip to base camp did have its lighter moments. Most Himalayan trips begin with wild bus rides—as the members of the very first Australian expedition to the Himalaya, to Mulkila in 1975, discovered—but there is something bordering

on the insane about rattling along the Karakoram Highway in one of the garishly festooned trucks sometimes dubbed the ‘magic bus’. The 1983 trip to Skardu, as Child recounted with some amazement, was perhaps not too unusual:

As the sun sets into a purple horizon the spine-jarring journey begins. Hours pass. The junga [bus] gears down and zigzags up endless switchbacks. My ears pop, signalling that we are crawling into the foothills of the Karakoram. Sleep is impossible as the junga bounces and creaks from pothole to pothole.

‘What the hell is that coming up behind us?’ says Steve, pointing to a bright light bearing down on us from behind.

The multi-coloured light, accompanied by loud, inexplicable music, flashes like a Christmas tree. As it closes the gap we see that the vehicle is not a travelling discotheque, but merely the night bus to Skardu. Inside, red, green, and orange lights pulsate stroboscopically, illuminating the tangled limbs and bloodshot eyes of passengers jammed six abreast. The light show is synchronized to the deafening beat of taped Pakistani pop music. Shrill vocals, twanging strings, and thumping drums overtake us and wail on down the road. ‘The Bedlam Express’, Whillans christens it.¹⁴

From Skardu, the route to base camp followed the deep Braldu Gorge to the source of the river at the snout of the Baltoro Glacier and then along the Baltoro to a place called Concordia, where several glaciers tumbling off K2 and its neighbours joined to form the Baltoro. It is the only feasible access route to most of the major peaks in the Karakoram and therefore is very heavily travelled—by expeditions and by trekking groups wanting to see the ‘pick of the Karakoram’.

The heavy traffic year after year had created environmental problems similar to those occurring further east in Nepal. Some of the most beautiful campsites in the Himalaya were slowly becoming rubbish dumps. Doug Scott was annoyed enough about the situation at Paiju, one of potentially the most beautiful spots on the walk-in, that he decided to do something about it.

With the expedition’s liaison officer acting as an interpreter, Scott gathered the local Balti porters together and explained to them the concept of picking up the rubbish—something that did not come naturally to them. It is not that Baltis are ignorant people, or people with a throw-away mentality, it is simply that they are so poor materially that they do not generate any trash in their normal, everyday lives so they do not know what to do when confronted with it.

The Baltis quickly took Scott’s exhortations to heart and began collecting old tins, boxes and other disused expedition gear and piling the rubbish at Scott’s feet. They did not, however, stop there. Soon they began to collect natural bits of the landscape—rocks, clumps of grass, twigs and other pieces of wood—and added

¹⁴ Ibid., ch. 7.

them to the growing mountain at Scott's feet. The game became even more fun when they set out after living things, such as lizards and birds, and began churning up the river for anything unusual they could add to the expedition leader's collection.

Scott was powerless to stop the Balti attack. Fortunately, the porters, who had carried heavy loads the previous day, soon tired and the environment of the Paiju hillsides was left to recover from its unexpected pillaging.

Soon after Paiju, the group reached the site of the Lobsang Spire base camp at Urdukas. As the team readied for attempts on its first objective, Child quickly discovered just how competitive and potentially divisive the team was. It was far different from the small, happy four-man team that surmounted the East Pillar of Shivling two years earlier.

First, tension was already developing about Scott's idea of attempting two other mountains before K2. About half of the team was itching to have a go at the big one, perhaps with a warm-up on Broad Peak, and thought the climb of Lobsang Spire to be unnecessary.

Then, during an acclimatisation attempt with Rouse, Parkin and Thexton on a subsidiary peak they christened Biale One, Child had an abrupt introduction to Rouse's competitiveness. The quartet was on Biale One's summit ridge—only 10 vertical metres below the true summit but about 150 m away horizontally along a difficult, knife-edge ridge—with darkness only an hour or so away and a storm brewing. Child and Thexton suggested a descent, as no-one had any bivouac gear. Rouse finally consented but was somewhat miffed. He was apparently quite prepared to spend a very uncomfortable and potentially dangerous night out to reach the summit of a small, warm-up peak.

The experience raised serious doubts in Child's mind about what he had got himself into. 'Were we a team?' Child wondered. 'A collection of firey [sic], strong-willed individuals, yes, but not a cohesive group striving for a common goal. We probably couldn't climb "as one", or "for the good of the group", if we tried. Alpine-style climbing is a sport of individualists rather than team players.'¹⁵

The brief disagreement between Child and Rouse was not the only outcome of the Biale One excursion. A rapport between the young Australian and Thexton, a medical doctor and a very strong climber, had begun to grow. So that pair joined with Scott to form a three-man team to attempt Lobsang Spire, independent of the attempt that Rouse and Parkin would make on a different route on the same peak.

15 Ibid., ch. 9.

Despite the fact that Thexton had little experience in aid climbing, the Child–Scott–Thexton team was exceptionally well equipped to tackle Lobsang Spire. Child, with his seasons of experience at Yosemite, was in his element on the steep, expansive walls of Lobsang. In addition, earlier in his climbing career, Scott had concentrated on scaling big rock walls around the world; that experience, coupled with his legendary strength, cunning and uncanny ability to survive anything mountains could throw in his path, meant that he and Child were an extremely potent pair to tackle a big rock climb anywhere.

The route they chose on Lobsang Spire followed a series of cracks that split the South Face. There were other less steep alternatives (indeed, Rouse and Parkin later failed on the slabby West Face, a route of a much less intimidating angle), but at least the crack system looked continuous.

Soon the three-man team fell into an efficient rhythm. One would lead up the crack, sometimes free climbing but often banging in pitons, attaching etriers and then stepping up to repeat the process. Despite his lack of experience in this style of climbing, Thexton soon became a powerful lead climber, taking his turn at the sharp end of the rope as the other two jumared up the rope behind him with the loads.

The steepness of the route soon became apparent. On one rather typical pitch led by Thexton, consisting of a series of bulges tucked into a corner, the rope hung free of the wall by 4 m or so when Thexton had reached a belay point. As Child succinctly put it, ‘The going is slow, the climbing difficult. Waiting is frustrating.’¹⁶ It was a typical big-wall climb.

Day by day, as the trio whacked their way up Lobsang Spire’s South Face, it was obvious that this was no ordinary big-wall climb. The setting was spectacular. The Biale Glacier slowly dropped away straight below while K2 and the stunningly symmetrical Gasherbrum IV began to loom in the distance. All around were the granite towers and snow-covered giants that made the Karakoram perhaps the most magnificent of all the sub-ranges of the Himalaya.

Lobsang Spire, however, had one last surprise. The mountain’s top is capped by a 30 m monolithic block; it is steep on every side, blank and crack-free. After a brilliant five-day performance, would Child, Scott and Thexton be denied the true summit?

During his years of extreme climbing in Yosemite, Child had acquired a diverse bag of rock-climbing tricks, one of which was to overcome blank walls by a clever application of rivets, bolts, skyhooks and a hand-twist drill. Child just happened to have the appropriate supply to, as he put it, ‘murder the impossible’¹⁷ on Lobsang

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Spire. At first, Scott was not sure, for ethical reasons, that Child should drill his way to the top of the small summit block. There was, however, no alternative. Scott eventually relented, commenting that ‘my old mate Dougal Haston used to say that ethics are like erections: No matter how well intentioned they might be they are prone to sudden deflation.’¹⁸ Scott’s deflated ethics notwithstanding, Child led the way up the last 30 m and onto the summit.

With his well-earned success on Lobsang Spire—a first ascent of the peak—Child began to view the expedition in a far more positive light. In addition to gaining a very worthwhile summit in its own right, he had continued to build a solid climbing partnership with Thexton. They had obviously achieved a healthy mutual respect for each other’s climbing ability on Lobsang’s walls, but more importantly for climbing in the Himalaya, they had the similarity of mountaineering outlook and philosophy, and the complementarity of personality, that typified potent partnerships, such as that of Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall.

The next part of Scott’s Karakoram trilogy—after the Lobsang Spire ascent—was Broad Peak. It was a logical next step towards K2. Whereas Lobsang Spire offered technical difficulty but not extreme altitude, Broad Peak was one of the 14 peaks in the world above 8000 m, but by its standard route was not particularly difficult. K2, of course, requires technically demanding climbing at the most extreme of altitudes and thus an aspiring K2 climber benefits from Lobsang’s difficulty and Broad Peak’s altitude. The latter was particularly important for Child, who had not yet climbed to 7000 m, let alone 8000 m.

With visions of climbing K2 together in the back of their minds, Child and Thexton, after a well-earned rest at the expedition’s K2/Broad Peak base camp at Concordia, set out early one evening in late June across the glacier towards the base of Broad Peak’s West Face. They had decided—for safety and ease of climbing—to begin the ascent by moonlight and tackle the couloirs at the bottom of the face when the snow was firm.

They made rapid progress in the good snow conditions and, as dawn came, decided to keep on climbing into the day and ascend as many of the straightforward lower reaches of the mountain as they could on the first day. It was a strong performance as they finally stopped at 6700 m near midday.

The next morning, they were pushing upward again—first along a low-angled spur of snow and ice and diagonally up a moderately angled snow slope leading towards a small icefall and a steep chute that led onto Broad Peak’s long summit ridge. After another long day of climbing, Child and Thexton decided to pitch the tent near the

18 D. Scott in *ibid.*, ch. 10.

seracs of the icefall at nearly 7500 m—much higher than Child had ever been before on a mountain. Also, after only two days and one night of climbing, they were in a position to launch a bid for Broad Peak's summit.

The rapid ascent was, however, beginning to take its toll. Both men had a miserable night. With stomachs queasy, eating and drinking were difficult. During the night, as Child graphically put it, 'altitude creeps into our heads. By morning it is bashing away inside our skulls. Waking is a long and difficult process, cloudy and drug-like.'¹⁹

Worse, much worse, was, however, yet to come. Despite their considerable physical discomfort, the pair decided to go for the top. They plugged slowly up past the small icefall, then up the chute and onto the summit ridge. Then they began to pick their way along the tricky ridge, discovering, as would the members of the 1986 AAA expedition to Broad Peak, that the mountain was no walkover near the top. They passed the 8000 m mark as they met Scott and Sustad returning from their successful summit attempt.

Soon after they passed through the 8000 m barrier, however, into what climbers called the 'death zone', Child's physical and mental control mechanisms began to disintegrate rapidly and he was plunged into a desperate struggle to hang onto his life.

Moving at 8,000 metres is like wading through treacle. I gradually become aware of a peculiar sense of disassociation with myself, as if a part of me is external to my body, yet is looking on. I feel this most when setting up boot-axe belays or making difficult moves, a strong feeling as if someone is peering over my shoulder keeping an eye on me, or even as if I have a second invisible head on my shoulders.

We traverse for another half-hour to the False Summit, an icy, corniced dome at 8,043 metres. There we sit, looking toward the tantalizingly close Main Summit. By now those sensations of disassociation are punctuated by feelings of total absence: momentary blackouts, when neither I nor the guy over my shoulder seem to be around. I would emerge from those absences a few paces from where they'd struck me, leading to a concern over stepping off the narrow ridge...

I look ahead: The corniced ridge dips down and curves left in a final long, easy slope to the summit, only six metres higher than our position. We are nearly there, thirty minutes away. But my fears about what is happening to me double. A vicious headache rings in my ears and pounds at my temples, and a tingling in my arms grows so intense that my fingers curl into a tight fist, making it hard to grip my ice axe. My last shred of rational consciousness raises a cry of concern over the possibility of a stroke, or cerebral edema...

19 Ibid., ch. 12.

The idea of turning away from success when it is so close was maddening to me...and Pete's ever present determination nearly got me going. I tried to ascertain whether the sensations I felt were imaginary, or were really the beginning of some short circuiting of my body chemistry. There is a state of mind that sometimes infests climbers in which the end result achieves a significance beyond anything that the future may hold. For a few minutes or hours one casts aside all that had been previously held as worth living for, and focuses on one risky move or stretch of ground that becomes the only thing that has ever mattered. This state of mind is what is both fantastic and reckless about the game. Since everything is at stake in these moments, one had better be sure to recognize them and have no illusions about what lies on the other side of luck. It was one of those times. I had to weigh up what was important and what was most important...

The decision to descend comes without a word. We just get up and begin the long path down, seeing that those red hills in China are now covered in cotton wool clouds, encircling K2 and lapping at Broad Peak's East Face.

A few hundred feet from our high point I feel a sensation like a light blank out in my brain. I have just enough time to kneel down before I slump backwards onto a patch of snow, then black out into a half-world of semi-consciousness and inaction...

'So this is it', I think with a strangely detached curiosity as the day turns pitch; 'this is where the plunge into senselessness and apathy begins, where the shades of death descend.' Yet at the same time I am conscious of my swaying head and my incoherent mumbling. I think of Salley, whom I have no right to inflict such folly upon. 'Get up you idiot, get up,' I keep telling myself, until vision gradually returns. How long had I been out? I cannot tell.

Next to me sits Pete, observing my state as a good doctor should. He wears a white lab coat with a stethoscope draped around his neck; I double-check; nonsense. He is wearing his red high-altitude suit. I am beginning to imagine things. A minute later I regain control of myself, as suddenly as I'd lost it. Pete puts a brew of hot grape drink in my hands. As soon as I drink the liquid I throw it up...

The purple stain in the snow forms intricate arabesque designs that grow onto the snow crystals glinting in the afternoon light. I could have watched these hallucinations all day, but Pete urges us onto our feet. Rapidly I begin to improve. My strength and mental faculties return. I'd made it back through the 8,000 metre door before it slammed shut and locked me in. But I'd cut it close.²⁰

Suddenly, just as suddenly as Child pulled out of his close encounter with death, it was Thexton who was in desperate trouble. As the pair reached the col leading off the summit ridge and down the chute towards the top camp, Thexton could hardly move. His lips were blue and he was having trouble breathing. They were classic symptoms of pulmonary oedema; the only course of action was to get Thexton down the mountain as quickly as possible.

²⁰ Ibid.

Somehow Child managed to summon up the strength to take charge of the situation. Below the narrow chute, wind and driving snow were raking the snowfield and it was rapidly growing dark. Child had to cajole every step out of Thexton, as he slumped into the snow with increasing regularity. Then his vision failed and Child had to talk him down the snow slope towards the small icefall and the top camp.

It was a Herculean effort by Child, who had only hours earlier been so incapacitated by the altitude that he had himself nearly perished on Broad Peak's summit ridge. Somehow he managed to guide, drag and lower Thexton through the dark down past the seracs to their tent, occupied by Don Whillans and Gohar, a Balti high-altitude porter, who were preparing for their own summit attempt.

The veteran Whillans then took over. He brewed up liquids for the two exhausted climbers and looked after Thexton while Child pitched another tent and crawled into his sleeping-bag for some well-earned rest.

There was not much of the night left and at dawn, only two hours later, Child was awakened by the calls of Whillans and Gohar. Thexton was dead, they said. In fact, he had just died as Gohar lifted a cup of warm tea to his lips.

It was a calm, clear dawn; the storm had suddenly abated. 'Notice that the wind has suddenly dropped,' remarked Whillans. 'Not a breath. It's always the same when death is about, always a lot of noise and wind, but as soon as it gets what it's after it quiets down. I've seen it before and it's always the same.'²¹

Death of a friend

Greg Child

We carried on along the summit ridge to about 7,990 metres, where we met Doug and Steve returning. They said the top was two hours away, but wasted no time to talk as Steve's feet were frozen in the blasting wind. Clouds were welling up beneath us, blanketing the red peaks of China, pointing to a change in the weather. But it wasn't only weather that disturbed me.

An hour from the top the alien physical sensations that I had begun to note grew too bizarre to be ignored. Massive headache, tingling in the arms and hands, lengthy black-outs and an eerie sense of being outside of my body and looking on led to concern of cerebral oedema. When I started vomiting and hallucinating it was agreed that, as close as we were to the summit, it was too dangerous to go on. In two-and-a-half days we had gone from 4,880 metres to 7,920 metres and the strain was showing.

We retraced our steps in the afternoon light, which saturated the panorama with colour, and reached the col, at just under 7,900 metres. I began to regain control over myself, but Pete suddenly developed problems of his own. In the high mountains, avalanche, cold and storm are not the only dangers. Other unseen dangers lie within us, like time-bombs waiting to be triggered by the altitude. These deadly short-circuitings of body chemistry take two principal forms. Cerebral oedema, the accumulation of fluid on the brain, had shown me its first signs near the summit. The other, pulmonary oedema, is the build-up of fluid in the lungs, literally drowning the victim. When Pete suddenly grew weak and told me through blue, oxygen-starved lips that he could barely breathe, a shiver went through me as the urgency of our conditions sunk in.

21 D. Whillans in *ibid.*

After an abseil to the steep snowfield I began wading a trail through soft snow. All our tracks had been blown over by a howling wind. After 100 metres I turned to check on Pete and found him not behind me but slumped in the snow, far away. By the time I crawled back up to him it was dark and his condition was extreme; not only could he not breathe, but he was blind, cerebral oedema hitting him as well.

So there we were, in the dark, at nearly 8,000 metres, no tent or sleeping bags, a howling maelstrom blowing spindrift everywhere and Pete immobile. It was like some heavy scene you read of in a magazine, but no, it was real and we were in it up to our necks.

Conversation was superfluous, if not impossible. I roped Pete down as far as he could move, cajoling every step out of him, then began carrying and dragging him. From somewhere a reservoir of energy came to me, and that strange feeling of being outside of myself returned, as if a third person was there, helping. At midnight we reached the ice cliffs, traversing the lip to find the pass and our tent. The spindrift blasted our faces as if it would take them off, and the cold was bitter. Pete mustered himself to follow my short leads across the top of the cliffs, but at the end passed out, sliding to the edge, almost dragging the ice axe that held us out of the snow and taking us into the abyss.

We located the pass and I lowered him to the tent, where Don and Gohar were resting. It was 2 am and we had been on the go for 22 hours. Pete perked up with a cup of tea, asked me how I was; done in, I assured him. We would descend at dawn I added, before falling asleep. Those were our last words.

Whillans woke me in the morning. He had impossible, terrible news. Pete was dead. I tried to bring him to life with mouth to mouth, cardiac massage, and finally hysterical pleas. But my friend, the quietly-spoken Englishman, whose subtle humour and personal warmth had reached out to remind me what friendship was, would only lie there, with an expression of sublime peace on his face.

The dawn was beautiful, windless, as we sat stunned, looking from Pete to the horizon, as if the contrast had some meaning. It was as if the mountains were saying yes, this endless splash of glowing horizon is the reward for your efforts, and Pete was the price. A muddled thought, but I remember it well.

The wind then returned, like a cracking whip, tearing at the tent. We covered Pete as best we could, then began the long descent back into the world of men, our heads full of sad thoughts.

From 'Mixed emotions', *Wild*, no. 12 (Autumn 1984), pp. 33–4.

For Child, that sudden, extremely painful blow—the loss of a climbing partner—meant the end of an expedition that had had its ups and downs. While some of the other expedition members stayed on to attempt K2, Child joined Whillans for the sombre walk out of the Karakoram and back to civilisation.

Like the Australians on Annapurna III in 1980 had experienced, and like the 1984 Australian Everest West Ridge team would experience the next year, Child had learned firsthand about the down side of Himalayan mountaineering: the all-too-frequent loss of a friend, companion, climbing partner. It is an experience that most mountaineers who make repeated trips to the Himalaya sooner or later have to endure.

By the end of 1983, even with just two Himalayan expeditions under his belt, Greg Child had already served an impressive apprenticeship. Doug Scott led both expeditions and they involved almost the full range of experiences encountered in high-altitude mountaineering as well as featuring climbing itself at the very highest

standard technically. Coupled with Child's strength and innate climbing ability, those experiences put him in a firm position to move out from under Scott's wing and launch a Himalayan career under his own direction.

During the early 1980s, when Child was serving his apprenticeship with Scott, some major strands of the Australian Himalayan mountaineering tapestry were growing stronger and beginning to interconnect. The AAA climbers were taking their first tentative steps into the Himalaya, while the southern Australian section of the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC) was progressing steadily towards its eventual marriage with the AAA to mount the bicentennial Everest expedition. The International Turkey Patrol burst onto the scene in 1982 with their amazing ascent of Changabang and the first major strand—spawned by Dunagiri in 1978—was nearing Australia's first success on Mt Everest.

During the second half of the decade, the time was right for Child, who had learned his high-altitude skills by climbing with some of Britain's best mountaineers, to join forces with this burgeoning community of Australian Himalayan climbers. He decided to set his sights high and link up with Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer, Australia's first two Everest ascensionists. When he did, some remarkable things were bound to happen. During our time on the Col, we spent much time in finalizing our plans. During that time I kept a daily account of exactly how many drinks Paul and I had had. If I had had 10 and he eight, it was time to get another two into him. Dehydration being the problem it is at high altitude, it was essential we got liquids down.

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