

RETURN TO THE ATLAS¹

BY HAMISH M. BROWN

(Two illustrations: nos. 69, 70)

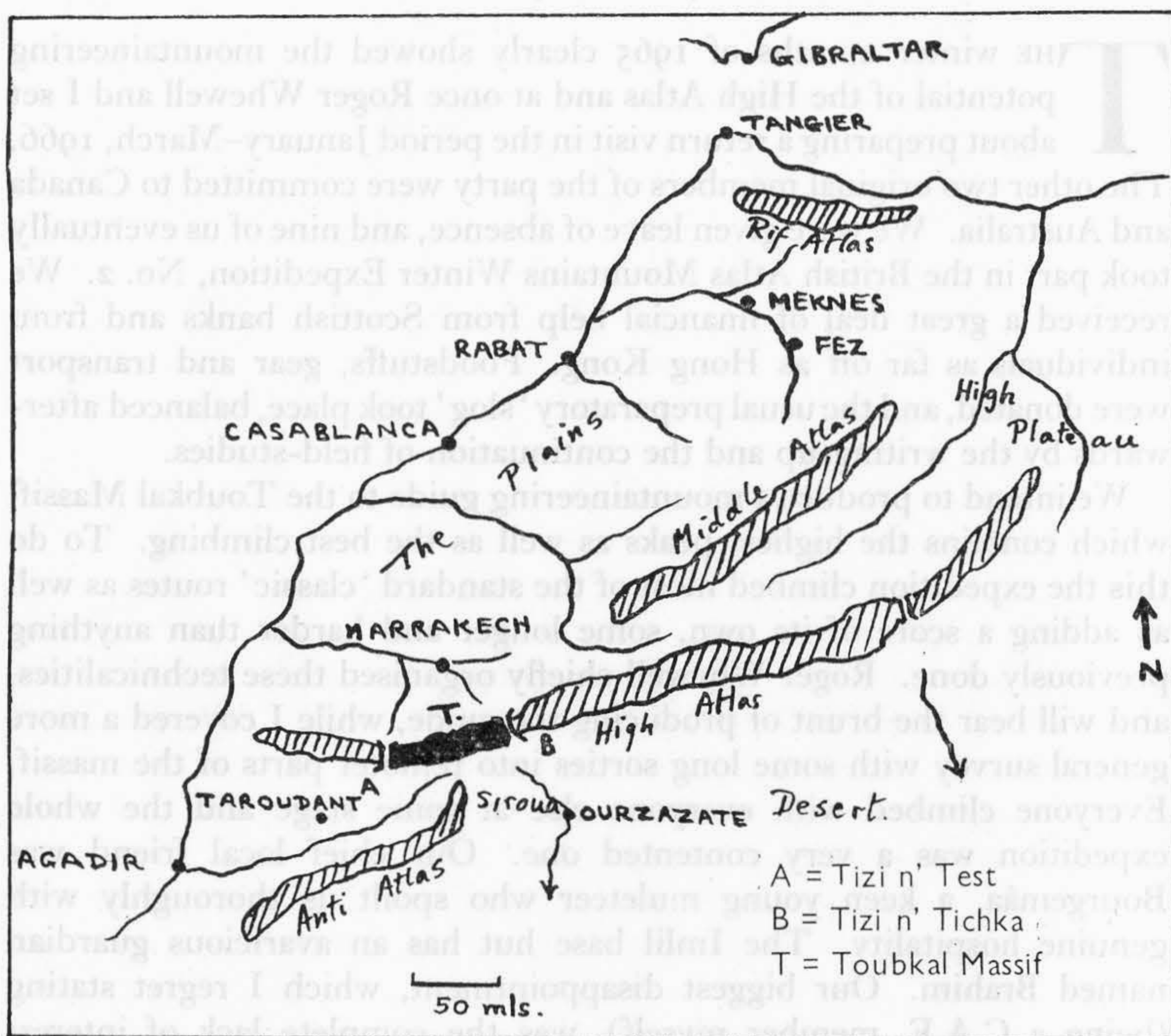
THE winter months of 1965 clearly showed the mountaineering potential of the High Atlas and at once Roger Whewell and I set about preparing a return visit in the period January–March, 1966. The other two original members of the party were committed to Canada and Australia. We were given leave of absence, and nine of us eventually took part in the British Atlas Mountains Winter Expedition, No. 2. We received a great deal of financial help from Scottish banks and from individuals as far off as Hong Kong. Foodstuffs, gear and transport were donated, and the usual preparatory ‘slog’ took place, balanced afterwards by the writing-up and the continuation of field-studies.

We intend to produce a mountaineering guide to the Toubkal Massif, which contains the highest peaks as well as the best climbing. To do this the expedition climbed most of the standard ‘classic’ routes as well as adding a score of its own, some longer and harder than anything previously done. Roger Whewell chiefly organised these technicalities, and will bear the brunt of producing the guide, while I covered a more general survey with some long sorties into remoter parts of the massif. Everyone climbed with everyone else at some stage and the whole expedition was a very contented one. Our chief local friend was Bourgemâa, a keen young muleteer who spoilt us thoroughly with genuine hospitality. The Imlil base hut has an avaricious guardian named Brahim. Our biggest disappointment, which I regret stating (being a C.A.F. member myself), was the complete lack of interest shown by the various C.A.F. officials in Morocco. They are almost exclusively interested in occasional weekend ski-ing, and the few active climbers avoid club membership.

Historically the de Lépiney brothers’ activity in the late twenties and the thirties, which led to the Toubkal guide of 1938, was very much a French affair; but for two weeks a Polish party romped through the area in 1934 leaving good new routes on Tazarharht, Toubkal and Aksoual. (I wonder what became of this party?) The war brought that period to an end and now the British interest is growing. Toubkal still remained a popular pedestrian peak. In the forties Roger Mailly began his

¹ This article supplements Mr. Brown’s earlier article, ‘The High Atlas in Winter’ (*A.J.* 71. 43–50).—EDITOR.

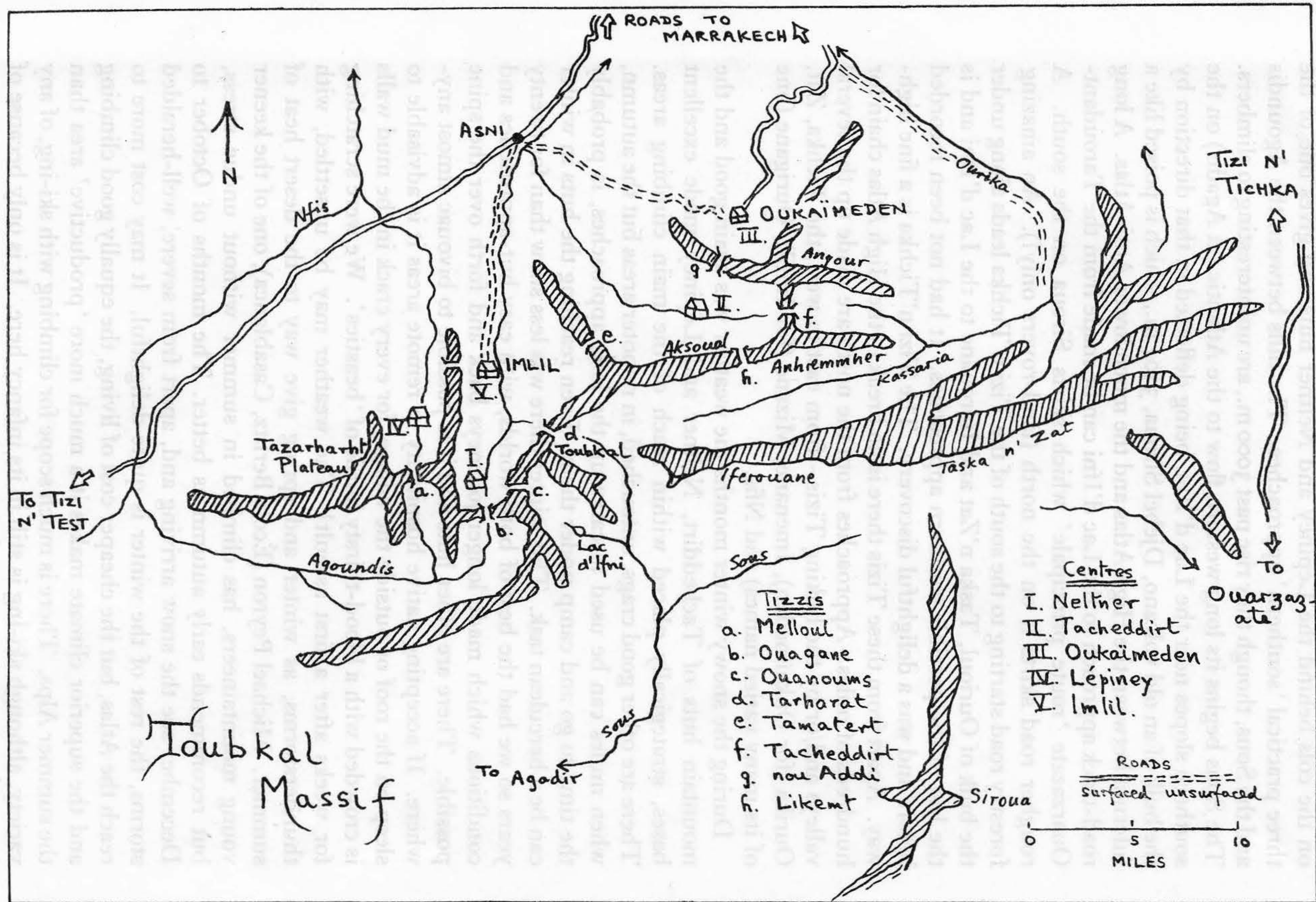
explorations and climbs and he is undoubtedly the greatest authority on all the mountains of Morocco. He added climbs of quality, and the Chamonix guides in 1956 joined him not only on Tazarharht's north wall but also on Djebel Aïoui, a great limestone cliff two and a half miles long and 1,900 ft. high situated 170 miles east of Marrakech by road. Mailly has produced the mountain part of a new book, *Villes et Montagnes Marocaines* (Rabat, Editions 'La Porte'), which takes each Atlas



SKETCH-MAP OF MOROCCO

mountain chain and divides it up into areas with brief descriptions, too brief for actual route finding but useful for learning the layout. It also contains a great deal of the practical and topographical information invaluable to expeditions ('été tracé', means 'has been climbed').

The Massif du Toubkal we define as the area between the two motor roads, both rising to 'Tizis' (passes) over 7,000 ft., and the River Sous in the south and the Haouz (Marrakech) Plain in the north. The Tizi n'Test is on the road to Taroudant. The road rises into the foothills to Asni (where the track goes on up to Imlil) and then, unsurfaced, follows up the Nfis to the pass. The Nfis is joined by the Agoundis which rises





B.A.M.W.E. photo]

HIGH ATLAS: TAZARHARHT, NORTH FACE—THE FINEST FACE IN THE TOUBKAL MASSIF.

(No. 69)

on the cols behind the Lépiney and Neltner huts and gives one of the three practical 'southern' approaches. The hills between the Agoundis and the Sous, though they rise past 3000 m., are uninteresting to climbers. The Sous begins its long western flow to the Atlantic (at Agadir) on the southern slopes near the Lac d'Ifni, being deflected in that direction by the bulk of an old volcano, Djebel Siroua, 3304 m., which is poised like a fulcrum between the High Atlas and the much lower Anti-Atlas. A long road-track approach to the Lac d'Ifni can be made from the Taroudant-Ouarzazate 'route principale' which skirts Siroua on the south. A rougher road skirts it on the north (land-rovers only!). An amazing forestry road starting to the south of the Tizi n'Tichka leads along under the bulk of Ourioul, Taska n'Zat and Iferouane to the Lac d'Ifni and is the last of the possible southern approaches. It had not been recorded before and was a delightful discovery. The Tizi n'Tichka is a fine highway. Apart from these Tizis there is no break in the High Atlas chain for hundreds of miles. Approaches from the north are made up the several valleys and/or by the linking Tizis—from east to west, the Tichka, Zat, Ourika (for Oukaïmeden), Imenane, Mizane (for Imlil), Ourigane (one of its many varied names) and Nfis.

During the snowy winter months the weather was again good and the mountain huts of Tacheddirt, Neltner and Lépiney made excellent bases, strategically placed within reach of the main climbing areas. There are other good crags, untouched, in remoter areas but the autumn, when mules can be used to carry up the long approaches, is probably the time to go and camp under them. Even reaching the huts in winter can be a herculean task. This winter there was less snow than for twenty years so we had the best of both worlds, with easy hut-approaches and conditions which made longer journeys back and forth over the spine possible. There are other huts and it is possible to bivouac almost anywhere. If accepting native hospitality in remote areas it is advisable to sleep on the roof or outside the village, for every crack in the mud walls is crowded with a blood-thirsty horde of 'beasties'. We were scratching for weeks after a first assault! The weather may be unsettled, with thunderstorms, as winter and spring give way to the desert heat of summer. Michael Peyron (École Berlitz, Casablanca), one of the keener young mountaineers, has climbed in summer without undue stress, but recommends early autumn as better. The months of October to December see the snow arriving and, apart from severe, well-heralded storms, the rest of the winter is quite delightful. It may cost more to reach the Atlas, but the cheaper cost of living, the equally good climbing and the superior climate makes it a much more 'productive' area than the summer Alps. There is much scope for climbing with ski-ing, of any variety, although ski-ing is still in its infancy here. It is only because of future commitments that we give away these secrets at all!

SOME CLIMBING NOTES FROM 1966²

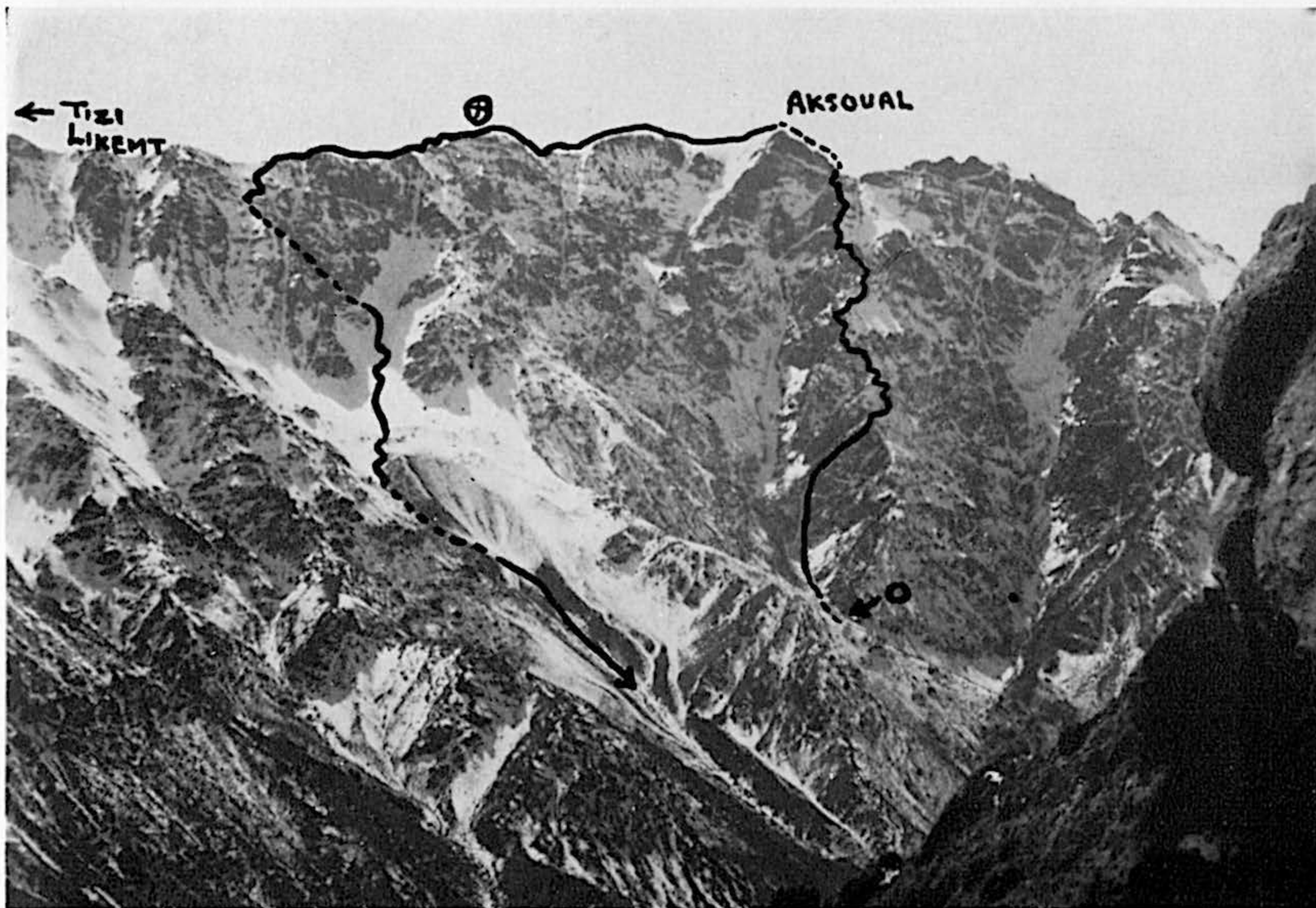
The South face of Angour was thoroughly explored from Tacheddirt and several new routes were made especially on the western end: Tower Ridge, The Needle, and others (Firth, Brown and Fleisch). The Needle was discovered, *à la* Cioch, by its previously unseen early morning shadow. The vast areas of rock towards the Tizi Tacheddirt are untouched and routes of a high standard will be possible near those of 1965 which Whewell, Brown and Barclay made on either side of the Great Gully. The traverse of Angour was done by Firth, Brown and Coueslant, without snow on the West ridge in January where twelve months earlier deep snow had defeated us. Whewell and Ogilvie did the fine North-east ridge of Anhremmher, good granite, and report good things beyond, but the approach is difficult as the Kassaria gorge is reputed to be impossible for mules. Firth and Brown bivouacked below Aksoual and by a good start climbed the great North ridge, over 6,000 ft. After a brief bivouac a descent was made in the dark by a gully invisible from below but probably the quickest way down, a 23-hour round.

Firth also climbed a ridge on Azrou n'Tamadout, the obvious but completely unexplored crag 'en face du refuge d'Imlil'.

From the Neltner hut Firth and Dangerfield did a direct start up the O.N.O. arête of Toubkal, while Whewell and Ogilvie from a high camp did a new route up the south side of the Tadaft and explored the southern two tops of Akioud, while the northern top was climbed by Brown using skis to the summit rocks. The delightful and incredible traverse of the Clochetons, Tour, Biiguinnoussene, Tadat and Aguelzim by Firth, Dangerfield and Brown verified that the height of Tadat is wrong on the large-scale map and hence in all reports. It is about 3637 m., not 3837 m. which is higher than Aguelzim, one of the peaks overlooking the col where this 100 ft. pinnacle stands. (It is now well-covered with routes.) Afella claimed the rest of the time with several long new routes on a face which had hardly been touched previously, and is one of the finest. There is much to be done near or beyond the cols at the valley head and on the remoter northern sides of Toubkal. South faces, not only on Toubkal but elsewhere, tend to be of very crumbly rock. Toubkal's summit was visited on several occasions.

The Lépiney hut probably has the finest situation for rock-climbing. While most of us were away to Agadir and the Draa valley, Firth and Donohoe climbed the Médiâne arête and explored the Tazarharht face. Several fine lines wait to be climbed, as on the East face of the Tssoukkine arête (the big dièdre on this arête was climbed by D. Mellor in 1965) and towards the Tizi Melloul end. The Couloir de Neige proved

² In addition to the author, the members of the party were R. Whewell, L. Coueslant, H. C. Donohoe, C. Ogilvie, R. Dangerfield, C. G. Firth, D. Fleisch and L. G. D. Barclay.



B.A.M.W.E. photo]

HIGH ATLAS: AKSOUAL, A 5000 FT. FACE WHICH GAVE A TWENTY-THREE HOUR CLIMB UP THE NORTH RIDGE, WITH DESCENT BY 'MOONLIGHT GULLY' (HIDDEN IN PHOTOGRAPH). THE TWO BIVOUACS ARE INDICATED.

(No. 70)

impossible through stonefall (as last year). Biiguinnoussene has hardly been touched on the Lépiney hut side. Whewell and Donohoe did the long No. 2 buttress ('better than the Médiane and more sustained') and the Ressaut Rouge, a fine T.D. sup. So was their Éperon Nord on the Médiane on Tazarharht—which was the last climb before a week of unseasonable heavy snow set us on our homeward way. Most main summits can be reached by easy routes and Brian Salmon (from Papatoetoe, New Zealand) last year ascended several with no previous experience. Most of the new routes done this year were in the T.D. category and had the characteristics of fine climbs.

It was from the Lépiney that Brown, Ogilvie and Dangerfield set out with several days' food supply to explore the southern approaches. Tazarharht, Fouzarhar and Makouz were traversed and a difficult descent made into the Agoundis at Aguerda. The next day was spent trekking up the watercourse. The mule hired for the day gave up at the Tizi n'Zaout. We continued up towards the Tizi n'Ouagane but then forked right to climb the Tizi n'Tamrhart, *c.* 3410 m. Dark by then and after cramponing down 2,000 ft. off the snow we bivouacked. Another 2,000 ft. brought us down to the Lac d'Ifni where we swopped matches for trout. A long, hot walk down southwards brought us to another Imlil where we discovered a lorry with a precious cargo of local timber. We slept under the stars for the sake of a lift and the next day rode the logs for twelve hours over desert plateaux and deep gorges until the lorry hit the main road at Agouim; this had saved days of trekking, and a bus the same evening took us over the Tizi n'Tichka to Marrakech.

Oukaïmeden, the ski-ing resort, was empty this snowless winter but normally in winter will give superb, cheap, sunny ski-ing, both on and off the *piste* with an abundance of lifts and no queues! The ski-mountaineering is splendid and skis a definite asset for travel under normal deep snow conditions. Even this year at least one 4000 m. peak was climbed using skis and giving 2,000 ft. of run back to base.

I have restricted these notes to the Toubkal Massif, but we visited other parts of Morocco as well. Until the production of the guide book, the writer will be happy to give any additional information to parties contemplating a visit to this nearest far-away range with its winter snows and all its ancient romance of High Barbary.³

³ In addition to the sketch-maps here reproduced, sketch-maps of the Toubkal massif can be found in *A.ŷ.* 40. 226 and *A.ŷ.* 45. 106.—EDITOR.