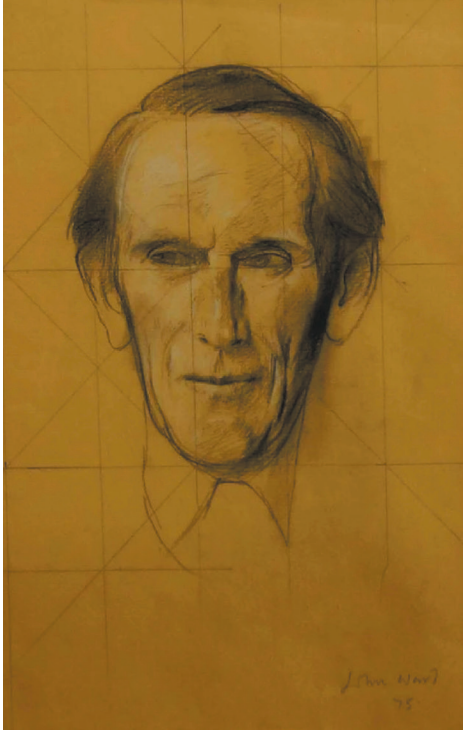

History



'On the Ascent to Snowdon, from Llyn Cywelyn', John 'Warwick' Smith, 1790, watercolour over pencil, 13.8cm x 20.8cm. (*British Museum*)

J G R HARDING

The Mountain Life of Robin Fedden



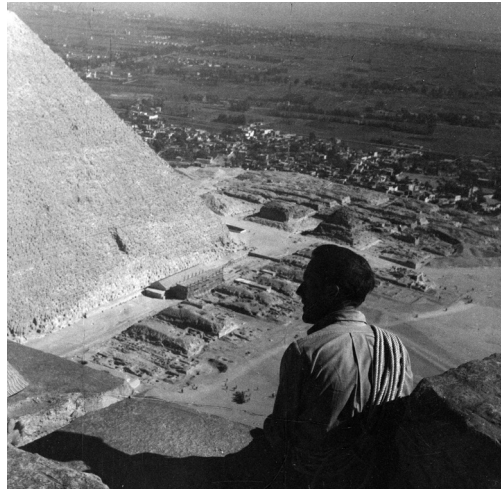
The multi-faceted Robin Fedden, sketched by the artist and illustrator John Stanton Ward.

Robin Fedden's name will be unfamiliar to most modern mountaineers for he came to mountaineering late in life and died young. His contribution rests on his accomplishments as a ski mountaineer and the expeditions he led to unusual, little-known ranges. His attainments as a writer, Middle East traveller and mainstay of the National Trust marked him as exceptional: an aesthete with a steel inner core who did everything with style, humour and charm.

Henry Robin Romilly Fedden was born in 1908. His father was the English landscape painter Arthur Romilly Fedden (1875-1939) who studied art in London, Paris and Spain and exhibited at the Royal Academy. His mother was



Fedden spent much of the Second World War in Egypt, where in the autumn of 1942 he married the Alexandrian Renée Catzfelis. They are pictured below the Khafre pyramid at Giza, which they were invited to climb the following year. (Courtesy of Frances Fedden)



Fedden on the summit of the pyramid in 1943. While a dedicated walker and skier from youth, he only began serious climbing in his late 30s. (Courtesy of Frances Fedden)

the American writer Katharine Waldo Douglas (1870-1939) from whom he imbibed a love for the Basque country. Robin's autobiographical *Chantemesle*¹ records his early upbringing at the parental home in this remote Seine-et-Oise village as a dreamlike evocation of rural France that influenced his attitudes and outlook to become as much European as English.

Romilly Fedden's choice of Clifton College for Robin's secondary education was influenced by the family's Gloucestershire roots. The school's reverence for manly vigour was personified in such alumni as the explorer and Great Game warrior Francis Younghusband and Younghusband's bosom friend Henry Newbolt, poet laureate of high imperialism. Robin was later to play his own game both as an adventurer and prose poet. After graduating from Magdalene College, Cambridge he travelled extensively in the Middle East and was temporarily an attaché at the British legation in Athens before taking up a lectureship at Cairo's Fuad al Awal University: times crisply recalled in *The Land of Egypt* (1939), *Syria* (1946) and *Crusader Castles* (1950).

Robin was lecturing at the university in the spring of 1941 when Rommel's Afrika Corps threatened to overrun Egypt. As an ardent pacifist he refused to enlist for military service in reaction to the severe shellshock his father had suffered after frontline service in the Great War. His stance was misinterpreted by the British embassy as defeatism but he spent that summer as

1. *Chantemesle: A Normandy Childhood*, first published in 1964, is still in print, courtesy of travel specialists Eland.

an ambulance driver with the Free French and British forces fighting the Vichy French in the short-lived Syrian-Lebanon campaign.

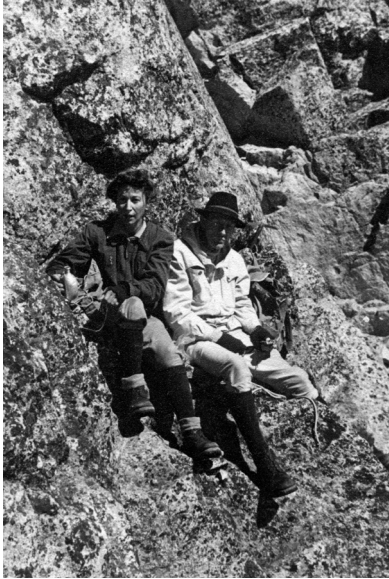
Wartime Cairo gave Robin's life a new dimension. As Artemis Cooper evokes in her *Cairo in the War 1939-1945* these were halcyon years for the brilliant set of literati that included the writers Lawrence Durrell and Olivia Manning, the poet Bernard Spencer and the soldier-scholar Patrick Leigh Fermor. Although Robin's natural eloquence was handicapped by a disconcerting stammer, he quickly established himself as a leading member both of this set and an influential group of cosmopolitan Greek friends whose parties King Farouk occasionally looked in on with Prince Peter of Greece acting as the gramophone's DJ. Here, too, Robin met Renée Catzefflis, an Alexandrian Greek who in the autumn of 1942 became his wife and lifelong climbing companion.

As their contribution to the war effort, Fedden, Durrell and Spencer founded *Personal Landscape* 'the most influential literary magazine to come out of the war years' (Turret Books, 1966), intended 'to preserve personal life and values ... in the channel of war' and encourage frontline servicemen to submit their own literary contributions. Another theme that preoccupied Robin during these years of self-imposed exile from German-occupied Greece was the loss of a culture he cherished and the landscape he loved. He never forgot climbing the Thessalian Mount Olympus in June 1939 and the pioneer ski ascent he made of that mountain the following Easter. In 1944, as his Middle East envoi, he made a 10-day traverse along the spine of the Lebanese mountains with Renée and the noted diplomat Bernard Burrows, later number two at the Foreign Office, ending with an ascent of Qurnat as Sawdā (3088m), the highest mountain in Lebanon and the Levant.

After the war, Robin returned to England and joined the staff of the National Trust, first as curator of Polesden Lacey in Surrey, in 1951 as secretary of the Historic Buildings Committee and in 1968 as the National Trust's deputy director general until his retirement in 1973 when he was awarded the CBE and appointed consultant, a post specially created for him in recognition of his long service and the numerous books and articles he had written about the National Trust's history, objectives and the properties it curated.

Robin's love of mountains had long predated his ascent of Mount Olympus. He had skied in the Alps since early youth and on his admission to the Alpine Ski Club in 1958 had already done no less than 33 skiing seasons. His book *Skiing in the Alps* (Hulton, 1956) was both an instructional manual and a guide to 70 different Alpine ski resorts. In 1952 he branched out from piste skiing to embark on his first serious ski-mountaineering tour in the Ötztal where, with Hans Lois as guide, they climbed the Wildspitze's south summit (3769m). In 1954 he completed a 10-day guided traverse of the Silvretta, bagging three peaks including Piz Buin en route.

The turning point in Robin's ski-mountaineering career came in 1955 when he embarked on the Chamonix to Zermatt *Haute Route*. Originally an invention of Alpine Club members who walked the course during the summers



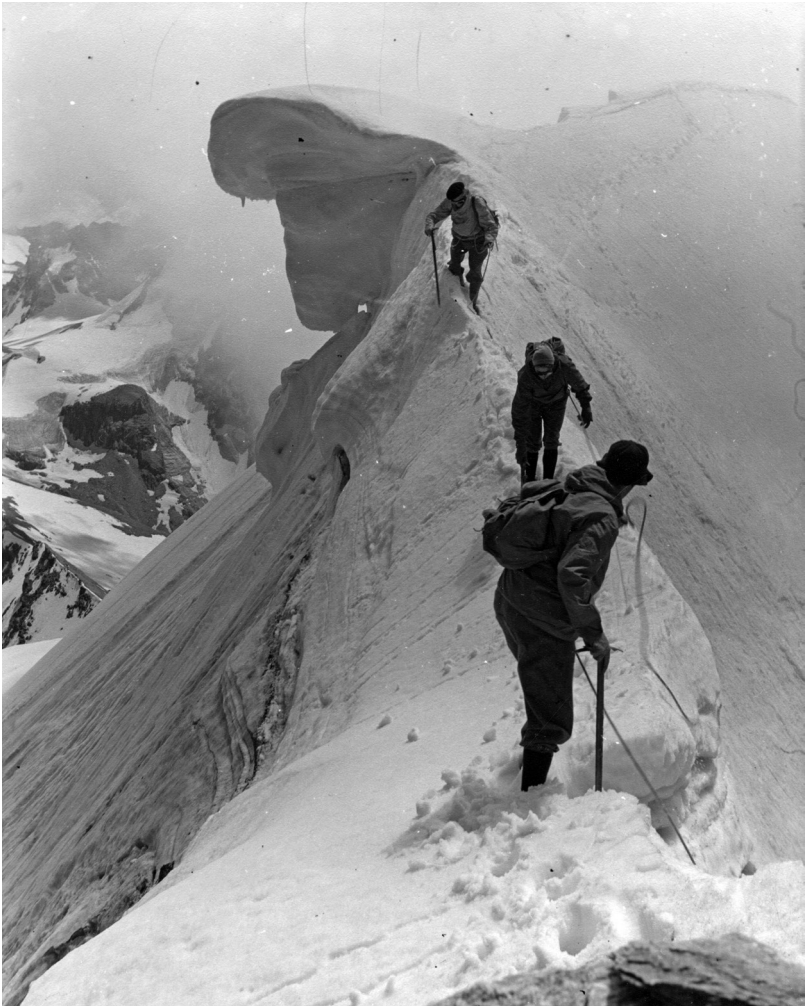
Renée and Robin in the Pyrenees, a range that suited their mountaineering philosophy. Robin Fedden's book *The Enchanted Mountains* captures this period of their lives and was widely praised. (Courtesy of Frances Fedden)



Renée in the Alps in the late 1950s. (Courtesy of Frances Fedden)

of 1860 and 1861, it was first completed on ski by F F Roget and Marcel Kurz with three guides in January 1911. For many years thereafter this 'most dramatic and sustained of the great ski tours in the Alps' was regarded as something of an achievement and seldom attempted by British parties. Though it has since become wildly popular, when Fedden did it with a French Resistance survivor and a Greek photographer and their guide Marcel Burnet, they met no other parties. Robin's account of their 10-day traverse, *Alpine Ski Tour* (Putnam, 1956), combines history and practical advice in a narrative that reaches literary heights. Their attempt on the Chardonnet by the Forbes ridge in dangerous snow conditions was frustrated 50m short of the summit due to Robin losing a crampon and fast-deteriorating weather. *Alpine Ski Tour* became the inspiration for ski tourers determined to revive post-war British ski mountaineering's near-moribund state and it was Robin who proposed the toast to the Alpine Ski Club's founder Arnold Lunn at the club's jubilee dinner in 1968.

By now, Robin's passion for mountains had gone way beyond skiing and he embraced serious mountaineering with the zeal of the converted. His choice of the Pyrenees, a range to which 'the smiles of the artist and heart of the poet will always turn', reflected his penchant for wild, little-frequented country. After climbing Aneto (3404m) with Renée and John Varney in 1953,



The Feddens traversing the Aiguille de la Grande Sassièrre in the Graian Alps. (Courtesy of Frances Fedden)

he returned the following year with Renée and Peter McColl to make guideless ascents of the Pic du Midi d'Ossau, Pallas, Ariel, Vignemale and Balaitous. In 1955 he and Renée reverted to the Alps to climb the Freiwandspitz (3035m), Kitzteinhorn (3207m), Gross Glockner (3796m) and several rock routes in the Kaisegebirge.

In 1957 the Feddens shared their most memorable Pyrenean year with Basil Goodfellow, a former Alpine Club honorary secretary and fine amateur photographer who added weight to the party. Their tally of 10 of the range's best peaks, culminating in a triumphal ascent of the Encantados that consummated Robin's quest, as he recorded in his magical *The Enchanted Mountains*:



Renée and Robin, left, with Peter Lloyd and Alan Pullinger on the false summit of Castor, having climbed the north face. (*Basil Goodfellow*)

A Quest in the Pyrenees (Murray, 1962), a book whose gem-cut prose transports the reader to share the author's exhilaration, joy and wonder. Later that year Robin was elected to the Alpine Club with his proposer Jack Longland lauding Robin's 'originality in the choice of the mountain districts he has visited.'

Originality remained Robin's mountaineering hallmark, exemplified in his first mountaineering expedition to Turkey's Kaçkar mountains, the culminating massif of the 500km mountain chain that runs parallel with the Black Sea to the Russian border. Known to the Romans as the Pontic Alps after the kingdom of Pontus whose first century ruler Mithridates the Great thrice fought their armies to a draw, the range's lower reaches are smothered in dense deciduous forest surmounted by spikey granite peaks and a scattering of small glaciers. Homeland of the Laz people, a half-forgotten remnant of Caucasian stock whose language is unwritten, it was once part of Christian Armenia whose decaying Georgian churches slumber in the folds of vertiginous wooded valleys. Here too, folk memory distantly recalls Xenophon's epic winter crossing of the range with the remnants of his ten thousand Greek mercenaries in 401 BCE.

Most often swathed in the Black Sea mists that make its heights invisible from the coast, this mysterious range had seized Robin's imagination. During the late 19th century British consuls and merchants based in Trebizond, modern Trabzon, would have taken more than a passing interest in these 'Little Caucasus' that bordered the frontiers of Russia's ever-expanding empire. However, when HMG wound up its Turkish consulates after the Great War, they passed out of British consciousness. A solitary German Karl Koch crossed the range in 1843 but it was Willi Rickmer Rickmers (1873-1965)

who undertook the first serious mountaineering exploration in 1894. (Awarded an RGS gold medal for his pioneer mountaineering expeditions to Central Asia and the Caucasus, Rickmers was elected to the Alpine Club in 1899, twice de-elected as an alien during the two world wars, and re-instated as an honorary member in 1958.)

During the inter-war years, Atatürk encouraged German scientific and mountaineering expeditions to Turkey as its former wartime ally. The Austrian explorer-scientist Dr Hans Bobek led one to the Kaçkar but left no traceable climbing records. After the Second World War, military and political constraints made travel in eastern Turkey extremely difficult though Denis Cecil Hills (1913-2004) was an exception to every rule.² From 1955 to 1962 he lived in Turkey as a peripatetic lecturer exploring its sites of antiquity and climbing its high mountains, mostly with Muzaffer, a Turkish Army sergeant who he converted to mountaineering. Hills invariably lived rough with shepherds and nomads. His last three years in Turkey were spent living near Trebizond allowed him to explore the Kaçkar: 'a botanist and climber's paradise'. In 1959 he and Muzaffer traversed the range from Ilica to Barhal, climbing the six summits of Altıparmak (3605m) en route. On his last visit in 1962, with the Byzantine scholar David Winfield, their attempt on the highest peak Kaçkar Dağı (3937m), was rebuffed by torrential rain. His book *My Travels in Turkey* (Allen & Unwin, 1964) is a classic.

Fedden and Hills had much in common save for their wartime experiences. Robin also preferred the company of like-minded friends. His Kaçkar expedition included Basil Goodfellow, Patrick Brunner and David Winfield as local expert and interpreter. Robin's two articles in *The Times* (30 and 31 August 1963) lyrically describe the range's Swiss-style chalets, its Lazi women dressed like peacocks, luxuriant forests of gigantic chestnuts, beech and alder, tracts of the native *Rhodendron ponticum* and the swathes of yellow azalea whose honey, harvested from barrel-shaped hives perched high in the treetops to frustrate marauding bears, once maddened both Xenophon's and Pompey's troops.

His nuanced assessment of the mountains as 'good second class peaks' might have been influenced by the 'curious and inconvenient' weather with incessant rain and snow and the insidious Black Sea mist that enveloped their campsites in 'a steady Scotch drizzle' to leave their tents dank and dripping and their sleeping bags perpetually sodden. Despite a misleading military map and magnetic rock that threw accurate compass bearings, they made first British ascents of Kaçkar Dağı and a spectacular neighbouring aiguille (3,450m).

In 1965, Robin set his sights on the Cilo and Sat massifs in Kurdish Hakkari. Tucked away in Turkey's south-east corner, Hakkari's mountains

2. Hills, a scholar at Lincoln College, Oxford, spoke six languages, served as a liaison officer with the Poles in World War Two, fought in North Africa, Iraq, Palestine and Italy and took part in the assault on Monte Cassino. In 1945, when Britain shamefully surrendered Ukrainians, Georgians and Cossacks to Stalin Hills saved many thousands from the cattle trucks and certain death. Hills was acclaimed by *The Spectator* as 'a hero of our times' for defying the Ugandan 'village tyrant' Idi Amin, having been sentenced to death. His daughter, Gillian Hills, had a hit aged 16 with the 'yé-yé' song 'Zou Bisou Bisou' and appeared in the films *Blowup* (1966) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).



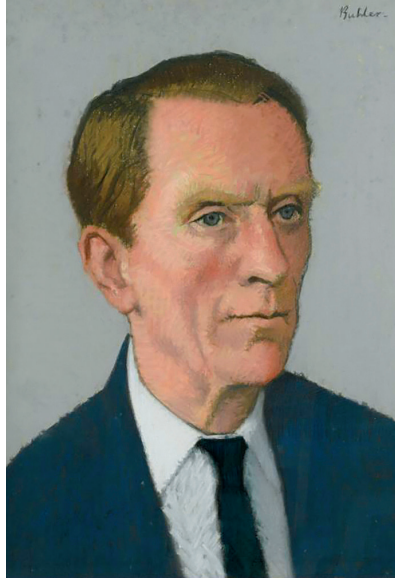
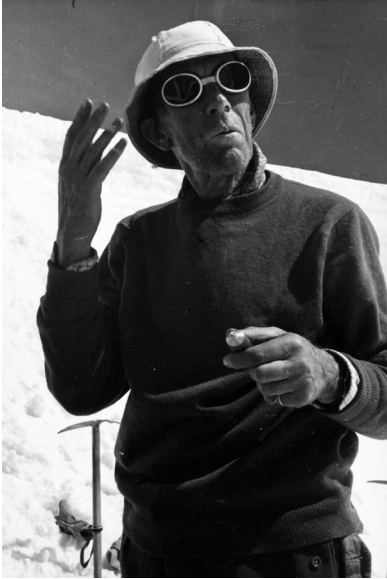
Renée on the Meije. In her obituary of her friend Janet Adam Smith wrote: 'Many of my best days on the mountains were with the Feddens – weekends in North Wales, a summer in the Dauphiné when we shared a chalet at Villeneuve-la-Salle and took it in turns to stay with the children while the other two climbed.'

(Courtesy of Frances Fedden)

are the most dramatic in the Middle East with fine alpine peaks and two sizeable glaciers. But the dark shadows of its violent history still lingered. Once a homeland of the Nestorian Christians, condemned as heretics at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, Tamerlane had scattered them to the winds. They fled to the fastnesses of Hakkari only to find themselves in fractious proximity to Muslim Kurds who massacred most of them at the turn of the 20th century.

Unlike the Pontic Alps, Hakkari's mountains were known to 19th century British travellers. Their exploration had been exclusively British affair thanks to the government's consular posts maintained in eastern Turkey until 1914.³ During the 1930s German-Austrian expeditions monopolised Turkish exploratory mountaineering, including one to Hakkari in 1937 led by the irrepressible Dr Hans Bobek in 1937. In 1956 and 1958 Austrian expeditions climbed all its major peaks with eight first ascents. In 1957 two Scots, Tom Weir and Douglas Scott, evaded officialdom to become the first Britons for 55 years to climb in the Cilo Dağı described by Weir as 'a paradise with superb mountaineering ... the most rewarding in which I have

3. In 1897, Lt Col Maunsell climbed Galianu (3685m) in the Cilo group and narrowly failed on Resko (4170m). In 1899, Earl Percy, on his second Kurdistan mission to assess the strategic threats posed by Russia and Germany and investigate the plight of the Nestorians, traversed the Cilo Dağ: *The Highlands of Asiatic Turkey*, Arnold, 1901. In 1909 British consul B Dickson explored the neighbouring Sat group.



Two views of Robin Fedden: photographed in the Alps and painted by Robert Buhler.

travelled' (*SMCJ*, 1958). In 1959 Denis Hills and Muzaffer undertook a month-long trek through Hakkari's mountains, just failing to summit Resko after several brushes with bears. Yet another German party gained access in 1962 and made the first ascent of Resko's formidable north face.

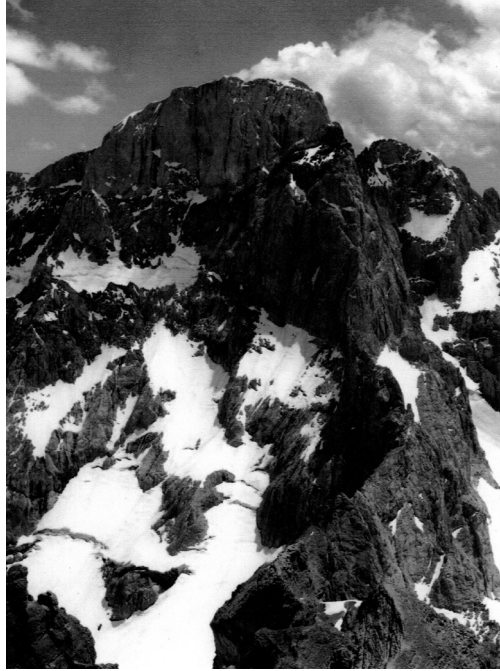
Hakkari was certainly not *terra incognita* yet remained a magnet for small-scale expeditions. Despite vicious guerrilla fighting on the Turkish-Iraqi border waged by Kurdish hero Mullah Mustafa Barzani against Iraqi armed forces, the opening of a major new road through eastern Turkey induced the government to relax travel restrictions to Hakkari: Robin resolved to go in 1965. He was invariably selective in choosing his companions and there was one Englishman long resident in Turkey who exactly fitted the bill: Sidney Nowill. A scion of the Levant's 19th century British mercantile dynasty, Sidney was born in Istanbul and educated at Rugby. At the outset of the Second World War he was working for British intelligence under the traitor Kim Philby, a man he 'cordially loathed'. Scholar, linguist, author, painter, photographer, economist, adviser to British envoys and Turkish politicians, gourmet, wine buff and compulsive traveller, Sidney was also a passionate mountaineer and long-established AC member with wide experience of Turkish ranges. He was also a fluent Turkish speaker.

Having previously climbed with Sidney in Turkey in 1961, I had suggested to him in early 1965 that we might visit Hakkari together. However, when he replied that he and his wife Hilary were already committed to join Robin Fedden's party of Renée, the Everest veteran Peter Lloyd and Robin McCall, I put aside Hakkari as another pipe dream. A Fedden-Nowill *équipe* should have been made in heaven but in late March Sidney wrote to say that it was

a non-starter owing to start-date disagreements and because Peter Lloyd 'hates women on a party.' In fact, Renée was always going to come and Peter Lloyd was a happily married man. A more intractable issue was breakfast. Lloyd insisted on porridge, Nowill on grape nuts. A compromise should have been possible, particularly as Renée was acknowledged to be the best amateur cook in London. More likely, it was a clash of two idiosyncratic personalities.

Having enlisted me as an eleventh-hour substitute, Sidney was determined to steal a march by starting out on 16 June, two weeks before Robin, to give us the advantages of better snow conditions and less oppressively hot weather in the valleys. In the event, Robin made the neighbouring Sat massif his first priority to do a new route on Hendevede (3800m) and two other respectable climbs. Moving on to the Cilo group, they climbed Resko, did an 'exhilarating' 700m rock route on its eastern spur and got to within 100m of Suppa-Durak's 4,060m summit. The Feddens' six routes (including three new ones) over a fortnight was more impressive than our one-week tally of a virgin aiguille on Resko's north-east glacier, Maunsell Peak (3870m) and Resko itself. At least that gave Sidney the satisfaction of Hilary just pipping Renée to a first female ascent by a few days.

In what proved to be the last decade of his life, Robin embarked on a flurry of expeditions. In 1970 he canoed down Turkey's longest river the Kızılırmak, in antiquity the Halys, which runs for over thirteen hundred kilometres from eastern Anatolia to the Black Sea. In 1971, he led an expedition to Peru's Cordillera Vilcabamba with Renée and an eclectic bunch of friends: André Choremi a Greek-Egyptian lawyer and anthropologist, Carl Nater a Swiss mountaineer, champion skier and manager of Cartier, Andrew Cavendish, 11th Duke of Devonshire and a passionate botanist, and Patrick Leigh Fermor, writer, scholar and Cretan resistance hero. Fedden wrote a brief factual report of the expedition in *AJ* 78 (1973) but its flavour is better captured in Leigh Fermor's *Three Letters from the Andes* (Murray, 1991).



Hakkari Resko (4133m), part of the Cilo Dağı massif in south-east Turkey. The Feddens' expedition there was Renée's favourite: 'the camps on the high pastures, the hospitable Kurdish nomads, the superb flowers, the splendid climbing in wild country.' (*John Harding*)



Fedden and friends in the Andes in 1971. Renée to his left, the Duke of Devonshire behind and slightly to the right and Patrick Leigh Fermor on the right.

(Courtesy of Frances Fedden)

Robin's main object was to explore a little-known group of mountains in the Nevado Cara Cruz relying on inaccurate sketch maps and Prescott's *Conquest of Peru*. Sustenance for the unfamiliar and uncomfortable experiences the three unfledged mountaineers – Choremi, Cavendish and Leigh Fermor – were to encounter included 14 bottles of airport whisky decanted into transparent jerry cans for a morale-boosting evening tippie. Their 14-day trek through virtually uninhabited country with eight ponies and a couple of indigenous pack-drivers involved a succession of laborious ascents and perilous descents through near-impenetrable jungle, across fast-flowing rivers, camps above the snow line at 14,500ft and the use of ropes and crampons. The mountaineers traversed the three summits of Cara Cruz, including the highest at over 5,100m but their brave attempt on Huayanay IV (5484m) was rebuffed 30m from the summit by waist-deep, avalanche-prone powder snow. Renée cooked 'miraculous' meals while Robin's 'quiet, imperturbable competence in the management of the whole undertaking with comedy and charm' made their trip 'nothing but concord and enjoyment ... enhanced by a snowballing mythology of private jokes.'

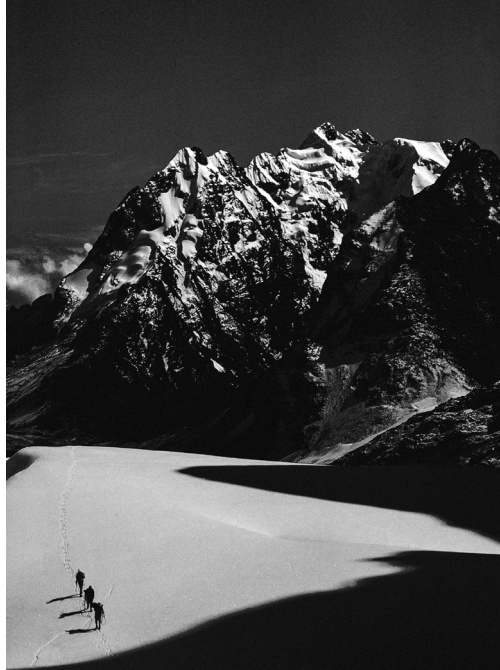
In the following year of 1972, Robin's long attachment to Greece made it an obvious objective both for him and Renée and also Patrick Leigh Fermor, now resident in the Peloponnese. Grecian mountains may not vie with the Alps but four-fifths of this 'gift of the sun and sea' is mountainous, sparsely populated and altogether wilder. British Victorian mountaineers scoffed at their pretensions but Edward Lear who well knew both the Alps and Corsica and had once painted Kangchenjunga from Darjeeling held the beauty of

Greece's mountains above all others. And although Greece had been overlooked by British mountaineers, in spring 1963 John Hunt, a long-time devotee, made the first recorded south to north 160-mile traverse of the Pindus range with an international party that included Tony Streater, George Lowe and John Disley.

The northern Pindus fall within Epirus, Greece's most atypical and scenic province, rich in classical sites and historical interest. The setting of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and the subject of Leigh Fermor's travelogue *Roumeli*, it offered Robin serious rock climbing comparable to classic Dolomite routes on the sheer, castellated limestone wall of the Tymfi massif whose northern scarp presents the grandest mountain panorama in all Greece. That June, Robin, Renée, Peter McCall and three members of the Andean expedition, Carl Nater, Andrew Cavendish and Paddy Leigh Fermor, plus a guide, foregathered at Konitzza before trek-

king up the Aoos gorge to attain the recently-built Greek Alpine Club refuge on the Astraka Col. From here, the Feddens and Nater climbed a virgin line up the impeccable limestone of Astraka's (2436m) north-west face. It was Robin's last serious rock climb and with honour satisfied, the whole party reversed much of John Hunt's 1963 Pindus trek. Their journey through largely untrammelled country with its deserted villages, vertiginous gorges, rushing waterfalls, sites of antiquity and monasteries is extravagantly described by Leigh Fermor in his letters to Deborah Devonshire, published *In Tearing Haste*, Murray, 2008: a mountain venture of 20 days, spiced with fun, humour and camaraderie and one of Robin's happiest.

Robin was not yet done. In March 1974 he returned to his beloved Pyrenees with the object of traversing on ski the ground occupied by virtually all the 3,000m peaks from Andorra to the Col de Somport. The first complete ski traverse of the Pyrenees from Canigou to Arette Pierre St. Martin had only been achieved six years earlier in 1968 by the Frenchman Charles Laporte in 34 stages. Robin's was still an ambitious undertaking on account of the range's often foul weather and the fact that few Britons had ever ski toured there. Fifteen separate stages were originally planned involving two separate parties with a support team providing motorised transport to take the skiers



Below the dramatic wall of Huayanay in Peru's Cordillera Vilcabamba. (Courtesy of Frances Fedden)



Patrick Leigh Fermor, pictured smoking in his tent, praised Fedden's 'quiet, imperturbable competence', pictured here with Renée at base camp. Their attempt on Huayanay IV ended just short of the summit. (*Courtesy of Frances Fedden*)

to and from the snowline and provision the huts. Typically bad Pyrenean weather frustrated the first, Spanish section and only four of the eight stages were completed. The traverse was recommenced at Espot and after finishing at Gavarnie they were transported to the Pont d'Espagne above Caunterets to complete the next seven stages to the Col du Somport in perfect weather. Now aged 65, Robin's Pyrenean traverse was a remarkable achievement for a man already suffering from deteriorating health. Save for a visit to



Fedden on his final expedition in 1976 at the head of the Kulu valley.
(Courtesy of Frances Fedden)

Kulu and Lahul with Peter Lloyd in 1976, it was to be his mountaineering valediction. He died a year later on 30 March 1977.

Robin Fedden will best be remembered for his 30 years' service with the National Trust preserving a score of historic houses for public enlightenment and enjoyment: a task well suited to his love of tradition and impeccable taste. His powers of evocation and finely tuned ear for language produced writing that elevated him to first rank of English prose-poets. He was an expert and exemplary ski mountaineer and a mountaineer whose originality, enthusiasm and determination, combined with empathy and humanity, won him the admiration and loyalty of all who knew him: a brilliant light extinguished before its time.

- The editor thanks Robin Fedden's daughter Frances Fedden for her help in illustrating this article.