THE MATTERHORN: A DIARY OF EVENTS AFTER THE DISASTER OF 1865

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The details of the actual first ascent of the Matterhorn have been thrashed out so often that new information is hardly to be expected. The following notes are designed to record the succession of events from the hour of the return to Zermatt of Whymper and the Taugwalders to the appearance of Whymper's letter in *The Times*. The only excuse for writing more about the subject, after so much has been published already this year, is that time and again erroneous statements have been made for the want of a little care. And error once made is very liable to be repeated by copyists.

Even quite recent writers have managed to make some surprising mistakes. Thus, if there is one matter in the Matterhorn tragedy that might seem certain and impossible of mis-presentation, it is that the rope broke between Lord Francis Douglas and Old Peter Taugwalder. Yet, as was noted in reviews in the last issue of the *Alpine Journal*, both Mrs. Williams (*Zermatt Saga*) and M. Frison-Roche (*Les Montagnes de la Terre*, vol. 2) manage to get the order on the rope wrong, as does a writer in *The New Yorker* (March 13, 1965, p. 144). Or again, Sir Arnold Lunn (*A Century of Mountaineering*, p. 56) assures us that Whymper much exaggerated the effect produced in Zermatt by the news of the ascent of the Matterhorn. Yet Miss Brevoort (Ronald Clark, *An Eccentric in the Alps*, p. 21), after questioning a maid in the Monte Rosa hotel a few weeks after the accident, gives us quite a different impression. So, too, does Charles Gos (*Le Cervin*, i, pp. 100–101), while McCormick in *A Sad Holiday* writes that 'every person at the table immediately got up, and went out to see them'.[1] Which testimony are we to believe?

J. P. Farrar once observed[2] that the pioneers could not have expected that their writings would be subjected to such strict scrutiny as is now common. We moderns have therefore a duty to try to get the record accurate in the first place; Mr. Gradgrind's admonition, to 'stick to facts', is something we need constantly to keep in mind, in view of the uncertainties we are dealing with. Our interpretations of the facts are likely enough to differ, since we are too easily influenced by our sentiments, or by some thesis that we may wish to prove. We can never

[1] *i.e.*, the party on the summit.
[2] Ronald Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

be certain that we have *all* the facts; we must at the least attempt to ensure that those presented are as faultless as possible.

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SATURDAY, JULY 15. Whymper and the Taugwalders arrived back at Zermatt at 10.30 a.m.

Whymper sent a note to the Rev. J. McCormick, who had left that morning for an excursion to the Gornergrat with Campbell, a pupil of Hudson's, asking him to return. McCormick reached Zermatt before 4 p.m. and went to see Whymper; he was thus the first Englishman to hear from Whymper himself an account of the accident. Yeats Brown (see below) probably met Whymper later.

A 'score of men' set out for the Hohlicht, from whence they could see the bodies of three of the victims lying on the Matterhorn glacier. On the way they met J. S. Phillpotts, the Rev. J. Robertson, F. Yeats Brown, and W. K. Wilson, with Franz Andenmatten, Frédéric Payot and Jean Tairraz, who had come to Zermatt over the Col de Valpelline after completing the 'High Level Route' from Chamonix.

The search party returned to Zermatt after an absence of six hours.

A correspondent at Randa sent what proved to be a very inaccurate account of the accident to the *Journal de Genève*, in which it was published on the 18th and reported in *The Times* on July 21.

SUNDAY, JULY 16. A search party to recover the bodies left Zermatt at 2 a.m.; it was composed of McCormick, Phillpotts, Robertson and Whymper, with the guides Franz Andenmatten, Frédéric Payot, Jean Tairraz, and Alexander and Joseph-Marie Lochmatter, who were lent for the occasion. The bodies of Croz, Hadow and Hudson were found and buried in the snow; the body of Lord Francis Douglas was not with the others and has never been found, though curious rumours about it have existed ever since. The search party arrived back at Zermatt at about 2 p.m.

The Rev. A. G. Girdlestone, who had crossed the Théodule with Douglas and Whymper on July 12 and been up Monte Rosa on the 15th, sleeping that night at the Riffelberg, arrived at Zermatt during the morning and went to see Whymper as soon as the latter had returned with the search party.

MONDAY, JULY 17. McCormick sent an account of the accident to *The Times*; this, the first reliable account to be published, appeared in the issue of July 22 (printed in *A.J. 70*. 19–21; the date of 16th for this letter, given in *A.J. 57*. 371, note 10, is incorrect).

Girdlestone left for Visp, where he had arranged to meet his pupil Walter Hargreave.

Whymper probably wrote his account of the accident—subsequently stolen—in the Visitors' Book of the Monte Rosa hotel.

TUESDAY, JULY 18. Admiral Harris, British Minister at Berne, telegraphed details of the accident to the Foreign Office.

W. K. Wilson (see July 15) was killed on the Riffelhorn while attempting it by himself. Earlier in the day he had made the ascent with some friends and guides. His friends at the Riffelberg went in search of him during the night, and M. Seiler of the Monte Rosa hotel also called for volunteers, and Whymper and McCormick set off early on the morning of the 19th to help. They were not required to make any search, however, as they were met on the way by one of Wilson's friends who told them that the body had just been found, and they went straight to the scene of the accident, on the rocks of the Riffelhorn above the lake.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 19. The Rev. H. Downton, British Chaplain at Geneva, reached Zermatt on the instructions of Mr. Mackenzie, the British Consul at Geneva, to enquire into the accident.

Acting on the orders of the civil authorities a party of twenty-one men left Zermatt to recover the bodies of the victims, spending the night at some chalets en route.

McCormick wrote to *The Times* reporting the death of W. K. Wilson; his letter was printed in the issue of the 24th.

THURSDAY, JULY 20. The search party returned with the bodies of Croz, Hadow and Hudson.

The Times quoted, on the authority of the *Journal de Genève* of the previous day, another incorrect report of the accident.

FRIDAY, JULY 21. Funeral service of the victims and of W. K. Wilson. An enquiry into the accident, ordered by the Valaisan Government, opened at the Hotel du Mont Cervin, M. Joseph-Antoine Clemenz presiding.

SATURDAY, JULY 22. The Enquiry continued with the examination of Alexander Lochmatter.

Whymper, being now permitted by the authorities to depart, left Zermatt and slept that night at Visp.

SUNDAY, JULY 23. The Enquiry was resumed with a further examination of 'Old' Peter Taugwalder; the questions prepared by Whymper with the object of enabling Taugwalder to clear himself of the suspicions that had already fallen upon him were put to him.

Whymper crossed the Gemmi to Kandersteg.

MONDAY, JULY 24. Whymper reached Interlaken.

TUESDAY, JULY 25. Whymper gave his account of the accident in a letter to Edmund von Fellenberg, asking him to take the earliest opportunity of submitting it to the members of the Swiss Alpine Club. A copy of the letter was enclosed which he requested von Fellenberg, 'should he see fit', to forward to the Editor of the *Journal de Genève*. The letter was not published in the Swiss press. Whymper also wrote to McCormick.

WEDNESDAY, JULY 26. Whymper wrote a similar letter to J. N. Rimini, honorary secretary of the Italian Alpine Club. This was printed, in an Italian translation, in the C.A.I. *Bollettino*, 1865, no. 1, pp. 20–25.

Whymper left Interlaken for Neuchâtel on the first stage of his journey home.

THURSDAY, JULY 27. A leading article about the accident was published in *The Times*. Smythe (*Edward Whymper*, p. 205) is incorrect in saying that *The Times* 'leader' only appeared the day after Whymper arrived back in England.

Following this leading article, letters appeared in *The Times* of July 28, 29 and 31, by T. S. Kennedy, J. J. Cowell and T. Fowell Buxton—all members of the Alpine Club—criticising various aspects of the disaster.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 2. *The Times* reported that it 'was requested to state, upon the best authority, that Lord Francis Douglas did not make the fatal slip which caused the lamentable accident on the Matterhorn'.

THURSDAY, AUGUST 3. 'A Friend of One of the Victims' wrote to *The Times* asking if Whymper would not write a first-hand account of the accident. The letter was published on the 5th.

MONDAY, AUGUST 7. Whymper received a letter, dated this day, from Alfred Wills, President of the Alpine Club, urging him to publish his own version of the accident. The same day he wrote, as from Haslemere, his account to *The Times* and it was published, together with Wills's letter to him, on August 8.

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 9. *The Times* published a leading article on Whymper's letter of the previous day.

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There follow biographical notes about some of those whose names must feature in any record of the events immediately after the Matterhorn disaster. Notes on the Rev. J. McCormick will be found in *A.J. 70*. 15 (footnote) and on J. S. Phillpotts in *A.J. 63*. 123.

Franz Andenmatten (1823–83). In his early days he climbed with Curé Imseng and also with Melchior Ulrich with whom, and others, he made the first recorded crossings of the Ried Pass and Adler Pass. Among his first ascents were the Strahlhorn, Laquinhorn, Nadelhorn, Balfrinhorn and Diablons. In 1872 he was one of the guides on the first ascent of the Zinal Rothorn from Zermatt.

Frederick Augustus Yeats Brown (1837–1925). Educated at Marlborough. He was a clerk in the Bank of England, 1856–7, and subsequently a partner in the banking house of Granet Brown & Co., Genoa. Further information will be found in Mumm's *A.C. Register*, vol. ii, p. 27.

The Rev. Henry Downton (1818–85). Educated at Trinity College,

Cambridge. Ordained deacon in 1843 and priest in the following year. He held various curacies and was Chaplain at Geneva from 1857–73. Rector of Hopton, Suffolk, 1873–85.

The Rev. Arthur Gilbert Girdlestone (1842–1908). He was one of the early guideless climbers and his book, *The High Alps without Guides*, recounts some of his exploits. He made an early ascent of the Matterhorn (1868) and among his many guideless climbs were the Jungfrau, Aletschhorn, Finsteraarhorn and Zinal Rothorn. At the time of his death he was vicar of All Saints, Clapham Park, London.

Admiral Sir Edward Alfred John Harris (1808–88), K.C.B. 1872. He was younger brother of the third Earl of Malmesbury and father of the fourth earl. Entered the Navy as a Midshipman in 1823 and was appointed Admiral when placed on the retired list in 1877. Was M.P. for Christchurch 1844–52. Consul-General in Denmark in 1852 and in 1853 held a similar post in Chile. In 1858 became Consul-General for the Austrian Adriatic coasts and afterwards Minister at Berne. In 1867 he was transferred to The Hague.

Alexander Lochmatter. A brother of J-M. Lochmatter, he renounced the profession of guide at an early age and opened the hotel-pension Lochmatter at St. Niklaus. His most notable expedition was probably the first passage of the Colle delle Loccie in 1862.

Joseph-Marie Lochmatter (1837–82). The founder of the line of famous guides and himself a well-known guide. In 1868 he made the second ascent of the Matterhorn from Zermatt and was one of Whymper's guides on the latter's ascent in 1874. He made the first ascent of Les Rouies and the second ascent of the Central Peak of La Meije and of the Aiguille du Chardonnet. With his eldest son, Alexander, and his tourist, W. E. Gabbett, he was killed on the Dent Blanche in 1882.

FitzArundell Mackenzie. Born in 1823 or 1824 he was Consul (unpaid) at Geneva from February, 1860, to May, 1872, when he resigned. He then lived in the south of France, and was Consular Agent at Nice temporarily from January 26 to February 13, 1880. Died at Nice on February 6, 1893.

Frédéric Payot (1839–1927). Though not so well-known as his brothers, Michel and Alphonse, he was among the leading guides of his day. He was three times Chief Guide of Chamonix and made more than one hundred ascents of Mont Blanc. He took a prominent part, as director of the workmen, in the construction of the Janssen observatory on Mont Blanc. Later, he and his brother Alphonse kept the Pavillon Bellevue on the Col de Voza.

The Rev. James Robertson (1836–1903). Educated at Cheltenham and Jesus College, Cambridge. An assistant master at Rugby and from 1884–90 Head Master of Haileybury. Vicar of Whittlesford 1891–1903.

Further information will be found in Mumm's *A.C. Register*, vol. ii, p. 284.

Jean Tairraz. He was one of the best-known guides of Chamonix in the 1850's and by 1856 had made sixteen ascents of Mont Blanc. In 1857 he became owner-landlord of the Hotel du Mont Blanc at Aosta, a hostelry subsequently much favoured by British climbers. He still found time to climb and in 1859 was with the party that made the first ascent of the Grivola—though he was not the one man who stepped on to the highest pinnacle—and in the following year made the first ascent of the Grand Paradis. He died during the winter of 1876–77.

William Knyvet Wilson (1838–65). Educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge; scholar 1860; B.A. (3rd Classic), 1862; Fellow, 1864; M.A., 1865. Assistant master at Rugby, 1862–65. Killed on the Riffelhorn July 18, 1865.