

THE IRISH SOLUTION TO THE BEN LOMOND PROBLEM

I recently spent a week at Fairhead in Northern Ireland, a cliff reminiscent of Africa on Ben Lomond. What impressed me was the strict adherence to traditional ethics, even to the method of descent. Said by many to be the best cliff in the UK, there is not a single bolt on the crag, including no bolted rap stations. At Fairhead, they walk to the top, rap in and climb out. Standard kit accepted by all, is to bring a 100m static rope to access the climbs. There are only two descent gullies at the crag, and both are wet, inconvenient and miles apart. Anchors are built by looping boulders well back from the cliff edge backed up by a nut or cam. Climbers are more than happy to share abseil ropes.



I believe the traditional climbing experience should be a self-sufficient one, leaving the cliff as you found it with no trace, and embracing both the climb, access and descent. It was refreshing to see this policy willingly accepted by all climbers. I would like to see this same attitude adopted by the Tasmanian climbing community at Ben Lomond.

For many years Ben Lomond was bolt free until some rap stations were installed by a well-meaning friend of mine, to facilitate a safe and speedy descent allowing more time for climbing, and also to save environmental damage in the gully. I removed the bolts in 2008 in the interests of keeping the mountain bolt free, to preserve one last bastion of pure traditional climbing in Australia. Begrudgingly accepted, the bolts have not returned but have been replaced by heaps of tat and recently chains have appeared to replace the ugly tat. Climbers are unwilling to summit the crag due to some loose rock, and to avoid the gully descent.

At Fairhead, I saw the solution to the Ben Lomond problem; walk to the top, rap in and climb out. I have already been doing this at the Ben for years, but at Fairhead it struck me that the whole climbing community has embraced this traditional practice without question, and happily carry 100m statics to the cliff top. I rarely approach the Flutes via the scree these days, but simply walk to the top via the summit track and the plateau, then abseil from natural anchors to access the climbs. It takes 45 minutes, not much longer than the scree..is a relatively flat and easy walk, provides quick access to the climbs, spares the gully from damage and then an easy downhill walk to the car. It just means carrying a 100m static to the top, something Fairhead climbers are conditioned to doing on the 20 minute approach to their crag. This approach could be adopted to access all the buttresses on the Flutes including 35mm Dream, plus the Cuchulain and Laendler area.



If the tat and chain persists, sooner or later someone will replace them with bolts, and the slippery slope to wholesale bolting begins. Though I may appear hypocritical on this issue, being one of the most prolific bolters in the state, I believe that it is the context of bolting which is relevant. Certain crags are ok to bolt such as Hillwood, which would be very limited as a venue without bolts. But Ben Lomond is a special case in my opinion, being in a national park for a start, but also predominantly cracks and a traditional ethic for almost 50 years which has been maintained, and we still have a clean slate in a magnificent natural alpine environment.

There is unlimited potential for new routes on Ben Lomond, especially bold face climbs. People can push the boundaries of their trad climbing ability and have awesome mountain adventures. Ben Lomond is one of the last places left in Australia where a pure trad experience is still available, without the ambiguity or grey areas which bolting of any kind introduces.

Can we please have one last cliff in Australia with a pure traditional ethic. There is something marvelous and rewarding about being totally self-reliant in the mountains, accepting nature's challenge and leaving the cliff as you found it.

