

## Echoes: One Climber's Hard Road to Freedom

by Nick Bullock

Vertebrate Publishing £20

The relative ease with which it is now possible to publish, particularly for those endowed with a little spare capital, has resulted in a recent slew of climbing and mountaineering memoirs. Whilst some have been respectably proofed and edited, a considerable number have not. And, in my humble opinion, a good many of these suffer from a basic misconception: before putting fingers to keyboard the authors should have taken a step back and asked themselves if what they had to say was really of any interest to anyone outside their immediate peer group. *Echoes* is not one of these books.

Nick Bullock's writings will be well-known to many, through his articles in British and American magazines, national club journals, and his blog. Those outside this circle are in for a real eye-opener, as the thrust of this work is the dichotomy of two opposing lives. In his early years Bullock suffered greatly from a yearning to be accepted, loneliness and a destiny for conformity. After a variety of jobs, including game-keeping at Porthmadog, his father read an article on prison service recruitment: 'You should apply. Job for life, pension, growth industry'. The upshot was an appointment at the High Security prison of Gartree, home to such notoriety as Kray, Brady and the Guildford Four. 'I knew I had thrown myself in at the deep end... a trait that would become my hallmark'.

The standard prison officer coping strategy of heavy drink and cigarettes was eventually replaced by training to become a PE instructor. And then a life changing event, he attended the course held regularly by Plas-y-Brenin for prison staff. Suddenly, he was enthralled. 'In that final week [of the course] I made a pact with myself – climbing would become my life'. His work day altered: weight training, circuit training and running with the inmates, with lunch breaks spent climbing on a nearby railway bridge, sometimes in the evening too. And often he would cycle nine miles to work, and back. It's not surprising he was good; few bodies could survive such a punishing schedule. Within a short period of time he was leading E6 and beginning a succession of plaster-encasing injuries.

Nick's writing is insightful, opinionated, and follows the trend of modern mountaineering autobiographies in completely baring one's soul. With him we discover the blood, violence, loathing and prejudice of prison life, quickly learning that a small battery, slipped inside a sock, makes a superb cosh, melting a Bic razorblade onto a toothbrush is perfect for slashing an enemy's throat, and avoiding bags of shit thrown out of windows is an almost daily occupation. A constant critique is the failing of our society to deal properly with hardened offenders, a failing that produces intensely hate-filled inmates. This is a literate book that asks as many questions as it answers.

Much of the book battles against conservatism, Bullock longing all the time for release ('after 10 years in the service going out at night concerned me – even frightened me'). Yet he continues to work until he has paid off his mortgage and banked a 'safety blanket' that will allow him two years' full time climbing. The hippy '70s mountaineer would have probably done so less than halfway through the book, but we live in different times. There are obvious comparisons with Andy Cave's *Learning to Breathe*, although Cave's spell as a miner was relatively short, and his book compartmentalized, while Bullock's impact (if you'll excuse the pun) on climbing came much later in his life, and his writing

# echoes

ONE CLIMBER'S HARD  
ROAD TO FREEDOM

nick bullock

foreword by Paul Pritchard

flits between two worlds. The climbing is savage, gripping, from his love and hate affair with North Stack Wall to his bold but doomed attempt on the coveted Meru Shark's Fin with the late Jules Cartwright, one of his closest and most influential climbing partners. High on the wall 'Cartwright's drive refused to allow him to accept the obvious and our blind faith in Cartwright refused to allow him to leave'.

Indeed, well-proofed and fact-checked, matching the high standard we are coming to expect from Vertebrate Publishing, the chapters read in isolation afford a brilliant juxtaposition of the rigours of prison work and hard winter alpinism or expedition climbing. However, bundled together there is a feeling of repetition that might have been improved by tighter editing.

The book ends in 2003 with his sensational new line on Jirishanca's fluted South East Face and his subsequent return home to eschew 'comfortable', a.k.a. the death of uncertainty. He hands in his notice to start a life on the road, and as we now know, a stack of material for a potential *Echoes II*. Keep climbing Nick, and continue to keep us enthralled with your tales, always delivered in that inimitable style.

Lindsay Griffin