

# Remembering Robie Macdonald

From his friends in the Vancouver Island section of the Alpine Club of Canada

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*Sandy Briggs*



I believe I first met Rob at a winter 1983 meeting of the ACCVI, but it was a couple of years before I joined. In my memory he was presenting the story of his epic first ascent of Mt. Bate with Paul Erickson. (That's one of the best epic trip reports ever in the Island Bushwhacker. December 1982, Vol 10, No.3/4) It was also a couple of years before we managed to get out on a trip together. What comes to my mind today, though, is a sunny morning in May of 2016 during a hillwalking trip to Scotland with Rob, Russ Moir and Josh Slatkoff. I was still recovering from a GI bug I had picked up a few days before at the hostel in Glen Nevis, but we were now in the beautiful Torridon hills and planning a clockwise traverse of the Am Fasarinen Pinnacles on Liathach. Still feeling a bit unwell, I fell behind the others on our hike up the first summit, Mullach an Rathain, stopping to chuck my cookies a couple of times before reaching the summit. The weather was perfect, the views superb, and the prospect of a scramble over the famous pinnacles very engaging, but I was not up to it. The others, or even just some of them, could have gone on and completed the plan, and I encouraged that – I'd have got back down to the hostel just fine. But my friends, with hearty endorsement from Rob, decided instead to forego the traverse and just relax together as a group of friends on that wonderful summit. And that's what we did. We lounged on the grass for three and a half hours in the warm sunshine enjoying the luxury of rest without pressure. I was grateful for this. The photo above is Rob on that special day.



Left: Rob leads us past a steep step on the glacier on our ascent of Mt. Challenger in the North Cascades in July of 1985.

Right: Rob on a telemark descent of Mt Myra on a May 1989 trip with him and Julie.

Rob was a great man and a good friend who will be greatly missed.

Sandy Briggs



**Robie - a fine mountain companion**

Robie, in my mind's eye, will remain as one of those, strong, sentient humans who I have, over the years, enjoyed many mountain passages alongside. Of the several trips I could expound on I remember most vividly the time when four good, "old fart" friends spent a glorious two weeks wandering, climbing and yes, imbibing the scenic ridges and glens of NW Scotland, The Grampians and finally the Lake District of N England.

For each of us it was a nostalgic journey. Sandy had cut his teeth on Scottish hills as a graduate student at St Andrews, Rick was steeped in the lore of Scottish climbing, while Robie, being of MacDonald ilk, felt and expressed a joy on tramping the glens and ridges of his ancestral roots. That's not to say that bars lined with arrays of malt whisky samples and taps gushing good ales were not another attraction. We combined the two aspects.

Well, at each evening's gathering we enjoyed jokes, chat and even blatant fibs, which brought out Robie's sharp recall of complex jokes and even well-reviewed commentary of a scientific nature, when we pumped him with questions. Our queries were always answered with clear and respectful insights, especially to a mind not versed in high-grade scientific reporting.

On exposed and lengthy traverses, such as the notorious Aonach Eagach Ridge in Glencoe, Robie was a delight to follow along with, in his secure steps on a challenging terrain, interspersed with barbs and retorts on whatever was the 'thought for the day'. In Glencoe of course, being a Macdonald, we quipped back and forth on the infamous "MacDonald massacre" of many bygone moons, enjoying the ambiance of four "good companions" among gorgeous West Highland scenery, with the added lustre of such poignant history. In Glencoe it helps being a MacDonald as opposed to a Campbell!!

We joked at the thought of taking back our ancestral lands from those nasty Sassenachs, whilst also relishing the fact that Scotland, always way in advance of other nations, has long held the fundamental "right to roam" for mountaineering and hiking, "written in stone". Oh, that others might follow!

I dearly imagine that somewhere he might now be traversing some "legendary peak", with joy in his heart and a humourous comment on his tongue.

"Slange Var, Robbie"



Rob on Slioch above Loch Maree looking out to Skye

### *Judith Holm*

At Rick Eppler's celebration of life, Rob paid tribute to Rick being the best friend one could have in the mountains, especially when the going was toughest. The same is true for my memories of Rob in the mountains.

In whiteout, with falling snow having covered all traces of our ski tracks at our most remote position on the Mt. Munday trip, it was Rob who quietly had taken the accurate back bearing that, together with teamwork, brought us safely back to our fully buried tents and saved our lives. Another day that week he saved us again, at a high consequence, technically difficult move. With all of us tight in apprehension, Rob unassumingly came up with a kind, extremely witty comment that dissolved all into laughter and enabled safe passage.

*Ken Wong*

I was having lunch by the sea at Tower Point when I received the sad news of Robie's passing. It instantly transported me back to the summer of 2010 at the precarious tiny summit pinnacle of Mt Bate listening to Robie and Rick's recount of their adventures in that spectacular area. I was truly grateful for them dragging me up to that top of the world and sharing that precious moment. What a privilege to be with that special duo. I will never forget. Climb on my friend.



*Sharon and Henri Wetselaar*

Lots of happy memories of this dear, dear man and of a life well-lived.  
He's off now, rambling those Blue Mountains with his old climbing buddy - and they're having the time of their lives!





*Claire Ebendinger*

He leaves us with so many memories of adventures in the mountains, and of great contributions to the club. He was always so respectful, sharing his knowledge in a helpful and humble way, often garnished with humour... a gem of a man 🧐. The photo reflects his composed way of making a funny comment, and enjoying the response.

As we shared the same birth date, May 5th will always bring back fond memories.



*Rudy Brugger*

Robie was a giant in camouflage.



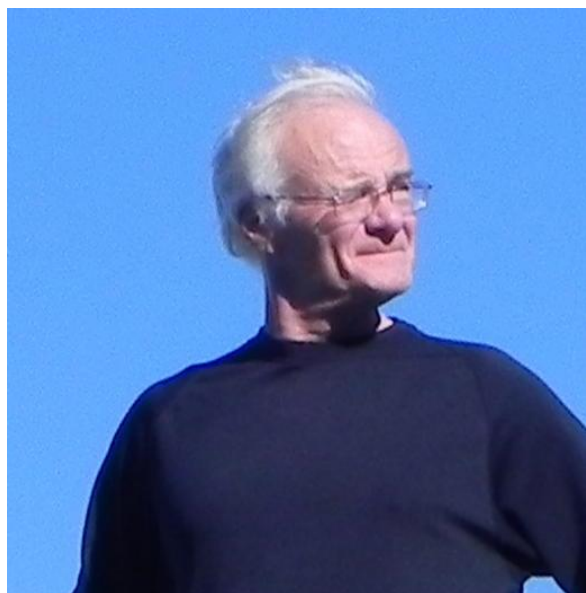
Rudy, Rob and Ian after climbing Mt Waddington

## *Rick Hudson*

Dr Robie Macdonald surfaced in my life through an unusual connection. As an oceanographer, I had read a number of his papers on ocean geochemistry, but hadn't associated the man at the Pacific Geoscience Centre in North Saanich with 'Rob', whom I'd met on visits to that institute. It was only later that I came to connect Robie with a string of important scientific papers. In later years he worked on how organic carbon transferred in marine environments, a subject that has become vitally important to us all, as our grasp of greenhouse gases becomes crucial to our understanding of global climate science. Rob received the Order of Canada in 2019 for this work.

While he dedicated much of his career to science, Robie had another side to him. He loved to climb, and his long partnership with Rick Eppler saw the two of them open up many unclimbed peaks on the Island, and beyond. Modest, even gruff at times, his manner changed when he stepped out of the car late on a Friday night, shouldered another crushing pack, and led off into the dark on another wild Island bushwhack. He would disappear into some as-yet unexplored pocket of devil's club and salal that other, lesser folk had deemed impenetrable.

Tough, with a self-deprecating chuckle that never flagged despite rain, sleet, steep ground or the awful prospect of no place to pitch a tent, he was un-phased by suffering, his quiet Scottish character undaunted by the problems of the moment. And his bear hug and hearty laugh when a fresh summit was gained made him a climbing companion of the highest caliber. His long list of first ascents are a testament to his stamina and skill as a mountaineer. Thank you Robie for all that you gave us.



*Rob and Rick at the Lucky 4 mine October 2010*

Janelle Curtis

I am grateful to Robie for many things. Robie knew I worked at DFO as a research scientist. Although we had only met a few times during alpine club events, he called me twice out of the blue to lend his support during my transition back to work after my accident. He knew that the first few years at work were not easy, and he understood the tremendous challenges I was struggling with there as a scientist. I am so very grateful that Robie made me feel valued and supported at DFO. He also cheered me on as my career progressed during the past few years.

As a new editor of the ACCVI's *Island Bushwhacker Newsletter* in 2020, I created a few columns, including one to showcase members of our executive, and one to showcase historical photos of members in the alpine. Robie was always willing to share his knowledge and experience with others. He wrote a very informative article about his role as the editor of ACCVI's *Island Bushwhacker Annual* that included a bit of its history and information about previous editors. He was also keen to share his historical photos in the alpine.

Most recently, Robie reinforced confidence in my ability to edit ACCVI's *2021 Island Bushwhacker Annual*. He shared information about the steps needed to manage photos for online and printed versions, and so much more. I understand that this publication was dear to his heart, and I feel tremendous gratitude that he believed in me.

Here is a photo that Robie sent me for the Winter 2021 issue of the *Island Bushwhacker Newsletter*. It captures how I will remember him: full of warmth, humour, and love for his friends and colleagues. Thank you Robie for sharing your support, knowledge, experience, and trust in me.



A photo caption from Robie: "This is an image from an attempted ski into Mount Munday in April 1993. We did not climb the peak because of the weather, but we had a great time and many of us went back the next year to finish the job. Clockwise from left you have Ian Brown, Margaret Brown, Barb Brooks, Kris Holm, Judith Holm, Gerta Smythe, me, and Rudy Brugger. A den of thieves if ever there were."



*Margaret Brown*

Robie's significant scientific, professional and academic contributions for which he received The Order of Canada have been acknowledged. As well his numerous mountaineering accomplishments have been mentioned. I most appreciated Robie for his kindness and compassion. We were on the last leg of the return from Mt. Munday. We had already skied down about 8000ft and then had to climb up Scar Mt. before we could reach the logging road. I was bagged and slowly plodding up the slope. Robie came up to me and with a kindly understanding smile pulled a Mars bar out of his pocket and offered it to me. That gesture meant so much at that moment and with that encouragement I was able to make it the rest of the way.



Robie and Ian navigating up Mt Munday

*Ian Brown*

So many fine trips together it's hard to pick out the best. Robie the highly accomplished mountaineer on our two trips to Mt. Munday and climbing Waddington with me and Rudy. Flipping snowballs ahead of me in whiteouts on the Wapta and on the glaciers near Munday. My deep gratitude for the latter since one snowball just disappeared. Turned out on investigation the next day that it went over a 250 ft. drop. He kept his wonderful sense of humour right to the end as we exchanged photos of our fun together. I trod on his stove the night of our descent from the Waddington summit and he would not even accept compensation a few weeks ago. What a pal! Margaret has made up a slide show from each of our two Mt. Munday trips. Available on Youtube with the private link. Anyone who wants the link, just email me.





Taking a pause on the Munday Trip. Left to right Doug from Nelson, Rick Eppler. Robie, Barb Brooks and Claire Ebendinger in foreground



Rick Eppler, Sandy Briggs, Don Berryman and Robie Mt Vancouver expedition 1986

*Albert Hestler*

Rob and I have known each other as fellow members of the Alpine Club since at least New-Year's day 1988, i.e. on the annual 'Katzenjammer' outing arranged by him, up Mount Landalt on skis. But it wasn't until the start of the Covid Pandemic that we established closer contact, mind you via internet, totally unexpected but very much appreciated.

I had written and sent to club members a 'good-news' story about how Elizabeth and I had to interrupt our holiday trip in Sicily and barely managed to return to Canada on the last Air Canada flight on March 11, 2020. Rob responded that he had also been to Sicily, albeit on a week-long NATO conference in 1982 in the medieval Norman town of Enrice. One afternoon he also visited the ancient Greek temple at Segesta and was 'blown away' by their culture so many years ago. It must have been the photos of these two places (attached to my story) that awakened Rob's memories of these events. Yes, pictures tell their own stories.

A bit later that year I wrote a story on my family's 'close-call' escape from Upper Silesia (now Poland) to West Germany in January 1945, just days before the Russian army overran the town of Rybnik, which had the closest railway station. Again, this story opened up the opportunity to look at our past and share our experiences. When comparing the catastrophes of the present pandemic and the impact of WW-II on our families, Rob noted that he had been very lucky in that he was born after the war, in Canada, and he therefore didn't have to deal with similar 'trials by fire'. In retrospect he concluded: "I am very appreciative, but I'm also aware of my good fortune in friends, family and colleagues. And the chance to go and climb mountains – a universal activity that does not care about who you are." I certainly agree with that.

Rob's exploits in the mountains with many different members of the Alpine Club, notably his long-time climbing partner Rick Eppler, are truly remarkable adventures. One of the highlights (for me, anyway) is his challenging exploration of the Mount Alava/Bate sanctuary, his 'Shangri La' of Vancouver Island.

Our letter exchange expanded my knowledge of Rob's professional life - beyond just spending lots of time as ocean scientist in the arctic – which reached the exceptional honour of receiving the Order of Canada. He accepted it as the highest award in civilian context, and added this comment: "It is indescribably sweet to be recognized by one's country, even though my scientific work has been, actually, reward enough".

Rob presented a great example of how important – and rewarding – it is to find a way to balance one's professional and personal life with one's passions. I'll miss our unique friendship ... now a wonderful memory.

*Catrin Brown*

I loved the way when Rob shared a funny story or a quote from his endless stock, he'd wait a minute with an eyebrow raised, then join in the laughter infectiously.

I appreciated Rob's leadership and company in the mountains, his passion and curiosity about science, nature and our place in it.

I admired Rob's ability to focus on the greater good at all levels, and valued his support, wisdom and encouragement on many occasions.



Avalanche Peak above Rogers Pass 2005

I am grateful for Rob's friendship and abiding influence in my life.



*"We've come a long way (in science and technology), baby, and yet not far enough in our own humanity",* wrote Rob in an email to me this Jan. Now as I listen to the heart-wrenching stories of human suffering in Ukraine from Putin's cruel, senseless war, I am reminded of Rob's prescient words. That quote is taken from his reply to my new year wishes to him and his family, in which I had mentioned that, following the successful launch of the James Webb Space Telescope, there would soon be amazing new discoveries to excite and cheer us all up! In his reply, Rob had added, *"I must say that I hope the oncologist can find something that would keep me going long enough to see the first images from the Webb telescope"*. Sadly, that was not to be, and life has snatched him away from us all too soon, even while the Webb telescope is still being aligned and calibrated for science operations set to start this summer. When those first images from the Webb do come out, I hope to be able to place a copy by his resting place, even while his soul dances freely amongst the stars and is now one with the Universe.

As I write this tribute to Rob, I reflect back on the few short years that I had known Rob, and yet just how close our friendship had grown in that brief period. I met Rob only in 2018, even though I had been with the ACC-VI for over fifteen years by then, and had often heard of his amazing mountaineering as well as scientific achievements. Thinking back about this, I find it surprising that I had not had the opportunity to meet him earlier since many of my mountaineering mentors with whom I did most of my back country adventures, Rick Johnson, Russ Moir, Sandy Briggs to name a few, were all very close friends of Rob, and they often did trips together.

I first met Rob in 2018 while on a trip to Triple Peak with Rick, Russ and a few others. Even before that trip I knew that Rick Eppler and Rob had posted the first ascent on this summit over thirty years back. Therefore, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that, in the long intervening period, Rob had never been back to Triple (perhaps having been focussed on his many other mountaineering objectives). Triple has always been one of my favourites, so it felt doubly special to be accompanying Rob on his 'second first ascent' of that peak. However, the weather gods had other plans for us, and even as we ascended to our planned campsite by Cobalt Lake, we walked into low, wet clouds and a thick, pea soup fog. As we tucked into our damp sleeping bags that evening, we hoped for clear blue skies for our summit attempt the next morning – however that was not to be, and we woke up to worse conditions, if anything. As we packed our soaked gear and headed out, Rob was keen to return the following year, and I was resolved to accompany him.

True to our plan, we did return to Triple in 2019, a smaller group of three, Rick Johnson, Rob and I. This time, we camped at the trailhead and summited as a day trip using the not oft travelled East Ridge route. The conditions could not have been better, the snow was firm even though the skies were clear and the sun warm. We made good time up the steep but firm snow to the base of the ridge, and then it was a bushwhack and scramble up short rock faces to the summit. In the attached photo, the exhilaration of being back on the summit over three decades later is clearly written on Rob's big smile - and in mine too, the joy of just being there with him on that day. The article he wrote for the annual Bushwhacker 2019 made it clear how much that trip meant to him, and by inference, to me too! In an email a couple of months later, Rob wrote, *"I remember well that day we topped Triple Pk - it was sublime and nostalgic in many ways. It's too bad that we did not climb something together far sooner than that"*.

Even though we planned to do other trips in the years following, sadly, his increasing serious health concerns and the onset of the Covid pandemic not too much later nixed any such opportunity. Rob was a very private person, and in those days he never mentioned the seriousness of his health condition, and so I anticipated his recovery and the resumption of our mountaineering plans. We exchanged emails occasionally, and his messages always left me with lots of food for thought.

Even in our email exchange in January this year, he had mentioned that, when his health condition permitted, Russ, Rick and he would be getting together for a coffee and catch up, and I had asked to be included in those plans. So in early Feb, I was about to email Rob to check about this coffee gathering, when Catrin's email about Rob's passing reached my inbox. Carpe diem, I think to myself now, as thoughts of those unfinished mountaineering plans and unvoiced discussions with Rob swirl around in my head. At the same time, I will always cherish those few trips we did share and the deeply thought provoking discussions we did have even in the relatively short time we knew each other. In one of our earlier discussions about why we climb, we found that our motivations paralleled each others so closely that Rob wrote, ' *Hi Karun, Brothers are where you find them*'. Yes, that is how I will remember him, my mountaineering brother, Rob, whose deep thoughts and words I will carry with me as I follow his quiet, contemplative path into the peace of the high mountains.



*Rick Johnson*

How do I begin to fit in all the great stories and adventures we shared together?

I first knew Rob through the A.C.C. when we were very small club, with some 75 members. Somewhere back in the mid 80's there. I knew of him first by reputation. He was known to be very fit, very capable, positive minded and humble. In addition to these qualities I also learned that he was a very respected and inspirational leader and a keen explorer, with a gift for dry wit as well as an endless repertoire of jokes.

Like me, he was known to love our island peaks in particular the less explored west coast. Later we would share the love we had for the Scottish Highlands, Cascades and the Rockies! Over time, we gradually started to do more and more climbs together. The two Rick's, Rob and what ever partner I had at the time. I remember watching Rob and Rick Eppler on our ascent of Mt Stuart. It was like watching honed musicians at their peak. They moved over easy class 5 like racing snakes, intuitively knowing the others movements. Now that was a rope team!

Rob respected climbers who had a code of ethic's and sense of climbing style. It wasn't just about getting to the top by any means. Respect for the mountains was important to him. We both enjoyed history of all types, but especially mountain lore and we both respected those that came before us, the mountaineering legends and their achievements.

As many of us know he was not only an accomplished and respected mountaineer but an equally accomplished and respected scientist. I think Rob was born to be this person. He had a deep passion for science in general and the Arctic and ecology in particular and had the gift of a highly disciplined mind.

He was always calm, principled, reasoned and rational. I can never once remember us ever exchanging even a hint of cross words in all of our trips together. I respected and trusted him completely.

I can still hear Rob in Scotland beginning to tell one of those jokes, I don't recall the exact one but he would always begin with a light chuckle and a little gleam in his eye, and often start like this; "Ok, so this guy walks into a bar and there are these two penguins and an Ostrich....". There would be fits of laughter all round before any punch line was offered. There were all the mountains, the great beers, the good whiskey, the very rich experiences shared with other dear friends.

As I look to my right while I write this I have only two photos in my home office. One is of Rob looking at me as he summited Mt. Assiniboine. Another amazing day shared with Rob. A great fun trip with endless laughter the whole way. I couldn't have shared it with a better person.

They say you die twice. Once when you pass, the next time when your name is last mentioned forever. I know Rob will be alive with us all for quite some time. Time spent with Rob was time well spent and an honour. A truly cherished friend.



Mt Arrowsmith November 2019



*Rob on his last trip into the mountains - a return to Mount Bate September 2020*

