

28

Where are the women?

The statistics on female Australian climbers in the Himalaya up to 1990 were not impressive. None had climbed an 8000 m mountain or indeed a 7000 m peak. In fact, there had been fewer than 20 attempts in total on major Himalayan peaks by Australian women. Curiously enough, the distribution of this very small sample was strongly bimodal, with seven attempts on 6000 m peaks and eight on 8000 m peaks, but only two on 7000 m mountains. Of these attempts, only a handful was successful. By 1990, apart from a very few who climbed trekking peaks, only two Australian women had stood on the summits of Himalayan mountains 6000 m or higher. And no Australian woman had climbed past 8000 m.

This Himalayan record is even more surprising given the strong role that Australian women played in the development of Australian alpine climbing earlier in the past century. Indeed, in the early history of Australian mountaineering in New Zealand's Southern Alps, it was the women who took a decided lead over their male counterparts.

As noted in Chapter 4, Dot Butler was the main driving force in establishing training courses for Australians in the Southern Alps in the 1960s. She was one of Australia's leading alpinists in her own right and was a qualified guide at Mt Cook. Even before Butler, however, there were two other Australian women who excelled in alpine climbing; in fact, they were arguably Australia's best alpine climbers of their era and certainly more well known than any Australian male climbers.

The first in this impressive lineage of female Australian mountaineers was the incomparable Freda du Faur. Her climbing career, although it ended before the advent of Himalayan expeditioning, included one of the most spectacular first ascents in New Zealand's Southern Alps—a climb that merits a closer look.

Just after the turn of the twentieth century, du Faur travelled to New Zealand for several consecutive climbing seasons and quickly amassed an astounding record. In an era in which women were supposed to be at home doing the washing and minding the children, the young Australian woman must have put some mighty dents in many male egos.

The first of her major achievements was the first ascent of Mt Cook by a woman, which was accomplished in the summer of 1910 with guides Peter and Alec Graham. That in itself would have earned her a place in history, but three years later she again teamed with Peter Graham, and with another guide, Darby Thomson, to grab the most prized mountaineering plum of the day in New Zealand: the Grand Traverse of Mt Cook.

New Zealand's highest mountain is a complicated massif with three major summits—the Low (3593 m), Middle (3722 m) and High (3764 m) Peaks¹—connected by a ridge about 2 km long. The traverse of this ridge—physically demanding and technically challenging—is a major mountaineering undertaking. The ridge between the Middle and High Peaks—a sinewy knife blade, often treacherously icy, with cornices on one side and a steep drop to the Hooker Glacier on the other—is a particularly daunting part of the climb. The Grand Traverse or 'GT', as it is commonly known among climbers, is still, in the twenty-first century, one of the most thrilling routes anywhere in the Southern Alps.

In du Faur's time, an attempt on the GT was at least an order of magnitude more difficult than it is today. First, the era before World War I was well before the time of crampons and modern protective devices for ice and snow. Every steep section had to be climbed by arduous step-cutting and careful, balanced climbing protected by dubious belays, which probably had only 'psychological' value. Second, there was the fear of the unknown. The summit ridge of Mt Cook had never been climbed in its entirety. As many climbers have noted, difficulties are magnified by the knowledge that no human has ever tread on the terrain one is attempting and the consequent fears of unknown dangers and difficulties possibly beyond one's capabilities.

Although du Faur was climbing with two professional guides, her contribution to the ascent should not be underestimated. She did none of the step-cutting (in fact, Graham did nearly all of it himself), but in every other respect she had to have the same skills as the others: the technical ability to climb anything that Mt Cook threw in their way, the physical stamina to move quickly throughout the very long climb and, most importantly, the mental toughness to conquer the fear of the unknown.

¹ The height of Mt Cook's High Peak has recently been reduced by several metres due to a massive rock fall on the East Face. Mt Cook is still the highest mountain in New Zealand.

In January 1913, the three climbers captured Mt Cook's most sought-after prize in a brilliant display of competence and strength. Du Faur's own account of the final climb along the summit ridge captures the drama and excitement of the first GT:

Ever since we had decided to attempt the traverse, the steep knife-edged ridge between the middle and high peak had been to me a haunting horror. From wherever you look upon it it appears impossible. Now, the moment I had dreaded had arrived, and the reality was all that imagination had pictured it. Steep, narrow, and horribly corniced, the ridge dropped sharply for a hundred feet. More than once as we descended it an icy shiver ran down my spine, as the ice-axe sank deeply into the overhanging cornice, and on withdrawal disclosed through the tiny hole the awful gap between us and the glacier thousands of feet beneath. Later, when we compared notes, we all confessed to wondering what would happen if a cornice broke away. Would the shock startle us into eternity? The mere noise and vibration of the falling mass would be enough to shake the strongest nerves, and we only stood about two feet from the junction of solid ice and cornice. At last we accomplished the many windings of the arete, and started up the highest peak. The relief of ascending with a wall in front to look at was tremendous, after the nerve-wracking, downward ridge of the last hour. Fate was again kind, and we only had an hour's step-cutting on the final slope.

At half past one we stood on the highest summit of Mount Cook, conquerors indeed. We were filled with mingled pride and thankfulness, as our eyes roved backwards over the great ridge we had spent the last six and a half hours in vanquishing. Very heartily we wrung one another's hands, and marvelled at our phenomenal luck in obtaining weather conditions which had enabled us to accomplish the greatest climb in New Zealand at the first attempt. Very happily we lay at ease on the summit, and putting all thoughts of the descent out of our minds, concerned ourselves only with the joy and triumph of the present.²

Images of Freda du Faur in the Southern Alps, clad in a long skirt and a trim white blouse, holding an ice axe and staring at the surrounding peaks with a fixed gaze of steely determination will long stand as a testament to the skill and toughness of one of Australia's two early world-class alpine climbers. (The other was George Ingle Finch; Chapter 2.)

The next in the line of Australian women who excelled in alpine climbing, after du Faur, was Marie Byles. Born in England in 1900, Byles moved to Australia in 1911 with her family. It did not take long for her to make an impact on Australian society. By the age of twenty-four, she had become Australia's first woman lawyer, as well as a writer, feminist and world-class adventurer.

Her first major climbing trip was a most ambitious undertaking for that time. In 1927, she set off around the world by cargo boat, stopping by any ports that had mountains nearby. Her long list of ascents on that trip included peaks in England, Scotland, Norway, North America and New Zealand.

2 F. du Faur in Keenlyside, F. 1975, *Peaks and Pioneers*, Elk, London, ch. 6.

Byles spent even more climbing seasons in New Zealand than du Faur and recorded some notable ascents. She climbed Mt Cook in 1935 and later made first ascents of several peaks rising above the remote Mahitahi Valley in Westland. Perhaps her most important mountaineering achievement, however, was to organise and lead an expedition to Mt Sansato, a 6000 m peak in the high mountains of western China. Although it could not be classed as a Himalayan expedition (Mt Sansato is north of the greater Himalayan ranges), the trip to the 'White Dragon' was certainly the first Australian climbing trip to a big Asian mountain. Although Byles and her colleagues were thwarted by bad weather in their attempt on Mt Sansato, they did make first ascents of several lesser peaks in the region.

Marie Byles' mountaineering career was cut short in 1941 by a bushwalking accident, but not before she had passed the mantle of Australian women's climbing on to Dot Butler.

Butler met Byles through the Sydney Bush Walkers. Although Butler was quite a bit younger than Byles, the two became quick friends. '[D]ifference in age means nothing to bushwalkers,' Butler noted. 'Marie lent me mountaineering books which fired my imagination—the reconnaissance of Everest by Shipton and Tilman, polar exploration, both Arctic and Antarctic, adventuring in Greenland and Iceland. It excited me enormously.'³

Closer to home, Byles was instrumental in involving the young Butler in Australia's most challenging climbing venture of the time. In the 1930s, word came back to Sydney from the western slopes of New South Wales of a small range of spectacular rock spires, pinnacles and walls—some of them 1500 ft (450 m) high. The peaks in this range, the Warrumbungle Mountains, soon attracted the best of Australia's climbers of the time.

Under the leadership of Dr Eric Dark of the Blue Mountains Climbing Club, an expedition was mounted to the Warrumbungles in 1936. The young Dot Butler, known for her 'tiger walking' and her ability to scramble on rock, was invited along. At that time, she had not yet done any roped climbing, but her natural talent became apparent so quickly that it was she with whom Dark paired for the major objective of the trip. Butler, climbing barefoot as usual, and Dark succeeded in knocking off Crater Bluff, the most highly prized peak in the range. It was an impressive accomplishment. On making a subsequent ascent of the route using fixed ropes left in place, the veteran Byles noted that it was a difficult climb by either New Zealand or Canadian standards, even with the ropes in place.

3 Butler, D. 1991, *The Barefoot Bushwalker*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, ch. 4.

In their joy at attaining the summit of Crater Bluff, Dark and Butler lit a fire on top as a signal to the rest of their group and to the people of Tooraweenah, a nearby township. The fire, however, quickly got out of control, so Butler and Dark not only made the first ascent of Crater Bluff, but razed its summit as well!

It was in alpine climbing, on the other hand, that Butler had her most significant influence on Australian mountaineering. Chapter 4 described the pivotal role she played in establishing training courses in New Zealand for novice Australian alpinists. She was a member of the 1969 Australian expedition to the Andes, which was the first major Australian overseas expedition of the 'modern' era (Chapter 15).

Although she was not the leader of the team, Butler's contribution to the Andes expedition was significant. She was the organisational driving force from the beginning, helped to select the team and was one of the three-person advance party that smoothed the way for the main group in Peru. In the mountains, she was the most experienced of the team, providing a wealth of good advice, sound judgment and encouragement. In addition, she led many of the climbs herself.

The trip was an unqualified success. The party climbed 27 mountains in Peru's Cordillera Vilcabamba—mostly above 18 000 ft (5500 m)—and several members reached the summit of Lasunayoc (20 000 ft, 6000 m), the highest objective of the trip.

With this extraordinarily strong background in alpine climbing, and with some high-altitude mountaineering experience under her belt, Butler would have been an obvious person to play a direct role in Australia's entry into Himalayan mountaineering in the 1970s. She made only one trip herself to the Himalaya, however—a primarily trekking holiday in Nepal in early 1970. Her party attempted a couple of small peaks in the Kali Gandaki Valley, climbing to 12 000 ft (3700 m) on White Peak (17 000 ft [5200 m], an outlier of Dhaulagiri) and reaching the summit of a small peak (13 500 ft, 4100 m) further up the valley.

It was a pity that Butler made no serious mountaineering trips to the Himalaya. With her legendary strength and stamina, her remarkable career as an adventurer and her skill as a rock, snow and ice climber, there is little doubt she would have been a Himalayan powerhouse. She would have been the ideal climber to lead the first groups of Australians to the great ranges of Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, but that was not to be.

The period from 1975 to 1980 was pivotal for the development of Australian Himalayan mountaineering. For Australian women, there were some promising starts during that period, but tragedy and changed directions knocked out the potential female mountaineers of the time and effectively cut the long and impressive line of

Australian women alpinists begun by Freda du Faur early in the century. The 1980s, a golden era in general for Australian climbing in the Himalaya, was a very quiet time for Australian women.

The first of the promising starters in the 1970s was Josephine Flood, a member of the initial Australian expedition to the Himalaya: the 1975 expedition to Mulkila in the Kulu region of India. She and the leader, Warwick Deacock, were easily the most experienced climbers on the team. Indeed, based on her past achievements, she clearly was a world-class mountaineer.

Like Deacock and several of the other early Australian climbers in the Himalaya, Flood was originally from England, with a very strong background in climbing there before she moved to Australia. Then Josephine Scarr (she married after coming to Australia in 1963), she excelled in the competitive and high-standard British rock-climbing scene. She was the first woman to lead Cenotaph Corner—one of the test pieces of British rock climbing at the time (well-known mountain photographer John Cleare followed her up the climb on the end of the rope)—and she became a climbing instructor at the prestigious Plas-y-Brenin National Recreational Centre in Wales.

In 1961, she and Barbara Spark set out on ‘The Women’s Kulu Expedition, 1961’, an ambitious project for a pair of young female climbers, as it involved an overland trip through the Middle East in addition to attempts on several unclimbed 6000 m mountains in the Indian Himalaya. Their journey by Land Rover from England to India was an amazing adventure in its own right, with an ascent of Mt Olympus in Greece, a frightening off-road drive lost in the shifting sands of southern Iran and long delays in Pakistan due to flooded roads.

Once in the mountains of northern India, Scarr and Spark proved more than equal to the challenge. They organised local porters and equipment, marched into an unknown part of the range, carried out some useful survey work and, most importantly, had a feast of excellent climbing on an array of virgin peaks. It was a tour de force for the two young mountaineers.

Their climbs included first ascents of two major peaks rising above the Bara Shigri Basin: the Lion (20 100 ft, 6147 m) and Central Peak (20 620 ft, 6306 m). Scarr’s feelings on the summit of Central Peak after climbing a narrow rock buttress that led directly up the South Face gave a hint of the delightful climbing the pair experienced in the remote mountains of the Kulu:

Like a good book, I did not want it to end, and was almost sorry when we came to the top. It was a cartoonist’s summit, a sharp point capped by a small block... The air was crisp and clear as though it were early morning and the sky quite cloudless, so that we could see for fifty or sixty miles in every direction. Range after

range of mountains stretched as far as the eye could see; the snow and ice peaks of Kulu to the west and south, barren Spiti to the east, and northwards, beyond the low rock peaks of Lahul, the red-brown mountain waste of Tibet.

I felt wonderfully happy, and so light that it seemed to be only my heavy boots that were preventing me drifting off like gossamer. I remember contemplating taking them off to see what happened.⁴

After those first ascents, the pair, along with one of their Sherpas, finished the expedition by pulling off a near-ascent of an unclimbed 20 495 ft (6268 m) mountain in the region. Climbing directly up a steep, technically challenging face in a bold style 20 years ahead of its time, they were forced back by darkness and deteriorating weather only 15 m below the true summit.

With climbs of two major and several lesser summits, the expedition would be a hard act to follow. As Scarr noted, 'it would be difficult to have a happier or better expedition than this had been'.⁵ Just a few months later, however, Scarr and Spark were back in the Himalaya on a trip that proved to be just as rewarding.

Before they had left England for their Kulu expedition, the pair agreed to join an English women's expedition to western Nepal the next pre-monsoon season. Led by Countess Dorothea Gravina, the six-person team would attempt the unclimbed highest peak in the remote Kanjiroba Himal. In 1962, that region had barely been touched by Western exploration. Only one botanical, one historical and two mountaineering expeditions had passed by, with none penetrating the heart of the range. It was truly uncharted territory.

After some initial difficult reconnaissance work, the party established itself in a valley below the Himal's major peak, Lha Shamma (21 035 ft, 6433 m). It was a mountaineer's paradise. 'If we ourselves had designed the ideal climbing area it could not have been better,' Scarr recalled, 'a pleasant green valley with water and firewood, and a host of mountains of all sizes and degrees of difficulty.'⁶

After climbing some smaller peaks around the valley, the team set to work establishing three camps along one of the many long, winding ridges that emanated from the summit of Lha Shamma. Racing failing weather on their second attempt at the summit from camp three, Scarr and Spark, followed by two of the Sherpa staff, led the way along the narrow ridge and finally gained the top amid strong winds and swirling clouds.

It was their second remarkable success in the Himalaya in less than a year. In fact, Scarr and Spark were the first two women ever to stand on the summit of a 21 000 ft mountain.

4 Scarr, J. 1966, *Four Miles High*, Victor Gollancz, London, ch. 9.

5 *Ibid.*, ch. 11.

6 *Ibid.*, ch. 18.

The next year, Jo Scarr decided to travel even further afield to climb—her target: the Southern Alps of New Zealand. On the way, however, she stopped in Australia. It meant a profound change of direction in her life.

Although she did get to New Zealand and climbed Mt Cook during the Christmas season in 1963, mountains soon began to recede in importance in her life. She exchanged mountaineering expeditions for archaeological ones and her earlier interest in classical Greek archaeology for Aboriginal prehistory. She completed a Master of Arts degree in 1964 at The Australian National University in Canberra and, while raising three small children, worked on a doctorate in Aboriginal prehistory. She received her PhD in 1973.

Jo Flood is probably now most well known in Australia for her work in discovering, documenting and conserving sites of Aboriginal significance. Much of that work was carried out with the Australian Heritage Commission, where her major task was to compile the Aboriginal part of the Register of the National Estate.

Going on archaeological expeditions can give much the same satisfaction as going on mountaineering trips, according to Flood: ‘There is the same sense of discovery and of being outdoors. There is certainly at least the same intellectual challenge, if not more. And archaeological expeditions are not without their dangers. On a trip to the Northern Territory in 1989, I found a taipan in one of the excavation pits!’⁷

Flood did return to the Himalaya in 1975 as a member of the Mulkila expedition. Given her experience in the Himalaya, where she had made first ascents of previously unclimbed peaks, the Mulkila trip proved to be not particularly challenging or satisfying.

‘We went to the foot of the glacier by bus; it was all so easy and civilised. Also, Mulkila itself had been climbed previously. I found it rather unsatisfactory; I wasn’t particularly motivated to risk my neck climbing anything.’⁸

Nevertheless, her interest in Himalayan mountaineering was rekindled in the mid-1970s. She had also applied to be a member of Chris Bonington’s 1975 expedition to Mt Everest, but was not selected. It is interesting to speculate what Jo Flood might have contributed to Australian Himalayan mountaineering had she been selected for Bonington’s team.

Like Dot Butler, Flood had an extraordinarily strong mountaineering background, including an impressive Himalayan component. It should be emphasised that Flood led, or co-led, every climb she did in the Himalaya. Unlike many other women, who tended to climb with husbands, boyfriends or other men, Flood never climbed with men in the Himalaya (apart from some Sherpa staff, with whom she had some

7 J. Flood, Interview.

8 Ibid.

interesting wrangles over leadership, as she recounted in her excellent book *Four Miles High*). She therefore had all the responsibilities and mental stress of being, as climbers put it, 'on the sharp end of the rope'. And to top it off, every peak she climbed in the Himalaya was a first ascent. Jo Flood was certainly in a position to lead the early Australian mountaineering effort in the Himalaya, but that was not to be.

Flood, it should be added, was one of two women on the Mulkila expedition. The other was Dorothy Brown, who, by her own description, was primarily a bushwalker and not so interested in getting to the tops of mountains. She was happy just to walk through the valleys and look at the big peaks. Interestingly, Brown, a retired Canberra schoolteacher, remembers Ken Baldwin, of Dunagiri and Baruntse fame, as a conscientious first-grade pupil at Campbell Primary School.

Two other women made brief appearances in the early days of Australian Himalayan climbing, but both met with tragic ends in 1980.

The first was Faye Kerr, a member of the Annapurna III expedition. Although one of the older members of the team, Kerr had recorded an impressive number of major climbs in New Zealand earlier in her career. The editor of the 1954 edition of the *New Zealand Alpine Journal* remarked about 'two young Australians, who have not been in New Zealand long but who, in the last nine months alone have ascended over forty peaks from Egmont to Earnslaw, including many good climbs in the Mt Cook region'.⁹ The pair was 'Kerr and Cutcliffe' and their climbs included Elie de Beaumont, Minarets, Malte Brun, Hardinger, Lendenfield, Tasman, Cook (GT), Hicks, La Perouse, Sefton and the second ascent of the Coxcomb Ridge of Mt Aspiring. Ironically, Faye Kerr survived the treacherous avalanches low on Annapurna III but died of a stomach ulcer in India after the expedition.

The second unfortunate Australian female climber was Lyn Griffith, who was a member of an American women's expedition that attempted Dhaulagiri (8167 m) in the post-monsoon season of 1980. Griffith, who had a strong bushwalking and general outdoors background, was leader of the support party that carried loads to camps lower on the mountain. The lower reaches of Himalayan peaks can, however, be just as dangerous as the higher slopes.

While Griffith and four other climbers were resident in camp two at 5900 m, a small slab avalanche came through the camp and pushed a tent, with the five women inside, down the slope and into a crevasse. The tent landed on a snow bridge about 10 m below the surface. The other four climbers survived, either in the tent or on the snow bridge, but Griffith was apparently swept out of the tent and down into the depths of the crevasse. Despite a two-and-a-half day search, her body was never recovered.

9 'Faye Kerr—obituary', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 33 (1980), p. 126.

With tragedies and changes of direction decimating the already thin ranks of Australia's female mountaineers, there was virtually no-one to carry on through the 1980s. Only two women figure at all in that decade of Australian Himalayan history—one of those an Australian-born woman who lives in and climbs out of the United States and the other a European woman who immigrated to Australia in 1983, married one of Australia's top Himalayan climbers and has established an impressive mountaineering record of her own.

Cherie Bremer-Kamp has had a most unusual Himalayan mountaineering career. Her story, told poignantly in her book *Living on the Edge*, is one of romance and tragedy set against the backdrop of the very highest of Himalayan mountains in the very harshest of conditions.

Born in Queensland, Bremer-Kamp's early introduction to climbing was on the sandstone rock faces of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales and the snow peaks of New Zealand. She emigrated to the United States, where she established a career as a nurse and midwife and married an American climber, Terry Bech. She continued her own climbing career as well, joining her husband on an expedition to Dhaulagiri in 1971.

Seven years later, she was back in the Himalaya, opting to join a large American expedition to K2 instead of joining the all-women's American Annapurna expedition, to which she had been invited. Although she was never considered as a potential summiter in the K2 team, she nevertheless put in an impressive performance, carrying loads to as high as 7700 m on the mountain. She also received a good dose of the tension and intense personal conflict that seemed to typify the large American Himalayan expeditions of the 1970s.

More significantly, it was on the K2 expedition that she met and fell in love with Chris Chandler, one of the other climbers. Chandler was a skilled climber and skier, having made the first ski descent of Denali (Mt McKinley) in Alaska and having climbed Mt Everest in 1976. On K2, he and Bremer-Kamp formed a liaison that would lead them back to the very highest peaks of the world but away from the large, conflict-ridden expeditions that both had experienced in the 1970s.

In 1981, the pair ventured again to the Himalaya, to the other end of the range this time, to tackle Kangchenjunga. More specifically, they were going to attempt the complex mountain's western summit, Yalung Kang (8505 m), from the northern side. It would be the first attempt on Yalung Kang from the north and only the fourth from the north on any of Kangchenjunga's summits, and it would be made by a two-person team—certainly not short odds for success.

Bremer-Kamp and Chandler, however, made a valiant effort. They established and stocked three camps on the North Face of Kangchenjunga and then pushed on to nearly 8000 m, climbing on the last day of their attempt from a bivouac at 7800 m.

In the end, they were turned back by a lack of supplies combined with difficult climbing high on the mountain. The unsuccessful 1981 attempt was, it turned out, only the prelude to an even more daring attempt a few years later.

In December 1984, the two climbers returned—again to climb as a two-person team only. This time, they would attempt the main summit of Kangchenjunga from the north in winter—the most dangerous and difficult of the three Nepalese climbing seasons. It was an extraordinarily ambitious undertaking, given that they again would be climbing from the remote northern side of the mountain and that they would have no back-up should things go wrong. The odds for success had certainly lengthened.

The expedition quickly took on all the characteristics of a typical Himalayan winter attempt: vicious storms, the lowering of the jet stream onto the mountains, unrelenting cold and long bouts of being tent-bound between bursts of climbing. There was, however, one important difference. Even though their high-altitude porter, Mongol Singh Tamang, helped with the climbing and load carrying, there were still only three of them to do all the work. There were no alternating teams of climbers to jump in and take over from tired comrades.

In an almost superhuman display of determination, the three battled on through almost 40 days of storm, wind and bone-chilling cold to establish four camps on the mountain—the first three of them in the same locations as the equivalent camps on their Yalung Kang attempt a few years earlier. Then with a long-awaited break in the weather in mid-January, they set out for the summit from a snow cave bivouac above camp four. Ironically, they reached almost exactly the same height as they had in their 1981 attempt on Yalung Kang before things suddenly went terribly wrong, leaving Bremer-Kamp in a desperate psychological and physical struggle for survival.

First, Mongol seemed to lose his grip, falling repeatedly during the last day of climbing and being unable to carry out simple camp chores, such as boiling a billy of water on the stove. The next morning, after a miserably cold night, Bremer-Kamp had far more to worry about. Chandler had contracted cerebral oedema and was rapidly becoming incapacitated.

Their situation could not have been more serious: high on a massive mountain in winter with no fixed ropes near to aid a quick descent and no other climbers in camps below to help. It was all up to Bremer-Kamp to try to descend with one dying man and another barely functioning. In addition, her fingers and toes were inexorably succumbing to frostbite.

Summoning an unbelievable amount of inner psychological stamina as well as physical strength, Bremer-Kamp took charge of the situation. She got Chandler's crampons and harness on him, organised him and Mongol on the climbing rope

and then began painstakingly belaying them down the mountain. Somehow she managed to avoid a fatal tumble in spite of having to hold repeated falls by the much heavier Chandler.

For Chandler, her efforts were to no avail. Cerebral oedema claimed him by the end of the day. He died in a bivvy sac not far below the previous night's bivouac site. There was simply nothing Bremer-Kamp could do. She and Mongol, too stunned to move, bivvied for the night. In the morning, Bremer-Kamp propped up Chandler's body in a sitting position overlooking the vast Tibetan Plateau and then began the painful descent.

Somehow keeping her profound grief in check enough to function, Bremer-Kamp slowly worked her way down the mountain. It was a frightful experience. The all-pervading cold was threatening to sap the last bit of life from her, her fingers and toes were by then severely frostbitten and virtually useless and she often had to cajole a sometimes hysterical Mongol into action. Miraculously, she and Mongol persevered, sometimes down-climbing, sometimes abseiling and sometimes literally falling down the mountain. Barely alive after several days of the tortuous descent, they finally stumbled into base camp and into the care of their staff there.

Loss of a loved one

Cherie Bremer-Kamp

I decided to descend. Chris then turned to me and said he didn't feel well, felt as though he had pneumonia. His chest started to gurgle. He began to gag, bringing up thick, green, foul-looking sputum. It was strange to see him gag, his white lips pursed and his face deep purple. It seemed he was getting bad fast. Even he realised it and agreed with my decision to descend. 'Yeah, it's time for us to go down, at least to 24,000 feet,' he said.

I started trying to put on his crampons but he wasn't holding still and it was really awkward. I was working away in my woollen mitts, wool gloves and polypropolyn [sic] liners when he said, 'I can't see anything, I'm blind.'

My heart froze and at the same time my fingers turned stiff and claw-like. My body must have got a sudden rush of adrenalin and clamped down the blood vessels to the extremities, the result of surging fear. It was only now I realised that Chris had probably developed cerebral oedema, and I had been blaming the fumes from the stove [for] his deteriorating condition.

Time became even more critical and I tore off the gloves to look at my hands. The fingers had become white and marble-like. I knocked them together. It sounded as though I was banging two pieces of wood against one another. 'Look at my hands,' I showed them to Chris. He giggled, 'They are pretty bad, aren't they?' I left the gloves off, for in order to do any manipulation at all, the claws needed to be exposed. Periodically I would pull the sleeves of my jacket over them to try and warm them up a bit, and then continue working. Both hands had lost all feeling at this stage and I began imagining them being cut off at the wrist. 'Can't worry about that now. Got to concentrate on saving the whole body. That's what's important now. Got to save the body.'

Finally Chris's crampons were on. I had to get his harness on next, but he couldn't stand up without toppling over. I was beginning to lose my vision, too. It was like peering through a foggy car window on a rainy night. I became even more anxious, fearing that soon I would also succumb. I screamed out to Mongol to help. 'What the hell have you been doing all this time anyway?' He acted surprised that we were going down.

Supported between the two of us, we finally got the harness in place and Chris was tied into the rope. As he couldn't walk without falling over, I put Mongol and Chris together on the rope, moving down on a fixed belay. Chris leant on Mongol so heavily at times that they would both fall down, but were held tight by the rope. Slowly we made progress downwards. We were now traversing under the top of the rock band.

Chris started to topple over and Mongol couldn't support him. I fell onto the ice axe but was yanked off and followed them falling down the slope. We must have dropped about 90–120 m (300–400 ft) before the rope snagged on a frozen snowdrift. I was surprised we'd fallen so far, and that we'd stopped about 9 m (30 ft) before a cliff. If the rope hadn't snagged we would have travelled over the edge. Well, that's one way of getting down the mountain, I thought to myself.

Packs and various pieces of equipment were scattered over the slope. Mongol unroped and collected it all. Chris was shaken up, but it woke him up a bit more and he started moving better by himself. I looked at the large hole in my glove liner caused by the passage of the rope. I hadn't been able to grasp hold of the rope and it had just passed through my hand.

The fall caused us to lose a little too much altitude and so we had to climb back up about 30 m (100 ft) before descending by the correct route. Now I placed Chris in the middle of the rope, trying to take advantage of both Mongol's and my belay should he fall again. He moved tenuously between us, stumbling and falling but being held in check by the tight rope.

We had just finished coming through the couloir of the top rock band and were standing resting. It was getting dark already, I couldn't believe it had taken so long to cover such a short distance. Where had the time gone? Still, at least we had made it so far, safe and sound. I turned around and saw Chris untie himself. 'What are you doing? Please don't!' 'I was just trying to help,' he replied. I tied him back in again while he stood meekly, looking like a scolded child.

I turned to discuss with Mongol what our plans should be. Chris had untied himself again. He was playing a game with us! I recognised a cheeky grin on his face. Oh! God please help us. Mongol saw my hands as I was tying Chris back into the rope. 'You stupid, stupid girl. Put gloves on!' I had tried to but at this stage they were so swollen and stiff, even the mitts wouldn't fit. I continued to pull my sleeves down to cover the hands, which helped a little.

Mongol led off as I moved along with Chris. I couldn't take my eyes off him for a minute. We staggered along like a couple of drunks coming home from a New Year's Eve party, and shared a joke about what bad shape we were in. I had wanted to make it down another 90 m (300 ft) to a bergschrund which I remembered on the way up. It looked as though it would provide a good bivvy site, but in the dark and feeling completely exhausted, with Chris likely to fall at any moment, it seemed wiser to stop where we were, just below the rocks, on a gentle snow slope. Mongol dug out a platform and we got ready to put Chris in his bivvy sac.

I asked Mongol to give Chris his sleeping bag, as he was a dying man and badly needed it. I thought it might just make the difference and tip the scales in favour of life. Mongol refused to part with it. A feeling of rage overwhelmed me. But how could I demand that Mongol give it up? It was, after all, our choice to leave the bags behind. The rage dissipated into a feeling of despair. I lay beside Chris to try to warm him up. He showed me that one of his hands was swollen and blue-looking. He must have lost a glove when we fell. 'Put it under your arm sweetheart, try and warm it up.' Mongol was digging another platform and I asked him to melt snow instead, as Chris desperately needed a hot drink. After being initially restless, Chris had settled down. He was still saying a few words to me.

I needed to empty my bladder and stood up to do so but I couldn't get the harness undone, or undo the zipper. I was becoming distraught. Chris looked up at me and said, 'Just pee down your leg. It doesn't matter.' I did. His voice was kind and reassured me that really everything was going to be OK after all. I let the muscles go, and felt the warmth flow down my leg and fill my boots. I was horrified to see surface the raw and basic instinct for survival. Where lay the separation between us and animals, after all? I shuddered, retracting from the thought.

We had tied Chris off to an ice axe to prevent him sliding down the slope, but I wanted to use another ice axe as a back-up to the first. Chris was lying on part of the rope and my bivvy sac. I needed to get at both. I gently started easing the bag from under him. Trying to help me he suddenly lurched over to one side. In the process he slid off the ledge. I pulled him back into place but he was now restless again, tossing himself around on the narrow platform. I couldn't control him, I needed help. I called to Mongol.

Chris slid off the platform again. Mongol began complaining that I'd already told him to melt snow, now I was telling him to help Chris, and why didn't I make my mind up etc. etc. I was putting all my weight on the ice axe for fear it would be pulled out as Chris was now standing up in the bivvy sac, fearing he was in danger. He panicked and tried to run, but of course got caught up in the bag. His last words were, 'Will somebody help me?' and then he fell down on the snow. He must have exerted an enormous amount of energy in those final moments.

Mongol had been standing motionless, watching the whole scene. He now came over and helped me lower Chris to the partially built platform where he had been standing before. My rage at Mongol overwhelmed me again. Then I saw Chris's limp hand fall out of the bivvy sac. It was mottled and deep blue. We turned him over to look at his face.

His finely sculptured features, gaunt from weeks of gruelling work, had relaxed into an expression of bliss. All the tension and cares of mortal beings had dissolved, there was only peace and beauty shining forth. His skin was warm and glowed with colour. I bent down to kiss his lips. They were strangely lifeless. I couldn't feel his breath upon my cheeks, only perfect stillness.

As death and love met, my whole being filled with terror, I felt him letting go of the past and all that we had shared, yet the future had not arrived. I couldn't let him go so easily, 'I need you Chris, don't leave me!' I screamed in silence.

From *Living on the Edge*, Macmillan Australia, South Melbourne (1987), pp. 177–80.

Bremer-Kamp later lost many of her fingers and toes to the frostbite she suffered on Kangchenjunga. The trauma of that and of the tragedy on Kangchenjunga itself did not prevent her from returning to the area again. She trekked back to the village of Ghunsa, the last village before Kangchenjunga base camp, to thank the villagers for the help and support they gave her during those difficult times in 1985. She assisted them in a more concrete way as well by spearheading an effort to raise funds for a school and health clinic for the village.

Cherie Bremer-Kamp's Himalayan climbing career ended with the tragic trip to Kangchenjunga in 1984–85. Despite the fact that she stood on no major summits, she climbed to nearly 8000 m several times and acquitted herself well under the most extreme conditions climbers could endure. Her account, in *Living on the Edge*, of Chandler's death, her response and her courageous fight for survival on the descent is one of the most moving adventure and love stories ever told.

Far from the snows of Kangchenjunga, in the dry warm air of western Victoria, romance would again play a role in the history of Australian Himalayan mountaineering. In 1980, a young Belgian woman stopped by Mt Arapiles on a rock-climbing/tourist trip around Australia. She was at that time already an accomplished climber and soon met many of the hot, young local climbers of the Arapiles scene: Mark Moorhead, Roddy Mackenzie, Jon Muir, Chris Shepherd and others.

Although it would be three more years before she married Jon Muir and returned to Australia permanently, Brigitte Muir's first trip was followed by several others to Australia in the early 1980s and by a journey to Nepal in 1982 to join the International Turkey Patrol's expedition to Changabang.

Brigitte Muir was certainly not a neophyte in the climbing game when she first travelled to Australia in 1980. Although her native land, Belgium, is just as flat as Australia, it is located much nearer to some challenging mountainous regions.

Ironically, it was under those mountains rather than on top of them that Muir first got experience in moving in the vertical dimension—she went on caving expeditions in the mid-1970s in Belgium, France, Italy and Spain. Some of her caving friends were rock climbers as well, so she soon traded claustrophobia for vertigo (see image 28.1). By the late 1970s, she had made two major alpine climbing trips: one to the Italian Alps and one to the Logan Mountains of Canada, where she made an ascent of Lotus Flower Mountain. Her best climbing, however, was still to come, after she joined forces with the brash young Aussie climbers of the International Turkey Patrol.

Her first Himalayan experience came on the Changabang expedition. Although the four ITP climbers justifiably received all the kudos for their brilliant ascent of the South-West Pillar, Brigitte and Elke Rudolph, Craig Nottle's girlfriend, were not content to sit quietly at base camp. During the course of the expedition, they made ascents of Hanuman and Divan, two 6000 m peaks in the region.

In 1984, Brigitte Muir again accompanied Jon on a Himalayan expedition, to the West Ridge of Mt Everest. This time she climbed with her sister, Veronique, who had moved to Australia and married Graeme Hill, Jon Muir's friend and climbing partner of long standing. The pair summited on the popular trekking peak Imja Tse (Island Peak).

In between those two trips, Brigitte and Jon were married and went to the European Alps for their honeymoon. While most newlyweds would be happy to spend their days together in Zermatt just looking up at the Matterhorn, the Muirs, of course, climbed the mountain.

Brigitte Muir's big breakthrough in Himalayan climbing came in 1986 on the spectacular mountain Shivling. After an abortive attempt on the peak a year earlier, she, Jon and Graeme Hill made the first ascent of the daunting South-West Pillar in impressive style (Chapter 20). It still stands out as one of the most difficult Himalayan climbs ever undertaken by an Australian team—and arguably the most difficult climb successfully completed.

Some of the pitches on the predominantly rock route of Shivling were grade 21, A4. Climbs of that difficulty are challenging enough on sun-drenched Australian rock at modest altitudes, but are significantly harder in the cold, rarefied air of a Himalayan mountain. Furthermore, Brigitte Muir was one of only three climbers and partook fully in the difficulties, dangers and discomforts of such a testing ascent. She took her turns at leading on the steep rock, did her share of arduous load carrying up the fixed ropes that the team employed in their 'capsule'-style ascent and had to endure 14 days of cramped camps, even more cramped bivouacs and meagre rations to reach Shivling's West Summit (see image 28.2).

A year later, she returned to the Gangotri region, using a climb partway up Kedarnath Dome as a warm-up before she, Geoff Little and New Zealander Lydia Bradey joined a large New Zealand expedition in the Karakoram. Their objective was one of the 8000 m peaks, Hidden Peak (8068 m), but bad weather and heavy snowfalls forced a retreat from 6800 m.

In 1988, she turned her back on the Himalaya, for the time being, but not on mountains. In that year, she embarked on one of the most exciting adventure-travel undertakings in high-altitude mountaineering: the Seven Summits challenge. The Seven Summits refer to the highest mountains on each of the Earth's seven continents. Although some climbers might have contemplated such a project earlier, the Seven Summits idea did not really take off until the early 1980s when wealthy American businessmen Dick Bass and Frank Wells decided to become the first to scale the highest peak on each of the continents. Bass eventually succeeded, although on the more difficult mountains professional mountaineers whom he had hired guided him to the summit.

Brigitte Muir's quest to become the first woman to complete the Seven Summits began in 1988. On 28 May, she summited on Denali—at just more than 6000 m, the highest peak in North America. The next year, two more fell: in February, she climbed Africa's Mt Kilimanjaro in a week-long trip, and on Christmas Day 1989, she completed a solo ascent of Aconcagua, South America's highest mountain and the highest peak outside of the Himalaya.

Australia's own Mt Kosciuszko was climbed in 1990, as was Europe's highest mountain, Mt Elbrus in the Caucasus Mountains of Russia. Five down, two to go. The five that Muir had already climbed were, however, the easiest of the seven highest peaks—both technically and logistically. Getting the last two is the trick.

One of the final pair is Mt Vinson, the highest peak in Antarctica. Mt Vinson is not particularly high (just less than 5000 m) and it is not difficult technically, especially during the summer when darkness is not a problem. Climbers can set out for the summit any time of the day or night, whenever a spell of fine weather appears.

Logistically, however, Vinson is the most difficult of the seven summits. It is located in Antarctica's Ellsworth Mountains, a long way from any of the scientific research stations or permanent landing strips. Getting there generally requires a special charter flight from Chile or Argentina and an equally expensive flight to be picked up after the climb.

Mt Everest, of course, is the highest of the seven summits and the most difficult technically, even by the standard South Col route. The narrow ridge from the South Summit to the top is a testing piece of climbing, made even more serious by the extreme altitude. In addition, access to Everest has ironically become more difficult recently with the rapidly increasing number of 'mail-order mountaineering' trips on the mountain. The fees for joining one of these trips (sometimes up to US\$30 000 per climber in the late 1980s—considerably more expensive now) have raised the average cost of an Everest attempt in general through market forces by leading to increased peak fees and local staff costs.

Staying safe

Brigitte Muir and Cherie Bremer-Kamp notwithstanding, the first era of Australian mountaineering in the Himalayan has been an exceedingly quiet one for female climbers. The obvious question is why, particularly since women played such a prominent role in early Australian alpine climbing?

One possible reason is the rapidly rising popularity of 'sport' and 'competition' climbing, in which Australian women perform very well and participate in large numbers. Although that activity bears the general name 'climbing', and indeed is virtually identical physically to rock climbing, it is a fundamentally different activity from Himalayan mountaineering, from alpine climbing in general and from traditional rock climbing. The difference is mental. Modern sport climbing is essentially a safe activity; in traditional climbing, possible serious injury and even death—particularly in Himalayan mountaineering—are essential elements of the activity.

Of course, the desire to avoid the dangers of traditional climbing is attracting males and females to sport climbing. The attraction, however—or the desire to avoid the high risk of hard Himalayan climbing—could be particularly strong for women with children. As Jo Flood put it succinctly: 'Having children changes your attitude. You don't want to leave your children as orphans.'¹⁰

10 J. Flood, Interview.

Cherie Bremer-Kamp's anguished thoughts just after Chris Chandler died high on Kangchenjunga echoed the same feeling:

I wanted to go with Chris, to seek out where he had gone. A subtle presence became more strongly felt. I recognised it as my two children standing there beside me, looking solemnly at the scene without pleading, grief or tears. I sensed their need for guidance and counsel, especially over the next few years. Although they never asked for help I turned towards them, and Chris went on alone.¹¹

Although Bremer-Kamp's bond with her children did not prevent her from undertaking a very risky climb on Kangchenjunga, it undoubtedly gave her the inner strength it took to get herself and Mongol off the mountain alive.

There could be other reasons for the lack of Australian women in the Himalaya. Doug Scott has argued that women, because of their smaller average size and lower strength, cannot compete with men in the modern alpine style of Himalayan mountaineering. That style requires extended periods of difficult climbing while carrying heavy loads. (Ironically, alpine-style climbing is anything but 'lightweight' as far as the individual climbers are concerned!)

Dot Butler has a somewhat different view on the same issue. She agrees that carrying heavy loads could be a problem, but argues that it is not that women cannot carry such loads, but that they do not want to these days. Certainly, as Butler herself proved, a few decades ago in New Zealand, Australian women were the equal of their male counterparts in hauling enormous loads over the Southern Alps and making impressive ascents along the way.

The dearth of Australian female mountaineers could simply be due to practical reasons. Mike Rheinberger notes that, within the Melbourne climbing community, many of the potential women mountaineers are married to climbers and are starting families just at the optimum time for pursuing their own climbing careers.

Jo Flood suggested that lack of opportunity for girls, coupled with the lack of our own major mountain range, could be important factors:

In Britain there were girls' Outward Bound courses. Many became involved in climbing that way. They had female instructors, and a lot of girls took such courses. The system isn't as developed in Australia. Here many girls wouldn't get introduced to climbing. Abseiling is popular, but not climbing.

Also, there are many other sports here that are attractive to girls. In addition, Australia doesn't have its own spectacular peaks—at least not snow and ice mountains—to attract potential climbers.¹²

11 Bremer-Kamp, *Living on the Edge*, ch. 9.

12 J. Flood, Interview.

It is difficult to ascribe the relative lack of female Australian Himalayan mountaineers to any of these factors, or combinations of factors, as the Australian mountaineering community itself is so small. Statistics are virtually meaningless with such a small sample and the absence of Australian female climbers in the great ranges of Asia could simply be a statistical quirk. Indeed, if two or three Australian women had climbed several major Himalayan peaks in the 1980s, including an 8000-er or two and Mt Everest, the question would not even arise.

Perhaps it is best to let Brigitte Muir have the last word: 'Women can climb mountains just as easily as men. We all need the same qualities: stamina, patience, and a strong head. The important thing is the mind driving the body.'¹³

¹³ B. Muir in Freeman-Greene, S. 1991, 'Muir. The Australian way', *Australian Airlines In-flight Magazine*, April, p. 11.

This text is taken from *Himalayan Dreaming: Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia, 1922–1990*, by Will Steffen, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.