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Text by Simon Richardson & Micha Rinn for Canadian Alpine Journal 2018

In August 2017, a British-German pair made the first ascent of the South-West Pillar of Monarch Mountain deep in the Coast Mountains. Simon Richardson explains how the route came to be, and Micha Rinn recounts the story of the ascent.

Simon: Monarch had been on the agenda for a long time – twenty years in fact. I first noticed it on the horizon, when traversing the Serra peaks, after climbing the South-East Ridge of Asperity with Dave Hesleden in 1997. We'd been climbing for four days and were becoming concerned about the weather. We kept throwing furtive looks to the north-west where one mountain stood head and shoulders above the surrounding peaks, ahead of the billowing clouds. Miraculously the weather held and the Coast Mountains delivered one of the finest mountaineering outings of our lives.

On our way back through Vancouver, we met up with Don Serl who explained that the distant summit to the north was Monarch Mountain (3555m). A truly great peak Don explained, but rarely visited and exposed to poorer weather than the Waddington Range. But the seed had been sown. I was attracted by Monarch's isolation and dominance. Geographers call this singularity prominence, but for a mountaineer it was a more basic attraction – it was simply a mountain that had to be climbed.

Monarch exerted a similar pull on the pioneers, and its first ascent by Henry Hall was a tour de force. Hall first attempted the peak in 1931 and made three more visits to the mountain over the next five years, before finally succeeding on the glaciated East Ridge with Hans Fuhrer in July 1936. The second ascent fell to John Dudra and Fips Broda in 1953 when they climbed the West Face. Later Broda described their bold one-day ascent as "a most exhilarating climb – in parts it was quite difficult and quite exposed." These two routes are occasionally repeated, but the third route on the mountain has yet to see a second ascent. In August 1977, Dennis Mullen and Fred Beckey attempted the long South Ridge, but were stopped by a deep notch at one-third height. After a bivouac and some creative abseil tactics to bypass the notch, Mullen carried on alone to the summit.

As it happened, Don also had a thing about Monarch. He was attracted to the long North Ridge, one of the largest structural features of the range. Don made five visits to the mountain before he was successful with Bruce Fairley and Bill Durtler in July 2000. Their three-day ascent, which traversed the North Summit, the highest unclimbed subsidiary peak in the range, was one of the greatest routes of Don's sparkling Coast Range career. It looked like all the major lines had been climbed on this massive four-sided pyramid, but in 2001 Guy Edwards, Vance Culbert and John Millar made the first continuous ski traverse of the Coast Mountains from Vancouver to Skagway. They saw countless peaks during their five-month journey, but Guy wrote afterwards in the American Alpine Journal that the scenic highlight was the view of the south side of Monarch. It was difficult to pick out any details from the grainy black and white photo that accompanied the report, but there was just the hint of a feature running up the South-West Face.

By this time, I had several Coast Mountain trips under my belt and Guy urged me to go climbing with him the following summer. I hesitated, as Guy's ability and energy clearly outstripped mine, but then tragically he and John disappeared on the Devil's Thumb in April 2003. Under any normal circumstances this would have been the end to the story, but in April 2007 mountain photographer John Scurlock made a remarkable flight around Monarch in his home-built airplane. His images revealed the South-West Face in remarkable detail, and in common with his other mountain photos, he published them on his website.



Soon after I received an email from Don Serl. “Hi Simon, have you seen Scurlock’s photos of Monarch? OMG... look at that route up the South-West Face!” I clicked on the link and there it was – the perfect line running up the center of the 1250m-high wall. It was an alpinist’s dream – steep, logical and most importantly, it appeared to be objectively safe.

We resolved to climb it together in the summer of 2008, but life got in the way, and our trip never progressed into the planning stage. Don attempted to pull another team together before retiring from serious climbing, but to no avail. Others showed an enduring interest too. In 2004 for example, Fred Beckey had assembled a strong team on the glacier under the West Face, but the weather was poor and they ended up climbing a new route on Princess Mountain instead.

My interest in Monarch was rekindled in August 2016 when Micha Rinn and I made the first ascent of the 1600m-high Diamond Ridge on the Grandes Jorasses. It was a strong line, never too hard, but notable for being the third time the Tronchey Wall, the largest face in the Mont Blanc range, had ever been climbed. I had spent several years trying to persuade my climbing friends to attempt the route, but they had all graciously declined. Micha’s strong technical skills complemented my wider experience, so when we were looking for a similar objective to climb the following summer, John Scurlock’s images of the South-West Face immediately came to mind. With the ideal partner raring to go, it was a case of now or never.

Micha: It’s June 2017 and the planning has become an adventure in itself. Living in different countries on another continent means the preparation process has become a significant part of the expedition. There is so much to think about in advance. Exchanging ideas and talking with each other becomes all-important, and the urgency and complexity adds a certain spice. We work on detailed gear and food lists and meet on Skype on a regular basis. Everything has to be thought about in advance. Our flight schedules to Anaheim Lake mean that we have no time in Canada to purchase extra equipment or specialist food. Once on the glacier, everything has to be in place – the puzzle needs to fit perfectly together.



Researching the mountain lets us dig deep into the history of Monarch, its mountaineers and the different circumstances behind their ascents. Browsing the web, spending time in the library reading through the Alpine Journals is one thing, but figuring out the current conditions of the face, is another. John Scurlock's photos are excellent, but how will conditions have changed over the intervening ten years? We decide that we will check out the descent by climbing the Dudra-Broda route on the West Face before we venture into the South-West Spur. In addition, we will keep an eye out for alternative routes on the adjacent mountains in case of unpredictable circumstances.

Alongside the planning, we know we have to be in good shape. In July, we both climb in the Mont Blanc Range with different partners to ensure we are properly acclimatized. Simon pioneers a new three-day route on the Aiguille du Chardonnet, while I spend a week training with the new German Female Expedition Team.

Our flight from White Saddle to the Monarch Icefield on 28 July takes 40 minutes. It is my first time approaching a mountain by helicopter, and everything moves very quickly. Helicopter minutes are precious, but as we come into land we make an extra pass by the South-West Face to assess the conditions, before scouting out the glacier for a safe spot to site base camp away from crevasses. Usually, when you approach mountains by foot they gradually come into focus and you have time to put them into perspective and understand the environment. But this is all so sudden. Everything happens so fast that I find it mind blowing.

We are surrounded by high mountains. Monarch doesn't look that big to me at first, but I just don't understand the scale yet. As each hour passes I discover more details, and my respect for the enormity of our environment grows. It takes me a whole day to put everything into context and feel comfortable with where we are. Being a long way from civilization, alone together in this powerful and overwhelming place, feels very daunting. I am impressed by the sheer

size of Monarch, the never-ending North Ridge of Page Mountain, and the enormous extent of the Empire Way Glacier. Every time I think about where I am drives a smile on my face.

The big difference between the Monarch Icefield and the European Alps is the wide empty space and absolute silence. It is quiet, and nobody else is here. Every day we are alone with our thoughts, sharing our common dream to climb this beautiful mountain by a new route. The silence enables an even stronger focus – it is a rare and fantastic feeling.

Simon: Our base camp is situated on the broad col between Monarch and Page Mountain at the head of the Empire Way Glacier. The weather is initially poor, but on 30 July we cross the glacier and make a north-south traverse of P2925m. Our ascent follows a beautiful sinuous snow crest and we descend to the col separating the Empire Way Glacier from the Monarch Icefield. There is a small cairn on the summit and we presume the peak had previously been climbed via the South Ridge from this col.

Two days later we climb Monarch by the Dudra-Broda route on the West Face. It is a long and complex outing, with some exposed climbing on the 'hanging roof icefield' and a difficult mixed pitch leading to the summit ridge. We arrive back at the tent after a 16-hour day. The following afternoon we descend from the col to scope out the South-West Pillar. The view from the West Face across to our proposed line had been rather disheartening as the lower part of the face is comprised of a series of vertical flat-topped towers separated by huge drops, similar to a set of skyscrapers standing in line.

This is the first time we have seen the South-West Face in full view and we study it for a long time. The wall can be divided into three sections. The lower two are defined by pronounced spurs and John Scurlock's photos suggest we can link them with a horizontal traverse. The upper spur is the steeper of the two and the 'raison d'etre' of the route as it leads to the apex of the wall, roughly level with the foot of the hanging roof icefield on the West Face route. Above, the third section follows a lower-angled buttress leading directly to the summit.

We stare at the wall intently for several minutes until suddenly Micha breaks the silence. "Hey Simon, rather than following the crest of the lower spur, it is more direct if we climb up to the foot of the second spur and avoid all the towers." It's a brilliant suggestion. The beauty of Micha's line is that it is protected from stonefall by steep walls above and leads directly to the foot of the upper spur. We watch the face for over an hour and there are no falling rocks despite being in the full heat of the afternoon sun. We name the features: the initial ramp – the hidden snow field – the triangular snow field – the great icefield – all landmarks to guide us up the subtle and complex route.

Micha: When the alarm goes off at 2am the wind is howling and snowflakes are blowing in the air. We soon realize that this is not snow but ash from the forest fires raging in BC. The sky is black with smoke and we cannot see the stars. It feels threatening and ominous so we hesitate. Our weather forecast is out of date, but a satellite message request to my partner Kirsten, who is climbing in Switzerland, brings back a revised outlook that all is set fair for the next two days. We decide there is nothing to be lost by going to 'have a look' and at 6am we cross the bergschrund and start up the face.

Just after midday, as we reach the landmark of the triangular snow field, we realize that we are now at the point of no return. A retreat from here will use up all our rock gear, which means that there is only one way back to our tent. And this way leads over the summit of Monarch. There is no discussion about going down – we continue climbing – and soon we are fully committed.





Simon: By early evening we are alongside the great icefield and at the foot of the upper spur. The climbing has become progressively more difficult through the afternoon. The volcanic rock is solid, but the holds slope downwards and the cracks are flared which makes protection difficult to place. The upper spur is undercut at its base and we can't find a way through. We try a couple of different options with no success, and as a last resort we downclimb a fault to the right to where it fades. The overhang is smaller here and we manage to pull through and fix a rope for the morning.

Next day we slowly pick our way up the upper spur. The climbing is steep and sometimes run out, and often when we think our options are closing down a single passage allows progress. Finally after 18 pitches of tense and absorbing climbing we emerge at the top of the upper spur where the angle abruptly eases. We move easily up broken ground to the upper buttress that leads to an exposed bivouac site above a huge drop overlooking the West Face.

Micha: The night is cold, and our bivouac small and cramped but we are excited because we know that just a couple of mixed pitches separate us from the summit ridge. We alternately doze off and watch the stars.

We reach the summit of Monarch early in the morning of 6 August. It is an overwhelming moment. All our preparation and dreams have led to this single point in time and sharing it with the best partner I can think of makes it an even richer experience. All along the way we have given each other our trust and provided confidence and motivation. There is a lot of energy and happiness in the air. I don't realize it at the time, but in retrospect, this moment – on top of Monarch Mountain – is something I have been seeking all my mountaineering life.

It's not clear when you start a lifetime of climbing exactly why you do it. You like the mountains, you like the people and you like the excitement of it all. But there is something more and making a first ascent suddenly puts everything into a new context. You need to study the mountain to understand how it behaves, but more importantly you have to nurture your climbing partnership so the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. Monarch took huge effort and teamwork and after so much uncertainty, suddenly we were on top. The summit is where it all came together – the final piece of the piece of the puzzle.

Simon: The weather is perfect and the view from the summit is breathtaking. To the south-east, Waddington stands out as a brilliant white wedge floating above a sea of pale grey smoke, and to the north lie the intriguing summits of the Monarch Icefield. It is tempting to linger, but instead we carefully descend the West Face and reach base camp later that afternoon.

Two days later we cross the Empire Way Glacier for a second time to traverse the long ridge running north from P2925m. We cross five summits and abseil a deep notch to reach the Sugarloaf (2620m) the highest summit in the chain. As far as we know this shapely curved tower is unclimbed. We stand back and proudly admire Monarch towering high above us. Our adventure is finally complete.

Summary:

Monarch Mountain, 3572m: *Game of Thrones*, ED2, 5.10a, 1540m climbing distance, 1250m vertical elevation, 32 pitches + 400m moving together, 4–6 August 2017

Monarch Mountain, 3572m: *West Face*, D+, 5.10a, up to 42°, 1500m climbing distance, 1100m vertical elevation, 1 August 2017

The Sugarloaf, 2600m: PD+, 5.3, 1400m climbing distance, 8 August 2017

Page Mountain Extender, 2625m: North-South Traverse, PD, 5.4, 1000m climbing distance, 30 July 2017