

JOY OF THE MOUNTAINS

– book review

a climber's life

by John Wilson

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Review by Pat Deavoll (issue 82, summer 2012/2013)

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On Sunday 19 June 1966 four young men from Christchurch set off to climb the [Otira Face](#) of [Mt Rolleston](#), an alpine route

considered technically challenging and arduous for the era, and a climb the climbers approached with caution. When they hadn't returned by the Monday morning, the alarm was raised and a search initiated. Because the team hadn't recorded their intentions, two groups of rescue climbers left Arthur's Pass Village on Tuesday morning in bad weather to search both [Mt Philistine](#) and Mt Rolleston. The group on Rolleston picked up the voices of the climbers and calculated they were somewhere in the middle section of the Otira Face. The rescuers were unable to reach them and retreated to the village to regroup, knowing that at least two of the young men were still alive.

The following day, winter arrived with a vengeance, but the rescue party left to set up a camp on the [Otira Slide](#), planning to ferry winches to the summit to hoist the climbers to safety. This plan was based on the assumption that they could not be rescued from below. By the end of the day they had established the camp and that evening were joined by skilled alpinists and friends [Norman Hardie](#) and [John Harrison](#), who had so far not been involved because of work commitments. By now the rescue team was operating in a full-blown southerly gale.

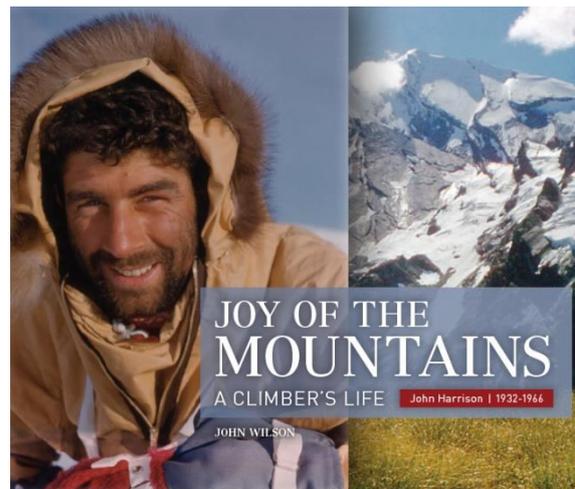
Some time during the night, Hardie and [John Wilson](#) (who were sharing a tent with Harrison) 'woke to hear desperate noises coming from John.'

Hardie said, 'I tried to move but from my hips down I was pinned by an incredible weight of snow. Clearly we were under a large avalanche, our tent flattened on our chests

I could not reach John and very quickly he fell silent. We shouted and got no response from the other tents.'

Hardie tore a hole in the tent for air, before both men slipped into unconsciousness.

All three of the camp's tents were buried by the avalanche and it wasn't until morning that two of the team were able to dig themselves out and affect a rescue on the others. Tragically, Harrison was found to have died in the night. The death of one of the nation's most renowned and accomplished climbers while on a rescue mission (and the imminent deaths of the four on the Otira Face) hit the close-knit climbing community hard, for, as well as his prowess as a climber, Harrison was a modest man who held a 'joy, simply to be in the mountains.' The death also shocked the nation, for during his career, Harrison had made a name for himself as one of the leading alpinists of the day.



John Wilson (a personal friend of Harrison's who was also caught in the accident) has written a succinct and highly entertaining book on Harrison's life, interspersed with excerpts and sketches from Harrison's diaries. It's a story that deserves to be told, for Harrison completed first ascents not only in the Southern Alps, but also in the Himalaya and in Antarctica. In 1955 he took part in a Canterbury Mountaineering Club expedition to Masherbrum, in Pakistan. An excerpt from his diary reads:

'The wildest night we have yet experienced on the mountain. The wind from the east kept up all night and buffeted the two tents which are pitched end to end almost on top of the Dome. I had quite a busy night as my lilo goes down three times per night regularly and I was showered with ice flung from the inside of the tent wall. I was up at 6am getting breakfast and we were away at 9.15am in clear, very cold conditions. Our target was the 1938 Camp 5 site which we hope to make our Camp 4 to save time- we reached this site in the upper basin at 1.10pm'

Three years after the Masherbrum expedition, Harrison spent a summer in Antarctica as a 'mountaineer's assistant' member of a New Zealand Geological and Survey expedition. The trip was not mountaineering focused, but Harrison made ascents of Erebus and Discovery.

Harrison's final expedition was as part of the 1960-61 Himalayan Scientific and Mountaineering Expedition to climb Mt Makalu in Nepal, led by [Sir Edmund Hillary](#). Although the expedition fell just short of the summit, Harrison played a pivotal role in reaching the high point of 27,400ft.

A highlight of the book is the wonderful layout by Book Design Limited. The numerous photos from Harrison's collection, plus the climber's own sketches, pastel drawings and diary excerpts are beautifully presented to compliment John Wilson's tidy editorial style. This is a volume anyone with an interest in the mountains will want to add to their collection. This is a fine book!