

ALAN BLACKSHAW 1933 - 2011

Alan was a climber, skier, sailor, intellect, civil servant and a family man. He meant so much to so many.

Hiroo Saso sends a message from the President of the Japanese Mountaineering Association Tadao Kanzaki and Fumio Tanaka, the former President:

“Alan was a good friend to us and we acknowledge his great contribution to the UIAA and to the mountaineering community of the world. We shall never forget his gentle smile on the floor of UIAA meetings.”

The Japanese, as in a haiku brush stroke, evoke an impression in that one sentence of Alan that we all recall - Alan's gentle smile that survived all the extreme challenges he faced throughout his life - physical, intellectual and emotional.

I first became aware of Alan just 50 years ago when checking out climbs in the Alpine Climbing Group Bulletin that Alan had edited. In it were lists of routes British climbers were doing including some by Alan and his fellow Alpinists - routes that might be possible for myself and friends in the Nottingham Climbing Club to do; the Cassin route on the Badile, Dent de Geant south face. It was a useful, if not essential publication, before the plethora of magazines available today

He went on to edit the Alpine Journal (1966-70) introducing a modern format with integrated black and white photos and an index - most useful for those researching information. He persuaded younger climbers to contribute including myself giving encouragement and advice - advice about many things - as when I was bemoaning National Park and council bureaucrats “Don't write them off,” he replied, “bureaucrats don't mind what they do, as long as they are doing something, so get in there first and programme them to do what is really needed.”

Alan could speak from experience of 20 years as one the top men in the Civil Service - a “Sir Humphrey” to numerous ministers over the years.

Alan continued to bring about changes in British climbing when President, from 1973-76, of the BMC. During that time the BMC moved out of London north to Manchester where most of the climbers were and now the BMC had ready access to the volunteers essential to move forward on many fronts.

Alan had from 1968-74 committed himself to reviving the Mount Everest Foundation at a time when there was talk of winding it down. He also increased funding for expeditions by obtaining Sports Council grants for the BMC to distribute in conjunction with MEF. This was a very good thing. I say that with a certain bias as according to the industrious Secretary, Bill Ruthven, I received more MEF/BMC grants than anyone. That was after being scrutinised by Alan and also Bob Pettigrew who is here today.

After my somewhat busy Presidency of the AC when we had a Millenium review, I was pleased that Alan accepted my nomination and was voted President to bring stability to the office from 2001-04.

One of the many 'causes' that Alan took on was that of the ownership and copyright of the Everest Photos. They had been lodged at the RGS who had proceeded to claim them and benefit from sales. Alan swung into action producing a report on the matter one hundred pages long and in two volumes. This proved to be good background material for Martin Scott to subsequently bring about a compromise between the MEF and the RGS..

As with many of you here I would from time to time receive even weightier reports usually on matters of access - the Cuillin mountain range of Skye comes to mind and then the Cairngorm Funicular railway project was another, not to mention The Land Reform (Scotland) Act of 2003.

The Director of Ramblers Scotland and close friend of Alan, Dave Morris, has written well in newspapers and on websites of this important aspect of Alan's life.

I would only add that Alan derived so much pleasure from the time he spent in wild places on rock, snow and on the oceans that he naturally wanted the same for everyone. He sought rights of access also as a means not only to lift ones state of being, but as a means to conserve the remaining natural places. He pursued this quest all the way to the UN where he was a member of the UN Inter Agency Group on mountains. Alan wanted it set in stone that there is a "Fundamental Human Right to the Enjoyment of Nature."

Alan's contribution to the world of mountaineering owed much to his appreciation of the traditional British climbing scene from which he drew great strength.

He was very proud to have been President of the AC as I was and Chris Bonington and everyone so privileged right back to 1857. He wrote "The fact that the Club is so firmly within the world of mountaineering for its own sake - with practically no links with commerce or officialdom - is perhaps its greatest strength."

Having been so unfettered it can get a man all worked up and in trouble when taking on foreign climbers from overseas' clubs that let in any Tom, Dick or Harry that can pay the subs and that in some cases have simply become extensions of their countries' tourist industry.

"The Rules of the Road have been lodged - its only people's games you have to dodge", observed Bob Dylan.

In some ways Alan made it his life's work to take on those whose games were against the great traditions of our sport and who fabricated the truth for their own selfish agendas, obtaining power by unfair means.

Alan had been a servant of the UIAA for 50 years during which time he applied his observation that "good administration is important for mountaineering to help people to climb or travel in the mountain better or more safely."

Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom and the means Alan often quoted were laid out in the "Nolan Committees Standards in Public Life" publication where it states "Non-Executive Board Members have an important role to play, both in guiding and controlling the Executive Management but also in being prepared to challenge the chair and fellow directors."

Where newcomers on the scene, such as myself, face governance issues with spluttering, righteous indignation, Alan approached problems in a balanced way accepting that all parties will have different perspectives and interpretations and yet he was always determined to get facts identified and properly understood.

There is currently another major upheaval taking place in the UIAA six years after Alan resigned the Presidency outmaneuvered by those who craved power for power's sake and with very little ability to govern if the present state of affairs is anything to go by.

All I want to say about that as UK/ BMC rep, is that I gave Alan a mass of paperwork surrounding financial irregularities and concealment and the detailed report of the last three Executive Directors and in two days, Alan had produce a five page "BMC" document for me to present at the last UIAA Management Committee meeting in Paris. It was only the facts stripped to the bone but so well set out as to convince the UIAA that there should be an internal audit and for the first time the UIAA Annual Accounts (2010) were not passed - the first step to major reform and all because of Alan's fierce resolve so disciplined in thought and action.

His Excellency Narinda Vohra, the Governor of Janu, Kashmir and former Indian Representative to the UIAA, passed on condolences to Bob Pettigrew, observing that Alan was "altogether fearless and with straightforward views on major issues and impeccable intellectual integrity, whether in the area of civil services or mountaineering."

He was a lovely man who I have come to admire more than any other for striving towards a better world. He was a true gentleman without any guile or cunning and never overbearing. He had tremendous humility and was always self-effacing. He became a good friend as he always had been to his extended family and a source of love and sage advice to his children Sara, Alasdair, Elsie, Ruth and of course, his wife, Elspeth.

Currently with five of the main pillars of our society creaking - the political, financial, church and now the media and police we need people like Alan more than ever. Men who just don't say NO and who can take the heat; and better still is the man that can retain through it all a gentle smile.

An appreciation by Doug Scott
Friday, 19 August 2011
Cathedral Church of St Andrew, Inverness