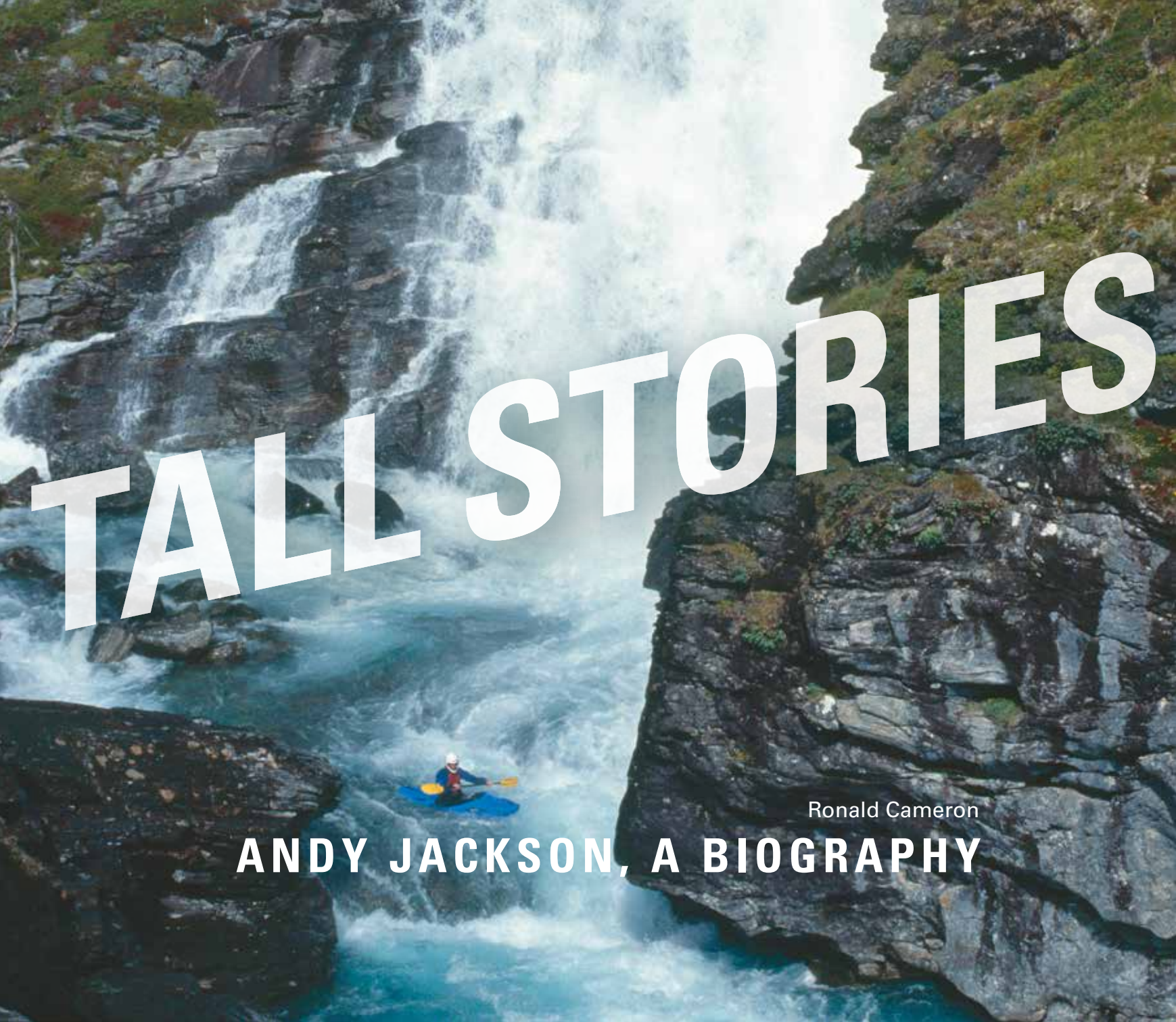


Ronald Cameron



TALL STORIES
ANDY JACKSON
a Biography



TALL STORIES

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ANDY JACKSON, A BIOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

Every year since 2005 kayakers have been lured north for a special weekend that gives them the chance to paddle Scotland's premier playboat river, the Inverness-shire Garry, on the Saturday and the beautiful but intimidating Morriston on the Sunday. The event, rapidly becoming a canoeing institution, is now dubbed 'The Wet West Paddle Fest'.

Probably most come simply to get the chance to run these rivers. Both are dam controlled and when they release offer quality paddling in the semi-arid conditions that afflict Highland Scotland each summer. The Morriston releases for twenty-four hours from mid-day Tuesday each week, which isn't at all convenient for a weekend jaunt. The Garry has consistently presented far greater difficulties and has been the scene of one of Scotland's most protracted conflicts between kayakers and anglers.

Once among Scotland's finest salmon rivers, fished by the rich and famous, the Garry was dammed for hydro-electricity in the 1950s. The redds, or gravel beds where the salmon laid their eggs in the head waters of the river, were destroyed, reducing the fishing to a shadow of its former glory. Nevertheless, water has to be released once a week in summer to keep the river alive. These 'freshets' still attract the occasional angler and although the river has long been paddled the main growth in its popularity stemmed from the short boat revolution of the 1990s. For many years there was a predictable twenty-four hour release which drew boaters in increasing numbers on a summer's evening from as far afield as the grim concrete canyons of central Scotland. It became increasingly clear there was little evidence that there were any fish to catch, a source of much angst to the river owner, Paul Williamson, who was busily trying to sell permits to catch very little. Stories are told of angry Belgian anglers waving shotguns at hordes of youths in colourful plastic boats. Down on the river things weren't much better. The eddy beside the playwave would be full to overflowing with midge food patiently waiting a turn. Anyone who screwed up and didn't get a good ride would be very badly chewed before the next opportunity arose. One absurdly tall boater seemed to rise above all this. Surveying the scene he would announce, with amused disdain, that "It's a zoo" and then ride the wave for a seeming eternity while desperados in the eddy fought for space to roll and wash off the insect life.

Andy Jackson had been coming to the river ever since he was a gangly teenager, blythly ignoring all demands that he should go away. He became the river adviser, engaging in long and ultimately futile negotiations over access. Mr Williamson wanted to impose limits on the numbers who could paddle the river at any one time, to exclude paddlers until 6 pm when the midges' feeding frenzy peaks and from below Whitebridge. Jackson was personally unwilling to accept any of these restrictions and eventually Mr Williamson refused to continue negotiating with him and persuaded the electricity company to instigate a

programme of random releases. Numbers of kayakers fell dramatically. Few were willing to drive all the way from Glasgow to find a dry gulch. A system of espionage and intelligence gathering of such deviousness, cunning and marginal legality that its details cannot be revealed enabled local boaters to enjoy all but exclusive use of Scotland's best play river. These were the famine years for those most affectionate of insects, the Glen Garry midges.

On the face of things, this should have suited Jackson. He could have the river to himself but he continued to advocate open access, both privately and publicly. By the time of his untimely death he had played a significant part in the creation of the Scottish Access Code which, among other things, recognised the right of paddlers to responsible access to rivers. The random releases continue on the Garry but most people are able to suss out when there will be water. The access code effectively ended the campaign to limit the numbers paddling at any one time or to keep them above Whitebridge.

There were about 500 people at the memorial service after his funeral, some from as far away as Canada and New Zealand. There was a familiar smile on the grainy image on the sheet that simply said 'Andy Jackson 25th May 1971 – 5th December 2004'.

"Andy Jackson was a terrible man..." said the minister, pausing for effect.

"He was terribly kind." Another pause.

"He was terribly tall."

"He was terribly principled."

"He was terribly brave." ... "He was terribly sharp." ... "He was terribly caring." ... "He was terribly vibrant."

In front of the her in the packed church after the interment was a gathering of people clearly struggling to come to terms with their loss. Seriously hard people, mountain guides, cutting edge paddlers, paragliders and crazy skiers were visibly red eyed and emotional. The minister could see this.

"It would be insensitive of me and downright untrue to suggest that you will all get over the death of Andy. You will not. You will learn to live with it and in time you will see that he has a part still to play in the present."

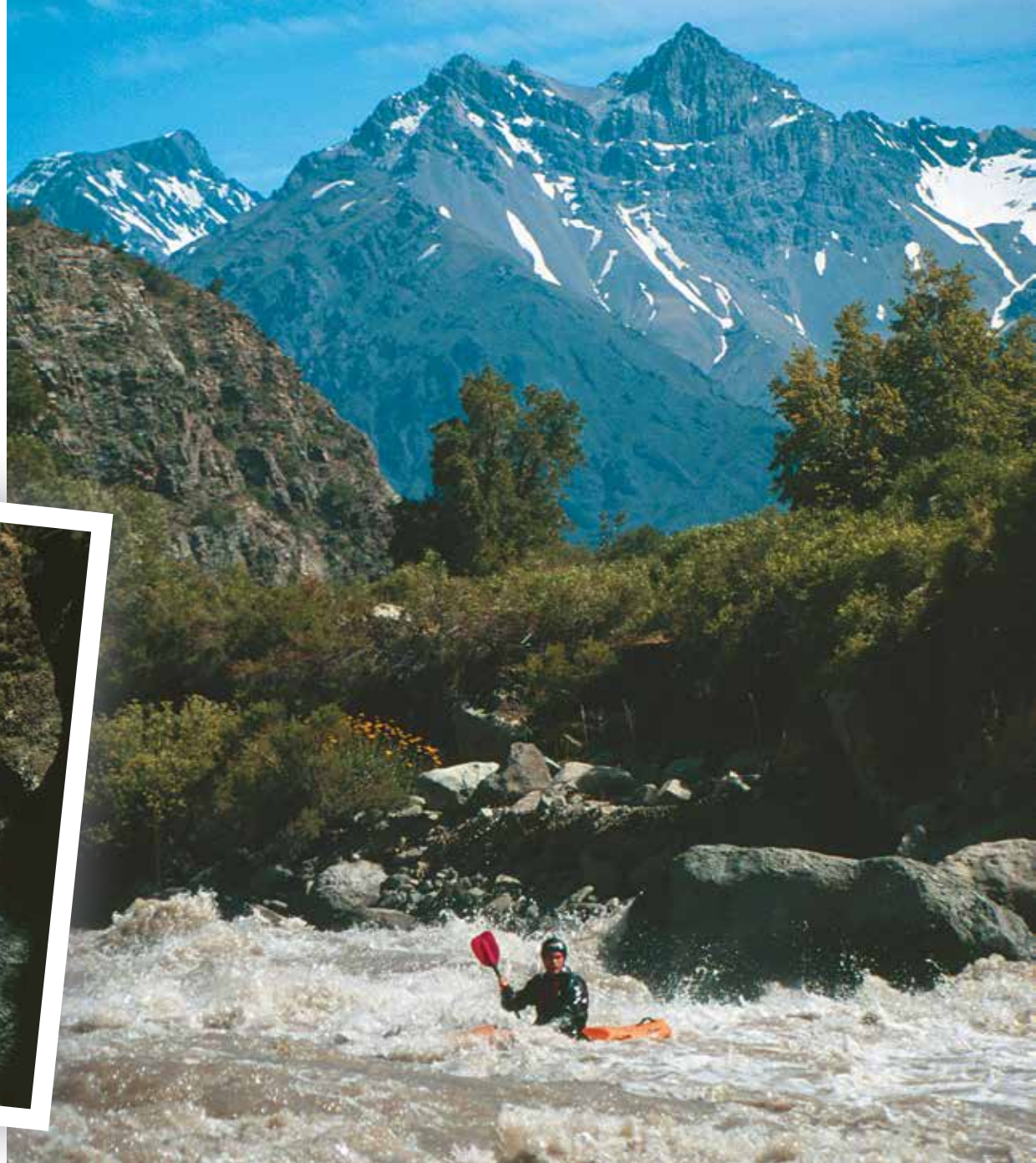
The first Garry and Morriston weekend ran in March 2005. Paul Williamson generously forgot his differences with Andy and agreed to a Saturday dam release and has done so in the two subsequent years. No more fitting memorial could be created to a man who relished parties and the company of others on rivers. The event continues and in time it may be forgotten how it ever got started. Andy Jackson, however, played a major part in the development of Scottish whitewater boating. His legacy goes far beyond an annual event of adrenaline laden paddling and is a story well worth recounting.

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RIGHT, STUNNING SCENERY
AND CONTINUOUS WATER ON
THE RIO MAIPO.

BELOW, ANDY BOATS 'THE
SEVEN TEACUPS' SECTION ON
THE RIO CLARO. ANDY SAW A
SIMILAR PHOTO AS A CHILD,
WHICH INSPIRED HIM TO
PERSIST WITH KAYAKING AND
VISIT CHILE SOME DAY.



CHILE

Antarctica and Africa seem to be the only continents that didn't receive a state visit from Andy Jackson. Bridget has been skiing in Africa and done a bit more there besides so that leaves Antarctica alone for her to visit. Here then is the story of their first visit to South America (joined by Dave Landie and Iain McKendry) written by Bridget and printed in *Playboating* magazine.

Rio Claro

Our ancient guidebook mentioned an upper stretch of the Rio Claro, the 'Veintedos' section or 22 falls. The advice given was that these had been run with 2–4 cumecs of water (a trickle). More water and the river would become impossible to paddle and, with its completely smooth water washed basalt walls, equally impossible to portage or climb out of.

An afternoon spent dicing with death and getting ever hotter, dustier, more thirsty and scratched as we peered into the clear water of the stunningly inviting gorge way below, was enough to convince us that we really wanted to do this run. We hadn't seen any definite portages – just lots of fun drops and one or two that looked kinda tricky – and that was from 200 feet up.

That evening we endlessly discussed the day ahead, and I for one spent the night tossing and turning as glimpses of the river floated through my mind. Had we really managed to see all the drops from the overhanging cliff edge? Was there too much water? Did I really want to run that big fall? How big was it anyway? What about that drop we couldn't quite see, and that river-wide ledge near the end? One thing was certain – once we were in, there was no way out except by boat. This was going to be one of the most committing runs of my life. Was I really ready for it?

Next morning, having chatted up the National Park's head Ranger and gained access to the washed out four wheel drive track that led to the put-in, we rallied our misused pickup through the bush. This process elicited manic grins from Andy and Dave, who took turns in the driver's seat and gasps of terror from those not behind the wheel. A couple of miles later, we surveyed the scratched vehicle and the huge boulders in the track ahead, and admitted that it was time to walk.

Soon we were deep in the gorge, looking around us at a world of brilliant sunlight, sparkling water and deep shadows, the only noise the tumbling of water and the almost audible throb of our hearts. The moment of truth had arrived. A major horizon line in front of us, a knot of fear in my stomach. Andy cheerfully scrambled out on the lip of the fall with his video camera and gave us the thumbs up. Iain was first and then it was my shot. A clean fall, a little over 30 feet. I didn't want to land flat – too many of my friends had hurt themselves that way, but I didn't want to pencil in. Seconds later, I surfaced in the sunshine at the base of the fall, a huge grin, relief, elation, time to relax and watch the others.

Then round the corner to the next horizon line and the next psyche-up. As drop after drop went smoothly, I started to relax and feel less trapped. The river felt so benign, so friendly, and the gorge walls, although completely un-climbable, felt less threatening. And then I realised that we were fast approaching the partially hidden drop that had left me tossing and turning in my sleep the previous night.

From our eddy, the water swirled down a narrow channel over a small drop and then disappeared. Beside us, the cliffs rose in a sheer wall of rock. There was no way to get out, no way to scout, or was there? Attached to a throw line, Andy swam off down the pool to a rock shelf and scrambled out. Dave followed, and the two of them inched along the ledge to the corner and a view. They signalled it was okay and Dave came back to explain the line. I was third to run, but somehow after dreaming of this drop all the previous night, knowing that the other two had made it was small consolation, particularly when there was no choice, no real way to portage. Down the first shoot, over the small drop, spin in the slack water and then over the fall, hard left and moving left to avoid the water slamming into the cliff face opposite. I seemed to be in the air for ages, falling from the light into the dark cave below. And then it was over. Safe once more, my heart still hammering, the adrenaline still surging, as I looked back at the fall. It was twice as high as Dave had said when he had explained the line in our tiny eddy high above – but then again honesty is not always a virtue, what was the point in scaring me beforehand?

We continued on downstream, feeling relaxed and confident but still very alert. Providing we hadn't missed anything on the scout, the biggest drops were now behind us and there were just a couple more bouldery rapids, some more 20 foot shoots and that last river-wide ledge. And sure enough, everything went sweetly. Some four hours after entering the gorge, we emerged, triumphant. Exhausted physically and mentally, we left our boats on the sandy beach at the take-out, and made our way up to the sun loungers on the veranda of the only restaurant for miles around. It was New Year's Eve, and four very happy kayakers swilled cool beer around their glasses and dreamt of the next three weeks and the rivers that were still to come. Boating in Chile was going to be fun.



ABOVE, IN THE LAND OF
THE LILLIPUTIANS
ON THE RIO PALGUIN.
RIGHT, ON THE 'SIETE TAZAS'
(SEVEN TEACUPS), RIO CLARO.



Andy was in the habit of noting details of rivers he had paddled or hoped to paddle in a variety of notebooks. Under the Rio Claro he observes: "Fernando, the Park Ranger with a moustache, has a key to the track (river right). Bring him Scotch Whisky!"

Sometimes the notebooks contain details of who owes whom money and occasionally entries were made in somebody else's hand. There is a comment on the Rio Peusco: "... supposed to be a full on grade 5. Put on at the bridge for a 5km run. The police chased us away." This event seems to have inspired observations on the Chilean police and AJ himself, written by fast jet pilot Dave Landie.

Insight into Chilean culture No. 1

With the demise of the Pinochet era picking on the intellectual classes has obviously become unfashionable in Chile.

Being working class themselves, the police are therefore limited to persecuting the lowest social order... kayakers.

To this end, and having taken great care to wait until we had fully unloaded the pickup and were all but ready to throw ourselves headlong into the Peusco, two of Chile's finest sauntered down the road from their border checkpoint looking like a bizarre cross between Mussolini and Sgt Bilko. I say sauntered yet they probably weren't even that fast. Not that that mattered because they were still easily within the time frame Andy required for his habitual pre-river running ritual of whingeing about his back, stretching and pulling it back into alignment with all accompanying creeks and groans, whingeing about his upset stomach, clearing the aforementioned so violently as to put his back out, whingeing about his back, stretching and pulling it... ad nauseum.

You can forgive these guys for not crediting us with the intellectual ability that fifteen years ago would have assured our position at the head of the torture queue at the local football stadium since the ensuing conversation went something like this:

First, from our point of view.

Carabineros: Wild and graphic gesticulations signifying certain death in the canyon below by means of either a smashed face, two broken arms, a severed torso and two broken legs.

A run-in with Zoro.

We were none too sure which but since the end result was the same we decided not to prolong the guys' clearly uncomfortable (but extremely funny) contortionist act. All, that is, except Andy who, having

somehow construed this gruesome portrayal as 'the nod', gave our two carabinieri a winning smile, two big thumbs up and started to drag his boat to the waters' edge.

From the Carabinieri's point of view we can only assume that the exchange went something like this:

Son of Pinochet: No

Gormless, lanky, apparently stupid kayaker:
Something unintelligible in a foreign tongue.

Son of Pinochet: No, absolutely not. You will die terribly and I will have to remove your body parts from the "Gorge of a thousand gruesome deaths". So no!

Andy: See above

Son of Pinochet: I am a policeman. In Chile when a policeman says "no" it means no!

Andy: So it's ok then?

Whether smart enough to warrant being shot or stupid enough to be allowed to die in the gorge, even Andy understood our now frustrated policeman's brutal mime of our imminent arrest and what might subsequently happen in custody.

We learned two things from this cultural exchange.

Chilean policemen would probably be very good at charades.

If Chilean policemen spent more time fighting crime and less time amusing tourists we probably would not have had our car broken into.

A number of other themes from Jackson's life are also reprised in the notebook; his awareness of wee tracks up river banks, as sharp as a burglar's eye for an open window; his occasionally strained relations with the 'Polis' and other access incidents.