

The W.H. Murray Literary Prize 1998

Failure

By Donald M. Orr

BLUSTERY, snow-laden winds in early March allowed him to forego the dubious pleasures of the North and spend a casual Sunday alone on the Renfrewshire-Ayrshire border. Not on the ragged, heathery tops of the West Renfrew Heights but over on the high, sad moorland country that sweeps eastwards to Strathaven, the Aven Water and the long valley of the Clyde. Edged on the west by the trench of the Barrhead Gap, the area undulates below the 1000ft. contour and is pocked extensively by dams and small lochs that held the dull colour of the sky and caught and reflected its occasional brilliance.

He skirted through the meagre dusting of powder snow by the crags he had often used as a summer starter. Rediscovering, in the light evenings, the tendon twanging limits of chalked fingers and the less-than-adhesive properties of rubber on whinstone. Beyond the old quarry the upland fields dipped and rose under a thicker blanket towards the rounded, forested hill that was his target. Silently, pondering his way up the slope, he paused periodically to draw a deeper breath and take in a familiar view.

He stood on the grassy summit gazing north to the white escarpments of the Kilpatrick and Campsie Hills. Snow clouds smothered the humped top of Dumgoyne as his eyes scanned some unseen distance. Failure now haunted him where before it had driven him on.

He had found it easy to establish a reputation as a mountaineer. All it seemed to amount to was a collection of tops, ticked summits, underlined routes and a large pile of trashed gear.

What had fired him was essentially failure. What they had raved about together were the disasters, wash outs, epic retreats, because, he realised eventually, that was when he felt really tested. When they were off route on a strange crag, a few degrees out in the cloudy fastness of some unfrequented wilderness, or when the ice suddenly went rotten in a slushy spring gully, he felt the zest and burn within him of increased vulnerability that doubled the intensity of the experience and promoted the telling of the tale to saga status.

He focused again, briefly watching the light change in the grey distance, before he faded back into his internal dialogue. It struck him that success had only confirmed his abilities while the failures had stretched the limits, taken him out of himself and allowed a re-assessment of what his potential might be.

He started to move downhill under a lowering sky. It had, however, been easy to walk away from the successes: the effects of failure remained for a long time and the varieties could be as intricate as some of the routes he had followed. As he ducked under the branch of a larch tree that overhung the path his eyes connected with the frosted whinstone flakes that surfaced the trail. Their whitened forms resembled limestone fragments and triggered an initial wave of dizziness to lap inside his head.

He gulped at the cold air but none seemed to enter his lungs and he sagged slowly on to the snow and leant wearily against the base of the larch. He recognised in his shifted perspective that the colour of the stones intensified an aura of menace still lingering in his memory.

No amount of training could have primed him for the sensations that he would experience. The Red Cross instructors had been thorough but they had not told him how he would taste the Austrian's last cigarette as he tried to force his frightened breath inside another man. Nor could they tell him of the smell of perfume that rose up from 'the casualty', left by his wife as she kissed and kissed and kissed him, desperately trying to force love and life back into her husband before he slipped away forever. In the delirious, dizzying pressure of reality, anxious sweat dripped from his face on to the older man's, splashing and deepening the darkening skin as he worked, panting in the humidity, trying to drive his breath past a stranger's purple lips. In a frantic spiral of desperation he tried to ignore the actualities before him for the promised joy of imagined recovery.

Mouth to mouth with a strange, overweight man, he never heard the helicopter, only a clatter of white stones as a paramedic and two nurses ran down the path. He was on the point of collapsing himself when they took over. Watching the medic give an adrenaline injection, and the nurses continue trying to revive their countryman, he sat on the path exhausted and bleeding and regarding in a dazed, apologetic manner the couple comforting the dead man's wife.

He was not sure how long they had been working on him but at some point, perhaps when he saw the bluish stain creep out across his chest, he realised the Austrian was dead and that there was no chance of reviving him. The medical team stopped their efforts and started to straighten out the body. The weeping woman was led away and a group that had materialised from a nearby hut assisted with the corpse. He remained sitting by the path stunned, disturbed and empty. Drained by the physical effort involved and shocked by the sudden turn of events that had turned his part in the drama into a very ill defined role. The doctor turned and spoke quietly and politely in German which was lost on him. The nurses smiled and shrugged which said it all.

Later that night in the hut he was aware of the eyes watching him as he sat alone at the rough table awaiting his evening meal. He saw wonder and awe, recognised fear in those around him and once or twice glimpsed that look of envy on a face that saw status in one who had touched the dead.

He found himself picking at his food, listening to the guttural blur of German surrounding him, at once glad yet anxious that he did not speak their language. The need to forget was being tormented by the desire to explain what he had done, how he had tried. He was now beyond his emotional margin, off route on a testing wall of unknown and unconsidered mental stress. He ordered a whisky, and another. By his third he felt he could have summarised to someone that it felt like a long, long runout with no protection. He wondered if they were watching him drinking, adding it up themselves and coming to some smug conclusion. He rose abruptly and left the dining room and went up to the small chamber under the eaves where he was sure no one else would wish to share the facilities.

A blackness tinged with green and pain was his only awareness. The blackness was pain and existed all around him. He could not understand the pain, could compute no reason for the greenish blackness. The pain made him move his head and his eyes opened. Slowly, these simple events and sights started the mechanism that tripped consciousness into being. Through his shattered senses the strange moss-covered rocks and the saplings around him only heightened his discomfort and uncertainty. The pain, now localised in his face, eased, and he propped himself up on his arms. The moss had been scraped off the rocks beneath him and bright red blood stains had soaked into the soft lichens making dark whorls within minute worlds, a miniature landscape drenched in blood. His temperature rose suddenly and dramatically, sending beads of sweat out across his forehead. Little trickles gathered in his hair as he continued staring at the ground wondering where and why? 'Okay, I'm okay,' he said quietly to himself in reassuring tones.

He pushed himself upright into a seated position and groaned as he lent his still-rucsacked back against a boulder. Running his tongue along his top lip he found a rounded hole on the inside where his bottom teeth had gone through. His hand found cuts on his chin and on the bridge of his nose but apart from these a blow to his left knee and some skinned knuckles were the only injuries he had sustained.

Looking up plunged his mind once more into swirling disorder as he failed to see the path or any other feature he recognised. He remembered navigating off the Wasen Spitz in low cloud and coming out of a drizzling mist to join the old track by the side of the Spullersee. He had followed a small path into a scented birch wood that cloaked the lower slopes of the mountain and remembered bending under a larch branch and feeling giddy.

This strange, moss-covered, boulder-strewn little valley filled with ash saplings was totally unknown to him. A sensation of fear penetrated the disorientation that filled his mind as he sat regaining his strength and composure. Struggling to his feet he tottered forward supporting himself with the branches. Yesterday's images trickled, then burst into his mind.

'I'm sorry! Oh Jesus, I'm sorry.' He closed his eyes and slid down the tree to his knees. Grief and fear, shock and dejection took their toll and he knelt moaning and crying, trying to atone with his tears and his misery. Eventually, at some point, he rose and stumbled off following the slope downward. Later, he was not aware that his feet had found the path and the sight of the evening lights of Klosterle a little way below him registered only vaguely on his mind.

It had been decided that a short holiday would be a good idea and he had agreed to all the gentle, cliched argument knowing that his nerves were in rather a ragged state. Unable to concentrate, sleeping badly, seeing his family and friends through a confusion of guilt, he still somehow bore the weight of responsibility for other lives in another country.

Amy drove the long road down the length of Argyll to Kintyre while he sat softly beside her recognising in her unaccustomed role his weakness and convalescence.

While he had never visited this part of the country before he regarded it listlessly as if the landscape were simply being viewed on a screen. He felt no interest or attachment to the land. He was not moving with it, only passing through it.

Turning off the main road on to the estate track plunged them into a new set of sensations. The estate was densely wooded and flooded with the noise of wind in the trees and the rush of tumbling water from the peat- stained torrent that drained the valley. They drove slowly over the wooden bridges, crept through tunnels in the forest and spied the house across a rough, uncut meadow of lilac grasses. The building occupied a raised site above a bend in the river and backed into a bank of impenetrable vegetation that swept down the east side of the narrow glen. He took to the house immediately and from its main window the prospect of the steep, wooded slopes across the stream filled him with a sense of security that eased his mind and instilled a calmness for the first time in weeks.

The next morning was still and damp. Heavy overnight rains had washed the air and freshened his attitude. The seemingly vertical forest across the now raging river was still draped in mist and low cloud, creating the washed effect of a Chinese landscape painting. Into this oriental water colour he walked and explored, with growing enthusiasm, for the rest of the day.

In the evening he took the children down to the beach. While they played along the shoreline he built a fire, farther back, on the grey pebbles that flanked the bay. Gently coaxing up the flames and their comforting warmth he was caught suddenly in a soft sadness that swept over him like the smoke from the embers. He could find no echoed childhood memory or cross reference from recent events that might have been triggered by the fire and quietly relaxed into the mood, calmly watching the sticks glow and flare through tear-filled eyes. Clearing himself and coughing away the emotion he looked out over the still, grey reach of the sound to the great, whale-backed mass of Arran. At this distance the mountains appeared rounded, the peaks a faint detail and the famous airy ridges a mere suggestion of tone and line that reminded him of McCulloch's brushwork. He stared at the view recalling the walks and climbs he had enjoyed there and the incidents that had filled the days. Through the last of his snuffles he realised that nothing was wrong. In fact, everything, for the moment, was quite all right.

The weather throughout May had slowly improved to near perfection and he had gradually built up his confidence revisiting many of the local crags with old friends.

Successive weekends in Glen Coe and Ardgour and the prospect of a break with the family in the Lake District had primed him to the point of quiet enthusiasm. As he walked down from his office towards Central Station on a June evening he was delighted with the thought of having just secured a house on Colonsay for the summer, a venture the family had decided on and he endorsed. He acknowledged that a dull shadow still lingered from the past but the potential of the gloomy reverie was broken as he met some colleagues under the portico of the station and the conversation turned to business and Saturday's sporting fixtures as they headed for their suburban trains.

She was quite happy, for once, to see him thinking about rock climbing. They had talked over the event many times, reasoning out his feelings of inadequacy and incompetence and she now felt that it was a process of time before he rationalised his emotions and dissolved the feeling of total failure that he equated with the notion of no return, no second chance. Lying in the sun she looked out over the top of her book, past the children playing on the low tide sands, to where he was perched, bouldering on the rounded scoop of a sea cliff. She was aware that climbing

demanded all his concentration and that in the precision of his next move there was no room for distraction. A good therapy for the big lump. Her eyes followed him as he moved on to a prow of sandstone and she considered how like dancing his movements were as his fingers took the weight and feet skipped out across pebble pocked conglomerate to weathered holds above a rash of barnacles.

Around the seaward edge of the arete came the tang of verdant obstacles and he wondered whether to traverse above the weed and kelp or follow the crackline in the wall overhead. A score of oystercatchers flighted a path over the summer tidefall, trilling their way across the beach and down the golden hoop of the bay fringed, below him, by the smoothed dross of stone that made a kind of rounded sea scree. He paused on a good hold to watch them pass and shake out the fatigue from his arm and chalky fingers then moved round the arete and into a hidden niche at the foot of an open corner. Squatting in the sheltered sunshine he viewed the dull smudge of the Ross of Mull nestling out on the western rim. He had not visited Iona for many years but the persistent and enduring nature of the site, its capacity to absorb the worst from history and offer a continuing solidity to the present, seemed to mesh with the recent conversations he had had with Amy. The distant island became personalised in his thoughts. They were both burdened with the weight of history and hindsight but he was not sure if their durability was despite or because of it.

The little squadron flew again between him and Amy sitting reading. He was aware she was watching him with that head-to-one-side aspect that always intimated she was thinking seriously. He thought of the balance of their lives together - still together after so many years. An image fixed in his mind of her on the trip to Coigach they had made before they were married. He remembered that specific day when the ragged ridge of Suilven lay like a blade against the wind, slashing cloud remnants apart that were combing over the serrations of Stac Pollaidh. Somewhere there he had found and grasped the handhold in her heart.

A soft sadness blew over the sea to envelope him, enhancing his sense of the immensity of the landscape, his small span within it and the finite nature of its range. He could feel for them all, sense the thrills and shocks that composed the rhythms of athletes out on the dun expanses of thin holds, the charged panoramas of the striders of alpine snow ridges, the eternal peace shrouding the smashed and shivered, locked in the blue tombs of frozen, tumbled rivers, and the cathedral quiet for those resting at life's last belay. Their life lines were route lines which mirrored the aretes and edges of the ranges which contracted and echoed in the scores and scars that cramponed boots had gifted or nails donated in the rain, before they all ascended to the stars, and took to the hills again.

He glanced again towards Iona, grinning to himself.