



## AAC Publications

---

### John Turner, 1931–2014

**As a 16-year-old climber in 1978**, with my long hair, swami belt, and patchy EBs, I stood on the damp little ledge at the base of Mazinaw Rock, Ontario, and looked up at the Joke, a beetling 100-meter wall decorated with a couple of bent and rusted pitons. The route was one of only two Ontario climbs in Chris Jones' *Climbing in North America* and offered a whiff of glamor not found on the suburban outcrops that were my usual venue. The beautiful narrow ramp in the middle of the route, the exposure, the run-outs, and the fact that it was created by the enigmatic John Turner in 1960 after two very serious falls, including one on which he broke his leg, comprised its reputation.

Sitting at my desk in our publishing house in Toronto in 2014, I was amazed to open my email to discover a message from Turner. He wanted me to know that instead of breaking left on the last pitch, as every subsequent party since the second ascent had done, he had climbed straight up a steep headwall. This more-or-less previously unknown last pitch might have been one of the hardest pitches in North America at the time.

Writing a response, I was flooded with personal memories of climbing Turner's routes in different times of my life and the people I had climbed them with. I felt something halfway between awe at having been contacted by a figure of climbing history and the fatuity of responding to a hoax, since part of the Turner myth was how reclusive he was about his climbing days.

Turner started climbing in North Wales and in England's Peak District in the early 1950s. An early partner was Geoff Sutton, an accomplished climber and writer whose translations of Anderl Heckmair's *My Life as a Mountaineer* and Lionel Terray's *Conquistadors of the Useless* introduced these great books to English readers. Sutton and Turner made second ascents of some of the leading English climbs of the day, some of which were harder than the American rock climbs of the time. When he arrived in eastern North America to study chemistry in 1955, he had to do new routes to climb at the same grade.

Turner's climbing partners in Canada and the U.S. included pioneering spirits Brian Rothery, Alf Muehlebauer, Dick Strachan, and Dick Wilmott, as well as Vulgarians like Art Gran and the titans of early Quebecois rock climbing, Bernard Poisson and Claude Lavallée. One of the first important new leads he did was a free ascent of Repentance, in 1958, a poorly protected 5.10 crack at Cathedral Ledge in New Hampshire. He also climbed Recompense, one of the most popular 5.9s on Cathedral now, but a bold lead in 1959. Besides the Joke, at Bon Echo, there was Sweet Dreams, a difficult traverse followed by a steep crack that was once graded 5.8 (most feel it's much harder). At Val-David near Montreal, he climbed a dozen new routes, including Bastard, which, at 5.9, was among the hardest routes in the area. The discovery of Poke-O-Moonshine, a 400-foot-high roadside granite outcrop in the Adirondacks in 1959, was followed by a streak of new routes, including the unprotected 30m layback crack of Bloody Mary, a 5.9 not repeated until 1971 by hardman Jim McCarthy. Turner also did some new climbs in the Shawangunks.

The only new route Turner did in the West was in the Bugaboos: the Northeast Ridge of Bugaboo Spire, 5.7, which was later enshrined in Roper and Steck's *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*.

Turner returned to England in 1964 and climbed no more. In a photo in Laura and Guy Waterman's *Yankee Rock & Ice*, Turner bounced on a horse in full fox-hunting gear and top hat. It couldn't have been an image more distant from the old photos of a muscular, shirtless young man in climbing boots

and National Health Service spectacles, with tousled hair. The sense among people who had known him was that he no longer wished to discuss climbing.

Was it his reticence, the shortness of his presence where he did most of his climbs, or the obscurity of the cliffs on which he did them that contributed to his absence from much of the climbing record? Colin Wells' *Who's Who in British Climbing* includes many Brits who did most of their notable climbing outside of the U.K. — including Brian Greenwood, Robin Barley, and Chris Jones—but Turner is absent. Apart from a piece on Alpinist.com by Ed Webster, neither the British nor American climbing press ran obituaries after he died. Perhaps he isn't as recognized partly because he climbed free at small, little-known cliffs in the golden age of aid ascents of big walls.

His last message before dying at his home in Church Farm, Long Buckby, on March 30, 2014, was taken down by his partner, Elsa, a few days earlier and sent out to his friends via American climbing writer Ed Webster. At the end he had found his climbing memories and the fact that his climbs had provided so much enjoyment to be sources of happiness:

"... It is very gratifying that so many routes have been giving pleasure to so many people and somewhat surprising that this pleasure has persisted for so long. I should very much like to thank each of them personally, but this would be beyond my capabilities. I wonder whether I might prey upon your good nature by asking that you should circulate copies of this email to everybody concerned.... May I say how much I have enjoyed the resurrection of happier days?"

David Chaundy-Smart

This tribute originally appeared, in slightly different form, in the 2014 edition of the **Canadian Alpine Journal**.

## Images



John Turner at home in England in 2013.



John Turner in 1953 on Mephistopheles Exit at Cratcliffe Tor in England's Peak District.

## Article Details

Author	David Chaundy-Smart
Publication	AAJ
Volume	0
Issue	0
Page	0
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	In memoriam