

# Geological days

From 1965 until 1980 saw me at the Otago University Geology Department as a technician and geological photographer. The exciting advent of plate tectonics, providing explanation for continental drift, was changing science forever. New young geologists could now boldly make hypotheses and do confirming field research whereas in the past, years of experience was needed. Huge geological voids in South Westland and Fiordland were beckoning. There was a lack of experienced mountain people to accompany advanced students. That's where I came in. Here are a selection of memories.

Alan went from English meadow geology to the other extreme. In 1966 he chose the block bordered by the Haast, Burke and Okuru Rivers. It rose 1800 metres in only 3 kilometres! Trampers take the line of least resistance. Not so geologists. It's bluffs, scrub, waterfalls and cold, wet gloomy gorges!

The land was unmapped but the first air photos were out. The trick was to use these and go cross-eyed to get a couple of centimetres of 3D photo-effect. By poking a pin through the photo, locations were marked, and data written on the back.

Initially we worked from the Haast Highway. We pushed through supplejack and thick forest to bush line at 1000 metres and back. After a week our Crown fern scratches were festering. I couldn't follow Alan when he knocked the moss off near the top of a 100 metre waterfall. I had to trust tree roots in overhanging bush to get out of that one. When bum-sliding down a steep sub-alpine slope, I still don't know why I chose just then to wait for Alan. Between my legs was a huge drop into an abandoned gorge. Alan's first ever night in a tent was my worst to that point. The wind came in blasts with calm in between. We abandoned the tent's remains at 3 am.

What scared me didn't scare Alan and vice versa. Experience verses unawareness. Short snow grass runout-dangers in steep bluff terrain was one of these. My hat off to Alan. With his mental strength he became a very competent back country man.

February the 13<sup>th</sup> 1967 was the only fine day in eighteen when Alan and I worked the head of the Burke River. Deer were small, hungry and gaped at us from 10-15 metres. There was not even moss on the bush floor and a third of the trees had



Crown fern country. *KDM*

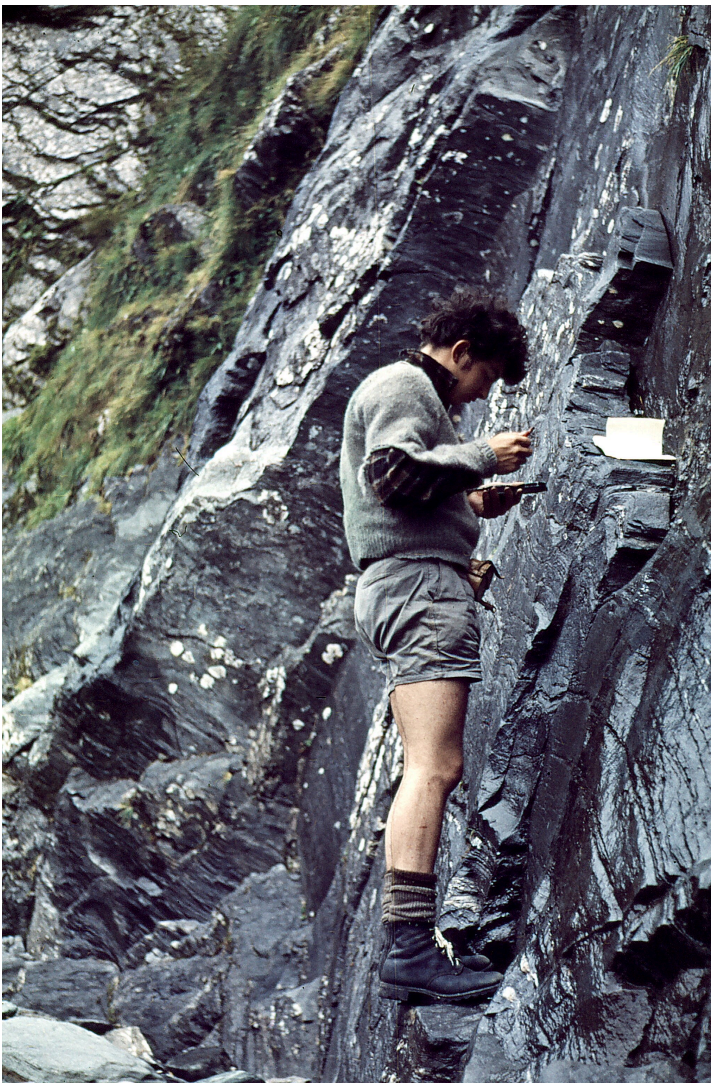


An unmapped waterfall we needed to ascend

been wind-thrown. On our one fine day a meat shooting helicopter came in and hit a big deer mob on an adjacent face. There we many shots but few hits. Several years later I saw chopper shooters with well-honed skills neck-shoot three deer with four shots, in forest. I wouldn't want to upset those boys!

With the bad weather there was no hope of reaching the alpine Lake Douglas for our next airdrop. Nobby Norris, the meat shooter at the junction of the Ngatau and Okuru Rivers, fed us up before we plodded out on water-inflated turf to the Okuru Road end. As the turf sank with our weight, water fountained upwards. Near Nobby's hut Alan thought I was telling porkies about the size of the trout that more than fed six of us on an earlier occasion. He was silenced when I marched over and dug up the fish remains.

Likeable Gary had an amazing physique. For amusement I would lead him between close-spaced trees just to see him get caught by those mighty shoulders.



Alan at work. *KDM*

John named a number of features in his field area. One was the spectacular fault notch of Mistake Creek's U Pass. Prior to that it had been referred to as 'Mason's Fault' within the Geology Department.

We were escorting John's PhD supervisor, Prof Doug Coombs, back to our camp in a hanging valley in Fiordland's Earl Mountains. Most people use a camera stop as excuse to regain their breath. Prof used a geological stop. He spotted an irregular protrusion from the moss of the beech forest floor. Half a dozen minerals were orally identified before he had even raised his geological hammer. An embarrassed groan followed as the 'outcrop' oozed sap.





A 1960s self-portrait in a heroic pose that didn't quite work.



I should have stuck with this...

'C' had been his school's head boy and in the first rugby fifteen. I think I was seen as a skinny lesser being. C's attitude changed when he collapsed due to heat exhaustion and salt loss and I had to support him on my shoulder to get him over a peak to be nearer water. I dropped down a further 300 m to retrieve water from a tarn. I suspect, being bit of a deer wallow, it was of dubious quality. He was duly given a mixture of sugar and salt. C presented a list of new names for the Skippers Range over-looking the Pyke Valley. He was blissfully unaware that the Geographic Board referred his list back to this lesser mortal for comment.



The Darrans from the Skippers Range. Tutoko right, Madeline centre *KDM*



Towards my favourite haunts of the Olivine Ranges from the Skippers Range. Beautiful and remote. *KDM*



'Exposure' has greatly differing meanings between geologist and trumper *KDM*



Murray Gunn and Andy McScratch at our Gunn's Camp base. *KDM*

I was choppered back to the Hollyford Road-end with a bundle of C's rocks in my Mountain Mule Pack. This style of pack's backward-leverage often made you feel as if knives were being pushed into and turned in your shoulders. It was not uncommon for numbness in the arms to make you drop your ice axe. Pack 50 kg; me 65 kg. A mixture of walking and rides got me to Te Anau where I put my load amongst similar size but light Milford Track packs. A beefy bus driver was loading the bus. Whisk, bang, whisk, bang as he just threw packs in. I just waited. He nearly fell flat on his face on reaching mine. "What have you got in this pack . . . bloody rocks? Yep, I said. Well you can load the bloody thing yourself!"

Yosuke was an older geology PhD student from Japan. He had a Kiwi sense of humour and became a friend and climbing companion. The following article gives a further idea of 1960s geology, working without maps or air photos.

### *Of Tapes and Boulders* *Ken Mason OTC 'Outdoors' 1970*

What a twit I must have looked. Standing in the middle of a mountain torrent, one finger through the ring of a tape measure, soaking wet and with the spray from a cascade billowing out over me. A call of 'okay' came from 30 metres below. The tape slackened and I automatically turned and faced upstream. Oh well, the \*%#@\*\$\* thing might break yet. I grunted and hauled myself up the dripping moss of a 10 foot boulder. Low hanging branches forced me out into white water. A few more splashed steps forward then just as my numb body started to regain feeling, the tape measure tightened again. The ring of a geological hammer came from below. Oh hell, this was going to be one of those longer stops.

For two days Yosuke, a Japanese geologist and myself had been working our way up this side creek of the Hollyford. As there were no accurate maps of the area, Yosuke had been using a thirty metre tape and a Brunton Compass to plot on graph paper the direction and gradient of the stream bed. Beside this plotted line he would mark the various rock types. Here and there he would collect a sample (more weight for me to carry) and take a reading of the outcrops dip and strike. In other words he would measure the angle of the outcrop relative to vertical and the angle relative to north.

At last the welcome call came. The tape slackened and I moved on upstream. Yosuke had the dry bit of the bargain. I had to stick to the creek bed in order to keep the tape measure straight and out of the tangle of vegetation. Yosuke could drop his tape end and pick a nice dry easy route to meet the end of the tape again at my previous stopping point. Then, just as I had given up hope, the tape suddenly