A Return to East Africa 1989

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(*Plates* 58, 59)

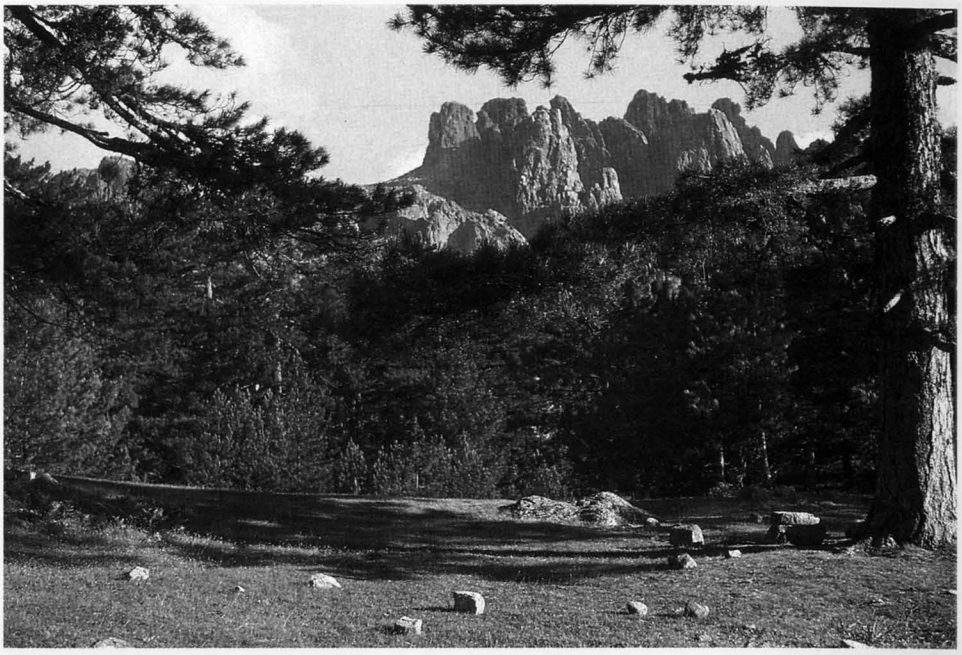
My first journeys to Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro were made during the first three months of 1943 while I was stationed at RAF Nakuru in the Kenya Highlands.

Taking part in operational training and 'crewing up' on Mark V Blenheims meant that my journeys were by air and not on foot. None of my fellow aircrews were interested in mountains, and in any case both Kenya and Kilimanjaro were too far away for a weekend furlough. Fortunately, the nearness of the Bell Inn at Naivasha did allow solo ascents of Mount Longonot and the Eburu Escarpment.

My pilot 'Jock' Wicks had some sympathy for my interest in mountains, and on 7 February 1943, following a flight to Lake Rudolph and Southern Abyssinia, we refuelled at RAF Nanyuki. We then flew over Mount Kenya and practised 'low-level' flying over the, then, much more extensive Lewis and Gregory glaciers of Point Lenana. It was frustrating not to be there on the ground, and shortly afterwards I remember the envy (as well as admiration) I felt on learning that, later in the month, three Italian mountaineers (POWs) had escaped from Nanyuki camp and ascended that third-highest point of Mount Kenya. For me, going absent without leave while on active service couldn't be considered! In March 1943 (my flying log-book tells me it was the 18th) we flew to Moshi in Tanganyika and on return flew across the Mawenzi Saddle. There, just above us, as Hemingway wrote: 'As wide as all the world, great, high and unbelievably white in the sun, was the square top of Kilimanjaro.' These exhilarating flights to the mountains of East Africa were a sustaining memory during the following two years of operational flying in Assam and Burma, and I often promised myself that I would return.

Despite a delay of 46 years, it turned out that 1989 was a good year to go back to Kenya and at last, on foot, to cross the Lewis glacier to Point Lenana; then later, in what was now Tanzania, to reach the summit of Kilimanjaro. It was a year of anniversaries.

At Lenana summit my companions remembered the 'no picnic' journey made by the Italians Benuzzi, Barsotti and Balletto. However, they were even more intrigued to learn that exactly 90 years before, in September 1899, Mackinder with the guides Brocherel and Ollier had made the first ascent of Batian, the higher of the two summits of Mount Kenya which could be seen just across the glacier saddle. Later, in the Teleki valley, as we camped among the Giant Senecio and Lobelia, we looked up the Diamond couloir to the Diamond glacier, the numerical connotation of its name a reminder that 60 years before,



57. Cornes d'Asinao, southern Corsica. (Kev Reynolds) (p 117)

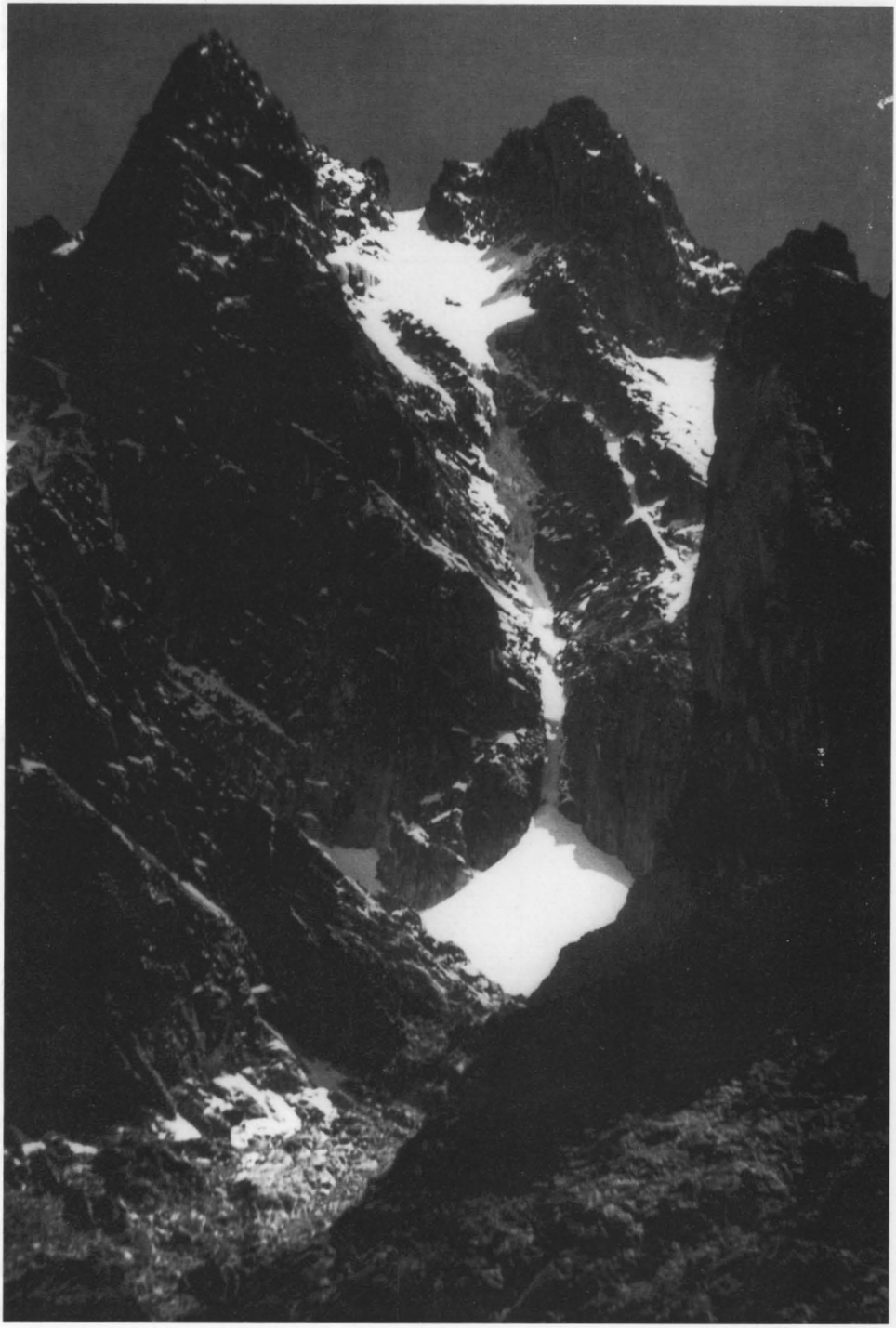


58. Looking to the Northern Glacier and Reusch Crater from Uhuru Peak, Kilimanjaro. (John A Jackson) (p 136)

in 1929, Shipton and Wyn Harris had made the first ascent of the summit of Nelion which we could see beyond the 'Gate of the Mists'.

As anniveraries go, though, it was probably the centenary ascent of Kilimanjaro that provided the main interest. No one in their right senses would ever describe the Marangu route as an exciting mountaineering ascent, though environmentally it is – and was. In Moshi there was much hustle and bustle while television crews led by Wolfgang Benn (a great-grandson of Hans Meyer, the first ascensionist in 1889) prepared to record their ascent to the summit at the beginning of October. With a good deal of alacrity we left Moshi before them, taking the route through the forest, moorland and high desert zones to reach Uhuru Peak (5895m) in the last week of September. The weather was good: warm, clear and dry. A pair of Auger buzzards greeted our arrival at Gillman's Point, and bathed in warming sunshine we looked across a sea of cumulus clouds to the rock serrations of Mawenzi, then photographed the rose-tinted seracs of the eastern ice-field. An hour or so later, at the Uhuru summit, fluted pillars and terraces of ice characterized the arctic terrain, but the diminishing 'Great Northern Glacier' was a reminder that the equatorial sun is rapidly removing the ice-sheet that formerly filled the crater. Surprisingly, even at this centenary period, there was no one else at the summit and lower down, at Gillman's Point, we had met just three other walkers. As with the circuit of Mount Kenya, we had the mountain virtually to ourselves.

It was a joy to return to the mountains of East Africa in 1989, but two pronounced changes were a particular reminder that mankind must strive harder to conserve the environment of planet Earth. First, I noted the appalling reduction in wildlife compared with 46 years ago and, secondly, it was astonishing to see the shrinkage in the size of the ice-sheet and the glaciers which had taken place on both Mount Kenya and Kilimanjaro in the same length of time. May they all still be there in 2039!



59. Mount Kenya – the Diamond Couloir leading to the Diamond Glacier and 'Gate of the Mists' between Batian and Nelion. (John A Jackson) (p 136)