

Blue Cow Mountain and more Western Face



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Our plans for making a wide exploration of the Western Face extending from the southern slopes off Ram's Head to as far north as Tate West Ridge which we felt promised some of the best and longest downhill running in New South Wales, were upset last winter by the almost continuous bad weather, and which, in fact, only permitted one trip to the main range during our stay. Although several descents down the Western Face had been made at different times and the International Downhill raced on the Townsend course in 1937, it was not until 1941 that any serious attempts were made to explore this side of the main range which offers ski-ing to rival the best European, on slopes of 1500 feet to 2500 feet, with an average gradient of 20 to 25 degrees. From the top of the range these slopes are obscured by ridges which give an illusion of perpendicular steepness and have resulted in this area being considered too precipitous and dangerous for ski-ing, whereas actually nearly every run is within the practicability of any competent third-class skier.

We were anxious also to test the veracity of older skiers' reports of the excellent ski-ing in the Perisher range, and decided to include in our first trip an ascent of the Blue Cow Mt. which lies roughly three miles north of Betts Camp in the centre of a triangle bounded by the Snowy and Perisher Creek, with a line east and west through Betts as base, and the existence of which since the building of the first Chalet at Charlotte Pass had become almost legendary. From there we planned to run down to the Snowy, climb up over Twynam, and descend one of the slopes on its west side.

It was not until our fifth day that a perfect morning fulfilled the promise of a break in the weather the previous day. We, Colin Wyatt, Jill McDonald, Bill Gordon and myself, were up before dawn impatient to start; as we breakfasted the grey morning sky gradually changed to a clear, cloudless blue, and the sun was just rising over the Perisher Gap as we started on the climb to the saddle at the head of Amos Creek on the ridge of the Perisher, between Betts Camp and the Snowy River. A further short climb to the right brought us to another ridge from which we could see our route to the Blue Cow which, like many other peaks in our mountains, appear near, but recedes further and further as it is approached. Skirting around the Perisher a series of wooded glades interspersed with open traverses are encountered, the running good but somewhat tricky; after crossing Farm Creek a steady climb took us to a rocky plateau before running down to a saddle near the head of Blue Cow Creek at the foot of a final 600 feet climb to the peak of the Blue Cow. One of the best panoramas of the whole range is obtained from the Blue Cow. The aspect is entirely different from anywhere on the main range. From the snow-topped peaks near Canberra, right down to Rams Head, each known peak stands out against the western sky, then around along Etheridge to the eastern side where Brown Mountain can be clearly seen across the Monaro highlands. For half an hour we enjoyed the scenery and picked a course to follow down to the Snowy; the slopes to the east looked smooth and clear, but to the west we could see we would have to descend through rocks and trees. To avoid the rocks immediately below, we skied down and around in a semi circle towards the north, then back south through a closely timbered wood to come out on our course before shooting through burnt-out scrub to a clearing which dropped sharply to the junction of the Blue Cow Creek and Snowy River. The descent, about 1600 feet, was difficult in the heavy snow, and probably would have been easier an hour or so earlier before the thaw set in. From what we had seen and experienced we considered that while the Perisher range would be sheltered and give good ski-ing, snow conditions would be similar to all the ski country between Hotel Kosciusko and Betts Camp, that is, it would be quickly affected by sun and resultant thaw.

We sank to our knees in soft deep snow as we crossed Blue Cow Creek to the east bank of the Snowy, along which we skied until we crossed about a mile below Pounds

Creek Hut to commence the long climb to Twynam. With the severe winter the Snowy, in contrast to normal years, was completely covered, and a crossing could have been made at any point above its junction with the Guthega. We more or less followed the course of Pounds Creek up to the flat under big Twynam, which we ascended directly from the north rather than take the longer and more usual route via Blister Gap, to reach the top around 1.30. Amazingly, there was almost a complete absence of the usual wind scoured ice usually encountered at the top, and in its place hard packed snow with only a few patches of ice, the rocks with their usual wonderful wind and ice formations half covered in the heavy snow. From the top of Twynam we skied out west to turn slightly north at the head of the spur that descends due west between Twynam west ridge (or Watson's Crags, as it is more generally known), and the Anderson ridge. Across the west face of Twynam to the north lies a gap in the range which would provide an escape to the head of one of the valleys leading back to Pounds Creek. Dropping over a small cornice to a gully on the north side of this spur we rapidly descended in a series of linked turns on absolutely perfect new snow for about 700 feet until a turn to the left brought us out on the lower part of the same spur we had started from above. Continuing down this spur another 400 to 500 feet we arrived at a rocky outcrop near the end and would have been able to descend another 400 feet, but decided it was time and the right spot for lunch. From here we studied the course down which we came; by continuing down the gully instead of coming back to our spur we could have descended another 400 feet of better running, but would have been shut in at the top of Watson's Gorge immediately under Mt. Anderson, without any view. Colin Wyatt pointed out parts of the courses he and Elyne Mitchell had descended in 1941 (see 1942 Year Book, under headings of Twynam and Anderson West Spurs) and for an hour we continued looking in wonderment at innumerable slopes and selecting likely courses for future descents. It was nearly 3 p.m. before we put on skins and commenced to climb back, which seemed much steeper than it did coming down; on arrival at the top we decided to run off big Twynam to the north, down a course we had surveyed coming up. This a steep open descent to the north-west of the vertical drop on the centre of Big Twynam's north wall, and comes out on to the ridge next further north to the usual Blister Gap course. It was a perfect and exhilarating run on really fast, hard snow. Commencing with controlled turns at the top, we soon turned straight downhill to carry us out across the flat at the base of the two Twynam peaks to gain the ridge-down which we raced to the Snowy; we were all sorry it was over, the snow had been so smooth and easy that none of us experienced the shaky legs usually experienced in a long downhill. After spending some time greeting a party that had just reached Pounds Creek Hut with the intention of proceeding to White's River Hut the following day, we climbed over the woods for a final run down the valley to Betts Camp, arriving in the dusk at 6 p.m.

Ignoring short broken descents we had 5200 feet of downhill running. Strangely we were not tired, and after dinner planned for another trip the next day with the intention of exploring Tate West Ridge. It was not to be. That night the storm returned and continued for the rest of my stay. Those that remained until the following week however, made a descent down the East Face to the Threadbo in moderate weather, but not sufficiently fine for main-ranging.

When our snowfields are reopened "Western-facing" will be very popular. Provided the Safety Rules are observed it can be undertaken by all skiers who have mastered continuously linked turns, not just four of them to pass the judges but continuously, ad infinitum. Skins are a "must," without them you will never climb up the long slopes on the western face. Skis must be secured to the legs by ankle thongs so they can't run loose and disappear into the gorges below should they come off in a fall. The number in a party should not be less than four, and an easy route back should be selected in advance for use in the event of an emergency.

Miss Doreen Elliott who took over the secretaryship of the S.C.G.B. during the earlier days of the war, and who is now a 3rd Officer of the W.R.N.S., writes—"The Year Book you have so kindly sent, has reached me, and I have read every word avidly. Thank you very much indeed. I must confess (and I hope you will forgive me*) that I have abstracted, without damage to the Book, the lovely photo of the man doing a christie. The whole effect, taken against the sun, has attracted me and I have mounted it on the wall of my office-cum-cabin. I gaze on it with nostalgia and all visitors exclaim over it. These are moments of home-sickness for the mountains I know so well, and the worst of it is, I have met no skiers with whom to have a friendly and reminiscent crack."

"May I congratulate you on your publication and repeat once again how much I enjoy looking at it? It is good to hear that Tom Mitchell is a prisoner of war, and that he is with a friend, in good conditions. The winter here so far has been mild, with an occasional cold snap followed immediately by Foehn. I have brought two pairs of ski from home in case we get enough snow, but I feel I have been too optimistic so far!"

*Forgiven.—Ed.