

AFTER A HUNDRED YEARS

BY SIR JOHN HUNT

IT IS appropriate that a review of the character and activities of our Club during the first hundred years of its history should be a main feature of the Centenary Journal. It is also a very considerable undertaking, which the Editor has wisely divided into periods and distributed among a number of our members well qualified to deal with each. The contributors deserve our thanks.

This series is not a history of the Club (which is the subject of a volume by another hand) but a series of monographs on seven ages of mountaineering. I am glad that this should be so, for two reasons. First, because I do not believe that any history should be recorded up to the very date of writing ; at least as far as the eventful last ten years of the Club are concerned, some time must yet elapse before their significance can be assessed in true perspective. Second, because one main characteristic of the members of the Alpine Club, and of climbers generally, is their intense individualism. We share a common love of mountains, yet when away from our playground, we hold, and hold strongly, contrasting, sometimes conflicting opinions—about attitudes towards our sport, about mountain problems, climbing techniques, and not least, about the personalities in the game, past and present. The views expressed about these aspects by the individual authors in this series of sketches are characteristic of this fact. They are also sincerely held, and, very properly, there is no attempt to indulge in an orgy of eulogy as a tribute to the passage of time.

Indeed, there is no call for congratulation of our society by its members. Traditions and achievements speak for themselves and we are rightly proud of them. Self-praise is, at best, unproductive ; satisfactory or regrettable, the past is but a springboard for the future. And the future is both full of promise and fraught with problems.

One of the problems is the character of the Club itself, which has survived substantially unaltered in the greatly changed social circumstances of today. Whether this is in the best interests for the Club's future, and whether, if so, our financial circumstances will permit it to remain so, is a matter of great consequence which is being investigated with the care it deserves.

Another problem is of a wider nature, extending, as it does, to the whole fraternity of mountaineers. This is a time of poise in the history of our sport. Fifty years ago, with the exploration of the main routes in our Alpine mountains largely completed, the whole of the greater

ranges of the earth awaited the quest of climbers ; the question-mark of man's ability to achieve even greater deeds in this realm was then attached to this wider and loftier horizon. Now this question, too, has been answered ; in the last four years, seven of the highest mountains in the world have been climbed. Much remains, but the period ahead of us will be increasingly one of filling in detail, still on a great scale admittedly, but a descending one ; in much the same way as we climbers have been doing in the Alps, the mountains of Norway and other European ranges in the fifty years which have passed.

This fact, together with the growing popularity of our sport and the mechanical climate of the times we live in, tends to encourage new attitudes to climbing. The spirit of adventure still remains, but its outlets are gradually being narrowed into fields which make greater demands on acrobatics and, above all, the mastery of artificial techniques. Inevitably, I feel, this spirit is coloured by the spirit of competition, of subjectiveness, and thus of speed and resort to mechanism, which are characteristic of the age.

How are we to foster the daring while retaining the best motives of earlier times, tempered with humility, when we still had the challenge of greater height above and before us ?

I suggest that this is no idle question. As increasing numbers look for outlets among the hills, from the growing artificiality of civilisation, there is a tendency, slight as yet but noticeable, to translate to this realm of lasting values some of the false values from the cities. Indeed, there is in winter on the ' piste ' and in summer on the crags, a certain failure to distinguish the mountains in their entirety, from the racing track or the rock. The general tempo of living and the taste for speed is reflected in the importance attached to the times recorded, whether downhill or uphill. There is an underlying attitude of presumptuousness implied in the application to climbing of such words as ' attack ' and ' conquest '.

Herein lies the value of the past, and the significance of our Club's Centenary. From the wisdom of experience it is possible to see clearly the importance of preserving the spirit of adventure in the future, yet of keeping that spirit free and objective, uncoloured by the prowess of individuals, still less of the nations which breed them. Provided that the danger is seen and the balance maintained, then the future of mountaineering is bright. There are no limits to those who love mountains for their own sakes, and for any one person there is a whole life's adventure to visit and climb upon all the mountains in Europe alone, apart from the ranges further afield. For those who can reach them, we are in the Golden Age of climbing in the Himalayas, with hundreds of lesser peaks to climb and countless routes to be discovered on those which have been ascended by the ways of least

resistance. In the Andes, in Alaska and other remoter ranges—including the Antarctic—much true pioneering still remains to be done. I am hopeful that such barriers as the Iron Curtain will now be lowered for mountaineers who live on either side of them, so that we may share our common passion for adventure, far removed from the material complications of national policies and economies.

As we advance into our second century, let us strive to increase and strengthen the bonds which link all climbers in all lands.