



AAC Publications

Mt. Slesse, East Face, First Free Ascent

Canada, British Columbia, North Cascades

After five trips with four partners over two seasons, I completed the second ascent and first free ascent of Mt. Slesse's east face, climbing with Jacob Cook (U.K.), via a six-pitch variation to the original route (1997, Easton-Edgar, ED2 VI 5.9 A3).

I made my first mission with Ian Strachan in July 2016. The goal was to climb an indirect line, traversing right from the top of the lower spur of the East Pillar into the upper half of the face. Familiarity with the upper route would prove to be a strategic advantage for an eventual direct ascent, especially if benighted. Ian and I succeeded in completing two new free pitches branching off from the East Pillar toward the east face. A barrage of rockfall and the ensuing nerves prompted retreat; however, the progress was hopeful.

A few weeks later, another Squamish local, Paul Cordy, was game to see it go to the summit. We succeeded in establishing the East Face In-Direct (5.10d) in a long day. Paul followed almost the entire route with two broken fingers after a fall from a committing position low on the climb.

The next obvious step, in the summer of 2017, was an attempt on the direct east face, loosely following the Easton-Edgar route. My friend Will Stanhope was interested. We climbed seven pitches before turning back, disheartened at the wetness, loose rock, and difficulty.

Later that summer, Jacob said he was fired up for an attempt. We made the now-familiar journey to the mountain, intent on establishing a new variation that would end where Paul and I had joined the original route with the In-Direct. Hauling a power drill and full bivy kit gave us plenty of opportunity for exploration. The thick forest-fire smoke provided some respite from the morning sun while Jacob mused over the possibility of his van catching fire.

The first day went smoothly, as I had done the first five pitches with Will previously. We climbed mostly moderate terrain with a crux up to 5.11b, eventually stopping to bivy at some spacious ledges about 600' up the wall. The next day we started up unclimbed terrain to the right of the Easton-Edgar. After two dead-ends, five bolts placed, and all the moves freed, our variation brought us to within 30m of our goal of a complete free route. Since we had not freed the route entirely in good style up to that point, though, we decided to call it and return to the ground.

With the path now clear, the urgency to return for a single-push free ascent weighed heavily. The intricate factors of weather and schedules became an obsession. Happily, the weather was dry and in our favor. Our chance came in early September.

Jacob's extensive background on sketchy British face climbs showed in his speedy confidence. We used double ropes in the traditional way Jacob is accustomed to. Without tagging a line or bag, we moved quickly. Around mid-height, the day's closest call occurred when a large rotten section of the corner I was following collapsed under my weight, luckily not hitting me as I swung into a 90° barn door. After almost coming off, I swung back and clutched a newly exposed edge. Jacob, out of sight, heard the carnage and then me shouting, "I didn't fall! I'm sending!"

The knowledge we'd gained and bolts we placed earlier were instrumental in making the ascent go

smoothly. Once on the upper wall, which I'd climbed before with Paul, I took the lead as Jacob and I simul'd through several pitches with minimal or no gear between us. We unroped for a couple hundred feet of easy terrain, content that we'd make the descent in the daylight. We stopped briefly on the summit, in a cloud of mosquitoes, to make a short entry in the summit register: Welcome to the Wack, 1,000m, 5.11d.

Three hours of downclimbing and rappelling the southwest buttress saw us safely back at the "propeller cairn." Another three or four hours of casual hiking on a good trail brought us to the car.

It may be a bit surprising how long it took this wall to get a second complete (and first free) ascent. Neither the grade nor the approach is that difficult by modern standards. It took a lot of perseverance, but a lack of effort and/or interest is what it boils down to—why that has been the case is anybody's guess. I don't imagine the route will ever get much action, but it's a big, fun climb on pretty decent stone. It still awaits an onsight.

Tony McLane, Canada

[Click here for a detailed description of the climb.](#)

Images



Tony McLane at the Propeller Cairn bivy below Mt. Slesse.



Tony reaching into the "glory layback" on pitch four of the east face of Slesse.



Tony McClane near the high point of the first Cook-McLane attempt on the east face of Slesse.



Bivy during the first Cook-McLane attempt. "It was at this point we discovered we had accidentally packed decaf coffee!"



Tony McClane beginning the crux eighth pitch of the east face during the second Cook-McLane attempt.



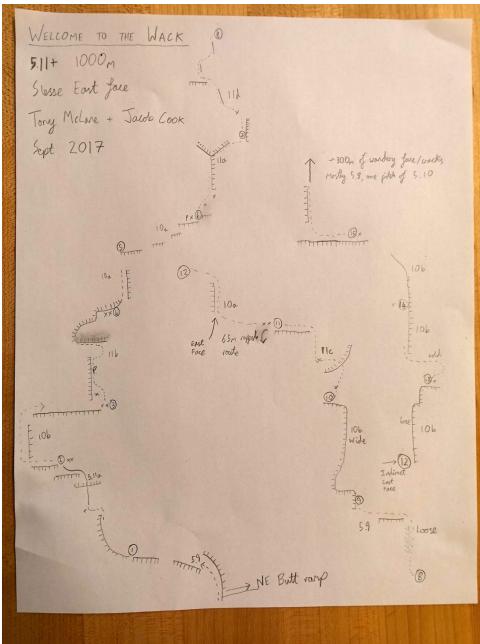
McLane (left) and Cook high on the east face of Mt. Slesse.



Smoke from the many fires in British Columbia made for atmospheric conditions.



Photo-topo of Welcome to the Wack on the east face of Mt. Slesse.



Hand drawn topo

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