

A progress in Pyreneisme

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While the Alps must indisputably be the world's best-documented mountains, the chronicle of climbing activity in the Pyrenees remains largely obscured, so far as British climbers are concerned. This is a little difficult to understand, at first glance, for their history is as old and vigorous as that of the Alps, and several marvellous characters have been involved in extensive campaigns upon their flanks and ridges—with notable results—and the more persistent of their practitioners have seldom lacked either the ingenuity to overcome problems, or the nerveless qualities demanded to increase performance. Over 2 centuries of activity have been witnessed and recorded among these mountains, and today, standards are being pushed ever higher as *Pyreneisme* keeps pace with modern trends of *Alpinism*.

The reason for this general lack of interest in Pyrenean affairs may stem from the proximity of the challenging heights of the Alps. Were they situated several thousands of miles farther E, no doubt the Aiguilles d'Ansabere, Vignemale and Tozal del Mallo would be as familiar to climbers from these shores as are some of the remote pinnacles of Asia. But since their ease of access is comparable to the much-lauded and provocative faces of Chamonix granite—set in magnificently unique surroundings—they have always suffered by comparison with the rock, and moating glaciers, of the Alps themselves. Early advocates of the Pyrenees tended often to allow their songs of praise more than a little licence, becoming guilty of a parochial enthusiasm not always warranted, with the predictable result that newcomers to the range expected something that just wasn't there. This is to be regretted, since all mountains have their own specific charms, and the Pyrenees no less than any others.

Throughout history isolated examples of mountain exploration occur in the records of man's endeavour. In the Middle Ages a number of such records suggested a period of enquiry, although these examples inspired no great surge of mountain adventuring, and indicate little more than the curiosity of certain men. One such was Peter III of Aragon (1236–85), '*a man of a splendidly stout heart, . . . a man of great courage*,' who made an attempt on the Pic du Canigou (2784m) in 1276. It is interesting to read the account of this climb; of the 2 faint-hearted knights who '*threw themselves upon the ground, and lay there . . . lifeless, in their fear and trepidation*' as a storm lashed the mountain; and of Peter's claim to have reached the summit alone. '*And when he was on the top of the mountain he found a lake there; and when he threw a stone into the lake, a horrible dragon of enormous size came out of it, and began to fly about in the air, and to darken the air with its breath.*'

Almost 3 hundred years were to pass before another attempt upon a Pyrenean peak was recorded. In the spring of 1552, Francois de Foix, the Count de Candale (1502–94), set out to climb the fine, solitary Pic du Midi d'Ossau, in order to establish its height. Although the attempt failed, the second-hand account which remains makes reference to 2 notable points of this expedition. The first is an allusion to the problems of 'mountain sickness'; '*. . . the cold and rarefied air which surrounded them caused them sensations of giddiness which made them fall down in their weakness.*' The second concerns de Foix's equipment. '*When the rock resisted their endeavours, they made use of ladders, grapnels, and climbing irons,*' clear indications of a very early dependence upon specialized apparatus to aid the ascent of difficult mountain obstacles.



10 Pic du Midi d'Ossau (This and next 4 photos: K. Reynolds collection)

Despite its somewhat formidable appearance, this same Pic du Midi d'Ossau (2885m) was, however, the first of the main peaks to be climbed. In March 1787, an army engineer noted an object on the summit and claimed that it had been placed there by a shepherd from the Aspe Valley who had made the ascent '*at the demand of the geographers Reboul and Vidal in order to construct a triangulation turret on the summit.*' This was a remarkable achievement for the period, but a second ascent was made in October 1796, by Guillaume Delfau and another shepherd, Mathieu, an ascent notable in that Delfau made no claims of scientific motivation, and climbed purely for sporting reasons.

About this time a considerable amount of interest was being focused on the mountains by geographers, geologists and military surveyors, but it took a northern politician, Louis-Francois Ramond de Carbonnieres (1755–1827), to make the first 'mountaineering' tour of the range. His initial travels in the Pyrenees took place in the summer of 1787. On the summit of the Pic du Midi de Bigorre he met Reboul and Vidal and, inspired by the multitude of unknown peaks that were set out before him, laid plans for his 5 weeks of exploration. He subsequently crossed many a high pass, traversed uncharted valleys and scrambled at will where none but the isard had been before him. In an emulation of de Saussure, he treated these mountains with the combined talents of the scientist and the artist, noting wherever he went the profusion of flowers and the geology of the heights. His pen recorded this wild and virgin landscape with an intensity that almost 2 hundred years have failed to lessen, as the following passage suggests, describing what is now known as the Lago de Paderna below the Maladetta, whose first ascent he was attempting.

'Already far above the valley which we had traversed, we had nothing about us but blackened rocks and ravines; the snows were suspended above our heads, and flowers and rivulets the most distant from our thoughts, when a little platform, entirely surrounded with the most menacing ruins, presented us the smiling spectacle of a little lake, whose borders were clad with the freshest turf, the tufts of pines of the smallest stature. This is the last retreat of vegetation the most secret of her solitudes: the universe disappears at its very entrance: it seems to be the remains of a world which has been buried up beneath its ruins.'

When the Revolution made life in Paris a precarious business for those involved in politics, Ramond found the Pyrenees offered a degree of anonymity, and returned there in 1792. During the 8 years that he was to stay there, he made few first class ascents, but having set eyes upon the 'lost' mountain, Mont Perdu (Monte Perdido), he decided to organize an attempt to climb this, the third highest peak in the range. The attempt failed, as did a second, but upon his third visit to the mountains, in 1802, he sent ahead 2 local men, Laurens and Rondou, to reconnoitre the route. They joined forces with a Spanish shepherd and actually reached the summit. A few days later, Ramond made his ascent, and this effectively crowned his climbing career.

The next achievement of note occurred in 1817 when Dr Frederic Parrot—the Russo-German professor remembered for his first ascents of the Parrotspitze on Monte Rosa, and of Mount Ararat—set off on a walk across the Pyrenees, from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, and made several new ascents *en route*, including that of Pico de la Maladetta.

During the first half of the 19th Century progress moved slowly but certainly among the high peaks. Survey officers visited new summits in the course of their work in preparation for the *Carte de France*, and in this manner the Balaitous (Peytier and Hossard) in 1825, and both the Estats and Montcalm (Coraboeuf and Testu) 2 years later, received their first ascents. J. D. Forbes was one of the first British visitors of distinction to grace the mountains, but in his visit of 1835—in order to study their geology—his excursions were limited to the well-known and much-trodden Breche de Roland above Gavarnie ('The Brèche itself quite exceeded my expectations'.) and the Port de Venasque, where he could observe the glaciers of the Maladetta. His comments on these ice-fields are a little surprising, considering their insignificance today, for he wrote in his diary that these 'prodigious glaciers . . . rival those of Mont Blanc, and vie with the ice-fields of Grindelwald.'

The Vignemale (3298m) is one of the more obvious and commanding peaks, bearing the longest glacier of the Pyrenees and a magnificent N face that would be outstanding in any mountain range. All the earliest attempts to climb this mountain were by the Ossoue Glacier, and in 1837 2 local guides, Henri Cazaux and Bernard Guillembet, successfully reached the summit. However, during the attempt they both fell into the fearsome *Grande Crevasse*, and rather than face its terrors on the descent, found an alternative route down by way of the Ara Valley, in Spain. It was from the Ara Valley, too, that the first tourist ascents were made, the distinction of the first of these going to Miss Anne Lister from Halifax, on 7 August 1838.

The experience of Cazaux and Guillembet, coupled with the publicity that followed the disappearance of Pierre Barrau in a crevasse on the Maladetta Glacier, invested glacier travel with a certain notoriety, to such a degree that for a while the napkins of snow and ice dressing the higher peaks were avoided as far as was possible. So it was that a circuitous route, chosen to eliminate all but the most unavoidable glaciers, was favoured for the first ascent of the highest of Pyrenean

summits, the Pico de Aneto (3404m). The pioneers here were the Count Albert de Franqueville and a young Russian officer, Platon de Tchihatcheff, with the guides Ursule, Redonnet and Argarot from Luchon, and the summit was reached on 20 July 1842.

By the middle of the 19th Century nearly all the highest summits had been won. The handful of men who had found a virgin range had taken their prizes, leaving only the more difficult peaks—or regions of untracked wilderness—inviolate. Halkett found a route to the summit of the Posets (3375m) in 1856, and 2 years later the attractive, double-toothed Fourcanade finally succumbed to the persistence of the young and impetuous Alfred Tonnelle. There were other summits to explore, and new routes to be made on those peaks already won, but after half a century and more of sporadic activity, the mountains of the Pyrenees had still to receive the scrutiny of a single-minded champion, a man prepared to devote time and energy to the cause of cataloguing the heights and publicizing their attractions. Such a man was Charles Packe.

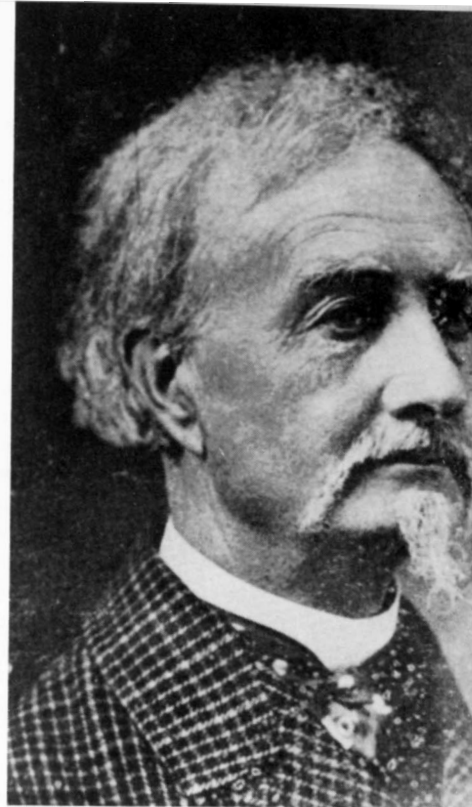
It is surprising that Packe's name is not better known, or that he is seldom acknowledged for his undoubted contribution to the history of mountaineering. For it was Packe who introduced John Ball, Hinchliff and William Longman to the mountains of North Wales and to the Lakeland fells. It was he who gave the young Haskett-Smith—the 'father' of British rockclimbing—his first mountain travel, with a walking and scrambling tour of the Pyrenees, in 1881. And it was Packe, more than any other, who discovered the vast potential for mountaineering within the Pyrenees.

Charles Packe (1826–96) first visited the range in 1853, and before long had accumulated a considerable fund of information that he made available to others through the publication of his *Guide*. For a great many years he visited the Pyrenees for extensive climbing and walking tours, and as he travelled he catalogued the mountains and, in the Maladetta massif, created an admirable map whose accuracy surpassed many that were to succeed it. On many of his climbs he teamed with Henry Russell, although in temperament they were poles apart. Packe was the dry, studious, scientific 'plodder', while Russell (1834–1909) was an unashamed romantic and one of mountaineering's strangest eccentrics, whose love affair with the Vignemale is legendary.

Russell's career in the Pyrenees covered 4 decades, and though he was in essence a traditionalist, his love of solitude and an indomitable, adventurous spirit led to countless route diversions that make labelling somewhat difficult. While accepting, and even welcoming, dangers and the challenge of difficulties, he could not applaud the trends which inevitably led to a growth in mountaineering activity in his beloved Pyrenees. Above all he was a deeply committed lover of the mountains. He wrote:

'I respect and envy those for whom the mountain is something other than a goddess. I am jealous of those to whom geodesy and the structure of peaks mean more than the voice of the torrent and purple of a precipice or the fire of the snows at sunset. But each to his own taste. Mine was to move and to feel.'

At this time few guides were prepared to seek out new routes, in fact the profession of guiding rarely reached the status or competence enjoyed in the Alps. Célestin Passet was the notable exception. Born in Gavarnie of a guiding family—his father, uncles and cousin were all guides at some stage—he was



*11 top left Ramond de Carbonnières
top right Henry Russell
left Célestin Passet*

discovered by Russell, but was encouraged to develop the full range of his talents under the patronage of Henri Brulle.

Brulle (1854–1936) brought an influence to the Pyrenean climbing scene that was as welcome as a gust of fresh air. His numerous visits to these mountains were interspersed with climbing trips in other mountain areas where he doubtless absorbed something of the vitality that had been missing in Pyrenean mountaineering. Together with Passet, and often in the company of Jean Bazillac and Roger de Monts, Brulle opened the doors to a new era of activity. Previously, mountaineering had been largely a repetition of the *voie normale*, but now the search was on for snow and ice-gullies and rock that demanded agility and the mastery of untried skills to overcome. Brulle and Brazillac climbed the Vignemale by the Clot de la Hount couloir in 1897—much to the disgust of Russell, who despised the ‘degeneration of mountaineering into gymnastics’—and a number of hard lines on the Cirque de Gavarnie. But the finest achievement in the whole of the Pyrenees during that eventful century of climbing, was the ascent of the Couloir de Gaube.

The Couloir de Gaube seams the N aspect of the Vignemale, a long gash separating the Piton Carre from the Pique Longue. A savage, yet tantalizing corner, it was studied at length by Henri Brulle—‘it had been haunting my dreams’, he wrote—then attacked on 7 August 1889. Brulle’s rope included Bazillac and de Monts, with Célestin Passet and Francois Bernard Salles as guides. It was a climb of great audacity, by far the most serious yet attempted. Even to cross the bergschrund at its base caused considerable difficulty, but the real problem came near the head of the ‘fierce-looking and vertiginous’ cleft, where an ice-coated boulder blocked the way. It took more than 2 hours for Passet to climb it, and then the couloir was won. Russell, again, was furious, but swallowing his objections offered celebration drinks to the victorious team on their descent.

Brulle was perhaps the most outstanding amateur climber active in the Pyrenees during the latter half of the century, and with Passet’s superb route sense and enthusiasm for hard climbing, the standard of mountaineering rose to fresh heights. Another prominent amateur of the day was the Count Roger d’Astorg who, with Brulle, opened the NW arête of Astazou, the Petite Encantat, and Pic Rouge de Pailla by the Dalle d’Allanz, a route described by Brulle as being the rock equivalent of the Couloir de Gaube’s ice.

With the dawning of a new century, the first fresh name to become imprinted in the record books, was that of Cadier. The family Cadier was prominent in the Aspe Valley, and the 5 brothers—Charles, Edouard, George, Henri and Albert—combined to make a formidable team of pioneering rock-men. With considerable natural expertise and an eagerness for creating new routes, they sprang into action throughout the main part of the range, from Aspe to Aneto, putting up hard lines as they went. Their major contribution, however, was the opening of the extensive ridges and faces of the wild and remote Balaitous.

After the Great War, Jean Arlaud’s influence had a profound effect on the development of *Pyreneisme*. He began his career by repeating the classic routes of the pioneers, in particular those of Brulle, and then rose to working out enterprising lines of his own. But perhaps even more than the quality of his climbing—in the Maladetta region he forged a vast array of enterprising routes—he will be remembered for his masterminding the introduction of young people to mountaineering through his organized camps, out of which grew the *Groupe des Jeunes*, a distinguished group of determined *Pyreneistes*. Under Arlaud the GDJ were

responsible for winter pioneering in the heart of the range, a natural progression that was to gain momentum in the late 'thirties.

A new trend began to take shape in the twenties; that of artificial climbing. On the Grande Aiguille d'Ansabere, in 1926, Marcel Cames and Henri Sarthou dashed the myth of inaccessibility by climbing an otherwise impassable overhang with the aid of an 'enormous iron rod'. In a similar vein, and with comparably crude aid, Cames, Dasabonne and Jean Santé pegged the overhangs of the Pombie-Suzon couloir on the Pic du Midi d'Ossau. But as the new techniques were being mastered, the pitons of more durable quality came into use, the old values, old fears, old limits of possibility were tossed aside by the fresh generation of *Pyreneistes*. On 8 August 1933, Henri Barrio and R. Bellocq set out for the N face of the Vignemale liberally equipped with an assortment of pitons. Their successful ascent on this otherwise untouched wall, underlined the establishment of the new era. It discarded an already badly tattered psychological barrier and closed the door on the past. One wonders what Henry Russell would have said on the subject . . .

After the initiative of Barrio and Bellocq had been digested, a rash of hard climbs was created throughout the range, but in particular on the many and varied walls of the Pic du Midi. Francois Cazalet, Roger Mailly, Robert Ollivier and Henri Sarthou were at the forefront of this new wave, and their routes stand the test of time, offering today's *Pyreneistes* both energetic and challenging outings.

The 'thirties was a period of inspired activity. With a great wash of enthusiasm the intensity of climbing increased, and a proliferation of exciting new routes became established. The GPHM (*Groupe Pyreneiste de Haute Montagne*) had been formed by the first young climbers to repeat Brulle's Couloir de Gaube—more than 40 years after the first ascent—and were the instigators of the crop of difficult winter climbs. Many hard ascents were made during which a respect for a



reappraisal of techniques became evident. But perhaps the most outstanding of the winter climbs was that of Marcel Jolly and Bernard Clos, when they stormed their way up the Vignemale's N face in February 1949, without a bivouac. There followed similarly attractive winter routes; the NW buttress of Pointe Chaussenque, N face of the Tour du Marboré and the highest route then achieved under winter conditions, the 1500m of Pic du Marboré by the Grande Cascade and Arête Passet.

Emerging in the 'fifties, the twin brothers, Jean and Pierre Ravier, dominated the upper sphere of Pyrenean climbing. Sharing a deep love of their mountain environment and an undisputed mastery of the art of extreme climbing, they brought the ultimate expressions of adventure to the range with routes not previously considered. From their spectacular NE diedre on the Grande Aiguille d'Ansabere (with Guy Santamaria on 12, 13 August 1954) to the Esparrets Buttress on Monte Perdido (with Jacques Ravier, on 13, 14 August 1973), their routes have consistently been bold, adventurous lines, maintaining an extremely high standard of proficiency on the sometimes dubious rock of these mountains. Their 1965 Embarradere Pillar route on the N wall of Pic du Midi d'Ossau—an extremely exposed line comparable in difficulty to the Bonatti Pillar on the Dru—has been described as the hardest route in the whole of the Pyrenees.

It is significant that French climbers have been at the forefront of all major developments in the Pyrenees. It is also of some significance that practically all the hardest routes of recent years should have been created on the N side of the watershed; but one notable wall that soars above the lush forests of Ordesa in Spain, is that of Tozal del Mallo, a dramatic piece of mountain sculpture, that seems quite unsupported and likely at any moment to topple gracefully into the canyon below. The S face catches the sun and glows seductively in ochre hues, and during the mid-'fifties it became the centre of the attentions of the more daring climbers. With the aid of 60 pegs, and no small amount of persistence, the team of Blotti, Dufourmantelle, Jaccoux, Kahn and Jean Ravier succeeded in making the first ascent, on 20 and 21 April 1957. Other routes followed, but every line forced demanded an exacting standard, and many were the failures.

Rich and varied are the possibilities for new ascents in the Pyrenees. The modern climber in action there follows in the footsteps of a number of remarkable—yet little-known—men. What the Pyrenean climber requires is enthusiasm coupled with persistence, trademarks that underlined the successes of men like Henri Brulle, Jean Arlaud and the brothers Ravier. They will not find their routes imbued with a charisma inspired by notoriety, neither will the rewards for outstanding performance include that of reputation, since the Pyrenees are not mountains of this order. But what the Pyrenees do offer is a sense of pioneering, with the additional charm of idyllic settings and an 'air of unquiet mystery'. More, a climber may not ask.