

## The W.H. Murray Literary Prize 2007

### BOULDERING WITH GHOSTS

By John Watson

GHOSTS have different solutions to things, they bring you different gifts. Nonchalantly, they walk through the walls of time, in swirls of out-moded language and kit, often dressed absurdly, sometimes in tweed or wartime surplus, sometimes in lycra, recently with strange beds attached to their backs like colourful hermit crabs. Each one has a different approach, a different piece of rock in mind, a different way of saying the same thing.

Here I was thinking I'd have the boulders to myself – I'd squeezed the boulder kit into the Dropzone mat, hauled the beast onto my back and stomped off up the new path to The Cobbler, intent on the clean schist swirls of the Narnain boulders. Out of nostalgia, I turned right up the old pipe-walk, steeper but quicker, stopping at the water-cup cistern on the flat bit before entering the corrie under the horns of The Cobbler. Maybe that diversion is what started it all. It was a fine summer's day, the sweat stung my eyes and a pleasant breeze whispered stolen conversations through the deer grass. I dumped my boulder mat by the first boulder and took off my top letting it dry in the breeze. I pulled a Sigg bottle out and plugged down the cool contents.

Then I heard the voices...a party of folk on the other side of the North boulder, but there was something odd about them, like the words inside a church meeting, they seemed deeper, differently inflected, sterner, but also light and relieved with the joy of a summer's day in the high corries. Normally no boulderers up here, I thought. Maybe walkers? I threw on a fresh T-Shirt ([www.scottishclimbs.com](http://www.scottishclimbs.com) – a fetching blue with orange logo, I seem to recall) and stepped round the corner. The shaded north face sported a stand-out arête on which a flat-capped climber in ragged shortcut pantaloons was fully stretched. He seemed to be wearing walking boots, loosely laced about his ankles, I was quite impressed, for I knew the problem was British 6a and steep, with tiny footholds and surely too technical for a pair of old leathers. There was a posse of similarly dressed lads around him, from teens through to bristled looking industrial types in flat caps or double-rolled beanies, old woollen sweaters and army surplus trousers, odd fashion I thought as I nodded at one or two of them who glanced my way.

"Go oan John!" shouted one. "Show them SMC boys how it's done!" and he winked at me for some reason.

"Don't look at me," I whispered and looked up at the climber, while peeling a banana.

"Where'd you get that?" said one of the younger boys.

"Sainsbury's," I said. "...organic." He seemed to be fixated on the banana. I pointed the banana at the problem: "That's at least an E3 crux," I added. He blinked. I decided to say no more. Our attention turned back to the boulderer.

A high hand-hold allowed him to pull down powerfully and get his feet high on the arête and then a steady leaning-back, studying the next holds, showed he was a poised 'trad-man', though I had the oddest feeling he'd done this before and that this was for effect. Indeed, all the other lads looked humbled – the greatest sign of this being a communal burying of hands deep in the pockets and the hunch-backed stance like a heron, which either means: "Yeah, it's easy, I could do it if I was bothered," or it could mean: "No way I'm trying that!" I wasn't sure which way it was with this group, but I felt I was witnessing something a little special, the gentle banter surrounding an event of some significance being treated as casually insignificant, the trademark of all great moments. The climber topped out, turned round, leaned over and put his hands on his knees.

"Right lads, who's next?"

Uproarious laughter and a dismissive waving of hands. Smiles all round. I found myself smiling too.

"Grand bit of climbing, John, just grand!" said somebody.

"Aye, no bad," I piped up. "What about the sit start though?"

John Cunningham stared down from on high.

"The whit?"

I swallowed as the posse all turned and looked blankly towards me. I had the acute feeling that I'd just stepped into a welder's yard with a tray of Tiffin.

Other ghosts can leave you furious, despite their reputation. Here's what happened. I was busy tending the handholds and footholds of a Font 8a, smacking them vigorously with a chalky beer mat. Clouds of carbonate dust made me choke and step back, then return to flog away again, hoping to squeak the holds dry enough to allow some sort of friction. I was thinking of using 'pof', but demurred and thought the rag would do, I'd be pilloried anyway, my shame would be all over the forums. There was a polite cough behind me as I applied the finishing touch of the toothbrush to the extra carbonate slick. I stepped back from the overhanging crack I was busy cleaning, defensively dipping my hands in a large chalk-bag like it was one of those film-star's hand-muffs. I raised my eyebrows.

"Alright?" I said.

The man was dressed head to toe in tweed, plus-foured at the bottom with puttees spiralling into the top of two brown leather boots. A fringe of hob-nails winked along the lip of the soles like shark-teeth. He wore a nifty trilby-style hat and he was smoking a fat pipe which was wedged heavily into a moustachioed mouth. Very camp, I thought.

"A stumbling block, eh?" he inquired, running his pipe up the line of the crack. "Mind awfully if I give it a jolly?"

It was a rhetorical question. He put the pipe back in his mouth, rummaged through a bulging hip pocket and pulled out a stubby hammer. From his left pocket he pulled some ironmongery, stepped up to the crack and, before I could offer him my toothbrush or chalk-bag, began to bang in an iron piton. The echoing clangs sank the peg deep into the crack and he expertly fiddled a short cord through the eyelet, tied it off, then, giving it one tug, he hauled himself up, hobnails scrabbling on my 'puffed' little ledge. He reached the big flange, explored it experimentally for a few seconds, then dropped back down to the ground. He was reaching in his pocket for another peg before I touched him on the elbow...

"Hey, what the hell do you think you are doing?"

I recognised him now...it was Harold Raeburn, he'd soloed *Observatory Ridge* in this outfit at the turn of a previous century. I liked the guy in his books, with his earnest instructional photos from *Mountaineering Art*. But hell, he was no boulderer, he had no ethics at all...abominable approach! I scolded him: Hobnails? Pitons? Did he know the damage he was doing? I had to ask him to leave, politely of course, put his hammer away. He pocketed his ironmongery, walked off sulking with his pipe and stood under the crag a while, gazing up at a long snaking crack which withered away before the apex of the cliff.

After I wiggled the peg out, I went back to working my project, shaking my head occasionally, brushing and re-chalking all the scratched and muddy holds. When I looked round after a while he had gone. I felt the pang of unexpected sadness.

"Dammit," I said to myself, dipping my hands back into the chalk sack, "I meant to say cheerio."

Other times the ghosts are not climbers, they appear as souls and people who, despite any rational rigour, invade your emotions in certain landscapes at certain times. They can leave you invigorated with a sense of the great wheel of life, or they can leave you angry, embittered and sad at the random swipe of history and its cruel tantrums of indifference.

My bouldering was interrupted by my own ignorance one day. I'd escaped to the Trossachs, to a special bouldering spot known as 'An Garradh', or 'The Garden' – a jumble of boulders under a wooded copse on the flanks of Loch Katrine. I was aware of a curious ghost following me through the boulders in the copse. I didn't see her until I'd gained some height and could see the shadowed grass of her family's run-rigs, the melted rubble of her shieling.

It is the late spring sun which brings her out to play, away from the stern retributions and privations of her home. She is dressed in a filthy linen smock which barely covers her driftwood frame, but despite that she is happily singing away among the boulders, occasionally chewing wild garlic leaves and spitting them out in disgust: "Yechhh..."

Suddenly, she's at the top of the boulder I am climbing.

"You can see for miles here... aw the way to France." She clutches her skinny raw legs and bites her knees, soaking up the glory of her Highland home, tranquil in the sun, a lookout at the junction of these perpendicular lochs, watching the smoke of her house rise into the still air of a clear Scottish day. She frowns at me. "What are you doing? You should be working, the cattle need shiftin', does your father know you're here?"

I gain the top of the boulder but she is gone again. I clasp my own knees and stare out over the landscape for a while, looking for clues to something I don't quite apprehend. When I look carefully, hold my gaze longer than a few seconds, the blunted outline of the ruined shieling rebuilds itself like the internal magic of salt crystals, the run-rigs sprout with crops, the detail sharpens and there she is, running over the tufted grass, through the sucking sphagnum up to the boulders where her favourite spot is, where she gains reflection, where she comes to claim this land as her own. This is her view, these are her stones. Her mother will call her down, but for the moment she is queen of the rocks in this hardened place. I am a curious visitor, like a coloured bird from the woods, or a strange beetle she might poke with a snapped reed.

Then the vision wipes as a cloud passes over. The smoke fades in swirls of nothing, the shieling sags down under the grass like a fugitive hiding under a cloak, there is the sound of schist rock calving and blocks of stone heaving to the bluebelled earth. Erosion. Time. Deer collapse and shrink into their bones, flies buzz their furious dot-to-dot pictures and flesh dissolves into the ground. These are Clearance lands, I must remind myself. These are not necessarily pleasant visions and it is right and proper I get things in perspective.

I pack up my boulder mat for another day, closing the book on another landscape and head back to the city, all the ghosts stuffed back into the mountains – layers in the rock, one on top of the other, assuming the geology of silence, the end of all our brief skeins of time on this earth and I am happy in my own way. Indeed, it seems to me that bouldering can be a form of listening...to deeper histories, to voices that ring like struck stones and too easily vanish into the clear air.