



## AAC Publications

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### Joe Brown, 1930–2020

Joe Brown on the Craigh Dhu Wall at Tremadog, Wales, in 1967. Photo by John Cleare  
**Joe Brown seemed to me a kind of Renaissance master, his medium blank sheets of rock and ice, the lines he drew on them elegant and clever, his tombstone grin full of maverick good humor and the wisdom of his craft.** His death at the age of 89 is not only the end of a defining era in climbing but also the loss of an immense creative force. “I’m always happiest when I’m doing something new,” he once told the journalist Peter Gillman. And even in his last illness, the preternatural curiosity that fueled his extraordinary life remained undiminished. Even as his body failed, he could and did talk for hours in that searching, teasing way of his: always the explorer, but never overwrought, never self-important.

Gillman was writing in 1967, about the development of Gogarth and Brown’s partnership with Peter Crew, the newest young star to come for his mantle. “I worship Joe,” Crew told him. “He’s the best climber in the world.” By then Brown was in his mid-30s and in the middle of another wave of era-defining exploration in North Wales. Crew’s gushing assessment might have been overstated, but it was forgivable. Most climbers of the generation that followed Joe calibrated themselves on the routes he created, first in the Peak District and soon after in Wales.

These days the routes Joe climbed in the 1950s and 1960s are comfortably within reach for even moderately able climbers. That’s hardly the point. Read the list: Valkyrie, Right Unconquerable, Elder Crack, Right Eliminate, Cemetery Gates, Vember, Cenotaph Corner, The Grooves, Sassenach, The Rasp, The Mostest, November, Shrike, Vector, Dwm, Hardd. A British climber doesn’t need to be told where these climbs are—we already know—and many are quite rightly famous internationally. They are also a foundation stone in what British climbing is and means. So much is built on it.

In the early 1970s, as Ken Wilson was assembling the first edition of his compendium *Hard Rock*, still in print and recently reissued, he wrote of Joe: “He has brought to climbing a rare combination of attributes: keenness, patience, strength, technical ability, eye for a line, competitiveness and, above all, a subtle and mysterious charisma. Few would deny that his place in British rock climbing remains pre-eminent.”

All this, and I haven’t yet mentioned his mountaineering achievements, including the famous first ascents of Kangchenjunga with George Band in 1955, the only 8,000m peak first climbed by Britons; Muztagh Tower, climbed the following year with Ian McNaught-Davis; and Trango Tower, climbed in 1976 with, among others, Joe’s great friend Mo Anthoine, with whom he started the equipment company Snowdon Mouldings.

Joe’s appearance in the early 1950s, alongside that of his younger partner Don Whillans, heralded a seismic structural upheaval in the social breadth of English climbing. The appearance of working-class climbers galvanized standards, and Joe was at the vanguard of that group, his upbringing having been unusually disadvantaged. He was born in the slums of Ardwick, then a heavily industrialized district of Manchester, the youngest of seven. His father was a jobbing builder who, during the Depression, worked as a merchant seaman. In 1931, when Joe was eight months old, his father suffered a shipboard accident and his injuries became fatally gangrenous. His widowed mother took in washing, and when Joe was old enough to be left in the care of his siblings, she went out to work as a cleaner. One night during the Blitz, in World War II, hiding under the dining-room table, they heard the rattle of an incendiary device coming down the chimney. Moments later the windows of

their house blew out. Heading for the local air-raid shelter, Joe saw that his school had also been blown up, “an agreeable piece of news,” as he put it in his memoir, *The Hard Years*.

Organized sports, organized anything, seemed dismaying to Joe. He was sacked from the Scouts for refusing to go on a church parade. He tolerated school, but his real education was in the outdoors. As a teenager, Joe explored the fringes of Manchester, camping out, playing and climbing in old quarries, and eventually, inevitably, aged around 16, he came to the gritstone ramparts of Kinder Downfall. He had read Colin Kirkus’ *Let’s Go Climbing*, and borrowing his mother’s discarded washing line, set out for the crag.

The gritstone climbing of the Peak District came naturally to him. I remember asking him about Right Eliminate, which plenty of strong climbers still struggle on. “I found stuff like that quite straightforward,” he replied. “Just over the roof I stopped and jammed my knee in so I could roll a fag [cigarette].”

In April 1951, Joe happened to be at the Roaches on the same day as Don Whillans. Over the next few years their names would become inextricably linked, like Lennon and McCartney, as the leading lights in a new climbing club, the Rock and Ice, which would become almost as legendary as they were. Leaving aside their achievements in Britain, in the Alps during the otherwise miserable summer of 1954, they managed to climb a new route on the west face of the Blatière and a repeat of the west face of the Dru.

The following November, Joe got a telegram from Charles Evans, leader of an expedition planned for the following year to Kangchenjunga, the world’s third-highest mountain. That Don Whillans was not invited prompted decades of speculation and a certain level of resentment. The truth is their personalities were too different for their partnership to have endured, even without Kangchenjunga. Joe reached the summit with Band on what had been a low-key and exemplary adventure. That he might not have the £20 “pocket money” he was expected to bring didn’t occur to the organizers, but he managed. In fact, he always did. Until the mid-1960s, when he opened the first of his shops and began manufacturing his eponymous helmets, money was always tight. By then he was married to Val, who survives, and they had their daughters Helen and Zoe. That didn’t stop him from having fun: He had far too much imagination for circumstances to get in the way.

The obvious route as a professional mountaineer—the famous mountains, the big expeditions—was never really his style. One of the hallmarks of Joe’s long and varied career (if that’s the right word) was the company he kept: Tom Patey, Mo Anthoine, and Hamish MacInnes are good examples. It’s wrong to say it hardly mattered what they did: the ascent of Trango Tower, for example, or hunting for gold in Peru, or working on Roland Joffé’s movie *The Mission*. These were significant things done well but above all with a sense of fun.

He was an unconventional hero. He was also an inspiration. Even when I started climbing in the early 1980s, it was hard to find anyone who didn’t find him so. The difficulties in his early life, which he seemed to have casually sidestepped, earned him the deepest respect. And yet the notion of “class” never interested him much. He would laugh about becoming a recluse, but his curiosity and need for friendship kept him engaged, even if being considered a legend was at times a burden. His contribution was immense. Perhaps it’s a cliché to say it’s the end of an era, but that doesn’t make it any less true. “Bloody hell,” he told me at the end of one interview, thinking of the world he had encountered and then made his own, “We were bloody lucky, y’know.” But if Joe Brown was lucky, then so were we. British climbing would not have been the same without him.

— Ed Douglas

**Editor’s Note:** This tribute was adapted from a longer version that appears at the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) website.

## Images



Joe Brown on the Craigh Dhu Wall at Tremadog, Wales, in 1967.

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