



THE CONSCIENCE OF CLIMBING: KEN WILSON

By Bernard Newman

Few people have shaped the way we see the world of rock climbing and mountaineering more than Ken Wilson. From his editorship of Mountain magazine – the cool, clear design of which is reflected to this day in magazines such as Alpinist – to the publication of such iconic works as Hard Rock and Extreme Rock, Wilson has been the lens through which a generation of climbers view their sport. Here Bernard Newman explains why the redoubtable Ken has been made an Honorary Member of The Climbers' Club.

I must admit it came as something of a surprise to learn that Ken Wilson was not an Honorary Member of the Club.

Perhaps I should pay more attention to the Handbook.

Given the criterion for Hon Membership, 'eminent service to the objectives of the Club' and the broader remit of service to climbing in general, Ken qualifies in spades. Ken joined the Club back in the mid-Sixties and was immediately making his presence felt (quelle surprise). Besides helping kick-start guidebook production and distribution, establishing the link with fellow CC member Ken Vickers's Cordee for example, he was keen to implement another major change in the Club, and he was to do it by changing just one word in the constitution.

The club Ken joined was an all-male setup, a concept difficult to grasp in this day and age, but by no means unheard-of back in the Swinging Sixties. Ken and his friend Brian Crofts proposed that the word 'gentlemen' be changed to 'persons' in the section on eligibility in the Rules. The membership present at that AGM, presided over by John Hunt, naturally thought the change was to dispense with outmoded wording, but Ken explained, honourably, that it meant women would be allowed to join the Club. It was voted out. It took several years, several AGMs and Ken's resignation (with others' including Martin Boysen and Ed Drummond) to get it passed, ironically during the Presidency of Hamish Nicol, a dedicated androcrat, in the early 1970s. In my mind, forcing that through alone would have qualified him for beatification, but Ken's subsequent CV is awesome. Let's take a peek at just some of his contributions to the wider climbing world: he has served on management committees of the BMC, Mount Everest Foundation, Plas y Brenin as well as CC area committees for London and Lancashire/Cheshire. He was instrumental, with Alan Blackshaw, in moving the BMC headquarters from central London to Manchester, even finding its first premises on the University precinct.

To the climbing world at large, outwith the corridors of power, Ken is perhaps best known for his publishing efforts. Ken

transformed the climbing magazine world in 1969 with the publication of his brainchild Mountain, which rapidly became the world's most important conduit for climbing information. Gone were the stuffy, cramped journals that hadn't moved on since Victorian times, and in came the glossy, visually stunning, and supremely readable spreads of Ken's vision. Mountain was a crucible for top quality writing, photography and rigorously accurate information gathering, all powered by Ken's unrelenting attention to detail combined with peerless photo-editing. It's often quipped that you haven't climbed a peak in Nepal unless Liz Hawley says you have, well it was Ken you had to get past in those days, after a thorough grilling to provide a 'plausible scenario' for your claims.

In the 1970s Ken branched out into book publishing setting up Diadem, and a string of 'iconic' titles followed including: Hard Rock, Classic Rock, Extreme Rock, Cold Climbs, Big Walks and Wild Walks. These titles are still hugely relevant today: the climbs are still there, they haven't changed, they're still just as hard, classic, extreme and cold! The inestimable benefit for the climbing world is that here was a publisher who was (and still is) a climber, who knew the game better than most and was not prone to the ignorant excesses of the 'civilian' publishing world when it came to representing our sport. He'll go to whatever lengths required to produce the best results. Back in the late Sixties he was working on a proposed book on Everest with Doug Scott, and he knew the Royal Geographical Society had a large archive of valuable negatives from early expeditions which they understandably wouldn't allow off the premises. Ken worked round this in typical fashion by building a darkroom, complete with blackout and large plate enlarger bolted to the wall, in the ornate Victorian gents toilet!

In the flesh, Ken often comes over as totally uncompromising: uncompromising regarding ethics and style, uncompromisingly loyal as a friend. On the crag, Ken is the best of companions, boundlessly enthusiastic, supremely competent and hugely encouraging.



However, to say that he doesn't suffer fools gladly would be an understatement of galactic proportions. He is a consummate pricker of balloons: the more inflated the ego, the more catastrophic the encounter. It's this refusal to compromise that's earned him the well-deserved title of 'The Conscience of British Climbing'. He won't conscience bolt in any form, and fearlessly confronts those who bend ethics to suit themselves and their self-promotion. The whole rationale of Trad climbing and first ascents relies on honesty and the rigorous, relentless pursuit of the clean ethic. At the slightest warping of these ideals, Ken will cry out in their defence, often putting us all to shame and forcing us to contemplate our own motives and performance in the process. Ken's other *bête noire* is self-aggrandisement and it's difficult to prise any information out of him, and no doubt this piece will be condemned by him as 'pissing in his pocket', his phrase for both fulsome praise and flannel. Indeed on reading this he'll probably blow a resounding raspberry! But I make no apologies – Ken is a climbing folk hero and deservedly so. Congratulations Ken, on your elevation to Honorary Member! ●