



Wearing fur-lined clothes made from his grandmother's sable evening cloak, Robin Simpson, then aged just four months, and Myrtle before sailing on the Leda from Newcastle to Spitzbergen for a five-month research trip.

Picture: PA Images

# NORTHERN LIGHT

**Myrtle Simpson and husband Hugh are only the second husband and wife to both be awarded the Polar Medal. At 87 the adventurer and skier still takes to the slopes**

**Words: SUZY BASHFORD**

**D**RIVING down a bumpy, single dirt track in the middle of nowhere in the Cairngorms, it crosses my mind that I may be lost because no 87-year-old woman would live in such a remote, unforgiving location. Then I remind myself that I'm going to interview the formidable adventurer Myrtle Simpson, who is no ordinary pensioner.

Myrtle's name is synonymous with world 'firsts' such as being the first woman to ski across the Greenland ice cap and the first woman to scale the 22,000 ft Huascaran peak in Peru. In 2013, to honour her many pioneering escapades, she was awarded the Scottish Award for Excellence in Mountain Culture.

Earlier this year she was awarded the Polar Medal nearly a half century after her husband Hugh. The honour, given to those who have undertaken expeditions in the harshest environment, meant the couple became only the second husband and wife to both receive the honour, following Sir Ranulph Fiennes and his late wife Virginia.

But to assume that Myrtle is driven by the pursuit of the 'first' would be to underestimate her. There is much more to her drive.

For Myrtle, adventuring off the beaten track is a way of life. Or, as she puts it, it's her

ever-present 'endeavour' to be out exploring in the outdoors, whether that's in her home in the Cairngorms, or in the Arctic or across equatorial America.

Following the crowds, or adulation from them in the form of medals or accolades, is not of great interest. Neither is preoccupation with her gender. "I never flew the feminism flag," she says, as we sit drinking tea in her cosy kitchen, clad with expedition photos. "I still think it's rather funny that that's what people talk about, making a 'thing' about being the first woman. That's really not important. It's never been important. It just happened. I just thought 'why couldn't I do it?'"

She gives the impression that she thinks the 'fourth wave' of feminism currently sweeping the media is a bit of a fuss about nothing.

"Modern women have shot themselves in the foot in many ways," she says. "I just had dinner with a friend last night who broke the glass ceiling and was the first consultant obstetrician. She's coming up for 90. She's always been a climber and gone to the Himalayas. Like me, it never occurred to her not to do these things. Nowadays women seem to be making such of issue of it and, because of that, it's not taken as normal."

**"I have never understood why people pay thousands to go up Everest"**

By contrast her tone softens and her eyes light up when she talks about the natural zest for life she sees in children, talking of a photo she's just been sent of her grandson who lives in Toronto. He's the son of her own son Bruce, who has three sons and has carried on the Simpson tradition by holidaying to Greenland with his children (Myrtle has four children with fellow explorer Hugh, three sons and one daughter. She famously spent one month's family holiday canoeing 200 miles through Greenland, when her youngest was only five years old, which was documented by the BBC.) "He's on a slide and, instead of going up the steps and sliding down he is insisting on walking up the slide with a beaming smile and zooming down it instead! You have to have an endeavour in life and I love seeing this little boy with an endeavour. He wasn't going to go up the steps like everyone else."

The thrill for Myrtle is in the unknown, in charting uncharted territory, which is why she turns her nose up at the thralls of climbers herding sheep-like to the Himalayas rather daring to venture somewhere new. She relishes the "terrific feeling" of climbing a virgin peak and the sense of satisfaction gained from this, far superior to more popular, higher summits.

"There's masses of them [virgin peaks] around, which is why I never understand why people want to go to the Himalayas and pay thousands to go up Everest," she says. One of her most exciting, exhilarating memories of conquering virgin peaks was as a newly-qualified radiographer in the 1950s, when she moved to New Zealand in search of higher mountains. At weekends, with a group





of Scottish friends, she targeted the Darran range, which had never been climbed before. The fact that she'd been a committed "week-ender" climber in Scotland, where she built up essential skills, meant she wasn't in the least perturbed by the challenge.

In fact, she sounds almost blasé when talking about the trips' quirks, like making rafts out of lilos to sail down fjords and "cutting steps" into snowy slopes.

The pull of the wild, the escapism of outdoor adventure and the freedom from the shackles of modern life was — and continues to be — intoxicating and addictive for her.

That's why the hesitancy of many parents to allow their kids to have true, free outdoor adventures, coupled with the strengthening grip of health and safety, depresses her so much. She blames this trend partially for the fact that, in her opinion, "a lot of people have completely lost touch with the outdoors".

Having witnessed many societal shifts in her time, the characteristic of our current one which "appals" her most is the selfie culture; the fact many women would rather take a picture of themselves than focus entirely on

the natural vista in front of them is a complete anathema to the modest adventurer, who is more comfortable with her lashes caked in ice than mascara: "What I can't understand is why these girls spend so much time looking at their faces?"

This behaviour is incomprehensible to Myrtle because she is so passionate about pushing herself, both physically and mentally, to her limits and believes there is an enormous amount to be gained from doing this. Above all else she values the adaptability, resilience, courage and — most importantly

**“Old people complain they can't ski as fast but there's nothing stopping us from getting the atmosphere on a crisp winter's day”**

— self-reliance needed in the great outdoors, which she perceives as lacking in culture generally today.

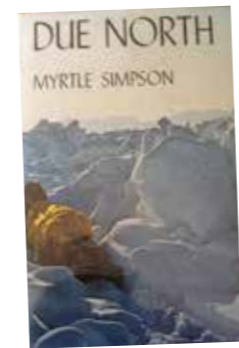
"The nanny state is absolutely appalling now," she says. "People just don't know how to look after themselves. There is little room for personal choice in the urban world. One is not even allowed to die in peace."

While it would be easy to dismiss some of her comments as the musings of an old lady who believes life was better 'back in the day', there's also a definite sense of frustration that women are missing out; a yearning for them to reap the benefits of embracing adventure in the way she has.

A dimension of this is spiritual, with the outdoors proving always to be her "solace" in hard times.

The ultimate test of her self-reliance and pushing herself to her limits was in her attempt in 1969, aged 39, to be the first woman to reach the North Pole.

True to form, she and her husband Hugh and friend Roger Tuftt didn't do this as part of an expensive, well-supported expedition but on foot pulling a heavy sledge over



Myrtle, left, at her home in the Highlands, recorded her adventures with her husband Hugh in the book *Due North*; right receiving her medal from the Duke of Cambridge at Buckingham Palace. Pictures: Myrtle Simpson/Suzy Bashford/PA



unrelenting icy ridges. Rather than yearning for home comforts, Myrtle revelled in the simplicity of this kind of existence with everything you need for life loaded on a few slats of wood on skis.

Her book *Due North* tells the story of extremes, from the elation of first seeing the pole in the distance, to the utter devastation at being unable to achieve her dream and having to turn back because the radio failed. What comes to the fore in these pages is her extraordinary, almost super-human mental toughness.

This steeliness allowed her to deal with discomfort that most of us would wither in the face of, like sleeping in sodden sleeping bags, trying to work equipment with almost frostbitten fingers and near-death experiences on cracking ice.

Over the course of one particularly difficult day, the party only managed to move three-quarters of a mile, despite a constant struggle against the elements.

At times like this, she used to "force" her mind away from the misery by reciting poems over and over.

Such was her commitment to her endeavour, and her ability to slog on in adversity, that when the radio failed and Hugh took the call to turn back, she fought him.

Of the three, it was her who was most willing to put her life on the line by continuing, eventually being persuaded to accept defeat when urged to think of her children, who would have been left orphans if they all died on the polar pack.

At 87 she can no longer attempt these feats of physicality but that doesn't detract from her joy in adventure.

Skiing remains one of her great loves and she can't fathom why so many women her age, still in good health, give up. To her, the taste of adventure is still as sweet, the views still as inspiring and the air still as fresh and crisp as it ever was. She's just travelling a bit slower these days.

"Old people complain that they can't ski as fast," says. "Of course they can't! But there's nothing stopping us getting the atmosphere on a crisp winter's day. You just do it as your own limits."

Similarly, she can't understand why elite

athletes often give up their sports after they win the highest accolades, announcing their retirements shortly afterwards.

"What you get back from sport shouldn't just be this 'thing' [a medal] at the top. It's surely a way of life that you get?" she says.

This determination to savour the outdoor life comes hand in hand with a deep gratitude for it.

This gratitude has been sharpened into focus with her husband, and equally intrepid explorer-soulmate, being admitted to hospital due to serious illness.

But Myrtle is not one to ruminate over the gloominess of a situation and, resilient as ever, says:

"People said 'oh, is Hugh in hospital? That's terrible'. And I say 'it's bad luck but we're in our 80s. We've had a fantastic life. We could have died again and again.'"

Whatever happens in future I have a sense that she will first find comfort in pulling on her hiking boots, sliding into her canoe or jumping on her bike or into the River Spey. After all, life without adventure to Myrtle Simpson isn't living at all.