

Edwin Drummond, 73, Who Turned Climbing Into Activism, Dies

By Daniel E. Slotnik

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Edwin Drummond, a mountaineer and poet who made international headlines by scaling landmarks like the Statue of Liberty as a form of protest, died on April 23 at a care facility in Oakland, Calif. He was 73.

His son, Haworth Ward-Drummond, said that the cause was pneumonia, and that Mr. Drummond had had Parkinson’s disease since 1994.

Mr. Drummond was already well known in climbing circles as a sort of alpine poet laureate before he decided, in the late 1970s, to use the talents he honed on European peaks and El Capitan in Yosemite National Park to draw attention to causes he considered important. He faced legal repercussions for climbing various buildings and monuments, which he saw as a small price to pay for battling injustice.

In 1978 he climbed Nelson’s Column in London with Colin Rowe, another mountaineer, to protest apartheid in South Africa; the next year he climbed Grace Cathedral in San Francisco to protest the incarceration of Elmer G. Pratt, a Black Panther who had been sentenced to life in prison in 1972 after he was convicted of killing a teacher. (Mr. Pratt spent years trying to prove that he had been framed before his conviction was vacated in 1997.)

Mr. Drummond climbed a third of the way up the Statue of Liberty with Stephen Rutherford, a younger climber, on May 10, 1980, also to draw attention to Mr. Pratt’s case. Once the two climbers had ascended, they opened a 25-foot-long banner that said, referring to Mr. Pratt by his Panther name: “Liberty was framed. Free Geronimo Pratt.”

The two men spent 24 hours nestled in the furls of Lady Liberty’s tunic, occasionally shouting answers to queries from reporters, then descended and surrendered to the authorities, who charged them with criminal trespass and damaging government property.



In 1980, Mr. Drummond, top, climbed a third of the way up the Statue of Liberty with his fellow climber Stephen Rutherford to protest the incarceration of a Black Panther who had been sentenced to life in prison. D. Gorton/The New York Times

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“As the men, their arms handcuffed behind them, were led away by park rangers, Mr. Drummond said that Mr. Pratt had been framed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” The New York Times reported. “He added, ‘This has been a climb for justice.’ ”

Park Service officials initially accused Mr. Drummond and Mr. Rutherford of doing so much damage to the statue with pitons and other climbing tools that \$80,000 worth of repairs would be necessary. Mr. Drummond contended that he and Mr. Rutherford had used large rubber suction cups, not pitons, to anchor themselves to the statue’s thin copper skin.

Both men were released on bail, and the charges were reduced to misdemeanors — an indication that whatever damage they had caused was considerably less than the initial estimates.

Mr. Drummond in police custody after he and Mr. Rutherford spent 24 hours nestled in the furls of the Statue of Liberty’s tunic. The charges against them were eventually reduced to misdemeanors. Marilyn K. Yee/The New York Times

For a climber of Mr. Drummond’s caliber, the side of a monument might as well have been a ladder. He soloed the Nose on El Capitan, the 3,000-foot-tall sheer granite cliff that has bedeviled generations of climbers, in 1973, and he made challenging first ascents — that is, pioneering routes — in England, Wales and Northern Europe.

His most daring first ascent was the Arch Wall route up the Troll Wall in Norway, which he climbed in 1972 with Hugh Drummond (no relation). The route took them up the left side of the Troll Wall, the tallest vertical rock face in Europe at about 3,500 feet. The climb took 20 days, during which they were buffeted by rain and snow, ran out of food and risked hypothermia and frostbite.

Mr. Drummond wrote about the Troll Wall climb in “Mirror Mirror,” an article first published in Ascent magazine in 1973. Like much of his writing about climbing, the article thrust readers into the exaltation, affliction, fear and occasional tedium of a long ascent.

In one passage he described his colleague’s foot, bloated after days of climbing: “It looked as though, during the night, someone had pumped Hugh’s foot up. His skin transparent as tracing paper, the foot was a mallet of flesh, the toes tiny buds.”

Much of Mr. Drummond’s poetry was connected to climbing. During some readings he cavorted on a 20-foot-tall metal tripod, which he called a “portable mountain.” His poetry and prose were compiled in several books, including the collection “A Dream of White Horses: Recollections of Life on the Rocks” (1987). The title refers to the name he gave one of his first ascents, on a seaside cliff in Wales.

In the opening stanzas of “To Climb or Not To Climb,” the book’s first poem, Mr. Drummond compares struggling to climb to language:

If climbing is speaking a fluent body language,

yesterday was all Greek

to me ...

Feet stuttered on doorsteps of granite:

a blank face.

Tongue-tied, my fingers

let me down, looking at the ground

as if I’d forgotten my name.

Edwin William Drummond was born on May 14, 1945, in Wolverhampton, England, to William and Madeline (Parton) Drummond. His father worked for the post office, and his mother was a domestic worker.

After graduating from Wolverhampton Technical High School in Wolverhampton, he studied philosophy at the University of Bristol, earning a degree in 1967, and began climbing; he wrote that his first lines of poetry came to him on a first climb. He supported his climbing and writing with a series of jobs, his son recounted in a tribute on the British Mountaineering Council’s website: “fireman, painter and decorator, lumberjack, steeplejack and teacher from time to time, to almost make a living.”

Mr. Drummond’s marriages to Josephine Ward, Grace Davis and Lia Simnacher ended in divorce. He lived in San Francisco for many years before moving to the care facility several years ago.

In addition to his son, from his marriage to Ms. Ward, he is survived by two daughters from his third marriage, Fiume Usnick and Areanna Drummond Simnacher, and two grandchildren. A son, Silvan, died before him.

Mr. Drummond developed his climbing protests of the early 1990s into a global effort, with the assistance of the United Nations, to raise environmental awareness and call for universal human rights. The event, called Climb the World, raised money for both causes and called for people in dozens of countries to climb local hills and mountains in a show of environmental solidarity. Thousands took part.

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