THE BLUFF AND MT. McDONALD

By A. J. Aird

TO those who have seen its terraced ramparts from Mount Buller, ski-ing on the Bluff to the south-east, would seem as impossible as a camel ride to the South Pole. Rising out of the Howqua Valley its cliffs tower 5,650 feet a.s.l. and, though some 300 feet lower than Mount Buller, it is by far the more impressive.

The easiest means of approach is by road from Merrijig over Warrambat Gap to Frys, thence by an old mining track up the Howqua River to an extensive river flat known as the Eight Mile Clearing. From here a rough cattle-pad follows up a spur to the south and in about three miles climbs some 3,000 feet to a higher rocky and snow-covered ridge. We climbed to this ridge and, turning eastward, followed it for about a mile till it dropped into a saddle right under the cliffs of the Bluff. We found an ideal camping place almost clear of snow in this saddle and pitched our tent. The view was magnificent. Right before us towered the cliffs of the Bluff, its 1,000 feet terraced walls hung with icicles that glittered in the sunshine. These icicles were a most unusual feature; the cliffs of The Bluff consist of a series of narrow terraces separated by overhanging rock walls varying in height from ten to fifty feet. The platforms along the tops of these walls are snow-covered, and this snow, melting under the rays of the sun, drips down from the top of the overhang and, freezing again, builds up icicles. We watched the growth of individual specimens and found that, depending on conditions, they grew upwards of two feet in twenty-four hours.

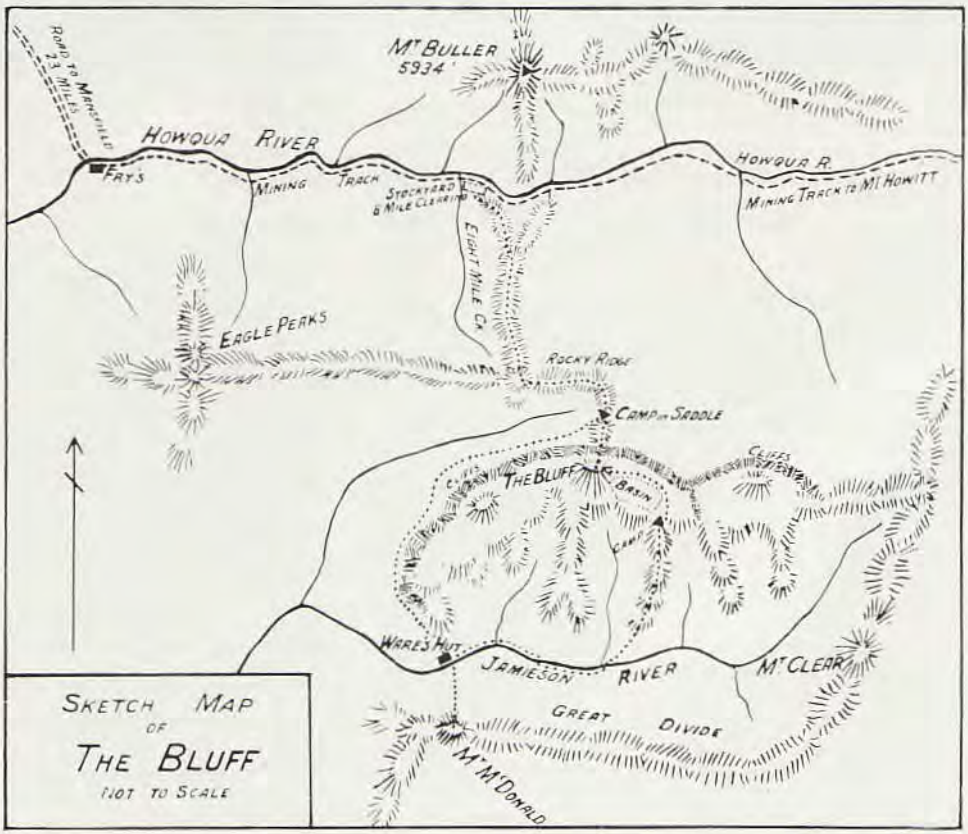
The sunrise next morning was glorious. Mount Buller just opposite across the valley was most impressive in its mantle of snow, and as we breakfasted we watched the changing colours on its snow-clad slopes. As the sun rose higher the pink glow faded and the mountain became a mass of dazzling white. At the top of a steep snow-covered slope we encountered the first rock wall. On a previous trip during the summer this had been easily negotiated, but winter put a different aspect on things. However, we eventually found a break and scrambled over a jumble of broken ice and snow on to the platform above. Our real difficulties now began. The snow lay steeply banked from the edge of the terrace to the foot of the next rock-wall and what had in summer been a convenient resting place had now become a treacherous, slippery, and steeply falling slope. We kicked steps up these snow-slopes and hung on anxiously up each rock-wall till at last above us, at the top of a long sweeping snow-covered face, appeared the corniced edge that indicated the summit.

We struggled up this last slope, negotiated the cornice, and stood on top. What a view! We were standing on the edge of an extensive snowfield stretching east and west along the summit ridge for about two miles with a breadth of between a quarter and a half a mile on the mountain's southern fall. This southern fall, in contrast to the northern face, fell away in long even slopes into the Upper Jamieson River. To the north and just across the Howqua Valley was the majestic bulk of Mount Buller, and further to the east the curving ridge to Mount Stirling. Then on the eastern horizon, Mount Cobbler, Mount Speculation, the Cross Cut Saw, Mount Howitt, and, far away in the distance, the Bogong High plains. From Howitt our eyes swept to the south past Mount Clear, Mount Wellington, and, just opposite, across the valley of the Upper Jamieson, Mount McDonald. On the far southern horizon, past the flat snow-capped top of Mount Skene, we could see the Baw Baw Plateau and further to the south and west the Warburton and Lake Mountain country.

The weather was perfect with a light breeze and a warm sun. We spent the afternoon ski-ing round the summit and descended the cliff to our camp in the saddle, to eat our evening meal in the glow of a big snow-gum fire. Next day, in perfect weather, we set out to explore the mountain. We worked eastward along

the summit ridge over a series of undulating tops, always with a steep precipice to our north and gently falling slopes to the south. The mountain has three main peaks, the central one being the most extensive. The eastern peak is separated from the central peak by a saddle perhaps 500 feet deep. There is a steep slope, about half a mile long, coming off this eastern peak into the saddle and a corresponding slope off the central peak. Both these slopes are quite clear of timber and well covered with snow. The western peak is joined to the central peak by an undulating ridge and is a little lower than the rest of the mountain. Just behind the central peak and on the southern slope is a large natural basin about 500 yards long from west to east and 200 yards wide. It has no visible outlet and in summer holds a little soak water. In winter the whole of the steep northern side is corniced and a plume of snow, blowing constantly from the top of this wall, drifts in a thousand little eddies along the bottom of the basin depositing in it a thick layer of soft powdery snow.

On a change in the weather we deemed it wise to abandon our now exposed camp site for a more sheltered position and, after a little exploration discovered an excellent place, almost free from snow, on the southern slope and quite near the top. The following days the weather broke and we had two days' bad weather from the north during which time we were mostly confined to the tent. The wind blew with terrific force and at times we feared the tent material would rend in two. Had it not been for a sewn-in floor on which we lay, it is almost certain that the tent would have blown away. During this time we lived on chocolate, rum and hot drinks, made with the aid of a small petrol stove. On



North Wall, the Bluff, from our camp. A. J. Aird.

the third day the weather cleared and we ventured out to survey the effects of the storm. The whole landscape was a mass of glittering white, the snow-line extending deep into each valley. The northern cliff of the mountain was plastered feet thick with new snow and any thought we may have entertained of descending by this route from our present camp was immediately forgotten. Along the top of this northern face an overhang of snow was breaking away in a series of small avalanches.

Digging out the camp fire and billies, we soon had a roaring fire, cooking a man-sized meal. We had had little to eat for the past two days and the next few hours were spent very pleasantly catching up on our menu. A further two days were spent ski-ing round the mountain, its wide snowfield forever opening up new vistas. It was with regret that we finally packed our gear and descended the long southern slope out of the snow on to the Jamieson River at Weir's Hut. Weir's Hut is pleasantly situated on the McDonald branch of the Jamieson. Built on a long narrow river flat right under the western ramparts of The Bluff, it is a difficult hut to find, there being practically no track into it from any direction. Next morning we packed lunch and, leaving our ski and other gear, crossed the river, taking a spur to the south to climb through forest country with Mount McDonald as our objective. As we climbed we left the forest and, coming to the snow-line, encountered red sandstone slabs that extended in a series of wide terraces to the summit.

Mount McDonald from a ski-ing point of view is quite impossible. The summit ridge is narrow and rock strewn. The northern slope is a precipice and the southern slope little better. It is, however, a very fine view point and quite justified a day's climbing. We reluctantly descended from this, our last high mountain, to the shelter of Weir's Hut, where we again spent the night and, next day, climbed out of the Jamieson Valley, descended into the Howqua Valley and thence to Frys. From Frys we were transported to Mansfield in a very ancient jinker, about the only conveyance that could be got over the road.

Our equipment consisted of a roomy tent made of a light waterproof material known as Kampette, with a sewn-in floor of green japara, the whole, including tent pegs and a fly, weighing about three pounds. Our sleeping bags were of the ordinary feather-down variety with an outer bag of thin japara and an inner bag of artificial silk. We carried a small petrol stove for use in emergency and this was set up very carefully inside the tent when weather conditions made it impossible to venture outside. We selected our camp site always with a view to a way of escape in emergency. We carried ample first-aid equipment and emergency rations and lastly, but not least, we knew our country beforehand from a previous summer trip.