

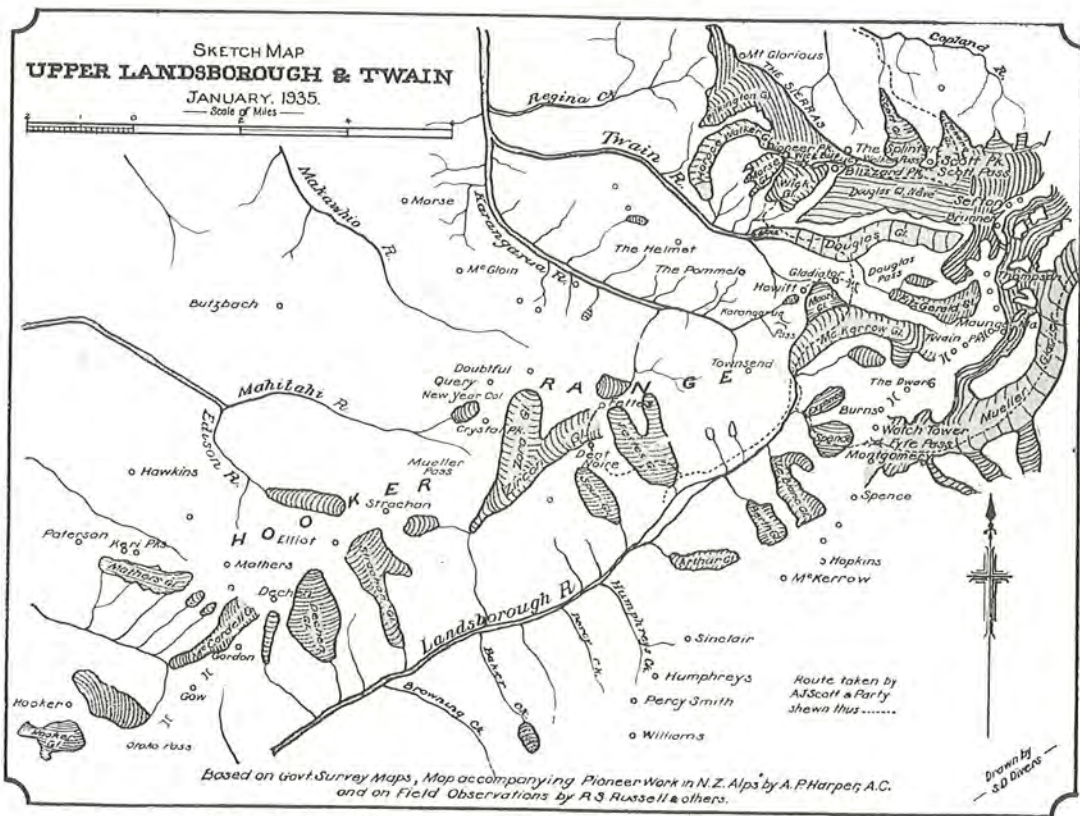
Peaks at the Head of the Mahitahi River and Zora Glacier.

By Marie B. Byles.

FOR six years from mountainless Australia I have been studying the New Zealand Alpine Journals, and one by one I have seen my chosen virgin peaks falling to this or that enterprising party. But the head of the Mahitahi Valley, Frank Alack assured me, was still uncontaminated by the foot of any climber. So that was all right, and as Marjorie Edgar-Jones had agreed to join the expedition, I felt nothing more was to be desired—except of course, the weather!

On the 29th of December we hopped off from Wehaka in Captain Mercer's orange dragon-fly aeroplane, and landed at Mahitahi. Through Frank's excellent organization, Harry Ayres, with Mr. Condon's assistance had, for some days previously, been packing stores out to base camp along the deer trail which Mr. Condon had blazed for us. Horses were practicable for the first five miles or so above Mr. Condon's farm, but after that everything had to be taken on our backs—that is, mainly Frank's and Harry's. Base camp was situated about a mile above the junction of the Edison River on the right bank of the Mahitahi. It consisted of a palatial cave whose only short-coming was a shocking propensity for hitting people on the head at unexpected times.

The West Coast ended its unprecedented drought as we hiked up the Mahitahi Valley, and the three days' rain that followed gave the cave an ample opportunity for exercising its arts. Then the New Year opened with a slight break in the clouds, and we made our way up to the Mueller Pass along deer trails. Anyone who has followed these knows that they have a habit of petering out or dividing in two or something, but that whatever happens to the trail the result is the same—you find yourself floundering ungracefully through scrub and rocks. However, we were thankful for small mercies, and definitely decided that the deer and their trails should be blessed by mountaineers. Anyhow, they enabled us to accomplish the remaining two miles of bush in about as many hours. Thence it was an easy walk up grass-slopes, up and down steep gullies, to the Mueller Pass, 4,509 feet high. This is a pass, not over the Main Divide, but over the Hooker Range, parallel with the Main Divide, and separating the



New names subject to approval of Honorary Geographic Board.

Landsborough, a tributary of the Haast, running north-east to south-west, from the coastal rivers running at right angles to it, the Karangaru, Makawhio, Mahitahi and Oroko, all of which flow to the north-west.

From the Mueller Pass we looked down on the Zora Glacier, and beyond it to what we provisionally called *Pyramid Peak*, a snowy cone most part of the year and visible a long way down the Mahitahi Valley. All the other peaks were swathed in mist. On the way back Frank located a rock for the high "bivvy" at the foot of an unmapped glacier, which we provisionally called *New Year Glacier*—all our names are provisional, for we are still trying to decide on suitable Maori names before making formal application to the Geographic Board. The glacier breaks down into a stream which joins the Mahitahi River about two miles from its source. The source of this river as shown on the map is wholly wrong, for it rises at the Mueller Pass and flows in an exceptionally straight line as far as the junction with the Edison. Apart from the New Year Glacier Creek it has before the Edison only one tributary flowing down a valley of any appreciable size, and this enters on the right bank just at our base camp; that is, about a mile above the Edison or about three and a-half miles down from the source. This might be called *Butzbach Creek*, since it rises below Mount Butzbach. The other tributaries are waterfalls flowing mainly from blind glaciers above. We counted about fourteen of them, and one, on the left bank above the camp, was exceptionally fine.

On the first fine day, 4th January, we packed ourselves and our gear up to the high "bivvy," subsequently, and for obvious reasons, named *Blow-fly Bivvy*—this name is *not provisional!* We built a substantial wall on the weather side, but, much to our delight, the wall was not immediately needed, for there followed two half-fine days. On the first, owing to the doubtful weather, we made a late start at 7.45 a.m., going up the New Year Glacier, thence to the col at the head, and thence again to the *neve* at the head of the Zora.

After six years I was again among the mountain peaks, and with a new realization of their meaning. Silent and serene they stood above the morning mists, but they revealed the stresses and strains of a living world that has grown through millions of years, and is still growing. In their glass the seasons of the earth's course round the sun seemed lost in the vaster seasons of geological time, where the winters are the glacial epochs that have coated the world in ice, and the summers are the dry, warm eras that have succeeded the great ice ages. "As for the man his days are as grass . . . the wind passeth over it and it is gone and the place thereof shall know it no more." And that is the secret of the serenity of the mountains. For what are all the petty cares

of mortal life, or mortal life itself when reflected in their mirror. In the next geological age man and his troubles will be as if they had never been. Small wonder, then, is the peace that broods over the ancient hills, and the easing of the heart that is found in high places.

Both the New Year and the Zora Glacier were split by huge schrunds, and we had some interesting snow and ice-climbing. We made for the peak at the head of the Zora, since, as far as could be seen through the mist, this appeared to be the highest. We climbed two summits close together, built a cairn on the highest, and with great satisfaction put the first virgin peak in our rucksacks. Everything was still swathed in mist, and we got only tantalizing glimpses down into the Makawhio Valley. Then we attempted to climb an *arête* of thin mica-schist that looked no thicker than cardboard, and time being limited, we gave up the attempt. Frank is certain that our peak is higher than the *arête*, but Marjorie and I are not quite so sure. Frank, however, would be the better judge.

At the time of climbing these peaks we thought that they were unnamed, but when we subsequently climbed Mount Butzbach we came to the conclusion that these peaks at the head of the Zora are the Mount Query and Doubtful placed on the map about a mile north-west of their true position. Anyhow, the peaks we climbed are connected with Mount Butzbach only by a long, serrated, rocky ridge on which are no peaks at all, let alone any that would correspond to the Mounts Query and Doubtful on the map. From the Mahitahi Valley our peaks appear as great, slabby rocks which would certainly be noticed by the cartographer, while almost equally certainly he would not realize that on the other side they support the Zora Glacier like the fingers of a hand; in fact, without climbing up to see, he would not realize that they had any connection with the Zora at all. This would easily explain why they are marked so far west along the Banock Brae Range, and also why they are called Mounts Query and Doubtful. Apparently thus they will remain until the country is surveyed!

The next day was a little more promising, and we set out at 3 a.m. for Fettes Peak. We dropped down from the Mueller Pass to the Zora Glacier, which lies about a thousand feet below it, and up the gully almost immediately opposite. Thence up the snow between Pyramid Peak and the peak intermediate between it and Fettes. It was easy going, and we did not rope till we reached the col. Thence we cut straight over the Intermediate Peak, and mainly by easy snow-slopes, but in mist and a bitter wind, to the little rock *arête* leading to the summit of Fettes. Going up the snow-slopes we saw footprints, and realized that Fettes was no longer an unscathed virgin. On the

top we found the expected cairn, and in it a card showing we had missed the peak by two days only. It was rather like Scott arriving at the South Pole to find that Amundsen had arrived there first, only this time it was "Scott" who got in first, and doubtless Mr. A. J. Scott will tell of their ascent, from the opposite side, in another article. We could not very well grudge them the victory, especially as one member of their party was an old boy of Fettes College, Edinburgh, and had reverently laid his college hatband as an offering to the mountain gods.

The mist continued to hang over everything, and though we posed in uncomfortable positions for a long time with the finger on the camera, we eventually gave it up in despair, and came down, lunching on the way in a schrund which was the only spot we could find sheltered from the piercing wind and driving mist. Then we climbed the intermediate peak, observing our friends' nailmarks there also, and finally Pyramid Peak; that anyhow was unclimbed, and though it cannot be much above 7,000 feet, it is the most conspicuous peak of the lot, so we built our cairn and put it in the rucksack along with the other virgins. I noticed that while Fettes and Pyramid Peak are composed of the West Coast mica-schist, the intermediate peak is composed partly of greywacke streaked with quartz, the rock common to the eastern mountains. It had been a fifteen-hour day, and when we got back we had to face the herculean task of undoing the ill-deeds done by blowflies in their efforts to propagate their species *inside* our securely fastened-up rucksacks.

For the next three days it "rained like hell!" The alpine tent and fly were fastened up by ice-axes along the mouth of the cave, and Harry's shirt, which he had unwittingly hung up to dry, was mercilessly commissioned to stop up the remaining hole. All spare paper and grass were used to stop up holes in the wall, and in his devotion to the cause it subsequently transpired that Frank had even donated his own safety razor, to say nothing of Marjorie's puttees and Harry's socks! And there we lay like sardines while the rain-curtains swept up the valley at the rate of an express train and the fury of a host of demons. On the fourth day there was a lull, and after lunch we went up by the New Year Glacier to traverse the peak lying between New Year Col and the Mueller Pass. We wish to call it *Crystal Peak* on account of the large quantities of quartz crystals in veins in the schists, although as a matter of fact we found quantities of crystals everywhere, and would have had no difficulty in filling our rucksacks had we nothing else to carry. It was a pleasant rock climb for Marjorie and I who could cling safely to the frail, friable schist, but not quite so pleasant for the heavier men. Altogether it was a perfect afternoon, and to it we owe many of our photos as well as further

knowledge of the geography of the region. The Zora Glacier, we found, is a twin glacier fed by two *neve* fields; the larger one at the head flows from Mounts Query and Doubtful, but another comes down from the slopes of Fettes. They meet to form the perfect medial moraine that runs down the middle of the Zora proper.

Then came a perfect day. We left at 4 a.m. for Strachan, the mecca of the expedition, going up via the Mueller Pass; then south west up the grass and shingle slopes, and thence up the Strachan Glacier. Taking in a snow peak to the south and cutting back over our steps, we finally stood on the summit of Mount Strachan (8,559 feet) at 9.15 a.m. It was the one perfect day we had had, and it was the finest unclimbed peak of this region, and both were matched by a peerless view. Tier upon tier the serrated ridges rose up one above the other until they culminated in the crowned head of Mount Cook. Never did we realize in the same way how Cook towers above everything, queen and goddess of the mountains, unchallenged and supreme. To the west the blue ocean broke in white breakers on the shore; to the south lay a lovely blue lake; while at our feet the long Landsborough Valley meandered down towards the Haast.

The Strachan Glacier was very much crevassed, and the negotiation of the schrunds on the way up had been by no means easy. Now going down in the full glare of the mid-day sun, they were no easier. It will live in my memory as the hottest, whitest and most burning glacier I have ever known, the sort Geoffrey Winthrop Young had in mind when he wrote that poem about plunging into a glacier-pool afterwards, only here there was no glacier pool! We followed the long, burning day by trekking down from Blow Fly Bivvy to base camp—with *all* our gear. Frank and Harry must have shouldered 90 lbs. each.

Next day we started for Butzbach, which lies above base camp, going up by the dry gully coming down on the right bank of Butzbach Creek a little above the camp, and thence taking to the grass-slopes. But rain drove us back before we reached the glacier. We changed the route the following day to the baby glacier which forms the source of the Butzbach Creek. This valley is perhaps a mile long and makes a good route for climbing to the top of the pass in the early morning. Later on it becomes an equally good chute for the stones! From the col we took to the glacier on the Makawhio side of Butzbach, a glacier not shown on the map. It took us nearly to the rocky top of the mountain, where we arrived just in time before the morning clouds grew to life in the valleys and blotted out the view of Cook and Tasman, the serrated ridges that form the head of the Makawhio, and the unglaciated peaks of Mounts Kinhi and Herman with the blue ocean beyond them. We traversed Mount Butzbach

MT. FETTES AND ZIRCON GLACIER, FROM MT. STRACHAN

Photo: Miss M. Byles.



Tasman
Cook
Douglas
Glacier
Sefton
Fettes
Dent
Noire
McKerrow

coming down by the rock *arête* and joining the glacier again only just before the col.

The next day—the second really perfect day—we packed down to Condon's farm. We crossed the river once over and back, and as a matter of fact even this crossing could be avoided by a short stretch of scrub-walking. This is the great advantage of the Mahitahi over the Oroko; you cannot be cut off from civilization by flooded rivers and absence of horses. The walk took us 1½ hours with packs most of the way, and we took it very easily for the last five miles or so, so that we could have done it in less had it been necessary.

After a solid week of rain we made a bid for the Oroko and Mount Dechen. It ended in Frank and Harry getting all but marooned in a valley where you camp on the south bank crossing the Paringa River on the way. If the rivers rise you cannot cross to the north, nor can you get out by the south; and you are helpless without horses even in ordinary weather in the summer. We are more than indebted to Mr. Jack Condon who, at considerable risk, went up with horses for Frank and Harry, who had gone in advance, and brought them down before the second week of rain commenced.

Looking back on the expedition, I feel that we climbed all that was possible in the very limited amount of fine weather Nature gave us, and the fact that we did this was due to Frank Alack's admirable organization of the whole expedition, though of course neither can we forget how Harry Ayres cheerfully bore the drudgery of packing, often on his own, often over the same country time and again, and generally in the rain!