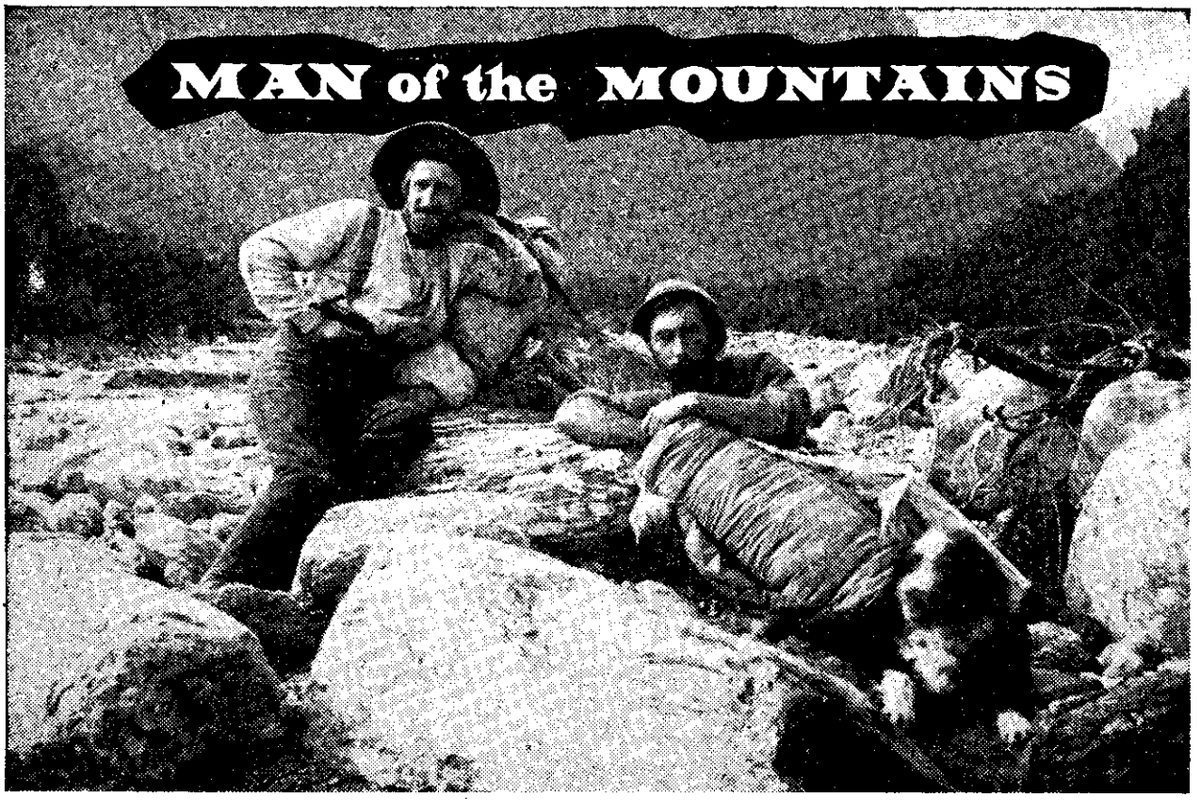
MAN of the MOUNTAINS



LEFT: Ready for the ranges (1894)—Douglas, A. P. Harper and Betsy Jane

"LYING in a Camp all day with no one to talk to . . . I often ask myself in amazement what impulse drives me into the Wilds. Had I remained at home in the Old Country, I might now have been the respectable Father of a family, passing the same Lampost—on the road to office—the exact same minute day after day, perhaps even standing at the Church Plate on a Sunday with a benevolent smile & a White choker. A comfortably situated old Foggy. A tooth in a Wheel of a Mercantile machine a perambulating Ink bottle, Ledger & blooting pad, with just sufficient thinking powers & education to gabble on the topics of the day, but with my Reasoning powers completely dormant. But such a life was not for me . . . as here I am after thirty years wandering, crouched under a few yards of Calico, with the rain pouring & the Wind & Thunder roaring among the mountains a homeless friendless, Vagabond, with a past that looks dreary & a future still more so, still I can't regret having followed such a life and I know that even if I & thousands besides me perish miserably the impulse which impells them to search the Wild places of the Earth is good, one or two are bound to add something to the Worlds stock of Knowledge while so doing, & even a small grain of Knowledge is cheaply purchased at the expense of a thousand ordinary lives."

More than six decades have passed since these words were written, and their author is still perhaps the least known of New Zealand's explorers. When Charles Edward Douglas died (in 1916) his death caused little comment in a world preoccupied with the wider concerns of war. Yet it marked the end of an era—the great era of Westland pioneering and exploration. Douglas, or Mr Explorer Douglas, as the Lands and Survey officially called him, devoted his life to the exploration of his adopted country, but it was not an ordinary life, and the recent publication of his life and writings* may help to prove that when Scotland lost a bank clerk New Zealand gained one of the greatest of her explorers.

Charles Douglas was born on July 1, 1840, at Edinburgh, son of James Douglas and Martha Brook, and educated at the Royal High School of Edinburgh. Of this school, John Pascoe comments that it was "a bottleneck for many of the good young brains of Scotland. As a source of culture its influence was profound." Many famous men were former pupils of the school: Sir Walter Scott, George Borrow, James Boswell, Alexander Graham Bell, and (linking it with New Zealand) men like Captain Cargill, Superintendent of Otago Province in the fifties, and W. D. Murison, an early editor of the *Otago Daily Times:*

> Some of the masters passed into literary and other history: Allan Masterton and Willie Nicol who, in 1789, drank whisky with Robert Burns—"O Willie brewed a peck o' maut, And Rob and Allan cam to see," which Allan set to music. Perhaps Charles Douglas sang in the Okarito Hotel the chorus: "We are na' fou, we're nae that fou, But just a drappie in our e'e!"

Some time after leaving school Douglas joined the Commercial Bank of Scotland as an apprentice. The bank was almost a family affair, as Charles's three brothers all spent time in the same career. His eldest brother, who became Sir William Fettes Douglas and President of the Royal Scottish Academy, had ten years in the Commercial Bank before leaving to become a professional artist. Charles spent only half that time there, and December, 1862, found him landing at Port Chalmers in the immigrant ship Pladda.

> Unknown arrivals such as Douglas would learn in that open and rugged country how to look after themselves; to use their ingenuity at improvising, and their sinews to survive natural hazards. What the young Scot did not know about hill and mountain country he would quickly have discovered in the wilds of North-west Otago. And he was soon to change this land of sun and wide spaces for an environment of a different character. Sometime after the middle sixties he went to the West Coast and stayed there till his death.

Douglas mentions the Shotover in his writings, and it was to another place famous in mining history that he made his way from Otago. For it was at Okarito that Douglas began his career in South Westland. He later was to write, "This town is situated at the mouth of the river, and is strictly speaking a seaport town, depending for its existence on the diggings; as they declined so did Okarito, and now it only has two pubs, a store, gaol & a monthly magistrate. The few cityzens spend their time shouting for each other, and talking about the good old times never to return. . ." He also defined three eras of progress for the ordinary digging township: "First the calico, sardine tin, and broken bottle era. Second the weather board, and sheet iron period. Third the borough. Some never get beyond the first, a few reach the second, and still fewer the third."

Okarito in the early sixties, however, skipped the calico period, for it "sprung into the weatherboard era all at once. In those days [wrote Douglas] it was entirely a public house town with a resident Warden, and a staff of Police to maintain order, a Survey and Custom house, harbour master, and a remarkably rowdy class of inhabitants and visitors. It made a desperate effort to reach the borough stage but ignomenously failed. A town council was elected who at once started to tax the cityzens, but as they had no power to do so, no one was fool enough to pay, so as there were no funds even for councillors beer it was judged best to retire. . ."

Before becoming a full-time explorer, Douglas worked at a variety of jobs:

LEFT: The young emigrant—a hitherto unpublished photograph of Douglas. RIGHT: The veteran explorer washing his gear in a glacier stream in the nineties

*MR EXPLORER DOUGLAS. edited by John Pascoe; A. H. and A. W. Reed; 37/6.