

MOUNT COOK

By W. G. CROLL

(Three illustrations: nos. 50-52)

IN the centre of the South Island of New Zealand lies the culmination of the Southern Alps, the ten thousand foot peaks flanked 250 miles to the north by a myriad of peaks rising from the bush-clad hills of Nelson through the screes of the Spencer Mountains and finally to the glaciated country beginning at Arthur's Pass and the great Canterbury river systems. To the south the chain diminishes more rapidly in height, rising again in the Otago alps and spreading out over Fiordland and tumbling into the sea on the remote south coast another 250 miles away. At the hub of the ten thousand footers lies Mount Cook, rising to 12,349 ft. a bare twenty miles from the sea. With three definite peaks, great bulges of permanent ice and its truncated approaches it looks in every way a big mountain. Because it is considerably lower than the highest European mountains it has been frequently misjudged by visitors. The climber must start from much nearer sea level in New Zealand and the weather is frequently violent and much more unpredictable than its counterparts in the Northern Hemisphere.

During my first visits to the Mount Cook region I steadfastly stuck to the rule that Mount Cook was something to be kept for later—a peak to be savoured in the expectation so to speak. But on the third visit the spell was too great—I gladly succumbed—first the Low Peak, then the High and finally the Middle Peak by the East ridge. I expected the spell to be broken but it strengthened instead as my respect for the mountain grew. And I came yet again.

The first cartographic record of Mount Cook appeared on Capt. Stokes' map of 1856 where it was described as 12,000 to 13,000 ft. It was named by Stokes after his predecessor, the great navigator, although it is doubtful if Cook saw more than a high mountain chain rearing out of the mist, a sight impressive enough for him to be moved to bestow the name 'Southern Alps'. The Maori name, Aorangi, interpreted as 'Cloud Piercer' or 'Cloud of Heaven' or 'Big White Cloud', is rather suspect as to its antiquity since the Maoris, prior to the arrival of the Europeans in the vicinity during the 1850's, were confined to the coast and, with the exception of two or three passes, knew little of the back country.

The first recorded interest in the climbing of the peak is a reconnaissance of the Southern end of the Mount Cook range to 7,500 ft. by Julius von Haast on April 12, 1862. From a mountaineering point of

view there was little activity until the arrival of the Rev. W. S. Green in 1882 who, with the Swiss hôtelier Emil Boss and the guide Ulrich Kaufmann, climbed to within a hair's breadth of the summit, a bare two hundred feet, only to be caught by the lateness of the hour and a rising north-west storm. They turned at 6 p.m. (the hour of sunset in March) and spent a miserable night out above 10,000 ft., soaked to the skin and unable even to sit. To sleep would have been fatal. In the light of present day knowledge of the effects of exposure it is quite astounding that they managed to survive. The lower approach to the route they followed was named after Green's wife, and this is still the most popular route, the Linda glacier.

With the failure of Green so close to success, the interest of the local amateur climbers was sparked into enthusiasm. It was a small group but with each attempt they became more proficient and more determined that a New Zealand party would be the first to reach the summit. The Haast ridge bivouac became well known to these enthusiasts but the weather turned them back time and again.

In 1890, Mannering and Dixon all but reached the same point as Green but turned back at sunset rather than be caught out at such an altitude. To the present day climber who uses crampons it is difficult to understand why they turned only a few minutes from the summit. More subsequent attempts were defeated by the weather. A handful of men spent every available holiday in the area and the Haast ridge bivouac site became their second home. M. J. Dixon described one of these occasions in 1894, 'at 10.30 p.m. a tremendous nor-west storm commenced, when all the fiends of fury seemed to be let loose against us; and who could but admire the grandeur of the situation, perched as we were in our lofty eyry with the storm howling around, above and below, the lightning so brilliant that, with faces turned downwards, and inside our sleeping bags and blankets, and with our very eyelids closed, the steel-blue flashes still were visible: add to this the flailing of the hail, the thunder, an avalanche or two, and the "The War-note of Lochiel" which Malcolm Ross occasionally extracted from that Gaelic instrument, a bagpipe, a fitting accompaniment to the grand hubbub in progress. The storm continued all next day and night.'

In the latter part of 1894 news arrived that the noted English climber, E. A. Fitzgerald, was bringing out the Swiss guide Mattias Zurbriggen to attempt Mount Cook and other peaks. This spurred the amateurs anew and attempts began in early November again on the eastern approach as before. Bad weather with few fine spells repulsed all attempts. A group consisting of M. J. Dixon, Malcolm Ross and Kenneth Ross reached the Haast ridge bivouac on November 8, T. C. Fyfe and Geo Graham joined them on the 10th and Dixon, Kenneth Ross, Fyfe and Graham reached as far as the ice-cap via Green's route on the 25th.

Time was running out and Ross and Dixon returned home. On Christmas Day Fyfe, Graham and the nineteen year old J. M. Clarke, on his first big climb, made the epic first ascent via the Hooker glacier and the previously untried North ridge. Largely a rock climb (Fyfe had a definite preference for rock), their route lay up a rotten ridge dividing two couloirs leading to Green's Saddle and over sound rock to the ice cap which in turn led them by more gradual slopes to the summit at 1.30 p.m. Fyfe described two rock avalanches, but otherwise indicated that the rock was loose in only two pitches. On returning to their camp they found that a snow wall had collapsed on their tent and after a miserable night they abandoned the camp and returned to the Hermitage. The tent (which incidentally they had borrowed from Mr. J. Adamson, the manager of the Hermitage) was discovered some four miles and 4,000 ft. down the glacier eighteen years later.

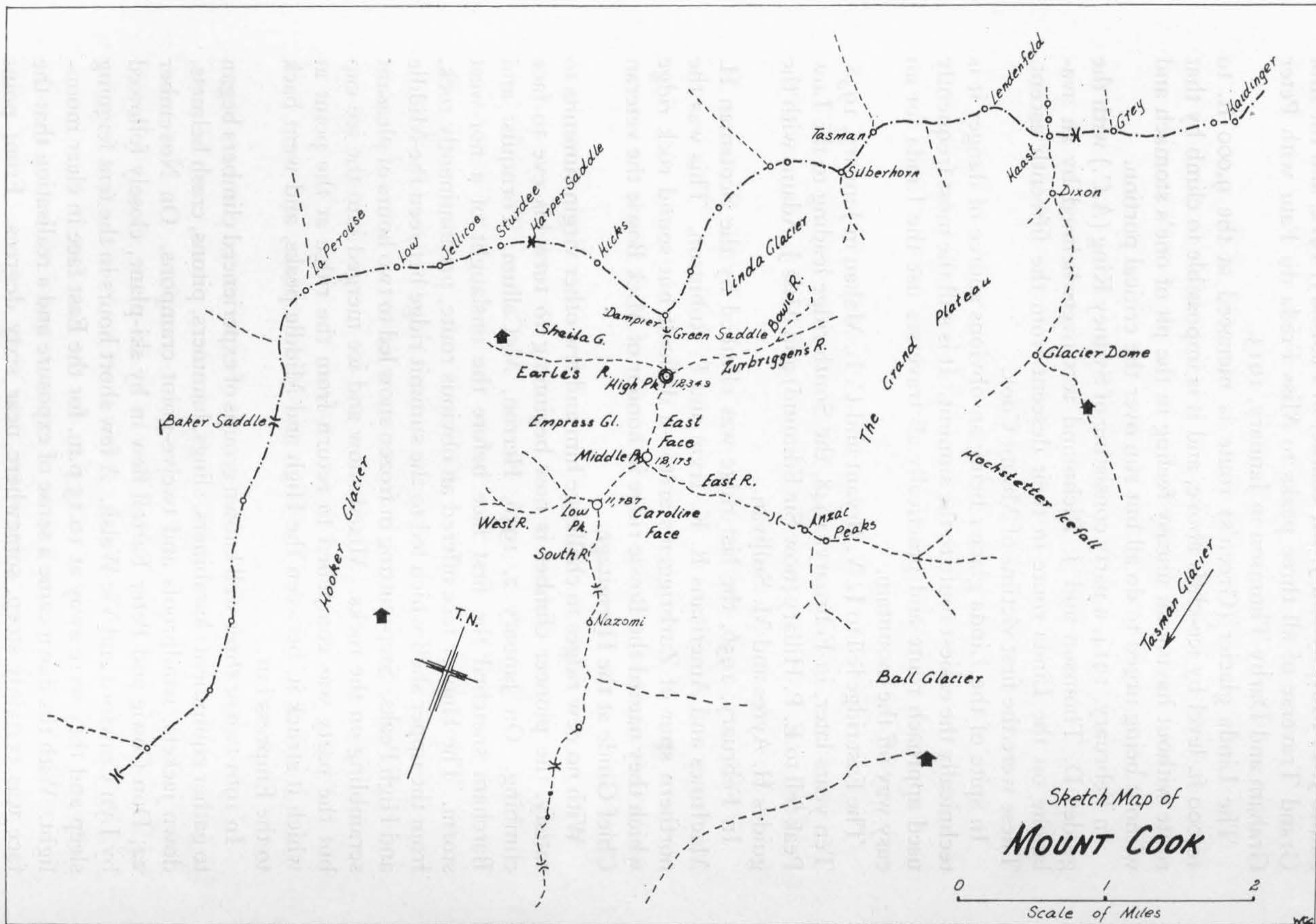
If any two men deserved the honour of the first ascent of Cook, they were T. C. Fyfe and Geo Graham. They had spent some forty-five consecutive days in their attack during which time no less than seven storms had swept the area. They narrowly missed making the ascent of all three peaks for they had passed within easy distance of the Low Peak on December 20 when they made the first climb of the Middle Peak.

Fyfe's route was an exacting one and was not in its entirety repeated for sixty-one years when D. G. Herron, G. J. McCallum, R. Tornquist and H. P. Barcham repeated the climb on the occasion of the hundredth ascent on December 28, 1955, and descended via the Linda glacier. That the climb has been repeated just once is not surprising and is probably due to the reported difficulty and the rottenness of the lower portion. I well remember coming off Earle's ridge to the Sheila glacier and hearing the almost continuous sound of isolated rocks flying down from the face overlooking Fyfe's Couloir—a series of whistling noises, each terminating in awful silence as the rock plunged into the soft snow of the glacier.

Fitzgerald was so disappointed at finding the peak climbed that he did not even attempt it. However, his guide Zurbriggen in company with J. Adamson, ascended the ridge which now carries his name. Adamson, very much out of condition, waited for five hours and watched Zurbriggen continue to make the first ascent from the east. Zurbriggen's description of an easy ascent was reflected in the fact that the next three ascents were made by this route.

In March, 1909, L. M. Earle, with the guides J. M. Clarke, Alex Graham and Peter Graham (no relation to Geo Graham), made the first ascent of the North-west rock ridge leading directly to the High Peak. Again their description of the climb attracted immediate followers and the next three ascents were made by Earle's route.

Green's route fell to H. C. Chambers and H. F. Wright, with the



guides J. P. Murphy and J. M. Clarke, in February, 1912, and the first Grand Traverse of all three peaks to Miss Freda du Faur with Peter Graham and Darby Thomson in January, 1913.

The Linda glacier (Green's) route is menaced at the 9,000 ft. to 10,000 ft. level by ice-cliffs above, and it is impossible to climb by that route without having an uneasy feeling in the pit of one's stomach and without being urged to do all but run over the critical portion.

In February, 1914, a party consisting of Sydney King (A.C.) with the guides D. Thomson and J. Richmond was overwhelmed by an avalanche on the Linda route in their descent from the fifteenth ascent. These were the first victims of Mount Cook.

In spite of the Linda glacier being an obvious source of danger it is technically the easiest route to the summit. It is still the most frequently used approach route and practically all traverses use the Linda for an easy way off the mountain.

The East ridge fell to L. V. Bryant and C. L. Mahan in January, 1938. Ten years later, in February, 1948, the South ridge leading to the Low Peak fell to E. P. Hillary (now Sir Edmund) and Miss J. Adams with the guides H. Ayres and M. Sullivan.

In February, 1956, the last ridge was climbed by the Scotsman H. MacInnes and Americans R. K. Irvin and P. Robinson. This was the northern spur of Zurbriggen's arête—a difficult but sound rock ridge which they named the Bowie ridge in honour of Mick Bowie the veteran Chief Guide at the Hermitage.

With no new ridges to challenge him and few other virgin summits to satisfy, the pioneer climber is now beginning to turn his eye to face climbing. On January 2, 1956, Herron, McCallum, Tornquist and Barcham snatched the first face before the onslaught of a nor-west storm. The Hooker face offered an obvious route, predominantly rock, from the upper shelf which led to the summit ridge between the Middle and High Peaks. Step-cutting in frozen snow led to two hours of pleasant scrambling on the rocks. Mixed snow and ice merged into the ice cap but the party was compelled to return from the ridge at the point at which it struck it, between the High and Middle peaks, and went back to the Empress hut.

In 1961 two or three well known groups of experienced climbers began to gather equipment: karabiners, slings, hammers, pitons, crash helmets, down jackets, windproofs and twelve-point crampons. On November 22, Don Cowie and Peter Farrell flew in by ski-plane, closely followed by Lyn Crawford and Vic Walsh. A few short hours in the tent feigning sleep and they were away at 10.15 p.m. for the East face in clear moonlight. With the dawn came a sense of exposure and a realisation that the face was certainly steep, somewhere near sixty degrees. Front point cramponing without relief stretched calf muscles. The snow gave way

to ice after six hours and the climb began in earnest. Sun-loosened particles from above hurtled past at fantastic speeds and all the climbers were bruised at one stage or another. Twelve hours of ice led to the summit just before sunset and a miserable night was spent at the 'summit rocks' on the Linda route.

This team with Brian Hearfield and Don Mackay later formed probably the most successful expedition ever to visit the Cordillera Vilcabamba of Peru.

A month later, H. Leitner and E. von Terzi climbed the East face by a route a few hundred feet to the north, following the merest suspicion of a ridge and joining the North-east ridge about two hundred feet from the summit.

The East face climb begins from the East shelf above the Grand Plateau and extends for about four and a half thousand feet.

The third face (as yet unclimbed) has attracted the very cream of the New Zealand amateur climbers with more tragic results. The Caroline face, an ice-wall of some seven thousand feet, rises from near the Ball hut (the site of Green's fifth camp) and soars directly to the Middle Peak (12,173 ft.), probably the major face of the Southern Alps. For some years men have been searching out a route from afar but seldom do they put a boot on the approaches.

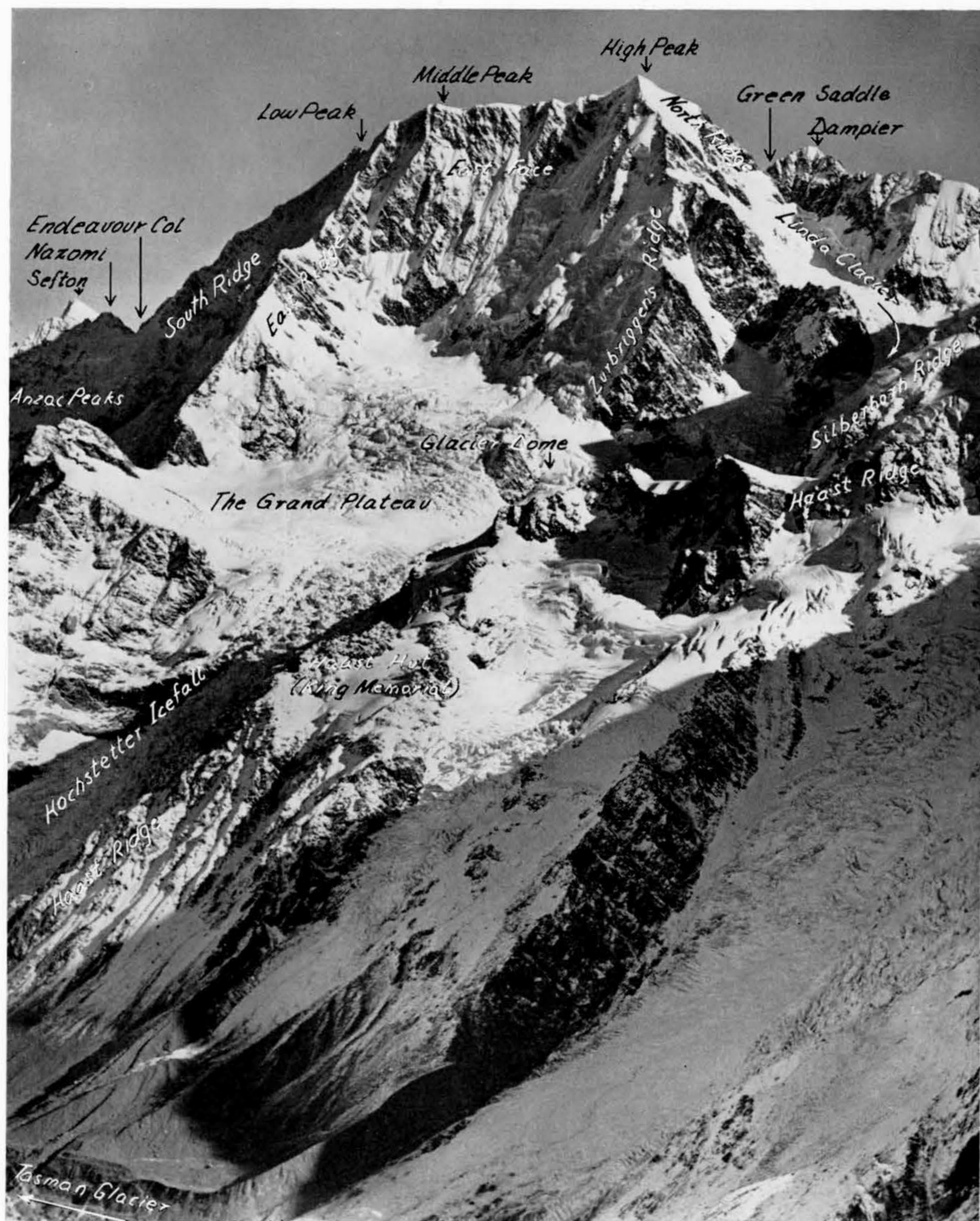
Late in 1963, Hearfield, Crawford, Farrell and Cowie made a reconnaissance to about eight thousand feet but retreated after one of their party was bruised by a falling ice-block.

In November, 1963, two final year engineering students, A. J. Cousins and M. Goldsmith set out on a reconnaissance of the face. A storm of unprecedented severity and lasting more than a week followed three days of near-perfect weather and obliterated all signs of their fate. The Caroline face is still unclimbed.

It took sixty-one years for the first one hundred ascents of the High Peak and only six years for the next fifty, which is an indication in itself of the great boom of popularity of mountaineering in New Zealand. We hope that the accident rate does not go up proportionately.

'In our foolishness we have sometimes spoken since of a mountain cheapened by this restless wave of humanity, have referred to it as a peak anybody can now climb. But because a great mountain momentarily relents, is it any the less grand when our fleeting time of triumph is no more than a treasured memory, and when the storms have raced in and polished again to purity the dazzling sweeps of black and white? Cook broods still over plateau and valley, while we cower under grey buildings with but a tenuous touch now on a moment of great meaning to us, but of no discernible significance at all to the mountain we thought we had conquered.'¹

¹ J. G. Wilson in the *New Zealand Alpine Journal*.



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MOUNT COOK: AIR VIEW OF THE EAST FACE. (See article p. 262).

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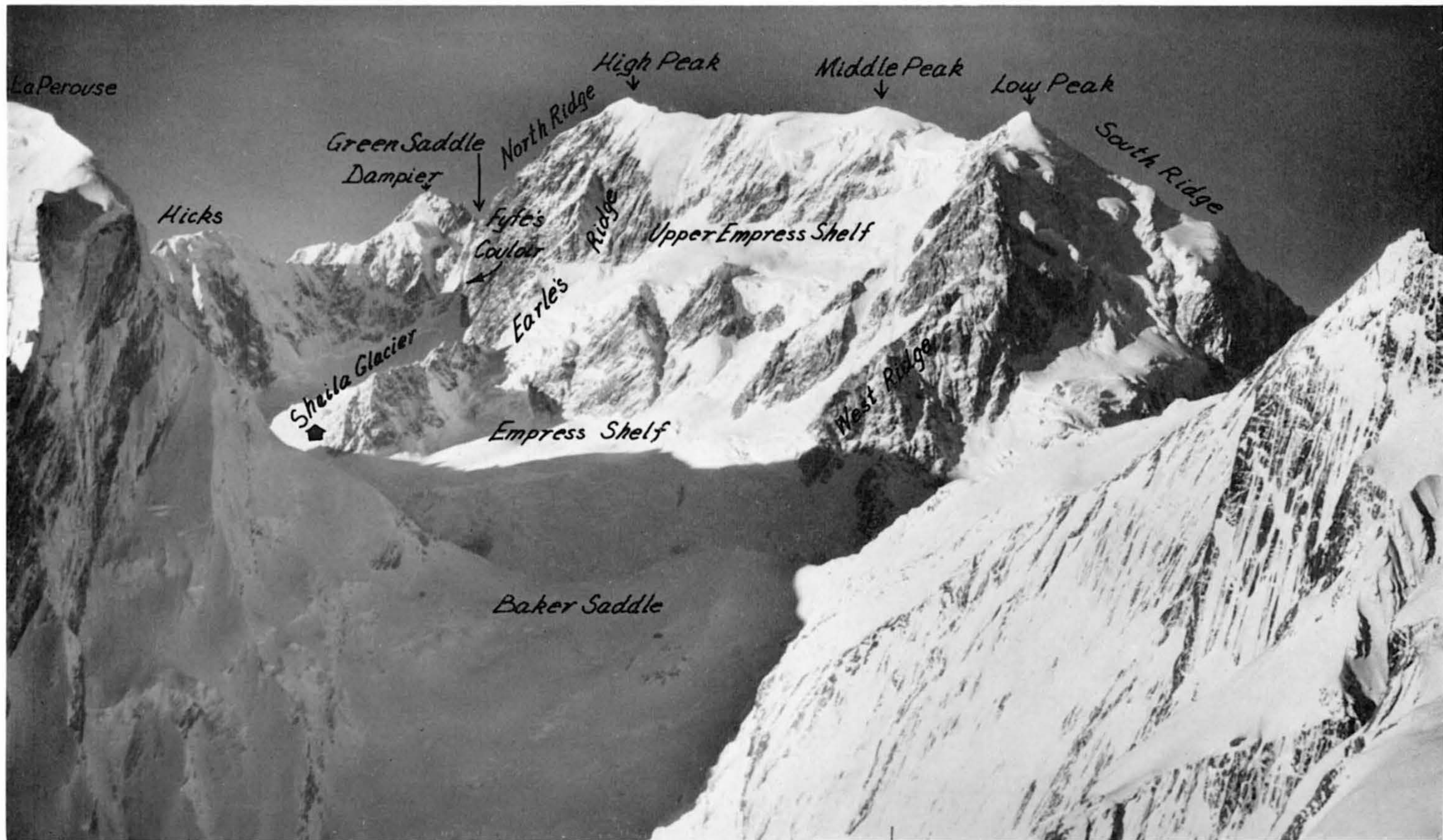


Photo: V. C. Browne]

MOUNT COOK: WEST (HOOKER) FACE.

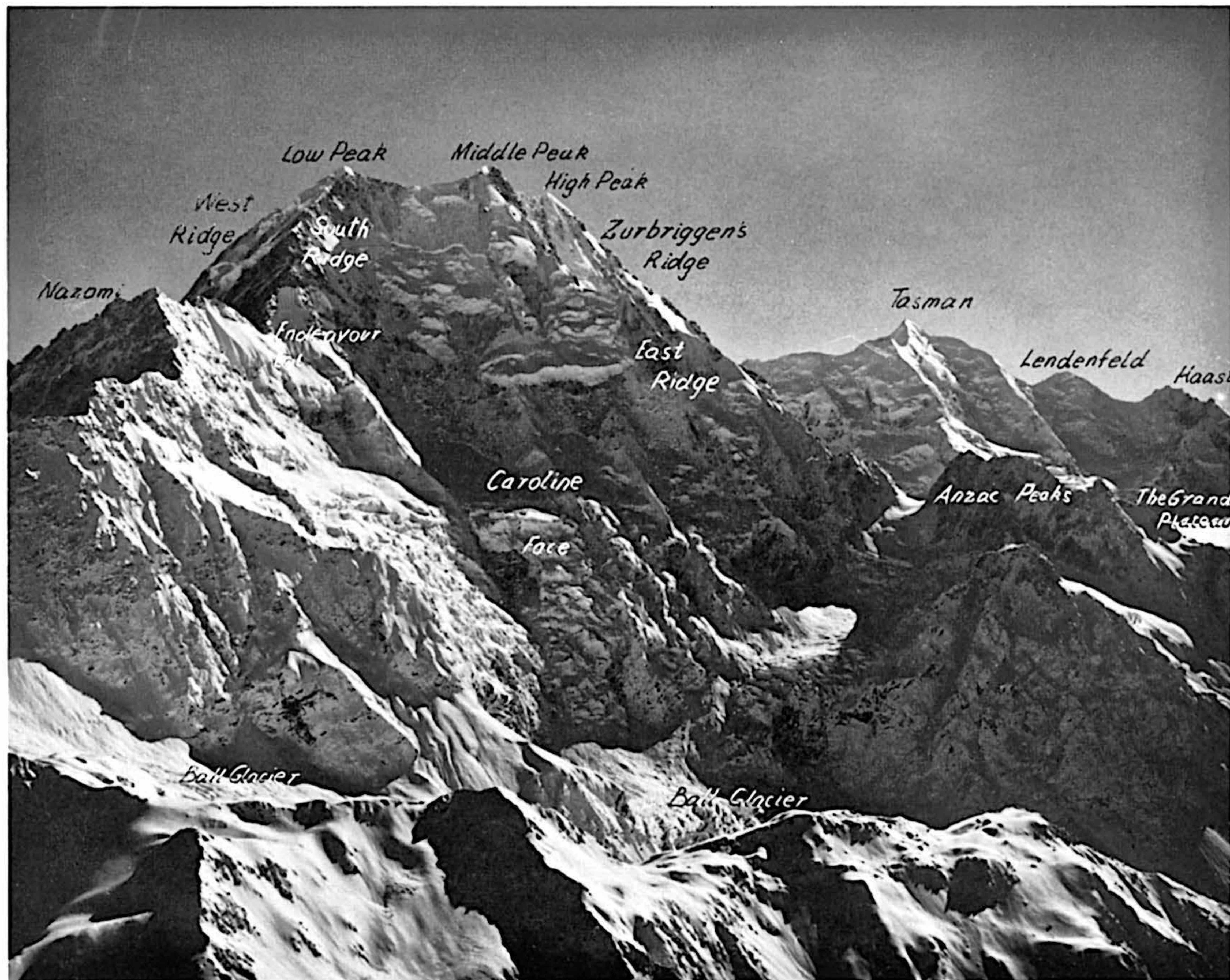


Photo: Mannering & Donaldson, Ltd., Christchurch, N.Z.]

MOUNT COOK: SOUTH-EAST (CAROLINE) FACE.

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