46 *The East face of Mount Sefton, 10,359 ft* (much foreshortened). The first ascent of this face in 1953 probably sparked off the modern phase of New Zealand mountaineering. Three routes now exist; the East ridge, climbed in 1898, is on the right. This and next photo: by courtesy of New Zealand High Commission

Recent New Zealand developments

Nick von Tunzelmann

Climbers elsewhere tend to think of New Zealand in terms of steep snow and ice, poor rock and inclement weather, and on the whole they are probably as right to do so now as they were fifty years ago. But it is rather more difficult to reconcile the view sometimes held by overseas mountaineers that we are technically static with the not inconsiderable achievements of New Zealanders internationally in the past decade or so: the first ascents of such peaks as Ama Dablam, Kangtega and Thamserku in the Himalaya, Mitre, Sacsarayoc and the formidable Cayesh (not since repeated) in the Andes, and Herschel and Lister in the Antarctic, give no reason to suppose that New Zealanders are not maintaining their record generally.

This article sets out to put the position in perspective, by surveying both the major recent climbs in New Zealand, and the technical developments which made them possible. I hope it will also help to fill a gap since I fully accept that using only accessible published sources it could be difficult for anyone who has not recently climbed in New Zealand to ascertain or appreciate the position. Even a comprehensive work like the newly published *Book of Modern Mountaineering* by Malcolm Milne (Arthur Barker, 1968; see p 369 below) apologises for omitting any reference.

Inevitably most of the climbing described is in the central Mount Cook region, an area containing all our mountains over 10,000 ft, giving primarily snow and ice routes which are both sustained and steep. Because of the poor quality of the rock, on the other hand, the opportunities for hard rock climbing on the high peaks are quite restricted, with the result that generally our development has been markedly different from Europe and America where rock has generally set the standard of technical advance. In some areas of the South Island, however, there is good rock climbing to be found, especially in the Darran Mountains, where though the summits are lower (Tutoko, 9042 ft, being the highest) the valleys are too, with the result that climbs of up to 8000 ft in length are possible. Unlike the ranges further north, the Darrans consist of good rock, and since the valley walls are usually very steep, they have allowed a leading school of rock-climbers to emerge. The era of new face routes in the Darrans is still at its height, with even the most accessible peaks not yet worked out. Some (such as Mike Gill) who have learnt their skills on Darran granite have been in the forefront of New Zealanders overseas. Regrettably I do not have the space nor the qualifications to extend the present analysis to this or some other important branches of New Zealand mountaineering.

The main advances

To demarcate the beginning of the modern phase of New Zealand is difficult, perhaps controversial. There is no local equivalent of a Joe Brown who by his

47 *The three peaks of Mount Cook, from the south-east* Aerial photograph. The South-east or Caroline face is in shadow, opposite. The East face (in sunlight to the right) is separated from it by the East ridge, falling from near the Middle Peak. Zurbriggen's ridge with sections of the Bowie ridge immediately behind falls, further right, from the High Peak, 12,349 ft. The South ridge leading to Nazomi is on the left. See also *A.J.* 69. [50–2]

own activities brings about a breakthrough into a new climbing generation. For the first third of this century, at least, the character of New Zealand mountaineering used to be dictated by the character of the Chief Guide at Mount Cook: J. M. Clarke, Peter Graham, Vic Williams, and others. There are grounds for arguing that the first really important new route made by a guideless party inaugurates the new phase—if so, the honour would probably fall to Bryant and Mahan for their first ascent of the East ridge of Cook in 1938. I am going to plump for January, 1953, when B. Barley, F. Edwards and G. Harrow of the Canterbury Mountaineering Club climbed the East face of Sefton, the first occasion on which a face of such steepness and exposure had been attempted in New Zealand purely to force a new line on a major mountain. This face dominates the view from the tourist hotel in Mount Cook village, almost beetling over it. The climb by Geoff Harrow's party undoubtedly caused many competent New Zealanders to revise estimates of their technical capabilities.

A succession of new routes involving severe ice climbing followed, such as Dampier from the Sheila Glacier and the first ascent of Magellan, both in 1955. Hamilton and Berry put up new rib routes on Lendenfeld and Tasman, combining artificial work on rock with artificial on ice. This movement, which I dare to call indigenous, became partly submerged through the arrival in New Zealand of technically advanced overseas mountaineers. One of the strongest impulses was given by the visit of that ubiquitous Scotsman, Hamish MacInnes, who in the company of various Americans and Kiwis established impressive new routes largely on rock, like the South ridge of Green, the lengthy South-west ridge of Nazomi, and the Bowie ridge of Cook. Subsequently, others were led to elaborate on the lines chosen by MacInnes' parties, e.g. Bosshard and Schaumburg on the full West ridge of Nazomi and later on the lower buttress of the Bowie ridge. The South ridge of Green has been climbed in October (i.e. spring conditions) by Winter, Taylor, Stewart and Glover, although R. K. Irvin wrote after the first ascent that 'Several places along the way, particularly the beginning of the slabs, will be very severe if ice is encountered'. In addition, Gill and party put up the South-east rib of Green. By contrast, the routes of Hamilton and Berry on Lendenfeld and Tasman have never been repeated, nor has that of Barcham and Waterhouse on Dampier.

The next advance was also inspired by visitors, in this case the Austrians Hans Leitner and Eberhard von Terzi. The intrusion of this Continental threat stirred leading New Zealanders into laying final plans for attacking some of the finest and most exacting faces of the Mount Cook region. (The xenophobic sentiments that might appear to lie behind this stimulus are to be modified by

48 *The jagged East ridge of Patuki in the Darran Range*, first climbed in 1962. Photo: Mike Gill.

the fact that most of these leading 'New Zealanders' were in fact British by birth.) On 20 November 1961, the East face of Mount Cook, 5000 ft of sustained ice and crumbling rock, was overcome. The successful party was Don Cowie, Peter Farrell, Lynn Crawford and Vic Walsh; men who were to dominate New Zealand climbing from that time up to the present. They chose a spectacular line leading directly to the summit ridge of Cook at the base of the final peak. A month later, Leitner and von Terzi completed the second, and to date last, ascent of this face, taking a route a little to the north of Cowie's, not intersecting the Cowie route at any point.

Even greater than the East face was the challenge set by the South-east (or Caroline) face of Cook. Cowie and Farrell with various associates or alone attacked this face repeatedly in 1962 and 1963: 7500 relentless feet of ice-fall and ice-wall. In November 1963 two younger enterprising climbers, Mike Goldsmith and John Cousins, disappeared without trace on the Caroline face in the course of a reconnaissance. In the aftermath of this tragedy, no subsequent party has gone as far as Cowie, Farrell, Crawford and Brian Hearfield in 1962. The story of the ascents of the East face and the attempts on the Caroline has been told much more fully by Wynne Croll in *A.J.* 69. 262.

Topographical considerations, especially the north-east to south-west alignment of the Southern Alps, make eastern or south-eastern faces generally the most imposing in this part of the country. The Sefton face has already been noticed. The East face of La Perouse fell to G. Hasell and party in the 1957–8 season, while Leitner and von Terzi made a south-eastern variation in 1960. Leitner and von Terzi, however, made their greatest initial impact with a first ascent of the East face of Tasman, New Zealand's second highest mountain.

Improvements in technique and equipment

Mere recitation of names and routes is only a secondary purpose of this survey. What is probably much more interesting to those who have not been primarily involved is to know the techniques by which such climbs were achieved, and in which ways the nature of climbing was transformed by the use of new techniques. The remainder of this article will attempt such a survey. Clearly the face climbs described above have been made possible or at least much safer by the spread of modern methods for coping with steep snow and ice, with modifications appropriate to New Zealand conditions where necessary.

First among these, perhaps the most obvious, is the replacement of ten-point crampons by crampons with front claws. Prolonged slopes of 50° or over were for the virtuosi of ten-pointers only. Most of the face climbs I have referred to above require at least 2000 ft of work of this kind. Partly because of their use

49 *Cramponing on the West face of Haidinger* Photo: G. W. Harris, from his forthcoming book *World Apart*

in such climbs, twelve-point crampons were at an early stage regarded as being for experts alone. The period during which beginners were recommended to graduate on ten-pointers before going on to front points was short, however, and is now long past. It was soon realised that front claws were a great advantage on such standard climbs as, say, Zurbriggen's ridge of Cook, saving hours of hard step-cutting toil. This is reflected in the rise of popularity of this route *vis-à-vis* the easier but more dangerous Linda glacier, a trend which I think entirely desirable.

The conversion from ten to twelve points, then, took place speedily and with little resistance. The adoption of secondary changes in the technology of imported crampons, on the other hand, provoked a good deal of argument, mostly still unresolved. Light-weight crampons, for example, have often (though not universally) been deemed inadequate for New Zealand's heavy ice conditions. Thus, while the exceptionally sturdy crampons of yesteryear are now rare in New Zealand, there has been little enthusiasm for some of the rather flimsy varieties of adjustable crampon made in Europe, or for the ultra light-weights. Similarly, crampons without a central hinge, though having advantages for continuous steep snow, have cracked under the strain of the ordinary glacier and névé work that many New Zealand climbs demand. In fact, the trendy New Zealander now has two pairs of crampons, one set hinged for routine work, the other with a fixed sole for face conditions.

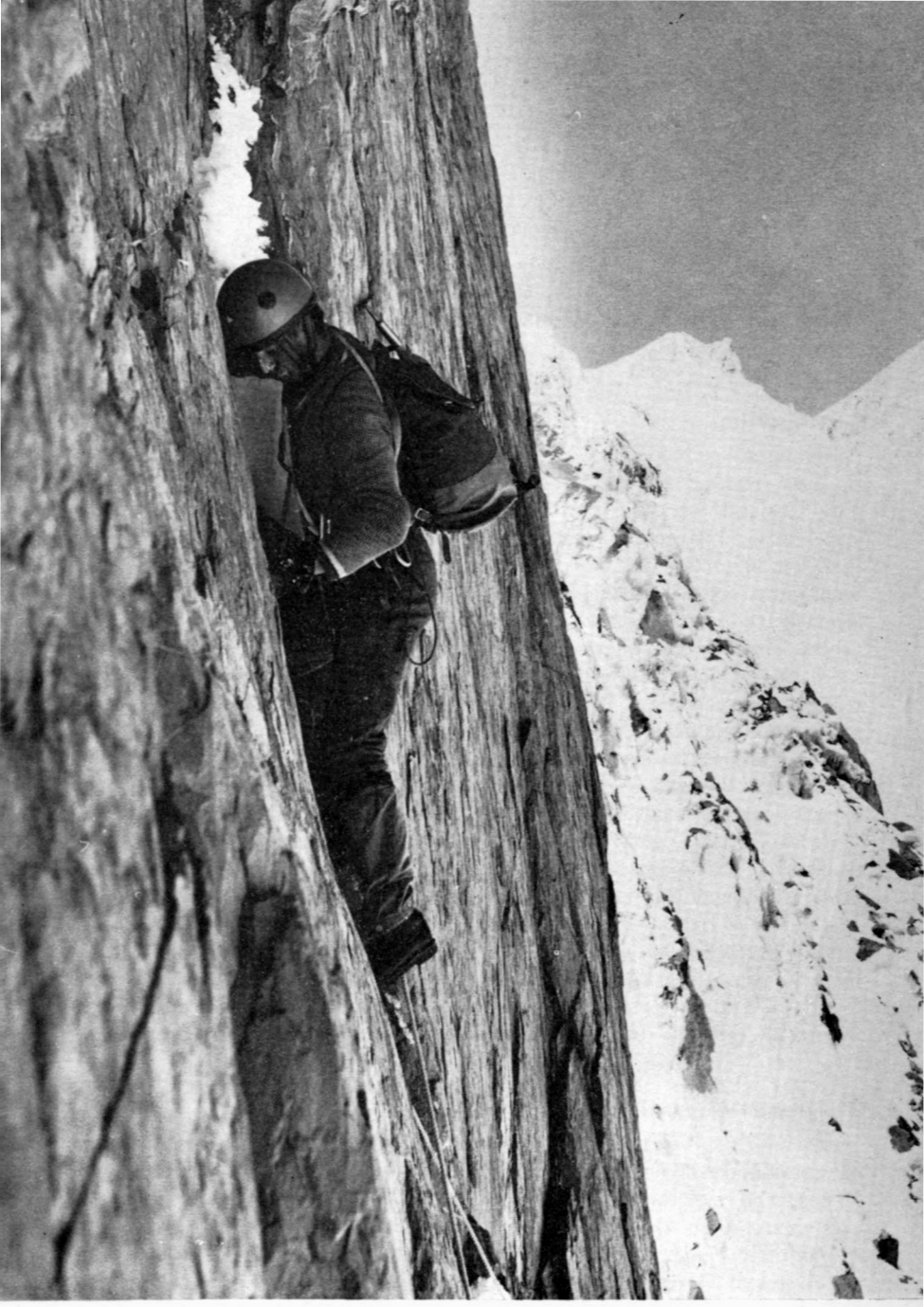
The introduction of front-pointing, along with the new methods of snow and ice belay to be discussed in a moment, has lessened the demands made upon the ice-axe. That hoary old trade-mark of the New Zealand mountaineer, the heavy, long-shafted axe, is now disappearing in the face of cut-down types.

Even those who have not succumbed to the short axe have taken up the north-waller or equivalent for use during front-pointing or on very steep snow.

A second major development, and probably even more fundamental than the first, is the general adoption of the dynamic belay on snow (see also p 331 below). This method of belaying, which originated in the U.S.A. but is still apparently uncommon in Europe, is currently taught almost to exclusion by instructors in New Zealand. Many of those skilled in older techniques of belaying on snow have appreciated the greater efficiency of the dynamic belay, which in the event of a fall counterpoises a downward pull on the ice-axe with an upward pull on the belayer's leg and boot. Locking the leg against the axe shaft, together with a downward pressure on the head of the axe exerted by the belayer's arm, practically guarantees a compact unit capable of holding long falls occurring in a wide range of snow conditions. The diffusion of this belay has therefore been especially rapid. There can be little doubt that a climber familiar with the dynamic belay, including its application while on the move, can handle all but extreme snow conditions with great safety.

With the arrival of safer techniques for snow came the search for advances in ice techniques. Ice-pitons initially helped satisfy the demand for good anchorages, but they were often found to bend or rupture in the hard ice frequently encountered. Nowadays ice-pitons are being used largely for runners only. The real breakthrough was deferred until the introduction of ice-screws. The relevance of ice-screws to New Zealand conditions was immediately grasped, and there was wide experimentation. Early results were sometimes disappointing—the varieties of screw that became available on the New Zealand market (hampered by import restrictions) were much too fragile. Corkscrew types, for example, would shear through their thin centres. So practical minds went to work. Don Cowie and Brian Hearfield developed a much more robust screw, built up from materials such as ordinary coach bolts. These screws were subjected to exacting tests and found to be much more suited to domestic needs than the imported kinds. In addition, they could be manufactured to any length thought necessary. These have therefore been the resort of every party to date attempting the Caroline face. But the types of European-made screws now becoming commercially available, especially those with a hollow tubular shaft, may help supply a generally felt New Zealand need.

Ice-pitons and screws are also required, of course, for artificial work on ice. Limited doses of 'artificial' have long been necessary, e.g. for vertical schrund walls. The new face routes involve ice artificial on a far more ambitious scale, with the 150 ft overhang on the Caroline face being only the most impressive example to date. New Zealanders abroad have been thankful for their home



50 *On Mount Alack, above the Fox glacier* Photo: by courtesy of G. W. Harris

experience in forcing artificial pitches on such peaks as Thamserku and Sacsarayoc.

Organisation

Administrative changes have been significant in disseminating knowledge of the new practices. In the last five years, the Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand, an association of major sporting interests in the Alps, have systematised instructional courses. After rigorous testing, the F.M.C. produced a handbook for instructors demonstrating the new dynamic belay techniques in particular; and they have also organised courses for instructors, selected from representative clubs. A new body, the Mountain Safety Committee, channels Government money into mountain publicity. And with the increasing interest in the big face routes sprang a need for highly trained rescue teams capable of effecting rescues there, if required. Accordingly, each major climbing centre now has its face rescue team, frequently drilled and kept in readiness for any emergency. There is still, however, the need for more sets of the Austrian rescue equipment, a need which is slowly being met. Finally under this heading, guiding has returned as a viable private venture. Crawford, Farrell, and Don Mackay, established Alpine Instruction Ltd to concentrate on organised instruction during the climbing season under their aegis. Guiding at this stage was rather a peripheral activity, depending on the availability of men of sufficiently high quality. Over the last two seasons the guiding aspect has become more important in the company's operations than hitherto. Recently Alpine Instruction came to an agreement with the Government-run Tourist Hotel Corporation, who own their base at Ball hut, and it will be interesting to see if this alliance can promote their rate of progress.

The trend to big face routes

Lastly in this survey I shall look at the changes that have occurred in the kinds of mountaineering activity undertaken. It is difficult to avoid overstatement. In nearly all cases the long-established routes make up perhaps eighty per cent or more of present-day successes, even for the most advanced of this generation of mountaineers. Again, many of the changes have precedents, since some of the routes of Fitzgerald, of Fyfe and Peter Graham around the turn of the century are still held in high esteem.

With these reservations, perhaps the broadest generalisation to be made is that New Zealand is following the evolutionary patterns laid down in Europe, but with a lag of some twenty to thirty years. There has been an obvious progression from virgin peaks to virgin ridges and finally to virgin faces.

There are still unclimbed ridges, some of them for the connoisseur, in the very heart of the Mount Cook district. For face routes, attention has skipped rather rapidly over secondary faces to concentrate from the beginning on major problems. The sudden build-up in the early 60s accelerated by the competition of European-trained climbers, has already been described. The next stage is to develop the face route to the *direttissima*, and there are indications that this is now taking place, e.g. the climb by G. Harris and P. Gough on the East face of Sefton in the 1967–8 season. In general, though it is pleasing to report that many faces were originally climbed by architecturally distinguished routes, notably the East face of Cook. On the Caroline face, a splendid line is ensured more prosaically by considerations of safety. There remains enormous scope for the climber who is not excessively ambitious for technical difficulty or objective danger but who likes good new face or ridge routes, particularly if he is willing to visit some of the more remote valleys of this central region. Some highly accessible faces offering a thousand feet or more of moderately steep cramponing, such as the East face of Jervois or the East (Constance Knox) face of the Minarets, have yet to feel the bite of front points.

Bivouacs and snow caves

Bivouacs tend to be disliked rather more than in Europe, owing to the changeability of New Zealand weather. In the last few years, several nights out have ended in disaster. No party has therefore tried to fill in six days by pegging its way directly up the overhangs of, say, the North face of Mount Hicks. One party did unintentionally spend four days climbing Cook via the Bowie ridge with no apparent long-lasting effects. However, one type of bivouac climb has recently had (I will not say 'enjoyed') some popularity, and that is the long ridge traverse connecting several summits. The best example, attempted a number of times before eventual success, was a traverse linking Mounts Tasman and Cook, the country's two highest mountains. The successful party was Derek Winter and Bruce Harrison, who in December 1963 spent six days out from Plateau hut, with two nights on the Tasman-Cook ridge itself. The advantage of such traverses over the customary bivouac climb is that the bivouacs can be sited on cols or saddles from which retreat is not so difficult in bad weather.

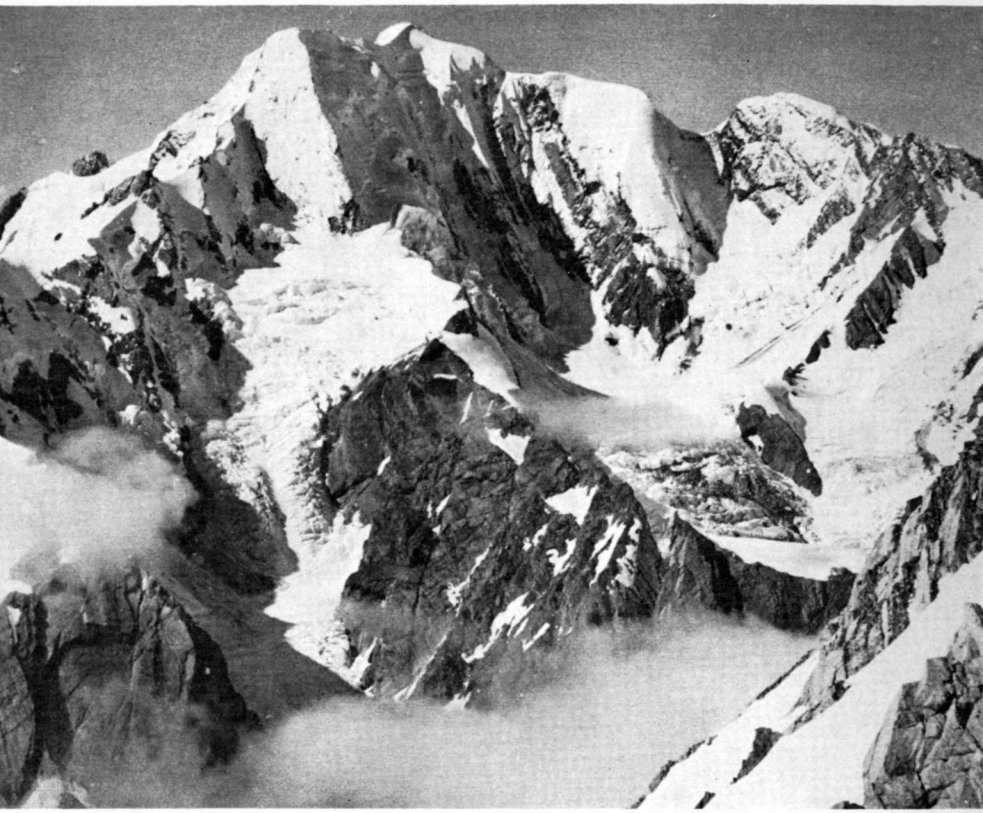
To provide for nights out under extreme weather conditions, New Zealanders have long experimented with snow-caves—indeed for over twenty years snow-caves have been recognised as one of the special aspects of New Zealand mountaineering. The art of snow-caving is now commonly taught at quite elementary instruction courses. Apart from emergencies, much snow-caving,

of course, is carried out intentionally to substitute for huts in localities not so served. On the higher, remote glaciers such as the La Perouse and the Balfour, snow-caves are the natural accommodation. In very high winds or blizzard conditions, far from infrequent in the Southern Alps, they give much greater security than a tent. By trial and a goodly amount of error various precepts for building caves evolved: choose a slope that is not too flat so that snow will not accumulate, build the living quarters above the level of the doorway, determine how much or little snow is necessary over one's head, etc.

Winter and other adverse conditions

Little notice has been taken of 'first winter ascents'. In the Mount Cook area ski-mountaineering takes over in winter, as many enjoyable and enterprising runs are available, particularly around the Tasman glacier. Winter climbing as such would be gruesomely hard work on the long New Zealand snow routes. Activity of this kind is generally transferred to the smaller peaks of the lesser ranges, e.g. the Arthur's Pass district for Canterbury mountaineers. A run of tragic accidents on such climbs has not made them any more popular, however. For those intent upon making life difficult for themselves on the mixed snow and rock climbs of the High Alps, there is the alternative of ascents undertaken when surface conditions are bad, for example after storms or without frosts. The days are longer and the air temperatures warmer, but the ground conditions can be just as unfavourable as in winter. A most impressive example was the climb of Leitner and von Terzi on the South ridge of Cook in early 1962. Sir Edmund Hillary had written after the first ascent of this ridge in 1948, 'Although we found most of the ridge straightforward going, it would be a very different matter if iced up. . . .' Solo climbing is frowned upon in most quarters, and as with winter ascents few bother to register first solo climbs of any mountain or ridge.

In this survey I have erred on the side of the exotic. Much of the comparative advantage of the New Zealander overseas still springs from the traditionalist elements in his upbringing; long approach marches, heavy packing, and long bouts of step-cutting, downhill as well as up. Yet the emphasis is changing; for example, approach marches are being eliminated on Mount Cook by ski-equipped planes that in some cases can transport you to the door of your high hut. Many of the techniques I have discussed, and still more the changes in the nature of the climbs undertaken, are at the moment in a transitional stage. As these developments work their way through, maybe joined by a number of others, the course of New Zealand climbing in the next few years seems somewhat predictable. But it may not be any the less exciting, indeed it may be all the more competitive for that.



51 *A New Zealand challenge to come: the West face of Mount Elie de Beaumont, 10,200 ft* The face lies in shadow, unclimbed and unattempted. Photo: by courtesy of New Zealand High Commission