

One Hundred Years Ago

(with extracts from the *Alpine Journal*)

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Plates 79–82

Although the clear skies and settled conditions experienced in the Alps during the opening weeks of 1886 provided a welcome change from the heavy snowfalls of the previous year the intense cold which affected many regions meant that, again, very little climbing was possible. The only expedition of note during the winter season was the ascent of the Signalkuppe, or Punta Gnifetti, in the Monte Rosa group on 18 January by Corradino and Gaudenzio Sella, with Jean Joseph Maquignaz and three other men. Arriving at the summit by way of the Colle d'Olen and the Lisjoch, the party enjoyed a very clear view before descending to Zermatt, where they were received by the parish priest.

After a late spring cold and unsettled weather persisted until the middle of July, when conditions began to improve. In the Pennine Alps first ascents included the E face of Mont Pleureur on 19 July by Adolphe Tschumi with Joseph Quinodoz and the SW buttress of the Hohberghorn by the guideless party of August Lorria and Oscar Eckenstein on 30 July. Other expeditions of note were the first recorded ascent of the Adlerhorn, on the SW ridge of the Strahlhorn, by Lorria and C C Branch on 26 July and, also on 30 July, the first recorded traverse of the Windjoch by W M Conway, George Scriven and H H West, with J J Trüffer, Aloys Zurbrücken and Joseph Knubel, the uncle of the famous guide of the same name. In the Bernese Oberland on 29 July H Dübi and L Liechti, with Christian and Hans Hari, climbed the Balmhorn by way of the SE ridge, the first time that the summit had been reached from this direction.

On 5 August a famous refuge, situated on rocks beside an equally famous route, was inaugurated by the Milan Section of the Italian Alpine Club. The Marinelli Hut was named in memory of Damiano Marinelli who had been killed five years earlier during an attempt to make the third ascent of the couloir which now bears his name. The day after the ceremony a route from the hut to the summit of the Jägerhorn, under the Nordend of Monte Rosa, by way of the Nordend glacier and the Jägerrücken rocks, was opened by Paolo Palestrino and Luigi Simondetti, with Antonio Castagneri.

The principal expedition of the season was completed in the Dolomites where on 12 August the guideless party of Georg Winkler and Alois Zott made the first ascent of the Cima della Madonna, the western and lower peak of the Sass Maor in the Primiero district. After climbing the higher peak, first ascended by C C Tucker and H A Beachcroft with François Dévouassoud and Battista della Santa 11 years earlier, they returned to the notch between the two peaks and at 5.45 P.M. started to attack the hitherto virgin W pinnacle. This presented most formidable difficulties, owing to the smoothness of the rocks and the fact that



79 Gestola (R) from the Bezingi glacier, 1886.

Photo: W. F. Donkin; Alpine Club Library Collection

they frequently overhang. The summit was, however, successfully vanquished, after great trouble, at 8P.M. The party was forced to spend the night there, enjoying wonderful moonlight views and a splendid sunrise. Starting again at 4.30A.M. on the 13th, they spent three hours in regaining by their former route the notch between the two pinnacles, and reached San Martino di Castrozza the same afternoon.'

Some weeks later, on 4 September, the second ascent of the Madonna was completed by Count Denys de Champeaux and Henri Brulle, with the guides M Bettega of San Martino and Barbaria of Cortina. In his account of the climb, which was printed in the *Alpine Journal*, Brulle wrote that after inspecting the Madonna from the higher peak the party returned to the gap, where they prepared for the final assault by an attack on their provisions. Then Bettega took off his shoes and 'swarmed up the first gully while we crouched under some overhanging rocks in order to shelter ourselves against the stones which he loosened. We could not see him, but after an interval which seemed to us very long we heard him give the shout that had been agreed on as a signal that he was up, and at the same instant the end of our 100-foot rope fell on our heads. Each of us in turn climbed up this way with divers adventures *en route*, having always a terrific precipice beneath his feet. The gully came to an end below the first shelf of rock; so we had to climb along the wall to the left over a boss of slippery rocks, a very delicate operation. I did not see a worse bit either on the Meije or on the Petit Dru. The man who goes first in such a place must be a climber of most exceptional powers.

The second gully was nearly as difficult as the first. At its upper end we gained the second shelf of rock, where a small cairn, built by our predecessors, showed us that we were on the right track. The climb now changes its character. The peak still rises nearly vertically above one's head, and to the left even overhangs; but on the right it is hollowed out and consists of several very steep ridges leading up to the summit, which is still invisible. We took to the first of these ridges, and after overcoming several difficulties, which elsewhere would have seemed to us very serious ones, we found that we had won the day and that the Cima della Madonna was ours.'

To reach the summit of the Madonna, an undulating ridge surrounded on every side by tremendous precipices, was a remarkable achievement for the period. It is interesting to note that Winkler wore special shoes of canvas with hempen soles during the first ascent.

Despite mixed weather throughout August and September, when very fine spells were followed by cold unsettled periods many new routes were completed. Summits in the Pennine Alps reached for the first time were those of the Pointe Sud de Moming, between the Zinalrothorn and the Schalihorn, on 16 August by H Seymour King, with Ambros Supersaxo and Aloys Anthamatten, and the Blanche de Perroc, the N peak of the Dents de Perroc, on 1 September by J A Vardy with Jean and Pierre Maître. Other first ascents in the region were the W face of the Nordend on 17 August by Lorria and F O Schuster, with Peter Trüffer and Joseph Gentinetta; the N ridge of La Sale, the peak to the north of Mont Pleureur, on 27 August by J Isler, with Joseph Gillioz; and the SE ridge of the Nadelhorn, a section of the classic traverse from the



Photo: Swiss National Tourist Office.

Lenzspitze, by H W Topham, with Xavier Imseng and Aloys Supersaxo on 29 August.

Despite the variable weather many other new routes of increasing difficulty were completed. In the Graian Alps on 5 August F Vallino and L Barale, with A Castagneri, A Sibille and G Martinengo succeeded in traversing the Colle Baretti, the steep and serious pass between the Becca di Gay and the Roccia Viva, while in the Mont Blanc range the N face of the Tour Ronde was climbed for the first time by F Gonella with Alexis Berthod on 23 August. On 7 September a new and somewhat dangerous route was completed in the Bernina Alps when Ben Wainewright and E J Garwood, with Martin Schocher and Christian Schnitzler reached the summit of Piz Scerscen by way of the SE flank.

Outside the Alps the principal expedition of the year was that of C T Dent and W F Donkin to the Caucasus, accompanied by the Swiss guides Alexander Burgener and Basil Andenmatten. Dent and Donkin, the first British party to visit the range for 12 years, were unlucky with the weather but succeeded in making the first ascent of Gestola (4860m), one of the peaks above the Bezingi glacier.

Arriving at the village of Bezingi on the N side of the chain, the party were accommodated in a house which was severe in its simplicity. 'It comprised one room, which was situated, rather literally, on the ground-floor. The front was of stone plastered over with mud, the chinks stopped up with anything that came handy. The floor was such as nature provided. The roof, constructed by the art of man, was of wood, decorated with prodigious festoons of cobwebs, and covered externally with turf. A hole, some three feet square, boarded up at night, admitted at once into our apartment air, light and the perfume of an adjoining stable yard. The room was furnished with an uncompromising seat, an uncertain table, and the framework of a suspicious bed.'

After a meal taken under the gaze of a continuous procession of villagers a remarkable visitor called, without being announced. 'An unkempt man, so dirty that he even surprised us by his state, entered and took up a good position. We made no sign, and he made no sign. For some ten minutes he stared at us in silence; then he examined an ice-axe closely. Whether he was pleased or not we were unable to tell. His features, from various causes, did not allow of mobility or expression. He put the axe back, and then fell to staring at us again. This time he took a twenty minutes' spell at it. Not a sound was heard to proceed from his lips. He spake no word. He spat once on the floor, but not in a manner calculated to give offence. Then he went away. The interview was over.'

After many delays due to bad weather and the incompetence of their interpreter a camp was established beside the Bezingi glacier on 26 August. Starting soon after 3am the party crossed extensive snowfields and climbed the great snow wall ahead to reach the W ridge. Addressing the Alpine Club in the following year on 'The Ascent of Tetnuld Tau' Dent, who later agreed with D W Freshfield that the peak should correctly be known as Gestola, described how the party advanced anxiously up the ridge. 'We could hardly believe that any insuperable obstacle would now turn us back; yet all was new and uncertain, and the conditions of weather intensified the anxiety. The heavy



Photo: Alpine Club Library Collection

stillness of the air seemed unnatural, and made the mind work quicker. The sensibility became so acute that if we ceased working and moving for a moment the silence around was unendurable and seemed to seize hold of us. A distant roll of thunder came almost as a relief. A step or two had to be cut, and the delay appeared interminable. Suddenly, a glimpse of a dark patch of rocks appeared above looming through the mist. The slope of the ridge became more gentle for a few yards. Our attention was all fixed above, and we ascended some distance without noticing the change. Another short rise, and we were walking quickly along the ridge. We stopped suddenly; the rocks we had seen so recently had sunk below us on our left, while in front the arête could be followed with the eye, sloping away gradually for a few yards and then plunging sharply down to a great depth. It was all over; through fair weather and through foul we had succeeded; and there was yet another peak to the credit of the Alpine Club.

It was not a time for words. Burgener turned to us and touched the snow with his hand, and we sat down in silence. Almost on the instant as we took our places a great burst of thunder rolled and echoed around — a grim salvo of Nature's artillery. The sudden sense of rest heightened the effect of the oppressive stillness that followed. Never have I felt the sense of isolation so complete. Gazing in front into the thin mists, the very presence of my companions seemed an unreality. The veil of wreathing vapour screened the huge panorama of the ice-world from our sight. The black thunder-clouds drifting sullenly shut out the world below. No man knew where we were; we had reached our furthest point in a strange land. We were alone with Nature, far from home, and far from all that we were familiar with. Strange emotions thrilled the frame and quickened the pulse. Weird thoughts crowded through the mind — it was not a time for words. Believe me, under such conditions a man will see further across the threshold of the unknown than all the book-reading or psychological speculation in the world will ever reveal to him.'

The party was then faced with a late and dangerous descent of the wall they had climbed without difficulty and it was nearly midnight before they reached the safety of their tent.

Two days later they attempted Dykh Tau from the south but although this and other plans were defeated by more bad weather Dent was delighted with the ascent of Gestola, which he always regarded as his greatest adventure. The expedition marked the beginning of a period of intense activity by British mountaineers in the Caucasus during which many of the great peaks were climbed.

The Hungarian explorer Maurice de Déchy also visited the Caucasus, on the third of his expeditions to the range. As in the previous year he was concerned principally with photography and topographical work, devoting much time to glacier measurement in the Adai Khokh and Elbruz groups.

In Britain three climbs during the year were of great importance. Addressing the Alpine Club in April W C Slingsby gave an account of an ascent of Deep Ghyll on Scafell which he had made on 28 March with Geoffrey Hastings and J Mason. After describing the route in detail he made a plea to his fellow members which was to be taken to heart. 'The old whisky-bottle which used to



be on the Pillar rock has been taken by Mr Haskett Smith on to the Sca Fell Pinnacle, and so far it contains very few names. Do not let us be beaten on our own fells by outsiders, some of whom consider ice-axes and ropes to be "illegitimate". Let us not neglect the Lake District, Wales, and Scotland, whilst we are conquerors abroad.'

At the end of June W P Haskett Smith made his famous solo ascent of the Napes Needle, at the foot of the Needle Ridge on Great Gable. Haskett Smith later recalled that he commenced the ascent feeling as small as a mouse climbing a milestone and that after descending safely he was relieved to stand on firm ground and look up at the handkerchief he had left on the top fluttering in the breeze. The ascent of the Needle, which was not repeated for nearly three years, was a remarkable achievement and it was not long before illustrated articles began to appear on the subject.

On the Isle of Skye A H Stocker and A G Parker of Lliwedd fame succeeded, on 19 August, in climbing the shorter and steeper W ridge of the Inaccessible Pinnacle, the highest point of Sgurr Dearg. They then descended by the E ridge to complete the first traverse of the Pinnacle, another fine achievement for the period.

These climbs, in particular the first ascent of the Napes Needle and the publicity it received, gave a considerable impetus to the development of rock-climbing in Britain.

An important date during the year was 8 August, the centenary of the first ascent of Mont Blanc by Jacques Balmat and Dr Paccard. The details of this historic climb were recalled and in an analysis of the available statistics it was noted that fewer lives, comparatively, had been lost on Mont Blanc than in other parts of the Alps.

In conclusion, the present writer and his readers should perhaps note the following extract from an article entitled 'The Madness of Mountaineering' which appeared in September 1886. 'Zermatt and Chamonix are by this time nearly deserted. And of all the scores of climbers who have crossed the snow-line this year, or any year, it may be doubted if one in twenty could give any good reason for his exploits, while few of the reasons given would agree together. It is the strangest passion. A man, often of mature and more than mature years, posts straight out from his counting-house or his chambers to some Alpine centre. He quits the comfortable shelter of his hotel to sleep in some draughty hovel, some hay-loft, or some hole in the rocks. Night comes, and he rolls himself up in a dirty rug, the common property of every passing traveller, and tries to sleep. At some unearthly hour in the morning his guide bids him rise to a chill dark world. He starts from the "hut", often stumbling and jolting over rocks by lantern-light, and ere daybreak begins the work of his day. And hard work it is: such as few navvies would undertake without high pay. To swelter through deep snow under a burning sun; to have to choose between ophthalmia and green goggles, which clothe nature in an unnatural bilious shroud; to scramble up rocks, barking his shins and bruising his fingers; to shiver on an ice-slope while the steps are cut; to be dragged, not at his own pace or pleasure, but according to the strength and speed of others, knotted in the bight of a rope which hampers and at the same time preserves him; to be

permitted occasionally to sit down on the snow and devour bread and ham: these are the ordinary incidents of every mountain expedition. At last he reaches his hotel, very wet and aching with fatigue, the skin peeling off his face, and sometimes with the sight of his eyes impaired.

And all this is without considering the hazards of the sport. Climbers say it is not dangerous; that experience, foresight, and skill guard against every risk. It seems, however, that every year lengthens the tale of the victims of Alpine climbing. Experience has to be bought at its own price; indefinite risks will claim their due; and a fusillade of falling stones or crumbling ice-pinnacles, a storm, a deceptive snow-slope, deceive, encompass, or overwhelm the most skilful and weatherwise. But strike these out of the account — how can answer be given to the question “what is it all for?”. Some tell you it is for the sake of the scenery; but the fact is that when the climber stops, he stops to eat and drink. He busies himself with his rations, not with the scenery; and when he is in motion he might as well walk in blinkers: he must perforce walk warily, and his boots and his guide’s footprints are the most distant objects within his ken.

Men are driven to scaling mountains by the fierce strenuousness of their race. It is the English who have made the sport and give it vitality and keep it in credit; and it is for the sake of the national energy that we pursue it. We are all mad together; and if we were a saner we should be a punier race. But mountaineering is so far different from all our other freaks, that only those who have tried it, who have bitten the fruit, know the passion; and even they can give no reasonable account of it.’

Who better to speak on our behalf than Dent, one of the finest climbers of his day, who concluded his address by exhorting his listeners to visit the Caucasus. ‘If you wish to be far from the madding crowd, far from the noise, bustle, and vulgarity of the buzzing, clustering swarms of tourists — go there. Nature will, as it were, take you gently by the hand and seem to say, “I am glad to welcome you; come, and you shall look upon sights that I don’t choose to show to everybody. Yet more, I will make a present of them to you; and in after times you shall call up in memory recollections of me, as I can be when in the mood, and you shall hug these memories with delight and even dream on them with enthusiasm.” To the end of your days you will remember it with pleasure.’