

The first and only man to scale the lofty parapet over which the waterfall pours was a daring young surveyor named William Quill. This was in 1890. Less than a year afterwards Quill met a lonely death while exploring the country between the head of Lake Wakatipu and Milford Sound. The following letter written by Quill to Mr. C. W. Adams describes the difficulties and perils of the climb :-

“On Sunday, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 1890, after breakfast, I left the Beech Hut in my usual climbing costume, taking with me also a billhook, a rope for lowering, an alpenstock, and a piece of calico, on which were painted with hematite my name and the date. The fall comes down a precipitous cliff which forms the saddle between Mount Sutherland and Mount Hart, and up this face to the top I had determined to go. On leaving the base I kept on the left or eastern side, about three or four chains distant from the edge of the fall. The climbing up to the head of the lowest leap is not very difficult, but beyond that it begins to get steeper, and as the face is of smooth granite rock one has to be careful ; while in some places there is neither hand nor foothold—crawling on all fours is the only way of getting up. Of course, by keeping closer to the fall I could have taken advantage of the scant herbage which there offers a precarious handhold, but owing to the quantity of spray brought down by the fall, I judged it better to keep away if I wished to make the ascent with a dry skin. On getting up about 700 or 800 feet I encountered a thick growth of a nasty kind of scrub, which extended up to the top of the middle leap, and this, with the increasing steepness of every foot, and the continuous spray which now came down on me from the upper leap like rain, made my progress exceedingly slow. With every foot higher I climbed the air became keener and colder. I had to creep as best I could through this stunted scrub, as it would delay me very much to use the billhook. The shingle and water-grass that surround the foot of the upper leap are remarkably level for so great a height ; in fact, the foot of this leap is not unlike the foot of the lower leap. The upper leap, descending perpendicularly, strikes a rocky pool, creating a powerful blast, which drives the spray with blinding force in all directions, sometimes down the middle leap, sometimes right out towards Mount Hart. A curious thing occurs here. The water dashes from the pool down a race fully two chains long before it takes its second great leap. The grade of this race is, I should say, about 1 foot in 16 feet.

“But now commenced the real climb. A steady hand and a strong nerve were all that kept me from slipping if I chanced to look down, and the least slip would send me down the perpendicular rock to be dashed to pieces hundreds of feet below. As I was nearing the top I had to work to the left to avoid a high precipice, and at last after three and a half hours’ hard climbing, I came out on the brow of the cliff. The spot where I came out was about three or four chains to the left of the fall. I travelled down this brow – which in formation is somewhat similar to Balloon Saddle, and now I stood at the summit of the highest waterfall in the world. As I stood I turned towards the south and discovered a beautiful lake about a mile wide ; but its length I was unable to guess as the eastern end was shut in by a shoulder of Mount Hart. The lake is fed by the immense glacier on Mount Sutherland ; lower down several small waterfalls and streamlets from the glaciers emptying themselves into the lake form a pretty spectacle. On the south side the lake is totally hemmed in by a range of peaks, which I have named the ‘Nicholas Mountains,’ at the foot of which is a pebbly shore ; but on

the north side Mounts Sutherland and Hart descend perpendicularly to the water's edge. The view from the brow on which I was standing was indescribably magnificent.

“This lake is the reservoir of the Sutherland waterfalls. The outlet or race is a deep chasm about 100 yards in length, 12 feet wide at the bottom, and with steep sides in some places over 50 feet in height. The water rushes through this chasm with great force and swiftness, making a terrible noise. I think that this chasm has a fall of about 1 foot in 12 feet, or possibly 1 foot in 10 feet. On the Mount Hart side I was able to descend in the chasm to the very water's edge, and I managed to go up the race towards the lake for about 25 yards ; and although the entrance at the lake could be seen very plainly, beyond that it appears impossible to go.

“Within about 10 yards from the lower end of this chasm the water strikes a face of rock, and after making a pretty curved leap in the air (somewhat after the manner of the Bowen Falls but on a smaller scale) it falls again to shoot along with increased rapidity until it disappears over the face of the cliff, and from this point its course is best seen from below. Close to the edge of this chasm, and as near to the top of the fall as there was holding ground I erected my calico flag, which can be seen by the naked eye from any point whence the fall itself is visible. On my return journey I came down from the flag to base in two hours and a half without a scratch or bruise. P.S.—The Sutherland Fall is 1,904 feet high, and strikes the rocky precipice twice in its descent, forming three leaps, the upper being 815 feet, the middle one 751 feet, and the lower 338 feet.”