

# Moonlight southern

20-21 August 2016

*Andrew Robinson (leader), Keith Thomas & Doc Watson all of HVTC; John Rhodes of SWTC*

At a club meeting Andrew Robinson promises a moonlight southern crossing of the Tararuas with snow, perfect weather and views. In a moment of weakness John says he might be interested, ‘... but only if the weather is exactly as you predict’. It’s 53 years this month since John’s first Southern.

They exchange emails with the subject line ‘forecast still looking good’. One of John’s says ‘I’m praying for rain so I can weasel out’. No rain is on the horizon, but MetService promises 35 kph north-easterlies with a wind chill of minus 8°. That’s enough for John. He ‘phones Andrew:

—Don’t expect me. I just might turn up, but don’t expect me.

\* \* \* \* \*

John is now asleep in Alpha Hut after coming from Walls Whare. He’s here anyway, and to his relief HVTC have failed to arrive. Some mishap has befallen them, or perhaps they never set out. Whichever, he’ll now have an uninterrupted night’s sleep, dreaming of a leisurely trip back to Greytown with a stop for the finest thing a tramper can aspire to, a brew beside the Tauwharenikau.

Treading boots and flashing lights wake him. It’s 9 pm. The Hutt Valleys have had a punishing 10½ hour trip up the Marchant Ridge through snow-felled windfalls, then knee-deep snow on the awful climb from Hells Gate.

Andrew (who can identify any tramper from his gaiters) divines that the mummified form on a far mattress is John. He’s already eliminated ten per cent of the world’s population by observing that the trail-blazer’s ice axe was in his right hand.

—Why did you change your mind? he asks.

—Because otherwise I’d get an email from you on Monday saying what a great trip you’d had.

The Hutt Valleys’ conversation suggests tiredness. Surely they’ve abandoned all thought of going further, but Andrew says nothing specific. John needs to know. He frames the question with care.

—What’s your Estimated Time of Departure, Andrew?

—About ten-thirty pm.

John's heart sinks. It's the 'pm' that troubles him.

—There was no moon when I came to bed, he says.

—There is now, says Andrew.

John bows to the inevitable.

—Wake me with half an hour to go, he says.

We leave a bit before midnight. Above the bush, the 35 k.p.h. nor'easter is as cold and miserable as expected. But John knows that by the time we get to Alpha peak the wind will make everyone want to retreat.

We walk on tussock and rock, and on the track when we can find it, and increasingly on snow. It's firm, but nobody wants crampons. We put on more clothes. It takes a while to reach the peak, and nothing is said about going back. Keith says presciently,

—At this rate we'll be pushed to get there before daylight.

The lights of Wairarapa, the Hutt and Wellington are like jewels on black velvet, marking streets and homes with sleeping people tucked up and warm, not faced with a frigid nocturnal marathon over snowy Tararuas. The moonlight (the attraction, remember) serves only to reveal how impossibly high and distant are Atkinson and Hector, both of which must be traversed before any rest.

Keith strides ahead. This Aussie bush-walker who arrived in the country less than six months ago has as much fitness as the rest of us put together. If the Tararuas had kangaroos Keith could run them down in the snow. It's mortifying.

Somewhere on the Dress Circle a second figure appears in front and John, trailing second, fears he must be hallucinating. But he's failed to take into account the popularity of moonlight southern crossings among the mentally unhinged. It's John Duggan of WT&MC, who's already covered three quarters of the distance from Kime to Alpha and has every appearance of enjoying the stroll.

—I'll be in bed before you, says John Duggan.

We can't argue with that.

We regroup on Aston. It's 2.30 am. The travel is slow and awkward, on and off snow, breaking through, sinking calf-deep, plunging ice-axes in for support and finding none as they disappear into unseen holes. Otaki and Wanganui are out on the left, with

entire populations asleep and comfortable, preparing for a Sunday morning lie-in with coffee and toast.

Cloud gathers over Atkinson and billows in its lee. The wind is from the west now, never a good sign in the Tararuas, and rising. John takes the lead and soon—too soon perhaps—he's on Atkinson.

—Only the Beehives and Hector to go. This isn't so bad, he thinks.

John's mental Tararua map is wrong. This bump is nameless and Atkinson still far away, mocking them in the pale moonlight. After tonight that bump should be named Robinson or Watson or Thomas to help people remember it.

Tea-drinking beside the sunny Tauwharenikau seems a remote idyll. It's 4.30 am when we haul ourselves onto the real Atkinson. Andrew hands out Squiggles and we turn hard left into cloud with the moon penetrating wanly. John dons over-trousers and gains a secure feeling to offset his weariness. Doc is still in shorts. The snow is thicker.

John struggles to catch his companions' pools of headlamp light, flashing as they turn to see if he's coming. The only indication that this is a place for humans is a series of track-marking waratahs, each with an orange cap. John's free hand grips the waratahs for reassurance and to help his tiring legs. He's stumbling—probably everyone is, but his thoughts are for himself. The scorn that he once expressed for route-marking on the tops has entirely vanished. He remembers the PLB in his pack and fleetingly imagines the Westpac helicopter with a winch and floodlights. It hasn't really come to that, but a cup of tea would help.

The Beehives ridge is a broad white arête without the comfort of tussock or rock and with sides plunging into blackness. The wind overbalances him. At least his legs are warm, helping morale. And there are footprints to follow, for people have walked here from Kime—in the sun.

—Andrew, do you know what we should be carrying? he says.

—What?

—Emperor penguin eggs

As we approach Hector John asks for the Thermos in Andrew's pack. Andrew takes it out beside the memorial cross (seeming shorter in the snow). It's not what you'd call a brew, but it's warm, wet and highly conducive to gratitude.

It's 6 am. John is nearly a walking zombie but there's not far to go. And as Keith predicted, murky daylight has arrived.

The ascent of Field Peak (once called ‘Weary Willie – how appropriate!) is smooth and featureless with no grip for boots whose motive power died an hour ago. Each sliding step is an effort of will. At last John reaches the leaning summit waratah and the gentle descent towards Kime Hut the Third, towards warmth, towards rest and towards a brew. The hut is puzzlingly invisible—has someone moved it?—until he’s beside it, more than seven hours after leaving Alpha.

A stranger in the porch is heating water in a billy perched on rocks over a hexamine flame. It’s almost boiling, and it’s for HVTC. Sam Kempthorne was to be on the trip, but instead he searched for a missing person in the Waiotauru, got dropped here by helicopter and is now caring for four tired trampers he’s never met before. John drinks the brew with boots half unlaced and over-trousers round his ankles. Some things are more urgent than getting your gear off.

After two hours of oblivion we wake for a meal that could be breakfast, lunch or dinner. It’s Sunday and yesterday was Friday. This is shaping up to be a 31-hour day trip with a couple of stops. John (putting out of his mind the man strolling the Dress Circle) thinks that perhaps we’ve done something just a little heroic.

—We’ve done this slightly heroic thing, thinks John, and we’re buggered. At least those whose bodies I inhabit are buggered. It may take us a while to get down to the Forks, but we’ve made a good effort.

Runners start arriving, girls in wispy shorts with microscopic day packs greeting the trampers cheerily, up from the Forks in three hours on a muesli bar and a sip of water. John takes solace—uncharitably, but it’s the only solace available—that one day the runners’ unblemished bodies will be like his. Approximately.

A wispy short-wearer asks where we came from. Andrew tells her and says,

—We achieved our objective.

John, still cynical about moonlight tramping despite sleep and a couple of brews, adds:

—Which was to redefine the word ‘masochism’.

The girls laugh politely and John regrets being smart, especially when he remembers Andrew’s life-saving Thermos on Hector. But truly, what he’s enjoyed most about this trip is the brews and the vanishingly brief sleeps.

The sun is out and he ventures to the deck. A figure approaches, incognito in goggles. John Duggan has been to Alpha Hut and strolled back after four hours’ shuteye with all the nonchalance of a promenade on Lambton Quay. He’s done our entire trip again in reverse, he’s as fresh as a daisy and he thinks nothing of it. Other John’s heroism, already undermined by girl runners, collapses in ruins.

We leave at 1 pm. Doc and John nurse dodgy knees through rock and snow past Dennan, easing themselves gingerly down big steps like the old men we're rapidly becoming. Doc knows about railways, and with afternoon sun turning the Otaki into a river of gold a conversation about Ganz-Mavag units gets them to Table Top. Keith arrives first at Field Hut, planted in the forest edge like a 1924 Noddy house, and sees the photo of Willy Field whose enthusiasm brought this track into being. Now the bushwalker has bush to walk in again, and to John's relief he admits at last to tiredness.

We hurry down Judd Ridge with tawa leaves on the ground, sun filtering through trees and the last train to Wairarapa in mind. Russell Clayton is waiting on the terrace above Otaki Forks. He brought the van all this way just for us. John kisses the HVTC logo on the door. He owes this club much, and a kiss costs less than a subscription.

For the next hour or two all human inadequacies, failings, shortcomings and omissions seem insignificant. We've done a moonlight southern and nothing else matters.

That's why God put the Tararuas here, so people can cross them in the snow and dark with Andrew and get buggered.



*Doc, John, Andrew & Keith*