

The North by North-west route on Du Toits Peak

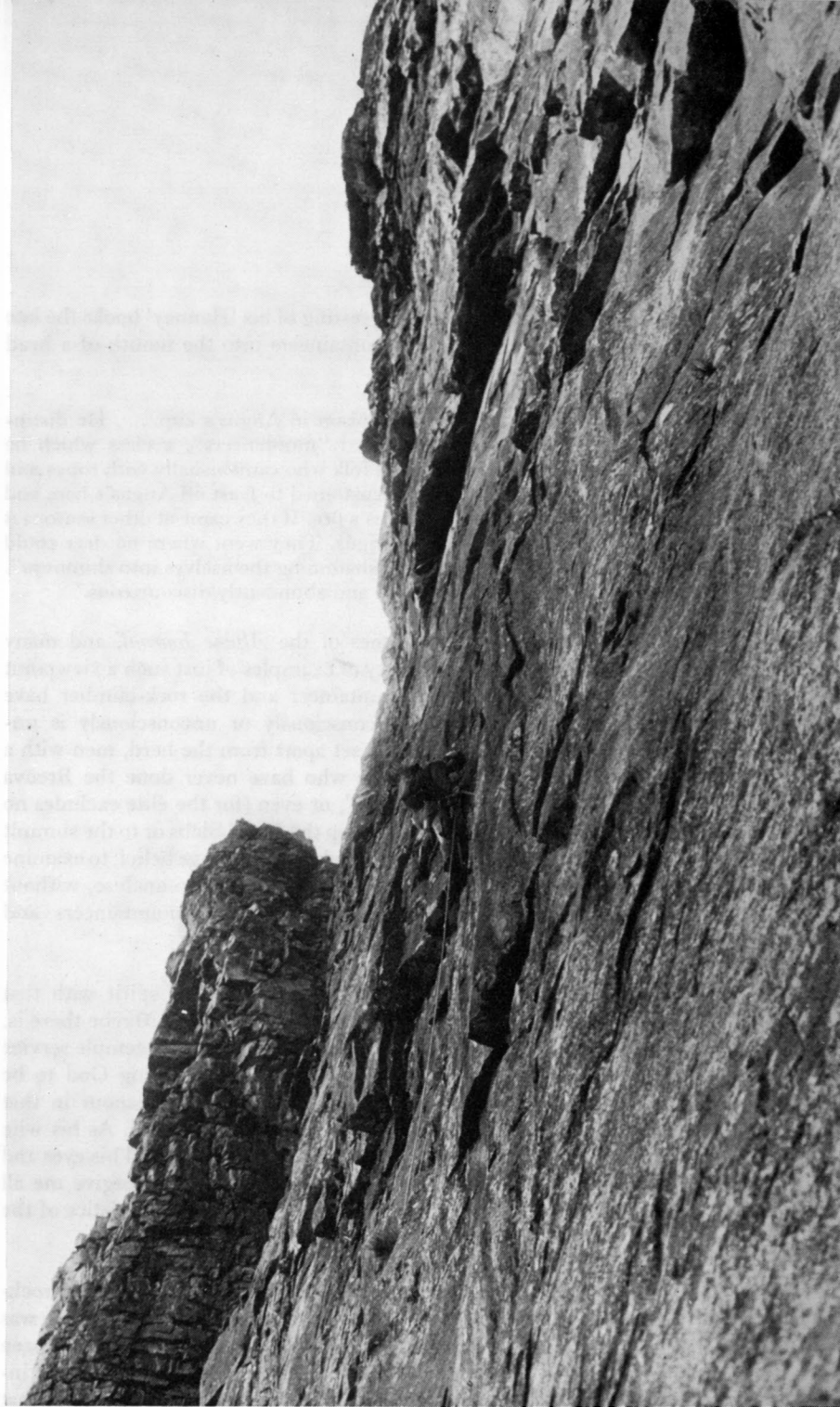
Michael Scott

Rock, sweeping in a tremendously sheer rise from a tumbled scree, shoulders the mists more than 700 m above. The wall is Table Mountain series sandstone, weathered hard to almost quartzite. On it, an armadillo array of shiny slabs reflect a shot-silk colour-range of white to orange, the daubed stroke of sedimentary centuries. Only 80 km from Cape Town on the national road to Johannesburg, Du Toits Peak has today a cragsman's esteem that old farmer Du Toit would agree belongs to the highest peak in the Western Cape. This new climb lies to the north of *the* grand old classic rock route in the Cape—the 1949 North-west Face Route. Named after the Hitchcock film, where the hero hangs from the Mount Rushmore memorial by his finger-tips while the wicked villain stamps on them; this route involves much finger-hanging also.

The first attempt, and Hans Graafland and I were two-thirds of the way up after two seared days in the heat, with lumpy backs from a fakir-bed bivouac. Groggy and sick from dud sunstroke tablets, we battled to escape into the gully route via a Hinterstoisser-type traverse.

Returning with Don Hartley, I pegged another stretch before abseiling in black storm clouds. That night, the view from our bivouac on top of Du Toits Peak revealed the clouds as smoke from a raging fire on the opposite side of the valley. Pockets of flame rent the Witteberg into a kaleidoscopic, glowing pumpkin as we watched and dozed. Again climbing with Hans, we descended from the top of the rock bands, endeavouring to find a direct link. We were stopped by an impassable 50-m traverse on decaying sandstone, the stuff you build sandcastles with, but do not climb. Finally, I finished the route, climbing this time with Keith Fletcher, but complex strata forced us regrettably close to an existing route for a large cliff like this.

Some 600 m of climbing, and over half of it sustained Grade 6, meant climbing fast and choosing the intricate traverse lines early, in order to weave through the overhangs with success. Starting only a few metres in the wrong direction could lead to big trouble. The opening ascent was made in a long day, by Henri Snijders, Jonathan Levy, Keith Fletcher and myself. Superbly smooth myriads of flat, finger edges plastered the rock in a puzzle of pitches. From a razor-flake layback to a horizontal stomach crawl pincushioned with portcullis stalactites, the wall yielded rock-warmed memories of tired arms and a great route.



39 *Action on Du Toits Peak.* Photo: J. Levy