

---

TOM HOYLE

## New Zealand 2017



On the Maximilian Ridge of Elie de Beaumont during the first winter ascent. (*Ben Ellis*)

An exceptionally warm and dry spring in the Southern Alps made for a short season last year. The rapid removal of snow coverage during this warm spell made glacier travel increasingly arduous and good freezes scarce as early as October. As climate change seems here to stay, this is likely becoming the norm and serves to discourage all but the most committed – see the Maximilian Ridge climb below – from accessing the more demanding routes with longer approaches in the Aoraki Mt Cook region. It also means that ice and snow conditions on lower peaks are harder to come by outside of winter. These conditions, combined with an increasingly time-poor population, have pushed trends towards shorter and more accessible objectives, with ski touring and alpine rock climbing trending in popularity over more traditional mountaineering.

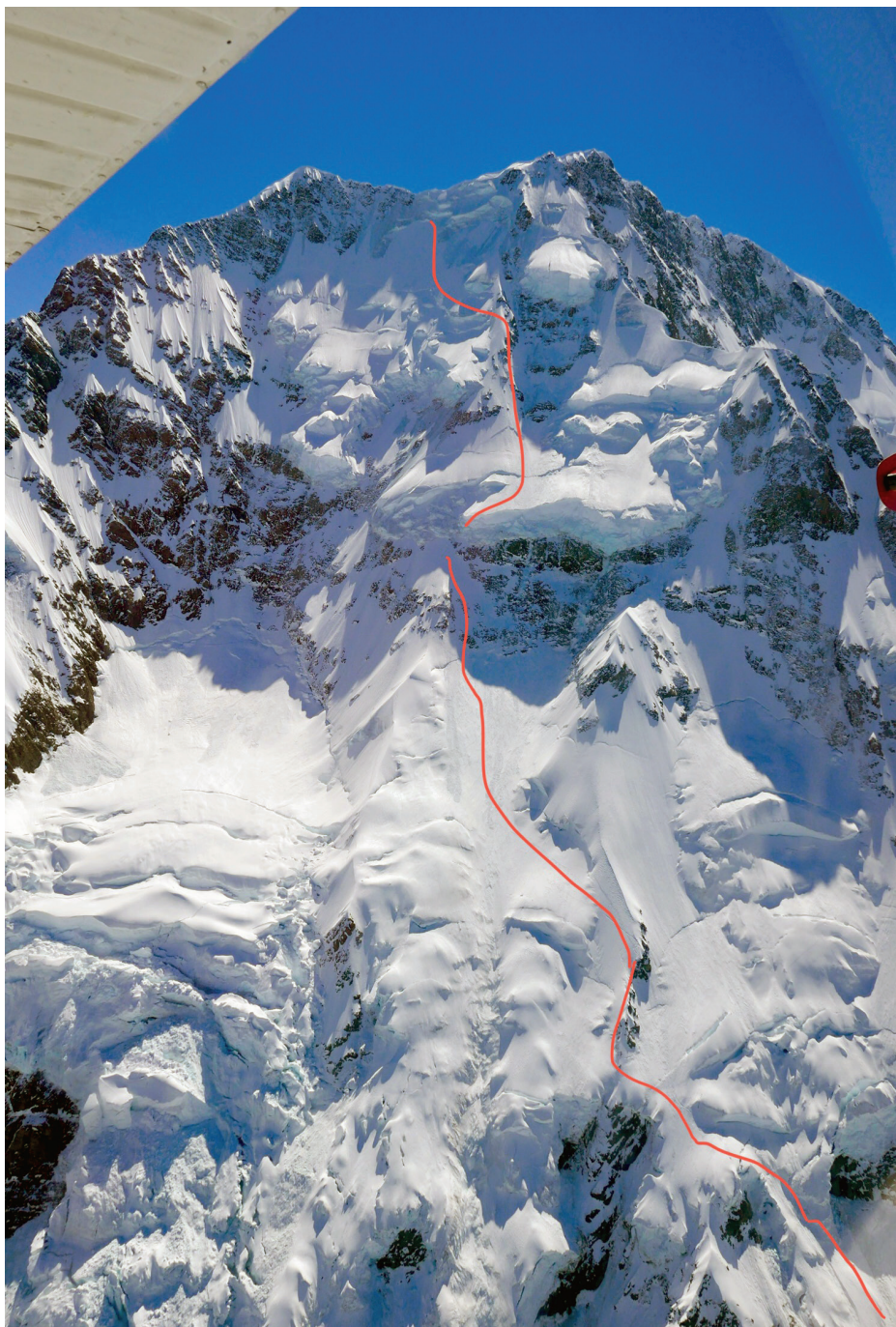
The glacial retreat has also led to geological instability in a few key sites on moraine walls and terraces, further increasing the difficulty of access. Murchison hut, at the head of Murchison glacier, has been closed due to slope instability and the opening of a large fissure nearby. The traditional route over the Main Divide from Hooker glacier, via the cable route up to Cop-

land Pass, is now unsafe, and the removal of Copland shelter is imminent.

Despite these challenges, the alpine community continues to seek adventure in these regions. New winter ice routes are added each season, helped by the focus of the Darrans Winter Climbing Meet based out of Homer hut, and the Remarkables Ice and Mixed Climbing Festival. The boom in ski touring has contributed to activity in searching for first ski descents of peaks and the completion of the 'Ski Rhapsody' addition to the classic Symphony on Skis traverse of the Southern Alps. This eastern link by Richard O'Neill-Dean and David Hamilton completes the traverse by skis from the headwaters of the Rangitata river in the east, all the way to the west coast through the heart of Aoraki Mount Cook national park.

The Maximilian Ridge of Elie de Beaumont (3109m) was first climbed in January 1951 by Ed Cotter, Ed Hillary, George Lowe and Earle Riddiford but had never been climbed in winter. In August, three Cantabrians, Jack Grinstead, Josh Mitchell and Ben Ellis headed to the Whataroa valley for a second try at the Maximilian. Their first, a summer effort the previous Christmas, was thwarted by cloud. The climbers concluded they would have better luck during the winter season. Over six days, the trio made the long approach via the remote Whataroa valley, on the west coast of South Island, then completed the climb and descended the Tasman glacier, on the opposite side of the range, to Mt Cook Village. Ellis offered a grade of 4+ on the Mount Cook scale, with a crux of about seven pitches leading to the summit ice, with powder snow on the south side of the ridge and mixed climbing on the north. On the third day, a huge cornice collapse persuaded the trio to take a diversion: descent to the Burton glacier and then re-joining the ridge via the first ascent route to the north of Roderick Peak.

On 27 October Ben Briggs and Tom Grant (UK), and the Italian Enrico Mosetti made the first ski descent of the Caroline Face of Aoraki Mount Cook (3724m). The Caroline is the most dangerous and difficult face on Aoraki and consequently the last to have been ascended, on 6 and 7 November 1970 by John Glasgow and Peter Gough. Almost 2km in height, the face had featured in Devon O'Neil's notorious list of un-skied challenges and had already cost the lives of Magnus Kastengren and Andreas Fransson, like the successful party based in Chamonix. Tom Grant had skied big faces in New Zealand on a previous trip in 2015 but fickle conditions kept him off Mount Cook. This time they found the line had changed, and for the better, and immediately flew to the Plateau hut to take advantage of the first available weather window, despite not having skied since the previous May. An inspection from the air convinced them that their proposed line was feasible. The team found deep snow on the east face and the east ridge, reaching the summit at 9am. They made two abseils on abalakovs to reach the face and found cold powder: ideal conditions. Grant reported that while they had skied steeper faces in the Alps, the critical aspect was staying on route. Mosetti said: 'The biggest thing I've ever skied, the biggest line I could imagine to ski, and in great powder conditions!' The three still had time to ski the central *Zig-Zag Route* on Malte Brun while working up a number of future projects.



The route of the ski descent of Mount Cook's Caroline face. (Tom Grant)