

AN ALPINE ARTIST : FRANCIS UNWIN

BY A. M. CARR-SAUNDERS

IT would be of no little interest to examine the impact of Alpine landscape upon those British artists who have attempted to portray it. To do so would need a knowledge of British art to which I cannot begin to pretend. The object of this note is more limited : it is designed to draw attention to the Alpine work of a recent British artist, Francis Unwin. His etchings and drawings are in general well known and examples of them can be seen in the Tate Gallery, the British Museum and other public collections. But it would seem that his Alpine work has nowhere received the attention which it deserves ; few lovers of the high Alps appear to know of its existence, while professional critics and amateurs of the arts, probably because of their lack of familiarity with high Alpine scenery, have tended to neglect it and to concentrate attention upon his more ordinary subjects.

In spite of the disclaimer above I may perhaps be allowed to say something about Unwin's most famous predecessors by way of introduction to his work. William Pars (1742-82) seems to deserve the credit of being the first British artist of note to discover Alpine landscape. He travelled in Switzerland with the second Lord Palmerston in 1767, and his drawings were exhibited in 1771 ; five of his Alpine subjects were engraved by Woollett. The Club possesses two of Woollett's engravings, one of the valley and glaciers of Chamonix, and the other of the valley and glaciers of Grindelwald. Mr. Oughton has drawn attention to these possessions of the Club, and has asked whether another engraving of the Chamonix valley, also in the possession of the Club, of which the margins have been cut, may not also be by Woollett after Pars.¹ Whatever may be the answer to Mr. Oughton's question, it is clear that the attribution cannot be to Woollett who engraved only one other view near Chamonix besides that possessed by the Club ; this other view by Pars is taken from Montenvers whereas the Club's unattributed engraving is a view of the Chamonix valley and its glaciers. From the two engravings in question which the Club possesses a good impression of Pars' work can be obtained, and anyone interested by them can see in the British Museum ten original Alpine drawings by him including the five engraved by Woollett. They are very remarkable. Topographically, except in the case of the view from Montenvers, they are fairly accurate. Clearly, Pars noted mountain form with care ; but he does not elaborate detail so far as the mountains are concerned. He avoided romanticism on the one hand and overstatement on the other. His mountains are not, like those of Swiss artists of the time, mere backgrounds for pastoral scenes,

¹ *A.J.* 54. 83.

and he does not seek to make them overwhelming. He gives a clear, calm, unemotional statement with competence and assurance which is surprising for one to whom the Alps were unfamiliar.

J. R. Cozens (1752-97) passed through Switzerland in 1776 on his way to Italy, going by Geneva, Sallanches, Chamonix, Martigny, Berne, Interlaken, Grindelwald and over the Splügen. His drawings were studied by Turner and Girtin, and he is often wrongly credited with the introduction of Alpine landscape to his countrymen at home. To Cozens mountains were ghostly presences. A great stillness pervades his drawings. We cannot go to them for topographical detail, for he etherealises the peaks which often dissolve into cloud ; a drawing done on the way from Chamonix to Martigny has as its chief feature the Dru wreathed in cloud from which it is hardly distinguishable.

Mr. Oppé has emphasised the great interest of the Alpine work of Francis Towne (1740-1816) which is not easy to see since apparently only one of his drawings of mountains is in public possession.² Towne visited the Alps on his way back from Italy in 1771, going to Chamonix among other places. He possessed Woollett's engravings and may have seen Pars' original drawings. But he did not look at the mountains through the eyes of Pars or Cozens. The outstanding feature of his treatment is severity. 'Contrary to all the accepted canons of the eighteenth century,' says Mr. Oppé, 'Towne did nothing to soften, but everything to accentuate, the crushing grandeur of the mountains. . . . The very detail only serves to emphasise the overpowering masses above. . . . He is totally devoid of sentimental enjoyment in the Swiss scenes ; the mountains . . . are something hard and cruel and too imminent and hostile to permit any thought of rustic bliss or primitive innocence in the valleys at their base.' He did, in fact, speak of his Swiss tour as a 'terrible adventure.'

J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) early became familiar with Alpine scenery when he was employed as a youth by Munro to copy Cozens' work. Girtin, who was his fellow employee, never got to the Alps ; but Turner paid his first visit to Switzerland in 1802, the year of Girtin's death. He was not just on his way to or back from Italy as were most of his predecessors ; Switzerland was the object of the tour. From Geneva he travelled to Chamonix ; he went up to Montenvers and sketched the Mer de Glace. Then he made the tour of Mont Blanc to Courmayeur, crossed the Great St. Bernard to Martigny, passed to Lauterbrunnen, visited Grindelwald and crossed the Great Scheidegg to Meiringen. Two visits to Italy in 1819 and 1836 took him over the Mont Cenis ; in 1836 he made another Swiss tour, revisiting Chamonix and Courmayeur. In 1840 he returned from Venice through Tyrol and visited Innsbruck. On his return from his first Swiss tour he told Farington that 'the lines of the landscape were rather broken, but there are very fine parts' ; he spoke of 'fragments and precipices' as 'very romantic and strikingly grand' ; he summed up his impressions by saying that 'the country on the whole surpasses Wales and Scotland

² Walpole Society, Vol. VIII, 1919/20.

too.' ³ Numerous Alpine drawings resulted from these visits. They are in the romantic tradition, but no facile emotion is evoked. Turner was evidently greatly interested in the complexity of Alpine scenery and structure ; he observed with attention, and as was his wont added fact to fact with the result that the drawings are lacking somewhat in direct inspiration ; for they seem rather to have been put together than to result from a clear impression or comprehensive grasp of some one aspect of the scenery.

The Club possesses an attractive watercolour of the Wetterhorn which bears the name of R. P. Bonington (1802-28) on the frame. But the attribution can only be most doubtful. Bonington paid his one visit to Italy in 1826. Travelling with his friend Charles Rivet he went by Geneva, St. Gingolph, Sion, Brigue and the Simplon to Venice. The weather was bad ; Bonington was in poor health and in haste to get to his destination. The two friends seem to have paid no attention to the scenery on the way. The return journey did not take him through the Alps, and there is no evidence that he was ever in the Bernese Oberland.⁴ The Club's picture is, in fact, only one of a very large number attributed without sufficient justification to this very great English artist.

It does not seem that Constable ever left the shores of his own country, and there is little more to mention of the work of British artists in the Alps until towards our own day. Of the achievements of the later generation we are concerned here only with the work of Francis Unwin (1885-1925). For details of his life I am indebted to Mr. Campbell Dodgson's *Memoir* and to Mr. Schwabe's article in *The Print Collectors' Quarterly* of January, 1934, supplemented by some notes which Miss Mary Unwin has been good enough to send to me. Unwin was the son of a clergyman and was born in Dorset. He was at school at Cheltenham and at the Winchester School of Art ; later, from 1900 to 1905 he was at the Slade. Before 1914 he visited Italy more than once, and also went to Egypt. In 1916 consumption made its appearance, and for a time he was in a sanatorium. In 1920 he paid his first visit to Switzerland, staying in the Engadine and making drawings for the Maloja set of etchings. Next year he went to the Bernese Oberland. These Swiss visits were not made for reasons of health ; he was ' particularly fit in 1920-21 ' according to Miss Unwin. Later he became ill again and died in 1925.

Unwin's Alpine work consists of etchings, lithographs and drawings. Mr. Schwabe's article gives a complete list of the etchings and lithographs ; of the etchings of Alpine subjects five were published as the Maloja set, while two, also of this region, were not published ; of the lithographs three relate to Swiss mountains, having as their subjects the Wetterhorn, the Jungfrau and a glacier. With the help of Miss Unwin the following list of drawings has been compiled : the Jungfrau ; the Wetterhorn ; the summit of the Jungfrau ; the Jungfrauoch ; the

³ A. J. Finberg, *Life of J. M. W. Turner*, 1939.

⁴ A. Dubuisson, *R. P. Bonington*, 1924 ; A. Shirley, *Bonington*, 1940.



THE SCHRECKHORN AND THE FINSTERAARHORN, 1921.



THE BREITHORN.

Mönch ; a Mountain Lake ; the Schreckhorn and the Finsteraarhorn ; the Breithorn ; and the Eiger and the Mönch. The last named is in the Fitzwilliam Museum ; the rest are in private possession.

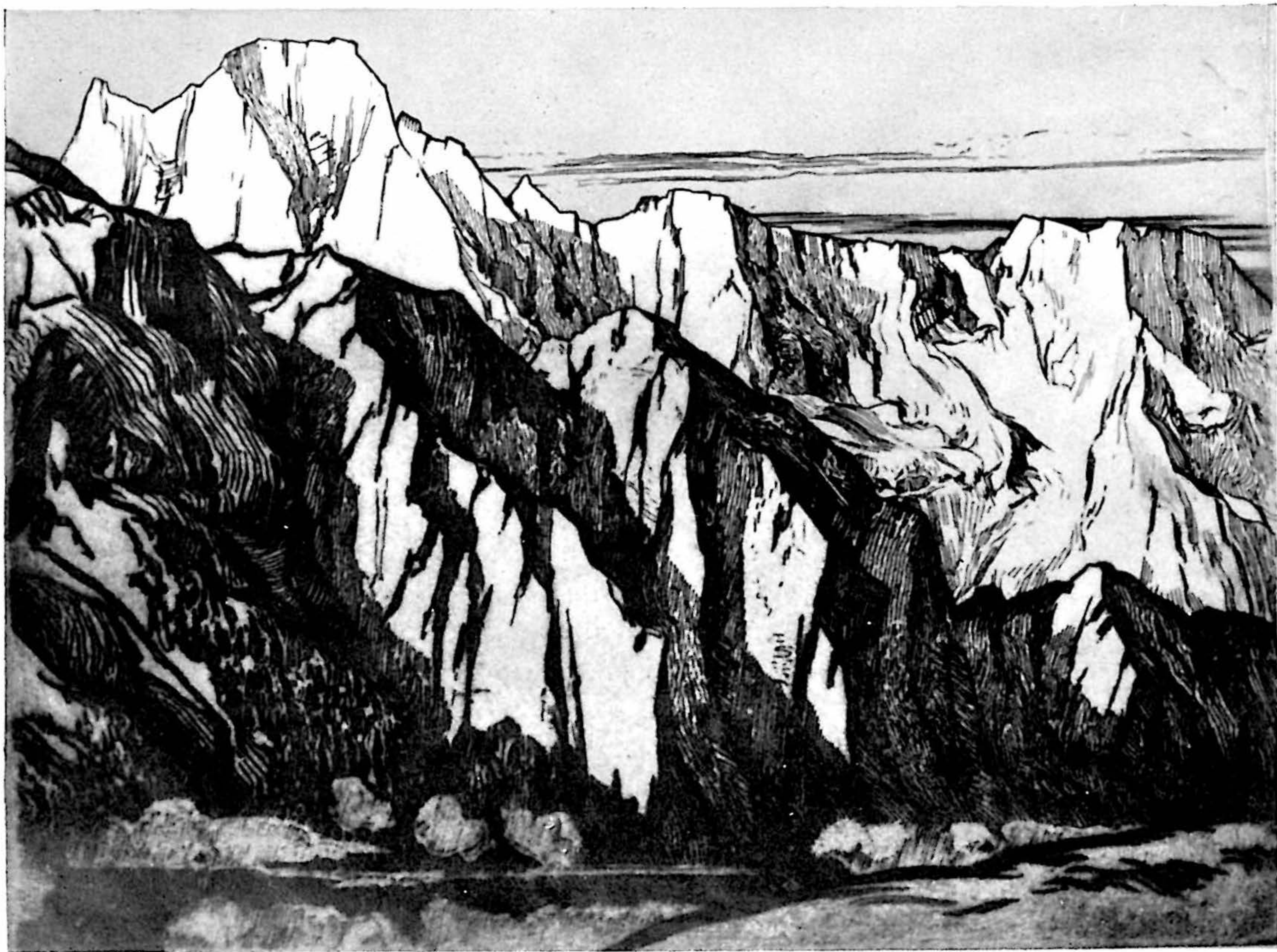
Unwin was the successor not of Turner, Cozens or Pars, but of Towne ; no romanticism, no etherealisation, no plain statement, but severity. However much he may differ in technique or otherwise from Towne, he has severity in common with him. In his previous work, which was largely devoted to architectural subjects, there is little foreshadowing either of the attitude shown or of the treatment used in his Alpine achievement. Evidently the mountains made an overpowering impression upon him, and to record the passion which he felt he evolved a special technique. Of the illustrations chosen for this note two are of drawings, the Breithorn, and the Schreckhorn and the Finsteraarhorn. The former is a monochrome watercolour, on yellow tinted paper, brown in shade and reinforced with body colour. An inspection of it shows that Unwin was not just under the spell of the grandeur of Alpine scenery ; he observed and rendered with remarkable truth its characteristic features, the ice slope, the névé, the hanging glacier, the rock rib, the shadows in the snow. The latter is a more distant view which does not permit so detailed a treatment of these features, but it has a comprehensive sweep which is magnificent. The other two illustrations are of etchings, one of the Monte del Forno from the Maloja set and one an unpublished etching of this region belonging to the Rev. J. A. V. Wallace of Chesterton. The Monte del Forno etching again shows how intimate an understanding Unwin had gained of Alpine detail, of the texture of rock and snow, their meeting places, the bulging glacier, for example ; in this etching a mountain form, undramatic and merely typical of Alpine scenery, has been held and grasped by an artist who could fix the fleeting impressions so familiar to those who have fallen in love with the Alps. The unpublished etching here illustrated is a more remote view, and it shows once again his capacity to state the impression made by a great range, this time of rock.

Of the Maloja set Mr. Campbell Dodgson writes that they ' are mostly studies of mountain forms pure and simple, firmly drawn and deeply bitten. . . . This ascetic later work . . . will never be popular with a generation brought up on Turner and Alfred Hunt, but it is his most original and personal contribution to English art. From Unwin's mountain peaks every rainbow and clinging wreath of mist have been swept away as by some pitiless, dry wind ; there is nothing pretty about them, and they do not cry out that they are sublime or evoke quotations from Childe Harold. Cold, bare and bereft of any human association as the mountains of the moon, they have been studied with a dispassionate eye.' Mr. Schwabe speaks of the ' rendering of giant mountain masses ' as ' energetic in the extreme.' He goes on to express some reservations and asks whether this ' trenchant simplification ' does not ' sometimes fail of its calculated effect.' No doubt there is danger in this mode of treatment which may ' fall into mere

Thomas Chace, 1920.



MONTÉ DEL FORNO.



MALOJA CRAGS.

naïveté and bareness,' to use Mr. Oppé's words. But to those familiar with high Alpine scenery it may well seem that the danger has been avoided. For Unwin was not concerned only or even mainly with the total effect; as has been stressed, he was fascinated with the peculiar aspects of Alpine scenery, the details of which, so far as the distance allowed, were stated with care and understanding. Those who take pleasure in snow mountains may well find in Unwin's work the most satisfying treatment of them by any British artist.

AN UNKNOWN ASCENT OF MONT BLANC

By CLAIRE-ELIANE ENGEL

IN a former article of mine ¹ published in the ALPINE JOURNAL in 1937, I stressed the fact that 'there was very little hope of finding early unrecorded ascents of Mont Blanc.' I have been lucky enough to prove this statement false.

Many new aspects of the early history of Mont Blanc have come to light, thanks to the fact that several new sources of Alpine information are now available. The Geneva Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire has lately bought a new collection of important documents, the Maillard-Gosse archives. They contain the papers of Henri-Albert Gosse, the well known Genevese chemist and naturalist. A number of these MSS. were already known. Dr. Dübi quoted several of them in his *Paccard wider Balmat*. D. W. Freshfield and H. F. Montagnier had access to this valuable source of information when they were compiling their *Life of H. B. de Saussure*. Mlle D. Plan went through most of the collection when writing *Un Genevois d'autrefois, H.-A. Gosse*. But Gosse outlived Saussure by several years and Mlle Plan was not a specialist in Alpine history. Thus, those historians left aside many papers, which were not closely connected with Saussure, Paccard or Gosse himself.

Among them is a very interesting account of a hitherto unknown climb of Mont Blanc. It is written on one sheet and a half (recto, verso and recto again) of pale blue notepaper; the second verso side being used for the address of Dr. Gosse. Here is the complete text, the spelling of which I have modernised.

Voyage du Mont Blanc en 1808. Chamonix. 14 d'août 1808.

Une nouvelle ascension que nous venons de faire à la sommité du Mont Blanc, David Payot, son frère Julien, Eugène Couttet, Jean-Baptiste Simon, son frère François, le 12 de Juillet, m'impose de vous en rendre compte comme je dois.

¹ A.J. 49. 70 sqq.