Lloyd George Mountains: First Ascents

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ABOUT 1920 I read in P. L. Haworth's book *On the Headwaters of Peace River* about the mountains located in 57° to 58° N., 124° to 125° W., and named by Haworth for David Lloyd George. At first these peaks seemed too remote to warrant serious consideration by the ordinary climber, but the vision of something alluring remained. In 1937, and again in 1946, after hearing that the peaks and snowfields had been seen from the air and from the Alaska Highway, I made halfhearted attempts to interest such men as Gibson, Hind and Hendricks in going there. Some additional information about the Lloyd George region was now available in print, for in 1938 J. Monroe Thorington had published an article incorporating observations from the air by Donald ("Curley") Phillips and flight photographs by S. L. Diack.* Such was the situation in the winter of 1946-47 when Rex Gibson, knowing that I had been vaguely attracted for many years, wrote me that Frank S. Smythe and Noel E. Odell were seriously interested: would I care to join them and him? I would, and needed no persuading.

During the next few months, Gibson busied himself with all manner of correspondence and arrangements. Toward the end of June 1947, the party, which now also included Mrs. Smythe, John H. Ross, of Cambridge, and David Wessel, of Bozeman, Montana, gathered at Jasper, did a little preliminary climbing, and divided into two groups for the roundabout journey to the Lloyd George Mountains by two different routes. Gibson, Ross and Wessel went by car from Edmonton over the provincial roads to Dawson Creek, and thence by the new Alaska Highway to Fort Nelson. Frank and Nona Smythe, Noel Odell and I took train from Jasper and, after a 24-hour delay caused by a freight wreck west of McBride, reached Vanderhoof on the Canadian National's Prince Rupert line early in the morning of July 2nd. A two-hour drive brought us to the old Indian settlement and Hudson's Bay Company post at Fort St. James, at the east end of 40-mile-long Stuart Lake. Here Central B.C. Airways, with whom Gibson had been in correspondence for

* "The Lloyd George Mountains," *A.A.J.*, III (1938), 142-7.

months, were supposed to be ready to fly us right in. Because of a change in management and the loss of files, they were not expecting us. We were rightfully wroth, but by noon the new management had made a rapid recovery and promised us the next plane in.

By 1.40 P.M. on the same day, we took off from Stuart Lake (2225 ft.) with Pat Carey, a capable bush pilot, in a little Junkers plane powered by a single Pratt and Whitney engine. Swinging north, we gradually climbed to just over 8000 feet, crossed Omenica River at 2.40, passed ten miles east of Tulizzi Lake at 3.00, crossed Ingenika River at 3.15, were over Pelly Lake at 3.23, passed a few miles southeast of Quadacha-Finlay junction at 3.53, and landed on Haworth Lake at 4.05. Looking up Akie River from the air, we had had broken glimpses through gathering clouds of the extensive snowfields around Redfern Lake. Quentin, Haworth and Chesterfield Lakes, with the Lloyd George snowfields behind, came into view as we swung up the Quadacha. At 4.30 the plane left for Fort Nelson to pick up Gibson, Ross and Wessel. It returned with them the next morning.

After some discussion of possible campsites—gravel flats or moss-covered ground in a stand of fir, with a clear spring—we wisely chose the latter and soon had established ourselves in comfort. Almost at once the weather started to deteriorate, and it remained poor until July 15th. After five fairly good days, it went sour again and did not make another serious attempt to clear before we left on July 30th. Some precipitation, often heavy, occurred on 19 of 28 days. The vivid green of the grass above treeline, the wholly unburned timber, the rich flora, the extensive icefields (about eight by four miles, at an average elevation of only 8000 feet) all testified to the probability that this is one of the wetter sections of the Canadian Rockies.

In 1934 the Bedaux Expedition, which passed by Chesterfield Lake only ten miles south of Haworth Lake, estimated the altitude of the latter as 4300 feet. We made Haworth Lake about 3800 feet, by an average of six aneroids from Stuart Lake and Fort Nelson. It is a very beautiful spot. I recall that a great sense of peace and contentment settled over the whole party when we learned on the day after the plane left that our radio transmitter was not powerful enough to reach outside stations. Our receiver brought us the world news, the baseball scores, the silly "flying saucer" stories and much

MOUNT DAVID LLOYD GEORGE, CENTRAL PEAK
WEST AND CENTRAL PEAKS

Photos, J. H. Ross

else for a few evenings; but soon even these reports were not of much interest to us.

On July 5th the plane came back from Stuart Lake with some remaining equipment; and Odell, Smythe and I made a two-hour reconnaissance flight to the north, to attempt (among other things) to find Mounts Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, to see the lay of the sketchily mapped land, and to ascertain whether we should plan to spend part of our month elsewhere. We flew north about 50 miles to the headwaters of Racing River, and circled a sharp rock peak (about 9600 ft. by aneroid) which might have been Mount Roosevelt. Turning southeast, we dodged fleecy clouds near a peak (not over 10,000 ft.) which might have been Mount Churchill, passed just west of Tuchodi Lake, and then gave up flying to Redfern Lake because of a gathering storm. We barely had time to circle the Lloyd George peaks, which we measured as close to 10,000 feet, and land on Haworth Lake before a fierce storm from the south lashed the surface into whitecaps. There was half an hour of torrential rain. During the two-hour flight, one thing impressed us most: the Lloyd George icefield and peaks stood out above all else within 100 miles. Nothing else was nearly so impressive from the air. We had flown at an average altitude of 10,000 feet, ducking to 8400 near Tuchodi Lake to keep below the clouds and rising again to 10,000 to circle over and around the Lloyd George summits. On this day, too, Gibson, Ross and Wessel became the first to reach the main icefield. They were directly below us when we circled the peaks, but we were so intent on the summits and the aneroids that we failed to see them. Later we learned that they were unable to find a good route for the descent, had a nasty time getting down, and reached camp late in the evening.

For the next ten days it stormed or threatened to storm daily and hourly. Smythe began his flower-collecting, and Odell his geological observations; Gibson and Wessel did what they could with their triangulation stations. Ross would go with one or the other, oftenest with Smythe because of his interest in flowers and photography. A raft was built for possible travel on the lake.

On July 15th, at 5.20 A.M., we set out for the West Peak of the Lloyd George group: Odell, Smythe and Wessel; and Gibson, Ross and I. The two parties were to travel by different routes. We kept together into Hidden Valley until we were just below the snout of

Stagnant Glacier. This glacier actually has small trees growing on its moraine-covered surface—most unusual anywhere south of Alaska, at least in my observation. Our rope reached the main ridge north of Hidden Valley by a steep 2500-foot couloir. From there to the summit, it was a struggle in soft snow, varying in slope up to 30°. We found no sign of the others. At 2.15 P.M. we stood in cloud on the corniced summit ridge and took turns looking over the sheer east face toward the Central Peak, which appeared, through momentary rifts in the clouds, to be exactly the same height as our own. My aneroid showed 9,750 feet—a disappointment. The descent in still softer snow was tiring, but an inner trough down the long snow couloir speeded things a bit. On the gravel flats below, we found footmarks pointing downward—to our relief, since we had begun to be concerned for the others. They had come, it seemed, to a snow slope of doubtful equilibrium on one of the humps in the ridge and, rather disgusted, had turned back.

Two days later, on July 17th, all six did the main summit on the best day of the four weeks. Some crampon work up the main ice tongue, a 125-foot pitch of steep, firm rock to pass quite close under the main ice cliff at the north side of the ice; and we were on the upper glacier. Circumventing a few crevasses, we came to the gently undulating main névé field. Then, after a Columbia Snowfield type of slog for three hours, a climb for an hour and a half up an easy snow arête of the final snow pyramid, and a 15-foot vertical snow pitch, we all stood on the small summit at 3.15 P.M., ten hours from camp. The altitude appeared to be 9800 feet, with a barely perceptible angle of depression to the West Peak. The view was extensive in every direction. A maze of peaks surrounded us. Stalin, black, chunky and sullen, just east of north, like Churchill and Roosevelt, if positively identified, was not outstanding. A prominent pyramid to the southeast might have been near Redfern Lake. To the southwest and west, perhaps well over 100 miles away, rose peaks of interior British Columbia and even of the Coast Range. This view, if somewhat average, was still inspiring; for remoteness does stir the imagination. None had ever seen this country from so high except in passing by air. The East Peak, two miles away, we estimated at 9400 feet. The only incident of the descent was in the passage of the 125-foot rock pitch. To save time and to keep the last man from being too exposed, we climbed one at a time down

to the ice surface under the overhanging ice cliff and, again one at a time, "ran for it" through a mass of small ice blocks, which now and then were dropping from above with sharp reports. No one was hit. Another half hour of crampon work brought us to the gentler ice tongue below, then easily back to camp and Nona's cheery welcome to supper.

On July 20th Smythe and Odell started for Cloudmaker, the attractive peak on the south shore of Haworth Lake; but they returned when Odell's sprained ankle gave trouble. Smythe and I then joined Gibson, Ross and Wessel on "Hill 6900," north of camp, where those three had spent the night in good weather for survey purposes.

On the 22nd Gibson and Ross occupied "Station 7900," south of the valley, and Smythe and Wessel left camp early by raft for Cloudmaker. On the way they were charged by a large bear—either a grizzly or an Alaska brown—which leapt out of the bush into the lake and tried to board the raft. Splashes and shouts diverted it in the direction of the shore, 25 feet away. Smythe and Wessel then continued, and eventually climbed the peak, but only after descending 1500 feet to avoid a heavy storm and then reclimbing to the top (about 8100 ft.). They slept that night at treeline and returned to camp by the now somewhat waterlogged raft.

On the 24th Gibson, Ross and I left with packs for the icefield and the East Peak. After occupying a camera station on a rock eminence (8500 ft.) four miles east across the névé, we spent an uncomfortable night and climbed East Peak the next morning, confirming the height as about 9400 feet. On the return across the icefield, I unroped and walked alone for two hours by a more direct line, while Gibson and Ross picked up the packs. The worst place on the route after I had rejoined them was a really steep, hard dirt slope at about 5000 feet. It hardly warranted roping, but for a distance of 100 yards it was distinctly ticklish for climbers with packs.

On the 24th Odell, Smythe and Wessel climbed Mount Crosby at the south end of the icefields, and reported the "bulge" glacier to the southeast of the icefields as the source of the Quadacha River, the "white water" reported by Haworth in 1916. Bedaux Pass separates the Quadacha from the eastward-flowing Muskwa, which rises from the most easterly glacier, the largest tongue to drain the 30-to-40-square-mile Lloyd George icefields. Another small northward-

flowing tongue from the head of the easterly glacier eventually drains into Quentin Lake. Quentin and Haworth outlets—the latter by way of a 200-foot fall, which accounts for the absence of fish from Haworth Lake—form the Warneford, which joins the Quadacha 20 miles above the Finlay.

On the 26th Smythe, Odell and Wessel sought revenge on the West Peak, and got it in good style by traversing from the Central Peak by a double-corniced ridge to the east face of the West Peak and then climbing up. From camp at sunset we could see the party cautiously making its way down the now bare upper ice slopes. Near midnight they came in. "Really got our teeth into it today," said Frank, as we enjoyed cocoa by the campfire.

Three days of bad weather followed. Just as I was starting to pack up on the morning of July 30th, the plane circled at the head of the valley and landed on the lake. Gibson, Ross and I climbed in. On the way out to Fort Nelson, we again tried to reach Redfern Lake, but were prevented by clouds. As we followed the Muskwa eastward, we soon saw the thin line of the Alaska Highway; and, after 90 minutes in the air, we landed on Fort Nelson River. Carey brought the others out to Stuart Lake the same afternoon. At the field we were told that General Eisenhower had passed through the day before and Viscount Alexander the day before that. We hoped that their visits to British Columbia had been as successful as ours.