
JOHN SHIPTON

Monte Shipton or Monte Darwin?

In February 1962 my father, Eric Shipton, climbed all three parts of the highest peak of the Cordillera Darwin in Tierra del Fuego with three Chilean companions Cedimir Marangunic, Eduardo Garcia, and Francisco Vivanco. A full account of the expedition is given in *AJ67*, 259 - 323, 1962, as well as in the last chapter of his book *Land of Tempest*. Not only was this the first ascent but also probably the first attempt to get near this peak, guarded on all sides from the Beagle Channel to the fjords to the north by ice cap. To this day the Darwin Range, a chain of mountains nearly as long as the Alps, covered in ice and rearing up straight from the sea, remains remarkably untrammelled by climbers. The chief reason is its inaccessibility, mostly natural but in part political. Access is perforce by sea in a region subject to atrocious weather. The greater part of the range is on a peninsula in the Chilean half of Tierra del Fuego, and mutual suspicion with Argentina has prevented land crossing from the now-populated Argentine half of the island.

At the time, the highest peak of this formidable range, placed at 54.24S 69.51W, had no official name. The only map available to my father, the Chilean Instituto Geographico Militar (IGM) 1:250,000 map printed in 1954, merely marks a point 2469m. More recently the peak has been given an elevation of 2470m on a ridge map published by the French Laboratoire de Glacologie and 2662m on a Japanese map which has contours delineating the three parts climbed in 1962 and referred to as I (2662m), II and III.

My father and his companions decided to call the peak Monte Darwin, honouring its status as the highest point in the range. However, this left cartographers with a problem. As my father acknowledged in his report, another peak (IGM marked altitude 2438m) further south (54 46S 69 29W) was already called Monte Darwin. The Italian priest and explorer Alberto de Agostini marks it as such on his maps while the IGM map calls it Co Darwin. For a long time it was assumed to be the highest peak in the range, and also it is far more prominent from the Beagle Channel, the most frequently navigated water around the Cordillera.

When, in 1970, the New Zealand Tierra del Fuego expedition made the first ascent of Agostini's Monte Darwin they sought to settle matters by continuing to call that peak Darwin while referring to my father's 40m higher Monte Darwin as Monte Shipton. But the few maps of a large enough scale to show the various peaks of Cordillera Darwin remain divided. Some retain Agostini's Co Darwin and leave Monte Shipton/Darwin unnamed, others have made my father's transfer and left the old Monte Darwin unnamed (the Japanese), and a third camp has adopted the 1970

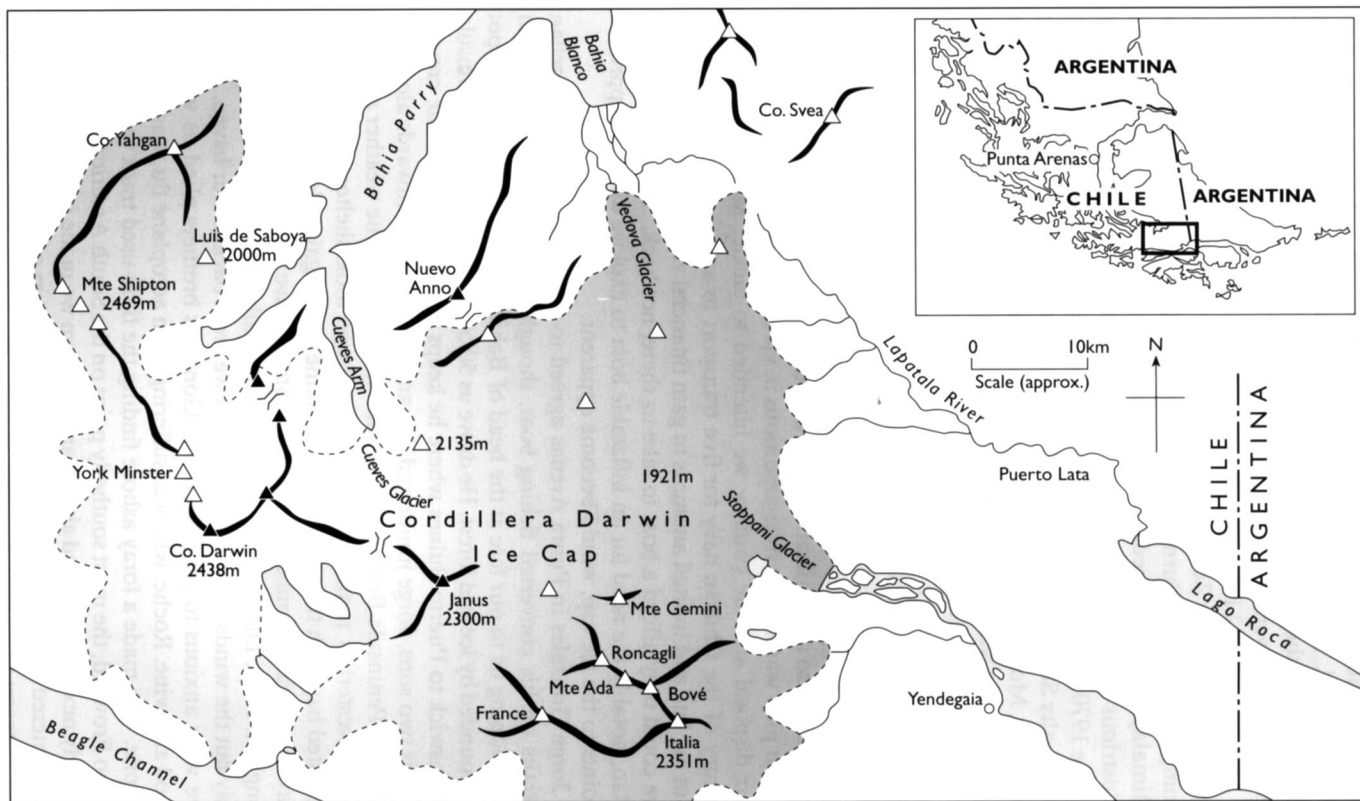
New Zealanders' naming, for example the Chilean 123 Entel series map *Cabo Froward*. To me, the New Zealand solution seems the best as it clearly distinguishes the two peaks while honouring my father's first ascent and his many achievements in Patagonia.

In January 2002 I went to have a good look at the two mountains. With me were three New Zealanders, Paddy Freaney and Rochelle Rafferty, my companions on Mt Burney in 2001, and Bill King, like Paddy a veteran of Himalayan mountaineering. I wanted to retread some of my father's illustrious footsteps and the Kiwis were keen to have a look at the ground of the 1970 expedition. We planned to traverse the Cordillera Darwin from Admiralty Sound to the Beagle Channel and attempt either Monte Shipton or, if not, Monte Darwin. We would hire a boat from Punta Arenas to take us across the Magellan Straits to Bahia Parry, off Admiralty Sound, and attempt to gain the ice cap via the Cuevas Glacier. Having achieved what we could on the ice cap we would make our escape by traversing the Cordillera to Yendegaia, an estancia on the Beagle Channel I had passed through two years before. From there we could get back to Punta Arenas by a ferry that makes the long passage through the Tierra del Fuego archipelago to the Chilean outpost of Puerto Williams on Isla Navarino.

Our plan was naively over-ambitious in view of the time and resources at our disposal and the country we intended to tackle. My father had the luxury of the Chilean navy for free transport to and from the Cordillera. But my late and limited attempts to gain financial support bore no fruit, so we could only afford a boat to take us there, not back. Other flaws in the plan, notably the need for an inflatable boat to explore different approach points to the ice cap, would become apparent.

Jorge Gonzales in Punta Arenas agreed to take us across the Magellan Straits on his converted fishing boat, though he had reservations about abandoning us to our fate at the head of Bahia Parry, an uninhabited spot surrounded by ice and forest. He drove us 50km down the coast of Peninsula Brunswick to Puerto Bulnes where he keeps his boat, *Cabo Tamar*, crewed by his two sons, Jorge junior and Alisandro. Sailing southwards along the coast of Peninsula Brunswick, we soon got a taste of the weather as strong south-westerlies roared up the Straits. Jorge took shelter in a beautiful forested bay with the unlikely Gallic name of Bougainville. Many islands, bays and straits around the Magellan Straits have the names of forgotten English, Irish, Dutch, Spanish and French sailors. We ventured out next day but the winds were still strong and we crept back to our haven. While we were anxious to get started, the Gonzales brothers plied us with fine food and wine. Roche, who was suffering from aeroplane flu, was glad of a respite. We made a foray ashore finding the little-used track that leads to Cabo Froward, the most southerly point on the South American mainland.

Early next day the wind abated and by dawn we made it across the Straits and entered Canal Gabrielle, a long, narrow strip of water that separates Isla Dawson from the Gran Isla of Tierra del Fuego. Untouched country



lay on either shore. By lunchtime we emerged from the Canal and started down the huge bay of Admiralty Sound. A succession of fjords cut into the peninsula of the Darwin range to the south. Looking up Broken Bay, where my father landed 40 years ago, Monte Shipton briefly emerged from cloud. In the afternoon we turned into Bahia Parry, the last fjord. Slowing right down, Jorge slipped *Cabo Tamar* over a sand bar and we entered the Cuevas Arm of Bahia Parry where we were confronted by floating ice from the Cuevas Glacier. Jorge dropped anchor by the eastern shore, which we identified as the 1970 New Zealand base camp. Immediately we could see how hamstrung we were going to be without an inflatable. A great bluff divided the beach from the head of the Sound, a four-hour struggle through forest by land, yet two minutes by boat. We persuaded the Gonzales brothers to ferry us round the bluff through the floating ice to a beach with a large river fed by huge, unnamed glaciers.

Jorge was fearful of being trapped, so after landing supplies for six weeks *Cabo Tamar* steamed away. We had engineered an exciting situation. We stood on a spectacular uninhabited shore, separated by 60 miles of the wildest country in the world from the nearest habitation at Estancia Yendegaia. Southern beech forest surrounded our side of the fjord. The water was covered with shifting ice blocks on which sea lions basked, joined by flocks of geese and duck. Every few minutes great chunks of ice crashed into the water, ejected with a sound like cannon fire from the snout of the Cuevas Glacier. The upper reaches of the ice were shrouded in mist and our path onto it guarded by thick forest. To the east we could see hints of the glaciers that fed the river rushing into the sea by our landing. Somewhere in that direction lay our escape route to the Beagle.

We had brought plenty of supplies and could consume luxuries at base camp that would not have to be carried, such as tins of corned beef and lots of chocolate. Roche, who had been far more diligent at gaining backing, had packs of fish lunches donated by the New Zealand company Back Country. We even had the odd litre of *vino tinto* to celebrate our arrival. We were determined not to go hungry as we had on Mount Burney where we lunched on three biscuits and a cubic inch of cheese.

Our first task was to gain the side of the Cuevas Glacier. Finding a way through the primordial forest near the sea is always a problematic feature of travel in these parts. Leaving Roche to recuperate from her jet fever, we set off along a shoreline littered with ice. At the end of the beach we started struggling through the forest. There are two dominant species of tree, lower down the evergreen *Nothofagus betuloides* and higher up, the deciduous *N. pumilio*. The understorey is often packed with calafate, the prickly *Berberis buxifolia*, which made for painful as well as hard work.

The shoreline proved so steep we were forced to try climbing out. This became demoralising as we struggled in the rain over a tangle of branches and thorns covering treacherous little gullies. Brief glimpses of the ground ahead indicated more of the same in every direction; a depressing scene

mitigated somewhat by the spectacle of the ice-strewn fjord opening out beneath us. I was about to advocate plunging down and trying a different approach when we came upon the lead we needed, a guanaco trail.

Guanaco, the small ancestor of the llama, are ubiquitous in Southern Patagonia and live in the wildest corners of uninhabited country. Here they had forged a very obvious route from the coast to the open country above the tree-line. Our depression turned to elation as we cleared the forest and found ourselves on moorland. The rain stopped and condors appeared, the huge birds wheeling overhead and gliding close enough for us to look into their eyes.

We were on a strange alpine meadow, bordered by glaciers on two sides and on another by the massive slabs of rock and ice of a nameless 2135m peak that rose dizzyingly above us. A 5km strip of rocky bog, the alp is dominated by the heath *Empetrum rubrum*, areas of cushion plants, such as *Astelia pumila*, and the bizarre globes of *Bolax caespitose*. We climbed to a little tarn and got our first views of the country we had landed in. To the south, our route onto the ice cap looked hopeful. A few hours of open ground would take us to the moraine of the Cuevas Glacier, curving out of sight behind the 2135m peak. To the east, we could see our escape route, a col next to the peak the New Zealanders had climbed in 1970 and named Nuevo Ano. The route up a glacier and a snow ramp to the col did not seem as if it would pose any major problems. The Kiwis had gone over the col but there was no way of knowing how the ice, which is receding fast, had changed in 30 years.

The guanaco trail to the shore was not always distinct and our job next day was to make a trade route up through the forest to our plateau. We had brought a small hand saw with us, and the next day Paddy cut a path and marked it with strips of blue plastic bag while the rest of us carried loads. Once, cutting a route in a false direction, Paddy inadvertently started trampling a little stand of the orchid *Codonorchis lessonii*. It took us a few days to get established at an advanced base camp perched by the lateral moraine of the glacier. Once or twice, as we ferried our supplies across the meadow, we spotted our benefactors, a little flock of guanaco making their strange whinnying alarm cries. The weather remained reasonable but the top of the ice cap was always obscured by cloud.

On 30 January, we set off up the moraine to find a route onto the ice cap. Setting foot on the glacier we found ourselves among crevasses both hidden and exposed. These became more and more convoluted as we climbed on into mist. Just after crossing some rather perilous snow bridges, the mist cleared to reveal an impossible maze above. It appeared our only chance lay in forging a route up snow ramparts we had passed earlier and rejected as too dangerous. The weather was settled so Paddy and Roche set off at dawn next day to make the first steps. Bill and I followed an hour later.

Emerging on to the glacier we expected to see the other two on the ramp, but were surprised to find them where we had left the cache of skis and



70. Arrival on the Bahia Blanca, Tierra del Fuego. (*John Shipton*)



71. Cordillera Darwin. Looking from the summit of Mt Ada towards peak Gemini in the centre. (*Simon Yates*)

sledges the day before. Paddy had started up the ramp and paused for a few seconds when a block of ice the size of a car engine smashed passed, missing him by a few feet. A veteran of numerous near misses in his career in the SAS and on climbs, Paddy remained unperturbed, but our attempt to reach the ice cap by the ramp was out of the question. If we had only needed to climb it once to reach a peak it might have been worth the risk, but this was to be a trade route where we would carry at least three loads.

It was hard to admit defeat so early on. However, from what we had seen of the country above us, crevassed and steep, and prone to long periods of white-out, we realised we needed much more time to get to grips with it. We also saw that some sort of water transport is vital. Without a boat we could not try routes onto the ice cap from the other side of the fjord and we certainly could not make a serious attempt on Monte Shipton.

However we still had to make the traverse to the Beagle Channel and keep our appointment with the ferry in three week's time. First we had to find a way over the escape pass. Bill and I forded the glacial river next to our camp – fairly manageable in the morning with the flow a little lower, but excruciating nonetheless – and prospected a way over the bluff to the beach where the New Zealanders camped in 1970. Their report that it was covered in orchids was poetic license, I think, for the profusion of *Primula magellanica* or the white *Pernettya pumila* we found. Wading naked across freezing torrents is best not done too many times so we opted for a longer route inland. Over the next few days, working from our base camp, we explored various routes through forest and up gullies to the nameless glacier leading to our col, carrying loads each time. As well as the ice, forest and scrub, beaver dams have become a major feature all over this part of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago. Beavers were introduced from Canada to be farmed in the Argentine and have escaped. They are an ecological disaster; their dams flooding vast areas of valley floor, killing the trees and making travel even more arduous.

A snow ramp led to the top of the col, a simple enough climb apart from threatening blocks of ice tottering above and white-out conditions. Dumping one load on the col, we went back for a well-earned rest day at base camp, watching floating seals and crashing ice. On our last journey up to the col the sky cleared over the ice cap and we got one final superb view of the great dome of Monte Shipton to the west.

The second ascent to the col was more difficult as the ramp had turned to hard ice. As we topped the steep section, one of the tottering blocks fell onto the track we had just made. Leaving a load with most of our food to be collected later, we descended the other side of the col, getting our first views of Bahia Blanca and the country beyond. We found a gently sloping icefield, but towards its foot the crevasses increased to a maze and we realised we were perched above an icefall. Getting down looked near-impossible, but after attempting hideous ice gullies Paddy and Bill found a fortuitous scrambling route round the side of the ice. Scouting around for a



72. Yendegaia Bay, Tierra del Fuego. Estancia on the shore at the left side of the photo.
(*Simon Yates*)

camp in the glacial rubble, I climbed a huge bank of moraine and found an ideal site where a stream had been naturally channelled to create a tiny meadow. Here we spent two nights waiting for the weather to clear so we could retrace our steps to the col and collect our food.

Quitting our eyrie, there was much moraine to struggle over before we eventually left the glacier for the forest and bog. From above we had seen a maze of little beaver dam lakes, but in fact travel was not too bad. Faint guanaco trails led through the forest and keeping close to the bank of the river proved a good technique for avoiding tussocky bog and the red cushiony moss or *turba*, as well as most of the beaver dams. In a day we were well onto the plain of Bahia Blanca and facing the daunting prospect of crossing the wide, fast-flowing glacial outflow of the Vedova Glacier.

We decided to attempt the crossing in the morning when glacial rivers are always lower after the night's cold. Just after dawn we packed hurriedly, naked except for boots, linked arms and waded across. The water proved to be waist deep and manageable in a group, though agonisingly cold. We tramped on for an hour or so to shake the ice from our loins before making camp on the other side of the rocky plain. We rewarded ourselves with a day relaxing while guanaco and Fuegan foxes wandered past.

Our way next led up a small valley to the south-east behind Monte Vedova, a 2000m peak above the glacier. It was slow going through dense *Nothofagus* bush, negotiating an endless tangle of branches and rocky outcrops, and we spent a night in this forest. Here again the steep valley was infested with beavers, their construction works making progress even more difficult. Trees felled by beavers lay everywhere. We cursed the idiots who introduced these creatures to Tierra del Fuego and devised a host of eradication schemes. At last, as we approached the head of the valley, the country opened out, and after plenty more bush and beaver dams we climbed on to the watershed. Glaciers flowed down on both sides from the peaks above, while to the south-east of this pass the Lapataia River hurried to Lago Roca, a freshwater lake half of which lies in Argentina, on the edge of the Beagle Channel.

The weather was clear and the mountains on either side enticing, so we planned a day exploring. But during the night the temperature dropped suddenly and by morning we were blanketed in two or three feet of snow. A day later it had gone and we moved on down the valley. Thick tangles of *Nothofagus antarctica* had to be fought through, but on crossing the Lapataia River we found guanaco trails, speeding progress through the forest and low tree scrub. On the second day we found signs of feral cattle, the first indications of human presence. The Estancia Yendegaia we were heading for was set up a century ago as a cattle station and over the years some have escaped. Now the estancia has been taken over by an ecological foundation that is attempting to clear cattle from the bush.

That evening we camped at Puerto Lata, an outpost of the estancia with a tin hut I had passed two years before on a walk across the Cordillera. Horsemen from the estancia turned up on their way to Lago Roca looking

for cattle. Among the *vaqueros* was José whom I had met on my last trip to the Cordillera and who had witnessed my riding skills when I rolled down a bank on to a calafate bush with the horse on top of me. The next day was actually sunny and hot and we spent it by the hut. I climbed the ridge 1000m above us, collecting *Primula magellanica* seed on the way. The views were stunning, notably of the eastern ramparts of the Cordillera Darwin, with Monte Bove, first climbed by my father in 1963, and Roncagli, climbed by David Hillebrandt in 1990.

Our travails were not over. The *vaqueros* had mentioned that the river draining the Stoppani Glacier was high. It had been difficult enough with horses, but crossing on foot with loads was going to be a problem. As we walked the Valle Traversal that connects Valle Lapataia with Valle Stoppani, the *vaqueros* passed us on their way back to the estancia and José promised they would come and help us across next day. We arrived at the river, which was wide and fast; twice as big as the Vedova River. Linking arms we made an attempt and were nearly swept away. We decided to wait for the horses and set up camp. Immediately we were attacked by swarms of mosquitoes, which must have arrived here with the introduction of horses and cattle. There are none in the uninhabited country.

In the morning the river was, if anything, a little higher and it was hard to see how we could cross even with horses. In any case our friend José did not appear on the other shore. It was frustrating as I recognised the little mound above Yendegaia Bay that marked the end of our journey, no more than two hours' walk and wade away. Disinclined to spend another day in a tent hiding from mosquitoes, I decided to swim across and summon horses or perhaps a small boat from the estancia. Paddy furnished me with a dry bag for a few clothes and after selecting a crossing point further down stream, I set off across the icy torrent. I was starting to flag and beginning to fear being swept away when I touched bottom on the further side.

Waving to the others I tramped the final miles, wading a second river flowing from glaciers around Monte Roncagli, and crossing the marshy Yendegaia flats to the estancia where I was greeted by the manager, Ivette Martinez. She and her partner Kiko were wondering whether we had survived. José's failure to arrive was due to an official visit from the mayor of Puerto Williams. With the river so high, even fording with horses was impossible, but Kiko had a tiny inflatable raft, a dry suit and a pair of flippers. We rode back and roused the others from the tents where they were hiding from the clouds of mosquitoes. Using his gear, Kiko swam across and ferried the others and our packs across. We had arrived at the Beagle and our march was over. Three days later the ferry called and we made the fabulous cruise through the channel and round the western end of Tierra del Fuego to Punta Arenas.

It had been a great trip even though we had signally failed to get near my father's mountain. Once again I was powerfully struck by his achievements. At least we had a measure of what was needed for exploration in this wild

and beautiful land, much of which remains unexplored. Passing through Santiago on my way home, on an off chance I dialled the number of one my father's climbing partners, Cedomir Marangunic. He and his friend Eduardo Garcia, who died recently in an accident on an Antarctic glacier, were with my father on Shipton/Darwin and on the great traverse of the Southern Patagonia ice cap. Calling from a street phone box, I was amazed to get through and went to meet him. It was wonderful to hear first-hand some of the background to these expeditions that I had failed to glean from my father when he was alive, how he inspired others and how he allowed others to inspire him to achieve great things.

Cedomir said they were just happy to call the great nameless mountain they had climbed 'Darwin', since it was the highest peak in the range. As to my concern that this left a problem of what to call the original Darwin, he just smiled. His son-in-law Mario suggested perhaps it should be Mrs Darwin. An interesting precedent I suppose. Cedomir said he frequently tried to persuade my father to climb in the Cordillera Darwin in the Southern winter. Although the days are short, the weather is usually stable and clear, without so much of the horrendous wind and mist of summer, and snow and ice conditions would be much better. This is food for thought for future exploration and climbing in this wonderful country.

Postscript: Following the expedition, John Shipton petitioned the Chilean authorities over the naming of the Cordillera Darwin peaks and received a favourable response from the Instituto Geografico Militar, the official mapping body. Colonel Sergio Urrejola Dastres, acting director of the IGM, said Eric Shipton had made 'an invaluable contribution to a wider geographical knowledge' of Chile. Col Dastres said the national map *Punta Arenas*, 1:500,000, reprinted in 1975, featured Monte Darwin, with an altitude of 2438m, as 'baptised during the voyages made by HMS Adventure and HMS Beagle in the passages by Tierra del Fuego between 1826 and 1836' and Monte Shipton, with an altitude of 2469m, from the 1962 expedition under the leadership of Eric Shipton. These names would be maintained in future publications, the Colonel appeared to confirm.

Summary: An attempt by John Shipton to follow in the footsteps of his father, Eric Shipton (though not quite so successfully) on a reconnaissance in the Cordillera Darwin of Tierra del Fuego, accompanied by three New Zealanders, in January and February 2002.