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# Mountaineering Eden – The Southern Alps

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(Plates 40–46)

New Zealand, the Gift of the Sea, a green oasis in the wilderness of the Southern Ocean, was the last of lands to be discovered by man. When Polynesian seafarers first set foot on this temperate Pacific island, barely 1000 years ago, it was as close to earthly paradise as existed. New Zealand's age of innocence ended abruptly 800 years later with the coming of the Europeans who felled the primeval forest for sheep runs and indiscriminately imported a ragbag of alien fauna and an aviary of European birds. This fatal impact irrevocably altered the balance of nature and consigned to oblivion a unique range of indigenous flightless birds who had roamed the country unmolested by natural predators. The North Island has borne the brunt of this 19th-century ecological disaster but the South Island, the land of the Long White Cloud uplifted high by the Southern Alps which support the world's biggest glaciers outside Asia and the Polar regions, remains one of the world's least spoilt natural wonders.

I had previously climbed the Southern Alps in 1970, so a re-match during my 3½ month sabbatical in 1988 was inevitable. As time was short, objectives were limited to Mount Aspiring and the Mount Cook National Park. In New Zealand, all mountaineering activity is in thrall to prodigious storms that can blight climbing for weeks on end. Inevitably, our visit had to coincide with early November, traditionally a touch late for ski touring, too early for climbing but generally unsettled. Yet I banked on memories of that first visit when I had struck lucky in November and in finding three New Zealanders to climb with – Mike White on Phipps, Mike Brown on Cook and Jim Wilson on Rollaston. This time round, medieval mountaineer recognized the inexorable logic of Hamish Nichols's advice to hire a guide.

NZ guides are a helpful, friendly breed whatever variety you opt for. But once *in situ*, Carl 'Thomo' Thompson (ski guide/pilot/Antarctic veteran) reckoned that my man for Aspiring was Nick ('Guide Anywhere Anything') Cradock, contactable exclusively through his sports shop sponsors 'Macpac'. Only after our telephonic deal did I discover that Cradock was New Zealand's 'Mountaineer of the Year', fresh from Cerro Torre. We met for the first time on 6 November in Christchurch when he fetched up with a hired car for the drive south. Answering to 30 (give and take), Nick was lean, laconic, rolled his own, had chosen to climb and had once been Alpine Guides Mount Cook's chief instructor. Now he did his own thing.

For the past two months, the Southern Alps had been stormbound but though it rained throughout our journey south, the forecast was for a change to Southerlies, NZ's high pressure winds. At Twizel, once a hydro town and now a dormitory for Mount Cook guides, we stopped for tea and a wad with Gary Ball, leader of the NZ 1988 Everest Expedition for the latest on Lydia Brady's claim to have become the first woman to climb Everest solo without oxygen.

The Mount Aspiring National Park, one of ten in NZ, was conceived in 1935, established in 1964 and now covers 288,000 hectares. The Maori name for the region is Titiraurangi, 'The Land of Many Peaks Piercing the Clouds' — which aptly describes this wild country of forest-clad ridges, hanging valleys and heavy glaciation where bad weather and access problems transform any climb into a minor expedition. The mountain itself they called Titita, 'The Uprising, Glistening Peak' — as evocative as the name 'Mount Aspiring' given to it by John Turnbull Thompson, NZ's first Surveyor General, in 1857. Aspiring (3027m) was first climbed in 1909 by Major Bernard Head (AC) — killed six years later at Gallipoli — with the NZ guides J M Clark and Alex Graham. Few other peaks in the area were climbed before the 1930s, none in the Haast range until after the Second World War, and several others not until the 1960s and 1970s.

We reached Wanaka — an ingenuous resort on a site rivalling Annecy's at the end of a 50 kilometre lake — towards evening, signed in at the Park's HQ and for the next hour bumped up and along the Matukituki valley in swirling mists and deepening gloom by a dirt road which forded countless streams up to and over the car's hubcaps. Everything was awash from a myriad cataracts cascading down the hillside like a skein of white ribbons. In the valley bottom, flocks of sheep grazed unconcernedly while seagulls wheeled and swooped amidst the paradise ducks. Cradock, ever economical in his conversation, pronounced that seagulls on a south wind augured well. From our road head we walked another two hours to the NZAC's Cascade hut and next morning, 7 November, awoke to a perfect day. Sunlight now bathed a swath of hoarfrost-bleached meadows running to the valley's edge before merging into the matt green beech forest. At the head of the valley the snow cone of Mount Bevan gleamed like a beacon. Were ever the European Alps so green or their snows so white?

With the costs clock ticking, Cradock's plans for Aspiring — a mere 3027m peak — seemed indulgent. One day to make the Lucas Trotter hut (1465m), 1000m up the French ridge: another half-day to cross the Bonar glacier to the Colin Todd hut. Only the third day was earmarked for Aspiring itself. But any resemblance between NZ and Alpine hut marches is coincidental. The normal route into the Aspiring massif up the Matukituki valley past Shovel and Pearl Flats twice crosses the river by suspension bridges and then takes flight up the French ridge by a path so resembling a rope ladder that it deserves a grade of its own. With food enough for a fortnight we needed all of seven hours to reach the hut. The weather looked good but the night was disturbed by the antics of keas repeatedly sliding off the tin roof. This iron-beaked alpine parrot — capable of killing a sheep and persecuted remorselessly for the trait — is one of NZ's few indigenous species to have survived the European. Intelligent,

fearless, curious and destructive, the kea has become the cult bird of NZ mountaineers.

From the Lucas Trotter hut there are three ways to get to the Colin Todd hut of which the fastest is via the 'Breakaway' – another way of describing the ice cliffs that spill off the Bonar glacier between Mt Joffre and Mt French. Threading a way through serac debris, I remembered the hut's memorial plaque to Ruth Trotter and Ralph Lucas, killed 18 years ago almost to the day by an ice avalanche while attempting this passage. After 2½ hours we emerged on to an ice plateau to be confronted by the gleaming white pyramid of Aspiring 3km dead ahead, rising 1200m sheer from the glacial moat of the Bonar, Therma, Volta and Kitchener glaciers.

In NZ you are always looking over your shoulder to the west for hogsbacks and other bad weather harbingers. Today the sky was cloudless and, with hindsight, our best bet might have been to go for Aspiring while the weather held. But I was not psyched up for this and nor perhaps was Cradock, who earlier had let slip that he had once climbed with someone even older than me. He too was weighing up what he had let himself in for.

The wind which got up later that afternoon was still blowing strongly next morning, 9 November. We made abortive starts at 4am and 6am and finally got off at 8.45am, bound for the NW ridge. This 1225m *voie normale* is rated 10 hours in the guidebook, though Samuel Turner's epic first ascent in 1913 took 60. To get on to the ridge Cradock festooned an ice ramp with a succession of ice screws but after half a dozen pitches, with the ridge seemingly within grasp, he broke off the engagement with the news that the wind was so strong that, even if we reached it, we would certainly be blown off. You need a special confidence to gainsay a guide on his home ground, but to yield ground so hardly won created within me an unresolved inner conflict. Cradock suggested that, to salve something of the day, we knock off Rolling Pin (2245m), the most southerly peak of the Haast range. This ran away to the north, a jagged line encrusted with double cornices billowing out a sheer 1000m above the Therma glacier like the square rigger's topsails from which their names derive – Main Royal, Sky Scraper, Star Gazer, Spike and Moonraker. Rolling Pin, only climbed in 1948, looked an improbable prospect *en face* yet yielded with grace. Dropping down to the hut from the ridge which gave a grandstand view of Aspiring's NW face, I allowed myself a moment's musing on what might have been as the sun beamed down out of an azure sky and the wind scarcely raised a murmur.

Back at the hut, besieged by keas, we braced ourselves for another crack at Aspiring next morning. But long before our 4am reveille, the North-westerlies were rattling and rocking the hut. The issue now was not how to get up but out. Food was no problem but, with a guide, a short stay in even the meanest hut is like a five-star hotel with none of the comforts. In any event, both of us had deadlines so we launched out at 10.15am into the blizzard aiming for Bevan Col. Cradock's last caveat was that descent might be impossible and retreat likely. For the next 1½ hours we marched on a 220° compass bearing, rope-length after rope-length, me in front and Cradock at rear semaphoring to maintain dead-reckoning. We reached Bevan Col as planned and now began a

dodgy diagonal traverse across the glaciated S face of Mt Bevan to knock off Hector Col. Everything hinged on navigation. To wander off east into the Waipara gorge guaranteed a three-day walk out to the coast: a variation west, an unwitting parapente off 1000m bluffs overhanging the upper Matukituki.

At 12.30pm Cradock announced that we were lost and the situation serious. As we sat down to ponder with altimeter and map, I noticed Nick's sac turning a couple of cartwheels before taking off like a chough. Nick's speed from a sitting start was impressive, but his sac was even faster. This normally taciturn man now gave vent with a *Heldentenor's* vocal powers but with a libretto limited to prosaic four-letter invocations. He reaped only the wind but, with sac, snow shovel, bivvy bag, sleeping bag, stove and a fortune in ironmongery at the bottom of the Matukituki gorge, he lifted his game and within half an hour of furious activity we had reached and positively identified the upper gorge of the Matukituki. By 1.40pm we were off the mountain, striding down the valley through sleet, rain and a tangled undergrowth occasionally relieved by the white splashes of the Mount Cook lily. Wading knee-deep through the Matukituki river as if it never existed, we reached the car at 8.15pm and slept that night in Nick's homely lorry/log cabin convertible at Wanaka.

After three days back in Christchurch juggling flight schedules, I caught the 8am Mount Cook Airline's bus bound for the Mount Cook National Park. Our driver Paul had long exhausted his limited gamut of superlatives by the time we stopped for the mandatory view of Mount Cook across the glacier-blue waters of Lake Pukaki. At Mount Cook Village most passengers got off at the Hermitage – now a US/Japanese redoubt – while I rendezvoused for a projected ski tour with my guide Shaun Norman, a former Brit accredited with more Antarctic seasons than most have done Alpine. In NZ mountain lore, the country's first skiers were immigrant Norwegian miners. Mannering and Dixon, on their sixth unsuccessful attempt on Mount Cook in 1893, fashioned skis from the hickory blades of an old reaper and binder. But the history of NZ ski mountaineering proper begins in September 1936 when Colin Wyatt, Britain's outstanding ski mountaineer for three decades, teamed up with Hermitage guide Mike Bowie. Their double traverse of the Main Divide set standards by which all subsequent NZ ski tours have been judged. Downhill ski resorts are not yet an intrusive feature of the Southern Alps but there is endless scope for both heli-skiing and ski mountaineering, and most NZ mountaineers regard skis as an indispensable tool to mountaineering.

Early November is usually the close season for Alpine Guides Mount Cook. For months the weather had been appalling, but today the skies were quite clear. Thus, barely arrived, I was rustling up an equipment package of primeval crampons and clod-hopping Salomon downhill boots – the only pair in stock. To catch the good weather we had to reach the Tasman Saddle hut that same afternoon. This, the best mountain base from which to explore the National Park's ski hinterland, sits uneasily on a precipitous bluff at the top of the Tasman glacier, 48km away from Mount Cook Village. When the sun shines you don't waste two days doing on foot what can be done in 45 minutes by plane. A dozen of these sat out on the airstrip quivering to get airborne but,

due to a gusty wind, only Shaun and I got off that afternoon, skis strapped under the wings and cockpit filled with food. For this 'Flight of a Lifetime' the trick was to fly straight at the mountainside and only back off when the passengers started screaming. After two dummy runs we landed at 5.30pm at 2303m, dumped sacs and skinned up to the Aylmer Col to see the sun sinking into the Tasman Sea.

Down at the hut, a pair of hard-eyed Yankee girls with an assortment of guides and others were generally in good heart for having climbed Elie de Beaumont (3117m) earlier that day. This was our objective for tomorrow – weather permitting. NZ weather preoccupations get tedious, but ten laboured hut-book pages spinning out the frustrations of the Keen Brothers trapped for 11 days a month earlier added substance to such hallowed sagas as H E L Porter's 18 days' incarceration in the Malte Brun hut and Austrian guide Conrad Kain's three successful ascents of Mount Cook in 25 attempts.

Next day, 15 November, we set off at 5.45am for Elie's S face. Shaun now made a sacrifice. To cope with the uncompromising Salomons, I would carry them and climb in my own boots. In descent we would swop: Shaun would ski the Salomons and I his Dynafit 'Tourlites'. On the steep approach slopes, Harscheisen would have been handy but were evidently regarded as pansy. At 7am we dumped our skis under an ice block and, after negotiating a selection of bergschrunds, reached the summit at 9.30am to make Shaun's fastest ascent. Later on in the season, open crevasses and bergschrunds can make the route virtually impossible. From the summit, the mountain backbone of NZ stretched away north and south as a progression of icy crests – cold, remote and altogether wilder than anything in the Alps. A cloud sea enveloped the western approaches, but to the east the eye of faith might have discerned the Pacific.

Next morning we again stole away from the now deserted hut as the sun's first rays lit up the ice dome of Elie de Beaumont. Shaun's plan was to cross the Tasman Saddle, ski down the Murchison headwall and glacier to its junction with the Classen glacier and then climb into the Classen Basin for a tilt at Mount Mannering (2637m). The previous night I had had an uneasy dream about this Murchison headwall. The reality – a glinting sheet of ice riven by bergschrunds – was no better than the nightmare but, once past it, we sped down deeper and deeper into the shadowed bowels of the glacier – skis clattering, thighs tightening, straining for breath in the icy air. One mountain in particular dominated the scene – Broderick, a 2637m pillar of rock buttressed by ice cliffs.

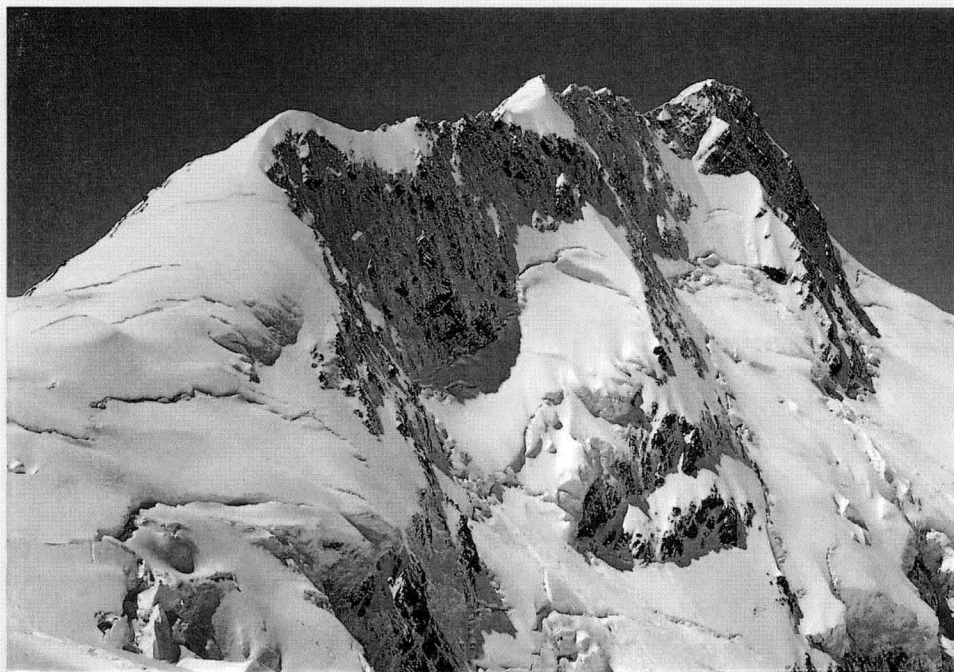
We donned crampons 750m lower and meandered through a staircase of crevasses up to the Classen Saddle. Mannering took shape as a spiralling snow cone surmounted by a vertical ice topping. It looked hours away. At my urging, we opted instead for the SE face of Broderick. Dumping our skis, we climbed up through yet more bergschrunds to a *brèche* which led on to the teetering ice wafer of the summit ridge. I reckoned that this tightrope, dropping a plumb 1200m to the Whymper glacier, was an hour's worth: Shaun bet seven minutes. We did it in eight to reach the top of Broderick exactly five hours after leaving the hut. Five kilometres across the sensational abyss of the Whataroa gorge the E face of Elie de Beaumont, yesterday's mountain, rose a clean 2000m from the pit of the Whymper glacier. We descended swiftly down soft, treacherous snow,

ski'd through the Classen's crevasses and dropped down again to the Murchison glacier — now a cauldron in the afternoon sun. But success was our fan as we stormed back to and over the headwall to make the hut by 3.55pm. In under ten hours we had descended and ascended almost 2000m and snatched the prize of Broderick.

The weather forecast of Northwesterlies for the following afternoon determined that our last shot would be an eight-hour descent of the Tasman glacier. You wonder how this restless river of ice — 29 kilometres long, 3 kilometres wide, over 100 square kilometres in area and up to 600m deep — can exist in the middle of a Pacific island at a latitude equivalent to the Pyrenees. But the genius of the place lies not in its skiing — only the top third is normally skiable — but rather in its backdrop of colossal ice mountains delineated by the galactic skyline of the Main Divide that runs 30 kilometres from Elie de Beaumont to Mount Cook. And it is at the foot of Aorangi, 'the Cloud Piercer', here soaring almost 3000m above its glacial base, that all journeys in the Southern Alps should end. In Maori legend this great mountain was the boy turned to stone on the shoulders of his grandfather, the Earth itself. And it is this vision of youth that leaves the most lasting impression of New Zealand's mountaineering Eden where nature has so unstintingly lavished her favours.



45. *Southern Alps: Classen Saddle, looking NE.* (John Harding) (p 98)



46. *Mt Broderick, 2637m.* (John Harding) (p 98)

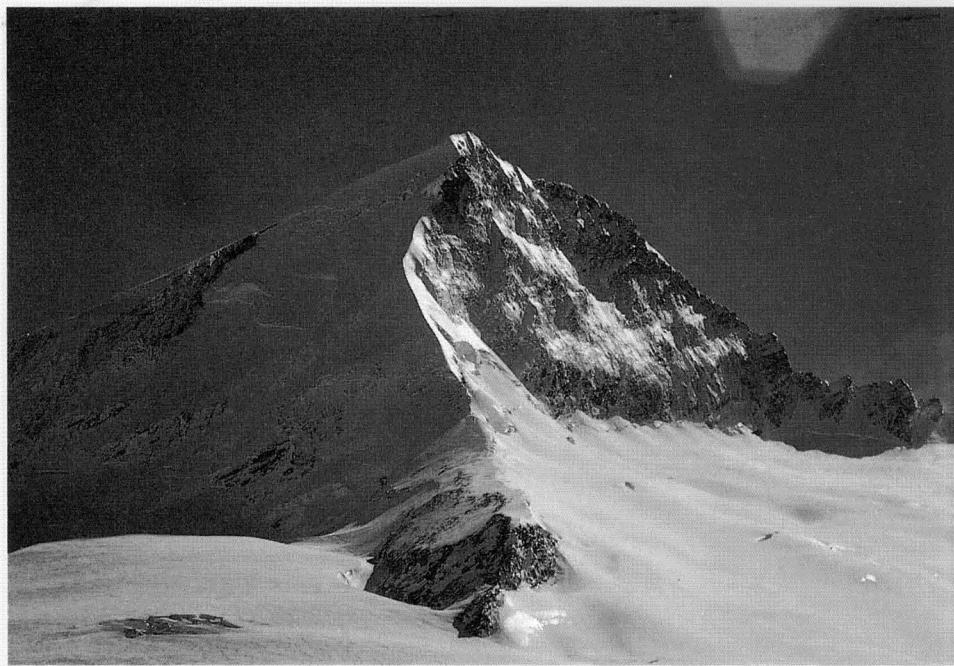


39. *Peak Lenin: ascent from Camp 1 to Camp 2.* (David Hopkins) (p 87)

40. *Southern Alps: looking N from Elie de Beaumont.* (John Harding)  
(p 98)



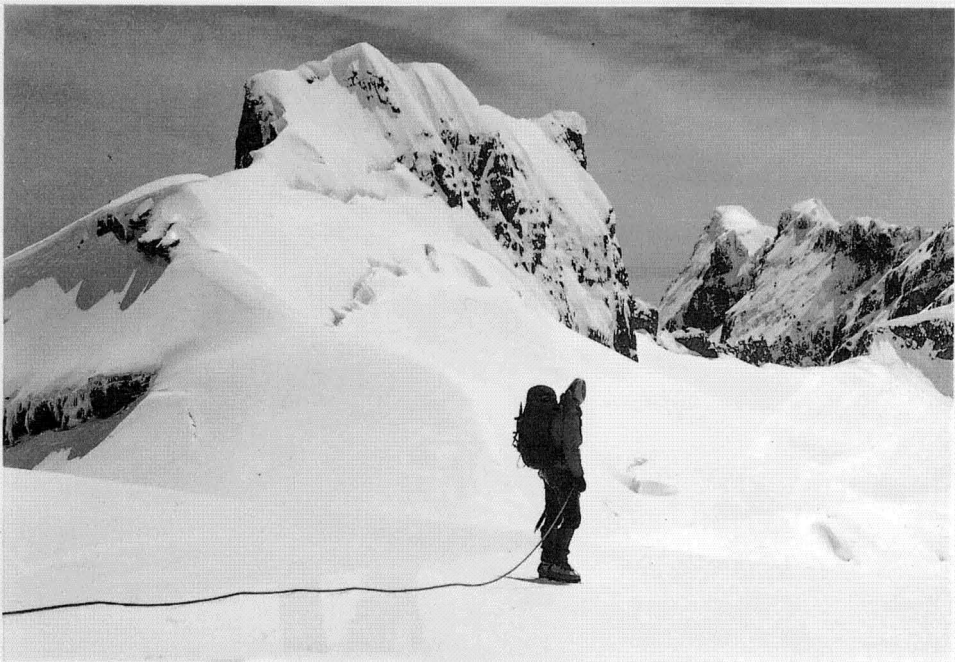




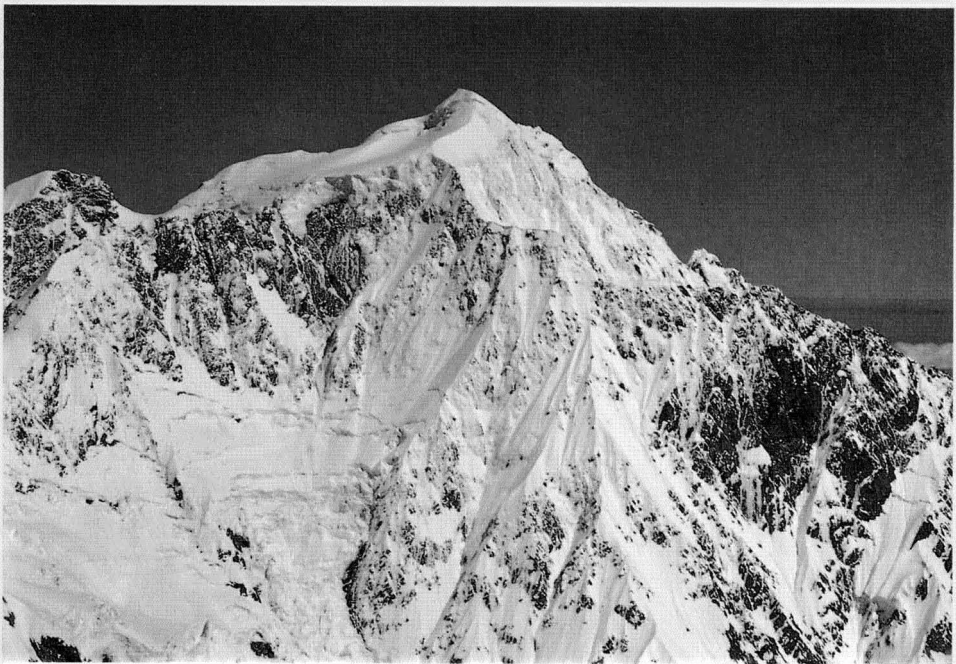
41. *Southern Alps: Mt Aspiring, 3027m, from the south. (John Harding)*  
(p 98)



42. *The Haast range, with Nick Cradock, guide. (John Harding)* (p 98)



43. *Rolling Pin, 2245m.* (John Harding) (p 98)



44. *Elie de Beaumont, 3117m, from Mt Broderick.* (John Harding) (p 98)