

spot where he fell, is still to be seen. His four-volume work on South African birds was published after his death.

But it was a group of Free State climbers who first started organised climbing in the Drakensberg. In 1908 an eccentric Irishman, Tom Casement, appeared on the scenes. In 1909 he took over Rydal Mount Hotel in the Witzieshoek area. Rydal Mount was the gateway to the Mont-aux-Sources area in those days, and soon Tom Casement and his Basutho boy, Melatu, commenced a series of sensational climbs. Tom was the brother of Sir Roger Casement, who was hanged by the British in 1916 as a traitor, and it is possible that Sir Roger even accompanied Tom on some of his climbs, for he visited Rydal Mount round about 1910 or 1911.

Tom himself was a lovable, great-hearted rascal of a climber, headstrong, impetuous, and with an explosive vocabulary that secretly greatly delighted the ladies, who were always on tenterhooks as to what he would say next! He soon proved himself to be a magnificent climber and soon the *Amphitheatre*, *Sentinel Peak*, *Eastern Buttress*, and even peaks to the south, knew the call of his voice. We tell the story of some of these climbs in a later Chapter.

But then World War I broke out. Tom joined up and served with distinction in the South African forces, attaining the rank of Captain. After the war he lived a roving and restless life. For a time, in 1919, he was associated with Hans Merensky, prospecting for diamonds on the Vaal River, and might have become a wealthy man. But his restless disposition would not permit of his sticking to any job for any length of time. His brother's tragic fate, too, had distressed him greatly, and he placed himself in the hands of General Smuts. It was thought better that he should leave the country. Round about 1921 he returned to Ireland. Early in the 1940's he was drowned, tragically. His body was fished out of the waters of the Liffey early one morning. It was thought probable that, returning to his rooms the previous night, he had taken a short cut across the canal by a narrow plank bridge over the top of the lock gate, missed his footing in the darkness, and fallen in. At the time he was said to be an Inspector of coastal rockets, though what Tom would be doing with rockets is difficult to imagine. He probably didn't know much about them, but that wouldn't worry Tom in the slightest! A roisterous, lovable, swashbuckling fellow of a mountaineer!

From 1912 to 1914 Tom Casement was associated with a very different sort of climber. Father A. D. Kelly was a Father of the Sacred Mission, who had arrived in South Africa in 1902, younger brother of Father Herbert Kelly, the founder of the Mission. At the time Alfred Kelly was Priest Vicar of the Cathedral at Bloemfontein. In his day he had been a semi-blue for tennis at Oxford, and was tennis champion of the Orange Free State. Before coming to South Africa he had done a little climbing in the Lake District. He was almost totally deaf.

He soon started climbing in the Drakensberg with Tom Casement. He and Tom were in the party that first climbed *Cathkin Peak* in 1912. When they arrived at the head of the Monk's Ravine, where the really difficult part commences, Tom and Father Kelly went on ahead impetuously, leaving the rest of the party behind. Soon, however, they found themselves in difficulty, pinned like butterflies on the sheer face of the cliff, and neither able to move, the deaf padre on one end of the rope in a position suggesting earnest prayer, and Tom at the other, purple with fury and letting loose such a string of profanity as those ancient rocks had never heard. It was fortunate that the good padre was deaf! But they managed to extricate themselves, and soon rejoined the others. Father Kelly did most of his climbing in the Mont-aux-Sources area, but there is a tradition, unconfirmed, that he reconnoitred a route up *Monk's Cowl*.

In June 1915 he returned to England, continuing his work in the training of Sacred Missioners at their Headquarters at Kelham Hall, Newark. He still spent most of his holidays climbing in the Lake District. Did he ever, I wonder, while climbing those benign and gracious hills, think back on the terrifying precipices of the Drakensberg mountains which he had helped to scale? He died, after a short illness, on March 19th 1950, at the age of 77, a dedicated priest to the last.

Drakensberg, and knew all its secrets – the standard routes on all the major peaks; the caves, the well-known ones and the remote and inaccessible ones known to few; the best camp sites, the paths, the water-points, the birds and the Bushman paintings. Emily Arnold who knew her well and often climbed with her, said of her, “Phyl loved all wild things – the untamed mountains, the rushing Berg streams, the sky, the stars, the birds, the animals and the flowers”.

One day in 1967 she started to climb a hill near her home at Blackridge, near Pietermaritzburg, to see if an unrecognised flower which she had found a few days previously had opened. It was her last climb. Near the top she was struck down by an African assailant, and savagely murdered. To those who knew her as friend and fellow-climber she is still remembered with affection and gratitude.

No account of the climbers of the Drakensberg would be complete without a reference to the Zulu and Basutho guides, who accompanied their masters into the high places. Indeed, such fine climbers were many of them that the terms “master” and “servant” fell away, and they became fellow-climbers.

One of the best known was Melatu, Tom Casement’s boy. Melatu (the name means a debt) was a Mosutho, tall, gaunt, tough and wiry. Father Kelly said of him that he was the only African boy he knew who climbed and who liked it. He claimed to have accompanied Casement on the latter’s ascent of the *Sentinel*, the *Eastern Buttress* and *Cathkin*. He is not quite correct about the first two, though he did climb them shortly afterwards. He certainly accompanied West, Amphlett, Kelly and Casement on their historic *Cathkin* climb in 1912, and he was with Casement when he made the terrifying ascent of Sentinel Gully in 1911. He also accompanied Father Kelly on the latter’s climb up the *Inner Tower* in 1913, though it is doubtful whether he reached the top. Melatu was born about 1870, and was still climbing in 1930 at the age of 60.

Charlie also was a guide, a Zulu, whose name is legendary in the Mont-aux-Sources area. His Zulu name was Maqadi Ngcobo. He was born in the shadow of the *Sentinel*, and this has been his home ever since. When Williams was leasing Coventry’s farm round about 1917 he engaged Charlie as a herd boy, and later he was employed to fetch visitors to the Hotel by donkey-cart from Bergville. Later still he was promoted to guide. Doyle Libenberg, who knew him well, (he once carried Doyle home on his back after Doyle had broken his leg on the slopes of *Eastern Buttress* in 1932) has described his distinctive character – his very genuine love for, and knowledge of, the mountains, his profound understanding of his fellow men, and his roguish approach to life. He loved to pull the legs of the people whom he led into the mountains. After supper in the Hut on the summit he would tell to a rapt audience the story of how a party of 20 Basutho, returning from the mines, were caught in a snowstorm on the slopes of *Mont-aux-Sources*, and all perished. At the psychological moment, with perfect timing, he would suddenly leap up, fling the door of the Hut open, and bid the ghosts of the 20 Basutho enter! In fact Charlie had a fund of quite impossible stories with which he would regale his audience in the long winter nights. But he was never malicious, always thoughtful and considerate, and in an emergency, magnificent. On one occasion the Acutt family from Durban were caught in a blizzard on the summit. He saved the whole family, leading them down the Chain Ladder, and carrying Miss Acutt, whose feet were frost-bitten, all the way from *Sentinel* to the Hotel, a distance of twenty kilometres.

In 1960 Charlie was still “guiding”, well on in years by then, but shortly after that advancing age called the inevitable halt, and Charlie retired to his kraal and to his beer under the shadow of the *Sentinel*, where for many years he still told his impossible stories, not to the tourists this time, but to the ring of wide-eyed and fascinated umfaans,* gathered round him in the sun. He died early in 1964.

What Charlie and Melatu were to *Mont-aux-Sources*, Mtateni Xosa, familiarly known as

* umfaan: a small boy (Zulu).

the home of the mountain eagles, and offered closer, and easier, climbs than the *Amphitheatre*. In 1890 Smith started taking in paying guests, and soon the place began to be known for its warm, genial hospitality, and as a starting point for those to whom the mountains called.

In 1909 it was taken over by the eccentric Irishman we have already met, Tom Casement, brother of the notorious Sir Roger Casement. Sir Roger at the time was the British Consul in the Belgian Congo, and actually visited his brother soon after Tom had taken over the place. It was Tom who finally converted the old farm-house into a roomy and comfortable Hotel, with outside rooms, and a dance floor. Soon holiday makers from far and near were descending on the place.

These days under Tom Casement were the best days that the Hotel was ever to know. Rail-head was at Aberfeldy, 35 km away, or through Kestell Road (52 kilometres), and Tom ran a coach service to bring his guests to the Hotel. But the roads were little better than wagon tracks. There were no bridges, and wet weather could mean flooded rivers, and travellers held up for weeks at a time. During holiday seasons, especially at Christmas, Tom's transport was unable to cope with the crowds, and local farmers from all around piled in to help. The roads were choked with American buck-boards, spiders, buggies, dog-carts, wagonettes and traps of every description, as they all took to the roads to bring Tom's guests the 35 kilometres to the Hotel. Great clouds of dust hung above the roads over the Free State plains, as the buggies all converged on the little Inn, with whips cracking and the raucous cries of the drivers. At the end of one Christmas season more than 600 guests had enjoyed Tom's hospitality. Days were spent in riding and hiking through the lovely country of Witzieshoek, where the Eland River flowed, and in the evenings fair ladies in their bustles and moustachioed gentlemen in their stiff Edwardian collars and Norfolk jackets danced long into the night to the fiddles and the castanets.

Most famous of all was the trip to the summit, organised to the last detail by Tom, himself no mean mountaineer. Parties would leave on horseback in the early morning, and ride through the pleasant valleys of the Eland to the foot of the Namahadi Pass. Here they would sleep the night in Suai's Cave. It is to be hoped that the ghosts of past occupants did not haunt the dreams of the tired riders, for blood had been shed years ago in this cave at the foot of the quiet mountains. A party of raiding Bushmen had caught two of the herd boys of Moshoeshoe, and had gouged out their eyes. It was a time of blood, and blood could only be answered by blood. The spearmen of Moshoeshoe gathered one night to avenge the deed. They surrounded Suai's Cave, where the Bushmen were sleeping. At three in the morning they leapt in to the attack, and all, old men, women and children, were hacked to death, all except the young girls, who were more useful alive than dead. Such is the story of Suai's Cave.

Next morning the riders would ascend the Pass, up Jacob's Ladder, reach the summit, and gasp as they gazed at the fairest view in all Africa, *Mont-aux-Sources*, the 3 000 metre precipices of the *Amphitheatre*, and the vast plains of Natal spread out far below. Here too were the Tugela Falls, the water pouring over a 1 200 metre drop into the gorge below, except in winter, when it was all iced over. Then back home, unless they planned a longer stay, in which case they slept in Crow's Nest Cave, near the site of the present Mountain Club Hut. And everything, supplies, equipment, horses, guide, for only R2 a day.

Those must have been wonderful days in the high Drakensberg, with Tom and Father Kelly and Melatu, and an occasional visit from the Amphlett's, who lived in Cape Town – first ascents, lonely valleys, virgin peaks, all to be explored and sampled. *Sentinel* was the first to be climbed. In 1909 W. J. Wybergh from Johannesburg reconnoitred the peak, but he had no companion with him, and could not tackle the climb alone. Next year, however, he persuaded Lieut. N. M. McLeod, of the Royal Field Artillery, stationed at Harrismith, to accompany him, and together the two men made their way to Suai's Cave, where they spent the night.

Next morning they set off for the peak. According to Wybergh's subsequent account it

It was the first page. The other pages followed swiftly. Back at Rydal Mount, Wybergh was so thrilled with his climb that he persuaded Tom Casement to come up with him immediately on a repeat performance, and a few days later the two men were back on the peak. This time fortune smiled on them, the weather was perfect, and they were rewarded with what must surely be one of the finest views in all Africa. Not content with that, the indefatigable Wybergh was back again a month later, this time with a large party, consisting of his wife and his twelve-year old daughter Betty; Mr. and Mrs. Amphlett; Miss Jagger; Tom Casement; G. J. Miller, a Bloemfontein journalist; Miss Gordon-Smith, and the faithful Melatu. Only Miller and Miss Gordon-Smith failed to make the top. The party assembled at Rydal Mount and this time proceeded up Namahadi Pass to the summit, and down the gully to the base of the peak. Again the weather was bad, and they climbed in mist, rain and thunderstorms, but eight of the party reached the summit. The first lady there was Mrs. Wybergh, while little Betty not only climbed well and reached the top, but later was to develop into a very fine mountaineer herself.

This was the start of Tom Casement's climbing career. He teamed up with Father Kelly and G. J. Miller after that, and, with Tom's Basutho servant Melatu, the four men made a number of sensational ascents in the area.

Six months later, in May 1911, Tom and Melatu made their way over Basuto Gate Pass and down into the gorge of the Tugela River. From there they climbed Sentinel Gully. This is the gully which runs up from the Tugela Gorge to the nek separating *Sentinel Peak* from the main escarpment. Even Tom, who had nerves of iron, described the climb later as "terrifying". The gully was packed with huge, loose boulders, heavily iced up, and the cold was intense. Three large and difficult waterfalls blocked their way, and had to be circumvented. They only just managed to reach the top.

On 13th June 1913 Father Kelly and Miller accomplished a first ascent of *Inner Tower*. The *Inner Tower* consists of three summits separated by narrow clefts about 20 metres in depth. From the top of the *Amphitheatre* wall the two men descended into the nek separating the *Tower* from the main escarpment, and from there contoured along the south face of the *Tower* and into the first of the two smaller clefts. From this cleft they climbed the left-hand, western, wall, and so reached the highest of the three summits, the one nearest the escarpment edge.

The next dramatic event took place on Friday, July 10, 1914. That night Melatu came running in to Tom Casement, who was entertaining his guests at Rydal Mount. "Baas," he cried out excitedly, "there is a fire on top of *Outer Tower*!" The peak had been climbed at last. Melatu set out hot-foot to greet the victors.

The victors were the same two men who had climbed *Inner Tower* a year previously, Father Kelly, the climbing priest from Bloemfontein, and G. J. Miller, the journalist. They had left Rydal Mount the previous day, made their way over Basuto Gate Pass, and so into Tugela Gorge, where they camped for the night.

Next morning, just as it was getting light, they left camp at 6.45 a.m. and made their way up the stream running up to *Devil's Tooth*. By 1.30 p.m. they had reached the nek between *Devil's Tooth* and *Eastern Buttress*, called in those days *Outer Tower*, and from there they made their way on to the northern face of the peak, facing the Tugela Valley. Here they found a narrow and very steep gully, up which they climbed, and by 3 p.m. they were on the summit, perilously late for that time of the year. By now, they were tired. They decided to spend a couple of hours resting, and at 5 p.m., after firing the grass, and with only half an hour's daylight left, they commenced the descent. By the time they had reached the nek at the base of *Devil's Tooth*, it was dark.

They managed to climb a little way down the gully in the dark, and then found a small ledge, with sharp pitches above and below, where they spent the night. Nearby was a narrow crack, and by squeezing into this they managed to catch a little water as it fell, drop by drop. Better still, they also found some dead trees in the gully, and managed to keep a fire going for

most of the night. They had no blankets, and for food only 57 grams (two ozs.) of chocolate. It was too cold to sleep, and through the long hours of the winter night they sat and dozed around their fire. Next morning, 27 hours after leaving it the previous day, they reached their camp down in the Gorge, and there, to their surprise, they met Melatu, uttering howls of delight and waving a big bag of food. "He who does not know the joy of climbing," said the good Father after this climb, "does not know what joy is, and this reaches its acme when it is crowned by the achievement of a first ascent."

Four weeks later, not to be out-done, Tom Casement made a second ascent of the peak, taking Melatu with him to the summit.

After Casement left Rydal Mount for the East African Campaign in 1915, it was again taken over by Herbert Smith, until he died about 1918. But its best days were over, and from the time Casement left, a steady decline set in. Water was always a difficulty. In the early days it used to be carted up from the river in drums by ox-wagon, but it was scarce, and exasperated guests, coming in hot and tired after a day's climb, were told "Sorry, no water!" Being outside of a municipality no liquor licence was available, and in 1919 Mr. Coventry, first lessee of the new Hotel on the Natal side, started to cut a series of paths to the summit, making for much easier access from the Natal side than the one up the Namahadi Pass. Worse still, it fell into inexperienced hands. From about 1919 to 1922 a Mrs. Enslin had it, and she ran it like a Girls' Boarding School, with all sorts of irksome restrictions. It must have been about this time that a ribald song used to be sung in the neighbouring farm-houses to the tune of *There is a Happy Land, Far, Far Away*:

*There is a boarding-house
Not far away,
Where the guests get rotten eggs
Three times a day.*

It revived for a time under Dr. Andries Cronje round about 1925. Dr. Cronje added rondavels, an ablution block, and a polished stone floor in the Lounge, still to be seen in 1967. He put in a pump and engine, and built a swimming bath. Then a younger brother of Cronje took over and it finally fell into the hands of another Irishman, by the name of Ostack. But competition with the Natal side was too keen. The new Hostel at what is now the Royal Natal National Park, had recently been taken over by Otto Zunckel and his son Walter, and was flourishing, attracting guests from far and near. Rydal Mount finally closed down in the early thirties. The land and the buildings on it were purchased by the Government, and added to the neighbouring Witzieshoek Bantu Reserve, and the buildings were demolished in 1969.

On the day I visited it in 1967, an air of sadness hung over the forgotten buildings. Two ancient oak trees still stood guard over the front entrance, but the grass had grown right up to the very doors and into the cracks of the stone walls. To the right of the steps, almost hidden in the long grass, a rose tree, planted no doubt in the early days, still struggled bravely above the choking grass, but for the rest the gardens and the terraced lawns were no more. The rooms which once echoed to the sounds of gay laughter and the soft swish of skirts, were deserted and empty. Toilet appliances had been stripped off the walls, wash basins hung drunkenly from their fittings. The swimming bath was cracked and full of weeds and stagnant water. The laughter and the bright lights were no more, the whiskered gentlemen and the ladies with the sigh and the lowered eyelash, all had gone. Only the whisper of the wind in the long grass was the same as it was in those days of long ago.

And over it all broods *Mount Qua-qua*, serene, aloof, unsmiling, ageless. For what are the brief antics of puny man in the face of its hundred million years!

Witzieshoek itself, of course, has a history much older than that of Rydal Mount. The first inhabitants, as far as we know, were the Bushmen. Then round about 1700 A.D. the Amatheza, as we have already seen, crossed over the Drakensberg at Gordon's Pass, the present Basuto

him, after climbing well up the South Gully, failed at the final pitch, this time owing to the Gully being iced up. Unlike the Stockers however, he spent the night in the Gully.

Finally in 1912 a very determined attempt was made to climb the peak. A strong team of climbers assembled at Col. Wood's farm *Heartsease*. They consisted of W. C. West and G. T. Amphlett from Cape Town, together with Amphlett's coloured servant, Tobias. Father Kelly came from Bloemfontein. He and Tom Casement rode down from Rydal Mount with the faithful Melatu, over 160 km in two days. They left Col. Woods' farm on the morning of 10th September, camped for the night at the foot of the mountain, and reached Monk's Ravine at 11.30 a.m. on the following day. Here, although the account is not very clear, they must have spent the night.

Next day, 12th September, they climbed the Ravine, where they saw the cairn and card that Wybergh had discovered a year previously. A little further up they found another bottle, with a note inside, which read: "Take the ice-slope to the right. Then up the Gorge, and away to the left and up the Peak. You will have a jolly good view, even if you have to go home without climbing *Cathkin Peak*. George Scott, Colin S. Nunn, August 1st, 1912."

Then they entered the Gully and climbed steadily for several hours. When they came to the last difficult pitches, which had defeated the Stockers and Wybergh, they at first decided to leave Melatu and Tobias behind, but they were both good climbers, and were so obviously disappointed at being left behind, that eventually they decided to take the two boys up with them. Climbing slowly now, and with infinite care, the six men made their way steadily up the final precipices, and reached the top at 2.20 p.m.

It had previously been considered that *Cathkin Peak* was higher than *Champagne Castle*, but when they reached the summit it was obvious that both *Champagne Castle* and *Monk's Cowl* were higher than *Cathkin Peak*. Their aneroid gave a height of 3 200 metres. The actual height is 3 149 metres.

We have already told the story of the second ascent, made by Londt in July 1921. Up to 1955 the only accepted route up *Cathkin* had been the South Gully, but on September 20, 1955 A. Leeb du Toit, Keith Frank Holderness Bush and N. D. Harte climbed the north face for the first time. It taxed their powers to the utmost, the climb terminating in a 100-metre chimney, very wet, slippery and dangerous in the rainy months, but quite feasible in the drier months. But the climb ended in tragedy. While abseiling down the sheer cliff face the sling attached to the rope holding Keith Bush broke, and he hurtled hundreds of metres to his death. Keith was a most promising Natal University student, son of Professor Frank Bush, also of the University. Amongst the many letters received by his parents at the time of the accident, was this moving tribute from one who knew Keith well:—

"At the hour of his tragic death Keith had no idea of impending disaster. He was with friends and fellow-students in the mountains he so loved, and with them he had just achieved a difficult and hazardous climb. He had done something worthwhile and he must have been filled with a sense of accomplishment for the brief time he and his comrades remained on the top of the conquered peak (*Cathkin*) and surveyed the scene spread out before and below them. Must not that have been a glorious moment! And in that moment, with no sense of pain or danger, he passed on."

His memory is enshrined to-day in the Keith Bush Hut, in the upper reaches of the Mhlwazini Valley, just below the spot where he met his death.

Cathkin Peak was named after David Gray's farm *Cathkin*, a name he had obtained from Cathkin Braes, near Glasgow, David Gray's home city. David Gray, it will be remembered, had settled in the area in 1858. The full story of the naming of *Cathkin Peak* and *Champagne*

Peak	Height		Date of first ascent	Climbing party	Standard of climb
	Feet	Metres			
Indumeni Dome	10 680	3 255†	1925	H. G. Botha-Reid and party*	A
Monk's Cowl	10 611	3 234	1942	J. Botha, E. Ruhle, A. S. Hooper, H. Wong	F
Ifidi Buttress	10 560	3 219		No record*	A
Injasuti Buttress	10 523	3 207	1935	G. M. J. Sweeney, M. Frank	C
Western Triplet	10 455	3 187	1951	R. F. Davies, D. Bell	G
Eastern Triplet	10 400	3 170†	1950	E. Scholes, R. Forsyth, D. Watkins, Lorna Pierson	G
Sentinel	10 385	3 165	1910	W. J. Wybergh, Lieut. N. M. McLeod	D
Middle Triplet	10 350	3 155†	1950	D. Watkins, Gillian Bettle, Lorna Pierson	F
North Saddle	10 346	3 153	1924	O. K. Williamson, D. W. Bassett-Smith	C
			1968	R. Fuggle, C. Fatti, B. Manicom, A. Dick from Ntonjelane Valley	F
Cathkin Peak	10 330	3 149	1912	G. T. Amphlett, W. C. West, Father A. D. Kelly, T. Casement, Tobias, Melatu	E
Mt. Amery	10 311	3 143	1920	D. W. Bassett-Smith, R. G. Kingdon	B
			1955	E. M. Winter, M. C. Moor, R. M. Moor, from Singati Valley	D
Elephant	10 300	3 139†	1936	O. B. Godbold and party*	A
Beacon Buttress	10 240	3 121		No record*	A