KING GEORGE ISLAND

By G. HATTERSLEY-SMITH

(*Note:* Only those place names which have been officially approved are used in this article.)

King George Island is one of the South Shetland group of islands, which lies off the northern tip of the Trinity Peninsula of Graham Land. These islands became, in 1819, the first part of the Antarctic to appear on a map in a state other than blankness, labelled 'Parts Unknown.' Early that year Captain William Smith sighted the islands, and, on another voyage later the same year, landed at North Foreland on King George Island, hoisted the Union Jack, and in the name of King George III claimed the land for the British Crown. Before the close of that year Smith again sailed south, this time in a ship commanded by Edward Bransfield, who early in 1820 anchored for a week in George's Bay. The carefully worded instructions, issued to Bransfield before sailing, make quaint reading to-day. 'You will ascertain,' they ran, 'the natural resources for supporting a colony and maintaining a population, or if it [the land] be already inhabited, will minutely observe the character, habits, dresses, and customs of the inhabitants, to whom you will display every friendly disposition.'

Though frequented off and on from this time by sealers and whalers in the season, and visited by occasional expeditions, King George Island was never permanently occupied until, early in 1948, the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey established a base in Admiralty Bay, a deep inlet on the south coast.

We were a party of three who celebrated Christmas Day 1948 at the base. Thirty-nine years before, Charcot, returning from the south, had spent Christmas at anchor nearby, doubtless in far less comfort than ourselves, who, nevertheless, could not record, as he did, that 'our cardboard Christmas tree, which has been in its box since last year, is brought out again.'

In a recent article in this Journal we read of climbing on 5,000 ft. peaks in Graham Land. On King George Island the highest elevation is rather less than 2,000 ft., and this height is attained only by the uninteresting plateau, which forms the backbone of the island. Ours is, therefore, a very trivial record with little enough about climbing, whose appearance can be justified only because there have been few previous articles on the Antarctic in this Journal.

Between December '48 and March '49, by which time our number had been increased to six, we were mainly occupied in work at base, and in making short boat trips to other parts of the bay to collect rocks or to kill seals for the dogs. During this time, however, on one of several visits of the *John Biscoe*, F. K. Elliott and Lieut. R. Brooke, R.N., came ashore and invited me to accompany them up the 1,000 ft. peak

Photo, R. Moss.]

ADMIRALTY BAY, KING GEORGE ISLAND.

Route described in text is marked. "B" and "P" mark respectively position of Base Hut and place where husky pup was found (see text.)

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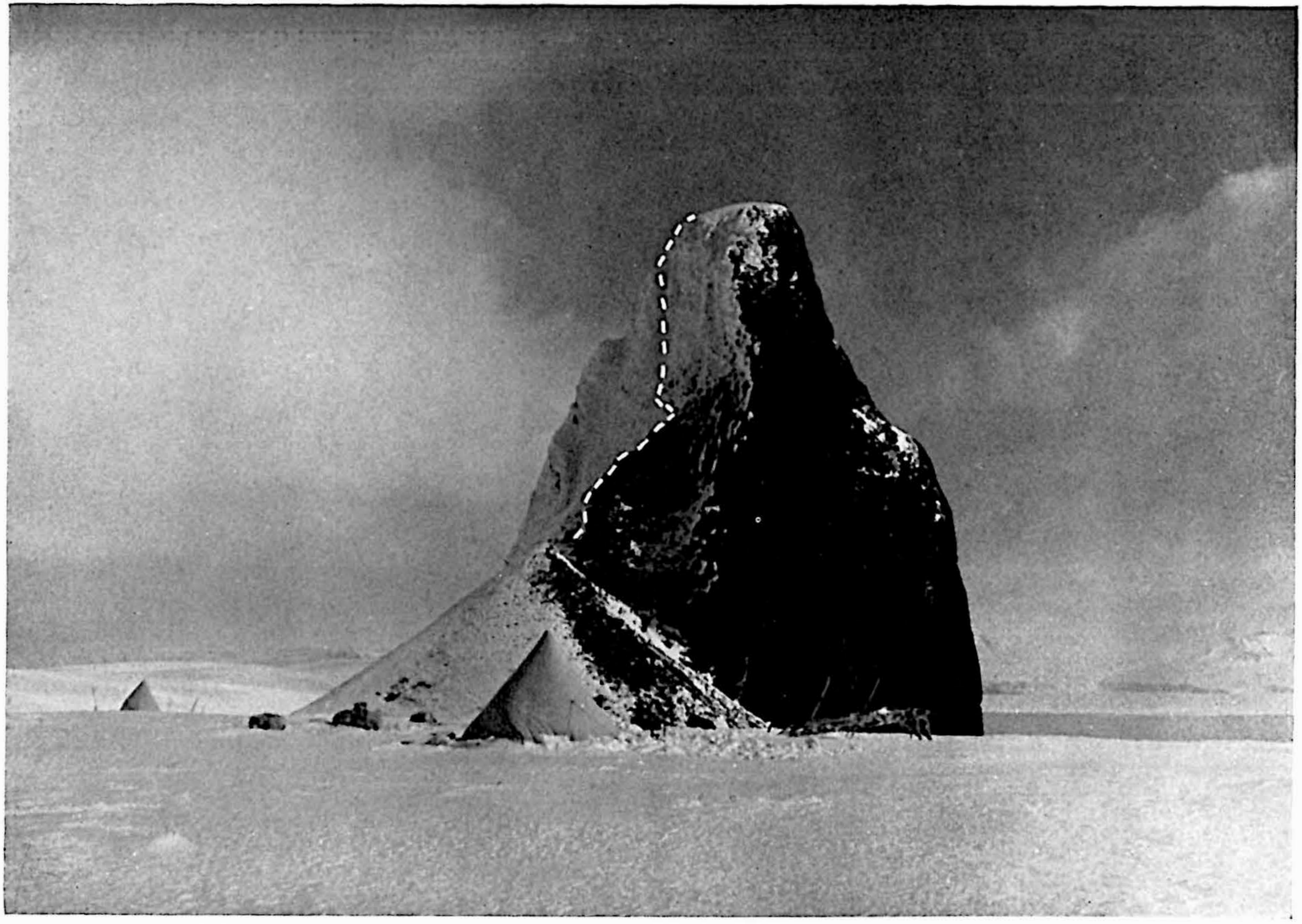
behind the hut for the official purpose of making an ice report. The summit of this peak can be reached by easy ridges on north and south or up a steep snow couloir, which cuts the east face, but on this occasion it was proposed to find ' a better way,' preferably on rock. Above the screes a scoop in the steep rock face was selected for the first part of the climb. An easy first pitch led to a good stance, but from here onwards the looseness of the rock seemed to increase as the angle sharpened. Fortunately the next 150 ft. could be taken in two pitches with the help of a diminutive stance and a doubtful belay halfway. Elliott, who was leading, had to test carefully each hold on the upper pitch, which on this account could probably be classed as ' severe.' At the top of this face we were on a shoulder of the peak, up which we walked to a ridge above. The route here followed a scoop inside and just below the serrated edge of the ridge for the last 150 ft. of the climb. The quality of the rock was execrable or, as Elliott described it, ' worse than Swiss rock.' The angle was not steep but the difficulty lay in avoiding extinction by the shower of scree, dislodged by Elliott, careful climber though he is. Brooke and I came up this last pitch together, keeping as close as possible. A short scramble then took us to the summit. The climb had taken three hours, and it was fortunate that the ice report was not urgently required. The sun had fallen behind the hills as we climbed, and our clothes, suitable for the early part of the climb on sunlit rock, were scanty covering in the chill of evening. So we hurried back to supper down snow slopes, where Elliott in Canadian rubber shoe-packs with barred soles found he could glissade best sideways.

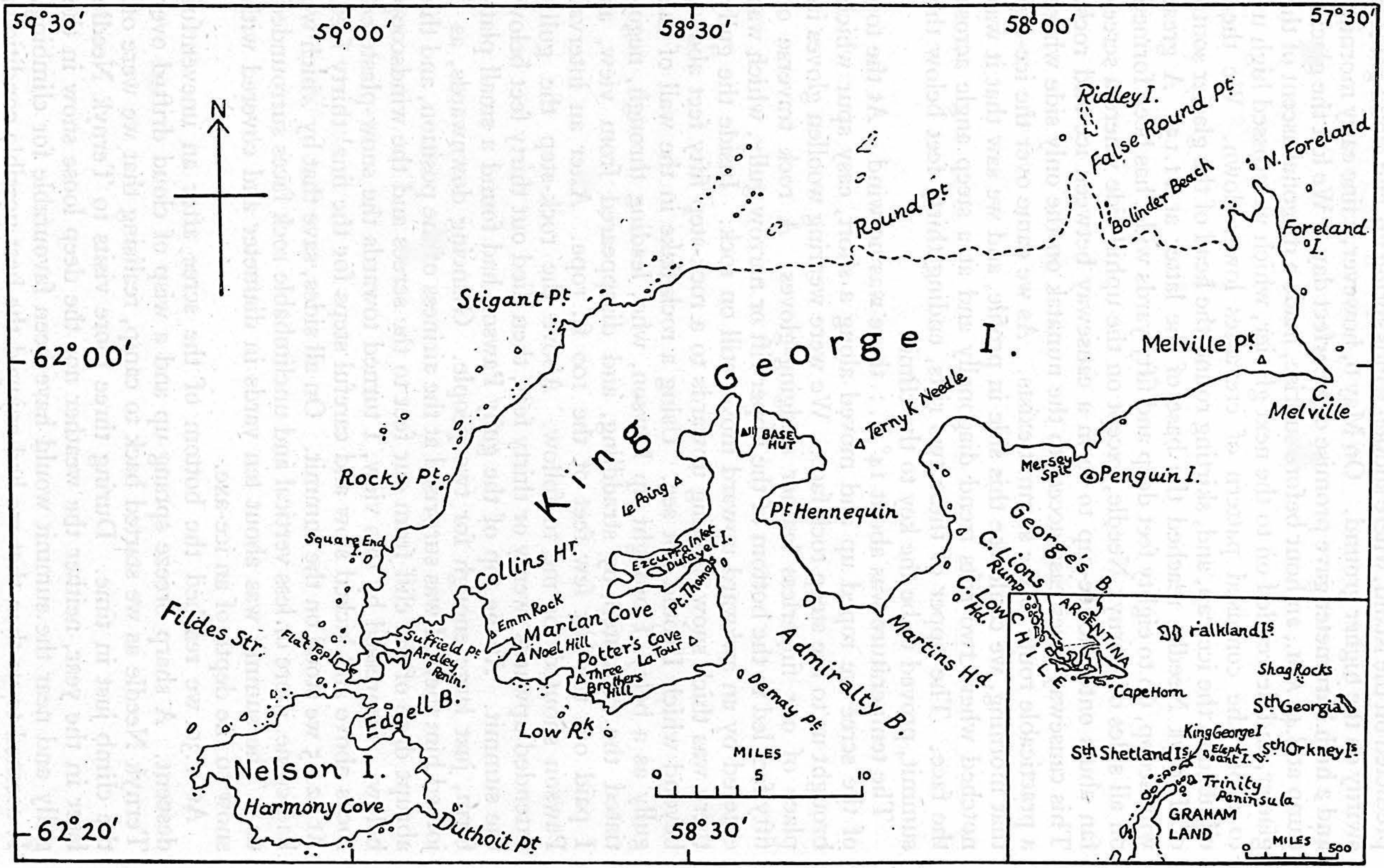
A climb by a dog soon after this under conditions of exceptional difficulty is worth recording. A husky pup, named Joey, disappeared. After an absence of a week, during which there were two severe blizzards, we gave him up for lost, thinking he had been carried out to sea on a floe. On the ninth day, returning at dusk along a ridge from the top of the peak behind the hut, we saw at a distance something green moving, and then recognised Joey with his head in a large green tin, which had contained dwarf beans. The tin was square with a narrow circular opening, and inside it, to add insult to injury, rattled two empty sardine tins. Joey owed his imprisonment to his habit of browsing over the rubbish dump near the hut for tit-bits. When released, apart from a chafed and swollen neck, he appeared none the worse for his blindfold wandering over nine days through two blizzards, and trotted down behind us to the hut.

In the middle of April we started the glaciological work, which formed an important part of the year's programme and involved a two months' camp on the glacier three miles south-east of base across the bay. We had long been attracted by the view from base of Ternyk Needle, a nunatak which rises some 300 ft. above the ice-cap to a height of 1,300 ft., and decided that with favourable weather we might attempt to climb it from the glacier camp. Calm clear weather for eight hours would be needed for the climb; such conditions can seldom be



Photo, G. Hattersley-Smith.]

TERNYK NEEDLE, KING GEORGE ISLAND.
(Route described in text is marked.)


59°30'
59°00'
58°30'
58°00'
57°30'
62°00'
62°20'
58°30'
N
King George I.
Ridley I.
False Round Pt.
N. Foreland
Bolinder Beach
Foreland I.
Round Pt.
Stigant Pt.
Melville Pt.
C. Melville
Ternyk Needle
BASE HUT
Mersey Spit
Penguin I.
Rocky Pt.
Le Poing
Pt. Hennequin
George's B.
Square End
Collins Hr.
Ezcurra Inlet
Dufayel I.
Pt. Thomas
C. Lions Rump
C. Low Hd.
Martins Hd.
Admiralty B.
Fildes Str.
Flat Top I.
Suffield Pt.
Ardley Penin.
Emm Rock
Marian Cove
Noel Hill
Potter's Cove
La Tour
Three Brothers Hill
Demay Pt.
Edgell B.
Low Rk.
MILES
0
5
10
Nelson I.
Harmony Cove
Duthoit Pt.
ARGENTINA
CHILE
Falkland Is.
Shag Rocks
Cape Horn
Sth Georgia
King George I
Sth Shetland Is.
Elephant I.
Sth Orkney Is.
Trinity Peninsula
GRAHAM LAND
MILES
0
500

predicted on the island, where sudden winds spring up, and cloud gathers swiftly on the higher ground. On May 6, however, a fine early morning and a high barometer gave promise of a perfect day. We left the glacier camp at 8.45 A.M., an hour before sunrise, made a diagonal ascent of the glacier, and descended on to the next glacier, which we crossed high up to avoid the confused pattern of crevasses lower down. We then climbed to the ice-cap, and, skirting round the head of the glacier south of Ternyk Needle, reached the base of the latter at 11.15. A great windscoop, up to eighty feet deep and fifty yards wide, has been formed on all sides of Ternyk Needle, except on the uphill side where a scree-fan abuts onto the ice-cap to form a causeway between ice and rock. This causeway gives easy access to the nunatak on the only side where a practicable route to the summit exists. As we came over the ice-cap that morning, we could see this side in profile, and we saw that it was notched where two rifts trend diagonally and at a steep angle across the face. The upper of these two rifts, ending thirty feet below the summit, proved to be the key to the climb.

The temperature was about 14° F.: there was no wind. At the top of the scree we roped up and moved along a short, easy spur which brought us to the steep rock face. We were wearing woollen gloves in place of our fingerless leather sledging-gloves. A rock traverse of fifty feet led to the bottom of the upper rift or narrow gully, which was entered by an awkward upward move, still on rock. Inside the gully there was thick snow, passing upwards to a rock-step fifty feet above, beyond which I could not see. Using a rock flake in the wall of the gully as a belay, I brought up Pawson, who, leading through, negotiated the rock-step by straddling, and disappeared from view, as I paid out the last few feet of the 100 ft. rope. After an interval Pawson shouted for me to follow. Above the rock-step the gully extended upwards twenty or thirty feet, then died out thirty feet below the summit. At the top of the gully Pawson had found a small platform, just large enough for two people. Glancing downwards, as I joined him there, I was surprised at the airiness of the position, and the abrupt drop of the cliff from our feet to the screes and the windscoop below. Impressed by this view, I turned towards the snow-plastered rocks above and kicked slow and careful steps for the final thirty feet. At 12.15 we stood on the summit. On all sides, save that by which we had come, more or less vertical and unclimbable rock faces surrounded us. The summit was about ten yards in diameter and covered with snow to the depth of an ice-axe.

At 1.30 we reached the bottom of the scree after an uneventful descent. A sharp breeze sprang up and a wisp of cloud drifted over Ternyk Needle as we started back to camp, realising that we were off the climb just in time. During three more visits to Ternyk Needle later in the year, neither the weather nor the deep loose snow in the gully and near the summit would have been favourable for climbing. It seemed to us then that we had enjoyed the best possible conditions on the day of our climb.

In the middle of June we returned to base from the glacier camp in time for the Midwinter's Day celebrations. By the middle of July the sea ice all over the bay had become safe for travel. On July 22, B. Jefford, K. Pawson, D. Jardine and I left base with two sledges and eighteen dogs to make a topographical and geological survey of the island. We made camp that evening near Demay Point. The following day we made an ascent of La Tour, which is sheer on all sides, except where a shoulder leads on steep snow to the top.

A run of bad weather prevented us from reaching Potter's Cove, our next objective, for seven days, for two of which we continued in camp near Demay Point. On the third day a fine spell enabled us to relay our loads up the glacier to the col below La Tour, where we now spent three days in a blizzard. The next day we were able to continue over the ice-cap and descend the glacier into Potter's Cove, where we made camp at the foot of Three Brothers Hill.

Below our camp on the moraines there stood a weather-beaten post, bearing the names of the members of the German ' Grönland ' Expedition of 1874, stencilled on a copper plaque. On the shore was a big iron cauldron, in which blubber had been rendered down, and nearby were strewn planks and the vertebrae of whales, bleached, half-buried in the snow—relics of the whaling days of long ago. There is an aura of sadness over any abandoned scene of man's activity, but more especially where, to quote an early visitor to Potter's Cove, ' the land wears now a most desolate and solitary appearance.'

> ' If a step should sound or a word be spoken,
> Would a ghost not rise at the strange guest's hand ? '

Three Brothers Hill is said to resemble the ' three joints of the fingers when the hand is closed.' The 300 ft. rock buttresses of the hill are divided by narrow gullies, filled with snow, leading to gaps in the summit ridge. The middle and western peaks are easily reached from the top of one of these gullies, but the eastern peak can only be reached by a difficult rock climb, which we did not attempt.

We were weather-bound at Potter's Cove five days, until at length fine though overcast weather in morning and early afternoon enabled us to travel on sea ice along the coast a few more miles to make camp near the entrance of Marian Cove, as another blizzard descended on us. Next day, the blizzard spent, we made a short excursion on foot into Marian Cove, above which rises Noel Hill in three ridges to about 900 ft. I was able to go up one ridge and down another on easy snow and rock, pausing at the top to take a round of angles. The latter task, cold on the fingers in a stiff breeze and near-zero temperature, could later be used as an excuse for the climb to the surveyors, by this time probably impatient to move on. The shapely corrie between the two southerly ridges of Noel Hill has now lost its ice in the general glacial recession, signs of which are apparent along most of the south coast of the island. When we arrived back to camp, the surveyors were sitting on their loaded sledge, waiting for us to load ours, and drinking coffee

in the meantime. We hurriedly ate our mid-day chocolate and in half-an-hour we were all away to the next camp, which was to be near Emm Rock.

The following day dawned misty and overcast, but by noon had cleared to become one of our very few perfect sledging days ; it was calm and cloudless, the temperature rather below zero. We ran out on a hard, crusted surface into Collin's Harbour, where we picked up a seal, killed at a blowhole the night before, which we now towed in two halves, one behind each sledge. That evening we made camp at Suffield Point. With the dead seal, representing four days' extra dog food, and the improvement in the weather, we now felt that time was on our side for completing the circuit of the island on this trip. Unfortunately we had yet to learn that an average of only one good travelling in six was to be our lot during ten weeks' sledging on the island.

Next day, while the surveyors sledged over to Duthoit Point on Nelson Island, Jardine and I crossed to the north coast with the intention of making a circuit of the south-west toe of the island via Flat Top Island, Fildes Strait and Ardley Peninsula. After reaching the north coast, we were able to walk round on the sea ice all the way, except in the narrowest part of Fildes Strait, where owing to a strong race the sea does not freeze, and we had to plough through the deep drift-snow of the ice-foot. Flat Top Island presents an interesting problem for a future climber with more time at his disposal ; its cliffs on each side and at the seaward end rise vertically for 400 ft. and show columnar structure of a most spectacular kind. These cliffs are only broken by very steep narrow gullies, one or other of which might ' go ' by a severe route. But the first landing on the ' flat top ' of the island in some vague future will most likely be made from the less steep landward end, where it seems that a possible, though difficult, route exists. As we followed the coast to Fildes Strait, the peaks of Livingston Island showed clearly, fifty miles to the south-westward, dominated by the massive outline of Mount Barnard, rising ridge upon snowy ridge to its summit at nearly 6,000 ft. It was dusk when we crossed Ardley Peninsula near a wind-fretted marker post, left by the survey party from *Discovery II* in 1935. We reached camp at 5.45 P.M., when the day ended with ' dried fruit, marmite, then pemmican.'

We needed one more day to complete our survey of the rocks on this part of the island. So the next day saw us chipping rocks from the twin hills to the north of camp to the peak above Flat Top Island, and from there to Ardley Peninsula and along shore back to camp. Chipping rocks in a biting wind and temperature about minus 10° F., unrelieved by any glimmer of sun, must be singularly unattractive even to the most inspired geologist. Jardine, however, in pursuit of his theories on the structure of this part of the island, was indefatigable, and I could only fidget coldly at each outcrop. At one halt I tried the ascent of the peak above Flat Top Island, but was defeated some thirty feet from the top, where the snow lay thick and loose on the rock, and a slip, with no second to hold me, would have ended near the shore

600 ft. below. That evening I find we had seal and powdered egg scrambled for supper, as a change from pemmican ; then iced the sledge-runners in readiness for the morrow. At this stage we were still hoping to carry out our original plan of sledging round the whole island in the one trip. It was obvious, however, that the return from the west would have to be made along the plateau above the north shore, as the sea ice along that shore beyond Square End Island appeared to be either absent or, at best, only a narrow, hummocky strip below threatening ice-cliffs. For travel on the plateau we wanted one of the infrequent days when it is not covered by a pall of cloud : such a day was necessary for the survey work and in order that we could see and avoid the crevasse systems, which occur where the plateau ice falls steeply to the north shore.

A break in the weather, or rather a return to the usual weather, imposed a delay of three days. The first two days brought a blizzard, with its attendant rise in temperature to nearly freezing point. An entry in my diary, which reads ' didn't finish yesterday's candle till to-day. Cleaned teeth,' suggests events of importance on such days as these—and they were many during our total sledging time. On the third day there was still low visibility on the plateau, but a seal, which we killed on the sea ice in Edgell Bay, compensated us in dog food for the delay.

We started next day, and made good progress as far as the part of the plateau above Rocky Point, where closing visibility and crevasses, looming ahead, obliged us to camp. Here we stayed for the next four days in a cloud, which only occasionally lifted to give us glimpses of the coast. On the fifth day we were able to make a modest advance in the direction of Stigant Point, until gathering plateau cloud again forced us to camp. A blizzard started next day and continued for two more. The weather cleared the following day and we decided to make south for Admiralty Bay, for it was now certain that we could not complete the circuit of the island on our remaining rations. Our attempt to descend to Admiralty Bay via the glacier north of Le Poing was frustrated at the top of the glacier, almost in view of base, by wide unbridged crevasses, which could have swallowed up dogs and sledges. The longer alternative route to base lay round the plateau at the head of the bay and then via Ternyk Needle, but cloud had again descended on the plateau, and there remained all next day. The day following smiled on us ; clear and cloudless, it gave us our best run of the whole sledge trip, twenty miles to base in seven hours. Good visibility was essential on this route, as the steep narrow ridge, leading down from the plateau to Ternyk Needle, lay between ice-falls on either side and had to be ' hit off ' exactly. We had been away from base nearly five weeks, but only accomplished half our intended programme.

Soon after our return from the first sledge journey, we made a three-day trip to Ezcurra Inlet to complete our survey of this part of Admiralty Bay. Dufayel Island, a mile long and a little more than a quarter of a mile wide, rises in the middle of Ezcurra Inlet to a 600 ft. knife-edge

ridge, running the length of the island. From the sea ice on one side to the sea ice on the other we crossed the island on steep snow slopes via a col, on either side of which we could view with respect the formidable series of gendarmes, which would make the complete traverse of this ridge a fine expedition. We also gazed in amazement at the magnificent cascade of ice-falls from the heavily-corniced edge of the plateau, a thousand feet above the north side of the inlet. After crossing the inlet to the south shore, we climbed to the ridge and onto one summit of the double peak above, separated from the other summit by a deep rift, too wide to jump. And so, back along the ridge, we returned to Point Thomas and camp. Next day, September 3, we sledged back to base.

On September 15 we left base to sledge round the eastern half of the island and so complete our survey. The weather, we said, must surely be kinder to us on this trip than on the last and we hoped to be back at base within three weeks. A run of nearly twenty miles to camp at Mersey Spit on the first day seemed to justify our hopes. But at Mersey Spit we were to stay for a week of intermittent blizzard, low cloud and poor visibility. Similar weather delayed us four or more days at each of our other camps at Cape Melville, North Foreland, Bolinder Beach, Ternyk Needle and Cape Lion's Rump. We were away from base thirty-seven days altogether and on two-thirds of those days we were weather-bound.

From our camp at Mersey Spit we crossed on sea ice to Penguin Island, the central and highest part of which is formed by the crater of an extinct volcano, active in geologically recent times. The steep cliffs on the south side of the island we traversed along the narrow ledge of ice, which clings to the rock a foot or so above the high tide level and is of practical value to the geologist, as it enables him to examine otherwise inaccessible sections of the coastline. Occasionally, where the ledge shrank to nothing round smooth rock corners, we resorted to the snow slopes below the corniced top of the cliffs.

From our camp at Cape Melville we climbed the 1,600 ft. Melville Peak via the glacier on its north-east side. We reached the top none too soon, for, even as we stood there, billowing cloud from the west obscured the view and chased us down to camp along the corniced east ridge, whose south side is an ice-fall above the sea. From Cape Melville in a clearance of the weather we could see the mountainous Elephant and Clarence Islands, ninety miles away to the north-east. To the south-east twenty miles away lay Bridgeman Island, a volcano rising 700 ft. out of the sea, which Bellingshausen, on his southern voyage in 1820, named ' Helena Rock,' evidently thinking that Napoleon, at that time still languishing on St. Helena, might suitably have been detained there.

The route from Cape Melville to North Foreland lay via a narrow col, the ice-shed between a north coast glacier and an east coast glacier. The steep slope from the plateau onto North Foreland cost us the shaft of an ice-axe, when a sledge overturned on the way down ; three days

later we had a hard slog up this slope on our way to Bolinder Beach. At Bolinder Beach six men from *Discovery II* were stranded for nine days in 1936 after the loss of their motor-boat. Somewhere under the ice-foot here, if not long since carried out to sea, lie Dr. Ommaney's sea-boots, of which he writes in *South Latitude*: 'If you ever go to the second point west of the observation camp and find them there, you may keep them. Pray that you never do!' The 'Esther Harbour' of the early writers probably lies near Bolinder Beach; it was in 'Esther Harbour' in 1821 that a party from a sealing-ship wintered in the Antarctic for the first time on record.

On October 12 we crossed from the north coast to Ternyk Needle on one of those days of good visibility on the plateau, which in our experience occurred about once a fortnight. From Ternyk Needle we went on foot to the lower slopes of the peaks at the head of George's Bay to collect geological specimens: the highest of these peaks we later climbed from base in eight-and-a-half hours.

Before returning to base, we visited Cape Lion's Rump, which we reached from camp near Martin's Head by traversing along the coast-line, where we found some climbing and scrambling on stacks and rocky promontories among nesting Cape Pigeons. Cape Lion's Rump is the site of a large penguin rookery, and a breeding-place for elephant seals. As an early writer remarks, 'all of these have a very disagree-able smell.' On October 22 we arrived back at base.

When six weeks later the *John Biscoe* arrived and three of us embarked for the Falkland Islands, we could look back on a full and happy year on an island which was once described as 'only fit for a temporary residence for the sea elephant, the seal, and the different aquatic birds.'