

Ascents in the Purcell Range

EATON CROMWELL and J. MONROE THORINGTON

WHEN David Thompson, geographer of the North-West Company, crossed the Rocky Mountains by Howse Pass, and reached Lake Windermere in the summer of 1807, the news of Trafalgar had but just arrived, and he named a conspicuous peak to the westward, Mt. Nelson. Thus it came about that the name of a British admiral was given to a mountain at the headwaters of the Columbia, before the sources of this river were discovered. On his famous map (1813-14), all of the area within the Columbia Loop, which modern geographic method divides into the Selkirk and Purcell Ranges, was known as Nelson's Mountains.

We had planned for some five years to climb together in Canada, and for an equal time the hope remained unfulfilled. We eventually met in Golden, B. C., on July 10, 1928, with the prospect of two weeks in the Purcell Range. Julian Hillhouse made a third; while Conrad Kain was at once outfitter and guide, assisted in the wrangling and packing by his nephew, Isidor.

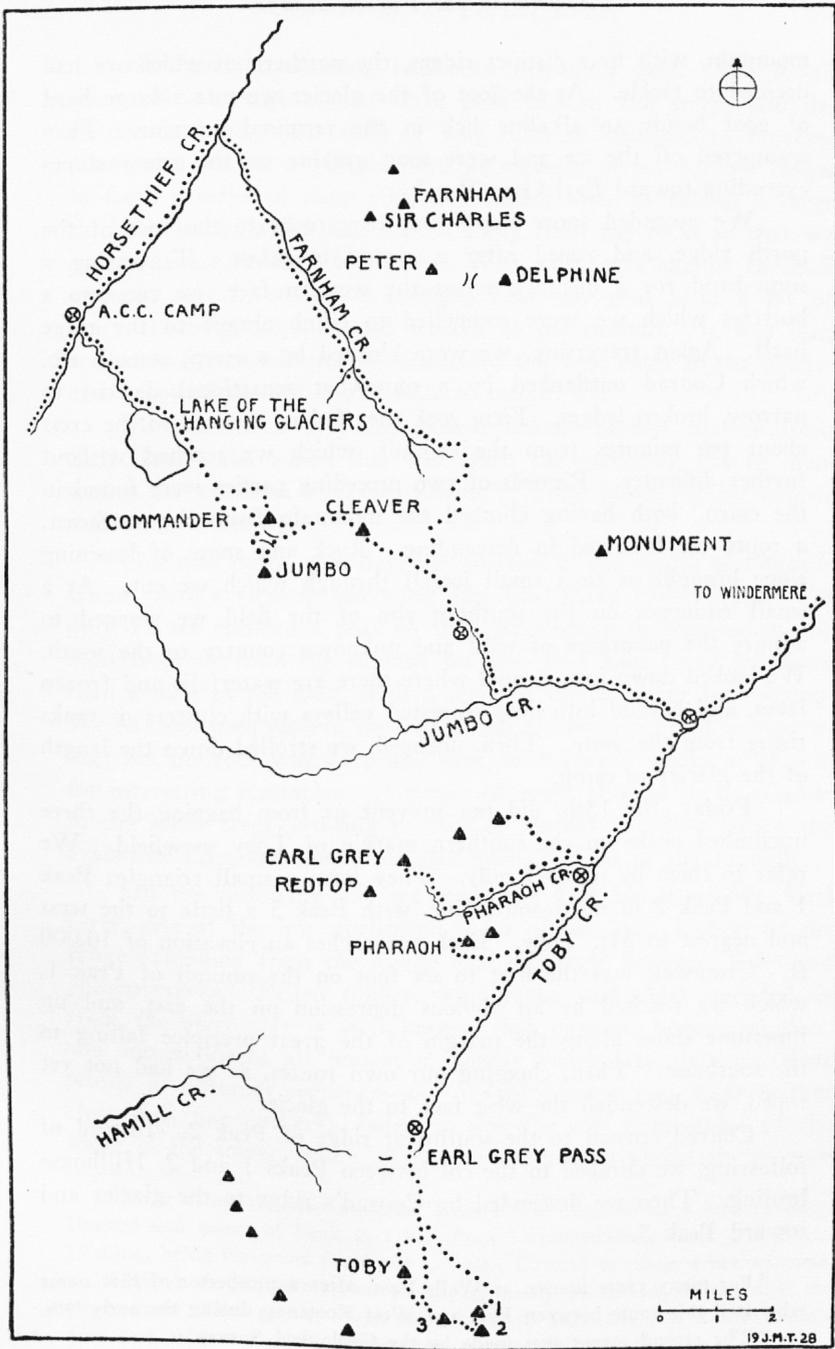
We travelled by the bi-weekly train, known as the "cordwood local," up the broad valley of the Columbia, arriving at Lake Windermere at 6 P. M. Conrad met us, and, after supper at Wilmer, we drove thirty miles by truck to camp in Toby Creek¹ at the mouth of Jumbo Fork. Many of the Purcell valleys have roads leading in some distance from the Columbia; nearly everyone in the country owns or thinks he has found a mine.

Next morning we started up-trail with the horses, fine stands of timber giving way to acres where fire had swept through some ten years before, emerging on a flower-strewn alp where we camped close to the fine waterfall near the foot of Toby glacier.

On July 12 we were up at 5 o'clock, enjoying a breakfast such as only Conrad can cook, before setting off for Mt. Toby (10,537 ft.), the highest peak of the district.² It is a pyramidal

¹ Named for Dr. Toby, physician and prospector, 1864, from Colville, Stevens County, U. S.

² Formerly known as Mt. Gleason. See *C. A. J.* IV, p. 99. From Toby moraine *via* Toby glacier, N. arête and W. face our ascent required 7 hrs. Descent by way of S. arête and snowfield, 3 hrs. 45 mins.



MILES
0 1 2
19 J.M.T. 28

mountain, with four distinct ridges, the northern of which we had decided to tackle. At the foot of the glacier we met a large herd of goat beside an alkaline lick in the terminal moraine. They scampered off the ice and were soon grazing on the grassy slopes extending toward Earl Grey Pass.³

We ascended snow slopes and easy rocks to the foot of the north ridge, and roped after a second breakfast. Traversing a snow-band for a distance across the western face, we came to a buttress which we were compelled to climb almost to the ridge itself. Again traversing, we were blocked by a steep, smooth rib, which Conrad outflanked by a somewhat sensational descent to narrow, broken ledges. Firm rock then led us upward to the crest about ten minutes from the summit, which we reached without further difficulty. Records of two preceding parties were found in the cairn,⁴ both having climbed the mountain from the southeast, a route we followed in descending. Rock and snow of lessening slope brought us to a small icefall through which we cut. At a small eminence on the southern rim of the field we stopped to admire the panorama of wild and unknown country to the south. We looked down into cirques where there are waterfalls and frozen lakes, and beyond into deep, forested valleys with clusters of peaks rising from the snow. Then, unroped, we strolled down the length of the glacier to camp.

Friday, the 13th, did not prevent us from bagging the three unclimbed peaks on the southern margin of Toby snowfield. We refer to them by number only. They form a small triangle: Peak 1 and Peak 2 in north-south line, with Peak 3 a little to the west and nearest to Mt. Toby. Each approaches an elevation of 10,000 ft. Cromwell was the first to set foot on the summit of Peak 1, which we reached by an obvious depression on the east, and up limestone slabs, along the margin of the great precipice falling to the southeast. Then, choosing our own routes, as we had not yet roped, we descended the west face to the glacier.

Conrad crossed to the southwest ridge of Peak 2. Instead of following, we climbed to the col between Peaks 1 and 2, Hillhouse leading. Then we descended by Conrad's ridge to the glacier and toward Peak 3.

³ For many years known as Wells Pass, after a prospector of that name who used this route between East and West Kootenay during the early '90s.

⁴ The second ascent was made by the Geological Survey.

Hitherto the climbing had been extremely easy. We found the northeast ridge of our third peak broken and steep, and determined, rather than force a way directly upward, to traverse across the east face. Conrad led us cleverly across narrow ledges to flank a series of steep ribs, and finally took us behind a large shield of snow, which had melted away from the rocks so that we could squeeze through behind it. With our backs against the cliff and our feet in snow we emerged near our goal after a bit of fancy climbing, unroped and walked to the summit. It was late, and after fifteen minutes we descended the west ridge to the glacier and followed the old tracks back to camp.⁵

Messrs. McCoubrey and Neave, heavily packed, arrived from Earl Grey Pass, where they had spent the preceding day in measuring the recession of Toby glacier.⁶ They joined us for supper and camped nearby.

Our new camp, next day, was situated at the mouth of Pharaoh Creek, with a view to ascending Mt. Earl Grey (10,215 ft). On July 15 we climbed a peak to the east, hoping to traverse to our objective, but from the summit we saw that Earl Grey lay more than a mile to the west, with a serrated line of ridge intervening. We had not used rope in the ascent and did not require it in returning; but the rock was steep and firm, with cuboid blocks of granite for interesting scrambles. A cirque of snow allowed us to glissade to the larch trees, crossing patches of marshy meadow where the avalanche lilies and anemones, half-open, nodded in the sunlight.

On the following day we made the first ascent of Mt. Earl Grey, one of the few unclimbed peaks of the area, highest of the range extending from the divide into the angle between Toby and Jumbo creeks. Fallen timber, windbreaks, and alder impeded us from the start. It is well known that parsons, horse-wranglers, and mountaineers all possess a similar vocabulary, but use their words in different sequence—our united powers (we were neither clergymen nor packers) failed to describe our impressions of the route in the lower valley. One is compensated at length by open

⁵ From camp at Toby moraine, Peak 1 was reached in 5 hrs. 15 mins. Descent and ascent of Peak, 2, 1 hr. Peak 3 reached from Peak 2 in 2 hrs. 15 mins., being traversed from east to west. Descent to camp, 2 hrs. 45 mins.

⁶ Mr. A. A. McCoubrey, of Winnipeg, kindly permits us to state that the recession of Toby glacier from July, 1915, to July, 1928, is approximately 1100 feet, with a decrease in thickness at the tongue of 100 feet.

glades and a rocky cirque that sparkled with thread-like waterfalls. We chose a watercourse to the north and scrambled up slippery ledges and over old avalanche snow above the polished chute through which the torrent foamed and boiled. On a small plateau above the falls we crossed to the western side, whence easy rock, steeper snow, and finally a hanging glacier led us to a snow-saddle in the bold southern arête. This we followed closely, with an occasional short traverse on its western side, to the southern, highest point of the mountain, the final ridge towers affording airy climbing.

A thunderstorm came sweeping down from the Selkirks, its dark fringes edged with sunlight. We stopped only long enough to take in the circle of peaks spread around us—Toby and the gleaming peaks of the Hamill cirque rising across the Pharaoh shoulder and the meadows of Earl Grey Pass; the rearing lines of Redtop; the Blockheads, at the angle of Jumbo Creek, with Cauldron and Truce in the sunlight and shadow of the approaching storm; Jumbo and Farnham across the brilliant green of the deep valley; Assiniboine, in the line of Toby Creek, a landmark in the Rockies; the Royal and Military groups, the Continental Divide in silhouette against the eastern sky. We reached the first snow-slopes as the rain began and were soaked before reaching the valley. Like climbers who, of a sudden, had developed a sea-going complex, we gave one look at the alders and then stepped into the stream. Anything was preferable to three more hours in the bush; so we waded back to camp, consoled by thoughts of a warm fire and a dinner of the fine trout that Isidor was sure to have landed.⁷

The sun shone brilliantly next day. Cromwell, in an undue burst of energy, induced Conrad to climb the higher Pharaoh Peak (*ca.* 8,000 ft.), and departed at the unorthodox hour of 2 p. m. They rounded the southern side and pulled through timber to the western saddle at 5.30, delaying to watch several fine deer close at hand. Easy rocks on the west face were followed by two vertical pitches, each of about 30 ft., the first of which gave Conrad the opportunity for a finished performance. Earl Grey and the route of the preceding day featured a splendid view, and a rapid return was made after roping off the lower pitch.⁸

On July 18 we moved up Jumbo Creek and camped in a narrow lateral valley entering from the north. A fine trail through

⁷ Camp to summit, 8 hrs. 45 mins. Descent, 5 hrs. 10 mins.

⁸ Ascent from camp, 4 hrs.

a forest of cottonwood and fir, with a carpet of ferns beneath, led us to levels whence we had unrestricted view of the shining granite wall and hanging glaciers that characterize the northern side of Mt. Earl Grey and its adjacent peaks. The group affords opportunity for many interesting traverses.

We left camp on July 20 at 6 and reached a little pass at the head of the valley just before 8.30. Cromwell's hat wheeled down a slope and was regained after a long glissade. Before us a rounded ridge led toward The Cleaver (*ca.* 10,400 ft.),⁹ which we reached by its steep southern face, which is less formidable than it appears. We climbed in pairs: Conrad and Thorington; Cromwell and Hillhouse. The summit cornice was reached at 11.15, and we moved off at once to the snowfield beyond. We passed by the little peaks of The Guardsmen, crossed a bergschrund where a long step was required, and rounded crevasses to the Jumbo-Commander saddle where we were once more on a level with Cleaver.

Clouds descended upon us and snow began to fall, intermittently blotting out even the nearest peaks. We stretched the rope tightly and marched on toward Jumbo (11,217 ft.); Conrad, from two previous ascents,¹⁰ was well acquainted with the mountain and had determined to include it in the high-level route he had selected for us. Wind increased, tearing at the fog and revealing a line of huge cornices looming against the sky. Often the mists would roll back from the west, giving us glimpses of peaks and meadows glittering in shafts of sunlight. Then a snow-squall would sweep across, hiding everything. The slope steepened and became icy; Conrad, hacking a zigzag staircase, would be almost out of sight at the end of the rope. Close behind the line of cornices we came to a snowy shoulder, where for a moment we were sheltered from

⁹ The mountain spoken of as Conforjohn, *C. A. J.* XIII, p. 239. We ascended in 4 hrs. from camp. It appears to be exactly the same height as the Jumbo-Commander saddle. Jumbo was reached in 5 hrs. from Cleaver, with numerous halts due to storm. Our party was the first to make this traverse and the first to make a descent direct to the Lake of the Hanging Glaciers. We required 16 hrs. between our camp and the Alpine Club camp in Horsethief Creek.

¹⁰ Conrad led on the first ascent in 1915; *C. A. J.* VI, p. 107; VII, p. 25. He deserves great credit for the second ascent which he made alone on snowshoes on March 5, 1919, taking 4 hrs. 30 mins. from the foot of Commander glacier (Farnham Valley) to the summit; see *Bull. Geogr. Soc. of Phila.* XXVI, p. 69.

the wind by the mountain's final dome. A few minutes later we reached the summit, crouching in the blast of freezing wind. Holes in the fog allowed us fleeting glimpses of the nearest cirques and valleys; we turned in our tracks and beat a retreat.

It was a relief to reach the snowfield; to find ourselves below and free of the dull monotone of driving cloud. Our problem still lay ahead. Séracs and crevasses formed a barrier in our path; we circled toward the northwest, skirting icy caverns. The rope was out at full length as we descended a slope of high angle, only to find it ending in space. Far below us, at the end of the ice, we saw a circle of larch trees and water of unbelievable blue, with tiny bergs drifted to the farther end—our first view of the Lake of the Hanging Glaciers.

How to reach it was a question. Conrad unroped and went down a little farther, discovering in the angle between the icefall and Mt. Commander a narrow and very steep slope offering a possible route to the cliff below. We retraced our steps nearly to the pass, and reached the head of the slope, Conrad leading down, facing toward the slope as one descends a ladder. Cromwell brought up the rear, the snow fortunately in excellent condition—a north slope on a cloudy day. During the half-hour that followed we made three crossings of a well-defined avalanche channel, it being necessary on one occasion to slide down gently from an overhanging lip to a slender slice of ice forming a bridge to the firm glacier beyond. Over old avalanche blocks we crossed to dry ice and reached the slabby cliffs; the lower fall is best avoided as it is frequently stone-swept.

In a little while we were off the glacier and walking along the boulder-strewn shore of the lake, stopping in the first grove of trees to look at the ice ending in the water. It terminates in a front nearly 50 ft. high, extending from shore to shore in a concave curve, with gigantic rents parallel to its face as huge shells of ice scale off to form the floating icebergs. It grew dark as we reached flowering meadows at the outlet of the lake: a heather-carpet where we sat down for a short rest and finished our provisions. Soon we were down the zigzag trail through the forest and enjoying the blazing campfire of the Alpine Club of Canada.

On July 22 we left camp as a split party. Cromwell and Conrad went off at 6.30, walked up and past the Lake of the Hanging Glaciers to return to our tents in Jumbo Creek by way of

Commander (10,900 ft.) and Cleaver.²¹ They reached the rift in the slab-wall which we had descended two days previously, and turned east from the ice-plateau to a couloir, filled with boulders and dust, leading them nearly to the crest of the undulating ridge in the direction of Mt. Commander. Using ledges on the western side of the ridge, the main arête was reached and followed. Soft snow made it necessary to remain on rock continuously, the crest being ornamented by occasional luxurious pools of clear water. At 2.30 the narrow summit was reached, now devoid of the snow-cone that Conrad recalled from the first ascent. Without halting, they continued to the Jumbo-Commander saddle, and, at 3 p. m., stopped on the last boulder for lunch. Cromwell led toward Cleaver, arriving for the second time in three days at a quarter before five, in time to see the two other members of the party ascending the glacier-slopes at the head of Farnham Valley.

Hillhouse and Thorington, hoping for an easier day, wandered downtrail through the forests of Horsethief Creek, and up Farnham Valley. There are waterfalls and a fine canyon to be seen; the Farnham Tower, through a gap, lifts into the sky, and one comes at last to the torrent below Commander Glacier.

Wading the lateral branch and crossing the main stream on a log, one goes up trail to cabins near the abandoned Phoenix mine. One may saunter ever upward through open glades where gnarled and stunted larch form a contrasting foreground for the dark precipices of Cleaver just across the ice. Behind, a silver thread of stream winds toward the distance of Horsethief. The glacier descending from the crest separating Farnham from Jumbo Valley has few crevasses, but the passage of these is not facilitated when the only rope is being used by another party, several miles away. A short, delicate traverse on a slant of snow between two schrunds, leads one to a depression (*ca.* 9,500 ft.) in the ridge south of Cleaver, whence the tents may be seen. A couloir of hard snow leads downward, and our party was reunited in camp.

On July 24 the truck came out and carried us back to Wilmer. On the curve of the road to Windermere, with the dusky red foothills of the Rockies ahead, we will long remember the spreading panorama of the grey-blue lake, and the valley of the Columbia

²¹Total time from camp to camp, 14 hrs. The route selected by the other members of the party through Horsethief and Farnham valleys proved almost equally long.

winding through the distances. We do not think that we have seen the Purcell Range for the last time.

Our pilgrimage ended a few days later in Montreal, under the trees of the old cemetery of Mount Royal. A simple granite column is surmounted by an old-fashioned sextant. The inscription at its base reads:

DAVID THOMPSON, 1770-1857

To the memory of the greatest of Canadian geographers who for 34 years explored and mapped the main travel routes between the St. Lawrence and the Pacific.