

THE AMERICAN ALPINE JOURNAL 2018

# AAJ

THE WORLD'S MOST SIGNIFICANT LONG CLIMBS



## KING LINE

THE SOUTHWEST FACE OF MONARCH IN THE COAST MOUNTAINS

BY SIMON RICHARDSON

HOW A SCOTTISH-GERMAN climbing team came to know about one of the finest unclimbed features in western Canada requires some explanation. My fascination with Monarch Mountain (3,555m), the second-highest massif in the Coast Mountains, began 20 years ago when Dave Hesleden and I traversed the Serra Group in the Waddington Range. As we tussled with the jagged crest, Monarch stood out like a sentinel 70 miles to the north. With a prominence of 2,925m, there is no higher peak until you reach Mt. Fairweather, a thousand miles up the spine of the coastal range. I was smitten by Monarch's dominance and resolved to climb it.

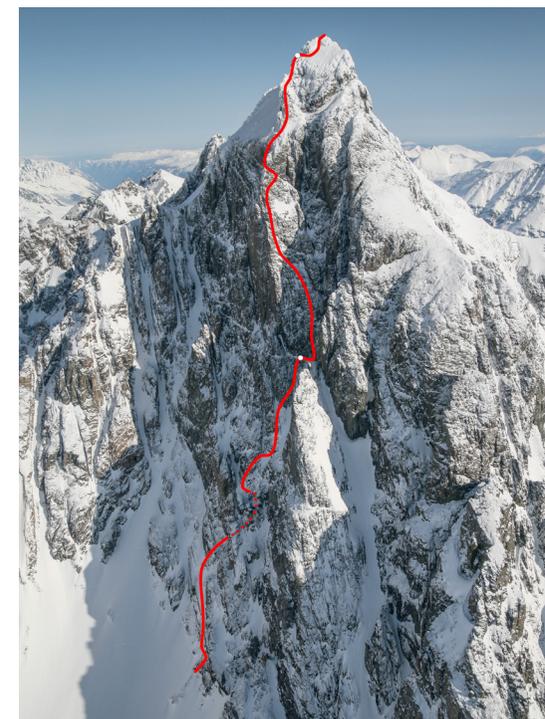
The Coast Mountains had got under my skin, and I made two further trips to the Waddington massif, a couple to the Pantheon Spires, and one to the difficult-to-access Mt. Gilbert to the south. During this time I became friendly with Don Serl, who had made five visits to Monarch, culminating in the first ascent of the stupendous pinnacled north ridge in July 2000 with Bill Durtler and Bruce Fairley. This was the fourth route on the mountain, and it seemed unlikely that Monarch would yield any further major lines. [*Monarch was first climbed in 1936, by the east ridge, by Hans Fuhrer and Henry S. Hall Jr.*]

In April 2007, mountain photographer John Scurlock set off from Seattle in his home-built airplane, bound for the Monarch Icefield. During a circumnavigation of the mountain, he photographed the rarely seen southwest face with its compelling central spur. This unclimbed 1,250m line prompted awe and excitement in equal measure—a veritable Walker Spur leading directly to the summit. John published his photos on the Internet, where Don and I saw them. We considered making an attempt on the stunning feature, but our expedition failed to materialize. Don later made plans without me, but these also fell by the wayside. Other teams considered the route, but nobody made a serious attempt. Later, Don retired from climbing and one of the unclimbed jewels of the Coast Mountains lay almost forgotten and untouched.

My interest in Monarch was rekindled when Micha Rinn and I climbed a 1,600m new route on the south side of the Grandes Jorasses, in July 2016. The Diamond Ridge was a logical and proud line, never very difficult but long and committing. We were looking for a similar objective for 2017, and I suggested Monarch.

On July 28, we helicoptered to the col between Monarch Mountain and Page Mountain at the head of the Empire Way Glacier. Two days later, we warmed up by climbing Peak 2,625m from the north and then descending the south ridge to the col separating the Empire Way Glacier from the Monarch Icefield. There was a cairn on top, and we presume the peak had been ascended by the rocky south ridge from the col. On August 1 we climbed the Broda-Dudra route on the west face of Monarch, a substantial climb on rock, mixed, and snow. This was the second route up the mountain, climbed in 1953, and had only seen a handful of repeats. It provided an interesting and somewhat demanding mountaineering route (D) and would be our descent route if we were successful on the southwest spur.

After a reconnaissance, we started up the southwest face at 6 a.m. on August 4. Our ascent was delayed by high winds and low cloud, and for the first time on the trip the air was full of smoke and ash from the forest fires raging that summer



[Top] Micha Rinn traversing the summit ridge of Monarch Mountain after climbing Game of Thrones on the southwest face. The Waddington group is visible in the distance. *Simon Richardson* [Above] Route line for Game of Thrones (1,250m, ED2 5.10a) on the southwest face of Monarch Mountain. *John Scurlock*



Micha Rinn on day two of *Game of Thrones*, the first ascent of the southwest face of Monarch Mountain. The compact, metamorphic rock was difficult to protect. *Simon Richardson*

At the top of the upper pillar the ridge provided easier climbing and we were able to simul-climb for about 200m. We bivouacked for a second time 70m below the summit ridge. Our ledge was cramped and exposed, and it was cold in our thin sleeping bags, but it was one of the finest bivouacs I've ever enjoyed. Below us lay 1,200m of challenging alpine ground, and all we had to do the following morning was to climb a couple of mixed pitches to gain the summit ridge.

We were on the summit early on August 6, enjoying a surreal view of the tops of the surrounding peaks rising above a layer of light gray smoke. The descent of the west face went smoothly, and we arrived back at our tent late that afternoon.

We called our route *Game of Thrones* and graded it ED2 5.10a. As expected, it was similar in difficulty and scale to the Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses, but more serious. We would not have been able to descend from above half-height because the compact rock would have quickly exhausted our rack.

After a day's rest lounging around at base camp we made the first ascent of the Sugarloaf (2,620m) on August 8; this is the highest peak on the pinnacled ridge running north from Peak 2,625m. Although not technically difficult, this proved to be almost a climb too far, as it traversed over six summits and we soon realized we were still very tired after our Monarch ascent. We flew out two days later. 

**SUMMARY:** First ascent of the southwest face of Monarch Mountain by *Game of Thrones* (1,250m, ED2 5.10a), by Simon Richardson (U.K.) and Micha Rinn (Germany), August 4-6, 2017. The two also made the first ascent of the Sugarloaf (Peak 2,620m) and climbed Peak 2,625m from the north.

in British Columbia. We convinced ourselves there was no harm in just "having a look." After an initial loose pitch, the rock improved and we committed ourselves to the ascent. We had seen from the west face that the lower half of the spur is comprised of a series of very steep towers, so, rather than follow the crest, we climbed a more direct line to its left before bivouacking at the foot of the impressive upper spur at half-height on the face.

The climbing had become gradually more difficult during the first day and was particularly challenging on day two as we climbed the crest of the upper spur. Unlike the Waddington Range, which is mainly comprised of excellent granite, Monarch's rock is a metamorphosed volcanic variety. Although this was very solid in the upper half of the route, the rock was compact with few protection possibilities, and the holds sloped downward rather alarmingly. We had numerous long runouts, and at times were worried whether the route would go, but fortunately we were always able to find a climbable line.

## HOMATHKO ICEFIELD, PEAK 9,331' AND OTHER NEW ROUTES

I FIRST LAID eyes upon the beautiful northeast face of Peak 9,331' while walking across the Homathko Icefield in 2016. Upon returning to the frontcountry, I was excited to find that the peak had not been climbed. Later that summer, I asked Fred Giroux if he would be interested in a mostly human-powered mission to the area. We spent the winter planning and training.

On May 15, Fred and I began our epic journey out to the Homathko Icefield. We took a water taxi up Bute Inlet to Homathko Camp, then trekked across the Teaquahan Valley to the Galleon Valley. For four and a half days we slogged through the bush, skied, and were tossed around by our packs until we reached a campsite half a kilometer from Mt. Grenville (10,001'). We hadn't weighed our packs, but we did decide to name them: Fred's was Soul Crusher, and mine was Suffer Sack. We estimated them at around 85 pounds each.

On May 25 we headed to the northwest face of Mt. Grenville. The face had been climbed in September 1991 by Michael Down and Alan Fletcher (on a heli-supported expedition), via a snow slope of about 50°. To the right is a gorgeous steep face of snow, ice, and rock. We ascended a mostly iced-up line on that face to an upper right-trending ramp. After pitching out the crux headwall, we simul-climbed the ridge to the summit. We named our new line (as we did with all the routes on this trip) after a character or place from Gabriel García Márquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: Melquíades (350m, AI4 M4+).

The next day we were up early and descending to the base of the northeast face of Peak 9,331'. We moved quite quickly and climbed this route in 2.5 hours from base to summit, ascending steep snow to a 75° ice step on the west side of the glacier. There was significant overhead hazard on this route, so moving fast was essential. We named our route *Remedios the Beauty* (600m, AI3). On the summit we honored my friend Cory Hall by spreading some of his ashes; Cory passed away in 2014 while climbing in Peru.

After climbing these two fine lines and skiing the north ridge of Mt. Grenville, we decided to head back to the toe of the Bute Glacier and try the north side of Mt. Bute via a potential new line. But with warm temperatures and constant snow movement, we decided instead to ramble our way up the south side of Galleon Peak. We mostly scrambled on dry rock, roping up only for four pitches of fun climbing. We called this route *Macondo* (600m, 5.10). This was possibly the second ascent of Galleon Peak, which was first climbed by Coast Mountain legends John Clarke and Jeff Eppler in September 1988.

With weather moving in, we decided to retreat. After six and a half hours of shwacking, linking the strands of flagging tape that mark the route, we made it back to Homathko Camp on June 1. Our trip was supported by the John Lauchlan Memorial Award.



*Remedios the Beauty* (600m, AI3) on the northeast face of Peak 9,331'. *Max Fisher*

— MAX FISHER, CANADA