JOHN THOM: MOUNTAINEER

By D. F. O. DANGAR and T. S. BLAKENEY

In the *Scottish Mountaineering Club Journal*, vol. 2, p. 101, Alexander Nicolson, writing of early climbs on Sgurr-nan-Gillean in Skye, says:

> . . . Let no one despise it as an easy performance; if he does, he may find cause to repent. This was sadly illustrated the year before last,[1] in the case of a fine young Englishman, who had travelled in the Alps, and ascended many peaks, and scouted the idea of needing a guide for such a hill as Scorr-nan-Gillean. He did ascend, and he left his card in the bottle on the top, with a pencil note to tell that he had that day 'gone up Scorr-nan-Gillean without a guide'. His descent, alas, was of a woful kind. A thick mist soon misled him, and the insulted spirit of the mountain was fearfully avenged. On the morning of the second day, his mangled body was found at the foot of a sloping precipice not far from the summit. He lay with his back to the rock, his neck broken and one of his legs, his paletot drawn behind him, covered with fragments of the rock.

The Register of Deaths at Edinburgh records the name of the victim of this accident as John Thom, aged 30, but gives no further details concerning him. However, Mr. Thom's name was already known in the pages of the *Alpine Journal* (vol. 32, pp. 217, 273, and vol. 56, p. 353) as being a Liverpool man, and recourse to the *Liverpool Daily Post* of September 7, 8 and 9, 1870, has brought a little more information. It is now possible to indicate something of this unlucky climber and, as will be seen, he was in his day one of the most enterprising mountaineers in the Alps as well as at home.

John Thom was born in 1840 at Liverpool, the son of the Rev. David Thom, D.D. The latter, born in Glasgow c. 1795, matriculated at Glasgow University and became a Minister in Liverpool, where he died on February 27, 1862.[2] The son, John, became well-known in the Liverpool cotton trade; he seems to have been a man of literary tastes and of a sociable disposition, but there is little enough known about him apart from his climbing activities. Farrar[3] commented on his enterprise; Mr. Alexander Nicolson, as will be seen, was struck by

[1] i.e. in 1870; Mr. Nicolson's original narrative was written in 1872, though not printed until twenty years later.

[2] *Matriculation Albums of Univ. of Glasgow*, ed. W. I. Addison. The Thom family appear in other Scottish University lists, and they may often be found in the Liverpool area, as well as in Ireland.

[3] *A.J.* 32. 217.

his apparent rashness, which was also the impression made upon the unknown writer in the Bär Hotel Book, Kandersteg, who broke out into flippant verse on the matter.[4]

It may fairly be asked, why was it that this rather dashing climber, who is to be found in many parts of the Alps, in the company of some of the best guides of the time, such as Almer and Peter Bohren, was not a member of the Alpine Club? The answer is, that John Thom tried three times to join the A.C., and on each occasion was 'ploughed'.

On January 18, 1868, he was passed by the Committee, being described as of the 'Athenaeum', Liverpool, and Manager to a Cotton broking firm. His proposer was Frank Walker and his seconder F. W. Jacomb. The Club's qualification book entry is, however, marked: 'Withdrawn by Proposer.'

On November 5, 1868, John Thom, having in the meantime added another active season's climbing to his list of qualifications, was again passed by the Committee, his proposer this time being F. C. Grove and his seconder once more F. W. Jacomb. The Candidates' Book entry is merely endorsed: 'Not elected, 9 Dec. '68. R. S. M(acdonald).'[5] The Club Minute Book simply notes that two candidates out of those proposed on this occasion were rejected.

On November 12, 1869, John Thom was passed by the Committee for the third time, and his whole application deserves to be given in full:

JOHN THOM, ESQ., Cotton Broker; 28, Erskine Street, Liverpool.
Proposer: F. Craufurd Grove;
Seconder: F. F. Tuckett.
Qualifications:—

Mont Blanc	Brunegghorn,	Moming Pass
Monte Rosa	Piz Bernina	Adlerjoch
Lyskamm	Piz Zupo	Jungfraujoch
Finsteraarhorn	Lysjoch	Lötschenlücke
Jungfrau	Biesjoch	Wetterlücke
Dom	Col du Géant	
Wetterhorn	Strahlegg	
Schreckhorn	Oberaarjoch	
Aletschhorn	Weisstor	
Weisshorn	Mönchjoch	
Strahlhorn	Beichgrat	
Mönch	Petersgrat	
Blümlisalphorn		

[4] *A.J.* 32. 273.

'Welcome, John Thom! As through the list I look
I hail thy writing in the Strangers' Book.
Good omen brings it of avoided dangers,
Through endless time may thou and I be strangers.'

[5] Macdonald was acting-Honorary Secretary at this time.

The entry is endorsed, 'Not elected, C. G. H(eathcote)'. This was on December 15, 1869, and the Minute Book for that date merely records that one candidate was not elected.

This series of attempts of the luckless Mr. Thom to gain election to the A.C. underlines the weaknesses of the old balloting system. The Committee could three times pass a man as a fit candidate and yet he was thrown out for no known reason. We do not know why Frank Walker withdrew the first application, but such a procedure by a man's proposer generally means that opposition is known to exist, and delay is recommended in order that the matter be looked into. But delay did not mend matters in Thom's case; despite an increasingly good qualifying list of climbs; despite support by leading men in the Club such as Grove, Tuckett and Jacomb, the candidate was blackballed in the general meetings.

It is fair to say that by the standards of 1869, John Thom's climbing record was outstanding for a candidate; he is, indeed, one of the few candidates of those days who would certainly qualify today. D. W. Freshfield, in 1864, had a slightly longer list, but he had a higher proportion of small climbs and his list as a whole seems inferior in quality to Thom's. When one recalls some of the climbing qualifications that *did* pass in those days, such as the redoubtable 'O.B.' (Oscar Browning, December 1864) who had only the Col du Géant and the Diavolezza Pass; or Albert Bankes (March 1872), who could only produce a solitary entry, 'Mont Blanc', the real distinction of John Thom's climbs is thrown into the more prominence.

No reasons being given why John Thom was rejected, one can only conjecture. It could hardly be an example of Victorian snobbishness about 'being in trade', for numerous A.C. men were; Frank Walker, for one, was a lead merchant; J. H. Fox was a wool manufacturer.

Cases have been known of candidates putting in a list of climbs that claimed more for them than had in fact been accomplished, but this does not apply to John Thom.[6] There are plenty of contemporary entries to corroborate him, particularly for his last three climbing years, as the more detailed study below will reveal. In his 1869 application, he did not specify the years in which climbs were made; but on his first attempt (January 18, 1868) he does do so:

> 1865 Mont Blanc. This is confirmed by the entry in the *Livre des Voyageurs* of the Grands Mulets (facsimile in A.C. Library), under July 17 and 18:

[6] He seems to have been naturally long-winded, judging by his writings; maybe this was also in evidence in his talk and led some members to regard him as a bore.

'Jac . . . ? (illegible) van Loo, Haarlem, Holland and John Thom, Liverpool, ascended and descended from summit of Mont Blanc, easily.' The writing is John Thom's. No guides are mentioned.

1866 Monte Rosa, Lyskamm, Col du Géant. We have not for certain traced his guides for this year.

In 1867, his record in his application agrees with his entry in Peter Bohren's book; for 1868 we can check the additional climbs he put into his second application with those found in Almer's and Bohren's Fuhrerbücher. There is one difference only; as the guides' books for 1868 show, he crossed the Petersgrat, but this is omitted from his November application form, and he has the Théodule Pass instead. Obviously, there has been a slip of memory here. For 1869 (his last Alpine year, so far as one can trace) Almer and Bohren again check up on his final application list of climbs.

A possible explanation for his rejection for membership is that he was considered too rash, and a clique determined to prevent his election. But, as will be seen from the following more detailed study of some of his Alpine ascents, Thom, though never one to be deterred by bad weather, always climbed with good guides and must have been a competent man in his own right. The few records, too, that we give of his climbing at home show him to have been enterprising and a strong walker, and it is welcome, some ninety years after his death, to rescue his name from oblivion.

Thom's ascent of Mont Blanc in 1865 is the first of his expeditions of which we have any definite record.

In 1867 he spent the greater part of July with Peter Bohren and begins his entry in the latter's Fuhrerbuch by saying that he is 'most happy in adding my certificate, which is I think, unnecessary, to the thorough efficiency of Peter Bohren of Grindelwald, who has now been with me twice'. It seems probable, in view of the fact that this was his second tour with Bohren, that it was Bohren who took him up the Lyskamm and Monte Rosa in 1866.

On July 8, 1867, Thom, with Bohren and another (unnamed) Grindelwald guide went up to the Bäregg chalets and next day crossed the Strahlegg to the Grimsel. On the 11th he ascended the Finsteraarhorn, first ascent of the season, having crossed the Oberaarjoch and camped at the Rothorn the previous day. Bad weather detained him at the Faulberg but he went up the Jungfrau on the 14th. Thom then made his way to Zermatt and on the 18th ascended the Dom, likewise the first ascent of the season. He only gives the barest details of these ascents in Bohren's Fuhrerbuch.

Two days later he made an unsuccessful attempt on the Weisshorn,

which is briefly described in the Fuhrerbuch, but a more detailed account, which gives the names of the other guides, was written in the Visitors' Book of the Monte Rosa hotel at Zermatt, and is repeated below:

> On the 19th inst. ascended from Randa to the highest chalets on the route to the Weisshorn and attempted that ascent today but entirely without success, being at least two or three weeks too soon. Ourselves quite in condition, weather everything that could be desired and scarcely any wind, but the mountain itself proved almost inaccessible at present, being almost a mass of ice thinly covered with snow. Spent seven hours of hard work rising to about 12,000 feet above sea-level, leaving still about 3000 feet more to the summit. After reconnoitering and finding the slopes more and more glazed and hard as rock, we finally decided to return at 10 a.m. and took six hours to travel back over the same ground. Guides declared that possibly, if without accident ad interim, we might perhaps reach the summit between 8 and 12 (midnight). Reached here after eighteen hours walking in all at 8.30 p.m. Same guides as above.[7] Peter Bohren of Grindelwald, Joseph Lauber of Zermatt and Joseph Moser of Täsch with Johann Schaller of Randa as porter to the chalets. First attempt I understand for three years.

Thom crossed the Weisstor on the 22nd and parted with Bohren at Macugnaga.

In 1868 he arrived at Basel on July 31 and the same night reached the Great Scheidegg, descending to Grindelwald next day where he met his guides, Christian Almer and Peter Bohren, this being Almer's first engagement with him. After climbing the Wetterhorn on August 2 they went up the Schreckhorn two days later and camped the same night on the Zäsenberg, not wishing to trudge down to Grindelwald through the rain.

Some bad weather followed and instead of getting up the Mönch on the 5th, as he had hoped, Thom found himself, with his guides and two porters, snowed up in a camp near the Mönchjoch for $22\frac{1}{2}$ hours, from which he was unable to get away until the afternoon of the 6th. Reaching Bel Alp on the 7th he climbed the Aletschhorn next day in bad conditions ('no *snow* en route, all being *ice* and consequently very difficult!'), descending by the Beichgrat to the Lötschental.

He then moved on to Zinal by way of the Petersgrat to Kandersteg and then by the Gemmi, arriving there on August 11. In spite of bad weather next day 'he decided to venture upon a trial of the Moming Pass' and succeeded in passing from Zinal to Zermatt in $14\frac{3}{4}$ hours, the shortest time so far recorded. This must have been one of the

[7] Presumably this refers to his ascent of the Dom two days before.

earliest crossings[8] and the pass made a great impression on him—'the most difficult I ever saw in my life, especially in bad weather'.

The weather continued bad for several days and prevented Thom from trying the Matterhorn. Peter Bohren had to leave him to fulfil another engagement and was replaced by Joseph Moser of Täsch, whom Thom describes as 'a good guide in every respect'. At last, on the 19th, he was able to start for the Weisshorn which he had unsuccessfully attempted the previous year, but by the afternoon the rain had begun again and the party had to descend to a chalet where they passed the night. Next morning a fresh start was made and a height of between 10,500 and 11,000 ft. attained and here, on what Thom calls the 'Almer Platz', they pitched camp. He mentions in Almer's Fuhrerbuch that this was the 'highest encampment yet made on the mountain'. Here they were weather-bound for four nights. One can but admire Thom's determination and patience. It snowed 'heavily every night except the last, when it froze hard, and, sixth day, 24th Augt., at 6½ a.m. we started for the summit which we reached at 12.45 p.m. Stayed till 1.25 p.m. in intense cold, but very fine indeed & in spite of the great quantity of fresh snow, & the keen frost, descended again to the camp at 5.45 p.m., leaving again at 6.15 p.m. with the tent & descending in the dark reached. . . . Zermatt at 11 p.m. in torrents of rain, which continued to fall all night.'

After a day's rest Thom crossed to Saas by the Adler Pass, taking the Strahlhorn *en route*. The recent storms had had their effect; not only was there an enormous quantity of fresh snow everywhere but the last part of the trip was made by a 'villainous thing called a road (and in the dark besides) but which was all either washed away or covered with debris—(in fact *totally destroyed*). Almer *always* & *everywhere* perfection.' In a month of almost continuous poor weather he had not done at all badly.

He engaged Almer again in August 1869. Once more they had very bad weather but on the 5th crossed the Jungfraujoch[9] and next day climbed the Mönch on which he had been defeated the previous year. After the passage of some low passes he climbed the Blümlisalp on August 13, and found it in bad condition, '(all ice), Almer cut more then 2000 steps'. From Kandersteg he went to Gruben and then by way of the Biesjoch and Brunegghorn to Zermatt, having descended 'by centre of ice-fall of Bies Glacr. for 2½ hrs.'.

Thom suffered another set-back to his plans and was held up at Zermatt by the weather for four days but on the 21st managed to get over the Lysjoch 'in 16½ hrs. in fresh snow 1½–2 ft. deep, carrying a

[8] Coolidge made the fifth passage in 1869.

[9] This was a notable achievement; up to 1869 the Jungfraujoch had not often been crossed.

very heavy portmanteau'. By way of Lugano and Chiavenna he reached Pontresina on the 25th. He and Almer then joined Robert Guest, A.C., of Manchester, and Peter Roth, and the combined party, with two porters, climbed Piz Bernina on August 27. On the way down, 'reached Glacr. at 11.35 a.m., when we instantly separated as I had determined to attempt the Piz Zupo (which was *all snow*) with the two Grindelwald men'. Thom duly reached the summit and thus had the satisfaction of making the 'first combined ascent in *one day*' of Piz Bernina and Piz Zupo.

John Thom's climbing in England is recorded in the Visitors' Book, Wastwater Hotel, and we are indebted to Mr. Ronald Clark for extracting these notes:

Sunday 31st. May (1868)

Josiah Hosking, John Thom } Liverpool

Left the Inn at '*Great Langdale*' 10 a.m. (having arrived there at 12.25 a.m.—*midnight*) ascending the '*Band*' passed on over the four summits in succession of '*Bow Fell*', then from the 'Eskhawse' (or some such name) by the connecting ridge up to '*Scawfell Pike*',—thence to the ridge connecting with '*Scawfell*' itself—(which is however *lower* than the 'Pike'). Found the ascent from the ridge to 'Scawfell' nearly impracticable—descended directly by a shingly-gully down the vale—(very fine route from the Ridge)—to '*Wast-Water*', crossing the head, reached this Inn at about 7.30 p.m. (En route, J.T., instead of descending as he should have done to Eskhause from the ridge, passed over the cliffs to the right of the summit & directly into the valley below—about 400 or 500 feet below the ridge & then finding his error climbed a summit marked on the Ordnance map 2,512 feet—name quite indistinct—then had to re-descend into Valley, & up to ridge etc.)

17th April 1870

Josiah Hosking, William M. Pendlebury, Richd. Pendlebury B.A. } Liverpool
Chas. Pendlebury, W. H. Finley, John Thom } (W. M., R. & C. P. & W. H. F. at Tysons)

W.M.P. and J.T. from Buttermere by the hills—'Red Pike', then across Ennerdale and up 'Windy Gap', along the three summits of the 'Steeple' or second 'Red Pike' and by the ridge up 'Yew Barrow' by the cliffs (a steep climb) to the two summits then here (*fearfully hot weather*).

(The following note appears under the above entry. R. W. C.)

Memorandum

The above-named Mr. John Thom was killed on the 2nd. September 1870, by a fall from a Precipice on Scour-na-Gillean Mountain, (being the most difficult ascent of any Scotch Mountain and formerly considered inaccessible Height 3200 ft.)—he succeeded in reaching the summit, his card being found in the bottle at the top,—and in descending became benighted and persevering after dark, slipped over a precipice being apparently killed instantly, his body not being found until two days afterwards—[4 words illegible. Last 2 possibly 'snow hard'. R.W.C.] heavy rain, thick mist and storms.

{5th. 6th.} June 1870 John Thom, Liverpool, from Ambleside by Great Langdale and Rossett Ghyll.

J.T. made a singular mistake on leaving here last Easter (18th April). He passed by Ritson's Wall directly up {'Lingmell' Ridge} to the side of 'Scafell Pikes'—then essayed and climbed '*Micheldore*' without difficulty—(had tried *twice previously* when ice and frost rendered it impossible,—once from above and once from below)—then re-descended,—met a friend (W. H. Finlay, mentioned previously),—climbed the 'Pikes' summit,—and made for Great Langdale but made at same time an easy blunder (having no map)—took the right-hand side of the 'Bow-Fells' instead of *leaving them* on the right-hand—descending between these & 'Scafell', thinking the 'Bow-Fells' were 'Langdale Pikes',—after many hours walking thus bogs & down precipitous becks (right-hand division of left-hand section of Eskdale) found ourselves at 6½ p.m. in *Eskdale* a mile above the Woolpack Inn & had then on *a dark night* to cross the Hills to Ambleside by 'Hard-knot', 'Wrynose', 'Cockley Beck', 'Three Shire Stones', 'Fell Foot', etc. Arrived at 11.30 p.m.,—the road being in very rough condition & moon not up & neither party knowing the road.—This little mis-adventure may warn other travellers,—the topography of 'Scafell' being rather complicated.

6th. June—for 'Pillar' mountain etc.

The final notice of John Thom's activities comes from the *Liverpool Daily Post* of September 9, 1870:

Sligachan, Isle of Skye, September 4. A sad accident has just occurred within a few miles from this place. A gentleman from Liverpool, named Thom, started with his companion on Friday morning (Sept. 2), at nine o'clock, to climb the Scuir-na-Gillean, near Loch Corruisk. Losing their way, they returned to the inn, and effected a second start soon after eleven. Neither returned at night, but, as it was probable that they might have proceeded to some other house on the other side of the mountain, no great anxiety was felt on their behalf, more especially as Mr. Thom was known to be an Alpine

climber of considerable experience. On Sunday morning, however, at nine o'clock, Mr. Thom's companion returned alone, reporting that his friend had parted from him late the day before in his desire to reach the top of Scuir-na-Gillean. Immediately search was made, but it was not till eleven this morning that the unfortunate gentleman's body was discovered, a deep cut over his forehead, and another on the side of the head, showing that he must have met his death by a fall from a cliff. Previous to finding the body Mr. Thom's card was discovered in a bottle on the summit of the mountain. Strange to say, the deceased gentleman's friend identified the place where the body was found as being within some 50 yards of the spot where he himself passed Friday night. The summit of Scuir-na-Gillean was for a long time deemed inaccessible; its estimated height is 3,200 feet.