

The Sunday Times
April 6, 2003

Mountain tension: How two British mountaineers faced disaster but lived to tell the tale

One mountaineer sent his friend to certain death to save his own life. Amazingly, both lived to tell the tale. But 18 years on, there is still an emotional void to conquer. Report by Peter Gillman

Simon Yates was on the move again. The familiar jumble of climbing paraphernalia - pitons, carabiners, ice-axes, down clothing - was piled in his spare bedroom in Penrith as he prepared for the three-leg, 27-hour flight to southern Chile in two days time. After a stopover in the frontier town of Ushuaia, he and his three companions would sail through the Beagle Channel to reach the Cordillera Darwin on Tierra del Fuego, for Yates one of the most remote and romantic places on the planet: 'It's a wilderness of beech forests, mountains, glaciers tumbling into the ocean.' They aimed to make the third ascent of Monte Francis, first climbed by the British adventurer Eric Shipton in 1963. 'We'll be climbing a long snow ridge. It's not technically difficult but it's serious because it's so remote. The weather can be appalling and if anything goes wrong there's not much chance of a rescue.'

Across in Sheffield, Joe Simpson had been digging a pond. He embarked on the project in October, having decided to add it to the miniature mountain brook he had installed in his garden the year before. The project was still incomplete. The pond was a disconcerting grey and, although some goldfish could be glimpsed through the murk, Simpson was intending to pour in a purifying agent to clear the water. 'It's called a colloidal flocculent,' he explained. 'You pour it into the pond and it binds with the debris which is in suspension in the water and falls to the bottom.'

Simpson confessed that his new-found interest in water engineering was displacement activity, an alternative to the novel he was meant to have started, oh, at least three months ago. He said he had been mentally sketching an outline while digging, but conceded it would take a contract and a deadline to get him started, and he has now asked his agent to obtain one for him. 'Once I know I have to do something contractually by a certain date,' he insisted, 'I do it.'

Eighteen years ago, Simpson, then 25, and Yates, 21, were cast together in one of the defining moments of mountaineering narrative. In May 1985 they had just made the first ascent of the daunting 4,500ft west face of Siula Grande in the Peruvian Andes and had barely started their descent when Simpson fell and shattered his right knee. Yates embarked on the herculean task of single-handedly lowering him down the face, rope length by rope length. Exhausted, out of food and drink, they were nearing the foot of the face when Yates found that Simpson, dangling unseen somewhere below him, was dragging him from his tenuous footing in the snow. Convinced that

he and Simpson were about to die, Yates cut the rope, saving himself but sending Simpson plunging, so Yates believed, to his death in a crevasse.

After briefly searching the crevasse, Yates reached the expedition's base camp that evening. Three days later, just as he was packing up to leave, Yates heard a wild howling from above the camp. It was Simpson, who had miraculously survived the fall into the crevasse by landing on a narrow snow bridge some 15ft down. He managed to drag himself out and then, in constant agony from his knee, crawled seven miles across ice and rocks until Yates finally heard his cries for help.

Touching the Void, Simpson's account of how he rose from the dead, is now acclaimed as one of the epic texts of mountaineering. It won the Boardman Tasker prize, the top accolade of mountain writing, followed by the lucrative NCR nonfiction award, and has sold 1m copies. To an extent, it has also defined the lives of the two protagonists. For Simpson it set a standard he has felt compelled to emulate. As sales mounted, he says, 'Its increasing success made it harder to write. I felt intimidated by the thought that I could just be a one-book wonder.' Even now he wonders if he is an impostor. 'I never meant to be a writer, I meant to be a climber - that's generally how I see myself.' He still feels disconcerted that he should be sharing a literary platform with the likes of Ian McEwan and Ben Okri. 'I feel very weird and uncomfortable.'

Simpson is also in thrall to Touching the Void in other ways. It is not just that his climbing injuries mean he is in pain when he gets up each day, with arthritis looming. When he and Yates returned to Siula Grande last summer to help make a drama-documentary, he was overwhelmed by all the symptoms of post-traumatic shock: 'Heart rate going, breathing going, flushes, shivering.' His response left him puzzled. 'Climbers are very good at dealing with this sort of stuff,' he says. 'It should have gone away.'

Yates has also had to struggle to evade the clutches of Touching the Void, which has cast him as The Man Who Cut the Rope. 'I get a bit fed up with it. It's nearly 18 years ago, but people go on about it as if it was yesterday,' he says. It was, in part, to redefine himself that, 10 years ago, he left the climbing community of Sheffield and moved to a village near Penrith where, now married, he leads a more grounded existence. He has set up a guiding and adventure company - the trip to Tierra del Fuego was its latest enterprise - and has written two books, the first of which offers his revised take on the events on Siula Grande.

Given that a core theme of Touching the Void is of bonding between two highly motivated climbers, the partnership between Simpson and Yates had surprisingly casual origins. Both had middle-class backgrounds and had been to university, Yates studying biochemistry at Sheffield, Simpson English and philosophy at Edinburgh. Both took up climbing in their teens, and after graduating became members of the Sheffield climbing community. It was, says Yates, a sectarian, obsessive world: 'All your friends are climbers, and when they're not climbing they're talking about it.' He and Simpson first

planned to climb Siula Grande in a four-man team, but at the last moment the other two dropped out.

It was in May 1985 that Simpson and Yates played out their duel with death. Published in 1988, *Touching the Void* resonated into the non-climbing world not just because it embraced the familiar mountaineering elements of risk, heroism, suffering and survival, but because the bonding theme was subverted by Yates's action in cutting the rope, only to be restored by Simpson's miraculous survival. At first, neither considered the episode worth writing about. 'If you're in the climbing world, lots of people have epics they recount in the pub and have a laugh about them,' Yates says. Simpson in any case had other things to deal with. As well as enduring five operations on his right leg in two years, he underwent a long spell of recuperation - physical and mental - before he felt ready to start climbing again.

Simpson says what changed his mind about writing the story was how garbled it was becoming as it circulated in the mountaineering world, with Yates coming under fire for having cut the rope. (It is a given between them that in parallel circumstances, Simpson would have done the same.) 'My only interest was to tell the story correctly,' Simpson says. He approached Tony Colwell, an editor at Jonathan Cape with a passion for mountaineering. Colwell had a hard time convincing his colleagues and it took him months to secure Simpson a grudging £2,000 advance. Simpson's first foray was hardly encouraging: he wrote 40,000 words following the standard expedition-book format before ditching them and starting again. Colwell had encouraged him to focus on the human drama, and this time Simpson completed the 75,000-word text in seven weeks. The crucial technical device was Simpson's decision to tell the story from both points of view, his and Yates's. He had taped an interview with Yates and related his account as if in Yates's voice. 'From the literary point of view,' says Simpson, 'that's the key to the book.'

Even now, Colwell had to fight for the book, sending the manuscript to friends to canvass their support. As for Simpson, 'I didn't have a sense of how good it was.' When the book began to receive ecstatic reviews, he thought it was because he had been lucky in having such a compelling tale to tell, rather than the quality of the writing. The first objective marker was the Boardman Tasker prize, followed by the NCR, when Simpson beat Stephen Hawking and other luminaries for the £20,000 prize. 'I just sat there and found it unnerving,' he says. Yates had been absent during this period. Although he realised that Simpson was using his account of events, he did not know it would appear in the first person singular, as if Yates was telling the story himself. He felt 'a little bothered' that Simpson appeared to be taking possession of his experience, 'then I read it and it didn't seem too bad. It was pretty much what I'd told him anyway'.

For Simpson, success brought one immediate problem: how do you follow that? He remained troubled by his suspicion that his success was somehow undeserved, and decided to venture into fiction as a way of testing whether he could write. He produced a mountaineering novel, *The Water People*, set in the Himalayas and published in 1992. Although it had mixed reviews,

Simpson says that it brought him the confidence he sought. 'There was good writing there, whether you liked the book or not.'

His literary mission achieved, he returned to nonfiction with *This Game of Ghosts*, confronting some of the issues that *Touching the Void* had raised. Why were climbers drawn to these jousts with death, where the attrition rate is so high? No fewer than four of Simpson's friends died while he was writing the book, and he described how he survived another potentially fatal accident, a long fall on a mountain in Nepal that smashed his left ankle and left him *hors de combat* for another six months. The book won excellent reviews and Yates, for one, considers it Simpson's best work. 'It's one of the best mountaineering books in terms of getting closest to why people do it,' he says.

Certainly, Simpson had been describing a world that Yates knew only too well. Since Siula Grande, he had been climbing almost nonstop, scraping together the money to pay for his next trip, to Pakistan, the Himalayas, or Kazakhstan. His success rate was decidedly patchy, with failures on several well-known peaks, and interruptions caused by injury and illness. In 1991 came his moment of truth. He went to southern Chile to attempt a new route on the east face of the central tower of Paine, a 4,000ft granite monolith soaring almost sheer from the Patagonian ice cap and raked by the region's notorious storms. After a month at the mountain, with numerous retreats caused by bad weather, he and his two colleagues were within a few hours of the summit when they were compelled to descend once more, abseiling down through a hurricane that left Yates frozen, drenched and grateful to reach the bottom alive.

When the weather cleared, the three prepared to return to the mountain. At the last moment, Yates announced he had changed his mind. In his subsequent account of the attempt, it is a riveting moment, subverting the genre as decisively as the act of cutting Simpson's rope. Yates had had enough, not just of risking his life on the face, but of the whole ambience of climbing at such an intensive level. He reckons he had become obsessive in his search for highs, oblivious to the accompanying pain, risks and sheer boredom of expeditions. 'Over a period, my existence had become so different from other people's. I had less in common with them and I was isolated and lonely. That was the revelation.'

Yates's two partners completed the ascent of the face and all three returned to Britain, where Yates began reshaping his life. He took up high-level access work on construction sites, which included the Millennium Dome. He joined the mountaineering lecture circuit and set up his company, Mountain Dream, taking climbers and trekkers to the Himalayas, Alaska and South America. He moved from Sheffield to the Lake District - doing so, what's more, with a partner, Jane Murray, a teacher and climber from Shrewsbury, who is still breathtaken at the speed of events, as they had only spent a few weekends climbing together. 'We really didn't know each other well,' she says. They got married in 1998.

Yates also resolved to write his own book, and Simpson's editor, Tony Colwell, secured him a £3,000 advance. However, Yates admits it was a struggle: 'I had to learn to write - it was daunting to sit down and write a 70,000-word book.' In *Against the Wall*, published in 1997, Yates delivers a taut, urgent account of the attempt on the Central Tower of Paine, pivoting on his decision to turn his back on full-time mountaineering. It also offers Yates's revised take on the rope-cutting incident on Siula Grande. He now believes that he and Simpson made their attempt in too cavalier a manner, and reckons he should have searched more thoroughly in the crevasse where Simpson fell when he cut the rope.

Simpson's own career was following an intriguing trajectory. Although *This Game of Ghosts* established, to Simpson's satisfaction, that he was not a one-book wonder, his next two did not match the standard he had set for himself. *Storms of Silence*, a mix of climbing and travelogue, including an indictment of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, is 'long and disjointed', Simpson says. He views his next book, *Dark Shadows Falling*, motivated by the death toll when two commercial expeditions were hit by a storm high on Everest in 1996, as 'too much of a rant'. By chance, *Dark Shadows Falling* and Yates's *Against the Wall* were short-listed for the 1998 Boardman Tasker prize, but only *Against the Wall* survived to the final three. 'I enjoyed it,' says Simpson. 'It's classic Simon - honest and direct.'

By now, however, Simpson was learning the value of celebrity. He found that his income could be boosted by retelling the story of *Touching the Void* on the corporate lecture circuit, where it is intended to inspire staff to bigger and better things. Simpson remains mildly baffled by the process - 'I just talk for 45 minutes' - but the invitations, and fees, keep rolling in. He moved into his current home, a former farm cottage, four years ago, sharing it with his principal live-in companion, a collie-like mongrel named Muttley.

Simpson has also been diversifying his activities. He followed a move by some fellow climbers into paragliding, but was 'distracted' when a close friend died in a freak accident. He has tried big-game fishing in California and wants to do more. At the same time, he has become ever less enamoured with the risk of climbing.

As someone who has existed in the climbing milieu for more than 25 years, Simpson is aware that to make such a declaration is close to heresy. He lists contemporaries who came to the same decision, but is puzzled that he still feels guilty. In an attempt to assuage these feelings, he devised a construct for his next book, *The Beckoning Silence*, that he hoped would bring closure to that part of his life. It would be structured around his long-cherished dream of climbing the once-notorious north face of the Eiger, one of the mythic sites of mountaineering and an apt arena for what would become his last climb.

Life, so often said to imitate art, did not on this occasion oblige. When Simpson and his partner Ray Delaney arrived beneath the Eiger in September 2000 the auguries were poor, as the weather had been unsettled for weeks. Once they had embarked, they felt as if they were travelling through 'hallowed

space', says Simpson, as they encountered or viewed the great landmarks of the route: the Difficult Crack, the Hinterstoisser Traverse, the Swallow's Nest, the Spider. But then came an incident that ended their attempt and compelled Simpson to recast his story. Climbing shortly ahead of them were two young British climbers, close enough for Simpson to hear their shouts to each other. When a new storm hit the face, he and Delaney took shelter. Later that afternoon they heard a rescue helicopter and learnt that the two men had slipped on the Second Icefield and fallen to their deaths.

With the weather worsening, Simpson and Delaney abandoned their attempt. 'It was pretty freaky and disturbing,' says Simpson. He recognised it as another 'there but for the grace of God' moment that had occurred through his career: 'It made me realise how close I'd got.'

The Beckoning Silence, with its revised structure and new ending, was published last year, and has just been issued as a paperback. Although Simpson had to contend with the loss of his editor Tony Colwell, who died of cancer last year, the book has the strengths of his best writing: tense climbing sequences, affecting meditations on the universal themes that mountaineering evokes, and Simpson's personal take on the Eiger's history. This time, Yates has reservations: 'I've enjoyed his books, but taken together he does have a bit of a preoccupation with death.'

Its sales are already comparable to those of Touching the Void, but even so, Simpson is irked to find that he still cannot live easily with his success - 'I still have this impostor syndrome' - nor has he finally renounced climbing, for he and Delaney returned to the Eiger in 2001 and 2002. Since they failed both times, they are laying plans for another attempt this summer. Simpson has even taken to worrying about the quality of Touching the Void. In the latest paperback edition he has added a note to the effect that he had failed to convey the sheer horror of his experience - 'a frustrating feeling,' he says, 'that you have not been able to articulate how bad it was'. His worst solecism, he says, was not to describe his absolute certainty, when Yates failed to respond to his first cries for help from above the base camp, that all hope was gone. 'It was the moment when I knew I was finished, and I didn't even refer to it in the book.'

Yates meanwhile has written a second book, The Flame of Adventure, which describes his climbing career before Siula Grande. He found it easier to write and reckons he has at least two more climbing books in him. He now only climbs for three months a year, and travels regularly with Jane, to the Scottish Highlands, Africa and the Caribbean. Jane says he is 'more settled and content' and has readily adapted to village life. These days Simpson and Yates see each other once or twice a year. 'Our lives have drifted apart,' says Simpson. 'Although we are still good friends, we have gone different ways.'

The last time they met was when they spent four weeks in Peru last summer to assist with the filming of the forthcoming drama-documentary based on Touching the Void. Yates had been back there in 1998, when he climbed the neighbouring peak, Siula Chico. 'It was great,' he says, 'a lovely trip.'

Simpson, however, was astounded that his memories of his fight for life, which he presumed had been settled, were disinterred. He felt terrified when he looked up at the mountain cirque, and when he reached the spot above their camp where Yates found him he had an 'almost out-of-body experience'. He had the illusion that Yates was grasping his shoulders to pick him up - and then felt as if he were an observer of these events. The biggest irony is that those memories should have been purged by the sheer act of retelling the story over the past 17 years. Instead, he supposes, he had distanced himself from it, so it had become 'someone else's story'. He says he is 'dealing with it' but, unusually for him, declines to go into detail. 'This is getting a bit private, actually.'

Yates returned from Tierra del Fuego on February 24, having accomplished his mission of climbing Monte Francés with his three clients. 'They were really happy,' he said. In Sheffield, Simpson was pleased to report the water in the pond had cleared. He had planted some irises, water lilies and bulrushes. 'It looks bloody great.'

Simpson had also received the troubling news that his agent had drawn up a contract and agreed an advance and deadline for his prospective novel with his publishers, Random House. 'I'm terrified,' he said. 'It means all the poncing about in the garden will have to come to an end.'

end