

The ‘Spirit of the Hills’: Mountaineering in Northwest Otago, New Zealand, 1882–1940.

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Abstract

A defined geographical region and time period is used to examine the growing popularity of mountaineering in relation to its social and cultural context. The study draws on oral histories, diaries, autobiographies, articles and archival material from mountaineers, and blends them with insights from geography, sociology, art history, literary criticism and cultural history.

The findings of the study demonstrate that early mountaineering in New Zealand reflected the legacy of Victorian values in relation to the landscape, in combination with a 'pioneering' spirit and a growing sense of a distinctive colonial character. The First World War marked a watershed, followed by an inter-war 'boom' in mountaineering. This growing enthusiasm can be interpreted as a reaction against the dislocation and devastation of the war and the growing rationalization of modern society. It was also part of the development of a sense of belonging to the landscape, and an exploration of what it meant to be a New Zealander.

The study concludes that mountaineering is expressive of a relationship between people and landscapes, and that within this context, its historical development reflects wider social and cultural forces.

Key words: mountaineering, history, New Zealand, colonialism, landscape, identity.

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Introduction

The advent of mountaineering as recreation is a relatively recent phenomenon. While people have ventured into mountainous regions for a long time, their purposes have been largely practical: to get where they were going; to further the interests of science; or to find resources which would bring them wealth. But as Lunn (1957: 22) points out, the 'essence of sport is the invention of an artificial problem for the fun of solving it'. There is little that is practical about it, in a conventional sense.

The Scientific Revolution, however, and the rise of Romanticism, created an atmosphere in which it was possible for people to become interested in climbing mountains for purely sporting or recreational reasons. To an eighteenth century observer, mountains were sadly incongruous with the rest of nature, and in popular mythology they were the lairs of dragons and the haunts of devils. That they drastically diminished humans by their immense size contributed to what has been described as a 'mountain gloom' which prevailed in Europe at this time (Rebuffat 1970: 13). Subsequent advances in scientific thought, however, led to the gradual erosion of much of the superstition and fear associated with mountains. Meanwhile, the Romantic tradition in art and literature emerged to instill the perception of mountains with a spirituality which has become the essence of many present day attitudes towards wilderness landscapes.

Throughout the eighteenth century a handful of individuals began to climb in the European Alps. By 1850 a number of major first ascents had been made by continental mountaineers, but from this time the English are credited with organizing

mountaineering as a sport (Lunn 1957). It was they who founded the first mountaineering club, the Alpine Club in 1857, and the first mountaineering journal that has survived till the present day. The following two decades, which were dominated by the achievements of the English, are known as the Golden Age of mountaineering in Europe. By 1880, all the major peaks had been climbed in the Alps, and the English and their continental guides had developed climbing technique and accumulated experience enough to launch expeditions to climb mountains in other parts of the world, including New Zealand (Temple 1969).

A localized case study

This case study traces the development of mountaineering within one geographical region and a defined time period: northwest Otago in the South Island of New Zealand between 1882 and 1940. The mountains, the valleys and the passes are a crucial backdrop to this story which is set in the districts surrounding Mount Aspiring and Mount Earnslaw - from the Matukituki valley in the east to the Olivine ice plateau in the west, and the Rees and Dart valleys at the head of lake Wakatipu in the south. The most striking feature in the history of mountaineering in northwest Otago is that which struggled for existence during the nineteenth century, caught hold after the first world war, and flourished during the lean and sombre years of the Great Depression.

Mountaineering in New Zealand began tentatively in the nineteenth century, born out of a Victorian tradition and imbued with the colonial pioneering spirit. It was recognized at an early stage that its form in the Dominion would be distinctive from 'Home', and that its pursuit could be instrumental in forming and strengthening the character of the young colonials. However, it was not until the inter-war period, with its prevailing sense of disillusionment and restlessness, that climbing mountains took hold of the aspirations of a generation of young New Zealanders (Leader 1988; Powell 1989).

Between the first and second World Wars, in the context of social dislocation and economic hardship, young men and women in Otago were drawn to mountain environments for an experience which diverted them from, and in a sense gave

meaning to, the world and time that they were living through. It was also a time increasingly characterized by the 'more rigid structures, impersonal forces, and sprawling cities' of the historical momentum of rationalization and bureaucracy (Olssen 1981: 278). To this generation, the fact that in northwest Otago they could explore 'their' mountains and that therein they discovered a sense of belonging and intimacy with their environment, illustrates the inter-relationship between this story and the thread of a vague searching for national identity that runs through the history of New Zealand and quickens during the 1930s. It was an intensification of the need to assert that New Zealand was 'god's own country', and yet to see this country through their own eyes. Similarly, developments within the cultural mediums of art and literature at this time reveal the ways in which they are linked with mountaineering as expressions of the search for identity and belonging in the psyches of the participants, and of the cultures which they represent.

Pioneer beginnings and Victorian influences, 1882-1914

The history of people and mountains in New Zealand in the late nineteenth century is a combination of the frontier tradition and the European traditions of the romantics, science and exploration. Although many appreciated the landscape as wild and romantic, most settled in the low lands and shared the desire to tame and domesticate their environment. The pioneering experience was marked by the harshness of clearing the land and making it productive (McNaughton 1986: 6-7), and the mountainous regions of New Zealand represented a frontier that challenged resourcefulness (Hewitt and Davidson 1954). As squatters moved towards the mountains to claim large tracts of land for sheep farming, they were hastily followed by government surveyors engaged in the task of exploring and mapping this vast wilderness. In search of a trade route from east to west, Dr James Hector of the Geological Survey and two companions crossed the main divide in 1863 by venturing up the west Matukituki and crossing the high col into the Waipara branch of the Arawata, which leads to the Tasman sea. In what has been described as the first real alpine adventure in New Zealand, the intrepid three used ice-axe and rope to traverse the deep crevasses of the Bonar glacier (McClymont 1940: 138).

Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, people employed by the government ventured into the mountain wilderness of the South Island. In many cases, particularly in the rugged west coast regions, they endured extreme hardships, surviving in the bush for weeks at a time, and traversing alpine passes and glaciers no more adequately equipped than with 'colonial ingenuity' (McClymont 1940). Those who tackled the mountains as a frontier 'blazed the trail' for the second wave of mountain visitors, for whom the mountains offered a very different range of experiences and objectives. Among them came the intrepid Victorian globetrotter, and the enthusiastic scientist, 'a two legged beast, wearing green spectacles, and carrying a hammer and bag' (Pascoe 1957: 75).

The inspiration for mountaineering in New Zealand came from English mountaineers, and began very much influenced by the English tradition (Ross 1914: 14). This tradition - inspired by the curiosity of scientific discovery, the imperialism of exploration and the experience of the sublime - is exemplified in the words of the Reverend William Spotswood Green, a member of the English Alpine Club, who came to New Zealand in 1882 to make the first attempt to scale Mount Cook:

... I hold that the essence of all true sport consists in the pleasurable feelings experienced when natural difficulties, whatever they may be, are overcome by skill. The greater the difficulty the greater the adventure, and the greater the pleasure in conquering it ... pleasure is experienced by the men, who, setting themselves to face the difficulties of Arctic travel, triumph over those difficulties amidst the sublime surroundings of vast polar wastes. Similar difficulties are encountered and overcome by skill in ascending the higher peaks of the world's great mountain chains, where again the pleasurable feelings are increased by the buoyant air, invigorating exercise, and the grandeur of the natural scenery ... This desire to overcome difficulty is the real inherent power of the dominant races of mankind (Green 1883: 2-3).

Though unsuccessful on Mount Cook, Green was in his element in the New Zealand mountains and his romantic spirit took full reign:

... Alone amongst these lovely mountains; alone, with the purity and beauty which seemed quite removed from all taint of the evil and sorrow said to hang about all earthly things ... if any spot can be pure and undefiled, what more likely to be so than this shining world of spotless snow? Though all men do not analyse the charm of Alpine travel, I feel convinced that it lies to a great degree in the highest joy of our higher nature; by being brought out of the world for once in our lives, and face to face with absolute sublimity ... I can't but think that a visit to one of these holy places of nature must ... make us less capable of falling into the narrowness of mind, from which half the sins of the world take their rise (Green 1883: 217-218).

Malcolm Ross of Dunedin digested Green's stirring narrative The High Alps of New Zealand or A Trip to the Glaciers of the Antipodes with an Ascent of Mount Cook (1883), and being young and fit, had his appetite whetted for 'mountain adventure'. In 1885 he headed for Mt Earnslaw on an expedition which was characteristic of the 'pluck and daring', colonial ingenuity and self-reliance which typified the early exploits of New Zealand's homebred mountaineers (Ross 1892). Ice axes were improvised from manuka saplings and the blades of sheep shears, while horseshoe nails provided extra friction for his boots (Gilkison 1957: 32). Ross's expedition triggered a number of attempts on Mount Earnslaw, which was finally climbed in 1890 by one of the original expedition members, a young local shepherd and tourist guide called Harry Birley.

Birley's feat was reported in the Otago Witness in an account which sensationalized the danger of the exploit and praised the bravery and daring thus displayed. By his first ascent, Birley extended not only the bounds of the physically possible, but also the bounds of knowledge, recording the physical aspects of the summit, the flora and fauna upon it, and its vantage point for studying the geography of the unknown country beyond (Gilkison 1957). In this way Birley echoes distinctly Victorian preoccupations, and by erecting a cairn on the summit, he left not only proof of his ascent, but also marked the advance of man further into this remote wilderness.

Soon after, in 1891, the formation of the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC) marked an important stage in the development of mountaineering in New Zealand by formalizing the association of a dispersed and loosely connected group of enthusiasts 'who for sundry reasons love the mountains and love to climb them and explore their fastnesses' (Mannering 1892: 8). With this new found identity they were able to express the both common and varied - though characteristically nineteenth century - interests and aspirations which comprised their love of mountains. Also instilled in the objectives of the club was a deep sense that its main purpose was to foster enthusiasm for mountains and mountaineering among the public in general.

The NAZC was, however, handicapped in its early years by limited numbers and the 'lack of interest taken in the sport by the public and athletic men in general' (Mannering 1892a: 3). Nevertheless, as the first organization of New Zealand mountaineers it played the protagonist's role in establishing and moulding their identity. The club's journal provided an important forum for the expression of the codes and principles of mountaineering, and for recording mountaineering achievements and defining the social meaning of climbing mountains for its nineteenth-century participants, in a New Zealand context.

While the club was modelled on the London Alpine Club and emulated this British legacy, it quickly recognised and prided itself that the unique New Zealand conditions 'will always tend to develop a different type of climber'. It was believed to be a point in favour of the New Zealanders '- that they, being without guides, are forced to learn and do many things for themselves which the English climber leaves to his guide and never learns' (Mannering 1892: 13). Hence the New Zealand climbers would be more hardy and self-sufficient in the colonial tradition. With the roots of a New Zealand mountaineering tradition firmly embedded in the urge for exploration, the young New Zealanders beheld a landscape with seemingly endless opportunities 'to test the mettle of our young Club' (Mannering 1892: 12).

Ross (1892: 36) predicted that as 'Otago youths are hardy and fond of adventure ... Alpine climbing ... will ere long have a lusty existence, and not be without some influence in framing the character of Southern New Zealanders'. In his autobiography,

A Climber in New Zealand, Ross reflected other predominant contemporary images of the 'age of conquest' in which those who came 'to lay the foundations of a new and sturdy nation have ventured into the heart of the Southern Alps to wrest the secrets of the higher snows', displaying great courage, endurance and resourcefulness (Ross 1914: 12-13).

The May 1894 issue of the New Zealand Alpine Journal (NZAJ) described the season just passed as witness of a boom in mountaineering in the New Zealand Alps and the Club boasted that it was flourishing financially and otherwise. A spate of activity in the Tasman district was spurred on by the successful first ascent of Mount Cook on Christmas day 1894 by the New Zealanders Jack Clarke, George Graham, and Tom Fyfe. By 1896 however, the NZAC was no longer functioning. The small amount of mountaineering activity in Otago during this period, while providing a beginning, did not prove sufficient to sustain a growing interest in climbing the mountains in the region.

Immediately prior to the outbreak of war there was a resurgence of interest among a handful of people, including Captain Bernard Head who made the first ascent of Mount Aspiring in 1910 with guides Alex Graham and Jack Clarke (Gilkison 1951). Head returned in December 1911 to the Dart glacier, and again in January 1914, meeting up with H. F. Wright and party for a number of first ascents in the Dart valley. It was Head's intention to return to the area, but he lost his life at Gallipoli during the First World War. A party led by the experienced and well-travelled Samuel Turner made the second ascent of Mount Aspiring in 1913. At the outset of the expedition Turner learned that his three companions had never been on an ice slope before. He had 'never dreamt that three men without previous experience would tackle such a formidable peak, but this is the resourceful stuff New Zealanders are made of – they will have a shot at anything, no matter how difficult of success or certain of failure' (Turner 1922: 18). An effort was made to revive the NZAC in 1914, but this initiative was stalled by the onset of war.

Dislocation and the search for belonging, 1914-1939

The casualties of the Great War can be numbered by more than the bodies of young men and women. Among the deaths were many of the benchmarks of Victorian society:

... the Great War took place in what was, compared with ours, a static world, where the values appeared stable and where the meanings of abstractions seemed permanent and reliable. Everyone knew what Glory was, and what Honor meant (Fussell 1975: 21).

The tragic ironies of that war shattered the very foundations of these allusions. Such ideals as British sportsmanship and the spirit of 'playing the game', could not survive the meaningless death of millions. Evidence of the loss can be found in the language. The 'high' diction of the archetypal Victorian gentleman now failed on his lips. To be plucky (cheerfully brave), or gallant (earnestly brave), to be manly (not to complain) and to conquer (win) the heavens (sky), could no longer apply to the world that emerged from the embers of this war. It has been said that the innocent army gained full knowledge of good and evil at the battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916. In one day 110,000 walked wave by wave into German machine gun fire in an unimaginative plan, totally lacking any element of surprise, which was thought not particularly 'sporting' (Fussell 1975). For the New Zealanders, Gallipoli has come to represent this loss of innocence.

The New Zealanders reacted to the war 'to end all wars' with an intense patriotism. At the same time the war required 'a demanding effort on the imagination to relate such distant events with the experience of life as it was lived in New Zealand' (Brown 1975: 47). Thus, while the war asserted loyalty to the Empire, it also highlighted more sharply those things that made New Zealand distinctive. This was a new impetus to the search for national characteristics, which had been dogged by the basic contradiction between an imported collective identity, and an individual sense of identity shaped by growing up in a particular environment.

While the horrors of the war had shattered all the old standards and certainties, the years between the two wars were equally 'a period of profound disorder and disaster'

and 'something of a watershed in history' as far as the emergence of a sense of place for New Zealanders was concerned (Brown 1975: 3). In the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the post-war period, and during the devastation of the Depression, those who had for so long looked out to the other side of the world, began to look more closely at themselves, to assess and define what it was on these small southern islands that was worthy of such human sacrifice. During the thirties this developed into a questioning of the validity of the dependence upon Britain for leadership and guidance in all things. In the political sphere there was a closer inspection of the nature and validity of the 'social laboratory'. In the cultural scene it was an effort to discard all that was British and Victorian, and to search the New Zealand consciousness for an identity that could be expressed in its place.

In relation to art and literature, the search materialized in an effort to accept and value the distinctiveness of the New Zealand landscape. While New Zealand landscape painting had from the beginning been greatly conditioned by the English tradition of topographical drawing and water-colour, by the end of the 1800s there was a feeling that 'In New Zealand we have so far only the impress of our local surroundings'. The need to revitalize landscape painting was recognized, so as to capture the colour, light and atmosphere that expressed something individual to New Zealand (Brown 1975: 35-37). This search for cultural identity, which could never be realized as long as the desire remained to transplant on to the local environment the British landscape tradition, was finally given the necessary impetus by the mounting disillusionment of the inter-war period. As this reached its climax during the social tragedy of the thirties, there emerged a 'prevailing interest in the depiction of the landscape, and the quest for some sort of national identity, in subject if not in style' (Brown 1975: 3). The new style that evolved was 'hard and clear, the colours are in flat planes, and the effect is of seeing the country through a gem-like atmosphere'. But there was also a new romantic standpoint, '- an insistence on the isolation and brooding loneliness of the hills' (Brown 1975: 65).

Simultaneously, writers were exploring the unequal and dominating relationship that the colonials had assumed with the land, the inevitable alienation that this hostility had caused, and the resulting inability to come to terms with the New Zealand

landscape. Frank Sargeson and Roderick Finlayson recognized in their writing 'with some guilt and sorrow, their ancestors' determination to possess and exploit the land'. In this recognition there was a longing to feel native to the land, and a conscious rejection of England as 'motherland'. Many writers understood that no amount of taming or conquest of the landscape could make a land belong to a people (McNaughton 1986: 8-9). Gradually writers began to explore the distinctive values of the landscape in the same way as painters did, romanticizing it in a different way. Characters in fiction looked to the natural world for spiritual values, and it became a sanctuary from the hostile urban-suburban environment (McNaughton 1986: 9-10).

In the same atmosphere that was bringing about profound changes in literature and art, increasing numbers of people throughout the country began to look to the mountains for recreation and adventure. Several practical advances influenced this. By the 1920s the craze of the automobile gave people unprecedented mobility. As roads penetrated further into the wilderness, servicing farmers and opening up scenic resorts, the distances between people and mountains were 'shortened'. In response to the social turmoil of the Depression years, the government was increasingly willing to assist community organizations in the active encouragement of outdoor recreation. A growing recognition of the value of recreation, and the role of the state in promoting it, culminated in the Physical Welfare and Recreation Act, passed by the Labour Government in 1937. The resulting Physical Welfare branch of the Internal Affairs Department attached 'considerable importance to the place of tramping trips in the back country in its programme of physical welfare and recreation. Such trips are cheap and companionable and achieve splendid results in ensuring wholesome and healthy activity' (Parry 1940).

But rather than creating a trend, the government was catching on to one, in recognition of its value for restoring public morale in the wake of the Depression and the onset of a second war. Already a wave of young tramping, skiing and climbing clubs had sprouted up around the country in the inter-war period, and these clubs in turn gave impetus to the development of the mountains as an area for recreation as they organized the building of huts, the cutting of tracks, and the encouragement of participation on a mass scale. A tramping club was formed in Dunedin in 1923, and

within a year boasted 157 members. Each weekend groups of up to 50 or 60 would converge upon the hills surrounding Dunedin. An extract from the club magazine Outdoors takes a retrospective look at the spirit of the time and place:

– sunrise from Ben Dhoran, moonlight on the harbour, clear views from mountain tops, here and there a misty day with rocks and trees looming immense and weird through the fog, splashing through the sea on the beaches, or wading knee deep in moss and fern under the glorious New Zealand foliage; and always a merry throng, full of happiness and good nature, pressing on through these wonderful natural beauties ... and, in the long holidays, far off mountains have been scaled and distant places have been visited. We are no longer lonely trampers, for the cult is now fashionable, and, for one walker we used to meet on the hilltops, there are now probably five. Health and pleasure and good-fellowship have been our reward (Gilkison 1934: 2).

This was, in a sense, the ‘physical’ response to the need to feel a kinship with the landscape and to explore its distinctive characteristics, which was simultaneously being expressed in art and literature. It gave new meaning to the old romantic zeal for mountains, and the Victorian urge to explore and conquer their fastnesses. For those that survived the ‘shell-shock’ of the Great War and returned, the one thing that remained intact in their minds was the ideal that New Zealand was ‘god’s own’ and far removed from the smoldering battlefields of Europe. But submerging oneself in the mountains was not merely escapism from an undermined and shattered Victorian world. The exploration of the Otago Alps during the inter-war period by the young ‘natives’ of Otago reflected a desire to come to terms with their own ‘nativeness’ and to discover the ‘real’ New Zealand of their dreams and aspirations.

By the end of the 1920s the groundwork had been laid for the extensive exploration and mountaineering activity of the thirties. A nucleus of enthusiastic mountaineers had become established, with their base in Dunedin, and had dedicated themselves to the development of mountaineering in the mountains of their own province. Consequently, when the NZAC came back into action in 1921, the focus of mountaineering in New Zealand had shifted from Canterbury and the Mount Cook

region, to Otago. Prominent club member Arthur P. Harper visited the Mount Cook district in 1926 to discover why the area which was the most developed for mountaineering, with a small group of professional guides and maintained huts and tracks, should be suffering such neglect. His conclusion was that the Hermitage Hotel at Mount Cook was costly, and the management tended to encourage social activities rather than mountain climbing. As Harper noted, the new generation of mountaineers had 'very limited holidays and purses' and in their recreation desired to 'shake off many of the conventionalities of modern society' (Harper 1926).

From the late nineteenth century till 1940 all the features of a modern and rational society were growing in force as New Zealand moved from a pre-industrial to an industrial state. The government reacted with increased bureaucracy as organization, systemization and specialization became essential to ensure efficiency in all spheres. Rapid urbanization and deepening polarization and social control accompanied these developments. Towns and cities grew in size and number, and by the mid-1920s town planning was well established to facilitate the centralization and suburbanization of more dense urban populations (Olssen 1981: 253). Rationalization even appeared on the rugby field, as sports too were organized, rigid rules enforced, and emphasis placed upon the determination of winners and losers. New Zealand was thus losing much of the personal and informal flavour that had characterized it as a pioneering society. During the Depression 'the problems posed by continuing social change were intensified by economic dislocation, social distress, and political disorder', and a struggle intensified in New Zealand society 'to find security and order in a world transformed around them' (Olssen 1981: 272).

This climate strengthened the appeal of mountaineering, as the mountains were the 'last frontier' in which the pioneering spirit could be played out. It was a simple and informal environment where character, companionship and physical endurance mattered most. There, in the midst of awe-inspiring scenery, climbers looked out over vast expanses of land untouched by the hand of civilization, and devoid of such concepts as 'economics' or 'politics'. The challenge of climbing was absorbing. Skills and knowledge were matched against obstacles; the rewards were immediate and gratifying. Even in failure there was close companionship; and the experience of life

‘on the raw edge’, stripped of complexities and contradictions. Apart from the basic equipment, the mountaineer's most vital resources were their ‘kiwi ingenuity’, their friendships, easy-going outlooks, and an appetite for adventure.

For mountaineering in Otago, the Depression was a time of unprecedented activity and development. A major catalyst of the thirties was the formation of the Otago section of the NZAC, and between 1930 and 1940 the club's southern membership grew steadily from 11 to 185. The club not only nurtured young mountaineers, but also took upon itself the task of developing further the recreational potential of the Otago Alps, and educating the public about the enormous value of this resource. An evening of public entertainment, including a cinema film and slides, during the winter of 1931 in Dunedin saw the attendance of nine hundred people and raised 66 pounds for a long dreamt-of climbing hut in the west Matukituki valley of the Aspiring district. The public shows became an annual event and continued to raise revenue for the club's activities.

During August 1935, ‘Otago's Alpine Charms’ ran for two nights in the Dunedin town hall concert chamber. The programme included three illustrated lectures, two dance presentations, and various addresses. An article in the Otago Daily Times Times (14 August 1935: 12) preceding the occasion praised the organizers for publicizing the ‘rich heritage’ that Otago possessed in her western mountains, as ‘few realize the scenic grandeur, the opportunities for healthful, vigorous alpine sport, or the potential commercial advantages they offer’. In this domain the mountaineer was the pioneer, leading the way in the desire to ‘know his own country’. Also expressed were social ideals close to the hearts of New Zealanders, which were brought into prominence during the Depression reconstruction. It was noted that because of the opening up of roads and the facilities being provided by the NZAC, ‘for a moderate cost any person has the opportunity of enjoying a healthful and enjoyable outdoor diversion which in older countries is more the privilege of the wealthy’.

This support for the development of the Otago Alps for mountain recreation illustrates the way in which the mountains had the power to capture the imagination of the public. Even for those who did not aspire to climb them, they still provided a vehicle

of escape from thoughts of mundane reality into an entrancing world of adventure and sublime scenery. The hundreds that were drawn to the annual reviews bear witness to this, as does the way in which the newspapers of the day followed the exploits of climbers with great interest.

Over the Christmas season of 1931-1932, the Otago section of the NZAC held a climbing camp in the Rees valley, at which older experienced club members gave up their personal objectives for the season, and focussed on instructing younger members. Graduates of this camp went on to spend a succession of ten-day summer and Easter holidays throughout the 1930s sweating up valleys beneath weighty packs, and climbing the remaining unclimbed peaks of the region. While this group of young mountaineers was notorious for their hardiness, the records of their exploits are filled with light-heartedness and good-humour:

A back view of us must have looked very much like 3 packs with a pair of legs at the bottom. A front view after the first 10 minutes must have looked like a river of sweat and three noses close to the ground (Edwards 1932: 1).

They began with one ice axe between them, and cutting sticks out of the bush made up the deficit. Gradually they progressed, replaced their sugar bag packs, and each sported an ice axe of the vintage that was so long, that one had to be a 'he-man' to swing it. With finances pooled, an old Hudson truck was purchased for about 35 pounds, but it was hard on tyres and four spares generally had to be carried (Edwards 1988). Though they may have looked like a few likely lads from Dunedin, newspaper articles from the Clutha Leader, to the New Zealand Railways Magazine and the Southland News followed the tales of their formidable list of first ascents and other accomplishments.

While most Otago section members (osonzacs) eventually gravitated further afield to new challenges in areas such as Mount Cook, the 'spirit of the osonzacs' gave them an identity that was inextricably rooted in the mountains of Otago. For Russell Edwards, nowhere could compare with this area for the combination of rivers, bush and high mountains (Edwards 1988). When Scott Gilkison revisited the area he

realized as never before 'just how beautiful are the southern valleys, and how barren and unfriendly in comparison are the great moraines and ice-slopes of the Tasman' (Gilkison 1940: 23). During the second world war the 'osonzac anthem' and other tunes written by members throughout the thirties, were published in a booklet to ensure the preservation of the legends, to maintain the bonds between the members who were separated by the hostilities, and to revive for them the 'spirit of the hills'. This form of 'mountain poetry' was stripped of romantic allusions, but abounding with humour and the pleasure of familiar friends and surroundings.

The club camp of Christmas 1939 was a fitting finale to this era of mountaineering in Otago. The news of the war interrupted the preparations, but did not ultimately deter the 107 climbers who converged upon the west Matukituki from all over New Zealand and as far a field as Australia. The week, during which 'war, politics, or other jarring notes were completely barred as topics of general conversation', saw approximately fifty ascents (Sim 1940: 157). If a sense of history is a necessary ingredient for the feeling of identity and belonging, then the camp was not lacking in this. A. P. Harper, one of the last remaining founding members of the NZAC, was in attendance at the age of seventy-five, and made a much celebrated climb to Hector's col. Club president Roland Ellis described the atmosphere of the camp:

Somehow all seemed imbued with the right spirit and ideals ... Everyone wanted to help everyone else. I saw many little but extremely thoughtful acts around the Camp, saw and heard tell of acts of self-denial by some so that others could share in the joys to a greater extent (quoted in Sim 1940: 165-166).

J. T. Crozier also wrote:

Within the shadow of Aspiring hopes were revived and ideals created which surely fortified the soul for the task ahead. To each was vouchsafed that rich experience of sharing the joy of 'pure mountains breathing space' in the company of a friend (quoted in Sim 1940: 166).

Shortly before his death in 1938, H. F. Wright wrote about an expedition in the Otago mountains, and similarly expressed a powerful symbolism held in his memories of the mountains:

Sometimes, watching the evening sun in Auckland sinking in a ball of fire over the Waitakeres, thoughts of the south come back in a rush of splendour. On such nights, do not the memories, all the fair memories of by-gone days, rise clear and fresh from the mists of the distant past and sweep by on a long undulating train, sunlit and alluring, until they lose themselves in the melting western glow, and all that is odious, all that is mean, lies behind in the dark seas of oblivion (quoted in J.F.R. 1939: 121).

My final illustration shows the historical transformation of our perception of the experience of life and place, and the way in which this change is evident in activities that express our culture, such as mountaineering. When Gilkison (1940: 112) wrote about his experiences as an osonzac, his words echoed the spirit of the Victorian mountaineer. But while the Victorians had focused on factual details of flora, fauna and geological features, adding interest with descriptions of ‘high adventure’, daring deeds met in a ‘sporting’ spirit, and a goodly dose of the sublime and heavenly, Gilkison explained the meaning of climbing for him and his companions with a different tone:

I go to the hills because I like going to the hills – and having gone there I climb because I want to. And after many years of acquaintance I can look on the hills as friends. Amongst the high hills I have lived many of my happiest, most memorable, most tragic, and most glorious days. We have found the hills shy and retiring sometimes; obstinate occasionally, discouraging, even revengeful; and often, by contrast, delightfully gracious and welcoming. And as we have come to know them better, so have learned to respect them more. We have been taught the need for concentration, for patience, and for ample, even excessive caution. We have seen the value of courageous decisions and determined endeavour. We have known the trouble and satisfactions of self-imposed tasks and hardships, the disappointments of failure, the elation of

success. We have come to know the exquisitely personal relation which can arise between the mountaineer and the hills he loves – an intimacy which, to my best belief, has no parallel in other fields of human endeavour. And, in our understanding of the hills, so we have come to appreciate the virtues and human qualities of our comrades, and, even more than ever before, we have come to know ourselves.

Conclusion

On an intimate and subjective level, mountaineering is a means for the discovery and expression of self. In a world 'stripped to its bones' there is infinite scope for building a sense of self and achieving a sense of fulfillment (Vervoorn 1981: 65). Although rooted in a Victorian heritage, it has become increasingly popular in the twentieth century as our modern technological world has taken much of the 'raw edge' and mysticism out of people's lives (Mitchell 1983). Within the context of rationalization, mountaineering offers people the opportunity to meet the challenges of the natural environment 'on nature's terms', and they are often seen to be seeking a feeling of balance and wholeness, compensating for what has been lost from other realms of their lives.

In its wider context, mountaineering is a vehicle by which societies can explore their interaction with the landscape and, particularly in colonial societies such as New Zealand, develop a sense of familiarity and identity with that landscape. 'Nature is always seen through the frames of culture' (Pound 1983: 16), and mountaineering is a medium for the expression of culture. Mountains capture the imagination because they are symbols. Artists too deal in symbols, and react to forces in society and culture, instilling these symbols with meaning. In contrast, however, climbing mountains is a physical response to the natural environment, firstly in the pilgrimage to the 'sublime' places of mountain landscapes, and secondly in the challenges that mountaineers perceived therein. The intensity and purpose with which such places and experiences are sought reflects the same historical forces that affect artists and authors.

This case study of northwest Otago is rendered unique by the specificity of detail, and by the extent to which it is the story of certain people and places, and the meanings that came to be associated with them. At the same time, however, it provides a portrait of the localized impact of larger processes. In the New Zealand context this is the dynamic of a colonial, pioneering tradition which was later transformed by the search for identity, and the desire for a more intimate relationship with the landscape. In terms of Western history, these processes are the Victorian traditions of exploration, scientific discovery and Romantic inspiration, transformed in the early twentieth century by the disillusionment of war, the social dislocation of economic depression, and the search for meaning in an increasingly rationalized and incomprehensible world.

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