Colombian central cordillera are not a playground for the helmeted tiger, nor a desirable goal for large expeditions. But the range, even to the Colombians themselves, is what we could call *exotic.* Its strange volcanoes, iced or otherwise, its peculiar vegetation and its sullen mood of sleet, drizzle and fog, broken dramatically by sudden revelations of black-blue skies and direct sunlight, make it probably one of the most unusual regions a mountaineer may ever find in his lifetime.

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Antipodean ventures

III. Mount Cook

J. G. R. Harding

Six days after my third abortive attempt on Mount Townsend – finest mountain on the Australian mainland, but without a route upon it meriting a grade – I arrived in Christchurch, New Zealand with the object of climbing Mount Cook within the week. It was 21 November 1970, the year in Australia when

Captain James Cook's discovery and possession of the land he christened New South Wales in 1770 was being celebrated as Australia's foundation bi-centenary. In the bi-centenial ballyhoo, Cook's exploits were, for the first time, being noised throughout that land. To me, this sudden elevation to the Australian pantheon seemed to augur well for a tilt at the mountain named after him by Captain Stokes of *HMS Acheron* in 1851. Disappointingly, it is doubtful that during the *Endeavour*'s circumnavigation of New Zealand in 1769 the great man ever saw what the Maoris call *Aorangi*, the Cloud Piercer. Then, as now, views of the Southern Alps were so often obscured by cloud.

I had already heard something of Mount Cook and its weather from Richard Brooke. Another who had climbed the area, Canberra's Bergmeister Fritz Staumberger, told me that November was too early and a week too short. He suggested that I settle for The Footstool, a shapely satellite certainly, but scarcely excuse for a 3000 mile detour on the way back to England. For a second opinion I canvassed the views of certain New Zealand pundits but they merely confirmed Staumberger's dicta and declined invitations to join forces. However, once landed in Christchurch prospects improved. Through Richard Brooke, I was invited to stay with Mike and Dot White. Their hospitality opened the doors to that friendly country and on the same evening of my arrival I dined off Canterbury lamb in the bosom of the New Zealand climbing fraternity. Mike, one of Hillary's Antarctic expedition to Mount Herschel, brought along another Antarctic and Himalayan hand in Jim Wilson, author of the monograph on Mount Cook *Aorangi*. Slides were produced, climbs relived and a congenial evening spent in time honoured fashion. Though neither were starters for Mount Cook, Mike offered to introduce me to the Arthur's Pass National Park and its mountains the very next day.

National Parks are a feature of New Zealand, a country 1000 miles long and somewhat larger in area than the UK yet with a population of less than 3 million and a range of climate and scenery even more varied. In the South Island alone there are 6 major Parks and the 240,000 acre Arthur's Pass Park established in 1901 pre-dates the first British National Park by over 50 years. Ironically, English Red Deer, Himalayan Thar and Swiss Chamois, deliberately imported into the country at the turn of the century, have proved the scourge of New Zealand's forests and particularly the Mountain Beech – pride of the Southern Alps.

Arthur's Pass, barely 90 miles from Christchurch, links the wet West Coast with the dry Canterbury Plains. In the rain shadow of the Southern Alps, the Plains bear little resemblance to the green pastures of Kent. Soil lies skin deep and trees are confined to straggling avenues of exotic conifers planted along the roadside. Even the foothills have that parched, skeletal look reminiscent of a Middle Eastern range. But suddenly, round a bend of the Waimakiriri river the scene changes. Framed by the spurs of heavily forested ridges of Alpine Beech whose dark hues are heightened by a brash yellow foreground of Broom filling the valley floor, a classic Alpine landscape of peaks and snowfields dramatically unfolds.

One advantage of living in Christchurch is that genuine Alpine routes can be done within the day. Three hours after reveille we were atop the Pass (921m) and breaking a path towards Mount Phipps (2042m). Our climb up its S face from the head of Twin Creek was in the style of a minor Alpine mixed climb

but in Scottish spring conditions. Baggy clouds obscured views from the summit but to the E we caught glimpses of the Park's 'Wilderness Area', while to the W, across the deep cleft of the pass, rose higher mountains dominated by Rolleston (2272m), monarch of the Park and source of 3 glaciers.

Enthused by this day in the hills I caught the first bus from Christchurch next morning for the Mount Cook National Park. The road to Mount Cook first hugs the coast before swinging inland across undulating steppe-lands known as the Mackenzie Country after a legendary sheep rustler, New Zealand's Ned Kelly, whose runs marched to the foot of Mount Cook itself. Our bus lurched round a spur, juddered to a halt on the shores of Lake Pukaki and there before us, filling the western horizon at the far end of the Lake, stood Mount Cook. The sight of such a mountain comes as a fulfilment of the Mountain Dream: a challenge to adventure. Instinctively you know it can only be Mount Cook. It is indeed one of the great mountains of the World. I had already glimpsed it from the air on the flight in; the mile long crest of its triple summit ridge alone thrusting through the cloud sea that marked the coast of New Zealand. Even a Queenslander sitting alongside, who had never before seen snow in his life, conceded it a fine sight but assured me that there were higher mountains in Australia.

Although without peer Cook is but one of a score of superb mountains – Tasman, Dampier, Haidinger, Sefton and Elie de Beaumont – that make up the 173,000 acre Mount Cook National Park. Although only 3764m high it is comparable in vertical scale with Mont Blanc with intermediate alps virtually absent. Thus, on its E flanks, Cook rises a clear 3000m without interruption from the snout of the Tasman glacier; to the W, its ice-fields almost reach the sea. Although altitude is not a problem, unpredictable weather makes any route a serious undertaking. The prevailing NW winds blow out from the heart of Australia, saturate themselves in crossing the Tasman sea and hit the wall of Cook as their first obstacle in 1400 miles. The result is an annual precipitation equivalent to 300 inches, huge glaciers, chaotic ice-falls and a pattern of storms most common in Spring and Summer that defeated so many pioneer attempts and those that succeeded them. But these same conditions have made New Zealand's climbers masters of snow and ice and the techniques of survival in bad conditions.

From Lake Pukaki the splendid sight of Cook, growing closer with every mile, was always before us and within 7 hours of leaving Christchurch I was installed in the New Zealand Alpine Club's Unwin Hut in the heart of the Park admiring the view. Not a cloud flawed the sky or the splendid panorama of peaks set about. But the hut was deserted; I had no one to climb with and so far as the hut guardian knew there was no one in the area likely to want to do so. So to explore new territory I walked 3 miles up the road to the Hermitage. The early history of Mount Cook is interwoven with that of the Hermitage and a tough breed of New Zealand guide – Adamson, Fyfe, Clark, Graham, Milne, Williams and Bowie – who made this their headquarters. The original Hermitage Hotel was destroyed by flood in 1913 and its replacement by fire in 1957. The modern Hermitage has become a village but sadly, the new hotel built in 1958, caters not for climbers but for inter-continental tourists. But a link with a happier past was retained by having the Guides Office in the hotel complex. Guiding, instruction and mountain rescue in the Park had become the respon-

sibility of Alpine Instruction Ltd., jointly run by Lynn Crawford and a Yorkshire emigré Peter Farrell. Having dutifully awaited my turn behind an American hiring a helicopter to ski down the Tasman glacier, Crawford gave me a sympathetic hearing. Apparently, the area was enjoying an unprecedented spell of good weather and Cook's last great problem, the 1800m Caroline Face, had just been climbed by 2 separate parties – Gough and Glasgow followed by Harris and Dingle – within 2 days of each other. But apart from the one course being run that season by Farrell and Dingle for aspirant guides and the like, he knew of no one else on the mountain. That course was now at Plateau Hut but scheduled to finish the following day and return to the valley. Crawford promised to contact Farrell that evening by WT but could only suggest I meet the course next day on its return to the Ball Hut to try my luck. Somewhat dispirited I wandered round the village buying food for 4 days; ran into Gough and Glasgow and then retreated to the deserted Unwin Hut.

Next morning the weather was still holding as I joined a bus load of Americans come to see the 18 mile long Tasman glacier from their Hermitage sanctuary. The ancient bus fought its way up the track to within minutes of the Ball Hut thus saving me 10 miles' walk and 600m of altitude. The hut, named after the Alpine Club's first President, had no one in it and while I waited for the heroes to return, the sun's ascent into a cloudless sky marked the passing of another perfect day and all the hopes that went with it. There was nothing to do but admire the view and note the progress of the ant-like tourists now disgorged from their bus and hugging the edge of the enormous Tasman glacier 400 feet below the hut and stretching 2 miles across the valley. Time stopped and I suffered a bout of married man's malaise musing on why it was there, I here, and the cost of it all to date.

Just after noon my gloomy reverie was broken by the explosive arrival of Farrell and Dingle. A posse of bronzed New Zealand youth vibrating energy followed hard on their heels. Great deeds had been done that past fortnight including ascents of Cook and Tasman's E faces by several ropes. Farrell had received Crawford's message loud and clear but doubted he could help. He and Dingle were definitely going down and so, it seemed, was everyone else. I felt incongruous and somewhat ridiculous in the midst of these mountain musketeers exuding bonhomie and reliving their adventures. However, over a bite of lunch Farrell interrupted the chat and asked if anyone wanted to return to Plateau Hut to climb Cook with me. Conversation stopped. In the embarrassed silence the great adventure was in danger of deteriorating into farce. Surely somewhere I could faintly hear a drum roll and a distant call to arms. Someone cleared his throat and then, miraculously one man spoke out. It was a Wagnerian moment. His name was Mike Brown, a Zoology undergraduate at Canterbury University. He was sitting somewhat apart from the rest, and had, apparently, missed out on the ascent of Cook owing to his companion twisting an ankle. He said he would give it a go.

Only moments ago all had seemed lost but now everything was possible. It was merely a matter of equipment, food, the weather and logistics. Apparently, in these parts, both ice-axe and north wall hammer were indispensable. I hired both at a price. My food would last us a couple of days. Farrell forecast another day's good weather. On reflection, what did not quite fit was what could be achieved in this time. Farrell said that we should get up to Plat-



18 N from the summit of Mount Cook (This and next four photos: J. G. R. Harding)

eau Hut 1100m above immediately; do a minor peak next day and then go for Cook if the weather still held. This, of course, was the key to it all.

At 14.00hrs Brown and I set off up the Tasman glacier for Plateau Hut. Our route lay up the Haast ridge. In parting Farrell said something about a long hard march and that we would have to move fast. Brown took him at his word and as he forged ahead inexorably, I began to regret the euphoric gesture made in the hut of volunteering to carry all the food. Our first technical problem was to gain the foot of the Haast ridge from the glacier. A century ago the Tasman glacier was 100ft above the lateral moraine. Now, owing to shrinkage, it is 200ft below with a near vertical wall to climb if you want to get off it. It was this wall that Brown now attacked. I accepted his line as that of the local expert but wondered why we had dispensed with the rope when initial progress, by way of stones embedded in crumbling detritus, came to a halt when the stones gave out. Thereafter we resorted to step cutting. Once again on

terra firma something seemed to be amusing Brown. 'Bad place this' he confided with a glimmer of a smile 'a lot of them come off here'.

I saw nothing more of Brown for the next 3 hours save, occasionally as a distant silhouette high above me on the ridge. The path up the Haast, if indeed there is one, eluded me completely and gasping in Brown's wake I could think of no hut march with which to compare it. The ridge is complex, rotten in great part and cunningly conceals two indigenous growths, the 'Prickly Bush Lawyer' and 'Fighting Spaniard', which unprovoked will lance your finger at the touch. Nothing in the Australian bush has spines so vicious. Tottering into King Memorial Hut 4½ hours after leaving the Ball, Brown revived me with 4 cups of tea. Although we were already 1½ hours ahead of standard time to the King Hut, Plateau Hut was still a long way off with night not far distant. Now we marched as a pair and just after 21.00hrs reached the hut, the last few hundred feet step cutting up hard nevé in total darkness.

Our march from the Ball Hut had taken 7 hours. Comfortingly, Plateau Hut was occupied by the 2 Horsley brothers in high spirits having just completed the Blue Riband of Mount Cook – the Grand Traverse of its 3 peaks. In the process they had lost one rope and a sac and had been forced to bivouac the previous night. Now they were awaiting the return of Harris and Mannering long overdue from the Whymper face of Elie de Beaumont. The Horsleys confirmed that apart from 'sastrugi' on the ridge, conditions were still good but the weather was about to break. Only a few hours earlier I could never remotely have conceived that by the time Brown and I had finished supper we would have convinced ourselves that the only hope of climbing Cook, another 1450m above, would be by the Linda Glacier route carrying straight on after only a couple of hours' rest.

As Jim Wilson records in *Aorangi,* only 231 parties had climbed Cook by the end of the 1967/68 climbing season and only 70 of these up to 1950. The majority of these ascents were by the Linda route now the *voie normale* though not that of the first ascensionists. The Linda was chosen as the natural line by the Rev W. S. Green (AC) and his Swiss guide Ulrich Kaufmann on the first serious attempt to climb Cook in 1882. Green's party took 6 months off to sail round the world to attempt their coup but were foiled by bad weather within 60m of the summit having overcome all difficulties. Their epic stimulated the race for the summit and presaged the foundation of the New Zealand Club and the Golden Age of New Zealand mountaineering. The first complete ascent by New Zealanders Clarke, Fyfe and George Graham took place in 1894 by the difficult N ridge not subsequently repeated until 1953. The Linda route was only climbed in 1912, 30 years after Green's near miss. Two years later the Englishman King and his two New Zealand guides Thomson and Richmond were all killed by an ice avalanche while descending the Linda glacier leaving the route with a certain reputation.

But as I lay in my bunk awaiting the dreaded 01.00hr reveille, my thoughts were not on the ice gauntlet of the upper Linda, about which I then knew nothing, but on the prospect of another 1450m of climbing without guidebook or even a suitable map. By the time we were up and about nothing remained of the zest that had marked our departure from the Ball Hut 11 hours earlier. Brown may have been straining at the leash but camouflaged his enthusiasm by a protracted breakfast of fruit, cereal, omelette, bread, butter, jam

and coffee. I accepted this as standard local practice but less readily a quiz conducted in the doorway of the hut as to the efficacy of the Tarbuck knot and whether ice-axe belays and prusiks were part of my scene. Fifteen minutes out I confirmed Brown's worst suspicions by forgetting my camera. We finally got away at 02.50hrs and promptly blundered on to the wrong side of the glacier and into a maze of crevasses. But by dawn we were well on our way breathing hard but going strong. High up the Linda the sun brought down a shower of ice-blocks best avoided by those with an eye for a ball by side-stepping. Leaving the glacier you traverse a snow-shelf to the NE ridge which sweeps up to the summit. Once above the 120m rock band I knew that nothing could stop us and as we cramponned up the summit ice-dome our hearts were singing. At 08.25 hrs on 25 November, my 5th day in New Zealand, we stood on the summit of Mount Cook.

19 Mount Cook





20 Mount Tasman from the NE ridge of Mount Cook

21 The summit of Mount Cook



There was a dream-like quality about that morning. By comparison with the nightmare march to Plateau Hut we seemed to have floated up the climb. Now it was as if we were standing at the apex of some gigantic bow from which the curvature of the earth was clearly visible and to whose N and S limits a succession of peaks and snow-fields stretched as far as the eye could see. Reality returned with our descent to earth down the long, exposed ridge which required constant care. I was mesmerized by the sight of Mount Tasman, Queen of the Southern Alps, rising tier upon icy tier from the bottom of the dizzy gulf into which we were descending and now, for the first time, became aware of our exertions over the past 18 hours. Progress dropped to a crawl down the Rock Band and trying to force the pace, I slipped on the ice and felt urgently the darker side of this huge mountain's personality and a keen sense of our own isolation. Once off the ridge pressures eased but Brown's bull-dozing progress beneath the seracs seemed more likely to start an avalanche than any natural phenomenon. The effort of staying with him down the glacier was lung-blowing but in the home straight I was still in his slipstream and on the rise leading up to the hut we matched stride for stride to break the tape together at 12.45hrs; just over 10 hours for the round trip.

Now a reaction set in. If the flesh had been stronger and the snow firmer we would have descended to the Hermitage there and then as we both had found compelling reasons for getting off the mountain. As it was, Brown retired to bed for the next 4 hours while I mooched round the hut desultorily writing up my diary and observing a Kea trying to make something of Brown's crampons left in the snow outside. This Alpine parrot with scissor beak will demolish virtually anything he cannot otherwise eat. We compromised for an 03.00hr start next morning to descend via Cinerama Col thereby avoiding the Haast ridge. I awoke at 04.55hrs and by 05.45hrs we were again tearing across the Grand Plateau glacier. Cinerama Col marks the exit to the Plateau but just short of it we paused to look back at the soaring ice-ridges of Tasman and Ledenfeld now highlighted by the sun's first rays. Once again the mountains had come to life and our own ambition was revived. So moved was Brown that he began soliloquizing about Ledenfeld's virgin face. This unexpected eloquence momentarily made me wonder why we were now going down. But our food was finished; we had squandered our early start and, in the event, the weather did finally break that afternoon. From the Col we studied the 1800m Caroline face climbed earlier that month. Certainly it is vast and impressive though not intimidatingly steep. Almost certainly its inviolability was so long preserved not so much by technical difficulty but by the risks involved in hazarding so long a climb in New Zealand's weather. The spirit of competition sped the rest of our descent and finishing strongly across the contorted Ball glacier, I just pipped Brown to the Ball Hut, a descent of 3¼ hours.

Down at the Hermitage we took a farewell drink off Lynn Crawford at the Tavern Bar now reserved for Hotel Staff, roadmen, climbers and the like. That evening with the Horsley brothers, I celebrated in the more convivial Glencoe Lodge, their Grand Traverse, the safe return of Harris and Mannering and our own adventure.

The rest is quickly told. The following evening back in Christchurch, Jim Wilson suggested the direct route on Rolleston's Otira face as my New Zealand finale. By 06.45hrs next day we were again at Arthur's Pass this time follow-



22 Mount Rolleston

ing a path up the Otira gorge through tussock grass interspersed with buttercups and the delectable Mount Cook lily in mist and rain. A nevé basin led to the foot of the face and the start of the climb reputed the best on Rolleston (2272m). At that stage of the day I had no idea what the route involved nor was much the wiser at the end of it for throughout it either rained, sleeted or snowed under a blanket of mist. For the record, the vertical interval from pass to summit is 1340m of which 760m is on rock, sound by New Zealand standards and seldom above Grade III though in the manner of most New Zealand climbs not lightly undertaken and in recent years the scene of a major climbing tragedy. We reached the summit of the High Peak 6 hours after leaving our road head; traversed the Middle and Low peaks and then lunched off sausages, eggs, salad and mayonnaise in the lee of the ridge, soaked to the skin. This was a taste of traditional New Zealand weather and with the Nor' Westerlies blowing up into something special I wondered what it might now be like on Cook some 1500m higher. Descent was by an interminable snow couloir in conditions reminiscent of a bad Welsh weekend. And so back to Christchurch in time for one of Dot White's splendid high teas. Next day I flew on to Perth and within 36 hours was back in London facing up to another murky December, power cuts and the dustmen's strike. I had been away in the Antipodes for 16 months.

That week in the Southern Alps of New Zealand was one of my best in the hills. Here, in a range 500 miles long and comparable with the Alps, there are enough mountains to last 100 climbing lifetimes. The ridges of Mount Cook alone would be sufficient for most and, to my knowledge, have all been climbed only by one individual, the great Hermitage guide Harry Ayres. But unlike our European Alps, these New Zealand mountains are virtually empty and many of them can only be reached after a minor expedition. Here lies their special attraction. But most of all I shall remember the mountain camaraderie of a friendly people whose traditions and attitudes are so similar to our own.