

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE COL DU GÉANT AND THE
LEGEND OF THE COL MAJOR.

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THE researches of the many writers who have dealt with the history of this celebrated glacier pass have thus far failed to bring to light any trustworthy record of a passage earlier than that of the two Chamonix guides, Jean-Michel Cachat and Alexis Tournier, in 1787 ; and it is almost needless to recall the fact here that even the familiar name by which it is now designated dates only from de Saussure's memorable expedition of the following year. But we are assured, nevertheless, by the Rev. W. A. B. Coolidge, that the Col du Géant was undoubtedly used as a direct and convenient route between Courmayeur and Chamonix at least as far back as the middle of the seventeenth century.¹ The evidence brought forward by Mr. Coolidge in support of this affirmation may be briefly summarised as follows :

1. A long series of old maps of Savoy and the adjacent countries, dating from 1647 to the close of the eighteenth century, on which a pass apparently affording a direct route between the two villages is indicated under the name of 'Col Major.'

2. A few vague and contradictory references to this pass in the memoirs on the Alpine frontier compiled by the topographical service of the French Army during the eighteenth century.

¹ See *A.J.* xviii. 59-61 ; *Jahrbuch S.A.C.* 1901, pp. 266-276 and 1902, p. 274 ; *Josias Simler et les Origines de l'Alpinisme*, 1904, p. cxiii ; *The Alps in Nature and History*, 1908, p. 202 ; and the *Revue Alpine*, 1911, pp. 230-232 ; 1913, pp. 229-250 and 448.

I note that Mr. Coolidge's views have undergone a considerable change since 1897 when he wrote in *A.J.* xviii. 60 : 'The name "Col Major" as applied to the Seigne is particularly interesting, as it disposes of an argument sometimes alleged that the pass *must* be the Col du Géant, whereas no doubt it might (in accordance with a general rule) have been used of any pass leading to or from the "Col Major" or Courmayeur (Curia Major).' For in his *Alps in Nature and History*, published eleven years later, he writes (on p. 202) that the Col du Géant 'is indicated under the name of "Col Major" on several maps from 1648 onwards, and so must have been known at that time.'

3. A persistent tradition recorded by several travellers in the district before 1787, to the effect that there once existed a direct route between Chamonix and Courmayeur which became impracticable at some indeterminable date in consequence of certain changes in the glaciers.

In other words, Mr. Coolidge asks us to accept his assurance that the Col du Géant, a pass more than 11,000 ft. above sea-level, the crossing of which is still a serious undertaking, was sufficiently well known by the middle of the seventeenth century to be indicated on the best maps of Savoy as a practicable route for travellers, and that it was regarded by the French military authorities throughout the eighteenth century as a route of some strategic importance. Although conscious of my temerity in venturing to differ with the most learned of our Alpine historians, I shall endeavour in the present paper to show first of all that the Col Major and the Col du Géant were unquestionably two very different passes; and, secondly, that the legend of the abandoned route between Chamonix and Courmayeur is hardly worthy of serious consideration, except, perhaps, to students of Alpine folk-lore.

THE COL MAJOR OF THE OLD MAPS.

The eminent Genevese geologist, Professor Alphonse Favre, seems to have been the first to assert in unmistakable terms that the pass indicated on the old maps under this name was none other than the Col du Géant.² In his great work on the geology of the Mont Blanc district, published in 1867, we read :

‘ Il paraît qu’à l’époque où le savant genevois [de Saussure] explorait les Alpes, ce col était peu connu. Lui-même, malgré ses nombreuses courses, semble en avoir longtemps ignoré l’existence, et ce fut, nous dit-il, M. Exchaquet qui le lui fit connaître. Ce col avait été cependant souvent franchi dans le dix-septième siècle. Sur la carte publiée par Cornélius Dankerts vers 1660, on voit un chemin qui traverse le Col du Géant. Il va de *Chamonys* à *Cormajeur* près *Cramoyen*, par le *Cormajeur* ou *Col Major*. . . . Le nom de . . . *Col Major* fut changé par le Saussure en celui de col du Géant.’³

² Goffredo Casalis, in his voluminous *Dizionario Geografico . . . degli Stati di S.M. il Re di Sardegna*, vol. iv. p. 548, refers to the legendary pass, and adds that on the old maps it was always indicated, but he does not mention the name Col Major.

³ *Recherches Géologiques dans les Parties de la Savoie, du Piémont et de la Suisse voisines du Mont Blanc*, 1867, vol. iii. p. 81. Professor

I gather from this extract that Professor Favre, finding a pass indicated as a direct route between Chamonix and Courmayeur on a map issued about 1660, concluded that this route must be the Col du Géant, and consequently that it must have been frequently crossed during the seventeenth century. Such a deduction would be reasonable enough in dealing with a modern map such as the 'Carte Siegfried,' but in the case of a seventeenth-century cartographer it seems to me highly imprudent. Until the close of the eighteenth century the maps of Savoy teem with errors. Practically all the cartographers seem to have known about the range of Mont Blanc was that somewhere between the Val d'Aosta and Lake Lemman there rose a chain of snowy mountains, but for a century and a half they were uncertain as to whether they lay to the N. or S. of the Chamonix valley. Even at a period well within the recollection of living members of the Alpine Club, a great snow-peak, over 13,000 ft. high, was indicated on the best Italian maps as the 'Mont Iseran,' which upon investigation proved to be non-existent. It seems to me, therefore, that in matters of detail the old maps must be regarded as extremely untrustworthy.

Professor Favre's identification of the Col Major was contested a few years later by M. Charles Durier, the author of the well-known monograph on Mont Blanc. In the first edition of his work, published in 1877, he asserted, somewhat hastily, that the supposed track drawn over the Col du Géant on the old maps was merely a frontier line. Finding this explanation unsatisfactory, however, he added a long footnote to a subsequent edition, in which he made light of Professor Favre's credulity. The seventeenth-century cartographers, he wrote, were under the impression that 'les

Favre's statement that de Saussure deliberately changed the name of the Col Major to Col du Géant is repeated by Mr. Coolidge (*J.S.A.C.*, 1901, p. 266), who adds that, in his opinion, the change is to be regretted. As a matter of fact, there is no reason to believe that the great naturalist understood the Col Major to be the Col du Géant. In the course of a careful examination of his unpublished papers and diaries, I have never come across a single mention of the former pass. In a letter to his wife, written on the Col du Géant on July 3, 1788, he says: 'I have rebaptised this mountain. It has been called the Tacul, which is seven leagues off, while it is quite close to the splendid Aiguille du Géant, which is visible from Genthod. All the guides approve this change. . . .' See Mr. Freshfield's *Life of H. B. de Saussure*, p. 254.

Glacières' (the range of Mont Blanc) lay to the N. of the Arve valley; hence they saw no difficulty in connecting Chamonix and Courmayeur by a direct route, and he pointed out the important fact that the Col Major disappears from the maps of Savoy precisely at the time when the cartographers first began to delineate the Mont Blanc district with some degree of accuracy. As they failed to indicate on their maps the old route from Courmayeur to Chamonix by the Col Ferret and the Col de la Forclaz, M. Durier suggested that they very likely had in mind those two passes.⁴ It is only fair to add that M. Durier's conclusions were based upon a very superficial examination of the question: had he pursued his investigations a little further, I have no doubt that he would have hit on the solution of the problem set forth in the following pages.

Mr. Freshfield, in his remarkable paper on the history of the Buet, in the *ALPINE JOURNAL* vol. ix, has also expressed the opinion that the old maps and the legend of the abandoned pass cannot be accepted as conclusive evidence that the Col du Géant was known in early times, although he thinks it possible that it may have been crossed occasionally by chamois hunters, smugglers or refugees before the first recorded passage in 1787.⁵

With the exception of M. Durier and Mr. Freshfield, no one has, as far as I am aware, seriously questioned the views set forth by Professor Favre. The Col Major-Col du Géant theory has found in Mr. Coolidge an able and tenacious advocate who has brought to bear on the subject a wealth of erudition for which I can only express my warmest admiration. In recent years Mr. Coolidge has reiterated his firm belief that the Col du Géant was formerly known as the Col Major so persistently that it now appears to be generally accepted by writers on Alpine history as an established fact. M. Henri Ferrand, our distinguished honorary member, has also expressed the same opinion on several occasions; ⁶ and M. Louis

⁴ See *Le Mont-Blanc*, 1877, p. 485, and 3rd edition, 1881, pp. 41-42.

⁵ In his *Life of H. B. de Saussure* (1920), pp. 241-244, Mr. Freshfield again dismisses the legend as uncertain proof, and suggests that the Col Major indicated on the old maps is either a cartographer's or a copyist's error.

⁶ See *Bull. de Géographie Historique et Descriptive*, 1906; and *La Montagne*, 1911, pp. 617-634.

Kurz, in the last edition of his admirable guide to the range of Mont Blanc, published in 1914, writes with regard to the Col du Géant, 'C'est le Col Major des anciennes cartes 1647-1787.'

The earliest mention of this mysterious pass that I have met with, personally, occurs on three maps by the celebrated cartographer, Nicholas Sanson, entitled :

(1) Haute Lombardie et Pays Circonvoisins où sont la Savoie, etc., dated 1647.

(2) Les Suisses, les Alliés des Suisses, leurs Sujets, etc., dated 1648.

(3) Le Gouvernement Général du Dauphiné et des Pays Circonvoisins où sont la Savoie, etc., dated 1652.

On the first of these our pass is indicated by a small cross between Chamonix and Courmayeur, and considerably to the E. of 'les Glacières,' under the name of *Col Major ou Cormoyeu*. On the second the name reads *Col Maior ou Cormoyeu*. On the third map well-defined tracks are drawn over the principal passes. Starting from Aosta one leads over the Great St. Bernard; the next (to the W.) leads by *Cormoyeu* over the *Col Major ou de Cormoyeu* to *Chamony*, and thence along the right bank of the Arve to Passy; while the third and fourth cross the Little St. Bernard and the Col de Grisanche (Col du Mont) respectively.⁷

At first sight the pass thus indicated undoubtedly appears

⁷ The Col Major is indicated by other cartographers as *Cell Major* (Sandrart's *Ducatus Sabaudiae*, circa 1670); *Cormajeur*, *Colmaior* (P. Lea's *New Map of the Dukedom of Savoy*, 1690); *Colmaior* (W. Berry's *Kingdom of France*, 1680); *Colmaior, Cormoyeu* (Jaillot's *Royaume de France*, circa 1710); *Col de Cormoyeu* (F. de Witt's *Carta Nova Accurata del Passagio et Strade dalli Paesi Bassi per via de Allemagna*, 1671), while Courmayeur is variously written *Cormajor*, *Cortemaggiore*, *Cormoyeu*, *Cramoyen*, *Curia Major*, *Courmaior*, &c. On several maps the name Col Major ou Cormoyeu seems to be attributed to the village of Courmayeur rather than to a pass. It is quite possible therefore that 'Col' is merely a corruption of, or a copyist's error for, 'Curia.' Bordier (*Voyage Pittoresque aux Glacières de Savoie*, 1773, p. 254) refers to 'Col Mayor ou Cormoyeu' in the Val d'Aosta as a village. Ch. Denina (*Tableau . . . de la Haute Italie et des Alpes qui l'entourent*, 1805, p. 173) says: 'Le nom de Cour-Mayour, fait par corruption de *Colle Majore*, ou peut-être, suivant M. Bourrit, de *Curia*, or *Corte* (pour *Cohorte*) *Majore*.' . . .

to be none other than our Col du Géant, for the track leads direct from Courmayeur to Chamonix instead of describing a long curve around 'les Glacières.' But if the three maps are examined attentively it will be seen that there is no trace of the mule paths leading from Courmayeur to Chamonix around the range of Mont Blanc by the Col Ferret and the Col de la Forclaz to the E., and the Col de la Seigne and the Col du Bonhomme to the W. Yet the history of these passes can be traced far back into the middle ages.

After examining a large number of old maps on which the Col Major is indicated, it seems to me that the only conclusion we can safely draw is that Sanson and his successors knew that there was a route between Aosta and the Arve Valley which crossed the main chain of the Alps somewhere between the two St. Bernards. Now in the seventeenth century, as well as at the present time, the most convenient route for a traveller proceeding on horseback from Aosta to Bonneville would be by Courmayeur over the Col de la Seigne to Chapieux, and thence over the Col du Bonhomme and down the valleys of Montjoie and the Arve. And this, I think, is unquestionably the route which the cartographers for a hundred and fifty years understood to be the Col Major. That Sanson could possibly have intended to indicate as a practicable route for travellers such a pass as the Col du Géant, instead of an easy mule-path which lay near at hand, is utterly inconceivable. If the track is drawn on his 1652 map in a more or less straight line between Chamonix and Courmayeur instead of making it pass by Chapieux, Plan des Dames,^{*} and Notre Dame de la Gorge, the mistake

* De Saussure describes the Plan des Dames, as follows, in his *Voyages dans les Alpes*, sect. 760-761: ' . . . on entre dans une plaine plus que demi circulaire, fermée par les rochers du Bon-Homme et autres cimes qui y tiennent, et couverte d'un beau tapis de gazon. C'est la plaine ou *Plan des Dames*. Je ne doute point qu'elle n'ait été anciennement consacrée à Jupiter, ce nom et celui de Val de Mont Joye que porte la vallée qui y conduit, ne permettent pas d'en douter. La belle verdure qui la couvre et l'enceinte de rochers qui la renferment, sembloient inviter à y construire un temple ou un hospice; je n'ai cependant pu en trouver aucun vestige. . . . On voit au milieu de cette plaine un monceau de pierres de forme conique de 10 à 20 pieds de hauteur, sur 15 à 20 de diamètre. Sous ce monceau de pierres reposent, à ce que porte une ancienne tradition, les corps d'une grande dame et de sa suivante, qui, surprises là par un orage y moururent et furent enterrées sous des débris de rochers. Ce monceau s'augmente d'un jour à l'autre,

must be attributed to his ignorance of the topography of the district or his carelessness as a draftsman.

It is a well-known fact that the early cartographers were notorious plagiarists. Until the beginning of the last century most of them copied, without acknowledgment, the errors as well as the improvements of their predecessors and contemporaries. Moreover, during the period we have to deal with, astonishingly little progress was made in the delineation of the Alps of Savoy. Hence it is not at all surprising to find Sanson's mistake regarding the Col Major reproduced in a long series of maps during the ensuing hundred and fifty years. On Borgonio's great map of the States of the Duke of Savoy, published in 1683, the Col Major is omitted. But it soon reappears, however, on Hubert Jaillot's '*Estats de Savoye et de Piémont*,' in 1690. On this map a broad track, which might easily be mistaken for a carriage road, leads from Aosta by *Doulina* (Dollone, a hamlet near Courmayeur) over the Col Major to *Chamunis*, and thence along the right bank of the Arve to Bonneville, La Roche, and Bonne. The name *Plan des Dames* appears in large letters between *Champion* (Chapieux) and Notre Dame de la Gorge, but there is no sign of either the Seigne or the Bonhomme passes. It is not until 1772, when Stagnoni issued his revised edition of Borgonio's map, that we find the last-mentioned passes clearly indicated for the first time. On this map the track leads from Aosta by *Dolina* (Dollone) over the Col de l'*Allée Blanche* to *Compièut* (Chapieux), whence a route branches off to the N., crossing the *Mont de la Sacha*, underneath which name we read *Bonome*, to Notre Dame de la Gorge, and thence on to Bonneville and Geneva; and the Col Major former track is omitted. From this date the Col Major as a direct route between Courmayeur and Chamonix gradually disappears from the maps of Savoy, and is replaced by the Col de la Seigne and the Col du Bonhomme. In 1790, on the map accompanying the '*Itinéraire de la Vallée de Chamouni*,' by Berthoud van Berchem and dedicated to de Saussure, we find the Col du Géant indicated for the first time as the *Route de Cormayor et situation de la Cabane de Mr. de Saussure*. It is interesting to note

parce que c'est l'usage que tous ceux qui passent là jettent une pierre sur ce tombeau.'

It is strange, to say the least, that a small uninhabited plain should be mentioned in large letters, apparently as an important place, on the principal maps of Savoy for more than a century and a half.

that this little map, which is entitled 'Carte en Perspective de la Vallée de Chamouni et des Montagnes avoisinantes dans le Haut Faucigny,' was drawn by the young Vaudois engineer Charles-François Exchaquet, who, as we shall see further on, made in 1787 the first passage by a traveller of the Col du Géant.

THE COL MAJOR OF THE 'INGÉNIEURS-GÉOGRAPHES.'

The topographical service of the French Army known as the corps of 'ingénieurs-géographes' was founded in 1691 by Vauban, the celebrated minister of war of Louis XIV. From that date until the outbreak of the Revolution the task of mapping and reconnoitring, from a military point of view, the Alpine and Pyrenean frontiers was carried on by a series of engineers of exceptional competence and energy. A few of them, such as La Blotière, Bourcet, and Montannel, acquired in the course of many years' work in the field a knowledge of the Alps from the Mediterranean to Lake Lemman which probably remained unequalled until the days of John Ball and F. F. Tuckett a century later. Their maps were usually accompanied by detailed reports or memoirs on the routes and passes of the Alps containing information likely to be of use in time of war; but unfortunately only a few of these documents have been published. They give the impression of being compilations rather than the work of individual writers, and in many cases there can be no doubt that memoirs drawn up early in the eighteenth century were subjected to continual revision by the authors' successors and not infrequently reissued under the names of the last engineers who revised them. Moreover, a certain amount of the information they contain regarding passes in foreign territory must necessarily have been obtained at second hand; consequently one finds in them here and there obscure passages which it is by no means easy to interpret satisfactorily.⁹ I give below in chronological order all the references to the Col Major in the memoirs of the 'ingénieurs-géographes' that have come to my knowledge.

BRUNET DE L'ARGENTIÈRE, 1742.—*Communications entre le Briançonnais, la Savoie et le Piémont.*¹⁰

⁹ See *Les Ingénieurs-Géographes Militaires: Études Historiques par le Colonel Arvers*, 2 vols., Paris, 1902.

¹⁰ An unpublished MS. in the library of M. Paul Guillemin at Cervières, near Briançon, to whom I am much indebted for per-

According to this writer three streams meet at the village of Chapieux :

‘ Le premier ruisseau vient du centre qui est un grand et rapide penchant de pâturages pelouses où il y a plusieurs cabanes de bergers ; au sommet est le col du Bonhomme qui va à Notre Dame de la Gorge dans le haut Foussigny.

‘ Le deuxième vient de la droite appelée les blanches à l’extrémité de laquelle est le Col Mayor ; du Chapieu sur le col il faut deux heures et de dessus la montagne à la paroisse du Col Mayor près de Morges, vallée d’Aouste, il faut six heures ; ce chemin est mauvais et peu fréquenté.

Le troisième ruisseau vient de la gauche d’une gorge où est le col ou pas de Rosselin, qui du Chapieu va à Beaufort et où il passe en été des mulets chargés de fromagés. . . .’

The pass described here as the Col Mayor or Col Major is unquestionably the Col de la Seigne. The name ‘ les blanches ’ (*Laix Blanche*) is attributed to the ridge or the summit of the pass, in which the writer agrees with P. A. Arnod, who in his description of the route from Chapieux to Courmayeur written between 1691 and 1694, writes : ‘ Ce terrain monte insensiblement jusqu’à la cime appelée la Laix Blanche de Courmayeur.’ ¹¹ The ‘ times ’ given by our author are also fairly correct as he counts eight hours from Chapieux to Courmayeur, whereas according to the last edition of Murray’s Handbook (1909) the journey requires seven hours and a half.

The next reference by the same author to the Col Major is less clear. Descending the Montjoie Valley, Brunet de l’Argentière writes :

‘ En descendant à la gauche du Bonan [Bon Nant] (jusques vis-à-vis le village de Condamines) on le passe sur le pont de Tadiou ; on laisse un chemin qui va de Beaufort, passant par St. Nicolas de Vérouse et les montagnes qui sont au dessus ;

mission to quote it. Some extracts from another MS. copy of this memoir were published in *A.J.* vol. x. pp. 275–278, by M. Henri Duhamel. Jean Brunet (1700–1755) was a ‘ commissaire des guerres ’ rather than a topographical engineer. A valuable memoir by him entitled *Le Briançonnais en 1754*, with an introduction by M. Guillemin will be found in the *Ann. de la Soc. des Touristes du Dauphiné*, 1892 : and Colonel de Rochas d’Aiglun has also reprinted as a separate pamphlet his *Mémoire de la Guerre sur les Frontières du Dauphiné et de la Savoie de 1742 à 1747*, Paris, 1887.

¹¹ *Josias Simler et les Origines de l’Alpinisme*, p. *270.

de ce pont on arrive au village de Dioné [Bionnay] entre lequel et St. Gervais il y a un ruisseau qui grossit le Bonan et qui vient des glaciers qui le séparent de la Val d'Aouste et qui régneront depuis le Col du Bonhomme jusques Chamony sans qu'il y aye aucun passage praticable pour traverser du Foussigny dans la vallée d'Aouste : celui que plusieurs cartes et mémoires marquent de Col Mayor à Salanches et qui formoit une branche du col de ce nom parallèle à celle qui y va du Chapieu n'existe plus depuis longtemps, ayant été bouché par des éboulements des glaciers.'

It would seem from this that the author was under the impression that there were two parallel routes both known as the Col Major. One of these he identifies as the Col de la Seigne, while he understood the other to be a pass situated further to the east which had become impracticable many years earlier. I shall refer to this abandoned pass further on in quoting the memoir by Montannel.

LIEUT.-GENERAL P. J. DE BOURCET, 1752.—*Mémoire de M. Bourcet relatif à sa carte manuscrite des Passages des Alpes*.¹²

On pages 118-119 of this memoir we find the following description of the Aosta valley :

' Cette vallée est fermée à son extrémité du côté du Piémont, par le château de Bard, et par Ivrée qui sont deux places fortifiées appartenant au roi de Sardaigne, et qui demandent des précautions considérables pour être assujetties. On n'y communique de la Savoie que par les cols du Grand et Petit St. Bernard et par les cols Major et de Grisanche.

' *Le Grand St. Bernard* est un col assez ouvert, on peut y passer avec des bêtes de charge. . . .

' *Le Petit St. Bernard* est au-dessus du village de St. Maurice dans la Haute Tarentaise ; il est très praticable pour les chevaux et les bêtes de charge. . . .

' *Le Col Major* est long et difficile, on ne peut se promettre de communiquer de Salanche et Chamunis (en Faucigny), à Morges, dans la vallée d'Aost, en moins de deux grandes

¹² This memoir is printed in *Voyage d'Inspection de la Frontière des Alpes en 1752 par le Marquis de Paulmy*, with an introduction by M. Henry Duhamel, Grenoble, 1902. Pierre-Joseph de Bourcet (1700-1780) was by far the most eminent of the 'ingénieurs-géographes.' See *Les Bourcet et leur Rôle dans les Guerres Alpines*, by Colonel de Rochas d'Aiglun, Paris, 1895.

journées de marche et par des défilés considérables où l'on ne trouve aucune habitation.¹³

Le col de Grisanche communique de la plaine de Sexte, par Ste Foy, à Derbe et à la Cité d'Aost; mais ce col n'est praticable que pour les gens de pied.'

As the Col Major is described in the above extract as the *only* route between Aosta and the Faucigny, it is, I think, obvious that Bourcet had in mind the mule track over the Col de la Seigne and the Col du Bonhomme. Mr. Coolidge quotes the lines referring to the Col Major without the context as an early account of the Col du Géant,¹⁴ but it would seem from Bourcet's definition of the term 'col' that he used it in the sense of a passage free from snow during the summer months, and of easy access, a description which can hardly be applied to a difficult glacier pass. He writes:

'La plaine de Piémont est séparée de la Savoie, du Dauphiné et de la Provence par des montagnes fort élevées qui n'en permettent l'entrée que par des chemins très difficiles, au travers de ces mêmes montagnes. Ces chemins s'appellent du nom général de cols; les uns sont praticables pour des voitures et peuvent servir au transport de l'artillerie; les autres ne le sont que pour les bêtes de charge, et les plus difficiles ne sont praticables que pour les gens de pied. Mais tous sont fermés pendant près de huit mois de l'année par les neiges, en sorte que l'on ne saurait entreprendre un passage au travers les Alpes que pendant les quatre mois de juin, juillet août et septembre; à la vérité dans ce temps-là on communique facilement partout.'

MARQUIS DE SAINT-SIMON, 1759.—*Histoire de la Guerre des Alpes . . . de 1744, &c.* Amsterdam, 1759, p. 83.

'On n'arrive à la vallée d'Aoste que par le Col du Grand St. Bernard, le Col Major, et ceux du Petit St. Bernard et de Grisanche: elle est fermée vers son débouché dans le Piémont par les châteaux de Bard et d'Yvrée.'

¹³ Compare this with Bourrit's description of the route from Nant Borrant to Chapieux in 1774:

'Nous ne pûmes cependant quitter cette frêle habitation sans regrets; c'étoit la dernière demeure des hommes; nous n'en devons plus trouver pendant neuf lieues de marche qui nous restoient à faire dans cette journée.'—*Description des Aspects du Mont-Blanc*, p. 29.

¹⁴ *Revue Alpine*, 1913, p. 246.

'Le Grand St. Bernard est un col assez ouvert, où l'on peut passer avec des bêtes de charge. . . .

'Le Col du Petit St. Bernard est audessus du village de St. Maurice sur l'Isère dans la haute Tarentaise; les bêtes de charge y peuvent passer. . . .

Le Col Major entre les Cols du Grand et du Petit St. Bernard est long et difficile et communique à Chamouni en Faucigny; il arrive à Morges après deux grandes journées de marche dans des défilés continuels et sans habitation; c'est par là que l'on croit que les romains ont passé. . . .

'Le Col de Grisanche communique par une petite plaine à Ste Foy et Sale, un peu au dessous de Morges; ces deux défilés pour entrer dans la vallée d'Aoste sont si difficiles qu'ils ne peuvent servir qu'aux gens de pied et qu'un cheval y peut à peine suivre son cavalier.'

Here again we find the Col Major described as the only pass between the Aosta valley and the Faucigny; consequently there can be no doubt that M. de Saint-Simon referred to the Seigne and Bonhomme passes. Mr. Coolidge, in quoting the lines referring to the Col Major as an early account of the Col du Géant, omits the concluding paragraphs in which the writer says the last-mentioned passes are so difficult that a horse can scarcely follow its master over them.¹⁵

MARQUIS DE PEZAY, 1775.—*Noms, Situations et Détails des Vallées de la France le long des Grandes Alpes . . . et de celles qui descendent des Alpes en Italie*, with a preface by M. Henri Duhamel, Grenoble, 1894.

On page 60 M. de Pezay writes that the Aosta valley can be reached only by the Faucigny and the Tarentaise.

'De la Tarentaise,' he continues, 'on débouche par les cols du Petit Saint-Bernard et de Grisanche; mais du Faucigny on ne peut y déboucher que par le seul Col Major, qui est long et difficile. De sorte que, pour entreprendre sur la val d'Aoste, il faut nécessairement occuper la Tarentaise et ne se servir du Faucigny que pour quelque détachement particulier.'

In the above extract M. de Pezay agrees with General de Bourcet and the Marquis de Saint-Simon in describing the Col Major as the only route connecting the Faucigny and the Aosta valley, or in other words as the mule track from Aosta to Bonneville by the Col du Bonhomme and the Col de la Seigne. On the next page he discusses the possibility of sending troops

¹⁵ *Revue Alpine*, 1913, p. 246.

into the Aosta valley by the little St. Bernard and the Col Major, which I think proves conclusively that he did not understand the Col Major to be the Col du Géant.

MONTANNEL, 1776.—*La Topographie Militaire de la Frontière des Alpes. Editée par les soins de M. A. Rochas d'Aiglun, Grenoble, 1875.*

On pages 8–11, in a list of some sixty passes along the main chain of the Alps, we find the following reference to the Col Major :

‘ Il y a encore au delà de ce dernier col [le petit St. Bernard] et sur la grande chaîne des Alpes, le Col de l’Allée Blanche et le Col Major. Ce dernier n’est plus susceptible de passage ; les pluies et la fonte des neiges l’ont rompu. Au delà du Col Major est celui du Grand St. Bernard.’

Again on page 188 the author considers the pass from a military point of view :

‘ L’ennemi peut aussi venir de la Valdost au Chapuy sans passer par le Petit St. Bernard. Pour cet effet, il n’a que passer l’endroit appelé l’Allée Blanche et par celui que l’on nomme les Glaciers et tomber de là sur Chapuy ; mais il ne peut faire usage de cette route, à cause des neiges, que deux mois de l’année. Enfin si l’ennemi accommodait le Col Major, qui est actuellement tout dégradé et impraticable, il pourrait venir par ce col de la Valdost dans la vallée de Faussigny ; mais ce chemin serait des plus rudes et praticable seulement deux mois de l’année, en sorte qu’il n’est guère probable que cet ennemi passe jamais le Col Major dans l’objet de venir sur le Rhône en corps d’armée. Je ne dis pas de même du Grand St. Bernard. . . . Au reste le chemin qui passerait le Col Major tomberait sur Chamunis, de là il viendrait à la Cluze. . . .’

Finally on page 193 we read :

‘ Le Col Major est entièrement ruiné ; les habitants de Sallanches m’ont dit en 1769 qu’on n’y passait plus depuis trente ans.’

Mr. Coolidge maintains that the Col Major described in the above extracts is undoubtedly the Col du Géant, but it is obvious, I think, that the author refers to a pass over which there was a mule track or at least a path. And I fail to see how a glacier pass like the Col du Géant could be affected either by rain or melting snow, or how it could possibly be *put in order* by a Piedmontese army.

As a matter of fact Montannel was very probably misled by

the old maps, with which, as a topographical engineer, he must have been familiar; and his knowledge of the district was moreover extremely vague. He crossed the Col du Bonhomme, it is true, and explored the immediate neighbourhood of the Little St. Bernard, but we may be certain that he did not visit either Chamonix or Courmayeur, otherwise he would have discovered at once the absurdity of supposing that the two villages were connected by a direct route.¹⁶

We have seen that Brunet de l'Argentière, writing in 1742, says the Col Major had been closed many years earlier by 'des éboulements des glaciers.' This is confirmed by Montannel, who writes that in 1769 he was told at Sallanches that the pass was completely ruined and that it had not been crossed for thirty years.

These two statements are supposed to corroborate the story so long current on both sides of the range of Mont Blanc that there was once a direct route over the glaciers from Chamonix to Courmayeur. But it seems highly probable, on the contrary, that our two authors refer to a very different pass. There are reasons for believing that there was a route leading from the Montjoie valley into the Allée Blanche which was abandoned

¹⁶ Michel-Jean-Auguste Cruels, *dît de Montannel* (1714-1785). See Colonel de Rochas d'Aiglun's *Les Bourcet etc.*, p. 22. In a letter from the Chevalier de Janvres to H. B. de Saussure, dated February 6, 1780, which has recently been communicated to me by M. Raymond de Saussure, I find the following interesting reference to Montannel:

'Je suis fâché de n'avoir pas eu l'idée dans votre passage en cette ville [Grenoble] de vous avoir fait faire connoissance avec un ingénieur géographe de cette ville nommé M^r de Montannel, qui a parcouru toutes les Alpes, et qui les a toutes dessinées en vue d'oiseau telle que la dernière planche de votre 1^{er} tome. Les dites cartes sont très grandes et entrent dans les détails très circonstanciés pour pouvoir servir à un général d'armée qui seroit chargé de la conduite des troupes. Cet ouvrage unique est accompagné de 3 gros manuscrits qui contiennent ses observations; il destine ses ouvrages au Roy, cependant je crois qu'il ne seroit pas facile de le détourner de cette idée si un particulier vouloit en faire l'acquisition. Il n'est pas intéressé, mais sa santé est si délabré qu'il seroit à propos qu'il se mît dans une certaine aisance pour la soigner. Si vous repassez dans ce pays, je vous le ferois connoître et je suis garant du plaisir que vous aurez à l'aspect de ses cartes qui embrassent depuis le cours du Var jusques et au delà du lac de Genève. Il n'est pas l'ami de M. Bourcet, il prétend que c'est sur les connoissances qu'il lui a donné que notre commandant doit la haute réputation qu'il s'est acquise dans la connoissance de nos montagnes.'

in the first half of the eighteenth century in consequence of certain changes in the glaciers.

Dr. A. Matthey, a Genevese physician who practised for many years at St. Gervais-les-Bains, writes in 1818 in a description of the Glacier de Miage Français :

‘ On traversoit autrefois ce glacier pour aller à Cormayeur ; on y alloit en six heures : cette route n’est plus praticable aujourd’hui. ’¹⁷

And in 1826 we read in a work on Switzerland by the French traveller Raoul-Rochette :

‘ Ce glacier de Miage offre une autre singularité. Il n’y pas longtemps qu’on pouvait le traverser dans toute son étendue, sans beaucoup de difficultés ; et M. Gontard, qui connaît si bien la région, m’assura qu’on se rendait par cette route de St. Gervais à Courmayeur en six heures de temps. Il paraît même qu’à l’époque où la France cherchait à s’assurer l’empire de l’Italie, au moyen des communications les plus promptes et les plus directes, un projet fut conçu pour ouvrir, par le glacier de Miage, une route militaire qui eût pu conduire en un jour de Genève à Turin. On croyait n’avoir affaire ici qu’à la nature, et l’homme qui foulait sous ses pieds tous les trônes, ne devait pas s’attendre à être arrêté par les Alpes. Des ingénieurs furent envoyés sur les lieux : un directeur-général s’y rendit en poste de Paris ; et le glacier fut sondé dans tout son cours. Mais cette entreprise gigantesque n’eut pas d’autre résultat. Dans l’interval de quelques années, les glaces s’étaient accumulées, au point d’opposer des obstacles insurmontables à tout effort humain ; la puissance de celui qui ne connaissait pas de borne à sa fortune, recula devant cette barrière inattendue, et aujourd’hui, cette route, qui s’est trouvée fermée pour un conquérant, n’est plus praticable que pour le montagnard. ’¹⁸

¹⁷ *Les Bains de Saint-Gervais, près du Mont-Blanc*, Genève, 1818, p. 25.

¹⁸ *Lettres sur la Suisse*, Paris 1826, vol. iii. p. 304. On pages 379–380 Montanell gives the following account of the Mont Blanc chain :

‘ Cette chaîne, après avoir montré vers son milieu une haute pointe appelée le Mont Maudit, se termine sur l’Arve au-dessous de la Bonneville. On ne peut rien voir de plus affreux que cette chaîne, particulièrement vers Chamounix ; on trouve là un glacier éternel où la neige paraît toute l’année. Il y a sur cette chaîne un passage par lequel on peut, malgré cela, aller à cheval, et après que les neiges sont fondues, depuis la Bonneville jusqu’à celle de

If there is any truth in the tradition thus recorded by Dr. Matthey and M. Raoul-Rochette, the abandoned pass between St. Gervais and Courmayeur they mention can only be identified as the Col de Miage. It is quite possible, therefore, that Brunet de l'Argentière and Montannel may have heard vague stories about this legendary pass in Sallanches or St. Gervais and assumed without further investigation that it was the route indicated on their maps as the Col Major.

A more plausible solution of the problem is suggested by a few lines in the diary of Mr. A. T. Malkin, an early member of the Alpine Club who crossed the Col du Bonhomme in 1845. At the village of Nant Borrant he writes :

'A passage formerly led by the Trelanlai [Trélatête ?] and Miage Glaciers from this spot into the Allée Blanche. The keeper of the chalet told me seriously that a company had been talked of to re-arrange the route, which, he said, half a dozen men might soon do, by cutting stairs here and there in the rocks, the change in the glacier having rendered the old route impassable. It must be very high, probably 11,000 feet.' ('A.J.' vol. xv. p. 125.)

Mr. Coolidge suggests that this pass was very likely the Col dit Infranchissable. But it seems to me far more probable that Mr. Malkin refers to the Col du Mont Tondu, which is described in the first edition of the *Alpine Guide* as the Col de Trélatête. In the new edition (1878) Mr. Ball says this route saves not less than five hours on the way to Chapieux, which is doubtless an exaggeration although it must be several hours shorter than the Col du Bonhomme or the Col des Fours.

Saint-Maurice sur le Rhône. Cette communication passe par Taninge, Samoëns, Champerey et Trétouren. Ces deux derniers villages appartiennent au Valais. Il est à remarquer que cette communication laisse le mont Maudit à sa gauche, du moins quand on va de la Bonneville à Saint-Maurice.'

The peak described here as Mont Maudit is unquestionably Mont Blanc. Yet our author says that a traveller proceeding from Bonneville *via* Taninges, Samoëns, the Cols de Golèse and de Coux, Champéry and Trois-Torrents, to Saint-Maurice would pass the Mont Maudit on the left. As a matter of fact, Montannel was undoubtedly misled by the mistake of a large number of seventeenth and eighteenth century cartographers in placing the 'Glacières' to the N. of the Chamonix Valley. On Jaillot's *Les Duchés de Savoye, de Genevois, de Chablais, etc.*, the Mont Maudit is placed to the N. of Morzine and Samoëns and due W. of Champéry. Had Montannel ventured into the Chamonix Valley he would certainly have discovered at once this error.

‘The last ascent,’ he adds, ‘is made up a face of rock which appears alarmingly steep to those who approach it from the opposite direction, but the stair-like ledges make it quite free from difficulty.’

COLONEL BROSSIER, 1800.¹⁹—*Notes Descriptives sur tous les Cols et Passages qui communiquent de France en Piémont, depuis le Col Ferret jusques au Col des Trois-Evêques.*

In the preface to this memoir dated Grenoble, 13 Pluviose, An VIII, (February 2, 1800), the author says he was employed on the frontier from 1796 to 1799. He adds that in the preparation of his work he consulted various memoirs by La Blottière, Bourcet, etc., as well as the principal maps of France and Savoie. Consequently it seems to me that his opinion regarding the identity of the Col Major is decisive. Now the heading of Colonel Brossier’s account of the Col de la Seigne reads :

‘Col de la Seigne ou de l’Allée Blanche, indiqué dans plusieurs cartes et mémoires sous le nom de Col Major.’

LIEUT.-GENERAL P. J. DE BOURCET, 1802.²⁰—*Mémoires Militaires sur les Frontières de la France, du Piémont et de la Savoie, depuis l’Embouchure du Var jusqu’au Lac de Genève. Paris et Strasbourg, An X (1802).*

On pages 40 and 158 the author mentions separately both the Col du Bonhomme and the Col de la Seigne ; but on page 160, under the heading ‘Chemins qui, de la Tarentaise, vont dans la Savoie, le Faussigny et le Piémont,’ we read :

‘De Chapières [Chapieux] l’on peut encore entrer dans la vallée d’Aoust, en passant par Gloenier [Glaciers], l’Allée-blanche, le col Major et Doulina [Dollone], d’où l’on va à Morges.’

Here the Col Major is clearly the Col de la Seigne. Yet, curiously enough, on the map accompanying the volume we

¹⁹ An unpublished MS. in the library of the late M. Henry Duhamel at Gières, near Grenoble. Simon-Pierre Brossier (1751-?) entered the corps of ‘ingénieurs-géographes’ in 1775 and rose to the rank of ‘maréchal des camps.’ See *Campagne de l’Armée de Réserve, Passage du Grand St. Bernard par le Capitaine Cugnac*, Paris 1900, p. 373.

²⁰ Although published under the name of General de Bourcet it is by no means certain that the memoirs in this volume were written by him. The first, which I have quoted above, is generally attributed to La Blottière, and is said to have been written about 1713. It must have been frequently revised however, as it contains many references to events which occurred as late as 1745.

find a direct route between Courmayeur and Chamonix indicated as the 'Col de Malay,' a name very likely invented in 1802 by the editor of the volume. On page 160 we find the following footnote by the editor :

'M. de Bourcet ne parle point du col de Malay dans ses mémoires ; c'est ce qui nous a fait douter de son existence, comme nous l'avons dit dans la table à l'article de ce col.'

And in the table at the end of the volume (page 349) he adds :

'Quelques cartes assez estimées ayant indiqué ce col on l'a conservé, par respect pour elles, quoiqu'on n'en ait d'ailleurs aucune connoissance et que les glaciers du Mont-Blanc rendent son existence très-problématique.'

The foregoing extracts comprise, I believe, all the important references to the Col Major before 1802 that have yet been brought to light. Of the six authorities I have quoted no less than four describe it in unmistakable terms as either the Col de la Seigne or as that pass combined with the Col du Bonhomme ; while two refer vaguely to an abandoned pass somewhere between the Col de la Seigne and the Great St. Bernard and in the neighbourhood of the former, I have shown moreover, that there are excellent reasons for believing that this abandoned pass lay between the Montjoie valley and the Allée Blanche. In any case it seems to me certain that neither the Col Major nor this abandoned route had anything in common with the great glacier pass we now know as the Col du Géant.

(To be continued.)

THE EARLY SWISS PIONEERS OF THE ALPS.

BY DR. H. DÜBL.

(Continued from p. 234.)

FRANZ JOSEPH HUGI.

HUGI was born on January 23, 1796, at Grenchen, canton of Soleure, where he was educated, proceeding thence to the universities of Landshut and Vienna. Upon his return he was appointed teacher of natural science at the *Realschule* and principal of the orphanage at Soleure. His work left him time to make long journeys—thus from 1821 onwards