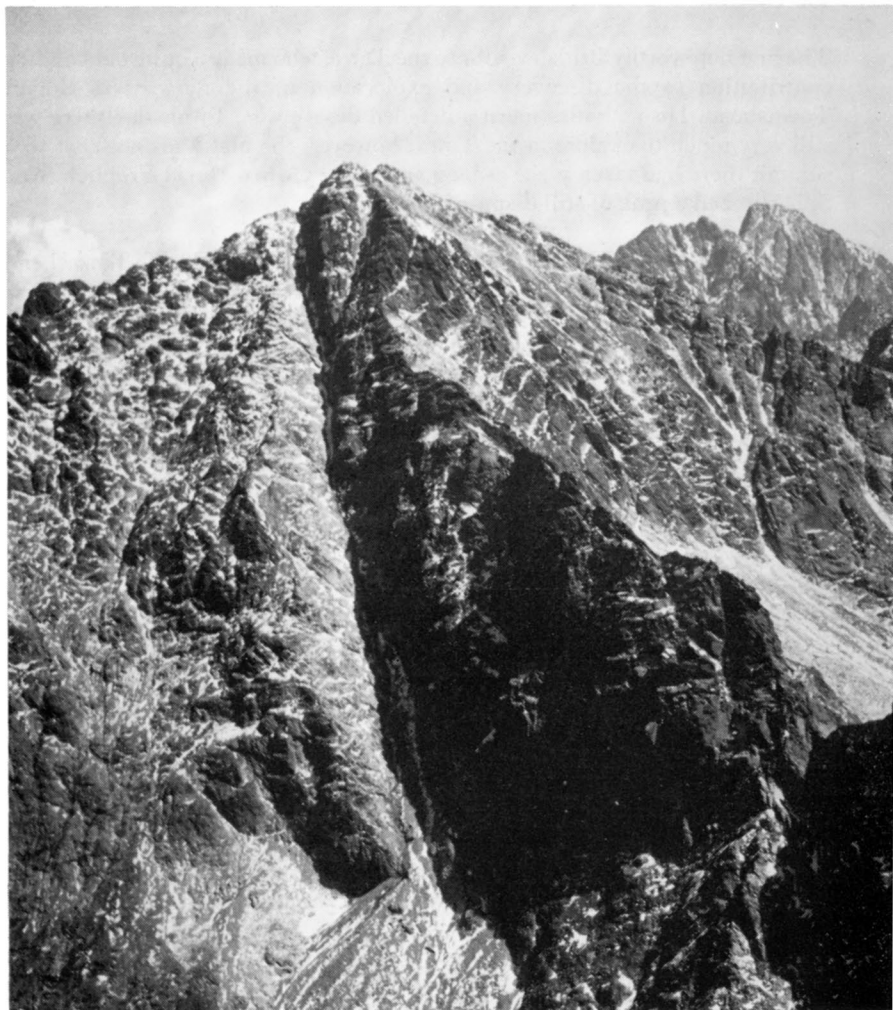


British Alpinists in the Tatra

Andrzej Kuś

The Tatra Mountains cover an area only 30 miles long, a relatively short stretch of the Carpathians providing the natural frontier between Czechoslovakia and Poland. They are the most rugged and dramatic section of the whole Carpathian Range, with numerous summits over 2500 m. Gerlach, the highest, 2655 m, then Lomnický Štít, 2632 m, and L'adový Štít, 2628 m, are the three most eminent mountains. The central part of the massif, the High Tatra, consists of jagged granite ridges, towers and spires of Alpine character carrying in winter large masses of snow. This brought the name 'Montes Nives' (i.e. Snowy Mountains) used for the Tatra some centuries ago, when they constituted the frontier between the Kingdoms of Poland and Hungary.



On the w and e flanks in the West and Belanské Tatras limestone predominates, the landscape is greener and softer and the flora more abundant and colourful. Among the granite cliffs and green valleys of the High Tatra British alpinism has had considerable achievements and developed fine traditions in the past which have, however, been largely forgotten now.

This article will certainly not be able to give full details nor mention all the important British visitors and results obtained in the Tatra; however, I hope that nothing really important has been overlooked.

Some visits and ascents are still waiting for detailed historical studies. To complete the matter it should be perhaps added that sources, even if published, may be scattered in very different countries, due to the complicated history of the Tatra region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Englishmen appeared in the Tatra in the eighteenth century or even earlier. In 1724 an Englishman of unknown name made an excursion to the Tatra with Georg Buchholtz junior, a renowned explorer from Spiš, but there is no record whatsoever of this visit.

The first noteworthy British visitor to the Tatra, who made a quite outstanding contribution to the discovery and exploration of the range, was Robert Townshend. His activities merit a detailed description. In his day there was still very much to explore in the Tatra; however, the first known ascent to a summit there had taken place as long ago as 1615 when David Fröhlich from Spiš climbed a peak of still disputed identity.

Shortly after completing his studies in natural science in Edinburgh Townshend set off, in May 1793, on a journey to northern Hungary. From Vienna via Budapest, the mountains of Matra, Slovenské Rudohorie and other places he came to Levoča under the Tatra in the month of July. Here at the beginning an unpleasant adventure befell the Scottish traveller, as he was accidentally arrested on the suspicion of being a Jacobite emissary. After liberation and a rest in Kežmarok he betook himself to the valley of Biela Voda Kežmarská in the e part of the Tatra.

'In the evening I reached the *koschar*, and there I found my retinue. This is a small wooden hut in the midst of a wood, divided into two apartments. In the first apartment the head shepherd, who is only a poor common peasant, lives and makes the cheese; the other is the store where it is kept till it is sent to Kežmarok, which is every week. . . . After the shepherd and his men had eaten their supper, the men, of whom there were four or five, left the hut, and went and slept under sheds round the fold. We likewise stretched ourselves upon the floor and slept. In the night the head shepherd got up two or three times and called to his men, to see whether they were upon the watch'.

This account and observations were printed in Townshend's book *Travels in Hungary in the Year 1793* (London 1797), which, translated into French and German, became soon a sort of best-seller of the epoch.

Written in a vivid and sometimes witty style it brings an exact scientific and literary account of the countries visited. Of its 500 pages some 60 are devoted

to a description of the Tatras (Chapters XV and XVII) as seen during a one-month stay.

After visiting the whole valley of Biela Voda Kežmarská Townshend made, on 7 August 1793, with chamois-hunter Hans Gross, the first ascent of Jahňáci Štít (2229 m) from the pass of Kopské Sedlo and descended along the sw ridge. Next day he rested in Kežmarok and then came again to the mountains into the valley of Malá Studená, where some interesting adventures occurred. He bivouacked under the ridge of Postredný Hrot, visited the whole valley and even tasted roasted marmots (!), as he was living in the company of a hunter.

He met there also a very tired gold-digger, who told him, as it is described with humour in his book, that he still had good hopes of finding something in spite of twelve years of unsuccessful searching for gold and precious stones.

On 16 August Townshend made a brave first known ascent of Lomnický Štít (2632 m) and measured incidentally its altitude on his barometer, with extreme accuracy, as 2880 yards, i.e. 2634 m.

Next he spent some time meeting the pastor Thomas Mauksch of Vel'ký Slavkov in Upper Spiš, a known explorer of the Tatra, before climbing Kriváň (2494 m) from the s by way of the mine works. On the magnificent summit (26 August 1793) he proved for the first time with precise measurement that Kriváň is lower than Lomnický Štít.

Townshend's further itinerary led via the Račkova and Kościeliska valleys of the W Tatra to Cracow and the Wieliczka salt mines in the then Galicia. On the return journey via W Tatra he visited one of the summits of the massif Czerwone Wierchy (2123 m) and noticed there again, as first of the explorers, that the mountain, though predominantly limestone, has a granite summit crust. Soon after the visit to the Tatra he obtained a doctor's degree at the University of Göttingen in 1795.

Townshend, even though he came at the same time as the famous French Alpine and Carpathian traveller Baltasar Hacquet, is rightly reckoned in the Tatra as the first visitor of scientific profile. He is remembered also for his friendly relations with local guides and hunters. After this great precursor one can observe in the Tatra up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, a general increase of scientific and tourist interest for the mountains.

Christian Genersich, Stanisław Staszic, Göran Wahlenberg, François S. Beudant, Albrecht von Sydow, Ludwik Zejszner, and Seweryn Goszczyński are the names of most eminent Polish and international scientists and travellers taking part in the scientific exploration of the Tatra at that time.

Now comes another English name—Wade Brown, traveller, of Trinity College Cambridge who visited the Tatra in a quite exceptional season. On 13 November 1825 in the 'most warm and beautiful weather' he visited the valleys of Piec Stawow Polskich and of Morskie Oko and admired the Wielka Siklawa



63 *Crossing the Zavrát Pass in the 19th Century* Reproduced from 'Tygodnik Ilustrowany', 1876

waterfalls. His companion was a forester of Bukowina village—Franz Klein, an Austrian settler in the Polish foothills of the Tatra, who was known for his botanical research and attainments.

Gradually, more and more common tourists also began to come to the Tatra. In their number were numerous visitors from beyond the Channel, such as Hunter, Arnold and Hambrough.

About 1840 this popularity of the Tatra led on to climbing and mountaineering. It started really with the first ascent of Rysy (2503 m), the actual highest peak of the Polish Tatra and fifteenth on the general list.

During that period of increased interest in the Tatra there took place also attempts on L'adový Štít (2628 m), which was still reckoned to be the second highest after Lomnický Štít (2632 m), because Gerlach was not yet 'discovered'.

L'adový is a difficult summit on the main ridge, inaccessible without climbing. The first recorded attempt on it by the German ornithologist G. Hartlaub in 1835 failed very near the summit. Eight years later, at the end of August 1843, L'adový was climbed for the first time by John Ball, later the President of the Alpine Club.

John Ball (1818–89), born in Dublin but living most of his life in London, was a man of versatile interests: traveller, botanist and explorer of European mountains and British colonies, and also the author of *The Alpine Guide*. The Tatra had seen him in 1843 during one of his scientific journeys to Austro-Hungary (1843, 1885). He described his botanical research in Austro-Hungary in a Hungarian scientific journal *Magyar Növénytani Lapok*, Vol XIII, but original sources about his mountaineering activity in the Tatra probably do not exist.

In 1843 Ball appeared in Javorina and undertook the trip to L'adový Štít via the Javorová valley and Suchý Žl'ab with the local inspector of smelting works W. Richter, a chamois-hunter, and the well-known geographer K. Ritter of Berlin. Some later reports mention that 'an unknown Hungarian painter, a Polish philologist and servants' were also there. Ritter, being 64 years old, accompanied the group to the bivouac in the Zadná Javorová travelling with a cart. He described the trip and the ascent by Ball in a letter to his brother in Kežmarok and in a book, published in Berlin in 1863. Ball himself recalls the ascent of L'adový in a letter to the Polish Tatra Society dated 13 March 1875 when he was elected an Honorary Member.

His ascent was soon repeated, on 6 October 1845, by the conqueror of Rysy, E. Blásky from Spiš, who reached the peak of L'adový with two companions.

In 1845 Britons are again noted in the bibliography of the Tatra. Doctor of Laws Ludwik Pietrusiński, who climbed Lomnický Štít, writes in his book about his companions—'a couple of Englishmen coming from Kežmarok and Miss Harriet'.

He mentions that during the bivouac by Skalnaté Pleso 'the ladies slept in a cave, comfortably prepared by the retinue of servants'. They climbed only up to Lomnický Hrebeň (c 2200 m). In the summer of 1871 there travelled in some Tatra valleys Alexander H. Hutchinson, captain of Royal Artillery and author of the book *Try Lapland*. Next year he published in London the book *Try Cracow and the Carpathians* with illustrations and a map of the Tatra. He was particularly enchanted by the beauty of Morskie Oko: 'The indescribably magnificent prospect—the fresh exhilarating mountain air, which puts new life in your veins!—all this amply indemnifies one for every discomfort that must await the steps of the traveller in the Carpathians.'

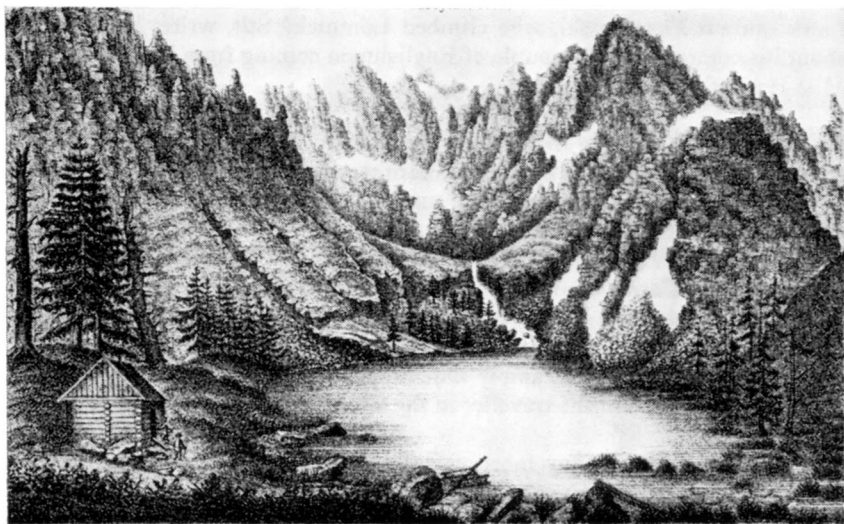
There were certainly many more visits like these two—comfortable or uncomfortable. Popular target of excursions in the nineteenth century was Lomnický Štít, called the watch-tower of Slavonic lands! Among its early women conquerors in 1891 is noted a British writer Margaret Fletcher. On

the highest peak of Tatra—Gerlach (2654 m)—which was climbed about 1855 by Polish botanists Z. Bośniacki and W. Grzegorzek, the Britons were also among the first.

The first alpinists from West Europe here were James Bryce and Leslie Stephen in 1878. Together with the guide Ján Ruman of Štola, who found the route to Gerlach from Batižovská Valley, they made the third ascent of his route, called the 'Batizovský climb'.

Viscount Bryce (born in Belfast in 1838, died 1922 at Sidmouth) was professor of Roman and Civil Law at Oxford and London. In the chronicles of alpinism Bryce is known for his visits to all European mountain groups and the ascent of Ararat (5156 m). Stanisław Witkiewicz, father of the 'Zakopane style' in architecture, mentions in his Tatra novel *Na przełęczy* (*On the Pass*) (1889–90) about the meeting with two British citizens of Polish origin: doctor of Her Majesty's Army Bronislav Yazdovsky and official of the Ministry of War and journalist Adam Gielgud, grandfather of the actor Sir John Gielgud. One of the Tatra high passes, Pol'ský Hrebeň, was traversed in a violent snow-storm on 24 June 1902 by the British ornithologist Charles Chandler as the *Memoirs of Polish Tatra Society* reported in 1903.

Another eminent person connected with the Tatra is Edward Theodore Compton (1849–1921). Self-taught painter, originating from the London suburb of Stoke Newington, he had visited many mountain districts—North Wales, the Alps, Corsica, Lapland. In the summer of 1904 he visited the High Tatra and thereafter often returned to them for his paintings (graphics and aquarelles). They are found for example as illustrations in Professor G. O. Dyhrenfurth's articles about the Tatra (*Zeitschrift des D u ÖAV*, 1908) or in the hall of the Grand Hotel in Smokovec before World War II.



64 *Der grosse Fischsee* Reproduced from *Die Hohe Tatra in den Central Karpaten*, 1864

British climbing women played a notable role in the conquest of Tatra faces and ridges in the pioneer times when there were still many problems to solve. One of such problems was to climb Lomnický Štít from the upper part of Malá Studená valley (Pät' Spišských Plies). (Actually, there are now more than ten routes from this side of Lomnický Štít with the famous 'Hokeyka' on the w face, but about the turn of century there was none.) Beatrice Thomasson of Edinburgh, the alpinist noted for the first ascent of the s face of the Marmolata in 1901, solved this outstanding problem of Lomnický by finding a roundabout and long, but very original, route. She was in the Tatra in 1899 and climbed with the local guides J. Breuer and J. Strompf. First she gave her attention to the beautiful silhouette of Bradavica (2476 m). During the descent from this summit to Velká Studená valley she climbed down the long, moderate n face for the first time. Next, on 22 July 1899 she climbed Lomnický Štít, reaching it from the valley of Pat' Spišských Plies via Pyšný Štít (2625 m), Bachledová Štrbina and finally via the n gully above the Vel'ká Zmrzlá valley. This new itinerary was a combination of parts of several other climbs. Her ascent is among the first five female ascents of Lomnický Štít.

Ruth Hale, who was the Secretary of the Ladies Alpine Club and a member of the Pinnacle Club before World War II, has recorded many first ascents. She came to the Tatra in the winter of 1934 for skiing but she was enchanted by the beauty of these mountains and returned soon to climb in summer. Accompanied by Witold H. Paryski, the author of a unique climbing guide-book to the Tatra and well-known expert, Ruth Hale started in 1934 with typical climbs: Mnich, Niebieska Turnia and a traverse of Snehové Veže.

On returning home she told English climbers of the wonders of the Tatra, and the following summer a large all-women party from the Pinnacle Club was organised. The members of the party made, in the company of Witold H. Paryski and Tadeusz Pawłowski, some fine ridge climbs such as that of Dračie Pazury, Vidlové Veže and Gerlach.

Ruth Hale with Annette Wilson stayed longer than the rest of the group and climbed some more difficult routes: Velický Štít nw face, fifth ascent; Malý Ostrý Štít, new variants from nw; and Świnica nw face. The *Ladies' Alpine Club Journal* (London 1936) carries an extensive account of the above trip.

In 1936 Ruth Hale was again in the Tatra, this time with Mary Glynne. On 8 September both climbed with W. A. Paryski for the first time the tower of Apostoľ II on the ridge of Źabi Szczyt Niżni and reached the pass Pod Źabia Czub over the Morskie Oko. Ruth Hale was very active and accomplished many fine routes, two of them first ascents: the right spur on the w face of Skrajny Granat with W. H. Paryski and a very difficult and exposed ascent on the se face of Świnica together with W. H. Paryski and Witold Orłowski.

She was completely under the spell of the High Tatra and during the cold, rainy summer of 1937 could be found among the Polish '*Taternik*' community in the Roztoka hut waiting for good weather. Nevertheless she still tried to climb.



65 *Cubryna and the Mnich* Photo: R. Ziemak

On 13 August with W. H. Paryski she was caught in a storm on *Żabi Niżni* (*Świerz* climb) and on the N ridge of *Veża Żelaznej Brany* by wind and snow. On 21 August she made a new variant on the SW face of *Kozie Czuby*. Most dramatic was the attempt on the unclimbed, severe, right buttress of the NE face of *Rumanov Štít* (2428 m), undertaken with W. H. Paryski and L. Januszewicz.

Bad weather surprised the team near the top and enforced a very difficult retreat along the E face of *Ganek* with two unplanned bivouacs, without food and with only a few remaining pitons.

Ruth Hale, a woman of unusual strength and strong character, continued the season of climbing in spite of that daunting experience. A week later she climbed

the ridge of Świnica from Walentkowa and the next day the N face of Zadni Mnich, this time in beautiful weather, a reward for the rainy season. On 6 September 1937 Ruth Hale was with W. H. Paryski and Zdzisław Dąbrowski on the NE spur of Cubryna above Morskie Oko, climbing in sunshine after a cloudy morning. In the easy upper part where they continued unroped she fell off with a loose block. She is buried in the new cemetery at Zakopane.

Another famous pre-war British visitor to the Tatra was Dr T. H. Somervell, a member of two Everest expeditions and later President of the Alpine Club. In July 1935 he came with his brother and two friends to the High Tatra. In eleven days they did a great deal of walking, climbing and scrambling—eighteen summits, including Gerlach, Cubryna, Mnich, Pät'Spišských Plies and Morskie Oko—all in bad weather and in a strange area. In the Tatra Somervell found also something more than the pure pleasure of climbing: the rare beauty of this mountain range and inspiration for his painting. He states in full admiration that Czarny Staw over Morskie Oko is more wonderful than the Oeschinensee near Kandersteg in the Alps. Elsewhere in his report (*AJ* 48 18) he writes: 'If there is a more beautiful picture in the world than the Kleine Kohlbachtal from its northern end, I should like to be told where to find it'. What a wonderful acknowledgement of the beauty of the Tatra from a man who has seen the Alps and lived long near and among the Himalaya.

The Tatra has had many connections with people from Mount Everest. Among an increasing number of visitors in recent times one can find well-known British names as John Hunt, Alfred Gregory and others. John Hunt and his wife came for the first time to the Tatra in June 1964 invited by the Polish High Mountain Club, and during this short official visit found time to climb the N face of Mnich over Morskie Oko. Next year, in September 1965, they came again with Alfred Gregory, John Longland and others, mostly young people in a group of 36 men organised by the National Association of Youth Clubs. British climbers, tourists and potholers visited the Slovak and the Polish side of the range, as well as many of its valleys, and climbed on Volová Veža, Vysoká, Ošarpance, Żabi Koń, Zamarła Turnia, Mnich, Żabi Mnich, Zadni Kościelec and on the limestone spires and in the caves of Kościeliska valley. Some of the routes were of the highest order of difficulty and first ascents were also among them. Astonishing it is, that all this was done in typically bad 'Tatra weather' and the initial meeting with Polish climbers in the Roztoka hut was just as described in the pre-war reports of Ruth Hale.

So the High Tatra has continued to become popular among climbers and Alpine organisations in Britain. They have been represented in such Tatra events as the JAMES climbing weeks in ČSSR, UIAA Youth Meetings, Rendezvous de Haute Montagne in Štrbské Pleso or the General Assembly of the UIAA in 1971 in Zakopane. We hope that the number of such visits will be growing every year.

These mountains will always offer a hospitable welcome to British mountaineers, who have contributed so much in the past to their development, notably by making the first ascents of two of the three highest peaks.