



AAC Publications

Aoraki/Mt. Cook, Sheila Face, New Routes

New Zealand, Southern Alps

THE SHEILA FACE of Aoraki/Mt. Cook—the northwest face—sits at the head of the Hooker Glacier.

Continuously steep and nearly 1,000m high at full height, it presents some of the most inspiring technical terrain in the Southern Alps. Helicopter access is forbidden, which means any party wishing to climb in the zone must walk from Mount Cook Village—a trek of between nine and 16 hours, with a good helping of objective hazard and complex glacial navigation. This, combined with the challenges of getting the face in good condition, means the Sheila often goes many seasons without an ascent.

The Sheila Face (northwest face) of Aoraki/Mt. Cook (3,724m), showing (1) The Ministry of Silly Walks and (2) The Pilgrim, both climbed in September 2018. Earlier routes not shown. Photo by Steve Fortune

Caleb Jennings was keen to try an impressive unclimbed couloir left of the Central Buttress, so in early September we made the long walk and ski up the Hooker to Empress Hut. September is quite late in the austral winter to try a sunny northwest-facing ice line, but persistent southeasterlies were keeping temperatures low. Still, to be safe, we decided to start climbing at midnight, traveling as light as possible and hopefully being up and out of the couloir before the sun was anywhere near it.

The route starts with a number of moderate ice leads. After three or four pitches, the climb changes character and heads up a wall of intermittent ice runnels and blobs. The climbing was engaging but never desperate and well protected with ice screws and rock protection (mostly WI4/5 and M5/6). At the crux, a semi-connected ice pillar presented itself as one option, but with Caleb below I wasn't keen to touch it. Instead, I was able to dry-tool up a crack and turn the roof near the top of the pillar.

After these six or so pitches we found ourselves in a large snow gut (a broad gully), and from here we simul-climbed around 300m on moderate terrain to a notch on a ridge feature, which we followed for seven pitches of easier but engaging mixed climbing (M5, 70°), eventually joining the Central Buttress to reach the summit. We called our climb Pilgrim, 900m, IV, 7 (WI5 M6).

We descended the standard Linda Glacier route until reaching the large seracs called the Gunbarrels. We waited here until dark, then crossed under the Gunbarrels and reascended to the Green Saddle. We were able to rappel Fyfe's Gut from here on V-threads, returning us to the Hooker Glacier.

On the drive home we received a call from our friend Rose Pearson, who was planning a three-day trip into the hills. After finding such good ice on Cook, we suggested the possibility of climbing another new line farther left on the Sheila Face. Soon Rose and Sam Waetford were following our skin tracks up the Hooker, though clad in snowshoes, the poor souls.

Rose and Sam's route started a few hundred meters higher up Fyfe's Gut than our own, and so their climb began with some brittle ice climbing (WI4) before branching up the Sheila. The southeastern wind flow had ended and temps were on the rise, and even at 2:30 a.m. the pair had to dodge a few rocks while in the gut. Happy to be out of the firing zone, the pair climbed a long pitch up a steep corner with a thin flow of ice. The following pitch involved some insecure mixed climbing, which gave access to a mixed gully that they followed for a few rope lengths to arrive at a large snow ramp at midday. The pair continued up the ramp, and after some more delicate mixed climbing arrived at the summit around 7 p.m.

They descended following our tracks. The next day Sam's knee decided it had done enough bending and he was forced to walk the entire Hooker valley in some kind of crazy shuffle, after which the pair named their route the Ministry of Silly Walks, 700m, VI, 5 (WI4 M4).

Tragically, Caleb Jennings, my partner on the Sheila Face, was killed in an avalanche on low-angle terrain in Arthur's Pass National Park a few months after we climbed this route. Caleb was an inspired climber and a great friend. The guy you call when you have a plan that clearly involves being wet, cold, and hungry. The guy that carries more than his share but doesn't tell you about it. That laughs, and makes you laugh, when you're miserable. Considered and careful, but when a dangerous task needs to be done, he gets on with it. That looks over mountains he has seen his whole life but shares the same joy he would as if it were his first time. Caleb, I will really miss you.

– Kim Ladiges, Australia

Images



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Ice runnels midway up the Pilgrim, a new route on Aoraki/Mt. Cook.



Caleb Jennings rehydrating on the Pilgrim.



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