

First Ascents and Explorations from the Mons and Freshfield Icefields

ALDEN F. MEGREW

TWENTY-EIGHT years ago a great peak was discovered in British Columbia, only six miles to the west of Mt. Forbes; a solitary mountain mass, isolated from the numerous icefields and rising to an altitude of 10,770 ft. Messrs. Collie and Stutfield were its discoverers, and since 1902 no attempt had been made to approach it. Their object was not to reach this peak, which they named Bush Mountain, but to find Mt. Columbia, and they attacked from the Columbia River by way of the Bush valley. In three weeks they advanced from Donald to within five or six miles of its base, where they were turned back largely by the denseness of the British Columbia "jungle."

When we started out last year our objective was not limited to Bush Mountain alone. We wished also to climb in and to reconnoitre from the Freshfield group. We left Lake Louise on June 28th with three packers and fifteen horses. Dyson Duncan and myself were the only climbers, for it was not until two days later, at Bow Lake, that our party was completed by the addition of Dr. Thorington, Mr. O. E. Cromwell and Peter Kaufmann, the Swiss guide.¹ Our pack-train was increased here to twenty-seven horses, five packers and five travelers, and with this outfit we proceeded directly to the Freshfield group, which we reached on July 4th. First of all we planned to climb Pangman Peak, situated at the northwest corner of the Freshfield névé. Starting from a bivouac at Niverville meadow, we crossed a series of moraines, heading straight for our objective. Once on the Pangman glacier, we ascended it to a col between Pangman Peak and a slight eminence 9,600 ft. high. One glance at the mountain showed that it would not "go" under the existing conditions. All the way up the glacier we had been wading through snow from knee to waist deep. Pangman itself was covered with new snow, and just after we arrived gentle avalanches began slipping off the steep rocks down the precipitous slopes towards the Bush valley. Under such conditions this side of Pangman is impossible, but after a dry season it might very well

¹ For additional details of the expedition, see *A. J.*, May, 1931, and notes on glacial measurements elsewhere in the present *JOURNAL*.

be climbed from the col, although it is rather a steep face, considering the rotten rock. The only other evident way of reaching the summit would be to climb Mt. Dent and traverse the entire length of the ridge. This, however, would prove not only extremely long, but also difficult on account of the number of gendarmes along the ridge.

After having abandoned hope of reaching the summit of Pangman Peak, Duncan and I turned our attention to Mt. Freshfield, partly because a guideless ascent of the mountain had never been made, and partly because it is the most outstanding peak of this group. Steve Latam, our head-packer, had never been up a real mountain, so we agreed to take him along, and I'm afraid that it will be his last climb. Although he seemed to enjoy it, I rather think that he failed to solve the great enigma of why people spend their time on the high hills.

As the ascent is well known I shall not go into details. But after having read Messrs. Collie and Stutfield's account of the first ascent we hardly expected to find the south face a steep wall of snow and ice. Half-formed cornices and a general angle of about fifty degrees forced us to cut steps from the "Frozen Lake" for about seven hundred feet to the heavily-corniced summit. However, our efforts were well rewarded, for the day was utterly cloudless, cold and clear; one of those rare days when the mountains and the weather are harmoniously perfect. From the top we had an excellent view of Bush Mountain, some ten miles away. We could not detect any obvious route up the peak, for it is flanked on all sides by steep icefalls, and even if these were overcome the route to the summit from the basin at the head of the icefalls is not self-evident. It had taken us five hours to reach the summit of Freshfield from the main camp at the tongue of the Freshfield glacier.

After a day of rest we started out with Dr. Thorington, Mr. O. E. Cromwell and Peter Kaufmann, their guide, to climb Mt. Skene (10,100 ft.). This was a first ascent, and very easy. We approached by a moderately steep couloir between Mts. Skene and Strahan, and then reached the summit by easy snow slopes. The ascent had taken four hours from camp. From Skene, Duncan and I crossed shale slopes to the summit of Strahan (9,960 ft.), where another cairn was built, while the rest of the party went across the Conway glacier to make a first ascent of Mt. Conway.

After leaving the Freshfield group we moved over to Glacier Lake and camped on the flats about two miles above the lake, and about a mile from the Lyell icefall.

Our initial climb here was an unguided ascent of Mt. Forbes by the west ridge. We bivouacked just below the icefall of the Mons glacier in a hollow protected from the wind by a high moraine on one side and Division Mountain on the other. From our tents we could see the sunlight lingering in crimson tints on the great north face of Forbes, the fifth highest peak in the Rockies.

At 1 o'clock we were up and preparing breakfast. Mr. Cromwell, Peter, Duncan and I planned to climb by the west ridge, but when we reached the base of the cone, conditions looked favorable for an attempt on the north ridge, hitherto unclimbed. As it seemed inadvisable for too large a party to try the north ridge, Duncan and I went on across the face to ascend the west ridge as we had already planned. We reached the summit at 9 o'clock, having taken six hours and a quarter from the bivouac. Mr. Cromwell and his guide joined us half an hour later, after scaling the north ridge, and we lingered for two hours enjoying a warm and windless sojourn.

Our next trip was an investigation of the easiest approach to Bush Peak. It was too late in the season for a real attack on the mountain, and all we could hope for was to find a route to the base, and, if possible, a feasible route to the summit. The former we did do, but the latter remains for those who have the time and equipment to make a real base camp, and can stay in the valley as long as is necessary to cope with the weather and the mountain.

On July 15th we left the Mons bivouac at 3 in the morning, carrying approximately fifty pounds apiece, including food, tent, sleeping-bags and extra clothing. There were three of us, Duncan, Steve and myself. Proceeding up the Mons glacier we crossed the Divide by an easy snow pass between Mons Peak and Division Mountain, which we took the liberty of naming Mons pass. Then following a series of snow couloirs, we left the glacier at tree-line. Bush mountain had been in view ever since crossing the Divide, but for the first time on our trip forest fire smoke was heavy and it prevented us from distinguishing more than the general outline. More impressive than the mountain, however, was the magnificent gorge at the head of the Icefall Brook valley. I have never seen the equal of this canyon, for it drops in a sheer precipice for nearly

3,000 ft. From one point, without turning around, we counted twenty-one waterfalls over five hundred feet high.

We ought to have realized that any attempt to descend directly to the bottom would be impossible, but at the time we did not know that this whole side of the valley, as far as the western end of Mons Peak, is a series of cliffs and slopes covered with timber and alder. This mistake cost us three hours of extremely difficult going. First we descended about five hundred feet, but then a cliff forced us to return above tree-line. Not only did this waste time, but with our heavy packs it entailed considerable effort. Having reached tree-line again we decided to traverse a broad shale-covered ledge, in the hope of finding an easier way down. After a mile and a half we came upon a stream which seemed to lead directly to the flats 3,800 ft. below. But again we were to be disappointed. The stream did lead to the floor of the valley, but a cliff, against whose sides the torrent raged, cut us off and to cross it was too dangerous, as it was deep and we could hear submerged boulders constantly striking against one another with the force of the current.

We lunched and then began cutting through the tangle of underbrush and alder above the cliff. In an hour and a half we had a trail, really a makeshift, for most of it was barely negotiable and we balanced on alder bushes three feet off the ground, but it brought us out on the flats at two-thirty in the afternoon, nine hours and a quarter from the bivouac.

That afternoon we explored down the valley to where Mons Creek joins the Icefall Brook. The views were magnificent. Just above the camp rose the beautiful conical summit of Mt. Arras, capped with a huge hanging glacier. Across the valley were the towering rock and ice slopes of Bush Peak, so heavily veiled by forest fire smoke that route picking was impossible.

After a miserable night, during which the mosquitoes did their best to drive us out of the valley—smudges merely seemed to whet their appetites—we were more than delighted when the sun drove them back to the woods. After breakfast we decided to resume exploration of the valley. We saw that we could not cross the main stream, for a warm night had swollen it. We therefore went down the valley for about a mile and a half, below Mons Creek, but here the timber offered extremely difficult going. Moreover, clouds were beginning to gather so we thought best to beat a hasty retreat to the Glacier Lake camp.

That we had taken nine hours and a quarter to reach the valley might indicate that our route is not well adapted to back-packing, but on the return, knowing exactly how to go, coming up from 3,200 ft. to 8,200 ft., and descending to the bivouac, consumed just seven hours and a quarter, including time out for lunch. This means that to cross from the bivouac to the valley, once a trail is cut, should not take more than six hours. To get over Icefall Brook a tree will have to be felled somewhere just below Mons Creek, as the trees above this point are not large enough to make a secure bridge over which heavy loads could be carried.

On the crest of Mons pass the storm broke; clouds and snow enveloped us; on the moraine above the icefall we were drenched with rain. For the next two hours we ran nearly all the way, anxious to get back to our comfortable balsam beds, a real meal, and a good game of poker in the tepee after supper.

The following day it rained steadily until late in the evening, when it cleared. So we decided to have one more climbing day. We hoped to make three first ascents of the peaks at the southeast corner of the Mons Icefield, Mts. Cambrai (10,380 ft.), Messines (10,290 ft.), and St. Julien (10,140 ft.).

Duncan and I were up at midnight at the bivouac, and off at 1 o'clock. Clouds were low on Forbes, and it seemed doubtful if the weather would give us a chance to make even one ascent. The marmots had been whistling all night, as if they expected rain. The snow on the glacier was in good condition, and although we managed to run into what is apparently the only patch of crevasses in the whole icefield, we finally found a detour around and reached the summit of Cambrai at 5.25. We built a cairn, ate some chocolate, and making our way back over the rocky northwest ridge, soon reached the snow and glissaded to the col between Cambrai and Messines. Then we hurried up the steep and narrow snow ridge, to the summit of Messines. It was only 6.40, but the clouds were already on Cambrai only half a mile away. St. Julien stood a long way off, but we still had hopes of out-running the weather. We descended Messines by the same route, and skirting along the north base, went around the mountain and struck straight up the northeast face of St. Julien, crossing the bergschrund by a none-too-secure snow-bridge. The climbing on the upper ridge was not too difficult but rather treacherous, for the rock was both steep and rotten. For an instant the clouds blew off Cambrai and

we enjoyed an excellent view of the two peaks we had just left, but then the wind rolled the cloud-bank back and we did not see them again.

On reaching the summit we built our third cairn, ate a real breakfast, and then started back for camp. Our old snow-bridge looked a bit too unsafe for the descent, so we traversed the length of the mountain towards the west before crossing the bergschrund. Once off the peak, we ran down the icefield, reaching the bivouac at 11.20 A.M. Our final day had been entirely successful, and now we lay on the grass outside the tent watching the oncoming storm, as peak after peak was enveloped in the grey clouds, already reminiscing on our trials and our triumphs.