The Centenary of the New Zealand Alpine Club

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(*Plates 44, 45*)

The New Zealand Alpine Club has lately celebrated the centenary of its formation in 1891 and of the first volume of its journal, published in the following year. The setting up of the club had first been suggested in 1882 by the Rev W A Green who, with Ulrich Kaufmann and Emil Boss from Grindelwald, was forced by bad weather to retreat when close to the summit of Mt Cook, New Zealand's highest mountain. Their example encouraged young New Zealanders to climb: among them were A P Harper and G E Mannering who, respectively, became the first secretary of the club and the first editor of its journal. Both became members of the Alpine Club which, in due course, made them honorary members. They took a pride in fashioning the new club as nearly as possible on its London 'parent' of which, in two respects, it was years ahead: ladies were elected from the outset, and enthusiasts who lacked the qualifications to become members could be subscribers.

Although Harper and Mannering were equally devoted to mountaineering, their attitudes differed much. Mannering was attracted to the highest peaks, and there seems little doubt that a party of which he was a member would have been the first to climb Mt Cook if they had used crampons. Harper, in contrast, was drawn to mountain exploration. It seems that he found life in Christchurch dull when he returned there after achieving an Oxford degree and membership of the Inner Temple. For nearly three years he explored in South Westland with Charles Douglas, becoming a first-class ice climber. Many young men were to follow Harper's example and, as their experiences were very different from those of the 'alpine fathers' in Europe, some introductory comments on New Zealand conditions may be helpful.

The weather largely controls the activities of climbers in the Southern Alps. The prevailing winds which reach the mountains from the NW, across the Tasman Sea, are moisture laden. They give rise to storms which may last for several days at any time of year. In parts of the W coast rainfall can exceed 500cm per year and on the mountains snowfall is considerably greater than in the European Alps. Thus, although the Southern Alps are lower than those of Switzerland and are nearer to the equator, they are more heavily glaciated. The Tasman glacier is longer than any in Switzerland and the snout of the Franz Josef glacier reaches to within 250m of sea-level. A week of unbroken good weather is something of a miracle. Many streams are unbridged and climbers waiting to ford them become familiar with the rather awesome sound of boulders being ground together by the force of the water.





Founders of the New Zealand Alpine Club:

44. *Above* A P Harper, the first Secretary (with his daughter).
(*From the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch, by permission.*) (p161)

45. *Opposite* G E Mannering, the first Editor of the *NZAJ*.
(*From the NZ Alpine Journal, Vol XII, 1948.*) (p161)

There is no indigenous population in the upper valleys of the Southern Alps and only three hotels: the Hermitage, near Mt Cook, and hotels close to the Franz Josef and Fox glaciers on the western flank of the range. Many huts have been built in the more frequented districts but elsewhere climbers must depend entirely on what they carry on their backs.

The first major achievement by New Zealand climbers came on Christmas Day 1894: T C Fyfe, G Graham and J Clarke, who were all employed at the Hermitage, made the first ascent of Mt Cook. This discommoded E A Fitzgerald who arrived soon afterwards with the guide Mattias Zurbriggen, their stated aim being to make the first ascent of New Zealand's highest mountain. Fitzgerald turned his back on Mt Cook but, with Zurbriggen, climbed Mts Tasman and Sefton. It seems that, later, Fitzgerald was surprised when Zurbriggen made a solo ascent of Mt Cook by a new route which was climbed only three times in the next 35 years. In the ten years after his ascent of Mt Cook Fyfe took part in several other first ascents, including De La Beche, the Minarets and Malte Brun; in 1906 he was again on Mt Cook leading Malcolm Ross and Samuel Turner. The Graham brothers, Peter and Alex (no relation of Fyfe's companion), became prominent guides at Waiho on the western flank of the range. Some of their earliest clients on Mt Cook were Canon H E Newton, R S Low and Dr E Teichelmann. The first ascents made by the Grahams included Mts La Perouse, Lendenfeld, Douglas and Elie de Beaumont. Mt Aspiring, the highest peak south of the Mt Cook group, was first climbed in 1910 by Major Bernard Head (subsequently killed at Gallipoli) with the guides Alex Graham and J Clarke. Miss Freda Du Faur, from Australia, became the first lady climber to achieve great prominence. In 1913, with Peter Graham and D Thomson, she made the first Grand Traverse of the three peaks of Mt Cook; a dozen years later H E L Porter described the ice ridge which connects the three summits of Mt Cook as 'surely the most wonderful highway in the world'.

Almost all the highest peaks in the central region of the Southern Alps were climbed, mainly by guided parties, before the First World War, and for years the NZAC had been largely inactive. The 1920s saw an upsurge of guideless climbing and mountain exploration by New Zealanders from different parts of the country. In Dunedin an active group, led by Roland Ellis, made the first climb by New Zealand amateurs of Mt Aspiring. There was a strong local desire to form a Dunedin climbing club and Ellis, backed by Harper, brought about the formation of the Otago section of the NZAC; Eric Miller, who had taken part in the ascent of Mt Aspiring, was the first chairman of the section. Since then nine other regional sections of the club have been formed and, as a result, the club has expanded greatly. In the early 1930s the club's journal, of which only two volumes had appeared since 1896, was revived and within a few years its editor, Jock Sim, caused it to become one of the world's leading mountaineering journals. Sim also organised the club's first climbing training camp. I had the good fortune to be one of his protégés. When Sim retired from the editorship of the *NZ Alpine Journal* the Alpine Club elected him an Honorary Member.

Between the First and Second World Wars mountaineering in New Zealand increased considerably, rock climbing and ski mountaineering receiving most attention. Lists of first ascents and explorations filled many pages of the *NZAJ* and, unlike the situation before 1914, visitors from overseas made little contribution to New Zealand climbing. There was, however, one important exception. H E L (Ned) Porter made four visits, accompanied once by his friend Marcel Kurz from Switzerland. They climbed almost all the main New Zealand peaks and gave much-appreciated advice to local climbers. Porter became rather a legend. A man who had walked up in heavy rain to Malte Brun hut in the hope of seeing Porter told me the following anecdote. Stories of the patronising attitude of some English climbers in the 1890s made him enter the hut rather timorously, but he saw a kindly-looking man, in a well-darned jersey, knitting in a corner. Surely this could not be the famous Porter who, in his youth, had climbed with Mallory and Winthrop Young? Putting down his knitting, Porter remarked that knitting materials were much lighter to carry than books which would occupy him for the same length of time. Then he persuaded his visitor to describe the climbing he and his friends had done and went on to talk of his own doings – but there is no record that his example led local climbers to take up knitting! After Porter and his wife (who was both a New Zealander and a mountaineer) died, the NZAC received a generous bequest which provided a climbing centre on the west coast.

Before the Second World War, owing to the length of ocean voyages, few New Zealanders climbed overseas. Dan Bryant was the country's only representative on a major Himalayan expedition. He won golden opinions on Eric Shipton's Everest reconnaissance in 1935 but unfortunately his inability to acclimatise to high altitudes excluded him from subsequent Everest expeditions. In 1951 a party organised by Earle Riddiford, and including Ed Hillary, climbed successfully in the Garhwal and, when a reconnaissance of Everest to be led by Shipton was proposed for the same year, the inclusion of New Zealanders was suggested by Harry Stevenson, President of the NZAC, Roland Ellis and others. The reputation of Dan Bryant undoubtedly influenced the decision to include Riddiford and Hillary. Riddiford made an important contribution towards finding a route up the Khumbu icefall. Everest having been 'booked' by a Swiss party for 1952, Riddiford, Hillary and George Lowe went with Shipton to Cho Oyu. That expedition, which Riddiford had helped to plan, was for him a disaster; he returned to New Zealand with an injured back. In 1953, under John Hunt's leadership, Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first men on the summit of Mount Everest, Lowe being in a supporting party.

The Alpine Club has good reason to congratulate the successors of those who, a hundred years ago, took their club and its journal as a model from which a truly indigenous climbing club grew. In his book on the successful Everest expedition, John Hunt paid a warm tribute to those on previous expeditions who had led the way. Similarly, in the record of New Zealand's achievement on Mount Everest, Dan Bryant and Earle Riddiford deserve to be remembered.

I express my sincere thanks to Jim Gilkison and Harry Stevenson for their advice in preparing this article. A future volume of the *Alpine Journal* will bring the story up to date, with a review of New Zealand mountaineering since 1953.