

By Kit Moore

Sweet Dreams' crux piton had been replaced by a vaguely immoral bolt, he was glad to know that we still enjoy his route, which remains one of his favourites from the past. My efforts to reply to his email were unsuccessful, so we decided to put the full text of his email in the Bon Echo guidebook, and hoped to hear from him again.

More time went by, then I received this email, "Hi Kit: Have been trying to contact you for some three years . . . If you would like some notes on the first ascent of Sweet Dreams, and a photograph, let me know. Yours, John Turner". This time we made contact, and I learned more about the Turner era in North America.

In our correspondence, John began by sending me a Sweet Dreams first ascent photo, showing the third of five climbers who made the first ascent in 1960 - our best guess is that this man is Alf Muehlbauer. The other three following John Turner were Brian Rothery, Erwin Hodgson and Dick Strachan. As for the route name, "Erwin effectively named the climb. It took until Dick arrived for him to recover his breath, exclaiming "That was a bloody nightmare!" He was out-voted four to one." Thus the name Sweet Dreams.

Other route names came to light during our correspondence. One of the Dacks' best routes, Bloody Mary, earned its name in a more ominous way. On the first attempt, says Turner, "we abseiled off . . . and were met by Mary, who had retreated from Neurosis with a scalp wound from a falling stone, which left her covered in blood". Another Dacks climb, FM, got its name when Turner's partner finished the climb and said, "All I can say is f--- me!" When I asked John about the Gunks, he credited his second's girlfriend for naming Glypnod. She was reading Anglo-Saxon at Radcliffe/Harvard and assured him the name meant 'Frightened'.

Turner started climbing almost by accident on a 1951 field trip studying geology, his extra subject at University. He



Above: The Third man (Alf Muehlbauer) on Sweet Dreams first ascent (1960) Photo: Brian Rothery

Opposite Page: John Turner leading on UK gritstone (Valkyrie at Froggat Edge - 1953) Photo: John Peacock

noticed that half the party were climbers, who made a point of collecting rock samples at the highest levels possible, so he tagged along. Once he got the climbing bug, he worked out in the gym at night, and climbed ancient buildings after dark, eventually graduating to Derbyshire gritstone. In John's words, "If you could climb on gritstone, with its sloping holds and ferocious cracks, you could climb anywhere:

possibly true!"

Turner was strongly influenced by Geoff Sutton, a climber who impressed him with a deep love of rock and mountains, and an appreciation of style and quality, rather than difficulty. Geoff also introduced him to his role models - two impoverished plumbers from Manchester, who also happened to become two of the all-time top climbers in the world - Joe Brown and Don Whillans. Turner was impressed that between them they pushed up British standards, had an amazing eye for a good line, and went on to many important first ascents. He managed to do second ascents of some of their routes, and the resulting buzz made him realize how exciting a high quality, first ascent must be. Is it any wonder that John Turner brought those same qualities to North America, and made such a startling impact here?

When I asked John how he managed to find so many exceptional lines, he mentioned his mentors and also his research background, where his prime motivation was to venture where no one has been and to discover the unknown. As he says, "this desire to innovate was perhaps a personality trait, and certainly carried over to climbing, which provided the additional stimulus of fear and excitement". Anyone who has climbed a Turner route will be familiar with those feelings of fear and excitement, and will know exactly what he means.

What drove an apparently sedate academic, a Phd chemist, to take the risks he took on these extraordinary first ascents? Well, he was no sedate academic. In *Pushing the Limits*, author Chic

Scott says Turner was the exact opposite, "a non-conformist, noted for his hair-raising driving escapades and other impetuous acts". This view was confirmed by a mutual friend, Louise Trancynger, who now lives in the shadow of High Exposure in the Gunks. In her younger and crazier years, when she was married to John's friend, Jim Andress, she remembers clearly racing with Turner around the Gunks' winding roadways, she on her motorcycle, and Turner passing her on blind turns in his old Studebaker. Wisely, she conceded defeat before anything tragic took place.

Turner continued his love of extremes after his climbing career ended, when he was riding to hounds back in the U.K., and earned the nickname of Dr. Death, as he and his equally exuberant horse, CJ, took jumps at up to 40 mph. Somehow, Turner managed to survive these high risk activities while climbing, driving, riding, and in other areas of his life, and in fact had very few serious accidents during his climbing career. My own opinion, after reading about him and corresponding with him, is that he owed his survival to four important elements of his life: his remarkable upper body strength, which he maintained by lifting weights; his natural ability, helped by a phenomenal sense of balance and weight distribution; his ability to visualize a new route, and to assess and take on the risks in-



involved; and a certain amount of good luck.

John Turner spent an exciting seven years putting up new routes and becoming an important part of climbing communities in Quebec, Ontario, and the northeastern U.S., and earned recognition in other areas of North America; for example, as Chic Scott notes, "In 1958, the classic northeast ridge of Bugaboo Spire was climbed in only five hours . . . only the second route on the mountain in 42 years . . . only a dozen pegs were driven for belays or runners". Today we enjoy John Turner's creations, and can appreciate the tremendous effort and risks that he and his partners took in putting up these routes. In a future newsletter, I intend to reproduce a list of Turner first ascents given to me during my correspondence with John Turner, along with comments from some of his many climbing fans and followers.

Once again, thank you, John Turner, not just for Sweet Dreams, but for all your exciting first ascents you left here for us to enjoy through the years. May we all continue climbing them for many years to come!