

The Western Face of the Main Range

By Colin Wyatt

BY far the finest running in the Kosciusko area lies on the western side of the Divide, and Mrs. Tom Mitchell and I spent a lot of time this winter exploring it. The shortest descent on this face is about 1,600 ft., and the majority give over 2,000 ft. of running which is in every way equal to the best European country.

The western face is little visited if at all by most runners, and seems to have a quite unmerited reputation for extreme steepness and danger; this is perhaps due to the fact that the slopes which give the best running are often out of sight from the top of the range, and only unfold themselves as one descends. These slopes hold good snow and have very few rocks, and their average gradient is between 20° to 25°. In August we always found excellent spring snow on them, while the return run back to Charlotte's Pass was almost invariably crust and skavla, except in the valleys.

The scenery is without exception magnificent, and to give oneself time to dawdle over lunch and still start the return trip before 1 p.m. to get the best snow and weather conditions, an early start is essential. We were never troubled with cloud in the western valleys, and on the one occasion when the top of the range was in the clouds when we crossed, the opposite valleys were clear below them and we had no difficulty, even in returning by a different route. One is usually in a very definite steep valley, or on an isolated ridge, so that finding one's way back to the Range in case of bad weather, even if one's tracks are blown over, is a more simple matter than on the wide open spaces of the eastern side.

The Western Face tours arrange themselves into three groups, those off Townsend, Carruthers, and Twynam. There still remain one or two runs off Carruthers to be investigated on the northern side.

TWYNAM WEST SPUR.

Our first trip was to explore the western ridge of Twynam, generally known as "Watson's Crag". This name appears to be applied indiscriminately to any and every rocky ridge to the west between Townsend and Twynam, but as this is by far the longest, most varied and most outstanding, it probably merits the name best. We left the Chalet at 7 a.m. and went up over the Blue Lake and the valley beyond to the Range, which we reached at 9 a.m. The usual route from this point to Twynam runs north along the range, but we turned south for a few hundred yards and went out along the big whale-backed sharp spur that juts out west, reaching the top of the first snow hump, 7,100 ft., in about ten minutes. Below, to the north, lies a deep valley immediately under Twynam, and further west, and about 1,000 ft. below, a level subsidiary snow spur juts out north-west from Watson's Crag, culminating in a point and a cairn. We proposed to go to the end of this, and on down whichever side looked best.

The Watson's Crags spur is about 60 yards wide at the narrowest point. In about half-a-mile it falls to a saddle at about 6,800 ft., which is the best point to drop over into the valley. At any other point the edge is apt to be more or less heavily corniced, but this spot is perfectly safe under normal conditions, and should never form a cornice. We climbed on along the ridge beyond, and soon reached a point from which we had a superb view of Jagungal; below lay a sheer drop of over 2,000 ft. to Watson's Gorge Creek, and beyond it rose the spur coming from Mt. Anderson. This spur drops to a saddle in the tall timber and then rises again to a little clear snowy alp on a knob surrounded by trees, which we visited a few days later. Our spur now turned slightly to the south, and we went on for another $\frac{3}{4}$ mile or so until we reached the end of the skiable part of it, a knob at 6,700 ft., about a mile out to the west of the Range. From this point one has a superb panorama of the western face; to the south is a steep gorge eventually connecting with the Northcote Canon, and across it one looks directly on to the sheer west face of Carruthers, about 2 miles away. To the right one looks up the length of the Northcote Canon, to Kosciusko framed between Northcote and Townsend.

We now returned to the saddle at 10.10 a.m. and had a wonderful non-stop run of 1,000 ft. over steep, open slopes to the foot of the subsidiary spur, along which we skied to the cairn at the end at 5,800 ft. The slope we had come down continued for about 200 ft. to the left and then ended in a drop, but it looked good to the right, so we went over the top and had very fast running for about 500 ft.; we then kept left-handed across the face through some burnt out black-wattle scrub and finished up at 10.30 a.m. on a tiny clear knob at 4,820 ft., just above the junction of the main creek from Twynam and the smaller one from Anderson, right under the Anderson ridge (see photo. opp. p. 26). After a rest we put on skins and had a very hot two hour climb back to the range; instead of following our down tracks to the saddle we continued straight on from the subsidiary spur up a steep, open slope through two rocky outcrops and up a ridge that joined Watson's Crags about half way between the saddle and the first hump. This, we realised, would have given a much faster and longer run, but under some conditions would not be safe, especially early in the winter.

From the Range we had a very nice run home via the Blue Lake, and were back in the Chalet in an hour and ten minutes.

Total day's running, including Charlotte's, 4,300 ft.; total climb, $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours; longest single descent, 2,200 ft.

THE ANDERSON SPUR.

The next trip was the Anderson Spur. We left the Chalet late at 9.40 a.m., and reached Twynam at 11.30. We then skied down northwards across the western side to the saddle between Twynam foot and Anderson; this was lovely fast open running on easy slopes for about 900 ft., and after half a mile or so of a slightly uphill traverse we arrived on top of Anderson, 6,300 ft., at noon. From this viewpoint we looked along the whole length of Watson's Crags, and could follow every detail of our last trip. We also noted that a slight spur ran off Twynam between us, dividing the Anderson Creek from the Watson's Gorge Creek, which would give about 1,500 ft. of superb open running, and would make a very well worth while easy day's trip.

We dawdled about taking photographs, and then started off down the ridge. After fine open slopes for 500 ft. it narrowed to about 30 ft. with easy slopes off to the right into a shallow valley. We fizzed down the ridge in continuous turns and came out into easy glades in burnt-out snow-gums, which continued down to 5,300 ft. The open running ended here, and the next 400 ft. was rather tricky wood-running through small suckers and bushes, and we had to go over to the south flank before we could rejoin the ridge and finish with 200 ft. of open running between huge mountain-ash boles. The run ended at 12.50 p.m. on a saddle at 4,700 ft. in thick tall timber, and 25 minutes' climbing took us out on to the open alp at 5,000 ft., that we had seen from Watson's Crags. We lunched here and studied the ridge we had come down, from top to bottom, and had a fine view up the gorge of Watson's Gorge Creek to the west face of Twynam. To the right rose the sheer rock face of the end of Watson's Crags that we had looked down

over on our last trip. We left the alp at 2 p.m. and were back on Anderson at 3:30 p.m. after an easy climb. Here we rested 15 minutes and then continued, our aim being to cut between the two humps north of Twynam, which may or may not be Gill's Knobs, traverse round behind Twynam to Blister Gap, and so home. We now know that it is far easier and quicker to climb all the way back to the top of Twynam, for its eastern side is cut by deep creeks and jutting-out ridges, and we had an awful time traversing in and out and up and down, losing quite a bit of altitude in the process, and did not get to Blister Gap until 5 p.m. By now it was cold and the visibility on the frozen skavla and ice was nil. We had a thoroughly unpleasant run down to the Snowy, and got to the Chalet at 5.45 p.m. This proved to us the need to start not later than 8 a.m. at the latest, and also how much nicer the snow is on the western side of the Range.

Total day's running, 4,800 ft., including Charlotte's, total climb $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours (could be shortened to $4\frac{1}{4}$ hours). Longest single descent (broken by short traverse up Anderson), 2,500 ft.

THE HANNELL SPUR OF TOWNSEND.

Our next objective was the Hannell Spur of Townsend. We left again at 9.40 a.m., in spite of my preceding remarks, and went up past the Foreman Hut to the saddle between Lee and Northcote, which we reached at 11.10, a very easy climb. After a lovely run down to Lake Albina, we reached the top of Townsend at 12.05. We could see a lovely spur, shown on the map as Townsend Spur, to the right below us, but the Hannell Spur was hidden by Abbott. After a rest, an exciting run of some 500 ft. followed by a short climb brought us to Abbott at 12.50 p.m. Abbott has two tops on a small plateau, and from the further one we had a reasonable view of the Hannell Spur; we could see the foot of the steep slope below us run into a creek that divided us from the Spur, and then follow the Spur pretty well to the timber line. So off we went and had a most exciting natural slalom for about 1,000 ft. down a steep rocky slope. It was fast running, but there were plenty of wide glades and open places for anyone wanting to do slow turns. We crossed the creek and traversed down across the north flank of the Spur on terribly soggy snow; we were again too late in the day. On the Spur itself there was lovely running in open glades of burnt-out snow-gums down to about 5,300 ft. We found a big rock at 5,500 ft. and stopped there for lunch at 1.45 p.m. Apart from the fact that one seemed to be sitting right on top of the Geehi Flats, the view from here was nothing out of the ordinary.

We began to climb at 2.45 p.m. and soon struck off to the south of Hannell Spur to a small rocky saddle. This led almost due south down a tiny slope to a creek, and up a lovely slope beyond to a ridge of the Abbott Range at about 6,700 ft., and a mile S.W. of Abbott. We crossed the ridge at 3.50 p.m. approximately a mile to the south of the Abbott peaks, and ran down into Wilkinson's Valley and up to what I believe is Northcote Pass, in an hour. As it was now 4.50 p.m. it was too late to go up to the summit, so we had a swift run down to the head of the Snowy and easy punting home. We got to the Chalet at 5.50 p.m. I think this trip would be far better done the reverse way round, going first to the summit and then across to the Abbott Range and down, and back via Abbott itself, leaving Townsend out of it altogether. The best running is from the Abbott Range down the Hannell Spur.

Total day's running about 4,600 ft., including Charlotte's, total climbing $4\frac{1}{2}$ hours. Longest single descent 1,600 ft.

THE TOWNSEND SPUR.

The best run off Townsend, and to my mind, the best run of the Western Faces, is down the Townsend Spur. We left the Chalet at 7.45 a.m. and arrived at the saddle between Lee and Northcote at 9.30 and on top of Townsend at 10.30. After some reconnaissance we cut across the summit plateau to the northern top of Townsend. From the top of this one looks sheer down into the Northcote Canyon, and on to the best run off the western face of Carruthers, and a little gully runs N.W., broadening out into a nice basin with a rocky knob beyond on the Spur.

One turns slightly left before the knob, and cuts around the foot of it out on to the main open west face of Townsend massif. Here a fast right-hand traverse leads back to the Spur, and ends in a terrific schuss with a beautiful outrun on to a wide snow saddle right on the edge of the Northcote Canyon. Instead of climbing up the little peak opposite, one curves left without stopping and has a long traverse S.W. on the inside or southern slope of the Spur down to the snow-gums, and through glades on to a sheltered saddle at 5,150 ft. overlooking the Geehi Flats. Actually the Townsend Spur forks at the upper snow saddle after the schuss, the main spur going up over the little snow peak and on due north, while our spur is a subsidiary one running almost due west. The joy of this tour is that it is mostly S.W. or south slopes, and that it can be non-stop if so desired, i.e., 2,100 ft. of continuous fast running. The gradients are easier than most western face slopes, averaging about 20°. In spring the whole thing is "spring snow." There are any amount of variations; there are two gullies and one ridge running from either top of Townsend down into our creek, though without crossing it, all of which offer a steep non-stop run of about 1,750 ft. into the snow-gum glades. A very fine, though shorter, run that could be done in certain conditions, would be from a suitable point on the upper Spur down into the Northcote Canyon, say, from the big saddle at the creek source. This would probably be advisable late in the season.

We left the foot of our run at 11.55 a.m. and arrived back on Townsend summit plateau in 2 hours; from here we cut across to Kosciusko in 55 minutes, and left the Summit at 3.05. We ran down to Cootapatamba Saddle, cut across Etheridge Range south of the Seaman Hut, and got back to the Chalet at 4.30 p.m., altogether much better timing.

Total day's running, including Charlotte's, about 4,500 ft. Total climb, 4½ hrs. Longest single descent, 2,100 ft. non-stop.

THE WEST FACE OF LEE.

Our last trip was a short one, due west off Lee into the foot of the Northcote Canyon. There is wonderful open running over vast slopes from Lee (or Carruthers) down to the creek at the foot of the subsidiary spur of snow that comes off the range near Northcote, and then one spins down a narrow steep 900 ft. funnel out on to the flank of the S.W. spur of Carruthers immediately above the Northcote Canyon creek. This gully is so narrow that one just goes down in continuous turns up either side of the banking, and is great fun in good snow. Total running about 1,600 ft. non-stop. On leaving the top of Lee one should keep to the right so as to land up at the top of the funnel. A much better edition of this run would be from the top of Carruthers S.W. to the top of the funnel. This would give well sheltered snow and about 1,900 ft. of non-stop, over 25° running. The climb out via Northcote Canyon to the Lee-Northcote saddle is very gradual and easy, and takes barely 1½ hours.

Total day's running, 3,000 ft., total climbing, 3½ hrs. Longest continuous descent 1,600 ft. (from Carruthers 1,900 ft.). A very nice easy day tour.

Some time I hope to explore the spurs from Carruthers to Watson's Crags, after which I should have enough reference photos to make a reasonably accurate chart of these very fine runs. But I hope that this article will convey to readers some of the glorious ski-ing to be had down the Western Faces, and convince them of its practicability and safety; any third class runner should be able to do and enjoy all these runs.

Highways to the West

By Elyne Mitchell

LAST winter's skiing was, for me, a lone fulfilment of what were many of the hopes we held together. Often, at Towong, when the first snows fell, we would look up at the steep western face of the Main Range—the magnetic point of our horizon—and dream of the ski runs we would do down those ridges and gullies. Accidents to us both, and the War, had stopped their realisation, but last winter—while Tom spent all his leave walking through the hot hills of Malaya—to be able to tell him of the spurs and gullies of the western face became my winter's goal.

Except for the Townsend Racecourse which leads into the Northcote Canyon, the western flanks of the Kosciusko plateau were almost unknown in winter. The party from Wragge's Observatory that made the first winter ascent of Townsend, also made an inadvertent descent of its western side, but it was on foot to retrieve one of their Kiandra skis that had gone sailing down towards Geehi. The first ski descent that is recorded was made by Tom Mitchell and George Day in 1934 (A. & N.Z. Y.B. 1935) when they went from Lake Albina, right down the Northcote Canyon. They climbed up by a narrow cleft which they named Little Austria, and which leads on to a steep ridge of Carruther's Peaks. It was down Little Austria that George Day subsequently had a bad fall in 1936.

My first experience of "western facing", except for the Inter-Dominion Race in 1937, was early in the winter, when I went as far as time allowed in the short winter day, directly down from Townsend. This was enough to suddenly make anything but the western slopes seem tame, though those of Townsend are not nearly as steep as they appear from the Murray Valley. Later, the well known slopes above the Snowy River came to be only the highway to and from what lay beyond.

There is some powerful mystery in the gullies that go down into invisible labyrinths leading to Geehi. Ridges are like magic stair-cases, but gullies only unfold their secrets as you go further, every corner promising some new revelation, and at the end of the skiing the overpowering secret may still be unrevealed, as the arms of the narrowing gulch have closed in, surrounding one with towering white walls, or leaving just one golden window open to the west through which a glimpse can be caught of the Murray's shining bends, away down past Towong. Such a gully was the first one I went down, a steep gully enclosed by a spur of Carruther's and a long narrow ridge which rises to a glorious pure snow peak which I called the Sentinel. "Toddy" Allen and I went together, swinging down and down, the snow gleaming golden in the western sun, cold engulfing us as we sped lower—and our whole idea of skiing at Kosciusko was changed.

The magnetic draw of that gully was immense, or was it the longing to stand far below the Sentinel itself that drew me back there once more before I returned home? One day of half sunshine, half cloud, George Day and I dropped over the edge into the mist-swirling funnel mouth and a few minutes later could laugh at the cold south wind that blew clouds and snow around the Sentinel. We had 1,300 feet of beautiful running. Once I went sliding down from the top of Lee into a dark cloud-filled valley with three companions who were like spectres vanishing and appearing in the clouds. None of us knew where we were going, but I had once seen that the first three or four hundred feet were safe. Soon we began to realise that the deep cut between austere rock cliffs into which the valley led us must be Little Austria.

Since the start of the war the value of everything that is Australian has grown to be infinitely more to us. For some, the Interior—the desert and cattle lands of the north—contains the meaning of Australia, for others perhaps the skyline of Sydney or a white wave curling up to break on to a long golden beach. But for us it is the mountains enclosing the Murray Flats, high western faces clothed in snow, the subtle colours of the foothills, all our well-loved horizon, that holds the heights and the depths of the spirit of our land and the life we love.