
NORMAN HARDIE

Mountaineering by New Zealanders 1954 –1993

(Plates 54, 55)

This is the second of two articles on the history of mountaineering by New Zealanders. Scott Russell's article, 'The Centenary of the New Zealand Alpine Club', covering the period 1891-1953, appeared in AJ97, 161-163, 1992/93.

In 1954 the New Zealand Alpine Club sent an expedition to the Barun area in Nepal to attempt the first ascent of Makalu. Sir Edmund Hillary was the leader, Sir Charles Evans his deputy, and also from Everest 1953 was George Lowe. Seven others, all new to the Himalaya, made up the team. Among these was Mike Ball from Britain who, like Evans, was invited for his talents, but also as an expression of gratitude for past invitations to New Zealanders on British expeditions. Two had been on the 1951 Everest reconnaissance, two were on Everest in 1953 and three – Riddiford, Hillary and Lowe – were on Cho Oyu in 1952.

On the initial venture to higher altitudes in the Barun, Jim McFarlane fell into a crevasse and his hands and feet were badly frostbitten. After a few days it became evident that he would have to be carried to Kathmandu. Meanwhile, a not very spirited prod was made at Makalu by the route later used by the French. Three left with McFarlane and the remaining six formed three mobile groups which between them climbed 19 peaks over 6000m, the most notable being Baruntse (7129m) and Pethangtse (6730m). When the monsoon began most went home, but Evans and I travelled west to Kodari keeping near the Tibetan border. I was with Charles, two days north of Kathmandu, when he received the telegraphed invitation to lead the Kangchenjunga expedition the following year. I was delighted that he asked me on the spot to join him. The story of that highly successful expedition is well known.

Also in 1955 the Canterbury Mountaineering Club sent a strong group to Masherbrum. They were progressing well when a porter died of pneumonia. Unfortunately all the party came off the mountain for several days of mourning. By the time they regained their higher camps the good weather had departed. They were never close to the summit.

It is interesting that these two expeditions, to the Barun and to Masherbrum, were the only ones sent out by the main climbing clubs in 40 years. Subsequent scores of groups to the Andes and Himalaya went on a private basis. The clubs gave their blessing and generally some small financial support but distanced themselves from the selection of personnel or policy, to the approval of the climbers.

Antarctica

For several years after 1955 the Antarctic became the objective of most New Zealanders seeking overseas experience. As part of the preparations for the work of the International Geophysical Year (1958), Hillary and Lowe joined a reconnaissance visit to the South Atlantic in 1957. Afterwards Lowe went to England where he joined the team aiming to complete the first Antarctic crossing. Hillary led a large contingent to the south shore of Ross Sea. Here they built Scott Base, some four miles from Captain Scott's 1903 Discovery hut. The New Zealand base, although later enlarged and then rebuilt, has continued to house a wide range of scientific projects.

Hillary and his small team were part of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic expedition. Their main task was to put in depots from the New Zealand side in the direction of the South Pole and to restock the party currently on its way from the South Atlantic. The depots were placed successfully. However, Vivian Fuchs and his party were several weeks behind schedule. It was clear to Hillary and the four others waiting in the furthest camp that if they stayed for the crossing team they would be forced to consume the other team's supplies. The simplest solution was to go on to the Pole and from there fly back to Scott Base on the coast. The press put all sorts of interpretations on this action and on intercepted radio messages, apparently trying to stir up the notion of a race to the Pole.

When Fuchs was near the Pole, Hillary flew back to join him. The TAE vehicles then completed the whole crossing on a higher route, which was proved by Hillary to be considerably better than the Beardmore glacier and the near sea-level ice shelf of the Scott and Shackleton journeys.

Since 1956 the New Zealand Government has financed the continuing Antarctic research work, while not formally encouraging mountaineering. However, there are always climbers at Scott Base for rescue work and for giving the two days' introduction courses which all new arrivals must undertake. Most people arrive unacclimatised and are often inexperienced in the necessary techniques for field work in Antarctica. Scott Base has some 95 beds and about 350 people pass through each season. Now, with improved air transport, it is less than six hours away from Christchurch and quite short projects are possible. Only the wintering party of ten has to stay more than five months. Field parties going to these hazardous areas have to include technical assistants who are capable on the local terrain. Consequently, at the end of the season, one finds that an increasing number of summits have been climbed by the technical assistants, often accompanied by the scientists. But this type of mountain activity has to tolerate an enormous amount of bureaucratic tape, nor can one get there with one's usual companions. Some field assistants may return for a second season, but seldom more, unless they are climbing the scientific qualification ladder and therefore obtaining other benefits from the experience.

One break in the red tape occurred in 1967 when Ed Hillary managed to have a group flown to the Cape Hallett area with a mountain as their chief objective. This was Mount Herschel which rises in one steep ice and rock



Left

54. Mt Cook: High Peak before the avalanche in December 1991. (Nick Groves) (p221)

Below

55. High Peak photographed from almost the same place after the avalanche. (Nick Groves) (p221)



face from the sea to its 3335m summit. It is a very formidable prospect. Two pairs did reach the summit by an easier route, away from the sea face. I joined the team as deputy leader and surveyor. Two geologists studied this significant location which is by one of the main fracture lines where the Godwanaland breakup occurred. Continental drift theory was still fairly young in the 1960s. The expedition had some successes but the two snowmobiles for pulling sledges were greatly underpowered on the wet snow which occurs on that very stormy coastline.

School expeditions

A 1958 visitor to Antarctica, Dr Griffith Pugh of the 1953 Everest expedition, convinced Ed Hillary that much high-altitude physiological work still needed to be done. Their discussions resulted in the large research expedition to Nepal in 1960. American finance was obtained for a one-year programme involving medical men from New Zealand, USA and Britain. The sponsors also added a 'yeti search' to the party's objectives. For the extent of the work and the altitudes contemplated, mountaineers were needed. Great advances were made in research, Ama Dablam was climbed and a retreat was made from just under the summit of Makalu.

For once, an expedition had surplus dollars at its conclusion. After long discussions with local Sherpas it was decided to build a school at Khumjung. A metal building was donated by ICI in India. The expedition paid for the portage to the site and the construction. Although this first building was not ideal, the teaching began with a full roll and a waiting list.

Soon, other villages began pressing Hillary for schools, medical assistance and larger buildings suitable as high schools. The situation drifted for three years while the first school was making its impact on the community. Over the same period, a 50 mile-wide access prohibition area was in force, while the Indians and Chinese had frontier confrontations.

By 1966 the situation had stabilised and a series of school building ventures began. Since then a small party has gone to Nepal every year for school, medical or maintenance work. There has always been a strong New Zealand input, but in recent years the main sponsorship has moved from the USA to Canada and more Canadians are being seen, particularly in the field of medicine.

Andes

New Zealanders began their considerable activities in the Andes in the early 1960s and the pressure continues. There were many reasons for this. Obtaining places in Government Antarctic expeditions was difficult and frequently frustrating. The closure of Himalayan frontier peaks kept people away from these areas and some of those who had a particular desire for Himalayan involvement were able to get there with the school building groups. Moreover, the Andes have many positive attractions, such as the shorter acclimatisation required, the steeper and more stable rock - and, of course, their great beauty.

In Peru, Huascarán (6768m) was climbed in 1959 and the following year Nevado Cayesh (5721m), the latter a first ascent. In 1962 Brian Hearfield led a party to the Vilcabamba, where they completed five new climbs and the third ascent of Pumasillo (6070m). Another group made the second ascent, with two Britons, of Rondoy (5882m).

Every year since 1962 there have been New Zealand climbers in Peru, Chile or Bolivia. They have succeeded on major routes of all types, including many first ascents. The list is long and it reflects the raising of technical standards which has occurred in recent years. The event which seems the most outstanding to me was the 1988 climb of Cerro Torre and Fitzroy by Nick Cradock and Russell Braddock. Then in 1993 two New Zealand guides made a winter ascent of the Super Couloir of Fitzroy. They were Erica Beuzenberg and Gottlieb Braun-Elwert, who also were the first to climb all the New Zealand 3000m peaks in winter in one season. There have been many other fine climbs, just short of these achievements.

New Zealand

Travelling has become much easier in the last 40 years and this has enabled climbers to gain immense experience in a shorter time. If one constructed a list of the top 50 or so New Zealand climbers of 1993, practically every one would have had an Antarctic season and have been to the Andes or Himalaya. Many have also been to Europe and North America.

Since 1953, equipment has become better and lighter, as have food and fuel. Clubs use highly qualified instructors to steer young climbers in the right direction. There are a number of artificial climbing walls in the main cities. The crags within a day's range of most cities have route guide booklets.

During this period every one of the 20 highest New Zealand peaks had several face routes made on them. The E face of Mt Cook was first ascended in 1962, the longest and most unrelenting of the big features. In 1992 a colossal rock fall of some 14 million cubic metres spilled from Cook, and the summit is now some ten metres lower. The newly exposed fragile precipice has daily rumbles and climbers do not go near it. (Plates 54, 55)

Two kilometres south is the Caroline face. This is a uniformly severe ice problem which tops at the ridge between the low and middle peaks of Cook. Peter Gough and John Glasgow waited in the district for weeks and eventually climbed it in November 1970. Two days later Graeme Dingle and George Harris repeated it. This climb was shortly followed by Dingle and Murray Jones making the first ascent of the S face of Hicks, which has subsequently had a host of variations on it.

Dingle and Jones had previously accomplished a brilliant Alpine season with the climbs of six major north faces. They began with the Matterhorn, the Bonatti Pillar, and the Croz Spur of the Grandes Jorasses. Next was the Dru, the Piz Badile, the Eiger and, finally, the Cima Grande di Lavaredo. Graham Dingle has been on many of the most successful Himalayan and Andean expeditions. He has just returned to New Zealand after taking three years to complete a round-the-world journey, keeping

north of the Arctic Circle. He is also a regular competitor in 'iron man' racing, combining cycling, kayaking and mountain running.

The spectacular E side of Mt Sefton, the nearest big peak to the road-end at Mt Cook, has had several brilliantly successful options taken on it. Mt Tasman, the second highest, has numerous ribs and faces, almost all involving steep ice, all of which have been climbed by a variety of routes.

During the 1950s several new huts were built in the main ranges. With glacial shrinkage often removing the lower support of lateral moraines, many of these hut sites have recently become unstable. Some have received severe damage and others are in a poor state. With so many sites being fragile, there is a reluctance to spend much reconstruction money on high risk situations. Generally the main base huts, with road access, are in good condition.

Himalaya

Apart from school related work, New Zealanders were relatively quiet in the Himalaya until 1975 when Margaret Clark led a joint Indian and New Zealand women's group to climb Hardeol (7151m) in the Garhwal. In a year of exceptionally heavy snowfalls, four of the party were killed when an avalanche from high on the mountain swept out across the level glacier floor where they were walking. Although Margaret suffered a setback, she has now returned to the mountains of India every year since 1980.

The extraordinary N face of Jannu (7710m) was ascended by a strong party in 1975, but they did not go to the summit, which is some distance from the face. One year later an Everest attempt was made by a group which had strength but little money. They employed no Sherpas and wore themselves out on the lower slopes, reaching no higher than the South Col. Not long after that Nick Banks, while part of a German expedition, stood on the top of Everest. As an instructor at Plas y Brenin, he has become a familiar figure in the UK climbing world.

In May 1981 eight New Zealanders summited on Molamenqing (Phola Gangchen, 7661m), while a mixture of New Zealand climbers and Australians succeeded on Changabang. Many other teams did well on smaller objectives in subsequent years. A team of four very nearly climbed Kangchenjunga, but were forced to turn back owing to their lack of strength when one member returned to base with an injury. Everest was tried again from Tibet in 1986, but in that year of bad snow the team was repulsed at 7000m on the W ridge and the N face. Two years later Russell Brice climbed the 'Pinnacle' NE ridge with a British Everest expedition.

In 1992 Martin Hunter's expedition climbed a new route on Cholatse and not far away John Nankervis and David Bamford completed a new route on the Rolwaling peak Chobutse (6689m). In the same year three men, Rob Hall, Gary Ball and Guy Cotter, hit headlines when they took a party of 14 to the top of Everest. Back in 1981 Hall had climbed Ama Dablam and Numbur and recently Hall and Ball climbed the highest peaks in seven continents in seven months. They were also prominent on many new routes in New Zealand. There seemed to be an abundance of

wealthy customers for their Everest operations. But they cared about the environment and were praised for the way they brought out all their expedition rubbish. In 1993 they again took a large commercial group to Everest. Sadly, in October of that year, the death was announced of Gary Ball, at the early age of 40, after he had developed altitude sickness near the 8167m summit of Dhaulagiri. He was brought lower down the mountain by his climbing partner Rob Hall, but despite medical attention he died from pulmonary oedema.

Karakoram

In 1957 Allan Berry and Hugh Tyndale-Biscoe had a successful month in Swat and Chitral, but after that there was very little activity for many years. The first big return was by a strong party which attempted Gasherbrum I in 1986, but bad weather turned them back at 7772m. A 1989 expedition to Uli Biaho led by Nick Cradock climbed its impressive E face, with the summit pitches and descent being made in a snow storm.

During July and August 1991 a party of five New Zealanders – Dave Bamford, John Cocks, Matt Comeskey, John Nankervis and John Wild, with liaison officer Major Arif Khan – made a number of climbs in the Lukpe Lawo (Snow Lake) region during an ambitious Biafo–Hispar ski traverse. Though they failed in two attempts to climb virgin Hispar Sar (c6400m), they succeeded on four peaks including the highest and most elegant peak (c6500m) above the East Khurdopin glacier via its SE spur. They were unimpressed by a persistent hungry bear which occupied rocks near their base camp.

Rob Hall and Gary Ball made three attempts on K2 via the Abruzzi ridge. Their turnback points were at 7300m, 7800m and 8300m respectively, foiled by atrocious weather and snow conditions.

Other mountains

New Zealanders have appeared in all sorts of remote places. Back in 1964 the highest peak on Heard Island in the South Indian Ocean was climbed after a most precarious landing on an exposed beach. H W Tilman was the skipper of the expedition's yacht, Warwick Deacock was the leader and participants included Colin Putt and Philip Temple. Putt sailed with Tilman again off Iceland and in 1990 he sailed a yacht to Antarctica for the climb of Mt Minto (4000m), the highest peak in N Victoria Land, a long way inland from Cape Hallett. Temple, now a very successful author, climbed most of the highest summits in New Guinea with Heinrich Harrer. Dr David Lewis, better known as an Atlantic solo yachtsman, has also sailed four times to Antarctic waters. He was prominent in New Zealand mountains in his student days. Colin Monteath is another New Zealander who seems to have climbed almost everywhere. He works as a freelance guide on Antarctic peaks and on polar ship voyages; he writes well and is an accomplished photographer.

The Alps have had many visitors and several New Zealanders have climbed in the old Soviet Union since the days when George Lowe was

there in 1962 with John Hunt. At about that time George also climbed in Greenland and in Ethiopia.

The *New Zealand Alpine Journal* of 1988 stated that fifteen expeditions went overseas in that year. For many other years the number has been about ten, which is astonishing for a country of only 3.5 million people and where sponsoring firms are small in both number and size.

A brief summary of New Zealand mountaineering must include a paragraph on Paddy Freaney. He arrived here in 1969 after eleven years in the SAS. He has been involved in outdoor education as a career, mixing it with numerous mountain exploits. He climbed Ama Dablam and went very high on two Everest expeditions. With Russell Brice, he climbed in one season all 27 of the local peaks over 10,000ft. These facts are not well known to the general public, though his claim to have seen a moa, a bird believed to have been extinct for 400 years, made him headline news for several weeks.

Both men and women have been climbing in New Zealand for more than a century. Although the New Zealand Alpine Club has always admitted women as members, the Christchurch-based Canterbury Mountaineering Club barred them from membership until 12 years ago. But now the latter club is booming since its change in the rules. In recent years women have been climbing big-face routes, are leading overseas expeditions and are scientists and technical assistants for Antarctic parties. In February 1893 New Zealand women were given voting rights in parliamentary elections (a world first). To celebrate the centenary of this breakthrough, there was a 'Summits for Suffrage' week in February 1993. 4000 women reached summits, even if these were sometimes just local hills. But four women stood on top of the still crumbling Mt Cook.

Forty fascinating years have passed since 1953. May the next forty be just as good.