

PROFESSOR FALLS

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It was a stolen climb: that Friday late in March should have seen me in my study writing, or at the university talking to students, preparing a lecture or marking. Instead I was in the Rockies revelling in that most esoteric branch of mountaineering-climbing frozen waterfalls. The decision had been easy to make; for it is almost sacrilegious for a mountaineer to be so close to the Rockies and not to climb. Having supervised my students teachers in the East Kootenays I pointed the rent-a-car in an easterly direction and headed for Banff. Arrangements for a climb were quickly made over a leisurely dinner with an old friend. Not being able to climb with me himself, Greg suggested that Tim partner me on the appropriately named 'Professor Falls'. Making a quick phone call, Greg confirmed Tim's participation, suggested that we leave early the next morning, and use Tim's car and my rope; little more needed to be said. I nodded my head in agreement and returned to the wine.

Apart from perhaps the Highlands of Scotland, the Canadian Rockies contain the finest collection of ice climbs in the world. As a sport, ice climbing began in Scotland at the turn of the century, but for more than sixty years it remained the preserve of a select number of hardened enthusiasts. The mysteries of winter ice climbing was appreciated by only a small group of masochists, who delighted in cold, danger and general discomfort. Recent technical innovations which allow difficult and serious climbs to be done comparatively safely, have encouraged more people to participate in winter ice climbing, and have led to a redefinition of what is possible to do on ice. Equipped with crampons and short ice axes with drooped picks the modern ice climber is able to move upwards much in the same way as a rock climber ascends a rock face. As a result, ice climbing objectives have changed: early ascents focussed on gullies and easy angled slopes between mountains or buttresses, but with improved techniques and increased competition the ice climber has ventured onto steeper ground, onto iced-up rock climbs, and increasingly onto frozen waterfalls. It is the existence of so many waterfalls that gives the Canadian Rockies its pre-eminence for the ice climber. In the summer the tourist in the Rockies delights at the beauty of its cascading and sparkling waterfalls, but in the winter with their incandescence frozen the waterfalls provide more intimate pleasures for those who revel in climbing the ice.

Not all ice climbs are the same: steepness, length, quality and seriousness are the criteria that differentiate one frozen waterfall from the other. Our chosen climb, one of the classic ice climbs in the Rockies, was 'Professor Falls'. It is graded 4 and although the climb contains many steep sections they are not unduly long and the climbing in general is comparatively safe. 'Professor Falls' lies in a narrow gully, and the climb rises in a series of six tiers with four of these sections being at least 80 degrees steep and over 35m high. The climb faces north which means that it is in the shade and therefore

cold throughout the day, a definite advantage on the longer, warmer March days. Also, the climb is not threatened by avalanches, which considerably lessens the seriousness of the ascent. Only a few weeks prior to our climb John Lauchlan, a member of the Canadian Everest team was killed, having been avalanched down 'Polar Circus' a long, difficult and dangerous ice climb situated above the Banff-Jasper highway.

As we had packed our rucksacks the previous evening, it did not take Tim and me long to finish breakfast, jump into the car and set off for the climb. 'Professor Falls' is situated close to Banff on the north side of Mt. Rundle above the Bow River and access therefore is comparatively easy. We were soon established at the base of the climb, and the ritual of sorting gear, uncoiling the rope, adjusting clothing and strapping on crampons began. As we looked up at the gully from the river the ice appeared very steep, an impression not belied on closer acquaintance. Tim volunteered me to lead the first pitch, and as I could not think of a reasonable excuse I agreed, but meekly, being very conscious of the vertical icicle rearing up in front of me. Tim quickly pounded a couple of ice screws into the base of the icicle, tied himself to them, and handed me the end of the rope. I tied into the rope, checked the equipment slung around my body, grabbed my axes and walked to the base of the climb. Taking a last look at Tim I swung my axe into the ice, it entered with a reassuring thud and the placement of the other axe was equally good. My crampons bit well into the ice and with my heels level, I extracted the axes and placed them higher. Gradually the movements became more fluid, I began to relax and enjoy the methodical and disciplined actions that took me farther and farther away from the ground. The ice was in good condition, neither too hard nor too soft: when it is hard (as often is in the extreme cold of the Rockies), the ice tends to shatter when hit with the axe, with chunks inevitably hitting you or your partner; when the ice is too soft the placements feel insecure and there is danger of the ice detaching itself from the rock. That day however the ice was receptive; as I climbed higher my initial clumsiness disappeared, and I moved into an economical rhythm. After fifty feet I reached an easier angled section. Here I stopped to place a screw, and with it securely fastened I proceeded with more confidence over an awkward little bulge to a steeper section that led abruptly to a large shelf, below another very steep pitch. I clambered across to the base of the pillar inserted two screws, pulled up the slack rope and when I felt Tim tight on the other end shouted for him to follow.

As I took in the rope I gazed at the landscape around me, conscious for the first time of my surroundings. Below me the Bow River was meandering gently, sparkling in the sun, its dark translucence contrasted with the snow and ice layered on its banks. Above the river, and beyond the road, a series of other ice climbs glistened, refracting and reflecting the intensity of the sun now well risen above Mt Rundle.

Further north, the peaks of the Rockies stood out starkly against an increasingly azure sky. What a great day! Stolen days usually are I thought; but my reverie was soon broken by Tim calling for me to take in the rope, and soon joined me on the shelf. It was now Tim's turn to lead, he took the spare

gear from me and was soon embroiled on the second pitch. He was climbing well, but with no obvious resting place was forced to hang off his axe in order to place a screw in the middle of the pitch. Soon he was up and I, with my rhythm now well established, quickly joined him on another large ledge. And so the climb continued with steep pitches interspersed by large terraces, with us alternating the lead for a further four pitches, and soon we were at the top.

We were pleased with the efficiency and speed of our ascent, and remarked that too few climbs are so trouble free. It is reassuring to occasionally do a climb competently for it reminds us that climbing does not always have to be a desperate struggle! The ease of our ascent also allowed us to appreciate some the aesthetic qualities and intellectual demands that climbing involves, but that are often underestimated. The clean stark lines of the climb, the beauty of its setting the contrast between the steep unrelenting ice pitches and the broad terraces, the precise technique that ice climbing demands, the niceties of judgements that the climber has to make as regards strength, commitment and experiences, the contrast between the concentration required whilst climbing and the euphoria that characterises the end of the climb, were all very evident to us that day.

The descent involved clambering down the side of the climb, and included a number of roped descents off conveniently located trees. After a couple of wrong starts we safely reached the bottom, collected our rucksacks and despite having to perform first aid on Tim's car still managed to make the pub by mid afternoon. That evening, on the plane back to Vancouver, I reflected on the day and the climb. Although I have done many similar climbs before, and anticipate doing many more in the future, that one was special. It was special because it occurred out of context-a stolen climb taken from a busy schedule of travelling, lecturing and writing. As such it added texture and counterpoint to a seemingly frantic urban existence. It is moments like these that we must continue to steal, and to treasure.