



## The Fascination of Snow

James Fenton

We both see it at the same time and burst into a run. But I have no chance of winning, no chance when two legs are competing with four. He dashes across the heather and is soon on his back, his legs in the air, rubbing and rolling on the snow. For, yes, it's the first snows of the Highlands winter... In Old Russia, the snow has fallen for the first time this year. People come out of their houses and that evening there is a grand celebration... In Durban, South Africa, there is a report of a snowfall not far out of town. Motorists stream out in their thousands to take a look... The London papers next day are full of it, front-page coverage "Country grinds to a halt"... Children wake up on Christmas Day to see the world transformed into a sea of white. Excitement mounts, sledges are dug out of the attic, snowballs are thrown, snowmen appear out of nowhere...

What is it about snow? Not only humans, but dogs too become excited by the stuff. Having shared our lives together for 16,000 years, has our fascination merely rubbed off on them? Or do dogs, and by association, wolves, also have an innate fascination? And cats?...



We evolved in Africa, and the snows of Kilimanjaro may have been part of the backdrop during our formative years. High up, out of reach, nearer the life-giving sun, white clouds come down to earth. Providing eternal water. Did the glistening white of the summits symbolise the abode of the Gods? White, virginal purity, unsullied; did this idea descend from Kilimanjaro?

The mess of an Arctic town in summer.... Litter and rubbish abound. But in the winter, this is different. The dirt is all gone, smothered, hidden. Anything thrown out is mysteriously sucked down and disappears. Cleansing, purifying.



Soft, beautiful. No two flakes the same, silently falling, snow on snow, as if an ever-thickening blanket. Transformational, protecting the ground below from the hard frost. Gentle, but the wind picks up, icy spindrift blows into any crack, eyes become frozen, steps become heavy, each one impossible, until, sinking softly down, the gentle embrace of death... A loud crack, the whole slope comes away, climbers, instructors, skiers, all are picked-up, tossed around, crashed against trees and buildings, hard, terrifying, unable to move, twisted. For it is dangerous, out to catch the unwary.



Much better to be indoors as the soft patter of wind-driven snow beats harmlessly against the window, the fire lit, warmth, safe and secure. But the next day dawns clear, the sky an unbelievable blue, the world, not white, but tinged with gold, with blue, with azure, throwing back rainbows. You have to go out, put on the skis and re-discover the world. Everywhere is possible, over burns and lochans, over rocks and boulders, for everywhere is now a highway: in the same way that the sea is a gateway to the whole world, the snow takes you anywhere.



A long, hard climb upwards – but the glide down, a swift descent wiping away the hours of toil. Sliding on snow: this appeals to us all. We may grow out of the early plastic bags and toboggans, instead taking a mature, adult pleasure in board and ski. We descend in a pure, white landscape, the mountains all around, we enjoy the thrill of speed, the smoothness of the slide, the snow flung into the sun at each turn; and - this is key - we enjoy our skill. For this is a silent pleasure, dependent on each one of us, far removed from the team games of football, rugby or cricket.

We have learnt to ascend into the mountains, to sully the abode of the Gods themselves, to steal their virgin white and to enjoy it ourselves. Snow is truly a gift of nature, one that catches our imagination. Not the slushy mush of our modern town centre, or the dirty brown, salt-spattered roads: that is no joy at all, and may turn our innate love to hate. Snow transforms our mundane lives, it has a schizophrenic fascination of the life-enhancer and the life-destroyer.

But I'm still not sure why my dog likes it!

*Postscript January 2010* - ... two feet of snow here, with amazing icicles off the house. Our car is a mile away at the bottom of our track, so we will probably be snowed in for ages. Great!

James lives near Inverness. An ecologist and writer, he works on landscape policies for Scottish Natural Heritage, but started his career with the British Antarctic Survey. His booklet *A field guide to ice* is briefly reviewed on the Network's website.

His website is [www.james-hc-fenton.eu](http://www.james-hc-fenton.eu).

All photos by James Fenton

Issues of *Landscape & Arts* include reviews of *Findings on ice*, Aardse & Baalen, 2007 [nr. 49, also in Reviews on website], *The snow show*, Fung, 2006 [nr. 33], and the exhibition 'Ice Garden' in Oxford 2005 [nr. 36 'Whatever happened to the polar bears?'].



.....

# The Climate Summit

*View from a TREE AID volunteer*

The 'Climate Express' chuntered into Copenhagen station early on Saturday morning, 12 December 2009, the 'Global Day of Action'. The specially chartered train was full of activists and concerned citizens from the UK, Belgium and France, representing many different groups, and none. The Campaign against Climate Change, based in London, had co-ordinated the UK contingent. The Danes very generously allowed us access to a school gym to lay out our carry mats and sleeping bags during our brief weekend stay.



*Sleepy head  
Hits hard wooden floor.....  
next moment, time to rise!*

Now wide awake, I made my way with some new-found friends to the Klima Forum, the 'Peoples' Climate Summit', temporarily set up for 12 days in a large sports centre in central Copenhagen, a few miles down the road from the Bella Centre, where the official COP15 UN conference was taking place in parallel.

I found a space in the entrance foyer and general 'milling area' to display a sample of TREE AID leaflets and material, so that we had a presence there, as a small but very relevant charity amongst the many other environmental groups, charities and organisations gathered from across



the world. The Klima Forum offered a free and open space where people, organisations and movements from around the world could 'meet, discuss and develop a constructive response to the climate crisis.'



It was soon time to congregate on the streets for the start of the demonstration. I met up with an assorted group of Buddhists and others, at the main train station. After a mind-settling meditation by a huge Christmas tree on the busy station concourse, we made our way to join the march under a suitably green, leafy and holistic banner. At first we were dancing to reggae music from a nearby float to help keep warm, then walking with placards, and finally carrying lighted candles in the early dusk. It was a spirited yet gentle and fun, family-orientated protest march, and the Danish police generally left us to it. Though we heard later that the 'Black Bloc' and some other activists at the end of the procession had been arrested, these were actually a tiny minority of the mass of perhaps a hundred thousand people peacefully exercising their right to demonstrate and express concern over the planet's future.

*Roar and surge,  
sweet, street tide –  
pandas on bikes, dragons, drummers,  
dancers, clowns.....*

The next day there was a chance to attend some of the talks and discussions at the Klima Forum. I saw a striking film from Ladakh, highlighting the disappearance of glaciers and rivers from the Himalayan region, aka the 'Third Pole', which at present supports and gives life in the form of water to nearly half of humanity. The situation here is serious, according to Vandana Shiva and others, as the glaciers are melting at an alarming rate.

I also attended some short presentations and a discussion looking at carbon markets, including the United Nations REDD (- Reducing Emissions from Deforestation in Developing countries) proposal. Deforestation is estimated to be responsible for some 18% of carbon emissions to the atmosphere, not to mention the loss of biodiversity caused by it, and its impact on indigenous forest communities.

According to science, developed countries are responsible for at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  of humanity's greenhouse gas emissions historically, while representing only about 15% of the world's population. The general consensus of the discussion was that the recently invented world trade in carbon has been set up to save money. It allows developed countries to delay and duck their responsibilities to reduce their own emissions of greenhouse gases. Near the end of the discussion an African woman stood up and powerfully blasted us and the whole of the developed world with her anger at our complacency and greed, which in her eyes without doubt condemns Africa and other developing nations to further unbearable suffering.

Back home, and in the TREE AID office the following Wednesday, I remember her feelings more than her exact words, particularly her feelings of anger, outrage and grief. TREE AID is actively engaging with climate change issues in its work and its effects on poor African communities.

As Thursday and Friday pass, the news from Copenhagen is not cheery. Factions persist and it looks like there will be no new legally binding agreement. Over the weekend the weary delegates return home to their own countries.

*Collapsing home, world-sighing.  
It has to be better  
than no accord.*

Jane Spray, TREE AID volunteer,  
22 December 2009

