

Charles Sherwood Early Days

My first ever rock climb was while still at school. A close friend and I signed up for a two-week adventure holiday organised by John Ridgeway on Cape Wrath at the very north-western tip of Scotland. We climbed, canoed, sailed, swam (cold!), practiced basic survival skills and hiked, and hiked, and hiked, through day and night, all the time being devoured by that curse of Scotland, the midges. I guess what I learnt on that trip was that a human being is capable of absorbing a surprising amount of pain and suffering. This has since proven useful.

Advised by a deeply influential housemaster, I headed to his old Cambridge college, Sidney Sussex. Now Cambridge is of course in the Fens, famous for being flat, wet and windy. There is nothing to climb. Well, not quite nothing...

These days, Cambridge is a demanding institution, or so I'm told by my two daughters, recent graduates from Corpus and Emma. But back in the late 1970s it was almost impossible to fail. There was only one thing you could do that meant automatic expulsion and that was climbing on the college buildings. This of course made the idea irresistible. I paired up with a fellow fresher (and lifelong climbing partner in-the-making), to put up a bold night-time ascent of our college chapel – at least it seemed bold if you had barely climbed before. I recall standing on the chapel roof, about to abseil down the rope now dangling into the courtyard below, when a college porter strode by. I thought, 'If he looks up, that's it. We won't have made even one term.' Mercifully he didn't.

Our prospects of eventually graduating improved as the focus of our climbing endeavours shifted from Cambridge to North Wales. For us teenagers the iconic climb in the country lay in the Llanberis Pass, a huge perfectly vertical 'open book' of a feature called Cenotaph Corner, originally climbed by the legendary Joe Brown. It took me four decades to muster up the courage to lead that route, but I finally managed it last year, albeit on the second attempt, following a 20 ft fall at the final crux.

My first serious climb on snow and ice was as part of a self-styled 1980 Cambridge Andean Expedition to Peru. We hadn't actually intended any proper climbing, but one volcano sort of led to another and soon we had our eyes on Huascaran, at 6,768m the highest mountain in the country and the 4th

highest in the Western Hemisphere. Our local guide, Vicenti, initially scoffed at the idea of taking us up, then cried with fear (literally) and then agreed. The truth was he'd had little choice. He'd been told to take us by the local 'fixer', whose nickname – Pepe El Loco – spoke a thousand words. This was not a situation my mother, or girlfriend (now wife), would have entirely approved of. However, two of us made it to the top and back again, having hauled each other out of successive crevasses. Our toes were black with frost bite, but importantly still attached to our feet. I now really had the mountaineering bug!

Life after Cambridge, and subsequently Harvard, offered rather fewer opportunities for climbing, but nonetheless I embarked on a series of annual Alpine adventures that culminated in 2007 in an ascent of the North Face of the Eiger. It was as I came off that mountain that I conceived a project, which was to occupy a significant part of my leisure time for the next decade: could I find on *each continent* a climbing route that would rank alongside the legendary Eigerwand, offering a comparable combination of mountaineering challenge, aesthetic appeal and deep historical context? In short: the seven best climbs in the world.

That quest was to take me from the Alps back to the Andes and on to Yosemite, Kenya, Nepal, New Zealand and Antarctica. I have now put pen to paper and written an account of that journey, *Seven Climbs*, available from Amazon and other good book retailers. All my author's proceeds go to the Himalayan Trust UK, a charity dedicated to improving the education and health of the mountain people of Nepal. The book is in part an opportunity to say 'thank you' to those who, along the way, have tied into the same rope with me.