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## The killing hills

The 1950s were a turning point in the history of Himalayan mountaineering. As noted in the previous chapter, improved access to many regions and the increased affluence of Westerners after World War II led to a rush of expeditions arriving to make first ascents of scores of virgin Himalayan peaks.

During the same period, the factors of access and affluence were also at work in Australia to greatly broaden the outlook of its outdoor enthusiasts. Bushwalking enjoyed a surge in popularity. Unlike many other Western countries, Australia was blessed with large wilderness areas near most of its major population centres, so with increased income and, perhaps more importantly, increased leisure time Australians were exploring their unique bush in greatly increased numbers.

Another outdoor activity—rock climbing—came onto the Australian outdoor scene after the war. Although Australia has no large mountain ranges that hold permanent snow, it is liberally sprinkled with a large number of rocky crags of a variety of shapes, sizes and composition. There are the free-standing volcanic plugs of the Glasshouse Mountains near Brisbane and the Warrumbungle Mountains of western New South Wales; the sandstone cliffs of the Blue Mountains near Sydney; the vast faces of metamorphosed sandstone of Mt Arapiles in western Victoria, destined to become the mecca for Australian rock climbing; the granite gorges of Victoria's Mt Buffalo and the sweeping granite slabs of Booroomba Rocks near Canberra; the massive quartzite cliffs of Tasmania's Frenchman's Cap; and countless other crags and cliffs scattered throughout the south-east. Like its good bushwalking areas, most of Australia's rock-climbing venues are not far from its population centres.

The sport of rock climbing appeared on the Australian outdoors scene as early as the late 1920s and early 1930s, when Dr Eric Dark, Osmar White and others of the Blue Mountaineers were taking 32-millimetre yacht manila or heavy sash-cord to the sandstone cliffs west of Sydney to do a bit more than just scramble around

them. After the war, more local climbers—with David Roots and Rus Kippax being particularly active—found their way into the Blue Mountains. Later hard-climbing newcomers Bryden Allen and John Ewbank from England added further impetus to the sport. Rock climbing was also becoming popular in Victoria and it soon flourished throughout the eastern states. The sport's devotees eventually appeared in Perth and Adelaide as well and by the 1970s, rock climbing was truly a national sport.

For groups of bushwalkers and rock climbers of the 1950s and 1960s, increasing affluence also meant access to wild areas further afield. New Zealand quickly became a popular destination. Not only was it relatively close to Australia and easy and inexpensive to travel around in, the South Island had the long range of rugged, snow-capped mountains that Australia so obviously lacked. Bushwalkers revelled in the open valleys rimmed by high peaks, the spectacular pass crossings and the large tracts of temperate rainforest—so different from Australia's sparse, mostly sclerophyll forests. Rock climbers traded vertical rock for steep snow and ice and 100 m crags for 3000 m mountains.

The lure of New Zealand's Southern Alps, however, led some unsuspecting and inexperienced Australian walkers and climbers into a number of nasty traps. First, there is the weather. Storms appear in the South Island's mountainous regions with a speed and ferocity virtually unknown in the Australian hills. Unprepared walkers find themselves pinned down on high passes by gales and driving snow. At the onset of rain or snow, slopes of snow grass quickly become perilous slippery slides to the valley floor.

For unwary rock climbers, the traps are even more insidious. Snow is a far more variable and inconsistent medium than rock on which to climb. It can vary from soft, sugary slush in which climbers sink to their knees or thighs to hard green ice barely penetrable by crampon points, and anything in between. There are patches of windslab snow on the lee of ridges and layers of fresh wet snow over a hard base—both ripe for avalanching, particularly on the moderately angled slopes that look so inviting to the novice climber. There are cornices on the knife-edged snow ridges and icefalls hanging above popular access routes. Even the rock is vastly different—usually shattered and loose and sometimes coated with a thin invisible layer of ice. Belaying—or attaching oneself to the mountain or cliff while one's partner climbs—requires far more judgment, skill and experience on snow and ice. Finally, when conditions turn bad, climbers cannot simply retreat to a nearby pub and have a beer; they sometimes find themselves so pinned down by a quick storm that even the closest hut is days away.

Walkers and climbers face perils on the broad glaciers that appear to be smooth highways to the high passes or give easy access to steep rock buttresses or snow slopes. Often there are hidden crevasses in the glaciers and a fall into one by an unroped climber or walker is usually fatal. Even if roped to a partner, the unfortunate climber

could still be in serious trouble if the pair is not skilled in crevasse rescue techniques. In the broad valleys, away from the glaciers, ice and snow, walkers and climbers still are not out of danger. River crossings are notorious killers in New Zealand and a side-stream that can be crossed with a hop and a jump on the way in to a mountain can, after a sudden rainstorm, quickly become a boiling torrent that might sweep away an impatient walker or climber heading back to civilisation.

These dangers are manageable by mountain-people of sufficient experience and with the proper training. New Zealanders have coped with the perils of their mountains for years and they have learned their mountain craft from their older and more experienced countrymen. Before World War II, only a very few Australians went to New Zealand to walk or climb. They nearly always climbed with guides or joined groups of locals so they learned mountain skills in the New Zealand fashion. The situation changed dramatically in the 1950s as scores of Australians made annual trips to New Zealand and some of these went into the mountains uninitiated, without the help of guides, New Zealand friends or groups organised by the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC).

The results soon became obvious and gave Australians an unenviable reputation. As Colin Putt, a New Zealand mountaineer who moved to Australia in early 1950 and was secretary of the Sydney Bushwalkers in 1953, recalls:

[O]verseas travel was becoming possible for the average young Australian and at the same time rockclimbing was becoming a significant sport in Australia. Increasing numbers of Australians, usually with considerable bushwalking and rockclimbing experience but with little understanding of alpine conditions and techniques started to go into the New Zealand mountains, often with absurdly ambitious plans and aspirations. By 1956, the number of serious and fatal accidents was quite out of proportion to the number of Australians climbing. Australians quickly achieved a reputation for being unsafe on mountains; most New Zealanders were therefore unwilling to climb with them, so they never got an opportunity to learn except by bitter experience. There were exceptions of course, but this was the pattern as seen by the New Zealand mountaineers.<sup>1</sup>

The problem was not the lack of skill of some Australians but their lack of experience. As Putt put it:

[T]hey tended to be rather faster and more agile than the New Zealanders, but they did rush in where angels feared to tread. They just didn't know about the weather of real mountains, avalanches, rockfall, the coefficient of friction of snow and ice, suitable and unsuitable clothing, river crossings, or crevasses.<sup>2</sup>

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1 C. Putt, Personal communication, 16 September 1989.

2 C. Putt, Personal communication, 15 January 1991.

Putt recalled a few representative incidents. ‘There was a man who set off to glissade down some snow slopes above the Mueller Glacier, head-first and on his stomach. He went over the high bluff at the bottom of the snow, non-stop. It would be funny if it wasn’t tragic.’<sup>3</sup>

There was also the well-publicised incident of the ‘Three Johns’, in which John Young, a very able, experienced Englishman, perished with two inexperienced Australian climbers. No-one knows precisely what happened, but it is probable that Young was somehow put in a position by his partners from which none could escape.

‘There were also a number of occasions,’ Putt pointed out, ‘where an Australian survived an accident (sometimes more than one accident) in which somebody else was killed.’<sup>4</sup>

The view of Australians as unsafe mountaineers became widespread throughout New Zealand mountaineering circles. The NZAC received numerous letters from Australian would-be mountaineers, which exposed profound ignorance of New Zealand conditions by asking questions such as ‘could Mount Cook be climbed the first season and was a tent required’. The secretary of the Canterbury/Westland section of the NZAC noted that ‘such a letter...almost required a book in reply’.<sup>5</sup> M. J. P. Glasgow, editor of the 1955 *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, wrote:

One of the most significant features about the accidents of the last year or two is the number of climbers from beyond New Zealand (chiefly Great Britain and Australia) who have been involved. It is probable that they have not been aware of the severity of the climbs they have undertaken, nor of the dangers brought about by the peaks being out of condition (as they so often are in New Zealand), nor of the unsettled weather usually encountered in the Southern Alps. In some cases it is clear that they have not realised the difficulty of adapting rock climbing techniques (however useful in their own field) to New Zealand’s snow and ice peaks, and to its mixed snow, ice and rock (often glazed) peaks.<sup>6</sup>

Australians’ unfortunate reputation even became part of New Zealand’s tourist promotion. A guide who took tourists up the Franz Josef Glacier used to tell his clients that ‘this glacier comes down from 9000 feet to sea-level, it has about 3,000 crevasses and there’s an Australian down every one of them!’.<sup>7</sup> It appeared that New Zealand’s Southern Alps had become Australia’s killing hills.

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 D. Butler, Personal communication, 27 January 1990.

6 Glasgow, M. J. P. 1955, ‘The gradual approach’, *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 16, pp. 1–4.

7 Butler, D. 1991, *The Barefoot Bushwalker*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, ch. 13.

Was that perception—so prevalent among New Zealand mountaineers of that time and built on anecdotal evidence—backed up by the statistics? G. H. Hasell reported in the *NZAC Bulletin*<sup>8</sup> that the total number of fatalities in the New Zealand mountains for the period 1945–62 was 88: 46 by climbing accidents, 24 by drowning, 15 by exposure and three by illness. No breakdown by nationality was given, although most of those killed by drowning would almost surely have been New Zealand shooters and fishermen.

The rate of total accidents of all nationalities was thus just more than five a year. That was fairly high, but even if Australian fatalities amounted to half of the total (which they probably did not), it would not have been the horrific rate sometimes implied by those critical of early Australian climbers. Nevertheless, as outlined earlier, there were enough Australian fatalities and enough serious accidents involving Australians that most experienced climbers, including many of the Australians who had become safe and very competent alpine climbers, recognised that a problem existed. For the sake of Australians' reputation, and more importantly for the sake of those inexperienced Australians who could easily come to grief in New Zealand, something had to be done.

A small group of Sydney-based mountaineers, including New Zealanders such as Colin Putt and Ian Wood, and Australians such as Dot Butler, Marie Byles and Lionel Lever, with close connections to New Zealand mountaineering, recognised the problem and approached the NZAC to form an Australian section of the club. The driving force behind this move was Butler, who had climbed in the Southern Alps since the late 1930s and had been an NZAC member since 1940.

The idea had been discussed in early 1956 by Butler, Colin Putt and Ian Wood—who, like Putt, was a New Zealand mountaineer resident in Australia—on a bushwalk in the Endrick River region of New South Wales. They talked around the campfire about the accident rate of Australian climbers and concluded, as Putt said, 'that what many Australians needed, desperately, was some elementary training in snow-and-ice climbing when they first went to New Zealand, and that this could best be organised and provided by NZAC, through its Australian Section, which we then proceeded to invent'.<sup>9</sup>

Butler wrote to longstanding NZAC member Whaka Newmarch asking that an Australian section be formed. There was considerable urgency in her letter:

Those of us who have climbed in New Zealand know that there is no alternative to actual experience under New Zealand conditions, if one is planning to climb in New Zealand; but if we could see that prospective visitors to your country were properly equipped, physically, materially and mentally, to meet the different conditions over

8 D. Butler, Personal communication, 14 January 1991.

9 C. Putt, Personal communication, 16 September 1989.

there, we will have gone a long way towards making for safer climbing and happier associations with your mountaineers. We all feel very seriously that something must be done, and soon, before the next wave of visitors goes over at Christmas.<sup>10</sup>

The NZAC looked favourably on Butler's request and the Australian section, based in Sydney, was established in mid-1956. The Sydney group soon became an information and advisory centre for Australians planning a climbing trip to New Zealand. It had a library of mountaineering books and *New Zealand Alpine Journals*. More importantly, it organised annual instruction courses in New Zealand, with some of New Zealand's best mountaineers and guides as instructors. Butler organised the first trip in the 1956–57 Christmas period and accompanied instruction trips for nearly 30 years thereafter.

It was most fitting that Dot Butler was the leading light in turning around Australians' reputation as incompetent and dangerous alpine climbers. She is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable people ever to appear on the Australian outdoor scene. Long before bushwalking was the popular recreational activity that it is today, Butler was charging around the Blue Mountains and areas further afield as one of 'The Tigers'—a small group of enthusiastic walkers who specialised in marathon weekend walks.

For example, Butler and fellow walker Max Gentle began one of their weekend dashes on a Saturday lunch-time. They bought a copy of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, caught a train to Blackheath in the Blue Mountains and then raced down to the Blue Gum Forest in the Grose Valley by mid-afternoon. It must have been a particularly weighty edition of the *Herald* (perhaps an election campaign was in full swing), as Butler used the paper for a sleeping-bag that night! The next day, Butler and Gentle took off down the Grose River and reached Richmond, 50 miles (80 kilometres) away, by the end of the day, thus completing the long trip in a day and a half. As was her custom, Butler walked barefoot.

She was a skilled rock climber as well and preferred to climb—as she walked—barefoot. She remarked, 'Rocks are my friends and I caressed them as I climbed. They told me what I could and couldn't do. People who climb in boots and overalls are cutting themselves off from that contact.'<sup>11</sup> One of Butler's most memorable climbs was her first ascent in 1936 of the spectacular Crater Bluff in the Warrumbungle Range.

Even at home Dot Butler did some rather remarkable things. In her tribute to Butler as *Australian Geographic's* 1988 Adventurer of the Year, Gillian Coote related a trip that surpassed even her 'Tiger' weekends:

<sup>10</sup> D. Butler, Personal communication, 27 January 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Coote, G. 1989, 'The rocks are her friends—Dot Butler', *Australian Geographic*, no. 16 (October–December), pp. 112–13.

Dot married Ira Butler, a fellow bushwalker, in Australia during the war. He had been posted to Melbourne and proposed by letter. Unable to get a seat on an interstate train, Dot rode her bike to Melbourne to marry him. On her return journey she rode from Melbourne to Albury on the NSW border before she could get a seat. She estimates she cycled 32,000 km during the war.<sup>12</sup>

It was in New Zealand that Butler made her biggest contribution to Australian mountaineering. Arriving in the Southern Alps in 1939, she spent most of the next three years climbing and became the first Australian to climb in New Zealand without a guide. In fact, she worked part of that time as a guide herself for the Mt Cook National Park. She was therefore in an ideal position to instigate the instruction courses for aspiring Australian mountaineers: she had intimate, firsthand knowledge of New Zealand climbing conditions, her considerable alpine skills were useful in the instruction courses themselves and she was well known in and respected by the New Zealand climbing community.

The courses proved to be extremely popular and very effective (see image 4.1). A group of Australian participants wrote about their experiences in the 1959 course in the next year's edition of the *New Zealand Alpine Journal*. The very thorough course was led by Norman Hardie, one of the most well-known and experienced New Zealand mountaineers of Sir Edmund Hillary's era. His instruction began on the train ride from Christchurch, during which he lectured on the use of the rope.

When the group arrived at the Crow Hut in the Arthur's Pass region, the course became even more intensive.

From this stage onward, the intensely practical course kept us on rock, snow and ice for practically all our waking hours, and quite long hours at that. Everybody plugged and cut steps, belayed, and climbed across, into, and out of crevasses in the Crow Icefall under Hardie's watchful eye, and each member had enough personal experience of getting out of crevasses to make him very anxious never to get into them...to add to the general experience, a sudden electrical storm had been arranged, with hail, wind and cloud, and the party watched aghast while 'dinkum' blue sparks played about the heads of their axes.<sup>13</sup>

The Australian writers concluded by affirming that the 'New Zealand Alpine Club's efforts...have already made a tremendous difference to the Australians' approach to climbing'.<sup>14</sup>

This was particularly evident when many course participants began to return later to help train the next generation of climbers. Australians began to provide a large number of rescue teams that operated in the Southern Alps, as evidenced by an incident related by Colin Putt:

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 18 (1960), pp. 358–60.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

In 1962 on New Year's Eve a party of Australian walkers managed to escape our net and thus the training courses, got themselves mislaid on Mt Avalanche in Arthur's Pass and got one of their number injured; the Australian training course in the nearby Crow Valley had sufficient trained members of the NSW Federated Bushwalking Club's Search and Rescue Section present to carry out unaided the rescue of fifteen people off a high mountain!<sup>15</sup>

By the 1970s, the Australian alpine climbing scene had begun to change. The Australian section of the NZAC, based in Sydney, had grown geographically with the formation of a strong nucleus of Melbourne-based climbers. There had always been at least a few Melbourne climbers in the club, with one of them acting as an unofficial representative for the Melbourne group. In the 1970s, Rob Mitchell, an expatriate New Zealand climber resident in Melbourne, became the representative. He soon realised that the lines of communication between the Sydney and Melbourne groups had become too long, slow and cumbersome, so, with the active core of the Melbourne group up to 20–30 climbers, he proposed in 1976 that their group become a separate section of the NZAC. After 18 months of negotiations, the southern Australian section of the NZAC was officially formed in late 1977.

Much like its Sydney-based parent, the southern Australian section held well-attended monthly meetings, put on slide shows and acted as a source of advice for Melbourne climbers going to New Zealand. In addition, the more experienced members of the southern section held instructional climbing trips for beginners, primarily at Mt Feathertop in the Victorian Alps, but also further afield at Blue Lake in the Snowy Mountains of New South Wales. Although these weekend courses could provide some instruction in the basic techniques of snow and ice climbing, they were no substitute for New Zealand courses set in the Southern Alps with their crevasse-riddled glaciers, unpredictable weather and treacherous rivers.

By the late 1970s, the alpine climbing scene in New Zealand had changed considerably as well. With the appearance of professional guiding and instruction schools—most notably Alpine Guides Limited in 1967 and Mountain Recreation in 1973—there was no longer the need for the specialist NZAC training courses that Dot Butler had organised. So, by the late 1970s, both Australian sections of the NZAC were referring many of the increasing numbers of New Zealand-bound Australians to the commercial guides for instruction courses. The Australian sections had done a magnificent job, not only in reducing the accident rate of Australian climbers to an acceptable level, but in generating an indigenous Australian mountaineering community. For the first time, there was an active group of Australians, drawn from the ranks of bushwalkers and rock climbers, with the desire and skills to climb ice and snow mountains.

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15 C. Putt, Personal communication, 16 September 1989.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the commercial instruction courses continued to build the community of Australian alpine climbers. Of these schools, Alpine Guides, centred on the Mt Cook region, and Mountain Recreation, operating in the Mt Aspiring area further south, were undoubtedly the most popular with Australians. Both continued the tradition of teaching basic alpine skills that was established earlier in the Australian section's training courses and both were most valuable in preparing climbers for the rigours of the Himalaya.

Geoff Wayatt's attitudes and mode of operation are typical of both mountaineering schools. He was a guide with Alpine Instruction Limited, the forerunner of Alpine Guides, in the late 1960s and, as noted earlier, founded Mountain Recreation in 1973. As an Australian, he was undoubtedly in a good position to anticipate the needs of Australians climbing in New Zealand for the first time. Furthermore, as the introduction to the interview of Wayatt in *Wild* magazine noted, 'Geoff Wayatt's philosophy towards alpinism and equipment has significantly influenced the amateur Australasian climbing community as well as many trainee instructors working for Mountain Recreation, perhaps more than any other individual ever to work in New Zealand's Southern Alps'.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps some of Wayatt's ability to design courses around the needs of Australian rock climbers and bushwalkers comes from his own introduction to the Southern Alps:

My first major climb in New Zealand was the Northwest Ridge of Mt Aspiring during a New Zealand Alpine Club meet. I was teamed up with the local 'Doberman Pinscher', a very fit and aggressive New Zealander. He charged full-speed over rocks in his massive Eckenstein crampons, dragging me tottering along behind. His humour did not improve when he could not follow me up a rock step and he had to detour. We roped on the snow in the dawn, and again he took off at speed. I yelled 'Hold on!' Instantly he flashed in a boot-axe belay, and turned to see me still finishing my chest coils. 'Don't say that again unless you're falling,' he spat. (We were standing on dead flat snow!) My second ascent of the peak two days later, with Australian friends, was a good deal more fun.<sup>17</sup>

The eight-day Mountain Recreation courses, as well as the Alpine Guides courses, continued the tradition of teaching basic alpine skills that was established earlier in the Australian section's training courses. Much of the emphasis in the professional New Zealand mountaineering courses, however, is on philosophy and attitudes towards mountaineering in general—characteristics that are probably more important than technical ability in determining success or failure in Himalayan climbing. Their approach is very similar to the tried-and-true New Zealand way, as Wayatt points out:

<sup>16</sup> Monteath, C. 1986, 'Interview with Geoff Wayatt', *Wild*, no. 21 (Winter), pp. 38–41.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Mountain Recreation is based on the simple formula of a novice being taken into the mountains by an experienced friend. I have simply substituted a professional instructor for the experienced friend, who these days seems hard to find. Mountain Recreation is concerned about specialist skills, but more importantly, it is concerned about the attitudes and values that give them their worth, such as personal aspirations, group communication and spirit, using the mountains to find an inner sense of well-being, and learning to live for extended periods in a sometimes bleak and hostile environment.<sup>18</sup>

The Alpine Guides instructors also impressed on their students attitudes and values that would lead to safe climbing practices and intensely enjoyable and satisfying experiences in the mountains. Several then-novice climbers of the Army Alpine Association, later to become one of the major strands in the Australian Himalayan story, recalled vividly their Alpine Guides course in the late 1970s. Their instructor, a rather gentle, laidback New Zealander, gave them the feeling for the mountains—the ability to understand the mountains on their own terms—which would see them through some difficult climbs in the 1980s.

The values that the Mountain Recreation and Alpine Guides instructors instil in their students for safe and successful New Zealand climbing—a lightweight approach, the importance of good food and safety through judgment rather than equipment—are those that are so crucial to the success of a Himalayan expedition. In fact, add the importance of group communication and spirit mentioned above and you have a pretty good formula for a safe and successful Himalayan trip.

Much of Wayatt's philosophy comes from his own climbing experiences (see images 4.2, 4.3):

During the Huascarán expedition [in the Peruvian Andes] we saw Poles, Americans, Germans, and Norwegians all burdened down with huge tents, imported foods, deck chairs, and so on. It took little imagination to realise that the implements of comfort were impediments to climbing. The lightweight, live-off-the-land approach is flexible, fun to organise and requires no committing sponsorship. High mobility can only be achieved through the use of lightweight tentage and improvised shelters such as bivvy sacks, bivvy rocks and snow caves.<sup>19</sup>

Alpine Guides and Mountain Recreation courses make copious use of natural shelters. Often accommodation is under rock overhangs, in snow caves or even simply on rock slabs on top of a broad ridge. Despite the decided lack of comfort, using 'passive' shelters does have an advantage, as Wayatt points out:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

[M]ore time is spent in closer contact with the environment we are trying to understand. An intimate knowledge of mountain weather is vital to successful climbing, and from under a bivvy rock you can sense the quickness of the storm building up, the fickleness of a westerly flow, and the suddenness of a southerly snowfall.<sup>20</sup>

Being able to make the correct judgments in difficult situations such as deteriorating weather is the essence of safe mountaineering. Having the latest fancy equipment is of little value; having sufficient training, an unfailing alertness of mind and plenty of experience are vital. As Wyatt says, ‘safety and judgement are in your head. Successful mountaineering does not rely on technological advances, but on a number of hard earned factors which can be loosely bundled under the title “judgement”... the only way to get them is to go climbing.’<sup>21</sup>

And go climbing is just what Australians did. First in Dot Butler’s NZAC training courses and later in the professional training courses, large numbers of Australians began climbing safely and successfully in New Zealand. By the mid to late 1970s, the Australian mountaineering community had grown to the point where new climbers were learning from their more experienced countrymen, in the traditional fashion. Australians began to undertake some of the most difficult ice climbs as well as repeating many of the classics in the Southern Alps. They even climbed several significant new routes. The days of the hordes of inexperienced Aussies were over. They were ready to have a go at the Himalaya in their own right.

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20 Ibid.

21 Wyatt, G. 1980, ‘Expeditions’, *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 33, pp. 60–1.

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