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Eustace Thomas: Manchester Mountaineer

Steve Dean

'I have been accused, too, of rushing things; but if one begins a long Alpine programme at fifty-four years of age there surely is no time to waste'.

Eustace Thomas (1928)

Despite having climbed, walked and run in the High Peak for many years, nothing had prepared me for the depth of fatigue I was now experiencing. A party of four of us were some 35 miles into an April circuit of the infamous Derwent Watershed a 40-mile bog trot over the roughest and highest hills of the Peak district. It was turning dark as we laboured along the Mam Tor-Lose Hill ridge and I for one desperately wanted to be back at the car down at the Yorkshire Bridge. Some hours ago, in the depths of Bleaklow, I had made a strong mental note that 40-mile bog trots across Howden, Bleaklow and Kinder with a 'sack and big boots, were just too tough for me. Someone's bright idea that it would be perfect Alpine training was now being roundly cursed. Later, as we collapsed into the pub and the glow of achievement arrived, I began to recall the wonderful loneliness of much of the route and started to wonder about its origins.

Some initial research told me that the Derwent Watershed Walk was the invention of Eustace Thomas of the Manchester Rucksack Club and that he first did the route in 1918 when he was already in his 50s. Eustace had my profound admiration; all we had to do was haul ourselves around the route. In his day, he and his companions would also have been busy dodging gamekeepers for much of the way. Further delving on my part revealed what an extraordinary mountaineer and character Eustace Thomas was.

He was born in London, in 1869, one of a large family, and his father worked as a tax inspector. Eustace spent much of his boyhood in Battersea and attended the City of London School. Later he became a student at Finsbury Technical College walking from Battersea to Finsbury and back every day with his brother Bertram. Whilst at the college, where he obtained a good degree and later a lecturing post, he was a contemporary of Owen Glynn Jones. In his early life he appeared to have no interest in mountaineering, but all this was to change when at the age of 32 he moved up to Manchester to join his brother Bertram who was setting up in business as an electrical engineer and contractor. They were later joined by another brother Frank, and Bertram Thomas (Engineers) Ltd was to become highly successful in the years ahead.

The company was particularly involved in the design and manufacture of heavy switchgear and their equipment came to be used all over the world. Eustace's role was to devise methods of dealing with the constant flow of customers' problems and to organise the workshops to deal with them. He had considerable scientific talent and great mental energy, which enabled him to make a great contribution to the development of the company. In due course he was rewarded with a comfortable income that enabled him to travel and pursue his many interests.

By the time Eustace had reached his late 30s, he was seriously overworking and his health was suffering. He had digestive problems and trouble with his feet and it seemed that the ravages of middle age were upon him. He responded initially by taking up race walking, and trained himself to become a good competitor. However, in 1909 when Eustace was already 40 a friend introduced him to the Manchester Rucksack Club and it was to transform his life. Initially his activity on the hills was quite limited although it did include some visits to the Alps, but gradually he became more involved with the activities of the club and was introduced to its traditions of hard walking on the Pennine moors. Despite already being in his late 40s, a flame was ignited in Eustace and he rapidly became the hardest hill-walker around. In 1918 he and Norman Begg repeated Cecil Dawson's Colne-Buxton walk of over 50 miles in under 18 hours and this was the beginning of many such hard efforts.

The long-legged Eustace approached bog trotting in a scientific and logical manner. He spent much time studying the terrain of prospective routes, but great care was also taken over matters of diet and light footwear. This attention to detail was to serve him particularly well, as he turned his attention to the higher mountains both in Britain and later the Alps.

Following the Colne-Buxton trip. Eustace planned and executed the classic bog trot of the Derwent Watershed, which was achieved in the autumn of 1918. In *High Peak* Eric Byne and Geoff Sutton described the event thus:

'His next great feat was accomplished with Norman Begg, Alf Schanning, William Walker and Bill Humphrey, when they planned and executed the Derwent Watershed walk, one of the stiffest and most notable bog trots in the Pennines. It is rough moorland from start to finish, exceptionally wild in character, and according to Thomas "included some very sharp corners." The distance of thirty-seven and a half miles gives no indication of the toughness of the course. They started from the Yorkshire Bridge Inn near Bamford at 5 am. The route lay over the summit of Win Hill, down into the Hope-Edale valley, up again to Lose Hill, then along the Mam Tor ridge and Rushup Edge to Kinderlow, then down the Kinder river to the downfall. Next one of the sharp corners led to Mill Hill, Ahop Head, Featherbed Top and the Snake Road. At this point the party were all together and ahead of schedule, but Bleaklow as always, was the crux. Despite good weather the long crossing by way of Bleaklow Head, Bleaklow Stones, Swain's Head and Rocking Stones to Margery Hill took its toll of energy. The party began to lag, and Thomas, still accompanied by the cheery Norman Begg, began to forge ahead. Round Howden Chest they swept steadily on, then crossed to Strines Edge and the Sheffield Road. They trotted down the last steep slope to the Yorkshire Bridge inn at 4.39 p.m., 11 hours 39 minutes after they had set out, and exactly 41 minutes ahead of schedule. The remainder of the party arrived 58

minutes later'

The achievement of this very hard course, dodging gamekeepers en route, in under 12 hours was considerable (anyone in doubt is invited to try it). Every February the Derwent Watershed now forms the route for a tough orienteering event in which four-person teams attempt to cover the course, largely at night. The top teams of fellrunners get around in about nine hours and in summer it has been run considerably quicker than that. I think Eustace would have been highly impressed by such speed over such unforgiving country.

Encouraged by his experiences on the Pennine moors, Eustace began to look further afield and initially turned his attention to the mountains of Snowdonia, where in 1919 he made what is thought to be the first complete round of the 14 3,000ft summits. This tough outing of 25 miles is now a classic and much sought after by competent hill-walkers. That same year, he also made his first attempt at the Lake District Fell Record, which had been established in 1905 by Dr A W Wakefield. The first attempt by Eustace ended in failure, when deprived of the partnership of Norman Begg (who departed for the USA earlier that year) he attempted the round alone. He succeeded in completing Wakefield's course, but was well outside the 24 hours allowed. With typical thoroughness, he set about preparing for a further attempt the following summer. This time, Eustace completed Wakefield's route in under 22 hours but did not regard the record as broken, as the course had not been extended. However, as a consequence of meeting A W Wakefield, Eustace was introduced later that year to Geoffrey Winthrop Young and the two formed a great friendship that was to last until Young's death in 1958. Two further attempts were made on the Fell record by him in 1921, but were thwarted by bad weather.

Eustace was finally successful at extending Wakefield's record when in June 1922 he succeeded in covering 66½ miles and 25,000ft of ascent within the allowed 24 hours. The weather was misty and drizzly for most of the way, but the conditions suited Eustace and he also had a very good knowledge of the course coupled with many months of careful preparation.

In the Rucksack Club Journal the following year, Eustace attempted to put this kind of activity into context in relation to mountaineering as a whole. There is a wisdom and humility in his words written 76 years ago: 'It would appear that this test makes as near an approach to the conditions of the greater mountaineering as this country can afford. There are no new ascents possible, and no glaciers, but there were the difficulties of cold, fog, and rain, and of a journey through the mountains at night without moon. The course made a severe call on endurance in virtue of the great height ascended and the distance travelled. Friends acted as porters, and carried food and extras-this being a precedent already established. There was no snow at this time of year. On other occasions, even this difficulty has been added by undertaking a long course in winter and at night, and meeting very serious conditions on ground not previously traversed. This is another variation of the same game, and is real mountaineering adventure under the conditions available in England'.

It was a very fine achievement by Eustace to improve on Wakefield's record, and he also continued for a further four and half hours to cover a total of 30,000ft of ascent. This level of performance over the Lakeland Fells was not improved upon

until June 1932 and the emergence of the Keswick fellrunner Bob Graham. To this day, the Bob Graham Round, (some 72 miles, 27,000 of ascent, over 42 peaks over 2,000ft all in 24 hours) remains a hard challenge for fellrunners and requires great fitness both physically and mentally.

Following on from the Fell Record, Eustace set his sights further afield. In the summer of 1923 he made his first serious visit to the Alps, already aged 54. Previously, Eustace had enjoyed a number of casual holidays in the Alps, but that year he spent five weeks in the mountains and formed a huge attachment to them. He acquired the services of the guides Joseph Knubel and Alexander Lagger, and in the course of the holiday climbed 24 major summits. These included the Charmoz, Grepon and Blaitière done in a single day, and likewise the Jungfrau, Monch and Gross Fieserhorn. In three hard days, they also traversed the Zinal Rothorn, Dent Blanche (by the *Viereselgrat*) and the Matterhorn (by the *Zmutt Ridgel*) before returning to Zermatt. Eustace's account of that holiday in the Rucksack Club Journal, makes extraordinary reading and it is clear that he had become smitten by the magic of the Alps. That year he became a member of the Alpine Club and resolved to return to the Alps the following year. In the course of the 1923 season, Eustace had formed a firm friendship, with Joseph Knubel and they were to climb much together in the years ahead. Eustace's comments about guided climbing are considerate, and honest: 'In final retrospect, the writer feels some regret at the number of inactive days; there were fifteen or sixteen on which little more was done than to walk up to a hut. A keen party of amateurs might have fitted some of these in and taken the risk of overdoing it. It would not have been fair to expect more from professional guides, whose living depends on keeping fit, and who, in any case, were doing cheerfully a good deal more than is at all customary. Moreover, the chief guide carried a responsibility from which the writer was free'.

Eustace commenced the summer of 1924, by becoming the first person to complete the Scottish 4,000ft peaks in 24 hours (using a car between Fort William and the Cairngorms.) He followed this by returning to the Alps and again procured the services of Joseph Knubel. It would seem that the suggestion of doing all the 4,000m peaks came from Knubel but it was a plan on a grand scale likely to appeal to Eustace. He adopted a list that had been compiled by Captain Farrar and made some additions of his own. Initially he climbed always with Knubel, and completed his first list of summits in 1928. One particular highlight that summer, was the climbing of all four great ridges on the south side of Mont Blanc (the *Brouillard*, the *Innominata*, the *Peuterey* and the *Brenval*) in only 13 days. At that time he and Knubel were the first people to traverse them all, a very fine achievement for the time.

However, the 4,000ers were not quite finished. Eustace kept on finding new ones that had to be done and in the meantime a new route had been made on Mont Blanc du Tacul linking several points above 4,000m. This climb, the traverse of the Aiguilles du Diable, was first done in August 1928 and combined great length and isolation, with technical difficulty and much abseiling. Eustace had completed all the other 4,000m peaks by August 1930, and earlier attempts at the Aiguilles du Diable had been thwarted by poor conditions. He had to wait until the summer of 1932, when he was involved in the third ascent of this superb Alpine route. Unable to

acquire the services of Joseph Knubel, Eustace teamed up with the guide Alexander Tangwalder, and together they did a training route (albeit a new one) on the Moine. From there they obtained good views of the Aiguilles du Diable, which appeared in reasonable condition. That night at the Montanvers they met the Chamonix guide, George Cachat, who had been on the first ascent four years previously. He agreed to join them and they set off up the route two days later from the Torino Hut. They made reasonable time up to the Col du Diable and on to the ridge proper. Initially, the two guides had thought they might only achieve part of the route, but to Eustace's joy, they completed the climb arriving at the summit of Mont Blanc du Tacul late in the afternoon. They arrived exhausted at the Requin Hut at 8pm that night, after an 18-hour day. At the age of almost 63, Eustace had completed all the Alpine 4,000m peaks. He was the first British climber to achieve this (by far) and only the fourth or fifth person to climb them (although none of the previous efforts had included the Aiguille du Diable.) The remainder of that 1932 holiday included ascents of the *Mer de Glace Face* of the Grepon, and then a journey east to the Dolomites to climb several routes including a traverse of the Vajolet Towers an ascent of the Third Sella Tower, and the *North Face* of the Langkofel.

Aside from his considerable Alpine achievements, Eustace was very active within the Rucksack Club and was President in 1924. He had a great gift for friendship, and his social functions were enjoyed by the club membership for many years. He was well aware of the rapid developments of British climbing at this time, and enjoyed the friendship of key figures such as Fred Pigott, Morley Wood, Maurice Linnell, A B Hargreaves and Colin Kirkus. During the 1930s he also became involved in the increasing concern about accidents and rescue facilities in the British mountains. Particularly bad accidents at Laddow and on Crib Goch highlighted the problem, and in 1932 the Rucksack Club appointed a Stretcher Sub-Committee which eventually led to the formation of the Mountain Rescue Committee. Eustace contributed hugely to this urgently needed work by designing and manufacturing a stretcher suitable for mountain rescue work. With its extending handles and sledge runners 'The Thomas Stretcher' embraced numerous features that did much to reduce the labour of rescue teams and the suffering of patients. The basic design albeit modified, is still in use all over the world, and it is a fitting memorial to this remarkable man's love of the hills.

Eustace's interests were not confined to the world of mountaineering. During the 1930s, he took up gliding and became highly proficient at it. He then acquired a small single seater aeroplane and learnt to fly. From this he moved on to a Percival Vega-Gull four seater, in which he made many excursions. Someone who flew with him on occasion being Ivan Waller. In 1939 Eustace celebrated his 70th year by flying his Percival out to Egypt and back again. He had a number of difficulties on the return flight due to the imminence of the war. Shortly afterwards the RAF commandeered his little plane. Eustace responded by providing £5,000 for Lord Beaverbrook's appeal to purchase a Spitfire for the RAF. The aircraft Eustace paid for was one of 10 provided by the people of Manchester from a fund set up by the City Council. Eustace's Spitfire carried the City Crest on its nose and was known as 'Eustace'. It served with a Czech-manned squadron, flying defensive patrols over south west England and

offensive sweeps over Northern France. It was shot down by enemy fighters in April 1942, the only one of the Manchester 10 that met that fate.

One of the regular delights in the later part of Eustace's life was the regular visits he was paid (most notably for the Rucksack Club Dinner each year) by his close friends Geoffrey and Len Winthrop Young. He particularly enjoyed entertaining them at his home in Cheshire. Eustace had been a particularly strong supporter of GWY's efforts in the early 1940s to rejuvenate the Alpine Club, and to make the initial moves that led to the creation of the British Mountaineering Council.

After the war Eustace continued to travel widely, and continued to support the activities of his beloved Rucksack Club, and the Alpine Club. Peter Harding recalled that Eustace had a particular fondness for Cratcliffe Tor and would always try to attend club meets there. On his 90th birthday Eustace was flown over the North Pole, a journey he enjoyed immensely and, finally, in October 1960 this quite remarkable man passed away, aged 91. He remains a great figure in the history of mountaineering in Britain, and his late entry into the sport and his wide ranging achievements have been an inspiration to many. His indomitable spirit and great powers of intellect, were coupled with a ready wit and a great warmth of personality that is fondly remembered.

So, next time you are out on the Derwent Watershed, spare a thought for the tall, shadowy figure that trod purposefully that way 80 years ago, still unaware of the great adventures awaiting him. His own determination and refusal to accept conventional limits, led the way for many others to follow.

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