

FOUR DAYS IN THE SOUTHERN ALPS

W. RAMSDEN

EARLY on January 16, 1950 a "Solent" flying-boat brought me safely down upon the smooth waters of Waitemata harbour, Auckland. The next day I flew south to Christchurch. In order to keep the weight of my luggage within the airliner's permitted free maximum of 30 kilograms, my climbing gear had been left at home. This deficiency was remedied to some extent by the purchase, in Christchurch, of a pullover, a windproof jacket, a hat, and a pair of boots. Most of the cost of these might have been saved had I known that all were available for hire at the Hermitage. The boots, the best available, were in fact heavy clodhoppers, not climbing boots. On Wednesday morning, the 18th, I left Christchurch by motor-coach for the Hermitage, the well-known climbers' hotel at the foot of Mount Cook, a little over 200 miles away by road.

For the first 90 miles we travelled across the Canterbury Plains. Our first stop was at Ashburton for lunch. Further stops were made at Geraldine, and at Fairlie where we had to change into a similar but older motor-coach. From Fairlie the road climbed to Burke's Pass, and then descended slightly to the MacKenzie Plains—so named after a certain Jock MacKenzie, a noted sheep rustler of bygone days. The plains were brown and dry, and covered by thick tussocks of long grass with, here and there, a few clumps of a viciously thorny, dark green shrub called Wild Irishman. We stopped for afternoon tea at a small hotel on Lake Tekapo, 3,550 feet above sea level. I walked alone down to the lake shore, threading my way through the tangle of sweet briar and Wild Irishman. Some black-billed gulls, objecting to my presence, rose from a small island a few yards off-shore and dived down at me. Twenty minutes was all too short a time to enjoy the supreme beauty of the lake and the surrounding hills, of the play of sunlight on the distant, jagged line of snow-clad peaks, and of the pure opalescent blue of the water. From Tekapo onwards every vehicle along the road could be traced by its streamer of dust, and whenever we slowed down our own dust stream promptly caught up with us and enveloped us. Another change of coach—into an even more elderly vehicle than the not-so-new one in which we had travelled from Fairlie—was made at Lake Pukaki, 30 miles

beyond Lake Tekapo. The works and buildings connected with a hydro-electric scheme, now under construction here, were an eyesore. A puncture delayed us for a few minutes between Pukaki and the Hermitage. Three or four diamond ducks disturbed from a nearby stream were, so it appeared, the only other living creatures in the valley. There was not a habitation in sight, no sign of cultivation, no bright flowers, no soft tinkle of cattle bells, only the limitless, brown tussock grass. The high mountains, still some little distance away, were magnificent, but to anyone accustomed to the bright and cheerful Alpine valleys of Switzerland this, the Tasman valley, was desolate indeed.

The Hermitage was reached just in time for dinner. It is a very comfortable hotel situated near the junction of the Hooker and Tasman valleys, about 2,500 feet above sea level. On the walls are numerous photographs and paintings of the mountains. Near the front door a notice informs guests in no uncertain terms that guideless climbing is forbidden, and even those taking short walks are asked to inform the office of their intentions. Another notice states that "Guides will be in attendance in the lounge between 8.0 P.M. and 9.0 P.M., and will be ready to give advice on all matters within their sphere." I arranged that a guide would be available for the following four days, to be shared with another guest, whom I had yet to meet. The charge for the services of a guide was 35s. per day, but for two persons sharing a guide the fee was reduced to 25s. per day. The guides are salaried employees of the New Zealand Government Tourist Department and the charges are collected by the department. It was suggested that we might go up to the Haast Hut, but no definite plans were made.

The next morning I was awake at 6 o'clock. Framed in my open window I could see Mount Cook, its summit brightly lit by the morning sunshine. There was not a cloud in the sky. I expected one of the guides to meet me either at breakfast or immediately after, to let me know what was being planned and when he wished me to be ready. However, no one came my way and the routine still remained a mystery to me. After a leisurely breakfast, enjoyed in the company of some members of an Australian bowling team, I went off in search of the equipment room. There I found Snowy Mace, assistant chief guide, who introduced me to my guide Jimmy Fosyth, and to Brian Fyfe who was to come with us. I hired an ice-axe and crampons, and we were soon on our way by bus. In the 13 miles from the Hermitage to the Ball Hut the road rises 1,300 feet; it is very rough



THE HERMITAGE

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MALTE BRUN HUT

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throughout, and in the last few miles where it follows the top of a large moraine there are several places that look decidedly unsafe.

Jimmy suggested that instead of going up to the Haast Hut we should go to the Malte Brun Hut and do a climb from there. Being completely ignorant of the local geography one hut was the same as another to me, and so I was willing enough to fall in with any suggestion. The Malte Brun Hut lies about 8 miles from the Ball Hut on the eastern side of the Tasman glacier. The walk down from the hut to the glacier through heaps of glacial detritus was a dusty business. Once on the glacier the going was easy, and there was no need to rope-up. Though my new rucksack was packed to bursting point, and heavier than anything I had been accustomed to carrying for a very long time, my load was quite microscopic compared to the immense packs that I later saw being carried around the mountains. The straps were troublesome, they were too weak and tended to bite into my shoulders. The Malte Brun Hut was being enlarged and reconstructed and a carpenter was hard at work on it when we arrived there at about 4 o'clock. As we found it, the hut was very small and cramped, with bunks for about twenty persons only. While work was in progress, Bert Barrie, the carpenter, insisted that everyone must sleep outside in the open, so that he and his assistant could sleep on undisturbed by climbers who rose and breakfasted during the small hours!

It might be as well now to consider the general topography of the district and to say something about the climate, the mountaineering, and the natural history. Sitting down amongst the tussocks of snow-grass outside the hut, and looking out across the Tasman glacier, one is faced by a great rampart of snow-clad mountains. On the left, between 6 and 7 miles away is Mount Cook (12,349 feet). and on the right, at roughly the same distance, Mount Elie de Beaumont (10,200 feet). Between these lie Mount Dampier (11,267 feet), Mount Tasman (11,475 feet) the second highest, Mount Lendenfeld (10,450 feet), Mount Haast (10,294 feet), Mount Haidinger (10,054 feet), Glacier Peak (10,107 feet), the Minarets (10,058), Douglas Peak (10,107 feet), and one or two lesser peaks. This is the highest section of the main divide which extends from Mount Rolleston near Arthur's Pass in the north to Mount Aspiring in the south—a distance of 170 miles as the crow flies. This great chain of mountains, much of which is less than 30 miles from the west coast, lies right in the path of the prevailing, moisture-laden westerly or north-westerly winds, which sweep in upon them from over hundreds of miles of ocean. The

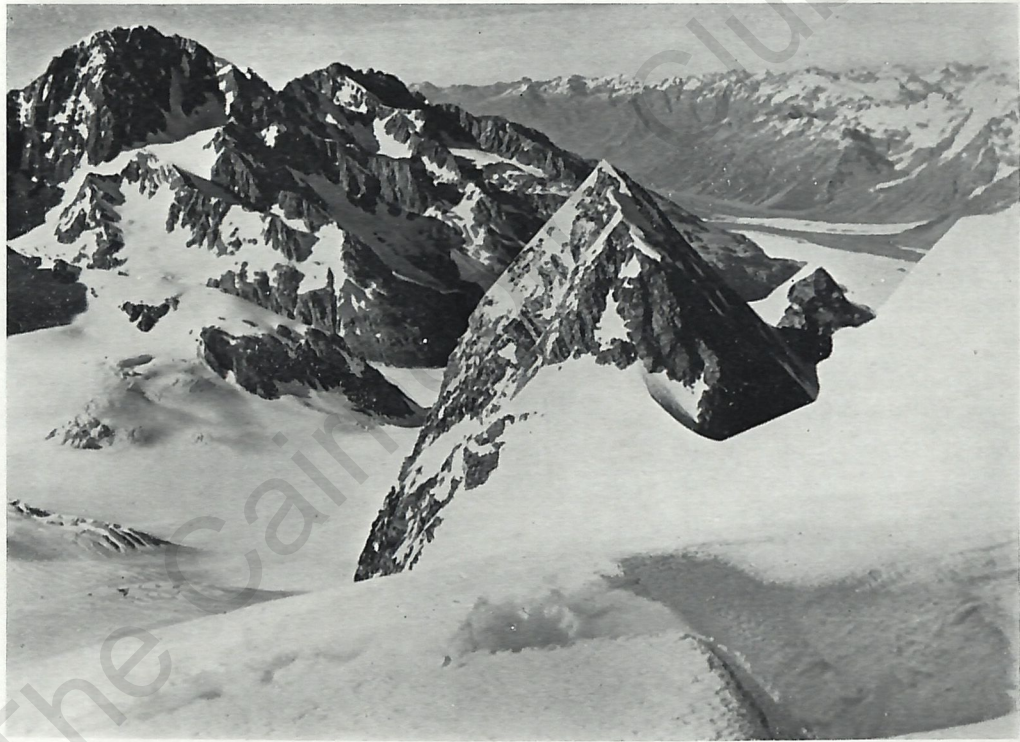
mountains are thereby deluged in snow, and although their latitude is some two degrees nearer the equator than that of the Swiss Alps, the snowline is about 3,000 feet lower. Stupendous ice-falls cascade down their flanks; one of the best-known of these, the Hochstetter icefall, which we saw on our way up the glacier, is over 3,000 feet in height. The Tasman glacier, which is 18 miles long and, in places, at least a mile wide, is the largest in New Zealand, and is, moreover, 5 miles longer than the Aletsch glacier, the longest in Switzerland. Most of the climbs hereabouts are over snow and ice, and for these crampons are in general use. The rock is a brittle and unreliable sandstone, and the only good rock climbing, so I was told, is on Malte Brun.

My introduction to the alpine flora of this region was on the grassy slopes about the Malte Brun Hut. Unlike the brightly coloured Alpine flowers of Europe those of New Zealand are mostly white, very pale mauve, or yellow; but white flowers are, I think, the most common. Even the gentians, one species of which, *Gentiana corymbifera*, was to be seen near the hut, are white. This sobriety of colour however in no way detracts from their charm and beauty. Most of the plants occur nowhere else in the world, and to anyone with even the scantiest knowledge of botany this whole district is a floral paradise. Few birds were to be seen; only a small pipit, very similar to the meadow pipit of British hills, and one or two black-backed gulls passing overhead. While Brian and I had been taking stock of our surroundings, Jim had been preparing supper—and a very good supper too, of ham and salad, stewed apricots, and tea. After we had finished we helped to wash up and to put the things away. In preparation for the night, mattresses and blankets had then to be taken from the hut and laid out on a more or less level piece of ground a few yards away. Jim told us that if the fine weather held he would be taking us up Mount Elie de Beaumont in the morning, and warned us of an early rise and a strenuous day ahead. Soon after 8 o'clock all three of us were in bed. I had six blankets over me, and was wearing all my clothes except my windproof jacket and boots! I did not intend to be frozen; in fact I was very snug and warm in my bed beneath the stars. Jim called us at 1.35 A.M. A truly magnificent breakfast awaited us—a plate of wheat-bix and stewed apricots with hot milk to go with them, followed by bacon and two eggs each, and bread and butter and jam, and of course—tea. We set out at 2.15 A.M. Jim had the only torch and by its rather uncertain light we plunged down through a tangle of tussock-grass,

scree and boulders, and then across a lateral moraine to the glacier. We trudged up the Tasman glacier for nearly 5 miles, unroped and with the crampons slung on our rucksacks. At ten past five we stopped to put on crampons and to rope-up—Jim in the lead, Brian middle-man, and myself at the end. By this time the tops of all the great peaks around us were bathed in brilliant sunlight, and standing out in all their dazzling whiteness against a deep blue sky. High up on the glacier a few crevasses were momentarily troublesome, but Jim never hesitated for more than a few seconds before finding a way across. At about 8,000 feet we came to an icefall. At its upper end a high wall of ice appeared at first glance to bar further progress. We traversed a short distance along the foot of the wall and then turned up a very narrow ribbon of ice that had broken away from the face of the main fall. At the top it was only a short step across from the detached ribbon to the upper glacier. It was rather a precarious journey along the crest of this narrow, lightly snow-covered, sliver of ice. It was about 9 inches wide with a vertical drop of 50 feet on the downhill side, and a crevasse on the other. At 7 o'clock, at approximately 8,500 feet, we stopped for a short rest and a drink of tea. Before we reached the 10,200 foot summit, steps had to be cut up a steep slope for about 200 feet, but other than this there were no other problems once the icefall had been passed. At one moment the summit seemed still a long way off, and then—quite suddenly—almost before we realised that we were there, we arrived on the top at 8.55 A.M. This was Brian's first experience of truly Alpine conditions; he was rather tired and had found some parts of the climb a little worrying. From the summit a grand prospect of mountains was spread before us. Mount Cook, Mount Tasman, and Malte Brun were the most prominent of the nearer peaks. To the west some low fluffy clouds hid much of the land but, through the gaps, I could see the coast. Nearer to us on the west side of the divide were the great *névés* that feed the Franz Josef and Fox glaciers. These two glaciers fall steeply in narrow defiles and move, for glaciers, at an astonishing speed—the Franz Josef attaining a speed of 15 feet a day. Both glaciers end at little more than 700 feet above sea level, and at their lower ends are enclosed by thick forest. To the south and south-east could be seen the MacKenzie Plains, and the hills and mountains around Lake Tekapo which I had passed two days previously. A cold north-east wind blowing across the summit did not encourage us to dally there for long, moreover Jim was anxious to get down to lower levels before the fierce sunshine made the snow

too soft and slushy. Indeed we soon noticed how rapidly the snow conditions were deteriorating. The descent of the steps was accomplished without difficulty. At the icefall Jim took over the lead from me and after some slight initial difficulty established himself on the top of the detached flake. Then Brian got on to it and passed ahead of Jim, and finally I stepped on to it and passed ahead of the other two, and then started the perilous-looking journey down. I finished the last yard or two by shuffling along astride, and Brian did most of it in that wet way. Having threaded our way through the crevasses without mishap we arrived at 11.5 A.M., at the point slightly below the Lendenfeld saddle where we had roped-up for the ascent. Here we removed our crampons and finished off our tea. I was very thirsty. The rope was kept on for another hour owing to the wretchedly soft snow. About a mile from the hut we had to walk through a patch of slushy ice which surged over the boot-tops. I spent some time taking photographs of the Alpine flowers growing on the steep slopes below the hut. The other two left me to this occupation and were back at the hut soon after 2 o'clock—about forty minutes before I arrived there. Four climbers who arrived at the hut during the late afternoon had come over from the Murchison Valley laden with tents, sleeping bags, food and other equipment in the true New Zealand manner.

Our plans for the remaining two days were to go the Haast Hut in the morning, stay there the night, and climb up to the Glacier Dome—a noted viewpoint—before returning to the Hermitage. Soon after supper we settled down once again into our beds on the open mountainside. No lights and no moon dimmed the brilliance of the stars, and the silence of the night was broken only by the rumble of distance icefalls. Brian and I did not stir from our beds until nearly 8 o'clock in the morning, by which time the other climbers had long since left. The sun was shining in an almost cloudless sky. After breakfast there was work to be done—washing-up to be finished, and bedding to be brought in from outside, folded up, and stowed away. By 10 o'clock we were ready to leave. After walking down the glacier until almost level with the Hochstetter icefall we climbed a well-marked ridge on the north side of the icefall. The lower part of this ridge—the Haast Ridge—was covered mainly by tussock grass, and amongst the grass and on the rocks were many Alpine plants that I had not seen before. Foremost among these was the silvery cotton plant—*Celmisia coriacea*—considered by New Zealanders, and not without justification, to be the finest daisy in the world. The world's finest buttercup—*Ranunculus lyallii*—was also growing there, but I



MALTE BRUN AND TASMAN GLACIER FROM MONT ELIE DE BEAUMONT

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saw no flowers, only a few of the large leathery leaves. The South Island edelweiss, eyebrights, forget-me-nots, ourisias, and many other flowers occurred there, and also the quaint "Spaniards" with long, stiff, spiny leaves, from the middle of which arises a massive, poker-like flowering spike 4 feet or more in length. On the upper part of the ridge we had some easy rock scrambling, and several patches of loose scree to cross. I did not envy the guides their job of carrying up supplies by this, the only, route to the Haast Hut. The huts are provisioned by the guides in the spring, before the climbing season begins and after the winter sports season has ended, 40 lb. or more of supplies being carried up on each journey. Well up on the ridge is a large projecting crag, with a knife-edge crest and a formidable drop below it. This is called Turner's Rock. Turner, one of the pioneers of climbing in the New Zealand mountains, is reputed to have stood on this particular rock and to have balanced an ice-axe on his nose while doing so! The Haast, or King Memorial, Hut is quite small but solid and well built—built, in fact, by Bert Barrie. There are bunks for twelve persons. At 4 o'clock, after we had been at the hut for about twenty minutes, clouds began to blow up from the south-east. Many of the higher peaks were soon cloud-capped and I was glad to put on some extra clothing. We were the only occupants of the hut that night. Soon after daybreak next morning, when I first opened the hut door and looked out, some clouds were drifting about the mountain tops, and more were gathered down in the valley, but there was as yet no sign of rain. At 8 o'clock we started out for the Glacier Dome. This was a very simple climb of a little over 2,000 feet, nearly all of it on snow. After walking up some broken crags immediately behind the hut we roped-up on the snowfield above them. The snow was very soft and inclined to slide off on the steeper slopes. Fortunately, perhaps, there was not much sunshine. The top of the Dome—8,047 feet—was reached at 9.25 A.M. Clouds now almost completely filled the Tasman valley, hiding most of it below 5,000 feet. The high tops however were clear. The view of Mount Cook and Mount Tasman was superb, both being comparatively close at hand. Our return to the hut was accelerated by two short sitting glissades. There was rough going all the way down the Haast Ridge, right down to the heaps of glacial wreckage at the bottom. Having taken little vigorous exercise for several months I was by now beginning to feel the effects of the past three strenuous days, and finding it difficult to keep up with my much younger companions. We were at the Ball Hut by 2.40 P.M., in good time for the tourist

bus. On our approach several keas flew up from a rocky outcrop near the hut. These birds are large grey-green parrots with murderous-looking beaks, and a scarlet patch under the wings which becomes conspicuous when they fly. They have a reputation for mischief. Any boots or cooking utensils left lying about are liable to disappear if keas are around! Shortly before we left a scud of rain blew across the valley. This brief shower was all I was destined to see of what is reputedly the worst weather in the world.

I decided before leaving home to make no plans and to leave everything "in the lap of the gods." Now that this journey is ended I can surely say that the gods were bountiful with their favours, and that during my short stay in the Southern Alps they gave me all, and more, than I could possibly have hoped for.

IN MEMORIAM

It is with deepest regret that we record the deaths of the following members and past-members:—

Dr George Hendry	.	.	.	1920 to 1952.
Dr J. Leith Hendry	.	.	.	1927 ,, 1953.
Mr Arthur J. McIntosh	.	.	.	1946 ,, 1953.
Mr R. P. Masson	.	.	.	1919 ,, 1953.
Mr R. M. Murdoch	.	.	.	1925 ,, 1953.
Mr James B. Nicol	.	.	.	1917 ,, 1953.
Mr William Stewart	.	.	.	1925 ,, 1953.