

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Before I took up photography professionally I used the camera to record and remember my rock climbing and mountaineering adventures. I remember one day in the hills in particular; but in a bittersweet way.

The mist had descended as we reached the Heather Terrace on Tryfan, the Snowdonia peak with the most distinctive cockscomb profile. It was used as a training ground by the successful British Everest expedition just 10 years before. As the rock was greasy we decided to climb Pinnacle Rib, a route the three of us were familiar with, and not too difficult in such damp conditions.

When we reached the tricky Yellow Slab section we found it covered by a thin film of ice. Although it was winter, we were surprised by the sudden plunge in temperature. So, stilled roped together, we moved to easier ground where we came across two other climbers. I recognised that one of them was Brede Doyle (later Arkless), a wonderful Irish mountaineer with russet cheeks and short dark curly hair. She worked as an instructor and went on later to lead several successful female expeditions. I knew her when I too worked as a climbing instructor in North Wales in 1962. That year I had taken a break from my job as a newspaper reporter to pursue my climbing ambitions.

We joined up and negotiated our way to the summit through the low cloud and freezing mist into bright sunshine. Suddenly we were looking down on the clouds that resembled a white duvet extending as far as the eye could see. A few peaks broke through the cloud cover like sharks' fins. And then something remarkable happened. A dark, almost circular form loomed out of the clouds. In the centre was a crucifix-like shape that was surrounded bands of colour. It seemed to be 50 to 100 yards away.

‘It’s a glockenspiel!’ I cried.

‘Wrong. It’s a Brocken Spectre,’ said Colin, the oldest member of our trio who, we were sure, had read every book on mountaineering published in English. I had also read about this rare phenomenon, even though I got the name wrong. The low sun behind had cast a hugely magnified shadow of us onto/into the clouds. The halo of colours is caused by the diffraction of the sun’s rays by the clouds and it is startlingly beautiful. I reached for my Kodak Retinette camera, but as I was removing the front of its ever-ready leather case the ghostly spectre disappeared. Bugger! I had missed photographing what was almost certainly a once-in-a-lifetime moment. Since that day I have only met two other people who have seen one.

Ever since, I have been fascinated by the emotive and metaphoric potential of shadows and they have frequently featured in my work, particularly in the 1970s - as have high vantage points. I have perched on ledges and vertical walls to make the most of the fascinating spatial ambiguities and "mark-making" possibilities offered by those elevated positions.

We had our sandwiches and coffee as the mist enveloped our two parties again. We descended into the Ogwen Valley down an easy path, but I couldn’t forget the spectre and that I had failed to photograph it. As I rather glibly tell my students: ‘Nothing exists unless it is photographed’. Unusually for me, I hadn’t photographed anything else that day - including the delightful Brede, who I sadly never saw again. I only

found out recently that she later married in the same year that I married my wife, Angela; that she raised eight children, and that she passed away four months before Angela died. They had both succumbed to cancer and were 66 years old.