

NEW INFORMATION ABOUT THE FIRST ASCENT OF MONT BLANC

BY SIR GAVIN DE BEER.

SINCE the publication of Professor Graham Brown's and my book *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc* (1957), a few items of further information have come to light from manuscript documents and rare publications. They concern the first serious attempt on the mountain in 1775, a published account of the first ascent, and evidence of the disagreement between Bourrit and Saussure over the former's *Lettre à Miss Craven*.

THE ATTEMPT ON MONT BLANC IN 1775

The first serious attempt to ascend Mont Blanc was made on July 14, 1775, by a party of four men, Jean-Nicolas Couteran son of the inn-keeper, and three guides, François and Michel Paccard, and Victor Tissay. The accounts of this enterprise are curious for a number of reasons. On the one hand, the names of the participants were not always correctly given: William Coxe left out François Paccard and substituted Jean-Marie Couttet who was then only eleven years old, and, as will be seen below, the new account here given refers to only three men as having taken part. Secondly, there are discrepancies in the descriptions of the highest point reached. Bourrit (1776) referred to it as *le sommet le plus voisin du Mont Blanc*; Shuckburgh (1776) specified that it was a summit more than 13,000 feet high; William Coxe (1779) said that it was the top next to Mont Blanc; Bertie Greatheed (1782) called it the third summit; but Henri-Albert Gosse (1803) struck a jarring note by his statement that the men went as far as the Grands Mulets. Later commentators have been particularly ungenerous in their estimates of the achievement of 1775: Charles Durier (1877) allows nothing more than the Grand Plateau; C. E. Mathews (1898) will have nothing more than midway between the Grands Mulets and the Grand Plateau; Douglas Freshfield says as far as the level of the Grands Mulets; E. Gaillard and H. F. Montagnier (1926) say the same as Freshfield; and E. H. Stevens says below the Petit Plateau. It was left for Professor Graham Brown and myself to show that the point reached by the four men in 1775 was the summit of the Dôme du Goûter. By the kindness of Mrs. Robinson, of East Raven-dale Hall, Lincolnshire, and the good offices of Mr. William Collier,

I have been enabled to study and have been allowed to transcribe for the ALPINE JOURNAL a passage from the Journal of the Rev. John Parkinson who visited Chamonix in September, 1780. His account of the attempt made in 1775, as related to him by Victor Tissay, will speak for itself. The omission of all mention of Jean-Nicolas Couteran, in whose mother's inn the drinking bout described probably took place, is difficult to explain except on the grounds that the guides were already tending towards the principle of the closed shop, and ignored the activities of those who were not guides. This is not without interest in view of the battle that was later to rage between Dr. Michel-Gabriel Paccard and Jacques Balmat.

Parkinson also went to see Dr. Paccard himself. It is curious to see how he constantly spelled his name, as also his cousins' names, 'Placart'. Nevertheless, Parkinson's description of Dr. Paccard and of his collections of natural history specimens is a welcome addition to what is known of the biography of that modest man. Of the Rev. John Parkinson himself, it may be added that he was born in 1754 at West Ravensdale and that he graduated B.A. at Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1774. He became a Fellow of his College in the following year, Junior Dean of Arts in 1786, and Bursar in 1787. In April, 1791, he was defeated in his candidature for the Presidency of Magdalen by Dr. Routh who beat him by one vote. In addition to his tour of Switzerland in 1780, he made a journey to France and Italy in 1783-4, and a journey to Russia and Siberia between 1792 and 1794. He was therefore no inexperienced traveller, and his Journal must command respect.

Extract from the Rev. John Parkinson's Swiss Tour, 1780

September 18 [1780, Chamonix]

It was by the Bossons, that Tissay our Guide, & the two Placarts attempted to get up to the Top of Mount Blanc. The attempt was made in the month of July. These three men after supping together, & drinking rather more perhaps than usual, challenged each other to this hardy undertaking, which they set out upon almost as soon as it was thought of, without reflecting on the Difficulties they should have to encounter, provided only with some Bread & Cheese & a bottle of Wine. It was eleven o'Clock in the Evening when they set off, from which Time till 2 the next Day, that is during fifteen Hours they continued ascending with incredible Labour, without Intermission. However, finding themselves then advanced no further than the highest Summit next after Mount Blanc whence it would be a Walk of four Hours more to reach the Summit, being affraid likewise that they might [be] overtaken by bad Weather, or what would be equally fatal, the freezing Air of the Night, before they got low enough to escape

its Effects, they thought it advisable to return. It appears from this account of their Enterprise that it was rather a Frolic than a well concerted undertaking. If their measures had been well taken, it seems extremely probable that they would have been [able] to accomplish their attempt. Indeed they themselves are of the same Opinion. But I fear that they were made so sensible of the difficulties of such an Exploit, on the first Occasion, that they will never make the Trial again.

I have been very particular in enquiring of Tissay, why Effects from the rarefaction of the Air in that great Elevation He assures me that they felt a difficulty of respiration, & such an unusual Lassitude, that, tho their Spirits were high, yet they found themselves, under the necessity often of refreshing themselves with a Glass of Wine. It was this Lassitude which he insisted upon most. When I asked him whether he felt an Oppression upon the Lungs & a difficulty of Respiration he acknowledged that he did. Yet he always resolved my Question before he had done, onto that Lassitude of which I have spoken. This Lassitude might be the Concomitant or result of such an Oppression or such a Difficulty of respiration. This account agrees by no means with what M^r Cox has said upon the same Subject. And I look upon the Authority of these men to be much better than that of M^r Saussure who I suppose was never half so high as they were in their Attempt to ascend Mount Blanc.

After returning from the Bossons we went to Professor Placart's Cabinet where we found a great Variety of Curiosities, especially a stuffed Chamois, a stuffed Bouquetin & her young one, the Horns of the male Bouquetin, a great Variety of the Christals, that are found upon these Mountains, & what pleased me more than anything, a Stone found at the back of Mont Blanc called ambest, of which the Romans are said to have made the Cloth upon which they buried their dead because not being [destroyed] by Fire, it preserved the Ashes entire. Placart began to make this Collection ten Years ago by the Advice of a French Gentleman. Hence it is that he has got the name of Professor, which however he deserves no less for his good Sense & his agreeable Manners. . . .

Finding that our Guide, who is a very sensible Man, was not unacquainted with the Works of Bourrit & Saussure I desired him yesterday to give me his opinion of them. He told me that M^r B. had very much exaggerated the Case, which he explained by saying, that he had remarked many Circumstances which do not exist, & omitted many that do. Of Saussure he said that there were many Errors in his Account of the Glaciers. I advised him at his Leisure [? to write] whatever he thought was amiss in either of these Authors, adding by way of Encouragement, that such a thing might serve to raise his reputation, & recommend him to Strangers.

A NEW ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST ASCENT

La Tribune de Genève of January 29, 1962, published an article by Mlle Claire-Eliane Engel containing a transcription of a hitherto unknown published account of the first ascent of Mont Blanc, to which her attention had been called by M. Francis Roux-Devilas. As this account was published on September 18, 1786, it ranks fourth in date of the now known published accounts, and is of great interest because it appeared before the greed of Balmat, the malice of Bourrit, and the betrayal of the truth by Saussure had had time to launch the legend that for so many years deprived Dr. Michel-Gabriel Paccard of the credit justly due to him for having reconnoitred, planned, led and carried out the successful expedition of August 8, 1786, and, instead, attributed it to Jacques Balmat.

The transcription published in *La Tribune de Genève* is imperfect, and I have therefore thought it necessary to transcribe it afresh from the original publication, which is very rare, in the Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France, of which I have the honour of being a corresponding member.

Journal Polytype des Sciences et des Arts, Année 1786, tome v. A Paris de l'Imprimerie Polytype, rue Favart, Où l'on souscrit. N° 91 du Lundi 18 septembre 1786, pages 122, 123.

Le Mont Blanc en Savoie, près des Glaciers de Chamouni, est célèbre par les Voyages de divers Physiciens, & en particulier de M. De Saussure, & par les relations de M. Bourrit. Cette montagne passe pour être la plus élevée de notre hémisphère; c'est là que des glaces accumulées depuis des milliers d'années croissent & augmentent tous les jours, au point d'engloutir insensiblement les Villages & de combler les Vallées voisines. Nul Voyageur n'avoit encore réussi à parvenir au Sommet du Mont Blanc: ce succès étoit réservé à M. *Paccard*, jeune Médecin, originaire de Chamouni, & qui a étudié à Paris. Il coucha à la Vallée de glace, & suivi du nommé *Balma*, il partit le lendemain à quatre heures du matin, & il arriva, après 14 heures de marche, au sommet de la montagne. Des curieux qui les suivoient des yeux, armés d'un télescope, les apperçurent sur la sommité la plus élevée. Nos intrépides Voyageurs y restèrent 32 minutes, & en redescendirent dans quatre heures, au clair de la lune. Le désir de connoître et d'observer, la plus noble des passions, rend l'homme capable des plus courageuses entreprises: cette ambition vertueuse procure des jouissances infiniment douces, qui ne sont suivies d'aucun regret, & dont le but est d'éclairer ses semblables en étendant l'empire des Sciences, & en multipliant les observations.

This simple, straightforward, and unbiassed account confirms the

conclusions to which Professor Graham Brown and I, as well as some of our predecessors, had arrived in concluding that Dr. Paccard was the leader and organiser of the expedition. Mlle Engel considers it so accurate that she thinks it probable that it was inspired by Dr. Paccard, and possibly written by him, in order to defend himself from the attacks made on him by Bourrit. But Bourrit's attack, in his infamous pamphlet *Sur le premier voyage fait au sommet du Mont Blanc, le 8 Août dernier*, was dated September 20, 1786, and as the account in the *Journal Polytype des Sciences et des Arts* was published on September 18, it must have been written before that date and therefore before the attack against Dr. Paccard had developed. This, of course, is no evidence that Dr. Paccard did not inspire or write the account, but it contains a number of small inaccuracies that make me doubt it. In the first place, it speaks of Dr. Paccard going to sleep at 'la Vallée de glace'. It was, in fact, on the Montagne de la Côte that he and Balmat bivouacked, and whenever Dr. Paccard mentioned it, he called it the Montagne de la Côte. It is difficult to see Dr. Paccard's pen here. Next, it specifies that he spent thirty-two minutes on the summit. Dr. Paccard himself said thirty-four minutes, and that was exactly the length of time that Baron Gersdorf recorded in his Journal. Dr. Paccard would not have made this mistake, and it suggests that the account was based on information obtained from a different eye-witness; it is known that there were several, and one of them might easily have made this estimate of the time that Dr. Paccard and Balmat remained on the summit. Finally, there is the statement that they descended in four hours. That was the time taken to descend from the summit to the Montagne de la Côte, but not to Chamonix. Dr. Paccard would not have made this mistake, although it might have been the result of editorial compression.

DISAGREEMENT BETWEEN BOURRIT AND SAUSSURE

In our work *The First Ascent of Mont Blanc*, Professor Graham Brown and I found evidence of disagreement between Bourrit and Saussure over Bourrit's *Lettre à Miss Craven* which glorified himself at the expense of Saussure more than the latter could tolerate. I have since come across confirmation of this disagreement from an independent source. The *Magazin für die Naturkunde Helvetiens*, vol. ii, Zürich 1788, included a letter from Saussure dated August 22, 1787, addressed to the editor of the Journal, Albrecht Höpfner, describing Saussure's ascent of Mont Blanc. It was Saussure's *Relation abrégée*, which Höpfner translated into German and printed over a footnote on page 287. The footnote was as follows:

Man muss dieses Schreiben, welches von dem Verfasser dem

Herausgeber eigenhändig zum Einrücken ist aufgesetzt und eingesendet worden, nicht mit einer gedruckten Relation verwechseln, von welcher Herr Bourrit Verfasser seyn soll; und die von diesem von Herrn von Saussure selbst aufgesetzten Berichte abweicht.

(This account, which was composed and sent to the Editor for inclusion by the Author with his own hand, must not be confused with a printed account of which M. Bourrit is said to be the author and which differs from this report written by M. de Saussure himself.)

The date of Saussure's letter to Höpfner, August 22, 1787, shows that the text of the *Relation abrégée* was finished by then; it was on sale on September 1, 1787, if not a few days earlier. Bourrit's revised *Lettre à Miss Craven*, written as a result of pressure by Saussure, was printed shortly afterwards.