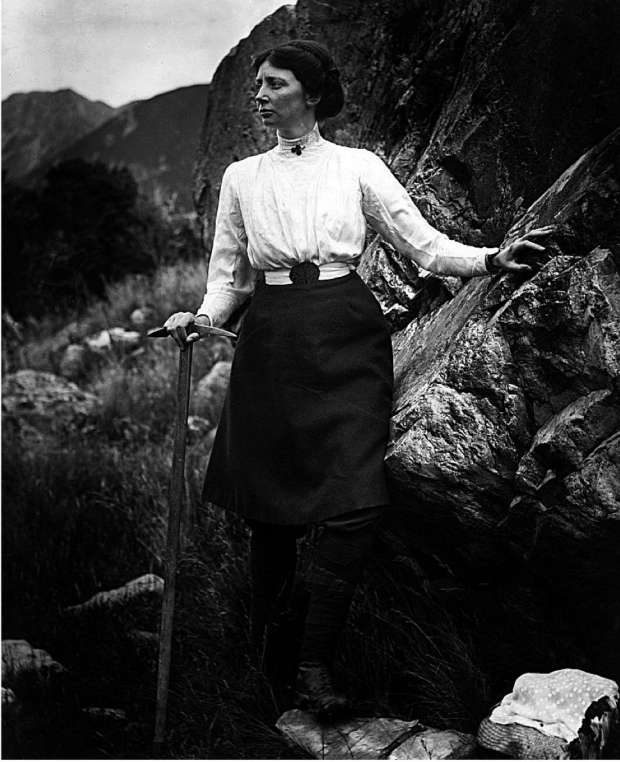

J G R HARDING

‘A Prey to that Longing’

The Life of Freda Du Faur



Freda Du Faur (1882-1935). (Guy Mannering)

We reached the Hermitage the same day, and not all the luxuries of life as there enjoyed could compensate me for the knowledge that I had had my last climb for the season, and that I must now pack up my belongings, turn my back upon the mountains, and go my way, the better, happier, and stronger for my days and nights spent among them, but a prey to that longing which all the excitement, gaiety, and turmoil of city life cannot deaden, for just one glimpse of snow-clad heights, and the peace of the vast silent spaces ...

Freda Du Faur, *The Conquest of Mount Cook*

Few have evinced a deeper passion for mountaineering than the Australian Emmeline Freda Du Faur (1882-1935) who, during her four seasons in the New Zealand Alps in the early years of the 20th century, became an exemplar and inspiration for all Antipodean mountaineers. A direct descendent of the aristocratic French Huguenot family the du Fours de Pibrac in Haut Garonne, Freda's great-great-grandfather Cyprian had emigrated to England in 1733 and married the daughter of the proctor of Rochester.

The Du Fours had long been Anglicised before Freda's father Eccleston went to Harrow. But rather than going up to Cambridge as originally intended, he joined the 1853 Australian Gold Rush and then the department of the surveyor general of Victoria to explore Australia's uncharted mountain ranges. After financing an expedition to the New Hebrides, he created his own 35,000-acre nature reserve at Cowan Creek near Sydney and established the Du Faur and Gerard Pastoral Company. A classical scholar, natural historian and photographer, he was also a founder member of the New South Wales Academy of Arts, subsequently Australia's National Art Gallery. Freda's mother Blanche was another first generation Australian, descended, in her case, from a distinguished English academic family. Her father the Rev John Woolley, had been a scholar at Exeter College, Oxford, before emigrating to Australia to become professor of classics and principal of Sydney University where he founded its School of Arts.

Freda, born in 1882 and the only girl of five children inherited the dominant genes of both her parents. Intelligent, artistic and articulate, she was only 5ft 2in tall, but spirited and courageous and never afraid to mix it with her brothers physically or intellectually. Proud of her ancestry and secure in her social status, she could be arrogant and intolerant, but was always passionate in supporting gender equality and never abashed about her incipient lesbianism.

The pattern of Freda's early life was not entirely typical of upper class Australian society. Her father Eccleston had built a fine family house named Pibrac, after the Du Faur's ancestral chateau, at Warrawee outside Sydney, but preferred to spend his time at the Bohemian art and photographic camps he organised in the Blue Mountains or in the wilds of his Cowan Creek estate. It was here that Freda, unconstrained by polite convention, explored the untrammelled bush, developed her rock-climbing skills and fostered a love of nature.

Originally set on a nursing career, she enrolled as a probationer at Sydney's Homeopathic Hospital in 1903 aged 21. Surprisingly, she failed to complete the course due to her 'sensitive and highly-strung nature' and later admitted that she found nursing 'much more stressful than mountaineering'. This combination of sensitivity and physical courage might have explained her near-mystical attachment to mountains and when the nursing experiment was terminated prematurely, she cast around for a role that would give her life new purpose.

The event that changed it forever was a trip with her father to New Zealand in 1906 to attend a photographic exhibition in Christchurch. A photographic



Mount Cook, from the Tasman glacier. (*J G R Harding*)

panorama of the Southern Alps so moved her that she resolved to see these superb mountains for herself. Travelling down to the Hermitage, her first view of Aoraki/Mount Cook from Lake Pukaki filled her 'with a passionate longing to touch those shining snows and to climb to their heights of silence and solitude'. From that moment, it became her mission to climb that shining mountain. When questioned later, 'Why take up mountaineering?' she replied: 'The true mountaineer, like the poet, is born not made.'

At this time, mountaineering was only barely recognised by alpha-male New Zealanders as a proper sport. Twenty-four years had elapsed since the Rev W S Green of the Alpine Club had travelled out to New Zealand with his Swiss guide Ulrich Kaufmann and the hotelier Emil Boss in 1882 with the avowed aim of climbing Aoraki. After two unsuccessful attempts, they got within 200 feet of the summit only to be defeated by a tremendous storm, which forced a nightmare bivouac and a desperate escape after 62 hours on the mountain. For the next 12 years, Mount Cook's summit remained inviolate despite four attempts by local New Zealander climbers Mannering and Dixon via Green's original Linda glacier route.

In 1891, the founding of the Alpine Club of New Zealand inspired a burst of activity culminating in first ascents of the Minarets, Malte Brun, Darwin and Footstool, though mainly by visiting foreign climbers. Put on notice by the arrival of the British mountaineer Edward Fitzgerald and his renowned Swiss guide Matthias Zurbriggen, the Kiwi breakthrough came on Christmas Day 1894 when Fyfe, Graham and Clark made the first ascent of Aoraki/Mount Cook's summit peak from the head of the Hooker glacier.



Freda seated between her guides Peter and Alex Graham, after her ascent of Mount Cook.
(*Guy Mannering*)

At last the spell had been broken, but when Fitzgerald and Zurbriggen put up a daring new route to Cook's summit and followed this with first ascents of Sefton, Hardinger, Sealy and Tasman, a gauntlet was cast. Freda Du Faur saw it as her mission to pick it up.

The place of women in the New Zealand climbing scene in this new Edwardian Age was ambivalent. Although New Zealand had given its women suffrage in 1893 (a quarter of a century before Britain) and the New Zealand Alpine Club, founded two years earlier in 1891, had been

open to all who fulfilled its climbing qualifications irrespective of gender, hidebound Victorian conventions still prevailed. And while in the Alps, many women mountaineers had already exchanged skirts for breeches and had no compunction about sharing tents or bivouacs with men, when Freda proposed her first serious expedition with her guide Peter Graham, the prospect of her climbing alone with another man, let alone sharing a bivouac, aroused so much hostility at the Hermitage that she was forced to employ a porter – 'Tom' – to act as a chaperone.

Freda had first met Graham, the leading Hermitage guide, in 1906 and promptly joined his party to visit the Sealy range. Four years older than Freda, this sensitive but socially unsophisticated man of the mountains was immediately impressed by Freda's natural ability and determination. Adopting the roles of both mentor and friend, he was probably the only man she ever came close to emotionally. However, this first 1906-07 climbing season was abandoned when she had to return to Sydney unexpectedly 'to attend her dying mother at her bedside'.

In 1908 a windfall legacy of £2,000 (£80,000 today) from an aunt's estate enabled her to return to the Hermitage for the 1908-09 climbing season financially secure and on her own terms. Now aged 26, she engaged Graham full-time for what became their famous climbing partnership.

After traversing Mounts Kinsey and Wakefield (when Freda saved her chaperone Tom's life by arresting his fall with an ice-axe belay), they failed on the Minarets, but went on to traverse Malte Brun in record time. Freda's first attempt to climb Mount Cook with Graham was met with another 'storm of disapproval and criticism' at the Hermitage, but after sitting out

a third bivouac in dreadful weather, they had to call it off.

In November 1910, Freda left Sydney for the Southern Alps in excellent physical shape thanks to a three-month regime of rigorous training under Muriel Cadogan, the independent-minded, deputy-head of Sydney's Dupain Institute of Physical Education. In turn, Freda introduced Muriel to mountaineering. It was a meeting of minds and bodies; in due course the two became lovers with their lives forever after intertwined. Freda's early climbs in that 1910-11 season had included a second stab at Mount Cook followed by successful ascents of De la Beche, Green and Chudleigh. But with other lady aspirants hovering in the wings, these were mere dress rehearsals for her third attempt at Cook. The weather had been uncertain, but this time nothing was going to stop her and on 30 November 1910 she reached the object of her dreams with Peter Graham and his brother Alex in the then record time of six hours up and six and a half down. It was the mountain's first ascent by a woman and instantly made Freda world-famous. Guy Mannering's iconic photograph of her gazing fixedly towards the distant peaks, with the neck of her white lace blouse demurely fastened with a brooch and one hand firmly grasping the adze of her long ice axe captured well her steely determination but also hinted at emotional vulnerability.

With Cook conquered, Freda's climbing ambitions were boundless. The following season she returned to the Hermitage and in the course of a two-month campaign accounted for Nazami and Dampier, both difficult first ascents, Lendenfeld, Muller, a new route on Sebastopol and most impressively, after narrowly failing on her first attempt, the second ascent of Tasman, the 'greatest snow climb in the New Zealand Alps'. She was now ready to attempt her most ambitious climb of all: the complete traverse of Aoraki/Mount Cook's three peaks, reckoned to be 'impossible' by some of New Zealand's most experienced mountaineers.

At 2am on 3 January 1913, Freda, Peter Graham and Darby Thomson left their bivouac below Cook's west ridge and five hours later reached its Low Peak. Before them lay the mountain's undulating, one and a half mile-long, saw-tooth summit ridge averaging 12,000ft in height with terrifying exposure on either side. That six and a half hour traverse to the High Peak gave Freda nightmares for the rest of her life.

They summited at 1.30pm and after descending the dangerously avalanche-prone, heavily crevassed Linda glacier without mishap, reached safe ground after 24 hours of continuous climbing. Luck had been with them for without perfect weather, a storm on the ridge would have destroyed them. For the next fortnight it rained and snowed without interruption, causing the Tasman glacier's moraine to break and flood the Hermitage so badly that it had to be completely re-built.

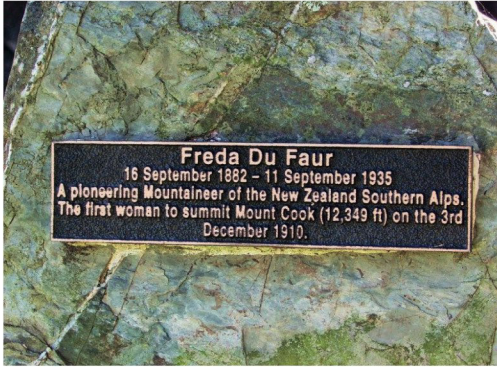
Freda was still not satisfied. Once the weather had settled, she set forth once again with Peter Graham and Darby Thomson to make the first traverse of Mount Sefton. This time, the weather was appalling and a paralysing blizzard almost did for them on the summit. Their epic day closed with a two-hour wade down an icy, swollen creek long after dark. On returning



Freda's first view of Mount Cook's 'shining snows', from Lake Pukaki.
(J G R Harding)

to the Hermitage late that night, they were greeted with the news of Capt Robert Scott's ill-fated polar party's disaster. Before completing what was to be her last season, Freda first climbed the peak she named Cadogan, then Elie de Beaumont and finally the difficult Aiguille Rouge on Malte Brun.

Over only four seasons, Freda Du Faur had achieved an unparalleled climbing record that included the first female ascent and first ever traverses of both Mount Cook and Sefton; the first mountaineer to have climbed all three of New Zealand's highest mountains – Cook, Tasman and Dampier – as well as a score of others, many of them first ascents. Her climbs were often undertaken in typically dreadful New Zealand weather; huts were few and bivouacs many; laborious step cutting did for crampons; equipment was crude and the bulky woollen skirt she wore over knickerbockers restrictive. She had always been a natural climber, but it was her stoicism, courage and determination that most impressed her guides. Freda's climbs, modestly recorded in her mountaineering autobiography *The Conquest of Mount Cook*, published in 1915, were the touchstones of her life. Her observations on nature and her passionate feelings for the grandeur and beauty of mountains illuminate a vivid narrative, while her superb photographs provide an unrivalled record of what the peaks, snowscapes and glaciers of the Southern Alps resembled in their ice-bound prime before the advent of global warming.



The memorial to Freda Du Faur in Sydney's Manly Cemetery, erected in 2006.

In 1914, Freda, then aged 32, was still at the peak of her powers when she and Muriel Cadogan decided to leave Australia to live and work in London prior to exploring the European Alps, the Canadian Rockies and the Himalaya together. It was a fatal decision. Deeply shocked by an avalanche accident on the Linda glacier, which killed her former guide Darby Thomson that same year, the outbreak of the First World War effectively stranded both Freda and Muriel in England for the war's duration.

Freda had always been passionate in her beliefs and determined in her views, but a vein of stubbornness now proved her worst enemy. At the urging of a young Canadian, Otto Frind, whom she had first met at the Hermitage, she had joined the Canadian Alpine Club. However, on discovering in London that the Alpine Club was a male-only preserve, she was so incensed that she refused to even contemplate joining its sister organisation the recently (1907) established Ladies' Alpine Club which included some of the era's most outstanding women climbers whose company might have given Freda the support and camaraderie that her proud yet sensitive nature craved. But she was never one to compromise. As her biographer Sally Irwin¹ wrote:

Freda underestimated the high standard of the women in the Ladies' [Alpine] Club ... The members were educated women, of high social standing, artists, writers and linguists. They worked hard to maintain the club, and probably felt as put out as Freda that they'd had to form one of their own. But they'd more than made the best of the situation.

Instead, Freda Du Faur turned her back on mountaineering and threw her energies into the cause of women's suffrage. However, when that campaign achieved its initial objective in 1918, her *raison d'être* had vanished and her mountaineering triumphs were all but forgotten.

On its first publication in 1915, her book *The Conquest of Mount Cook* had received a lukewarm notice from Edward Fitzgerald. But it took the *New*

¹ S Irwin, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Life of a Mountaineer, Freda du Faur*, Victoria, 2000.

Zealand Alpine Club Journal another six years to publish its own more disparaging review in which Freda was accused of being 'tainted with egotism' and unfairly criticising certain New Zealand climbers. These slights would have hurt Freda deeply, but more serious was the gradual deterioration in the mental health of Muriel who, despite expensive medical treatment paid for by Freda, died in 1929 aged 44.

Freda was devastated and with her woes exacerbated by the stock market crash and an unseemly dispute about Muriel's Australian estate, she returned to Australia in 1935 a wizened, withdrawn and lonely woman, her world in ruins. On 11 September, aged 53, she committed suicide by putting her head into a gas oven. For decades, Freda's exceptional mountaineering achievements were largely forgotten but in 2006 a group of New Zealand climbers finally placed a memorial stone over her unmarked grave at Sydney's Manly Cemetery.

Only after reading Jim Wilson's monograph of Mount Cook, *Aorangi*, in 1970 did I learn about Freda Du Faur. My young family and I had emigrated temporarily to Australia and before returning to England I made my own bid to climb Mount Cook, achieving that ambition on 25 November 1970 with Mike Browne when we took 10 hours to get up and down. Our hubris was quickly dispelled on learning that Freda's great traverse had been done without crampons. Eighteen years on, in 1988, I visited the Mount Cook National Park once again for three days' ski mountaineering with Shaun Norman. We climbed Elie de Beaumont and Broderick on successive days before making our exit down the Tasman glacier. And it is here, in the shadow of Aoraki, romantically translated as the 'Cloud Piercer', Freda's mountain, that all journeys in the Southern Alps should end.