

Winter Climbing in the Mont Blanc Massif

Henri Agresti

(written in collaboration with François Lespinasse)

(Translation: H. Pursey)

While it is true to say that mountaineers are always seeking new problems—for instance, exploration of the last European mountains, and of little-known mountains outside Europe, ascents by all-women parties or in winter—we should refute the commonly held notion that this is only a recent trend. For example, winter mountaineering did not post-date the conquest of the Alps, as is evident if one remembers that the first winter ascent of Mont Blanc was in 1876.

In fact, this was when Miss Straton, Jean Charlet and Sylvain Couttet undertook, for reasons which remain obscure—but then, does one ever understand the motives for mountaineering?—and succeeded in this audacious climb. Their success was one of the first, if not the first, of those recorded in the Mont Blanc massif, to mention only the most important among massifs of the French Alps. In the other French massifs, winter mountaineering has developed along similar lines, with the possible exception of the Dauphiné, where most of the important problems remain to be solved.¹

Up to the beginning of this century, winter expeditions in the Mont Blanc massif were very rare, and it was only during the early decades of the century that people began to visit it in any numbers in winter. One should note especially some twenty successful ascents which took place between 1900 and 1940, when most of the summits already climbed in the 'Golden Age' of Alpinism were conquered in winter: Aiguille Verte in 1903, Grépon—which according to Mummery some fifty years earlier was 'the most difficult climb in the Alps'—in 1922, Aiguille du Dru and les Droites in 1928.

From 1940 onwards the practice of winter Alpinism intensified, paralleling the historical development of Alpine exploration. After the ascent of the peaks by the most straightforward routes, the teams attacked some of the most difficult: the South-east ridge of the Tour Ronde to Mont Maudit and the South ridge of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey in 1949, the Major and Innominata routes on Mont Blanc in 1953—some fifteen routes were climbed in winter between 1940 and 1957.

In 1957, Couzy and Desmaison climbed the West face of the Dru. Although the ascent was not completed, it is often considered as marking a new stage in the growing severity of objectives envisaged and achieved. This tendency was to be reinforced in the following years, with the successes of Bonatti and

¹ Except for the North-east face of the Ailefroide, the North-west face of the Olan, the South faces of the Meije and the Ecrins, the principal faces of the massif. The North-west face of the Ailefroide, the North faces of the Pic Sans Nom, the Pelvoux, the Meije and the Râteau have not been climbed in winter.



78 *Mont Blanc—Innominata Face*. Photo: B. R. Goodfellow

Zappelli on the Walker spur of the Grandes Jorasses between 25 and 30 January 1963, of the Polish climbers Gryczinski, Michalski, Strycznski, Warteresieivic on the North-east spur of the Droites between 7 and 11 March in the same year, and of numerous successful ascents during the exceptionally fine winter of 1964 on the most important faces of the massif: Drus, Aiguille Verte, and others.

It was perhaps the ascent of the Central Pillar of Frêne by Desmaison and Flematty between 1 and 6 February 1967, which was finally to destroy the idea held by some that certain routes were impossible in winter. Others, on the other hand, felt that the risks run by climbers engaging in these enterprises were negligible and wholly exaggerated.

Public opinion, and particularly the world of Alpine climbers, were to be reminded by last winter's tragedy on the North face of the Jorasses that winter Alpinism is a serious affair. The winter of 1971 had, however, begun with some considerable achievements: the North face of the Droites by the Davaille route between 22 December and 4 January, the North face of the Grandes Jorasses by the Walker spur (the third winter attempt) by six Japanese between 22 December and 2 January, and by the Croz spur between 10 and 13 February (Marmier and Nominé).

Without entering into the argument raised by the death of Gousseault and the rescue of Desmaison, let us consider one thing, most interesting in itself. While the gap between the first-ever ascent and the first winter ascent of a peak was about 100 years in the case of Mont Blanc, it has been progressively decreasing over the years, so that the first winter ascent of Frêne followed shortly after the first-ever ascent, and the gap was finally reduced to zero in the case of the attempt by Gousseault and Desmaison. This daring enterprise, which was both the first-ever and the first winter attempt, using a *direttissima* route on one of the most substantial faces of the massif, and with classical techniques, had no previous equivalent either in this massif or elsewhere in the Alps, with perhaps the exception of the successful climb of the Cervin by Bonatti, who went a stage further with a solo achievement of the same order of difficulty.

Another interesting fact to note during this 1971 winter is the reaction which followed the success of Berger and Müller on the Davaille route. Already, methods which could scarcely be called 'classical' had been used here and there in varying degrees in the Alps, and even in the Mont Blanc massif, on the guides' route to the Drus in 1967, for example. However, the 'radical and uninhibited' use of this technique, now more often admitted in the course of such expeditions, allowed Berger and Müller a success both greatly coveted and also relatively comfortable, since they came down every evening to the Argentière hut. It was this which revived the endless debate over the rules of the sport of Alpinism, and caused some people to assert that the first winter climb on the Davaille route remained to be done.

Likewise, the placing of expansion bolts in places where they are not normally necessary poses the same question as the use of fixed ropes, jumars or an

excessive number of pitons—although some people are most concerned with the problem of expansion bolts. However, with the growing use of mountains in winter, it is to be feared that the use of expansion bolts, which first appeared on the Walker spur—and remember that the first two winter successes were achieved without their use—is likely to multiply.

Of the twenty or so successful first winter climbs in 1971 alone, let us underline the ascent of the Grand Pilier d'Angle between 5 and 11 March by the Poles Dvorak, Kurczab, Mroz and Pietruski. This great 'first' nearly ended in tragedy, as did an attempt at an integral ascent of the Peuterey ridge. In both cases the intervention of a helicopter was necessary to save the distressed climbers, whose exhaustion was great. Here, as on the North face of the Jorasses with Desmaison and Gousseault, a serious problem poses itself, and the same question concerns also Alpine climbing in summer: have Alpinists lost their feeling for the 'ultimate limit'?—or, rather, do they not now tend to add a new parameter, in assuming the availability at any time of a helicopter in case of necessity, to the usual, classical parameters? This is possibly part of the explanation of the increasing number of 'brilliant successes' in recent years. Audacity grows as the risks diminish. It could also account for the growing accident rate, and for the need for increasingly difficult rescue operations by the mountain-rescue teams. The solution, wholly impracticable, of stopping all forms of mountain rescue would be a way of saving the spirit of climbing. But the problem is complex. Because of the direction taken by climbing in the Mont Blanc massif, some Alpinists—including some of the finest—have had no hesitation in quitting the region to rediscover elsewhere, in or outside Europe, this spirit which has doubtless been lost for good between Chamonix and Courmayeur.

The temperature, which may be very mild on certain days during winter, is generally quite low on the massif, particularly on the high peaks. It is not unusual to find -40°C above 3500 m, particularly on north faces where there is no sun from December to March. As the days are fairly short, bivouacking is often necessary, even on the shorter climbs. For the longer climbs several days are normally required. In these conditions tent, stove and duvet are essential, as well as the equipment normally carried in summer. Wind-proof or down-filled over-trousers and several pairs of gloves will also be appreciated if the climb is to last several days. Double-soled boots are absolutely essential for climbs at high altitude, on north faces, or whose duration is to be more than one day. The team which went up the Pilier d'Angle last winter equipped only with ordinary boots suffered serious frost-bites, necessitating amputations. For a climb of several days one must also carry food and fuel (butane gas is suitable; even if it freezes it can be thawed out against the climber's body prior to use). Rucksacks, already heavy enough, are often weighed down further by skis or snow-shoes, which are needed to reach the foot of rock faces. Knowing what a formidable enemy weight can be, one may assume that the tactics employed in winter must be very different from those in summer. One must take into account the slow pace, but with the proper equipment there need be less fear of the bivouac. However, one must not count too much on uninterrupted fine weather, and for my part I have never seen greater



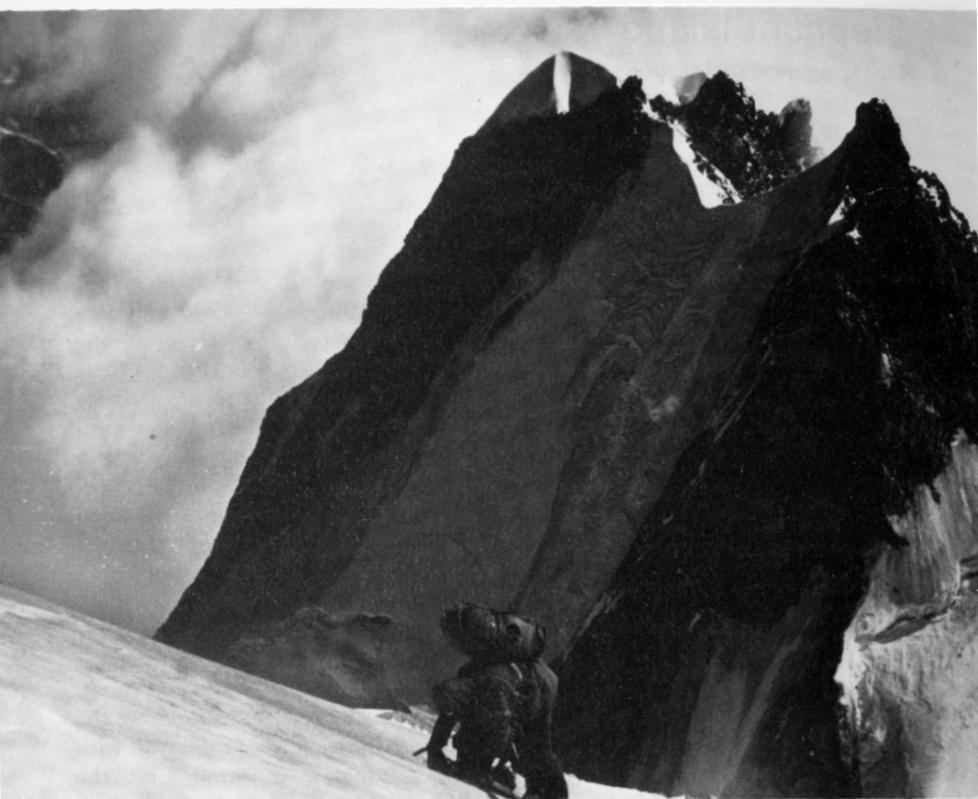
79 *Grand Pilier d'Angle, showing bivouacs on winter ascent. This and next photo:*
A. Mroz

meteorological stability in winter than that which is usual in summer. It is certainly true that the formidable summer storms are now exceedingly rare, and the rock faces remain bare even in bad weather. Even if the cold is extreme the Alpinist can rely on his protective clothing; to the extent that he will seldom find himself damp or wet, the bivouacs expose him to fewer risks than on certain days in summer.

For several years now a profound change has been taking place, which no doubt can only accelerate: winter climbing, until recently the sport of a minority of first-class climbers, will no doubt be practised by more and more people, among whom will be some complete novices. So far, the successful winter climbs have generally been *premières*, but in the future there will certainly be an increasing number of repetitions. Even if in some years the conditions for mountaineering are poor—as in 1968–9, for example, when for two months only the couloir was possible on the Aiguilles du Diable on Mont Blanc du Tacul—one can usually count on some fine weather up to mid-February, and this may sometimes last for several days, or even weeks, as happened in 1971. In the years to come we shall see the achievements of summer extending into winter, and perhaps in exceptionally fine weather towards Christmas or the Shrove Tuesday holiday there will be several parties out on the most severe routes.

Looking now at the position of the successful climbs to date, it must be pointed out that the majority have been on summits which are readily accessible, except for the one on Mont Blanc itself, which is something of a special case by virtue of its importance and prestige. Thus most of the routes on summits near the Aiguille du Midi, the Capucin, Tour Ronde, Mont Blanc du Tacul and on the Aiguille du Midi itself have been climbed, some of them more than once. On the other hand, in areas such as the Bassin d'Argentière or around Mont Maudit quite a number of routes still await their first winter ascent. The impact of the téléphérique here has not been negligible; firstly at the Aiguille du Midi, but equally on the North faces of the Drus, the Verte and the Droites where one may observe that the winter ascents have all been subsequent to the installation of the téléphérique at the Grands Montets. Thus one may in part explain the fact that the summits of the Dauphiné have seldom been climbed in winter.

It would appear that future prospects for winter Alpinism are unlimited. For the most ambitious, a good number of serious problems remain to be solved, one of the trickiest being the Peuterey ridge; for those of more modest attainments this is a new form of climbing for them to discover. If present trends continue, one can look forward to a similar growth in female and solo winter climbing. In reality, female winter Alpinism is as old as winter Alpinism itself, if one recalls that a woman, Miss Straton, was one of the victorious team on Mont Blanc in 1876. As to solo climbs, these are likely to become proportionally as common as in summer, with the ten or so successes in recent years. No truly exceptional solo has been achieved to this day, however, always speaking only of the Mont Blanc massif.



80 *Winter attempt on the Peuterey Ridge*

One could comment equally on various other aspects of the sport: on the nationality of Alpinists, the composition of the parties, the variations in strategy between one group and another, and so on. It would also be interesting to list in full the successes in the massif to date. But there is neither the time nor space to do this here, and our sole purpose has been to draw the readers' attention to one form of climbing now developing rapidly. At a time when, in some people's eyes, the terrain of 'The Playground of Europe' is becoming more and more restricted, climbing in the winter months gives a certain amount of renewed interest. In fact, the average climber is already deriving some benefit from it, and there is no doubt that this will spread to other enthusiasts of the high mountains. More than any other activity, Alpinism practised in winter, as in summer, can contribute to the achievement of a degree of stability in the frenetic existence of today's city-dwellers.