

## Chapter One

# My Ghost Mentor

To me a mentor doesn't have to be living within your lifetime. Charlie Douglas, the great Victorian-era South Westland explorer, was one of these. On remoter trips we frequently spoke of him as if we were about to meet him around the next bend. When held up in rain between flooded rivers his quote, 'Oh, I am indeed miserable,' came to the fore.



In 1885 Mt Ionia in the Arawhata was Charlie's prime surveying objective.

Fog cheated us of the summit in 1972. We found our way back by using the blue light from ice axe shaft-holes. I wondered if Charlie's bill-hook (short slasher) steps could have done the same for him. On the way up a group of kea joined our party by using our footsteps.

In the Arawhata, Douglas commented on an unusual glacier that appeared to have no catchment névé. In January 1972 my party reached the terminal of the Tornado Glacier

Tornado Glacier. We climbed Holloway (top left) the previous day (Chris Jackson) *KDM*



in the Northern Olivines. By climbing over a rock shoulder we found the missing névé and did a number of ascents. Only a year earlier the Limbo Glacier, over the ridge from us, was first visited.



Mt Aspiring and Volta Glacier from Glacier Dome (Dick Brasier) KDM

Charlie climbed Glacier Dome at the head of the Volta Glacier from the west. We climbed it from the east via Ruth Ridge. Oddly both of us were there to survey, but 100 years apart. For us it was for escape-routes and for a possible winter ski circumnavigation of Aspiring.

In 1883 Charlie Douglas had problems with his surveying equipment and health. He wrongly mapped the head of the Okuru. He made it twice as long as it is now known. He bisected the Main Divide as two ranges. Peaks were named on the real range as well as the non-existent range. Mt Citheron was shown as being on the Main Divide when it was actually five kilometres to the west. Charlie thought he was looking over the main divide when in reality he was looking into a tributary of the Haast River\*\* (see pg 8). He named this Maori Saddle, a traditional Maori crossing. The whole area's topography was further confused when the first air photos came out about 1965.

In the 1980s the Mount Aspiring National Park Board gave Bob Craigie and I the honour of sorting out residual geographic confusion west of Makarora. Bob was the driving force behind the formation of the park while I had current knowledge of this area and was an honorary park ranger. Our main mission was to use Mr Explorer Douglas's original field notes to formally pin-point Maori Saddle.



The 'Okuru Ledge' in the Ngatau (Arthur James) *KDM*

Charlie's errors certainly added mystery to the area. From Governors Pass at the head of the North Young Valley our six-man party was lured down to camp on an attractive bush-line ledge in the Okuru. We later found out that we were actually in the Ngatau. Had it not rained we would have made an attempt on Young Peak, said to be then the last unclimbed named peak on the Main Divide. Why unclimbed? People kept climbing the wrong mountain. Friends got it in 1967.

Getting off the 'Okuru' Ledge in the Ngatau was interesting. It was overhanging along most of the eastern valley-side. It took two days and another camp to sidle above the cliffs. A party member decided to wash our eating utensils above the cliffs. While hauling a billy of water up on a rope from a waterfall plunge-pool, he knocked most of the utensils over the edge. A competition ensued to see who could carve the best spoon or mug.



In Easter 1972 my five Otago Tramping and Mountaineering Club bushcraft instructees had to be 'nursed' across the Makarora River and into the Blue River Valley. Three were regaining confidence after having recently lost a party member and brother in Snowy Creek on the Rees - Dart crossing. Part way into the Blue we were overtaken by a much faster Otago University Tramping Club party. They overtook us twice more before we all camped together on the upper flats. I guess good party route-finding is better than speeding individuals.

Next morning a fog-bound Maori Saddle lay ahead. The university party were more than happy to let me route-find over the saddle and through the bluffs on the Okuru River side. Here we parted company. Our party did a tricky



crossing into Roaring Swine Creek to gain our pick-up on the Haast Highway while the others sped off for a Burke River exit.



On reaching Makarora we found out that the OUTC party had lost a member in the Burke Gorge. The missing man went ahead after the party had crossed the old two-wire Strachan Creek bridge. Two years earlier we crossed roped-up as the wires were in poor condition. This was a very scary crossing just above the lip of a fifty metre waterfall. The Burke gorge is impressive and may be in places as narrow at the top as at the bottom. The missing man's body or belongings were never found.

**Not the two-wire Strachan Creek bridge but a similar one of the era. KDM**

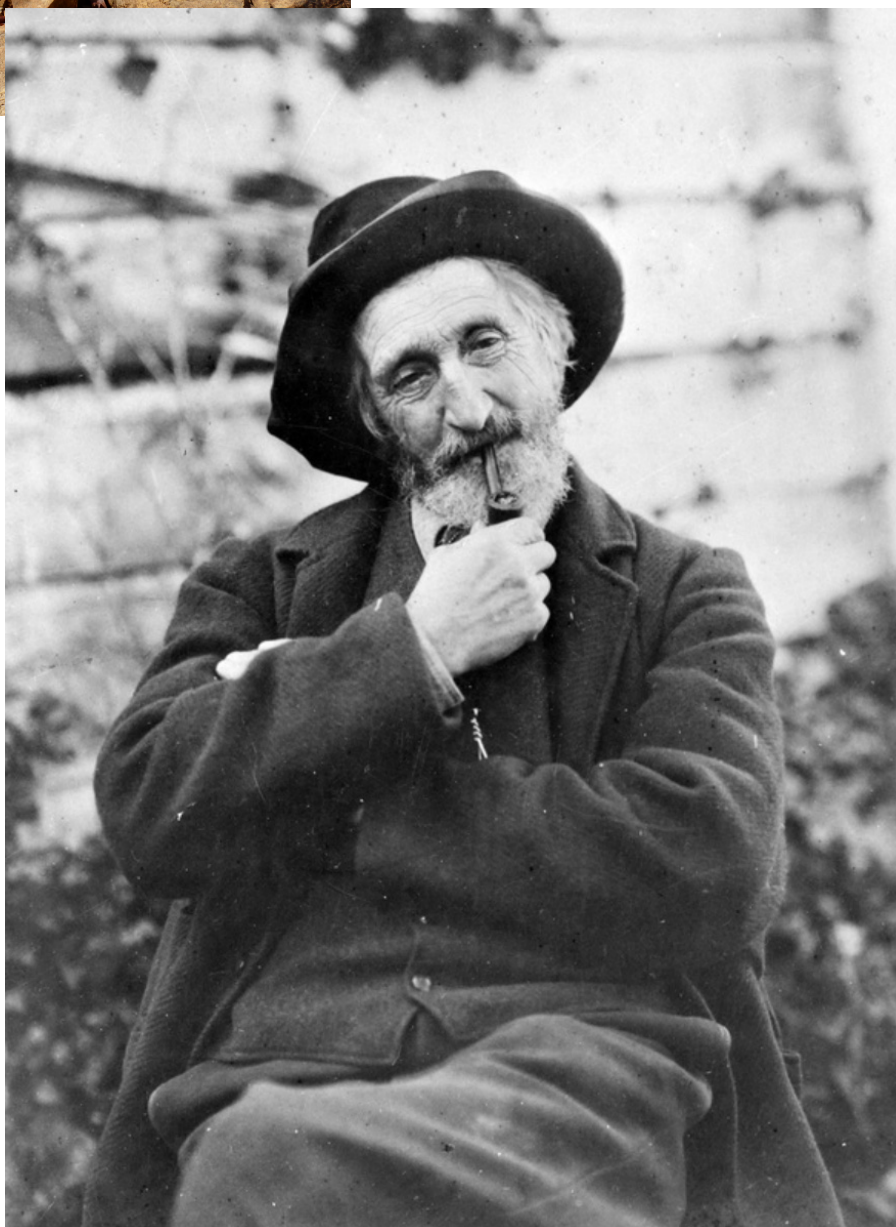


After the Cave Creek viewing platform tragedy in 1995, the Strachan Creek wire was collapsed by DOC. To now cross the gorge above the waterfall without the wire has a high chance of disaster. Apparently DOC doesn't care about your safety per se. It's any potential liability falling on them from structures that counts. So ended what had become a popular four-day tramping circuit.



My younger son Mark loves to repeat old photos of me in the mountains. In January 2015 we replicated a shot taken by me at the elaborate metal Douglas-Mueller trig on Red Hills some 45 years earlier. Both the trig and I are showing obvious signs of decay. *Mark Mason*

On Queen's Birthday Weekend 2016 I joined over 300 people in Hokitika, at the hundredth anniversary of the death of Mr Explorer Douglas. Participants were encouraged to share a dram of whiskey with Charlie at his grave. The following day I went back to spend reflective time with my ghost mentor.





H. D. Mason

# THE NORTHERN OLIVINE RANGE

Compiled from maps and aerial photographs of the Lands and Survey Dept.

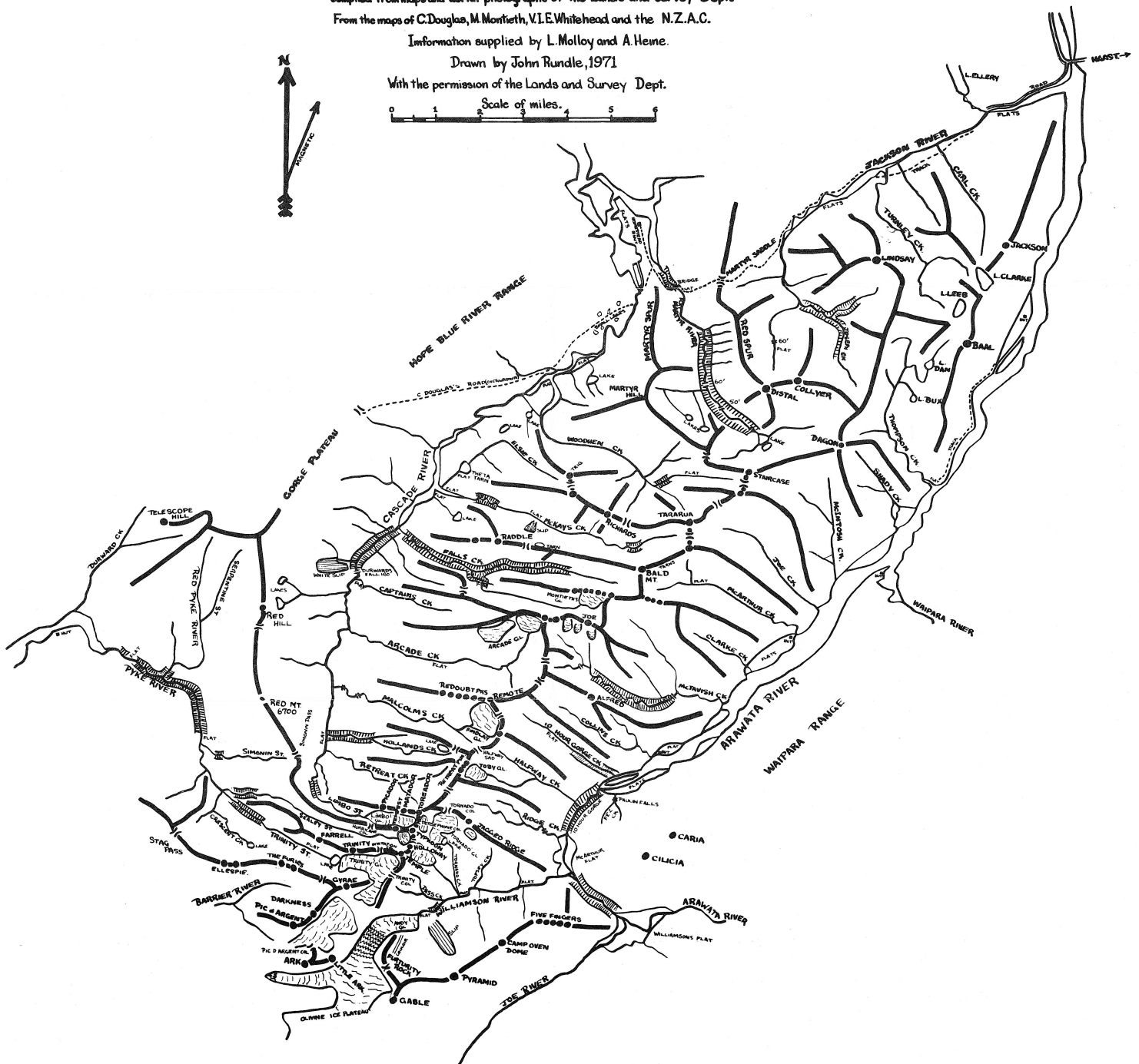
From the maps of C. Douglas, M. Montieth, V. E. Whitehead and the N.Z.A.C.

Information supplied by L. Molloy and A. Heme.

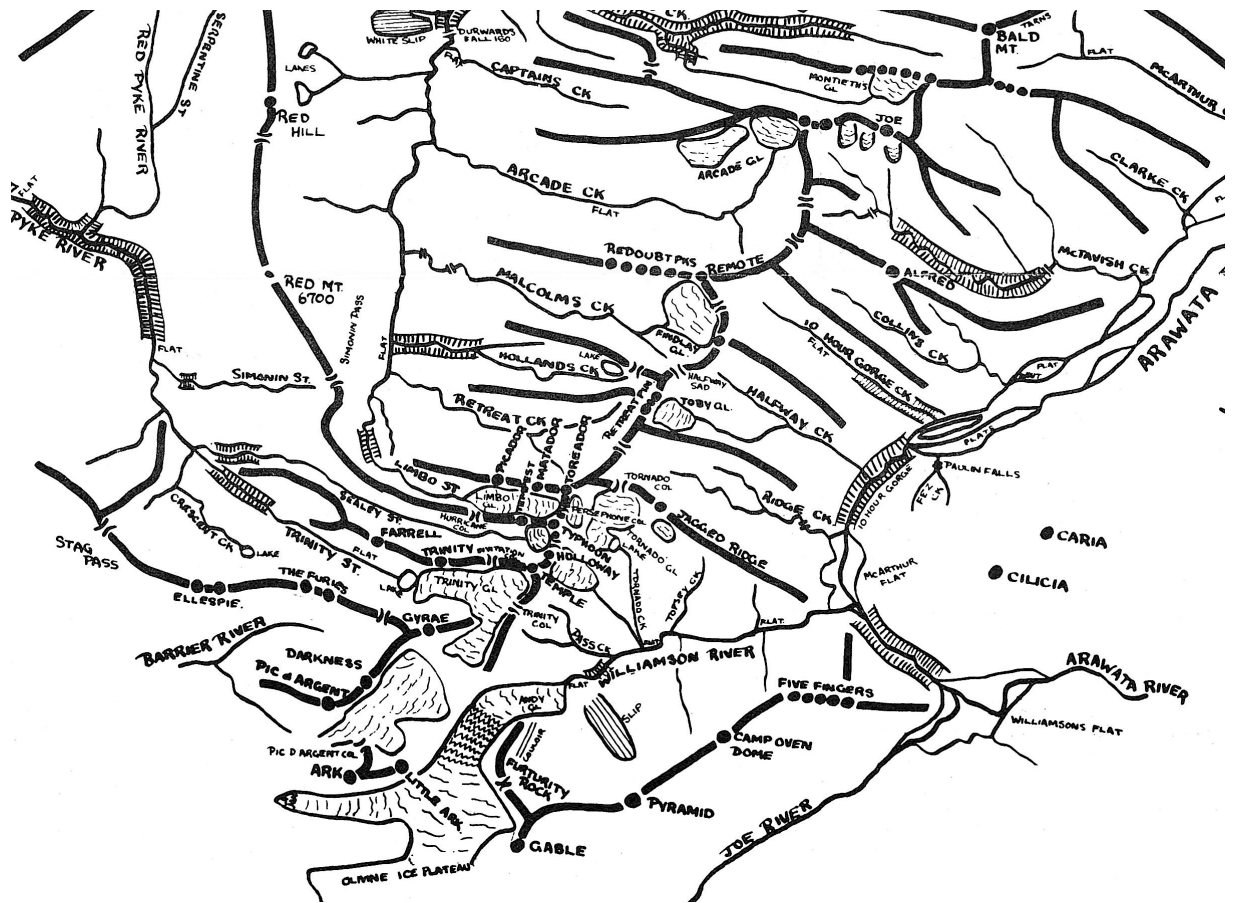
Drawn by John Rundle, 1971

With the permission of the Lands and Survey Dept.

Scale of miles. 0 1 2 3 4 5 6







The dramatic ultramafic-schist boundary in the Red Hills. Few thought 20 years before my geological assisting in the 1960s that the mirrored geology in Nelson, 480 km away, was due to the Alpine Fault. KDM.





**\*\* Footnote**

This statement on page 2 could be correct or incorrect, depending on where Charlie was looking from. If viewing from Citheron or Douglas Saddle it is correct. If from Maori Saddle incorrect.

