



AAC Publications

Tom Patey: One Man's Legacy

By Mike Dixon

TOM PATEY: ONE MAN'S LEGACY By Mike Dixon (Scottish Mountaineering Press, 2022).
Hardcover, 464 pages, £30.

In the mid-1970s, when I was new to climbing, none of my circle was buying hardcover books. Yet all of us knew the anecdote about Royal Robbins' comment to Tom Patey on how to recognize a good crack climber's hands, or about Patey and Don Whillans' famed retreat off the north face of the Eiger. We repeated these stories gleefully, as if they were our own. And at some point we read all of Patey's *One Man's Mountains* and said to ourselves, "This is the stuff."

Now, a half-century later, Mike Dixon has lifted the veil—much of it anyway—on the man behind the words with *Tom Patey: One Man's Legacy*. The biography is an elegant tome of nearly 500 pages, meticulously researched and beautifully presented.

Patey began climbing in the era of Tricouni-nailed boots and cutting steps on steep ice. He roped up with the most famous names of his era in British climbing: Hamish MacInnes, Joe Brown, Don Whillans, and Chris Bonington, among many others. He made an astonishing number of climbs in the 20 years before he died in a rappelling accident in 1970 at the age of 38: over 200 first ascents in Scotland, including the Cuillin Ridge in winter, as well as the Karakoram plums of Muztagh Tower and Rakaposhi. Dixon notes that his most difficult climb in the Alps was likely the northwest face of the Aiguille Sans Nom.

This sort of list is neither at the heart of the man nor this book. Rather it's Patey's style, both on and off the mountain, for which he was well-known. As a climber, Dixon notes certain strengths: "off-vertical, suspect rock, lacquered in moisture and vegetation, with scanty protection." An early climb is described as having a "crux of double overhangs, coated in a mean slick of verglas, on which he deployed the adhesive properties of...woolly gloves."

Patey was famous for his "cavalier preparation" and often showed up for a climb with "a packet of sausages, a bottle of whisky, and his accordion." Bonington, who despite being parodied in Patey's "Onward Christian Bonington" ("He has climbed the Eigerwand, he has climbed the Dru/For a mere ten thousand francs, he will climb with you"), seems to have enjoyed a lasting friendship with Patey, noted that "it was a problem persuading him to tie in at all, on anything up to HVS [5.9] he preferred soloing. When he did lead, he hardly ever put any protection in, and when he did, it was badly placed. He was not remotely interested in gear."

What he was interested in, and famous for, in addition to going hard in the mountains, was what today we would call "partying." In his case: drinking, storytelling, singing, playing music to all hours—a classic "hail fellow, well met."

In his foreword, Mick Fowler nicely summarizes Dixon's work: "a picture of a driven man who was fired by an irrepressible desire to explore, climb, and serve his patients well." And by all accounts, as a rural family doctor, Patey steadfastly served patients with great dedication and efficacy. True to form, his medical practice also was observed to be unconventional: "He [Patey] carried on smoking as he proceeded his examination, occasionally flicking ash in the patient's belly button, in which he would

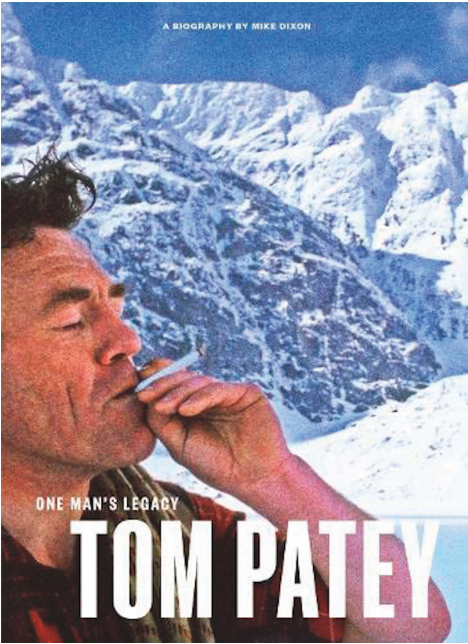
slot the filter end of the fag when requiring both hands free.” Fowler calls this a “warts and all” biography.

Dixon in his intro mentions the reluctance of a potential interviewee because they didn’t want “the myth to be pierced.” He claims he attempted to write a balanced account of Patey’s life, rather than a “hagiographic nostalgia trip.” However, I couldn’t help noting that Patey’s wife is essentially absent here. One wonders if, and suspects, this is because Patey was largely absent from her life. Dixon seemed to stop well short of piercing the myth.

At close to 500 pages, you would expect a full treatment of a life, and it is definitely a full treatment of Patey’s life as a climber. The hard-drinking raconteur, the up- all-night musician and poet who poured his soul into One Man’s Mountains is on nearly full display here. It’s a compelling, fascinating portrait, brilliantly researched. I couldn’t have kept up with Patey in the mountains, but I would have loved to have kept company with him during a night in the pub (where, undoubtedly, I also would have been unable to keep up). I just wouldn’t have wanted one of my sisters to have married him.

—David Stevenson

Images



Article Details

Author	David Stevenson
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	98
Page	
Copyright Date	2024
Article Type	Book reviews