In New Zealand with the Locals

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Personal reasons apart, two images took me to New Zealand: the albatross colony of the Otago Peninsula, and Hillary's account of how he came to take up climbing by overhearing the talk at Mt Cook. 'Those fellows now, were really getting something out of life. Tomorrow I'd climb something!'

The albatrosses came from one of David Attenborough's epic series – the end of the last programme of *Life on Earth* I think. The image was certainly a potent one. At the very end of the earth, on a windy clifftop, he kneels wide-eyed and wondrous beside a solitary bird which has returned to the same spot to nest for over 40 years. Airborne, its wingspan is greater even than the condors of South America, and it can circle the world without landing.

The reality was more sobering. When I went to the peninsula this bird had failed to return from the sea for the first time ever, the nesting season was nearly over, and all that could be seen against a cold sea was what looked like a discarded sheepskin with a brick placed on top of it. It *was* an albatross chick apparently, but having just had a stonking good meal it was asleep. And, quite rightly, it refused to wake up for mere tourists.

As for the mountains – what did I expect? One can never quite remember afterwards, but what I do know is that they rarely disappoint. The Southern Alps demanded investigation, and on my second day in New Zealand Bill King, local expert and sometime correspondent for this journal, called me with an invitation to join him, fellow Kiwi Owen Coppage, and itinerant Englishman Nick Groves, for a week in the Mt Cook National Park. Weather allowing, we would fly in and then use skis to reach some technically straightforward but interesting peaks in the heart of the highest part of the range.

I had been a bit concerned about the skiing side of things, but when Nick arrived at the airfield outside Mt Cook village bent under a huge rucksack full of hardware I began to feel reassured. The story was that he wasn't much of a skier either, and with that rucksack to slow him down I shouldn't be left all that far behind. My spirits rose still further when my second-hand ski suit (£5 in the local jumble sale) raised sarcastic comments, being thought too trendy for real mountaineers. Just what I would have said myself.

The flight in to the Tasman glacier seemed a miniaturised version of last year's air charter to Greenland: smaller plane, shorter distance, less gear – but larger pilot. A friend of Owen's, he bent the rules to drop us virtually on the Tasman Saddle, a few minutes' easy skiing from the hut. Oh, to be out with the locals! I wasn't just getting into the hills, but enjoying a greater privilege. For two days we skied the compacted powder, enjoying magnificent views, putting more or less neat tracks all over the virgin surface, and watching the planes land. Owen, the only really good skier amongst us, pronounced the conditions to be

the best he had ever experienced. Even and deep, the snow was so forgiving we all felt like experts. We climbed Aylmer, a small but worthwhile peak, and Nick fought his way up Hochstetter Dome for the hundredth time. Bill thought there was more snow than any year he could remember; later, New Zealand radio was to claim that it was the snowiest for 40 years. Perhaps it was just old age, but with the ridges covered in feet of new powder I didn't trust them and adopted a policy of letting Nick go first to test out the ground. On Hochstetter I retreated all the same and was relieved to reach my skis on the saddle, where I looked out west over a sea of peaks and deep valleys falling rapidly to the sea. The valleys, every foot covered in dense temperate rain forest, were black in colour, changing suddenly to a sullen white at the snow-line. Some of the mountains looked almost Patagonian, every feature white with snow and thick rime. As in South America, it is the proximity of the western ocean which makes these mountains what they are: unstable in temperament, heavily snowed, altogether more substantial than their size would suggest. They glowed pink in the evening sun whilst a thick layer of cloud covered the sea and began pushing up the valleys. On my left was the impressive profile of the Maximilian ridge of Elie de Beaumont, long and crenellated, rising from deep bush and covered in white icing. Bill thought it had probably only been climbed twice, and never in winter, and I could now see why. These mountains may not be high, but just to get to that ridge would take several days of bush-whacking. As in most of the country, the rock would be indifferent if not worse. It would take a long time, and there was no escape route. And if a South Island nor-westerly storm caught you there . . .

My own experience of a New Zealand storm arrived that night. We heard it shaking the tin cladding of the hut, and in the morning spindrift screamed at the windows and visibility was zero. We had hoped to descend the headwall on the far side of the Tasman Saddle and so reach the more remote Murchison glacier, but it now looked as if we wouldn't have the chance. For three days all movement outdoors was reduced to essential purposes only. The hut was large and consequently very cold, but at least it was fairly new which presumably meant it would stay firm. (A much older hut in the Mt Cook area had succumbed to a nor-wester a few years earlier, killing all three occupants.) We occupied ourselves in the usual time-honoured ways, but with far better food than most trips I've been on: steaks most nights of course, this being New Zealand. The radio-telephone also helped to pass the time. I thought Nick unnecessarily voluble and long-winded on this until I realised that the Park radio supremo at the other end was his girlfriend. Bill and I shared some memories of Alan (Rouse). I remember Alan enthusing about New Zealand just before he left for K2, and Bill confirmed that he had loved the place and fitted in to the climbing scene as if it were his second home.

On day three the storm redoubled its efforts, flashing and banging most impressively for 24 hours without respite, and even Owen began to look a little concerned. (The hut was definitely 'settling on its foundations'.) For him and Bill it must have been a bit frustrating, as this was more or less an exact repetition of their previous year's attempt to ski the Murchison, but for me it was all part of the New Zealand experience. In fact it made it more real in a way;

one knew, and not just in theory, that these mountains could be as frustrating, as mountain-like, as anywhere else. I had felt the same way the afternoon I spent waiting to rendezvous with Bill and Owen at a road junction south of Christchurch. There I had drunk endless pots of tea in a café and fallen into conversation with the owner, who turned out to be a depressed pom who had come out here 30 years ago and was now thoroughly disillusioned with the place. No sense of history seemed to be his primary objection; but really, he hardly had a good word to say. He was feeling wistful for the swinging sixties in Bromley, and was impervious to my suggestion that things in Bromley might have changed. I tried to cheer him up by enthusing about the open skies, the cleanliness of New Zealand, the incredibly empty roads (in retrospect, hardly a plus point to a café owner), the friendliness of the people. But it was no good, it just made him feel worse. I even started to feel depressed myself. Yet I was grateful to him; New Zealand *has* got so much – visiting it can become a bit shallow, like a cardboard cut-out experience. His glumness made the place more real.

Thursday brought a slight respite in the weather and we decided to make a break for it. Despite the whiteout the skiing was easy at first, and I caught glimpses of icefalls, snow-slopes disappearing into the mist, and narrow side-valleys which looked forbidding now but would be idyllic in summer. Lower down, the glacier was blue ice and we were blown out of control by the wind. (More accurately, I was.) We took the skis off and wallowed ineffectively in the soft snow on the moraines for an hour before putting them back on and making a route through the twisting valleys between the piles of rubble. Then there was a wet, sliding scree to climb and a long ski down a moraine, crossing large piles of avalanche debris. It was late afternoon by now and the scene was murky and without colour, the landscape not at its most inspiring in a persistent heavy drizzle. The next front had obviously arrived. We trudged along cold and wet, just like you do in Scotland, and as in Scotland my waterproofs let in lots of water. It all seemed rather familiar. And that was appropriate because there is much in New Zealand's South Island, not just the winter weather, which is reminiscent of Scotland or has its origin in Scottish ways. The place-names, for example, are uncanny reminders. Dunedin (Gaelic – New Edinburgh), Glen Orchy, Lochnagar, Ben Nevis – they're all here. It's as if everything is a monument to someone's fondest memory. And the mountains; the Cook area may be alpine, but elsewhere many of the ranges are very Scottish in size and character. Even parts of the coast are reminiscent. Close to the albatross colony you can go to a cove of yellow sand framed by wet rocks and an undercliff of rubble and grass. The day I was there it drizzled half-heartedly every now and then, a keen wind blew, and you could have been on Skye – but for the sudden realisation that those odd little objects emerging from the sea and waddling up the sandy beach were penguins.

I came out of my reverie at Blue Lakes, a famous beauty spot marking the snout of the Tasman glacier and the end of the moraines. Unfortunately it was now dark, but Owen's smart car, driven by one of Nick's friends from the Park service, was there to pick us up and save us a long, long trudge along the road. Inside, the radio played jazz and we opened beers. Oh, to be out with the locals!

We hadn't climbed much, we hadn't even got the rope out, but that didn't seem to matter any more. In any case, though there is some fine climbing to be done, on Cook obviously, the S face of Douglas, E face of Mt Watkins and elsewhere, I didn't get the impression that technical climbing is the great New Zealand strength. It seems more the place for long backpacking expeditions, remote ski touring – basically, good old-fashioned mountain adventures. And I was reminded of a book by John Hunt whose title I have always admired: *Life is Meeting*. A fine title for any autobiography, but a particularly happy one for a book featuring climbing reminiscences. For how true it is, if mundane to say it, that so much of our pleasure in mountains is inseparable from companionship; and what a privilege when the pleasure of a new area is increased many times over by being out there with the locals.