

Climbs in the New Zealand Alps

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ON December 24, 1955, I arrived in New Zealand to take up a Fulbright Scholarship for the study of geology at the University of Otago, Dunedin. In Dunedin I was welcomed by our honorary member, Professor Noel E. Odell, who immediately took a warm personal interest in my activities. I was soon honored by membership in the New Zealand Alpine Club which enabled me to meet other climbers and take advantage of special opportunities and facilities for climbing. Thanks are due to the U.S. Department of State, U.S. Educational Foundation in New Zealand, and the University of Otago for the opportunity to participate in the climbs described.

My stay in New Zealand lasted until late May 1956, during which time I had two six-weeks climbing seasons in the Southern Alps as well as a number of shorter trips. During the second of these seasons I was joined by Dick Irvin who came to New Zealand on his way to the Karakoram. Another American Fulbright Scholar, Stephen Espie, also participated in a number of ascents.

1. Mount Conrad

While staying at the New Zealand Alpine Club's Unwin Hut near the Hermitage in early February 1955, I became acquainted with Brian Timmings, of Auckland and talked him into taking me up the Murchison Valley to climb Mount Conrad, a peak which interested me for historical reasons. To begin with, we had to walk twelve miles to Ball Hut because the road had recently been washed out. Next day we went straight across the two-mile width of the Tasman Glacier and descended the left lateral moraine for two miles to the junction with the Murchison Valley. We then hiked up the broad gravel flats of the lower Murchison. Five miles up from the Tasman junction lies the moraine covered snout of Murchison Glacier. A short distance below this, on the west side of the valley, beside the stream issuing from the hanging Onslow Glacier, is the newly constructed Steffan Memorial Hut. Some distance below the hut the Murchison River swings in against some vertical bluffs. Since the river could not be forded we had to climb over the bluffs, clinging to vegetation, and digging our feet into gravel and loose rock. It was frustrating because we could look out across two miles of easy gravel flats just in front of us.

We were away at dawn on February 10 up the horrible moraines of the lower Murchison Glacier. Five miles of this tedious labor brought us opposite Mount Conrad (8505 feet) on the Liebig Range. We climbed up moraines and snow-grass slopes to the edge of a little glacier on Mount Conrad. At this point Brian found himself assailed by some peculiar sickness, and generously insisted on waiting, while I pushed on to the summit by the easiest possible route. I ascended to the head of the little glacier and up a long scree slope onto the main south ridge. I was following the route of the second ascent and had now intersected the ridge which Conrad Kain and H. O. Frind used on the first ascent in 1914. Where the previous parties had climbed partly on snow, I found a dry ridge of rotten rock, and, except for one exposed step, there was no difficulty.

The first thing which caught my eye when I arrived on the summit was a low, man-made pile of rocks. Apparently this was all that remained of Conrad's seven-foot cairn.* Frind had been so impressed with this, that he immediately asked Conrad's permission to name the peak "Mount Conrad." It is said that Conrad introduced cairn building to New Zealand, but the high peaks are snow-capped and cairns cannot always be built. I recalled the scene in August 1953 when four of us made the second ascent of Mount Conrad in British Columbia, in a blowing mist and found the remains of another of Conrad's monuments which he built in 1933.

I had arrived at the top about 1:00 P.M. Far below I could see Brian. I jumped up and down and yelled loudly. Soon an answer came floating up from below, but later I found out that he had not seen me, and only by coincidence had he decided to yell. The view was extremely broad and could hardly be described in the space allowed here. One point of interest was the contrast between the Godley Valley to the east, a broad expanse of stream gravel running from the Godley Glacier down to Lake Tekapo, and the curving course of the Murchison Glacier to the west. The upper névé of the Murchison heads on the divide.

At three o'clock I rejoined Brian. He had stretched out on a warm slab, and wasn't feeling "crook" any longer. It had been such a pleasant, easy climb that I was sorry there was not time now for him to go up also. We had a race against darkness back down the glacier, and various wild boulder-hopping techniques were tried for speed. In the end we got off the glacier snout just before dark. After a day of rest at the Steffan Hut, we hiked the entire 21 miles back to the Unwin Hut in one day, avoiding the terrible Murchison bluffs by fording the river twice in the early morning.

* Conrad Kain, *Where the Clouds Can Go*, edited by J. Monroe Thorington, New York: American Alpine Club, 1935 (reprinted 1954), page 331.

2. *The Southeast Ridge of Mount Tutoko*

For four days in January 1956 seven of us lay huddled beneath an enormous bolder in the Tutoko Valley of the Darran Mountains, Fiordland, waiting for torrential rain to cease. It was an entertaining group to be marooned with. Gerry Hall-Jones and Lloyd Warburton, of the Southland (Invercargill) Section of the New Zealand Alpine Club, Niel Wales and Norman Griffiths, of Dunedin, Stephen Espie, of New York City, Dick Irvin of San Francisco, and myself.

On January 7, with the sky clear again, we moved upward through the damp jungle-like forest and over several thousand feet of dangerous snow-grass bluffs. Lloyd and I, with light loads, went ahead and reached Sam Turner's Bivouac Rock (5000 feet) about noon. Just across the valley rises the tremendous southern face of Mount Tutoko (9040 feet), the highest peak in Fiordland and, in the opinion of many, the most beautiful mountain in New Zealand. To the left are the diorite rock buttresses and walls of the Southwest Ridge which terminates in the Tutoko Valley about 1000 feet above sea level. In the center is the south ice face which looses avalanches onto the Age Glacier every few minutes. On the right is the long Southeast Ridge, our objective for a first ascent, with its three forbidding rock buttresses, terminating in a high col. Lloyd and I spent the afternoon searching for a route to this col over a series of steep, narrow snow ledges.

Back with the others at Turner's Rock, we saw heavy clouds again darken the horizon, but this was a false alarm, and the morning of the eighth was perfect. Gerry, Lloyd, Dick, and I started at 4:45 A.M. With excellent crampon conditions we quickly proceeded unroped around the steep slopes and up to the col at the base of the ridge, arriving at 7:40 A.M.

At the base of the first buttress Lloyd and I roped together, and I climbed gingerly across the moat between snow and rock. The rock was steep, firm, and very cold. One hundred and ten feet up a belay was found, and soon all four of us were working our way up a snow and rock ridge toward the second buttress. A fresh north wind blew mist over us occasionally, but was not annoying. Much to our surprise, the much-feared second buttress was climbed straight up easy rocks on the exposed lefthand side with "bomb-proof" belays behind two large rock needles. We arrived at the top of the second buttress at 10 A.M.

Things were going well, but now the last buttress at the top of a long, curving snow arête looked more forbidding than ever. At the base of the buttress Lloyd and I moved a few feet out to the left along the top of the snow. Lloyd secured himself around a large projecting block, and I moved up the wall, eager to test its possibilities. About 40 feet up I encountered

difficulties in a series of short overhangs. Eventually these were overcome, and I was able to move out onto slabs to the right and 30 feet up these to a small belay stance. Lloyd joined me quickly with the pitons, one of which was used to secure the belay. He then led up the remainder of the slabs and sent down the glad news that we were up the final buttress. He unroped and moved off to plug steps up the snow, while I sent down the rope to protect Dick's lead.

A few minutes later I was hurrying up Lloyd's steps to the crest of the ridge. His dim shape could be seen moving ahead through the mist, and shortly I was with him. From where we were, near the snow peak capping the last buttress, a narrow snow ridge swung gently downward to a col and then upward, sweeping to a magnificent "ladder to heaven" below the Southeast Peak. We put on the rope and crampons and set out along this without delay. It was a long, tiring stretch of step kicking, but at last we arrived on top of the unclimbed Southeast Peak. From this point Gerry, fulfilling a promise of the day before, took over step-plugging duties across a broad col and up a long slope to the higher peaks of the mountain.

We arrived on the southern bump about 1 P.M., and here had to decide through drifting clouds which of several peaks was the true summit. The narrow, corniced northern peak was proclaimed highest by all of us, and we strolled easily to it in ten minutes, thence returning to the rocks of the southern bump for lunch. If appetite is any indication, and I am sure it is, then I can say that rarely have I felt such great satisfaction upon reaching a summit. Fortunately for me, my friends' unmistakable enthusiasm was not reflected in the same way. Not much could be said for the view: occasional glimpses of glaciers, peaks, valleys, and the sea far below, with the continually shifting clouds around us giving an atmosphere of mystery and excitement not encountered on a clear day.

We were on our way down at 2:30 and reached the top of the last buttress in 45 minutes. Dick did a masterful job arranging pitons and slings for the 100-foot rappel to the snow below, and the rest of the ridges and the second buttress went easily. A second long rappel down the first buttress was very time consuming, but brought us back to the col at 6:30 P.M. The worst part of the day was the steep traverse of the snow ledges below the col, which were now soft and dangerous, as well as very much exposed. At last we reached a point where we could unrope safely and retrace the route Lloyd and I had used the day before. We enjoyed a spectacular sunset and rejoined the others at Turner's Rock about 9:15 P.M.

While we had been up Tutoko, Stephen and Niel had climbed Mount Madeline (8300 feet), the second peak of Fiordland. On the ninth, a

cloudless day, they went up Mount Syme, while we four traversed Madeline, obtaining magnificent views all over the Darrans and especially of our ridge on Tutoko. The rest of the sunlight hours we spent enjoying the scenic and sunbathing advantages of Turner's Rock with the 6000-foot ice- and rock-face of Tutoko as a backdrop and with thundering ice avalanches for entertainment. There is probably no more spectacular sight in New Zealand.

The descent of the snow-grass bluffs, which had been worrying us, was accomplished quickly on the morning of the 10th with the aid of ropes in two places. In the afternoon we pushed on down the Tutoko Valley over the rough forest track and about 4 P.M. reached Gerry's car on the road two miles from Milford Sound. From Tutoko Bridge the mountain loomed at the head of the valley almost a full 9000 feet above us, its upper ice set like a jewel in the black rock which rises sheer from the forest.

3. The North Buttress of Mount Aspiring

It had taken five days for Dick Irvin, Dr. Roland Rodda, and me to establish high camp at 7000 feet on the lower Northwest Ridge of Mount Aspiring. The first day we drove to Mount Aspiring Station from Lake Wanaka and hiked the twelve miles up the west branch of the Matukituki Valley to the Aspiring Hut (about 2500 feet). Jerry Aspinall, of Mount Aspiring Station, had been kind enough to bring most of our food in by horse. The next two days we carried loads from Aspiring Hut to French Ridge Hut (5200 feet). After a fourth day sitting out a storm at French Hut, on the fifth day we climbed up to the Bonar Glacier and crossed it to our high camp.

The main glacier systems surrounding Mount Aspiring, the Bonar on the south, and the Therma and Volta Glaciers on the north, are separated by the two main ridges of the mountain: the Northwest Ridge with its lower extension known as the Shipowner, on which we were camped, and the Southeast or Coxcomb Ridge. A lesser ridge, the Southwest, runs straight to the summit from Bonar Glacier. The Northeast Ridge or Surgeon's Spur rises steeply from the Therma Glacier and joins the Coxcomb some distance to the east of the summit. All of these four ridges had been climbed previously, the last, the Northeast, having fallen to climbers in 1955. Dr. Rodda, by careful study of the North Face seemed to have found the one remaining possibility for a new ridge-route on the mountain. From the tangled ice of the Therma Glacier a forbidding rock rib arches upward for 2000 feet directly to the summit. Dick and I came prepared with pitons and ready for serious difficulties on rock which has the reputation of being very rotten.

On January 19, 1956, we had breakfast at our high camp at 3 A.M., but soon it began to rain and continued until 8 A.M. the morning of the 20th. Thinking it too late to start for the big climb, we left for a reconnaissance of the North Face about 10:30, taking with us ice axes, crampons, but only one rope. Winding around and over crevasses on the Therma Glacier, we reached the base of the North Buttress about 1 P.M. Wishing to rub noses with the buttress a little, we started up the lower 700 feet of moderate slabs. There was a gusty wind coming across from the Northwest Ridge, which made the going unpleasant but kept us moving. The prospects for having another day of good weather seemed poor, and gradually we made up our minds to go on with the climb that day.

In 50 minutes we reached the top of the lower slabs, and Dick took over the lead from me. Above us rose the two steep 300-foot buttresses, one of which we knew would be the crux of the climb. As it turned out, the rock was mostly firm, the belays usually good, the exposure always immense, and the route just deceptive enough to keep the outcome in doubt until the very last. Our big regret was that we had only the one rope. Once or twice Dick and I had to climb together until he could reach a belay. At several points Dick found what was probably the only way up. The climbing had a certain semblance to both the Exum Ridge of the Grand Teton and the Northwest Ridge of Mount Sir Donald, but was more exposed than either.

Once above the second buttress we decided that I should continue unroped while Dick brought up Dr. Rodda. From here it was moderate snow- and rock-scrambling all the way to the summit rocks, just under the summit ice cone. While waiting I constructed a cairn to commemorate our ascent, and we had lunch there together about 4 P.M.

We put on crampons and rope for the summit, and I kicked and cut steps carefully upward. The peak itself was an uncorniced knife edge of rotten ice with an ominous-looking crack running the length of the crest. The wind was moderate, and we paused a few minutes for photographs. Of all the peaks to the south, Tutoko stood out most boldly, while the great mass of Cook dominated the northeastern horizon. No peak close to Aspiring has any significance at all, a fact that enhances the sense of altitude and isolation felt on the summit. Again we had the great experience of being able to look out over the sea from a high mountain top.

Like all previous parties we made our descent by the Northwest Ridge on easy snow and rock. We arrived back in camp in time to relax and gaze back at the sharp profile of the mountain as the last blood-red rays of sunset touched the top.

The next morning we could see that the weather was going bad. After a quick ascent of two minor peaks to get a head-on view of the North Face, we packed up and moved back to French Ridge Hut. After two wild nights of storm there, we descended to the Aspiring Hut and enjoyed a dinner of venison given to us by the local government hunters.

At the end of the twelve mile hike out to the road we enjoyed the warm hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Jerry Aspinall, the owners of the famous Mount Aspiring Homestead. Here, 40 miles from the nearest town, at the Forks of the Matukituki River, we found New Zealand character and friendliness at its very best. Year in and year out they welcome climbers to their lonesome valley, and we hope that a few of those who come hereafter will enjoy repeating our route on the solid North Buttress of Aspiring.

4. *The Bowie Ridge of Mount Cook*

Good weather seemed to have arrived at last on February 1, 1956, and Dick Irvin, Hamish MacInnes, and I hurried back to the Haast Hut (6000 feet) below the Grand Plateau of Mount Cook. A few minutes before we rolled out of bed the next morning two New Zealanders arrived. They had completed their traverse of the High Peak of Cook via Earl's Route and the Linda Route in moonlight. Setting out ourselves at 3:15 A.M. behind two New Zealanders headed for the East Ridge of the Middle Peak, we worked our way up the familiar route onto Glacier Dome (8000 feet).

Once on the slope leading down onto the Grand Plateau, our spirits rose, and as we wound our way unroped through open crevasses toward the Linda Glacier, Hamish led us with a song. The sparkling moonlit ice walls of Mount Tasman echoed the words:

*On Mount Joy one Monday morning
High upon the gallows tree,
Kevin Barry gave his young life
For the cause of liberty.*

This day was to be a festival of unroped climbing. I shall never be sure whether we did the right thing, but I doubt if a roped party of three is likely to repeat our climb.

From the High Peak of Mount Cook (12,349 feet) the North Ridge leads down to Green's Saddle, which separates Mount Cook from Mount Dampier on the main divide. On the east side the Zurbriggen Ridge descends over 5000 feet to the Grand Plateau, separating the North and East Faces. Part way down the Zurbriggen Ridge a jagged, buttressed ridge separates itself northward toward Mount Tasman. This confines the Linda Glacier to a northward course from the North Face of Cook until it breaks

through a tremendous cleft and plunges chaotically eastward onto the Grand Plateau. Our objective was to make a first ascent of this ridge.

By sunrise we had crossed through the lower Linda Glacier and put on the rope to negotiate one of the most enormous crevasses we had ever seen. In order to avoid the huge lower buttress of our ridge, we worked up a small glacier and climbed onto the rocks of the east flank. Hamish led a difficult 100-foot pitch from the ice onto the rock, and we scrambled the remaining 1000 feet to the crest of the ridge.

Above us towered the second buttress composed of solid, reddish graywacke. The climbing on it proved to be mostly grade 3 to 4, with plenty of holds but few belays. We proceeded quickly "unroped together." About 200 feet below the top the moderate climbing ceased temporarily, and I belayed while Hamish made a fine lead up a thin, exposed crack.

From the top of the big buttress at 10:20 A.M. we proceeded toward five sharp gendarmes which we expected would give us some difficulty. But there turned out to be a fairly reasonable route through them. Easy scrambling brought us up the small final buttress to the junction with the Zurbriggen Ridge at 12:25 P.M. A new route on Mount Cook was ours. We decided to name it for Chief Guide Mick Bowie, who has done many fine ascents in the region, and who is always a generous friend and advisor to all serious climbers in the district.

We put on crampons for the mixed rock- and snow-ridge ahead, and soon I found myself far ahead of Dick and Hamish. Over on the East Ridge of the Middle Peak two black dots could be seen moving slowly upward. Mount Tasman gradually sank below the horizon, and more of the Tasman Sea came into view. To the northeast the Tasman Glacier looked like a flat monster with tentacles reaching to every peak. All other peaks seem to lose significance when one is on Mount Cook.

At the rocks below the summit I rested 30 minutes until Dick and Hamish caught up, then relinquished my seat to them and continued kicking steps up the final 900-foot icecap to the summit. How fortunate we were to have such a day to be on top of New Zealand. It was so clear that one could see the Pacific Ocean on the far side of the South Island. Our hopes of doing a grand traverse of Mount Cook were quickly disposed of, for the whole southern ridge was sheathed in rock-hard green ice into which crampons would hardly bite.

After we had all been on the summit about 30 minutes we heard a whoop. Soon the guides, Phil Boswell and Gavin Harper, arrived, with Tony Luytens. They had come up Earl's Route from the Empress Hut (8000 feet) on the upper Hooker Glacier. This was the first time in history

that two parties had met on the summit of Mount Cook! We were of five nationalities: New Zealand, Australian, English, Scottish, and American.

We inquired of the guides if it would be feasible for us to descend Earl's Route. They told us the angle was moderate and we would have their steps to follow. This proved to be very bad advice. Soon after leaving the summit at 4:30 we found ourselves on a 45 degree slope of green ice with projecting rocks. If we had been thinking clearly we would have climbed back and gone down the Linda Route. The steps were very small and far apart. Hamish's steel-handled ice hammer, which he used in lieu of an ice axe, proved to be the only thing which would penetrate the ice. Dick went down first finding rocks for belays.

After several hours we got below the hard ice and were able to scramble unroped on easy rocks with small patches of snow or rotten ice. At one point I cramponed down onto a patch of rotten ice. Realizing it was not as solid as expected, I turned inward to plant the pick into the surface. Just as the pick struck the ice, both feet broke out from under me. I was in self-arrest position before I had slid more than a foot, and expected to stop immediately. Instead I found myself accelerating. Beneath about two inches of rotten stuff the ice was hard as rock. I became annoyed with myself, for I knew there was a 2000-foot precipice not far below. I was to be an object lesson for unroped climbers. This was the end, but at least I would go down fighting. Every particle of energy was applied to the axe. The slope lessened, and the effort seemed to be succeeding, for my speed decreased until I was moving slowly. But try as I would I could not stop. Now death was flirting with me before the final doom. I bumped over the first rocks. The precipice was near now. Suddenly I was no longer moving, and only the loose ice continued to hiss downward. Contrary to my training, I had been digging in my feet with crampons on and these had caught on some rocks to stop me. Twenty feet below was a small drop, and 100 feet beyond that was space. I had fallen 300 feet. I shouted to Dick and Hamish that I was unhurt and then became much annoyed because I had lost my sun goggles and my watch.

In the evening sun we scrambled down over more rotten rock with waning hopes of reaching the Empress Hut that night. We stopped in a little cave at about 10,500 feet at 9:00 P.M. Putting on all the clothing we had, we sipped a little trickle of water and ate. Hamish and I wedged ourselves together between two rocks for warmth, and Dick curled up a foot or two away.

We started down again at dawn and reached the Empress Hut in about three hours, after a very unpleasant time getting from the rock onto the

glacier. There was plenty of food besides what we had brought over the top, and soon we were having an orgy to be followed by long sleep. I was often contemplating what it meant to be alive.

In the early evening there came a knock at the door, and our two friends from the East Ridge of the Middle Peak came in. They had made the Middle Peak very late, but had been stopped by the green ice of the high peak just before sunset. They dug an ice cave at about 12,000 feet to spend the night, and took all of the next day coming down from the Middle Peak into the Hooker Valley. All of us can be thankful there was no storm that night. They soon left in order to reach the Gardner Hut before dark.

We left Empress Hut about noon the following day and descended the Hooker Glacier via Gardner Hut, Pudding Rock, and the Hooker Hut. Fourteen miles and seven hours later we reached the Hermitage. From here Hamish ferried us two miles down to Unwin Hut on his motorcycle. For the next five days there were violent storms, and we had plenty of time to think over our experiences before the next climb.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Southern Alps of New Zealand.

ASCENTS: Conrad, 8805 ft., February 10, 1955: Peter Robinson.

Tutoko, 9040 ft., first ascent of Southeast Ridge, January 8, 1956: Peter Robinson, Richard K. Irvin, Lloyd Warburton, Gerry Hall-Jones.

Madeline, 8300 ft., January 9, 1956: Robinson, Irvin, Lloyd, Hall-Jones.

Aspiring, 9957 ft., first ascent of North Buttress, January 20, 1956: Robinson, Irvin, Roland Rodda.

Cook, 12,349 ft., first ascent of Bowie Ridge, February 2, 1956: Robinson, Irvin, Hamish MacInness.

