New Zealand, 1977

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WHO could turn down a free trip to paradise? I did for two years in a row. I was invited to train promising young Kiwi climbers in big-wall techniques in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. I couldn't go in 1975 because of the K2 expedition, nor in 1976 because of work on a book. In 1977, thanks to a grant that the Ministry of Recreation and Sports had given the Canterbury Mountaineering Club, I traveled to a land similar to the America of my childhood with few people, slow living, clean air, and endless miles of countryside greener than Ireland on St. Patrick's Day.

The Southern Alps, legendary as the spawning place of Sir Edmund Hillary, are 200 miles long with no point farther than 65 miles from the sea. The highest point, Mount Cook, is the biggest 12,000-foot mountain in the world. Others may rise more directly from the sea, or, like the Hawaiian volcanoes, rise from some unseen depth, but Cook really looks like an 8000-meter giant as it soars above the Tasman Glacier, which is longer than any glacier in Nepal. The Himalayan appearance is no accident. New Zealand is not just a pair of oceanic islands, but rather the emergent parts of a continental mass involved in plate collision similar to that which created the Himalaya. The Southern Alps have already risen twice the height of Everest from a depth of fifteen miles below the sea.

I looked longingly at Mount Cook from the air as I flew south to the Darran Mountains, a range of the Alps in Fiordland National Park near famed Milford Sound. When Chris Bonington had climbed both Cook and nearby Tasman a month earlier, he had had to face inward and use his axe to descend snow slopes where Kiwis had faced out and plunge-stepped with abandon. No one had signed up for my prospective Mount Cook climbing courses because Kiwis were past masters at snow and ice. All five of my five-day courses were rock climbing in the Darrans. I was about to learn why New Zealand had produced an Ed Hillary but no Joe Brown.

I was met at the airport by Mike Perry, a bearded, barefoot detestor of uniforms who happened to be a Fiordland park ranger. Mike was on my first course and he had written me a long description of the Darrans. The area was known for its firm dioritic granite and deep, U-shaped valleys that are often glowingly compared in scenic splendor to Yosemite. Mike's route description sounded familiar enough, but his parenthetical insertions were disturbing: "(few of the faces have distinctive features such as

dihedrals or long continuous cracks) . . . (the larger faces usually incorporate large cirque walls running with water and slime) . . . (rainfall averages one inch a day)".

My classroom turned out to be several hundred square miles of vertical jungle connected by marshes and rivers. Robbins boots were the shoe of choice, not for the performance on rock, but rather for ability to survive approaches that were as often underwater as above.

Our base was Homer Hut, just off the Milford Road. It was filled with more than twenty climbers patiently waiting for the rain to stop. When it did stop my students led me toward a bivouac under Mount Sabre in an area that only about fifty people had ever visited. The only climbing regulation in the park was: absolutely no bolt placing. Midway to Sabre we came upon a long cable fixed with bolts big enough to anchor a bridge. It had been placed by rangers to aid hikers in the wilderness when gentle slabs were wet or icy. As near as I could discover, these were the only bolts in the park.

We scrambled up and down over ridges for several hours, gazing through growing mist into Milford Sound, an arm of the Tasman Sea. Near the end of the approach came the crux, "Gifford's Crack," a 60° gully coated with grass and moss. At times we were totally dependent on grass handholds. I breathed a strong sigh of relief when my feet touched solid rock again.

Soon we came to a spacious boulder cave. Inside was Murray Jones, a top New Zealand climber whom I had met in the States. He was swathed in bandages and resembled a war casualty. We learned that Murray had fallen down Gifford's and luckily, I think, hit a ledge instead of going the distance. Our tea was interrupted by a helicopter, summoned by Murray's friends, that plucked him off to the hospital.

We camped in an even more spacious cave equipped with a cache including plates, stove, utensils, frying pans, condiments, and a heavy brass salad bowl from the Milford Hotel. The very steep 1400-foot north face of Sabre beckoned, but disappeared the next morning in storm clouds. We sat in the bivouac for two days, perfectly dry, waiting for the torrential downpour to stop. Then, as is typical for New Zealand, the wind changed to the south and cold Antarctic air turned the rain into a blizzard. Gifford's Crack became out of the question. The first course ended with a cold walk out a longer route.

The storm continued into the next course, discouraging two young Mount Cook guides who wanted to learn more rock techniques. Homer Hut was at low elevation below the snow level. One morning several climbers decided to alleviate boredom by running thirteen miles in the rain to Milford Sound. I came in last, covering the distance in a respectable hour and twenty-five minutes. It was my first lesson that Kiwi climbers are generally in far better shape than their overseas counterparts.



The next day twenty inches of rain fell in twenty-four hours. We were marooned in the hut by torrents over forty feet wide on both sides of us. When the water began to recede we escaped in an ancient Czechoslovakian station wagon and decided to try our luck on Mount Aspiring, a Matterhorn look-alike in a region with less rainfall. We drove hundreds of miles of gravel, found clear skies, walked rapidly toward the peak, bivouacked in a rainstorm, never saw the mountain up close, and retreated. Our pace was a steady 4mph with packs. The guides placed their feet with the absolute accuracy of native mountain people, but considerably more times per minute. Just as I was jogging to make up for the lost steps, I overhead them commenting that visiting Aussie climbers just don't know how to walk. I smiled.

On our return drive we stopped in Te Anau, a tourist town with headquarters for the national park. I began to see a sharp contrast with American parks. Fiordland appeared to be paradise, but with an important component of my normal wilderness experience missing: New Zealand has no native mammals except for a few bats. The landscape has no naturally evolving large animals. It is like Alaska with no moose, caribou, bear, or wolf. It does have deer and elk; nineteenth-century deer transplants have grown to hundreds of thousands in a land totally devoid of predators. In 1905 Teddy Roosevelt donated eighteen elk, which have now multiplied to thousands and have interbred into superdeer. The national parks have surrogate predators in the form of "deerstalkers" who make a living shooting deer with rifles from helicopters. I'd much rather put up with grizzlies. New Zealand deer are officially called "noxious animals" and are blamed for erosion, loss of vegetation cover, and forage competition with rare and protected flightless birds. Fiordland park gives permits to thirty helicopters that haul out about \$5,000,000 of venison each year bound for dinner tables in West Germany.

A ranger was assaulted in a local pub shortly before I arrived by a chopper pilot who thought he had been dealt a poor permit area. The locals joked about it, saying that rangers were always getting beat up because the penalty for poaching was greater than that for hitting a ranger.

My third course had only two members. John Barnett and Alan Hay were both in their early twenties and already in the top echelon of Kiwi rock climbers. John had climbed extensively in England; Al solely in New Zealand. They wanted to learn multi-pitch aid climbing and luckily the weather cleared as we returned to Homer Hut.

Before dawn we set out for Moirs Mate, a popular crag already criss-crossed with several routes up a 1000-foot wall. No routes went through an overhanging diamond-shaped area that overhung half the height of the wall, although several had been tried. We went for the diamond and I attacked the rock with vigor. After ten days of bad weather, I was eager

to get moving, but I got nowhere quickly. Cracks were steep, discontinuous, and filled with vegetation. I rained down whole ecosystems on my belayer as I fought and thrashed up the first lead. I came to a point where a crack ended and it was impossible to continue aid climbing. I was forced to lead a 5.9 ceiling or to descend. With wet feet sliding, I managed the ceiling and reached a belay. Since the next lead was equally steep, I continued leading. Below us, a group of climbers sat down to watch how the Americans do it just as I was leading a long, free section that appeared to end on a ledge. As I neared the "ledge" my last nut and a sling over a horn popped out, leaving me forty feet above protection. I heard the watchers comment that Kiwis never led so far above protection and Americans must be really bold. Just at that moment I had finished a 5.9 jam and reached an insecure finger crack below the lip of the ledge. I reached up and over only to find gravel poised on a steep, crackless slab. I couldn't find a safe way to get over the lip, and I thought the onlookers were going to have a real show: their visiting expert was about to take an eighty-footer off his first Kiwi climb.

For long moments I hung from the jam and gardened grass and gravel above. I tapped a copperhead into a bottoming slot and, not trusting it to hold a fall, I made the final move of the otherwise free pitch on aid. John came up on Jümars while Al free-climbed all but the final move. Another messy 5.9 crack brought us to the top of the diamond and a lunch stop. I tried to convince Al and John that my techniques worked beautifully on clean California rock, but the example I set was not entirely convincing. Al later wrote, "Basically on our course we learned how to jümar . . . If you imagine three people working in a difficult and dangerous job with only one person knowing what he is doing, then perhaps you will understand what Galen had to put up with . . . I quickly learned four things: fitness, efficiency, ability, and enthusiasm. Without these qualities we would not begin to learn the finer points."

I thought that I would never have begun to rock climb if I were born in New Zealand. I was learning four things too: waiting, wading, walking and weeding. It was most trying to overlay methods designed for bare granite and warm sun onto the wet vertical jungle. Al and John led the last section of the climb up continuous cracks not over 5.7. Both were talented free climbers, but they were noticeably slow in rope management, racking of gear, and changing belays; so slow that they more than doubled the normal time for climbing. With more practice I was sure that they would blossom into competent big-wall climbers, but where in New Zealand can one get the experience that is available every weekend in fine weather to a Californian? In the Darrans I found not a single clean, easily accessible practice climb like the thousands that become classrooms for overseas climbers.

On the summit the troubles of the slimy climb slipped from my mind as I looked around at a sea of peaks and glaciers culminating in Mount

Tutuko which was only 9000 feet but every bit as icy and impressive as Nanga Parbat. Another peak a thousand feet lower appeared to offer an appealing mixture of rock and ice; Mount Christina rose over 6000 feet above Homer Hut. Set below the clouds and ice were tropical rain forests, green valleys, and arms of the sea. The canyon beneath us had 5000-foot granite walls, but entirely covered with vegetation. We joked that the Darrans would become a world climbing center if only someone could breed a new species of sheep adapted to vertical feeding.

Clear days were as water in the desert: they had to be used carefully and frugally. We voted not to waste a clear day walking back to the Sabre bivouac, so we headed for a 300-foot cliff band on Mount Talbot the next morning. A few members of the earlier rained-out courses joined us on some short new routes. I led "The Sickle," a two-pitch climb first up a 5.8 crack, then on a face-traverse under an overhang. Zane Williams followed, but by the time Roland Logan was in the middle of the last lead it was snowing.

That evening we celebrated with a dinner at the Milford Hotel. I had the distinct feeling that I had lived through the experience before, and indeed I had, many times in the early sixties in Yosemite and the Tetons whenever I tried to eat at a tourist hotel with a group of climbers. The Milford management snubbed us and my friends assured me that were it not for my plea in an American accent, we wouldn't have been seated at all. We were stuck at a corner table and given bland food with poor service at double the prices of anywhere else in the country.

The next day's climb was, quite simply, the most dreadful route I have ever done. John Barnett and I set out for a two-hundred-foot-high slab near Homer Tunnel. It looked clean from a distance, but upon close inspection we named it "The Slug's Head" because it was blunt-shaped and running with slime. John led the first pitch up 5.8, A2 mud, slime, and grass. Then I nailed a wide groove that I had to garden every inch of the way. Soaked to the skin and covered with mud, I felt something move against my hand in the crack, pulled out a grotesque white slug, told John to catch it, and tossed it down.

Our uncontrollable laughter marked the moment of my Kiwi transformation. We had found a slug on The Slug's Head, but beyond that simple irony I had begun to find humor in dreadful conditions. I was finally accepting New Zealand conditions at face value rather than always searching for something I'd never find. We laughed our way to the summit through thin glutinous mud, set two rappels through a waterfall, and returned, slimy and giggling, to our Homer home.

The next day was clear, but we decided to rest from technical rock because our fingers were scuffed by three days of intense work on rough rock. Before dawn we set out for the west side of Mount Christina which had 6000 vertical feet of class 3 and 4 rock followed by a corniced snow ridge. Since the fastest previous roundtrip had been seventeen hours, we



started out at full speed. Al kept up for the first hour, but decided to turn around before we were committed to unroped climbing on steep rock. John, tremendously fit from previous months at Mount Cook, led his guide most of the way to the summit in just over four hours. After a lunch stop on top we decided to traverse the peak. Even my Kiwi partner faced in and used his axe for the first thousand feet of very steep snow. Soon we crossed a bergschrund and waded through deep snow across a glacier and around crevasses onto now-familiar rock festooned with greenery. By midafternoon we were having an idyllic swim in the warm waters of Marion Lake. Unknowingly we had made the first west-east traverse of the peak in very good time.

The fourth course included two veterans of the 1976 New Zealand Torre Egger Expedition, Daryll Thompson and Hugh Logan, plus a glacier guide, Andy Campbell. After some aid-climbing practice on boulders, we set out for Mount Sabre to try a new route on the right side of the north face. The weather held and at dawn the next day we began a long overhang at the base of the 1400-foot face. The climbing was slow and intricate; by noon we had made only three pitches and I had taken two falls overcoming wet 5.9, A2 difficulties. On top of the naturally slow terrain, the Kiwis brought an additional slowness to wall climbing that I had never experienced before. Rope handling, jümaring, and hauling packs became complex maneuvers that took many times longer than they should have—a great contrast to the tremendous speed and daring that Kiwis had shown me in covering non-technical terrain. When it became clear that we couldn't do a direct line up the wall in a day, it was already afternoon. I began an upward diagonal traverse to the west ridge a few hundred feet below the summit. We rappelled in the dark to a bivouac site at the base of the west ridge. To my surprise the bivouac without sleeping bags did nothing to dampen my companion's spirits. The next morning we set out on a rapid traverse up the west ridge and down the east ridge of Mount Sabre, covering ground unroped that would normally be considered low fifth class.

Rain halted further climbing until the fifth course. I had been attracted by the "Donne Corner" on Mount Underwood, an unclimbed 1500-foot buttress that dropped into the Donne Valley from the south ridge. It seemed tantalizingly close to the Milford Road, but an afternoon's exploration proved it to be quite distant. The members of this final course were more spread in age, ability, and experience than those on earlier courses. Graham Elder was a general mountaineer in his thirties with no particular rock bias. John Stanton was a veteran of Torre Egger, plus another Andean expedition and a new route up the Caroline Face of Mount Cook—7000 feet of some of the most dangerous ice climbing in the world. Miles Craighead was a college-age climber with lots of natural talent, but he lacked the experience of the other two.

The approach was unlike anything I had ever experienced. We climbed

long overhanging bands of rock solely on vegetation. The rain forest just kept going up and up for countless thousands of feet above the river. We reached the base of the route at two in the afternoon, cached our bivvy gear, and decided to push on. I led pitch after pitch of 5.4 to 5.8 climbing on good rock. I had a choice of going unprotected on slabs or sticking close to cracks where the rock was coated with vegetation. For the most part I stuck to the slabs. The threesome below me increased their efficiency with every pitch. They learned to set up Jümars, clean a pitch, and be ready for another in half the time that the beginning pitches had taken. I didn't dare give up the lead, because time was so short. Just before dark I led the last pitch, but night overcame us before we could get down to our bivouac gear. We began to sit out an absolutely clear night on a broad ledge. Stars were out and not a cloud was in the sky. Two hours later we were in a storm. Like Patagonia, New Zealand is such a narrow buffer of land that storms from the Roaring Forties come almost without warning. At first light, cold and wet, we headed down the vertical jungle, having taken seven hours on the approach, seven on the climb, and seven in the bivouac.

The Donne Corner was my last climb. The weather closed in again and I headed home by way of Mount Cook, which hid from me in a storm until the morning I had to leave. I returned with the feeling that I learned more from the Kiwis than they learned from me. What I learned from them was staying power and a willingness to accept what nature deals. These are far more important components of alpinism than the temporal techniques of what we call modern big-wall climbing.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Darran Mountains, Southern Alps, New Zealand

New Routes: Moir's Mate, "The Diamond" NCCS IV, 5.9 A3 February 5, 1977 (Barnett, Hay, Rowell)

Mount Talbot "The Sickle" NCCS II, 5.8 February 6, 1977

(Logan, Rowell, Williams)

Mount Christina, west-east traverse, NCCS III, 5.5 February 8, 1977 (Barnett, Rowell)

"The Slug's Head," NCCS II, 5.8 A1, February 7, 1977 (Barnett, Rowell)

Mount Sabre, right side of north face, NCCS IV, 5.9, A3 February 12, 1977 (Campbell, H. Logan, Thompson, Rowell)

Mount Underwood, Donne Corner, NCCS III, 5.8 February 17-18, 1977 (Craighead, Elder, Stanton, Rowell)

Personnel: Mike Perry, Zane Williams, Willie Trengrove, Roland Logan, Allan Cutler, Nick Craddock, John Barnett, Al Hay, Andy Campbell, Daryll Thompson, Hugh Logan, John Stanton, Graham Elder, Miles Craighead, Galen Rowell.