

*"Will my grandchildren have a glacier to ski on at all?
It is a sobering question."*

Symphony on Skis

SKI MOUNTAINEERING IN THE SOUTHERN ALPS

Words by Thomas MacTavish

In momentary surrender I hunched forward and rested my hands on my knees, breathing short and sharp, every expulsion filling the narrow band of light cast by my head torch with thick shrouds of mist. From behind me came the groan of a man whose energy was long since spent. That man was my cousin Nick Begg, and, connected as we were by blood, rope, and the physical and emotional rollercoaster of the preceding sixteen hours, that groan could just as well have come from me. After a minute or so, I straightened and moved on. The snow was light and dry, my pack heavy with the weight of skis. The combination was a killer. With every step the snow compacted thirty centimetres and then a further ten under the full weight of my body.

However, no amount of step plugging, no pain or exhaustion, could extinguish the joy and wonder welling up in me. Nick and I were within a stone's throw of Graham Saddle, the highest point in our fifty kilometre ski traverse of New Zealand's Southern Alps. There was not a breath of wind and the eerie silence was enchanting. Above me twinkled an incredible night sky, star-studded despite the glow of a three-quarter moon. Below me, the moonlight picked out seracs, crevasses, and undulations patterning the snow surface.

Far below, my eye caught a tiny flicker of light, a car moving up the road to Mt Cook village. What had kept this person out to nearly midnight, a social drink perhaps? I had never in my life felt so distant from another living human being. In sharp contrast, I felt a growing empathy with two others no longer living – my grandfather, Neil Begg, and mountain guide Gottlieb Braun-Elwert.

Neil, a Dunedin paediatrician, historian and explorer of New Zealand's southern regions, died in 1995 when I was only eight. However his enthusiastic account of skiing adventures amongst the high peaks of New Zealand's Southern Alps during the 1930s in his autobiography, *The Intervening Years*, fuelled my desire for similar adventures. Gottlieb Braun-Elwert was a highly respected mountain and ski guide whose life was sadly and unexpectedly cut short soon after successfully guiding former Prime Minister Helen Clark on a backcountry mission in 2008. His contribution to both high country conservation and alpine adventure are well known. And it was Gottlieb and two others, who, in 1986, pioneered the Southern Alps ski traverse they named 'Symphony on Skis', which Nick and I were now retracing.

Beginning near the head of Lake Tekapo and finishing at Fox Glacier on the West Coast, the *Symphony on Skis* involves 4000 vertical metres of climbing, four high alpine passes and five of New Zealand's largest glaciers. Gottlieb's original party completed the entire 46.7km traverse in an impressive eighteen-hour single push. On completion of the traverse, Gottlieb wrote: 'A ski traverse is like a well composed piece of music. It flows with harmony, surprises with the unexpected. It engages all your emotions and the melody lingers in your mind afterwards. Good music needs players who are masters of their instruments'.

We decided to try and emulate the same 'music' as Gottlieb's team, but, given that it was midwinter and we were not quite such 'masters of our instruments', we opted for three to four days, with a series of hut 'interludes'.

So it was, in August 2011, that two nervous and excited young men found themselves bumping their way past Lilybank Station and a further 32 km up the Godley River bed in the 4WD of a local hunting guide. My grandfather had undertaken the very same in the very same month of 1938, but his party had tackled the track between Tekapo village and Lilybank in his car, a set of rudimentary rope 'chains' and shovels their only insurance against deep snow. A quiet old packhorse lent by the Station owners made their long walk up the Godley River a little easier.

After a 4:30am start the following day, we soon removed our skis from our packs at the snow covered entrance to Rutherford Stream in preparation for the 1200 metre ascent to our first pass – Armadillo Saddle (2160m). Skinning my way up the Rutherford I was thankful for my light modern skis and spared a thought for Neil and his party, who sweated their way up the glacier with heavy, brass-lined, hickory skis.

Our equipment was a modern, streamlined version of theirs. Our fibreglass, bamboo, carbon-steel, and plastic skis are lightweight and we wear ski boots that can transition between a classical rigid downhill and an uphill/walking mode at the flick of a switch. They are a long way from the hob-nailed boots used by my grandfather. When travelling uphill, sticky, purpose-built climbing skins fitted to the base of our skis allow the ski to slide forward but then grip to prevent backward slide. 'Skins' today are synthetic, but as the name would suggest, they were originally fashioned from seal hide. My grandfather wrote of his sealskins, and of his companion, John Adams, who had to settle for makeshift strips of pleated sacking.

Gottlieb described the journey of his party up the Rutherford as 'Andante' and I was pleasantly surprised to find that this was also an entirely appropriate metaphor for our journey. A deep blanket of snow bridged the boulders, waterfalls and other such difficulties and the valley was largely free of avalanche debris. Transceivers and careful spacing between us ensured that, in the event of an avalanche, one of us should remain clear of the slide and use his transceiver to locate the other. That was another bit of modern technology for which we were grateful.

As we gained altitude and the sides of the valley steepened, we occasionally paused to admire the surroundings. Steep buttresses of rock were decorated with chandeliers of neon blue waterfall ice and patches of intruding sunlight revealed millions of minute, sparkling crystals of surface hoar. On reaching the final steep snow slopes stretching up to Armadillo Saddle, skis were traded for ice axes and crampons. Arriving at the Saddle puffing and sweating, we certainly felt more than ready for the next phase, which Gottlieb described as 'Scherzo'.

I had secretly been feeling rather chuffed at the ease with which we had negotiated Rutherford Stream and the climb to Armadillo Saddle, but the sight of the labyrinth of glaciers and mountains before us served as a reality check – the hard stuff was just beginning. Anxiously our eyes picked out what appeared to be a steep narrow route of continuous snow slopes and gullies leading down into the Harper, a valley directly above the Murchison Glacier. Nick, a stronger skier than me, quickly transitioned, and I watched with a mixture of joy and envy as he effortlessly carved and whooped his way down steep chutes into the lovely deep powder of the Harper.

With Gottlieb's description of his skis dancing down the same run some 26 years before and Nick's whoops lingering in my mind, I also launched



Thomas climbing with Fox Glacier in the background PHOTO: NICK BEGG



dissipated. Well fed, we left Kelman Hut rejuvenated and eagerly anticipating the ten kilometre ski run down the Tasman Glacier. Skiing the Tasman, with its gentle 15-20 degree slopes, was most exhilarating for its outlook. Malte Brun lay to our left, the heavily glaciated faces of the Main Divide to our right and Aoraki/Mt Cook loomed in front of us. Traditionally popular with heli and ski plane trips, in 1986 Gottlieb wrote that, 'we sailed past groups of fancy skiers air-dropped onto the glacier from another world'. By contrast, we didn't see another soul skiing on the Tasman that day.

Bindings released and skins back on, the joys of downhill skiing on the Tasman were soon a distant memory, the Rudolf Glacier and the infamous Graham Saddle our new reality. If we were to make Graham Saddle before nightfall we must certainly skin and climb 'Vivace' as Gottlieb's party had. The moraine wall that had peppered Gottlieb's party with rockfall in 1986 was also harassing us.

Increased rockfall is a consequence of the current glacial retreat in the Southern Alps. A warmer climate leads to 'downwasting' of a glacier's trunk and therefore steep-sided valley walls, formerly held up by ice, launch loose rocks at unsuspecting skiers and climbers. A warmer climate also means rapid changes at the glacier's terminus and from high up on the Rudolf I could see the huge lake that has formed at the front of the Tasman Glacier. The lake, now in excess of 6km long and 200m deep, did not exist 40 years ago. Similarly, the Godley Glacier, the focus of my grandfather's skiing adventures, is now also only a shadow of its former self. 72 years ago he strapped on his skis just twenty metres from the Godley Hut. Today I would need to travel over a kilometre in a boat before reaching ice. Will my grandchildren have a glacier to ski on at all? It is a sobering question.

Glacial downwasting on the approach to Graham Saddle since Gottlieb's traverse in 1986 meant bypassing the lower icefall and forging a route with crampons and ice axes through steep, frozen, south-facing gullies on the true left of the glacier. While only the front points of my crampons penetrated the hard ice, I gained confidence from my ice axes, their deep penetration forcing squeaks and squeals from the frozen surface. Thank! Suddenly my methodical upward motion was rudely interrupted as the adze of my ice axe crashed into my nose. Head ringing and blood welling up in front of my eyes, I cursed my stupidity. It pays to take care when removing a 'stuck' ice axe close to one's face. Shaken, I continued upward, leaving a scarlet trail on the pure white snow.

The firm conditions and the sustained nature of the climbing soon necessitated a rope. It took forty solid hits with the hammer on the back of my ice axe to drive a sleek 60cm metal snow stake into the snow ice and we backed it up by hammering in an ice axe. Nick remained attached to the anchor, and, as I climbed, he fed me rope through a friction device that in the event of a fall should allow him to catch me.

myself down the slope. Whumph! On the second downhill turn of the trip I buried my tips and 'face planted' into the snow! Humbled, I picked myself up and set off again more sedately, giving myself time to adjust to the snow conditions and the heavy pack on my back. By the time we reached the final 20-30 degree slopes leading to the Murchison Glacier my confidence was restored, and finally, I, too, was able to experience the joys of Scherzo.

Our skis met New Zealand's second largest glacier and Gottlieb's breakfast spot, the Murchison, in the early afternoon. We had not matched the tempo of Gottlieb's party, and there was still another long climb, 900 vertical metres, to Tasman Saddle, lying between us and Kelman Hut. But the gentle slopes of the Murchison allowed my mind to explore our new surroundings. The shadows of a shy winter sun accentuated pitting and etching on the snow surface, a fine mist of snow crystals scurried down glacier in a gentle breeze, and acres of snow-covered crevasses resembled the ruffled surface of a silky white duvet. Encircling this landscape were the mountains, proud and uncompromising.

As the sun began to fail and the cool breeze gained momentum, the blood gradually drained from my fingers and a chill began to creep through my body, in spite of my specialist alpine clothing. I consoled myself with

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thoughts of the attire used by Neil and his party, army issue clothing covered with chaff sacks that had holes cut for neck and arms. My grandfather wrote that by the time they had skied, eyes streaming, down the Godley Glacier, their clothes would often have frozen solid. I was more fortunate – this was the only time on the journey I felt the cold.

When we finally stumbled through the door into an empty Kelman Hut at 9.30p.m, we were more than ready for an interlude. Nonetheless, after food and refreshments, and believing that our longest, hardest day was safely behind us, it was with some satisfaction that I finally laid my head down in New Zealand's second highest hut.

Stiff and sore, we reluctantly left our sleeping bags just in time to watch the first rays of sunlight strike the northern flanks of Mt Aylmer. When those same rays hit my flanks, my stiff limbs began to relax and residual tension

Once, our climb was disturbed by a rumble so loud that it was difficult to locate. I looked down and saw Nick silhouetted against the billowing clouds of a massive avalanche running off the Main Divide on the other side of the valley. My initial awe was soon replaced with a shudder as the powder clouds travelled right across our skin trail from just a few hours before. Feeling small, I continued climbing.

'Adagio' soon became a more appropriate tempo than Vivace. It was nightfall before we had successfully negotiated the two icefalls leading to Graham Saddle. Bypassing the second icefall, we encountered blue glacier ice so hard that my light walking ice axe simply rebounded off the bullet-proof surface. Working by head torch, we instead used ice screws to drill holes that met to form a 'V'. Threaded with cord, these provided us with secure anchors. Building anchors and climbing sequentially is slow and arduous

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The original 1986 Symphony team PHOTO: ANNE BRAUN-ELWERT

work and so it was many hours later that we finally reached the easier ground above the icefall. In an uncontrollable release of emotion I shouted, "Take that, Graham Saddle!"

And so we came to be sitting, exhausted but philosophical, at midnight, on the easy snow slopes not far below Graham Saddle. Eventually we rose and slowly but surely plodded our way to the Saddle. We stood on top of the Main Divide and experienced the joy of gazing westward at the flickering lights of Franz Josef Township.

A mix of moon and torch light allowed us to carefully ski our way down the upper snowfields of the Franz Josef Neve and then skin across the dimly glowing snow to Centennial Hut. At 3:30am, after 18 hours, it was a surreal feeling to finally see the silhouette of the Hut appear out of the darkness. In our slightly delusional state, Nick crashed his skis into the hut door three times before grasping that he could not enter without removing them from his pack. I cringe when I think of our loud and obnoxious entry, but the character of high huts and the people that occupy them ensured there was not a whisper of complaint that night. Indeed, one person even rose and made us a much needed hot brew. High huts are special places, small oases of warmth, shelter, food and companionship in what is an otherwise harsh and unforgiving environment.

After those two epic days, we chose to have a day's rest at Centennial Hut. A day later, re-energised, we crossed the desolate landscape of the Franz Josef Neve under another spectacular blue sky and were standing on Newton Pass (2492m), the highpoint of our third and final ski day.

We began our descent with caution, negotiating shrunds and crevasses with delicate traverses and precise turns. Successfully off the pass, however, and away from immediate danger, my skis were free to express feelings of emotional release. Snaking our way down the glacier, the Tasman Ocean in our direct line of vision, we whooped with pleasure as we



Nick Begg skiing off Armadillo PHOTO: THOMAS MACTAVISH

found slope after slope of light fluffy powder. In no time we were next to the serac towers of the lower Fox Glacier and we removed our skis and plodded the final 50 metres as Gottlieb's party had done 26 years before.

With Chancellor Hut in sight, it was time for the final crescendo. Nick, with crescendo in mind (or perhaps the small audience at the hut), decided to bomb the final snow slope at lightning speed. His descent was perfect but for an uncharacteristic 'wipeout' on the very last turn. As I skied the final slope in a less flamboyant manner, I smiled to myself, thinking it just wouldn't have been in keeping with the rest of our musical composition if the Finale had remained faultless.

As the light faded and the drone of helicopters was replaced by the squabbles of a cheeky band of keas, my thoughts returned to Neil and Gottlieb. How fitting, I thought, that our adventure had ended at Chancellor Hut. Built in 1935 and one of New Zealand's first alpine huts, it was just a few years old when Neil embarked on his Southern Alps skiing adventures. Although his equipment may have become obsolete, I feel Chancellor Hut is as valuable to us today as it was to my grandfather's generation. The hut makes it possible to access the lonely mountains and glaciers of the Southern Alps, a timeless adventure playground that evokes the same joy and wonder from me as it once did from my grandfather.

I have immense respect for those who have raised awareness, not only about this special environment, but also the continued need for its preservation. Outspoken on high country conservation, Gottlieb Braun-Elwert was undoubtedly such a person. Although our rendition of his 'Symphony on Skis' may not have been quite the harmonic masterpiece of his party, it had its own special ingredients. As young New Zealanders, we were grateful to draw upon the inspiration of the past, and hope that this incredible experience remains possible for other young New Zealanders into the future.

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2007

Haggis prefers helicopters over hiking

2008

Pang has been down this chute on everything but a snowboard

2004

Josh was bluffed out & had to pick his way back up

1997

Boss managed a ton of TT's (tight turns) before hitting the lake

2009

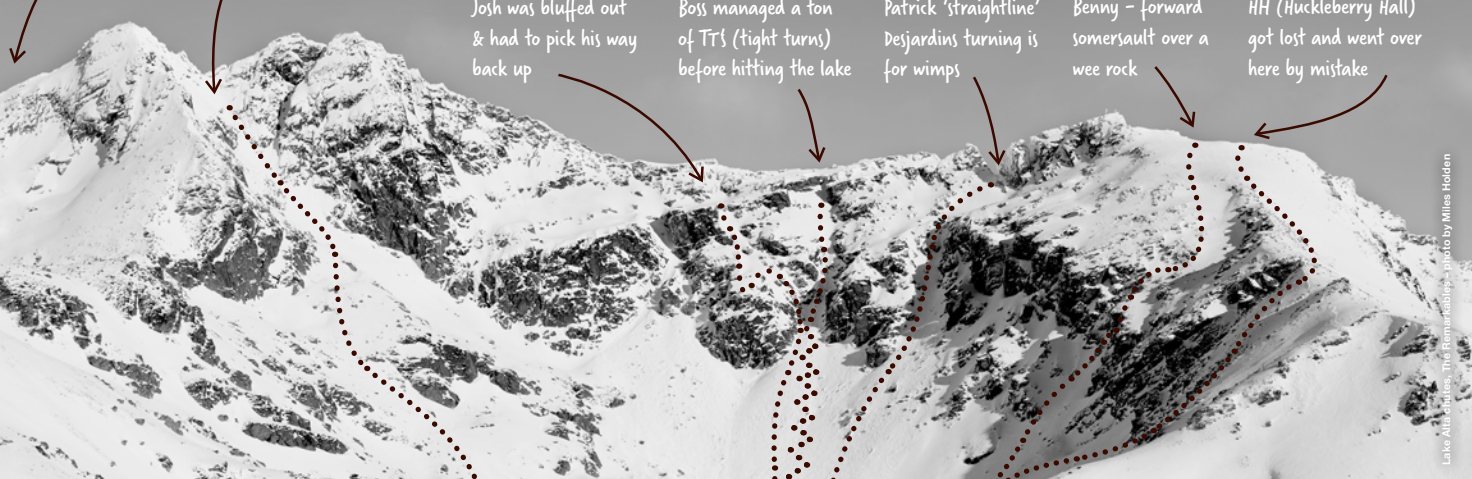
Patrick 'straightline' Desjardins turning is for wimps

2008

Benny - forward somersault over a wee rock

2007

HH (Huckleberry Hall) got lost and went over here by mistake



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