

## BOOK REVIEWS

**“Running High” by Hugh Symonds; Hayloft Publishing; £16.99p.**

**“Feet in the Clouds” by Richard Askwith; Aurum Press; £16.99p.**

Our sport being the minority interest it is we don't have the literary traditions of a sport such as mountaineering and therefore books about fell-running are not exactly thick on the ground; however for this edition of the magazine I was fortunate enough to be offered not one but two books to review and, although they are very different works indeed, I enjoyed both of them, perhaps all the more for the contrasts in their viewpoints and styles - it might be an idea to persuade someone to dig deep and treat you to both of them for your birthday !!

### “Running High”

In 1990 Hugh Symonds completed an amazing run, the continuous traverse on foot, including the distances between them, of all the 3,000 foot peaks in Great Britain. Having achieved this in the staggeringly short time of eighty-three days, when his target had been a hundred, he decided to add the Irish tops to the list and still finished in ninety-seven days, raising a considerable sum of money for Intermediate Technology along the way. His account of this epic was first published in 1991 but, because of commercial complications, getting hold of a copy of the book was like finding snow in August. However, he was persuaded by Hayloft Publishing that, despite the passage of time, his work was worth re-printing and so, with a few of the appendices updated, it has duly re-appeared.

So much for the basic facts about the book but the feature that makes it such a gripping read is that it is far, far from being a straightforward blow-by-blow recounting of the course of those ninety-seven days - it is instead, whether Hugh intended it or not, a fascinating look into the psychology of an athlete at the height of his powers driving himself with awesome single-mindedness deeper and deeper into the challenge he has set himself. For those people interested in the motivation behind those people who are capable of pushing themselves way beyond normal limits it makes a riveting read.

I have here a confession to make - I started the book with serious misgivings because it appeared from the Contents page and the initial map that this was to be another book about the Munros and I have never been able to summon the slightest enthusiasm for Munro-bagging, not because I don't like Scotland, quite the contrary, but because so many of the Munros are shapeless, fairly uninteresting lumps which happen to be over 3,000' and there seem so many better mountains on which to spend all-too-infrequent trips north. However, not only did I soon discover that Hugh himself tended to share this view of certain mountains but that, strangely enough, the details of the mountains, although skilfully and evocatively described, occupied a surprisingly small percentage of the book; they were but a part of the elements against which Hugh had set himself, together with weather, distance, logistics and the fundamental issues of fitness, injury, nutrition and fatigue.

To overcome all these required the development of a singleness of purpose which necessitated the exclusion of nearly all other considerations and it is the depiction of this development from the first steps up Ben Hope to the realisation that he has the reserves and the fitness and the stamina to complete the task if only he can shut everything else out which gives the book its fascination.

The contrasts between Hugh's accounts and the entries from his wife Pauline's diary serve to accentuate this increasing fixation all the more. She devotedly spent the time while Hugh was on the hills in driving their campervan all over Scotland to pre-arranged meeting points, looking after and educating their three young children (I wonder how they recall the experience fourteen years on ?) dealing with an incessantly demanding pile of dirty clothing and ensuring that when Hugh returned that he had the food, rest and moral support needed to enable him to carry on. It must have been a monumental task in itself and was at times obviously very wearing but all the time I was reading her busy, people-inhabited entries I was aware of the solitary figure outside them driving himself on through the frequently dreadful conditions towards his self-imposed goal.

It is the same with the other characters who feature in the book - a veritable “who's who” of the fell-running world appear in a variety of essential supporting roles, either on the hills or otherwise, and while I am sure that Hugh fully appreciated and acknowledged their contributions and has an affable and friendly relationship with them they do not appear as fully-drawn characters in their own right. It is as though the task in hand demanded a cold-eyed appraisal of all the factors contained within it, each bit to fulfil its own function - food, sleep, clothing, companions, etc. - nothing to be overlooked but nothing to be over-emphasised.

If this implies that there is a coldness to the book it is not so; the degree of passion and commitment Hugh devoted to his project is very evident but to make the project succeed demanded that this be controlled and organised to an extreme extent and, had he not been able to achieve this control, it is clear that he felt he would not have performed as he did.

It is very much a book about a single obsession and a tracing of the development of the single-minded qualities needed to bring that obsession to a satisfactory conclusion. This particular obsession finds its expression through fell-running and hence the book will have appeal to readers of this magazine, after all at one time or another most of us have visions of ourselves battling against insuperable odds, but it could have been set in any field of endeavour because it is about the man behind the deeds rather than about the deeds themselves and therefore, apart from the fact that no-one else has even had the temerity to try to repeat the exploit, it doesn't matter at all that the run took place fourteen years ago, he could have done it last week and it wouldn't have made any difference to the immediacy of the atmosphere of the book.

Try it and see - I found it fascinating.

### **“Feet in the Clouds”**

This book is one of the most effervescent books about anything - never mind fell-running - that I have ever read. It is an explosion of enthusiasm about the sport which whips along in a most compelling fashion indeed and, once started, proves very difficult to put down.

The author has a distinguished background in journalism and there is very much of that background evident in the pacy, direct style of the writing and in its range, which can switch its tone from tongue-in-cheek exaggeration to considered discussion and evaluation to straightforward vivid and effective description in as many pages. He is a self confessed “middle-class southern softie” (although that definition needs to be taken with a sizeable pinch of salt once you have penetrated a little way into the book) who came to fell-running in his early thirties and found it very nearly the answer to the great questions about The World, The Universe and Everything; as a result he has obviously steeped himself in the history, traditions and personalities of the sport and has researched all his material most assiduously to produce a work which is at once both stimulating and informative.

The book is ostensibly built along two main chronological strands, the first one being “Scenes from a fell-running year”, which traces and comments on the monthly events in the fell-running calendar of 2003 and the second one being the author’s various attempts (ultimately successful) on the Bob Graham Round. Both of these are in themselves most readable, perceptive and revealing but their progress is, however, interrupted by a series of chapters dealing with a range of issues as diverse and interesting as you could wish for. There are chapters on the legendary personalities, living and deceased, of our sport, out of which appear genuine, complex characters vibrant and skilfully and sympathetically delineated; there are chapters on the history of the sport which open up the amateur/professional issues in a very lively fashion; there are chapters on what he sees as our traditions; there are chapters on the place of Clubs in the sport; chapters on ethical issues such as risk, responsibility, risk assessment and the role of the FRA; chapters on significant races; chapters on two-day events, long distance challenges and so on and so forth.

The book is a very rich and tasty stew with an amazing number of very piquant ingredients spiced with not a little controversy here and there and what forms its base is the sheer quality of the writing coupled with the constant sense of freshness and enthusiasm. It bubbles with details, quotes, references, personal reminiscences and anecdotes, none of them gratuitous but all there to serve the purpose of the particular section. The amount of interviewing, letter-writing, phone calling, reading and other research which Richard must have undertaken to produce work of such detail must have been quite staggering but the feeling and humanity are never obscured by this detail, only enhanced by it and the book never becomes a mere recitation of fact - facts are used to justify description, spark opinion or add richness to an anecdote but they are clearly not there just for their own sake.

Whatever the author’s reservations about his qualifications in the sport this is undoubtedly a singularly knowledgeable and informative book written by someone who knows and appreciates what fell-running is all about and feels a burning need to communicate that knowledge both within and outside the ranks of the converted - it has a sense of concern and a sense of fun in equal measure and carries a feeling of sponaneity which no doubt took a lot of craft to create but which is no less genuine for that.

If I were you, I’d read it - you’ll end up learning a lot more about our sport than you thought and you’ll enjoy yourself immensely while you’re doing it !! And as a special treat the publishers are offering the book at a discounted rate to readers of “The Fellrunner” - £14-99p (including postage and packing !!) - just ring 01903 828503 and quote reference AUR151.

Dave Jones.