

Mount Burney

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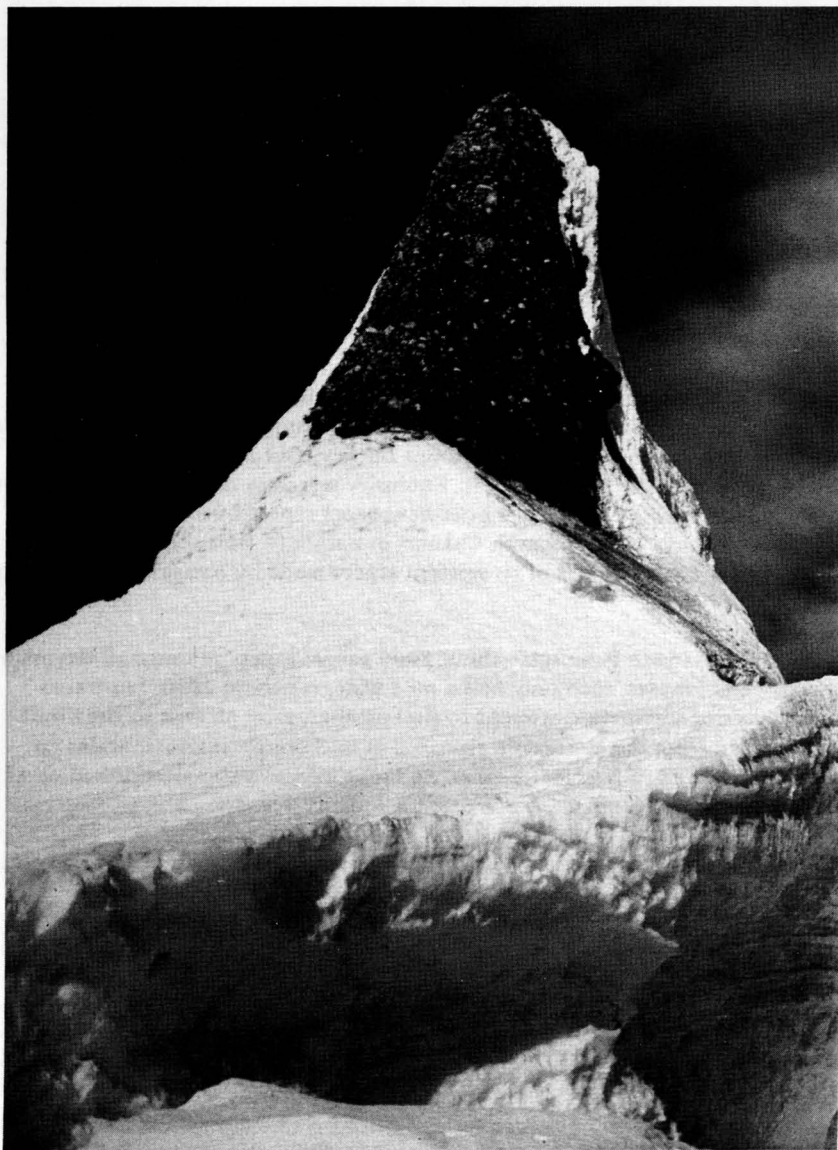
It can be seldom that the ascent of a 1750 m mountain merits notice in the 'Alpine Journal'; but perhaps, as a curiosity, an exception may be allowed in the case of the isolated volcanic pile on the NW sector of the Muños Gamero Peninsula.

In March 1962, after our expedition to the Cordillera Darwin in Tierra del Fuego, Cedomir Marangunic and I spent the remaining fortnight of his summer vacation in an attempt to explore Mount Burney. Our interest was sharpened by the lack of information about it. Extensive search in the libraries of London and Santiago had yielded only a brief newspaper report by a sea captain who, in 1910, had seen it from Smyth Channel in a state of violent eruption, and 2 rather impressive drawings of its western aspect made by navigators in the early 19th Century.

The Muños Gamero Peninsula—about 2000 square miles—is joined to the mainland by 2 isthmuses, each only half a mile wide, which, in 1830, frustrated Lieut Skyring's desperate attempt to find an alternative passage to the Strait of Magellan from the N. Heavily glaciated in its S sector, it also contains an extensive system of freshwater lakes. So far as we knew the interior had never been visited except, possibly, by Alakaluf Indians.

From Skyring Water (discovered by Fitzroy in 1829), using an inflatable boat, we made an amphibious journey NW across the Peninsula; but after 8 days, lack of time and the difficulty of the terrain forced us to stop, still 12 miles from our objective. From a prominent spur, in a brief spell of clear weather, we saw Mount Burney, its glaciers and jagged summit ridge dominated by a splendid white fang. Early the following year, before my second visit to the Cordillera Darwin, I followed the same route across the Peninsula with John Earle and Jack Ewer. With the advantage of the previous reconnaissance we reached the E foot of Burney in 8 days. The weather, however, was atrocious, with almost continuous rain, snowfall and heavy wind, and although we spent 16 days making a complete tour of the mountain, we never saw its upper part.

In 1972 I invited Cedomir to join me in an approach from the W and received an enthusiastic response. This, however, was the last I heard from him and repeated letters remained unanswered. News from Chile was bad, and in October I received a horrific account of the situation from George Lowe. This, coupled with Cedomir's ominous silence, almost caused me to abandon the project. Meanwhile, however, it had aroused the interest of Roger Perry, former Director of the Galapagos Research Station, and his enthusiasm alone overcame my craven doubts. Later we were joined by Pete Radcliffe of New Zealand. The Chilean Naval Mission in London promised to arrange for a ship to take us from Punta Arenas to our base.



1 Agglomerate pinnacle. This and next photo: Roger Perry

In mid-February, 1973, we foregathered at Rio Gallegos on the Atlantic coast, Roger having gone ahead to make a reconnaissance across the border. Thence we travelled by bus to Punta Arenas. This once prosperous little town had a woebegone aspect; but in spite of the severe shortage of all provisions we managed, with the help of the British Consul, to procure the few simple items we needed to supplement those we had brought with us. Pete had an assortment of ice-screws and other technical gadgets, but through a misunderstanding as to who was to bring what, none of us had brought a rope. Luckily we were able to rectify this omission at a ships'-chandler's.

Despite the prevailing gloom we found the Chilean Navy as courteous and as efficient as ever, and in little more than 2 days we embarked in their patrol ship 'Lientur'. While in Punta Arenas we heard that HMS 'Endurance' was due to evacuate the Joint Services Patagonia Expedition from the Gulf of Peñas about 21 March. So we sent a message to the British Naval Attaché in Santiago requesting him to arrange for her to pick us up on or after the 25th, informing him of the position of our proposed base and saying that we would choose a suitable helicopter pad and prepare a smoke signal. We left, however, before there was time to receive confirmation of this arrangement.

After a 20-hour voyage, 'Lientur' put us ashore in a sheltered bay on the coast of the Muños Gamero Peninsula, due W of Mount Burney. At first our progress through the dense forest flanking the shore was slow and laborious, but on a range of hills beyond we found more open country. After that our main obstacle was swamp. We had chosen this season because, in my experience, the weather in the autumn is likely to be less severe than during the summer months. In fact, for the first 10 days, conditions were comparatively mild and we actually had some fleeting glimpses of our objective.

On 7 March we established ourselves at 600 m on a W spur of Mount Burney, above the forest and overlooking a fine ice-fall. Two attempts to reach the top were frustrated by wind and mist. Returning from the second of these we started to construct an ice cave at 900 m. But by the morning of the 10th the wind had dropped and there were signs of improving weather. The mist dissolved as we climbed and when, at 4pm, we gained the summit ridge it was in perfect stillness and under a cloudless sky.

The ridge, forming the rim of the central crater of the volcano, was crowned by a crescent of spectacular spires which provided exhilarating climbing on rain-washed ice. Their tops commanded a vast panorama of fjords and mountains, bathed in the soft light of the declining sun. Northwards, across Union Channel, we looked up the narrow gorge of Skyring's 'Canal of the Mountains', flanked by the Cordillera Sarmiento, a splendid range of ice peaks as yet untouched. The N and E sectors of the crater wall were breached, giving rise to 2 long glaciers. To the S lay the lake country—very remote it seemed—that we had explored 10 years before, and the great ice fields of the far end of the Muños Gamero Peninsula. On the NE horizon stood the jagged outline of the Towers of Paine. A crater lake on the S flank of the mountain looked as though it might have been lately formed; otherwise there was no sign of recent volcanic activity.

On 12 March we started on a journey to the N coast of the Peninsula. Following the N glacier we found evidence of its recent advance into the forest. We reached the coast at Sarmiento's 'Ancón Sin Salida', the farthest point reached by the great 16th Century navigator in his attempt to find an alternative passage to Magellan's Strait.

On the return march we found that foxes had raided our dumps and, despite the care we had taken to protect them, some of the food had been looted.

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There were some tracks of guanaco in the forest and on the slopes above we saw several huemul (deer). Roger made a collection of insects and listed the birds seen in the region. During the whole of this latter period the weather was bad, with much rain and wind, and we saw nothing of the upper part of Mount Burney, which emphasised our luck in hitting off the one perfect day for the ascent.

On 24 March we camped on the shore at the point where we had landed, and prepared our smoke signal. A shingle spit formed by the mouth of a stream provided the only suitable helicopter pad in the vicinity, and even that was covered at high tide. That night there was an exceptionally violent storm and our tent was flooded. At 11 o'clock the next morning Roger spotted 'Endurance' passing the entrance of the bay, and presently a helicopter appeared. Luckily the tide was low, and half an hour later we were enjoying the warm hospitality of the Royal Navy.



2 Northern summit